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## ***When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream? On the artworks***

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The art of Otobong Nkanga and her thinking process are constituted of multiple strata, which cannot be distinguished from one another. On a visual level, this aspect of her work is detectable in a great many of her productions, notably in *Solid Maneuvers*, 2015, a sculpture made of layers of different metals one on top of another, precariously balanced on steel stems that seem to barely touch the floor. The layers are flat but they contain holes and perforations, and in the holes are various metals ground to dust or in bigger grains. The negative becomes positive, like in the tapestry *The Leftovers*, 2017, in which the pearls of a necklace, rather than precious stones, represent the holes left in the ground by the extraction of ore.

Extraction is of course a political subject: it is the mutilation that humanity has imposed—and is still imposing—on the Earth. In fact, extraction is not the right word. One should speak rather of extractivism, a fanatical activity of extraction. This extractivism is represented in three series of documentary photographs (*Emptied Remains*, 2004/15, *Things Have Fallen*, 2004–05, and *Post I and II*, 2019), as well as in other more graphic works such as the photographic dots included in several tapestries like *Where Traces Lie I and II*, 2019, *The Weight of Scars*, 2015, and *Double Plot*, 2018.

Their backgrounds look like topographical maps where circles with non-geometric contours represent holes instead of reliefs, constantly recurring holes, so repetitive that in the end they form landscapes and constellations. As we know, a constellation is a group of stars. Ever since the beginning of civilization, humans have connected them to create shapes relating to tales, legends, and myths. Thus constellations represent the kingdom of the imagination. What is it that links the stars, if not a desire to invent universes?

The world of Nkanga is made of permanent links. Sometimes they are almost invisible, as in *Manifest of Strains*, 2018, a circular installation in which water, air, and heat are united in an unseen process of entropy. They can also be abstract, as in *We Could Be Allies*, 2017/21, an installation connecting colors from the nearby environment in order for them to become allies and accomplices, as mentioned in the title. Most of the times, however, they are very visible (ropes, branches, stems, or roots), like in *Fragilologist's Predicament*, 2011. Obviously roots link us to the Earth, while ropes (*Wetin You Go Do?*, 2015, or *Of Cords Curling around Mountains*, 2021) are tools for labor, uniting humans in their effort, especially in their exploitation of the Earth. But before these connections, there are arms, always represented by Nkanga like mechanical joints, kinds of prosthetic limbs prolonging the body, as in *Double Plot*, 2018.

“The way I think of arms,” she says, “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*, 2009, 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” (see p. 122).

But action is always a manifestation, another keyword. How do things manifest themselves, how do they appear before our eyes? How do things become tangible as in *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories*, 2009? Tangible means what is obvious, concretely what one can touch. However, many occurrences are visible without actually existing (like the stars that one can see every night even though they actually disappeared a very long time ago), or on the contrary actually exist even though we cannot see them (like invisible diseases). This complexity of the gaze, of appearances and perceptions runs through Nkanga’s entire production.

But for something to manifest itself, it has to be measured, at least in science. Measuring transitory phenomena goes further than making a work of art (*Contained Measures of Shifting States*, 2012); it is a research method that leads Nkanga to investigations such as the ones she conducted for a workshop in 2016 at the art and research center B.tonsalon in Paris, where she “questioned the notions of transitory states and metabolization—whether in the field of geology, art, political science, or genetics.” She investigated three different substances: mica (in the series *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014), kola (*Contained Measures of a Kolanut*, 2012), and steel. All three are related to the major era of the planet’s industrialization between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “They enable me,” she says, “to understand better the functioning of the capitalist machine from which our modern world originates.” These transitory states are embodied, for instance, in her installation in progress *Steel to Rust*, 2016–21, in which steel (after having dominated the world) becomes dust once again. Quite a symbol of evolution!

This relation to matter, and more generally to materiality, is also essential in Nkanga’s work. Here the old saying about mind and matter takes on its full meaning. “However things happen or take shape, I’m very meticulous about the materials that I choose. They really have to function with the concepts, with the ideas in my thoughts, because there has to be coherence.” In *Anamnesis*, 2015, she created a huge scar in a wall, like a separation, a tear between two spaces. But this gap is in fact filled with imported goods from southern countries (coffee, spices, and other products), which not only give out specific smells but also outline the form of a faraway horizon where our gaze becomes lost. Such materiality does not impede a true sense of poetry, which, rather than being a style, is actually a slightly different way of producing art. Poetry enables her to free herself from the constraints of language (punctuation, syntax, or phonetics). It allows for wordplay and a greater freedom of expression. Concretely, this happens through the creation of works that can be openly interpreted, such as *In A Place Yet Unknown*, 2017, in which she expresses her fears and anxieties through different interpretations of the words “rage,” “age,” and “sage,” according to their respective meanings in French and English. The sound installation *Wetin You Go Do? Oya Na*, 2020, is even more significant, a pure exercise of sound poetry through its phonetic distortions and its technical conception, made of six tracks forming a choir, all of which are sung by her own voice. The latest example of her poetry to date (October 2021) is the two-part title of her exhibition at the Villa Arson in Nice (June 12 – September 19, 2021), *When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream?*, followed by the title of her exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, *Of Cords Curling around Mountains* (September 25, 2021 – July 3, 2022). Nkanga chose to write these two titles like a haiku in two movements. “When looking across the sea, do you dream? Of cords curling around mountains.” The two titles are in fact one. So everything is truly related.