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Of Cords Curling around Mountains On the artworks

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Cords – Forming a horizontal landscape on the third floor of Castello di Rivoli, where the exhibition *Of Cords Curling around Mountains* is on display, numerous hand-braided cotton cords run along the floors. Part of Nkanga's art since some early performances, and also a major component of the installation *Wetin You Go Do?* for the 13th Lyon Biennial in 2015, cords can be interpreted in relation to the lines that she often traces in her drawings tying human beings to one another, while also evoking connections to every other form of life on the planet. The artist also links her cords to the type of dialogue that occurs on social media, making reference to the ways emotions and opinions spread and multiply, giving rise to connections and complex, intertwining patterns. At the same time, she embraces the memory of cords as a time-honored technology employed in different cultures to create bridges capable of crossing large distances in order to bring together otherwise distant sites. In the case of the exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, the cords also echo those used by mountain climbers. Nkanga sees them as overcoming barriers, making it possible to cross, for example, the Maritime Alps that stand between Villa Arson Nice and Castello di Rivoli, in this way connecting her two exhibitions into a single, cohesive project.

Wood – Along with the cords, the first sculpted presence that greets visitors to Nkanga's exhibition at Castello is a series of wood elements. Carved with the assistance of local artisans, these sculptures were made from the remains of a beech tree—in fact, a weeping beech, whose branches reached out to the ground, as if seeking heat. Having fallen a number of years ago, the tree is brought back to life by the artist through the very act of sculpting. The beech is widely found in the mountains of Italy; traditionally used to produce tools and furniture, it also has medicinal properties, and frequently serves as firewood. For the artist, the use of this wood establishes a connection between her exhibition and the Castello's immediate surroundings. Carved to respect the wood grain and arrayed on the floor, these sculptures are hollow containers that, much like hands, bellies, or other parts of the human body, are ready to hold organic materials.

Clay – A material naturally tied to the earth, rich in symbolic implications, and suitable for a wide variety of uses, clay has been a part of Nkanga's art from the very beginning, in her student days. Working with Italian craftsmen, she has created a new series of clay sculptures for her exhibition at Castello. These works are molded in the geometric forms of the polyhedron and the sphere to reference the crystalline structures of minerals and the roundness of planets, respectively. Like the wood elements, the clay sculptures have visible streaks running through them like veins, evoking ripples or geological strata.

Sound – Some of the clay pieces were designed by the artist as containers capable of producing sounds. Like bodies that inhale and swell before modulating sounds, they endow the words murmured or sung by the artist with spatial volume. The resulting installation offers a sort of gentle polyphony that Nkanga likens to the experience of someone hearing many voices inside of their head.

Organic materials – The project conceived by Nkanga for Castello di Rivoli reveals her vivid interest in the places she encounters, starting with the type of soil and what grows in it, whether spontaneously or through cultivation. Her wood and glass sculptures hold a number of different organic materials, including local soil and herbs, both aromatic and medicinal, including lavender. Grown in Piedmont and a traditional feature of the landscape of southern France, lavender establishes a sort of scent-memory tying together the artist's exhibitions at Villa Arson in Nice and at Castello di Rivoli. Nkanga's exploration of Piedmont also introduced her to other local products, such as mint, of which the region is Italy's largest producer, as well as lemon balm and chamomile. Other sculptures contain organic substances traceable to the artist's earlier works and her research on products that, transported from one continent to another, generated stories of far-reaching relations. Along with shavings of black soap from the work she produced for documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, these materials include African clay, incense from Senegal, myrrh and red palm oil. As the artist notes, the unifying theme of this wide variety of materials is their capacity to provide nourishment, serving as food for the body, the skin, and the soul.

Fibers – Textile works have a major role in Nkanga's art, and include tapestries and carpets. Works in the form of carpets made their first appearance in Nkanga's art in 2015 with *From Where I Stand*, a large surface fit for walking on, produced by printing the enlarged details of a mica mineral on vinyl. In 2020, she began pondering the production of a series of hand-woven wool carpets, where each one, like a star in a constellation, relates to the others while still remaining an individual, standalone work. She produced the carpets in collaboration with the artisans of the TextielMuseum of Tilburg, in the Netherlands, closely following each phase of the process—from the initial design to the preparation of the fabric, including the selection of the fibers, the colors, and the different types of yarns. *Leaving trails in the distance* has the irregular shape of a quartz block, enlarged to welcome a person lying down. Made with wool in various shades of gray and black and the addition of Lurex threads, the work evokes a miniature landscape featuring mountain peaks, boulders, and valleys. In crafting the carpet by hand, Nkanga obtained varying thicknesses, heights, and degrees of softness. *Leaving trails in the distance* and the other carpet *Lined with shivers sprouting from the rock* are the starting points from which the entire exhibition unfolds.

Fibers – *Lined with shivers sprouting from the rock* was commissioned by Castello di Rivoli and is the winner project of the public announcement PAC2020 – Piano per l'Arte Contemporanea, promoted by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Italian Ministry of Culture. The piece depicts a multifaceted micro-landscape that includes profiles of seacoasts and their bodies of water, verdant plains and hilly areas. The artist's inspiration for the work was the azurite-malachite, a rare gemstone of a marbled greenish-blue hue. Replacing the hardness of the stone with the softness of wool, while retaining the beneficial properties of the mineral in sublimated form, the carpet acts as a catalyst of energy. In Nkanga's vision, it can restore comfort and wellbeing—that's why it is proportioned to accommodate a prone human body. Together with *Leaving trails in the distance*, this carpet is the point of origin of the long cords that traverse the space and in turn connect multiple elements of sculpture with which visitors are invited to interact.

Glass – The sculptures Nkanga made especially for this exhibition include numerous glass elements, which were produced in Italy on the island of Murano, famous for its time-honored tradition of master glass-blowers. The organic forms of some of the glass pieces resemble sea creatures, with their rounded or elongated aquatic morphologies, striking colors, and various degrees of transparency. Other sculptures are possibly similar to alembics and pieces of a chemistry set, with bends and cavities suitable for holding liquids in transformation. For the artist, the glass works on show at Castello help to focus attention on concepts of fragility and transition, alluding not only to the various materials needed to produce glass but also to their disparate geographic

origins and to the way in which the breath of each master glassblower produces unique, inimitable sculpted volumes.

Poetry – On the walls of the exhibition galleries, which were painted in earthy hues of dark brown, orange, and ocher, Nkanga has written poetic verses that came to her during the months of the project's preparation. Displayed in a central position, *When looking across the sea, Do you dream? Of cords curling around mountains* is the poem whose first lines were used as the titles for the exhibitions at Villa Arson and Castello di Rivoli, respectively. Other texts, previously composed by the artist, include very brief poems, such as *Soft rock, Soft bed...* Sharing for the first time her inner creative process, Nkanga has also inscribed new texts directly on the walls: graphic signs, letters, and words that are replaced and shifted, as well as lists of alternative terms provide evidence of how she ponders and weighs the use of one word as opposed to another, considering alliterative possibilities or semantic shifts. Composed in English, these texts include words from other languages tied to the many places Nkanga has visited and the cultures that have nourished her, among which Portuguese and Ibibio, a language widely spoken in Nigeria including in the state of Akwa Ibom, where the artist's family has its origins. Nkanga wrote all the texts with white, black, yellow, or light blue chalk. Avoiding chemicals, no fixative sprays were used, leaving the writings free to exist as precarious, fleeting presences.