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I Leave Space for Time

Éric Mangion

Éric Mangion Poetry is essential in your work. Yet your style isn't poetic in the sense we mean when we want to designate an unclear or sensitive approach to the work of certain visual artists. You *write* poetry, which is very different. In the exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, poetry is there on nearly every wall, for instance in the title *Of Cords Curling around Mountains*, which functions like a haiku bouncing off the title of the Villa Arson exhibition: *When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream?* There is poetry also in the installation *We Could Be Allies* or in the tapestry *In A Place Yet Unknown*. In the latter, for example, the text is constructed from wordplay on the words "rage," "sage," and "age." We know that puns are like doors that open up to multiple interpretations of ideas. So, what does poetry do for you, especially considering that you're an artist who doesn't like to write, and greatly prefers orality? You say, for example, that poetry makes it possible to reveal things that aren't visible or tangible. Do you use poetry to create a contrast with the images?

Otobong Nkanga With poetry, I don't have to think about commas, periods, exclamation marks, all this structure that has to carry language. It's a way of really entering a language and concentrating on what relates to the work. The poetry of *In A Place Yet Unknown* was linked to an emotion that I couldn't describe. It was in 2016–17. In the United States, in Brazil, in Europe, the extreme right was rising everywhere. A sort of fear was settling in, an anxiety that I was unable to translate through a tactile work. The phonetic variations between English and French helped me. "Sage" is a plant that we use for cooking or for chasing evil spirits. But in French, "sage" means wise. "Age" means the same thing in both languages. As for "rage," it's caused by the traumas of life, which can lead to a certain wisdom as one ages. So the three words can be connected. *In a Place Yet Unknown* is about this sensation of fear and the relation between fear and rage—which, for me, is an uncontrollable feeling.

ÉM The sound installation *Wetin You Go Do? Oya Na* (which is a pure experiment in sound poetry through its phonetic distortions and technical conception) is designed with six tracks of recorded sounds forming a choir, which are in fact a single voice, your own. You created this work in 2015 in a studio in Berlin. It was seen by many as a self-portrait, or at any rate as a frontal and direct way of transmitting your emotions. What is it about, exactly?

ON Most people in West Africa speak a sort of broken English, extremely alive, which functions like a vernacular, everyday language. *Wetin You Go Do?* means "What are you going to do?" and *Oya Na, Oya! Oya!* "Come on! Get up! Get up, let's do something!" Here I'm also talking about a certain form of powerlessness, of fear, of anxiety. But it's something intangible. How can one give shape to an emotion? This is what I'm really interested in. I recorded the sound during three days, six hours a day. So in the end I had approximately 18 hours of recorded material with several layers corresponding to different states of mind, different characters. For example, one of the characters is a hyperpositive person. He's the person who says to everyone: "Come on! Come with me! Let's go together and I'll be the force that makes you do things." The second character is someone who wants to forget everything because he no longer wants to be a part of this world, and he's going to

drink, or get into drugs, to find another way of living without feeling anything. The third one is a guy who “doesn’t give a shit,” who surfs on the waves of things but is complaining all the time... He seems pretty happy about being powerless, but he needs to complain to make it look like everything is okay. In fact, he can’t stand being powerless. In short, he’s full of contradictions and paradoxes. And when you put all these voices together, you have a polyphony of different timbers, from deep, to tenor, to soprano. You have all this in *Wetin You Go Do? Oya Na* [laughs]. In a way, these are all the parts that I’m made of.

ÉM You’re capable of talking for hours to an audience during exhibition visits or performances. One feels that you enjoy this one-on-one, direct exchange. Should we interpret this as the attitude of a storyteller in the griot tradition (some people see your performances as rituals), as the art of a performer (as soon as you stop speaking you begin to sing), or simply as the need to share your passions, your aesthetic experiences?

ON I always think about how I can introduce people to my world, how I can tell a story that might be interesting not just for me but for everyone, for the people around me. But I also think it comes from my childhood. In Nigeria, if you walk into a church or if you have a conversation with old people, there’s a specific way of beginning a story. You create a kind of atmosphere, you make the words visual. Even in your way of saying hello to someone, you’re not saying: “So, yes, I wanted to tell you something.” You say: “Ah! It’s nice to see you! How’s your mother? How’s your father? How’s everything back at the village?” and it goes on, ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-la-la-la-la... It’ll take ten minutes. But you really need this time to introduce the conversation and provide some space for the other person, to put them at ease or to make them ill at ease, to make them react, to feel them. When we used to go to the village, there were old women there who began to sing before they spoke. At some point they would pour alcohol on the ground, call the ancestors, without really getting to the heart of the matter. I like this moment of waiting along with the other.

ÉM You left Nigeria when you were 20. You lost your parents pretty early. And when you were very young, a fire ravaged your house, destroying most of the family archives. Once you said, “the diaspora plays tricks on my memory.” One can feel this troubled relation with your childhood memories in the diptych *Grey Zone*, in some of your drawings, but especially in the tapestry *Revelations*, where your own youthful head is changed into a circular cloud of images representing Nigerian landscapes or coins. In fact, you compare the regular devaluation of the currency (the Naira) to the devaluation of your own memory.

ON As I’ve been living in Europe for over 20 years, I have doubts about what I really felt or saw during my childhood. But memory can also crystallize. For example, a few years ago I was in Brazil and went to the Japanese District in S.o Paulo to eat; I was with a Japanese friend who told me that the way they cook there is really the way they used to cook in Japan at the beginning of the past century, simply because many Japanese left for Brazil at that time and retained their cooking customs. But in fact, when you go to Japan today, they’ve completely changed their way of cooking. We see the same process with the Yoruba or Candomblé religions, which have retained the language that was spoken during the nineteenth century. And when you listen to Yoruba today, it’s not at all the same, even if certain sounds, ways of writing, or pronouncing are similar. And when I talk about the tricks of memory, it’s because my memory is so full of information that I regularly have doubts about what it’s trying to tell me. I realize this, for example, when I talk to my sister. Even though most of the time we’ve been through the same experience, she has a completely different way of describing it.

ÉM As a young woman, you wanted to become an architect. We can feel this, for instance, in the installation *Awaiting Pleasures But It Cut*, made between 2002 and 2003, an early work in which

you were still to find your forms and vocabulary. How did you go from a desire for architecture to a desire for art?

ON At the age of 15, I had to choose what I wanted to study. And I told my mother that I'd like to study architecture. She answered: "Are you sure? Why do you want to do architecture?" I loved the sort of rigidity that architecture has: calculating, drawing, constructing something functional, which has its place in the world. Architecture is concrete, you can look at it, you can live in it, feel good or bad in it, it's very tangible. By contrast, I couldn't see how art would be able to have a place in the world, especially in my country. I wanted something that was really anchored in society. And at the same time, I was afraid of living without money, because when I was seven, my father died and we lost everything. We had to start all over again from scratch. For me, this was a very physical fear. And I said to myself that if I became an artist, I wouldn't be able to support myself with my art, or even survive, especially as a woman in the conservative world of Africa, a very patriarchal and tough world. But my mother said something really important to me: "If you want to study architecture because you think you'll earn money, that's not the right choice. You have to make a choice linked to passion, to the things in which you believe." And at the same time, she did something that deeply impressed me: she dreamt of me in color. And finally, she said to me: "In art, you can do anything, including architecture." That's when I understood she was right. Still today, my work is very similar to that of an architect. I often think of a structure supporting another structure, of the way in which things interconnect, or how to create something that can be sculpted or installed in different ways. How to contract, reduce, enlarge. And all this in accordance with the space in my studio, with my mental space. I try not to do things that go beyond what I'm capable of imagining, and I keep telling myself that time often provides the answer that makes it possible to understand and resolve a problem. Concretely, this means that when I'm making a work of art, I provide space for time. I can revisit or redo a piece that I'm not able to produce at a given moment. I think that in architecture there's a lot of that, in relation to the constraints of space, of temperature, of all the elements.

ÉM Why is one work of yours called *Awaiting Pleasures*? It's a strange title.

ON Yes, I admit it's strange. I created it at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, in my studio, which was like a studio inside the studio. I wanted to represent objects that help develop your muscles, like a swimming pool, things that provide a certain pleasure. But before one's body becomes sculpted, one has to wait. It's like a plant: it takes time to see it fully grown [laughs]. Watching a plant grow is a moment of extreme pleasure. It's the same with expecting a child. Indeed, all the work I was doing at that time was like projecting a kind of dream: owning a swimming pool, imagining a structure in which my body would be permanently toned, owning a farm... [laughs]. I put all my dreams and my desires into this installation, and that's why it's called *Awaiting Pleasures*.

ÉM You're now well known for the variety of your work, which crosses the line with ease from photography to drawing, to video, installation, sculpture, sound, social practices (*Carved to Flow*), and poetry. But what often strikes people the most are your tapestries, especially the largest ones such as *The Weight of Scars* or *Double Plot*. You've often said that they were conceived as an echo of the tapestries produced in Europe in their "classical" period, notably the eighteenth century, when they were a way for important families to tell their story, or to recount History, beginning with facts of daily life (hunting scenes, court scenes, etc.) and endowing them with a heroic or mythological dimension. You're also fascinated by the fact that the people who commissioned these tapestries decided to bring the outside world inside their homes. It's unusual to see an African artist seeking inspiration in the history of European art, but it's also true that your family has a very strong relation to the fabrication of textiles. Where do you situate the origin of these tapestries?

ON Actually, I'm situated a bit all over the place [laughs]. When I was 15 years old, my mother started doing batik. This left a strong mark on me because I was the one who did the drawings on damask or brocade fabric more than 5 yards long. We worked with weavers who made aso oke (fabrics handmade by the Yoruba people in West Africa), then we sold them to fashion designers in Lagos. Little by little, I learned the staining techniques, I learned how to distinguish between synthetic and natural fabric, cotton and viscose, and to recognize the origins of the materials: lace from Switzerland or lace from Austria. I understood how the skin breathed beneath the fabric. Then I learned how to make batik by using a cassava starch paste or raffia, which makes it possible to fold the fabric like an accordion. But when you arrive in Europe, when you visit the museums and you see this incredible weaving, the gigantic tapestries, the new motifs... well, it necessarily changed the way I looked at textiles. In Belgium or in the Netherlands there's a great tradition of Flemish tapestry, like the Gobelins in France. European tapestries give us a vision of wealth, nobility, or aristocracy. But this isn't just a vision of history or of the desire to embellish an interior—it's also an extension of life. In a way, it's the same thing in Africa. Through the materials or the colors, you can distinguish the origins of the families that wear these fabrics. Fabrics tell the story of the world, they are very political. And it's the same in South America or in Asia.

ÉM You have your tapestries made at the TextielMuseum. On a practical level, how does that work?

ON The TextielMuseum is in Tilburg, in the Netherlands. As its name indicates, it's a museum where one can see old weaving looms, because the city has specialized in this field for centuries. I work with the TextielLab, a lab integrated into the museum where you can really experiment. They receive artists, fashion designers, students, architects, and all sorts of people who want to produce textiles. I begin by making a drawing in my studio of all the elements that will be integrated into the tapestry. But when I draw, I think mostly of separating the colors in such a way that the loom can read them distinctly. If the colors are too similar, it creates a sort of visual chaos that the loom can't interpret. I have to draw according to some constraints, also when dealing with the size of the tapestry, which can be reduced with time. Everything has to be prepared minutely ahead of time. For 10 or 11 years, I've been working mostly with Stef Miero, who's been working there for 30 years. I give him my drawing and he includes it in the loom's program. And then, there are an incredible number of ways to weave it. For example, if I draw a circle, it can be woven in various ways: in a very taut way, in a voluminous way, or by leaving the threads in disarray. But all of this is planned. I choose the colors of the threads. I go into a room where there are plenty of them, with all sorts of colors, textures, metal threads, copper, steel, flax, cotton, acrylic, Lurex. When you send the information along with the drawing, you begin to see the mixture of colors appear. For example, I use between 8 and 12 threads of color, and as many fabrics. But I can create approximately 140 colors with these. 10% of blue with 60% of red, or 10% of black, will become a sort of very dark crimson red. And if I add more than 50% of blue, 50% of red and perhaps 10% or 50% or 100% of black, it becomes a sort of black violet.

ÉM The tapestry *Double Plot* is related to a rougher installation: *Manifest of Strains*. On a visual level, it's an oxymoron because the two works look completely different. And yet they're complementary. They both stage states of tension: the first in a very visual way, with a NASA satellite image of Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Arab Spring events in 2011, and the second in a very cold way with a metallic structure—even though it's partly organic, with a hidden mixture of gas, air, light, noise, speed, and heat inside a circular sphere. What's the link between the two? It looks like you attempted to associate the visible and the invisible.

ON *For Double Plot* and *Manifest of Strains*, the idea was really to come within the range of what a manifestation is, of what a manifestation means in its different understandings. But if something you can see is manifest, there are also things that you can't see and that can manifest themselves suddenly. For example, there are stars that you see every night but that perhaps haven't existed for 3,000 light years. This apparition, in spite of absence, interests me. How can you make something that doesn't exist appear? *Manifest of Strains* functions continuously. The steel that supports the entire circular structure is eroded from the inside by a liquid that makes it more fragile. The inner temperature becomes extremely hot and then very cold; a sort of cycle begins. You could compare this cycle to many things in life, even in our own bodies, on a psychological level, on a physical level, things that can decompose but that you don't see falling apart, for instance in the case of certain diseases. Cancer can eat away at us without our knowing it. And then all of a sudden it appears, it manifests itself. You can also see this in nature, on a cosmic level, and in a society where things begin to deteriorate before the entropy comes to light. So, I wanted to create a work embodying this paradox of manifestation, but in a very abstract way. I wanted it to be continuous—a persistent performance that never stops. Concerning the tapestry *Double Plot*, it's a way of reminding us of the connection between space and earth, between the universe and us. The two works complement each other, prolong one another.

ÉM *Solid Maneuvers* and *The Leftovers* function according to an identical principle, a play between negative and positive. *The Leftovers* is a tapestry where you can see a pearl necklace, except that the pearls are not the usual shape because in fact they represent holes resulting from mining extraction. What interests you in duality?

ON The Earth in itself is a container where what's inside functions continuously, with a magnetic force that maintains a certain stability. This equilibrium must always remain if we, as human beings and living forms, are to remain alive. When I look at those huge buildings in Dubai, Shanghai, or New York, I immediately think of mines and of all the strata of minerals extracted from the ground to build them. In the same way, refuse just fills a hole. It's a substance that decomposes and becomes another substance. For me, construction and destruction are united through a similar link. If I make a tapestry (*The Leftovers*) with a necklace representing mine holes, it's to make us understand that the jewelry we're wearing is related to a hole somewhere else. So, the way that I see the relation between negative and positive corresponds to a way of seeing the world through its antagonisms.

ÉM Your works can also be seen as metaphors. For instance, the tapestry *Steel to Rust* reveals a greatly enlarged image of a tiny piece of steel. A speck of dust becomes a landscape. It's even more significant in another tapestry: *After We Are Gone*, which represents a hybrid plant made of three or four other different plants, which you imagined as the first vegetation to grow back after the end of the world, which is why the background looks like a burned down and lifeless forest. In both cases there are few effects. In your opinion, is an image enough to produce effects?

ON We live in a world where everything is represented through images, through things that we can see. But I don't think that an image can be enough in itself. On the other hand, it can be a trigger, a spark for our conscience. Trigger is like a shock. For *After We Are Gone* you could say that it's just a plant, basta. But when you look at it closer up, you begin to see that the plant is a little bit stained, that it's not really normal, that it's made of a mixture of vegetation. And that's when you begin to ask yourself questions. The title is also important, it gives clues. But mostly, I think that our interpretation of images depends on our cultural background, on our stories and our personal lives. My story, the one that I put into my work, becomes something else when seen from someone else's story.

ÉM You conduct investigations (sometimes in an almost journalistic way) concerning numerous materials: mica, steel, or kola. I use the word “materials” because no matter what their content is, they become the basis for work and for producing art. What links them together?

ON These three materials are linked to the history of power, political power—in any case to a power that can change the way things happen. They come from the great industrialization period of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. A lot of people were needed to work, and these people needed energy. In the West, research was conducted to discover energizing products. This is how kola became an ingredient of the famous Coca-Cola. The same with guarana and all those plants that were useful to colonial powers for their pharmaceutical capacities. In the same way, we needed a lot of steel to make bridges, buildings, planes, boats, and trains. As for mica, it’s a whole family of minerals used for makeup (it makes it shine), as well as in construction, because it’s a very good insulation material. All three enable me to understand better the functioning of the capitalist machine from which our modern world originates.

ÉM The first time I saw your work, I was surprised by your very graphic representation, almost robot-like, of bodies that are sometimes without heads or feet, or with their feet stuck in the ground. But what surprised me even more was the arms, which often function like mechanical joints (prostheses?) and are prolonged into tubes or branches that also have a tendency to form links between themselves.

ON The way I think of arms is totally performative. Arms are related to action. There are arms that care, arms that kill, arms that work, arms that protect, arms that dominate, or on the contrary, arms that are exploited. I even made a drawing called *Choices We Make*, which shows all sorts of arms. A single person can have all these arms simultaneously. This person can represent a multiple being, like Kali, who can be a goddess who kills or a goddess who protects. Indeed, this way of conceiving the arms is very feminine. But sometimes the way I use them is very masculine. On the other hand, in my drawings it’s rarely possible to say whether a body is that of a man or woman. I try to break down gender, because for me, only gesture, only action, are important.

ÉM You see territory as a body: it shows traces of wear, it has scars, deformations due to time. But a body has a limited lifespan in relation to the Earth, which has been in existence perhaps for several billion years. The Earth moves, transforms itself, whereas you and I will cease to exist in barely a few years. Isn’t this a paradox?

ON It isn’t really a paradox: as I see it, the Earth and the body possess approximately the same kind of structure, like a tree. The difference is just in their longevity. You’re born, you die. A plant can hold out for 500 years and then one day, bang! At the same time, it gives life to other plants. As human beings, one might almost consider that we live on eternally—not as Otobong or Éric, but in the sense that we can transmit life to another form of life. Human beings benefit from endless continuity without having to be alive in this world. And I think it’s the same for plants, and also for plenty of other things. A volcano can wake up, destroy everything around it, but it will also give life to new forms because lava will regenerate the ground. Everything is recycled and transformed. Nature doesn’t separate elements, even if we have this unfortunate tendency to destroy everything, or at least to accelerate the process of destruction. Trees talk to one another, protect one another. We now know this but we still don’t understand their language. And most certainly, they don’t understand ours either.

ÉM You prefer multiple points of view to a univocal way of seeing things. Just like your roots or your branches, everything in your work seems to ramify. In your own words, “history is complex [...] things are interdependent, they evolve and remain connected.” In fact, you wrote: “I am a

fusion of different worlds.” And you speak of construction, destruction, regeneration, and transformation. The exhibition *When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream?* starts with the poster of a photograph representing a house made of random elements on the island of Curaçao in the Caribbean. Paradoxically, this kind of precarious housing, which is common in southern countries, resists time and its hazards rather well. Like Anna Tsing, who wrote about matsutake mushrooms in her famous book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*,¹ you’re interested in air plants that can develop without roots in inhospitable surroundings. In spite of the extreme extractivism that you condemn, you seem to trust in our future, and remain at the margins of a generalized fear of collapse. Is this really the case? Are you a fatalist or—as in your installation *Wetin You Go Do? Oya Na*—do you go from one mood to another, from enthusiasm to despondency?

ON My mood is always changing! You have to change all the time [laughs]! One day it’s “Oh dear, this is it for us,” and the next day, “Oh, it’s not that bad!” [laughs]. But in fact, what I really think is that it’s not the end of the world, nor the end of us. The world will regenerate, even if it takes 10,000 years. Nature will transform, it will absorb everything we’ve destroyed, everything we’ve thrown away, all our plastic; it will mix up everything and create other forms. As human beings, I believe we’ll continue to exist, albeit in a different way. When I see how people live on a daily basis in very difficult conditions in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Brazil, or other parts of the world, with diseases due to pollution and absence of hygiene, I tell myself that our bodies will end up developing their own physiological resistances and will transform little by little. I don’t see things in an entirely negative way—rather, I see them as a certain form of transformation, what’s unlivable can become livable. Yes, some essential things will become luxury commodities, and populations, places, and countries might disappear. It will be intensely unequal. But it won’t be the end of the world; it will be the end of a certain kind of world. And we alone will be responsible for it.

ÉM In the magazine *Flash Art* you said you are not preoccupied by terms such as “Anthropocene,” “colonial,” or “postcolonial.”² It’s unusual to hear this today, because these words have been emerging for several years as a vocabulary used by critics or artists, and have become at this stage slogans rather than true reasoned reflections. Yet your work is completely anchored in ecological and postcolonial preoccupations. Where does this paradox come from? Are you wary of these commonplaces? Are you reluctant, in a very pragmatic way (in the philosophical meaning of the word), to be locked into a single theory? Or is it simply your desire to state once and for all that you’re a multiple being?

ON In a way, specific terms make us classify things too much and lock them up into compartments or boxes. It always sounds good to say: “Oh yeah, oh that’s colonial,” or “Oh these are postcolonial artists.” It makes things seem more comfortable. Most of the time we use the term postcolonial to designate artists from the southern part of the hemisphere who carry the weight of systems that were imposed upon them in their own territories, systems they didn’t choose. I’m not interested in this terminology because things are much more complex than that. Too often, one tends to confuse responsibilities, too often we accuse one another without really knowing the truth about the events. Once again, we separate people without having the right information. We forget about the fluidity of history, the fluidity between territories, people, and economies. We forget that the forces of capital aren’t new, they’ve always existed. There have always been exoduses and massive migrations provoked by the forced labor of slavery. We also forget to say that ever since our countries have become independent, they’ve actually been just as colonized. They give you money from the IMF, but in reality, it put a chain around your neck. We move on, we move on... but power doesn’t change. We’re not in a postcolonial phase; we’re still very much in a colonial world. And this is true not just for Africa or for the south of the world, it’s true for all the countries where force and domination have been established.

ÉM In the introductory text for the exhibition *When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream?* I used the term “forensics” concerning your working practice. Forensic research includes all the methods of analysis used during a work of investigation. So, it’s a method that goes through layers of interpretation. Do you agree with the relevance of this term?

ON Sometimes I do, but not always. Sometimes I don’t conduct forensic research; sometimes it’s just reflecting, a way of throwing up thought... [laughs], it’s very visceral. And sometimes it really is research in which indeed several methods are used, several ways of working. Be that as it may, and however things happen or take shape. I’m very meticulous about the materials that I choose. They have to function with the concepts, with the ideas in my works, because there has to be coherence. For example, if I speak of extractivism, I have to make sure not to use toxic materials because the work can become problematic, even if the idea behind it is magnificent. This is where my work becomes forensic—it digs deep and investigates things all the way.

ÉM What do you see as a toxic material or a problematic work?

ON It’s when you use a component or a strong chemical process that produces gas or toxic emanations. This happened to me, for example, with *Carved to Flow*. I couldn’t use products that might damage or affect the skin, so we had to do quite a bit of research, in spite of a lot of great ideas we had about the composition of soap. This made things more complicated. But that was normal. In the end, it’s always a question of time.