



The Question of  
'Africanness' and  
the Expanded  
Field of Sculpture  
(Part I)

Prof. Olu Oguibe  
Dr. Johan Thom  
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## **The Question of 'Africanness' and the Expanded Field of Sculpture (part one)**

Transcript of an online talk featuring presentations by Prof. Olu Oguibe and Dr. Johan Thom, moderated by Carolyn Jean Martin



All photos: Johan Thom.

## “Things appear and disappear”

Johan Thom

### Part one:

[Read by Sven Christian]

#### CONTAINER

Date: 2010

Mediums: Sculptural intervention with turmeric, cow dung, soil, grass, and labour

Site: Maya Sarovar Public Park, Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India

Size: 5 x 1.2 m (approximate)

For this artwork Johan Thom (hereafter referred to only as ‘the artist’) creates an invisible public sculpture in a public park situated in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India. In order to do so, the artist produces a large-scale, process-based sculptural intervention that organically disappears, leaving no physical trace of its existence. According to the artist statement that accompanies the artwork on his website, the

artist wants ‘to draw attention to the momentary, performative nature of the experience of art.’

Before we proceed it is worth noting the following facts related to the art project for which the artist created work:

- The artist visited Bodh Gaya during the period of 3 - 16 February 2011.
- The visit formed part of an international art project, ‘Buddha Enlightened,’ initiated by the artists Sanjeev Sinha (India) and his life partner Diane Hagen (a Dutch artist).
- The project is officially funded and supported by the government of India under patronage of His Excellency Mr Anjani Kumar Singh, the chief secretary of the province of Bihar.

Now, on to the production of the artwork.





The artist first spends five days exploring Maya Sarovar Public Park, interacting with its inhabitants. These inhabitants are mostly poor families and their children, who also use the adjacent seasonal public dam for all their daily ablutions (including, but not limited to, cooking and washing). This group of people are thus designated as the 'public.' Over a period of five working days the artist now works with a number of local labourers to dig a hole approximately 5 metres in radius and 1.2 metres in depth.



The hole forms the shape of a container or 'bowl' in the earth. This shape is smoothed out and covered with a layer of locally sourced cow dung. Finally, a thick layer of turmeric (or 'haldi') is added. The bowl-shaped hole is left open for two days, after which point it is filled with soil and neatly covered with the original layer of grass.







The official representatives of the government of Bihar visit the site to look at the work on the evening of the 15 February (the 'exhibition opening').

They are deeply dismayed to find nothing worth seeing.





A number of conceptual threads are woven into the work:

- India and South Africa are historically connected by way of the so-called Spice Route, first plotted during the fifteenth and seventeenth century by European traders.
- The Cape of Good Hope was established as a resupply camp for the traders of the Dutch East India Company (who regularly traveled to south-east Asia in search of spices).
- Haldi (or turmeric) is known in many parts of India as a particularly auspicious spice that is associated with marriage – thus signalling a co-joining of two different parties into a union.
- India is in fact home to one of the first great universities in the world, namely Nalanda University ( fifth or sixth century CE to 1197 CE) – a fact that the artist often pondered whilst staying in the province of Bihar (where Nalanda was also located).

Today very few people know of this historical centre of learning, and one might say that it has all but disappeared from view.





Finally, the artist Sanjeev Sinha unexpectedly passes away on 6 November 2020.

Things appear and disappear.





**Part two:**

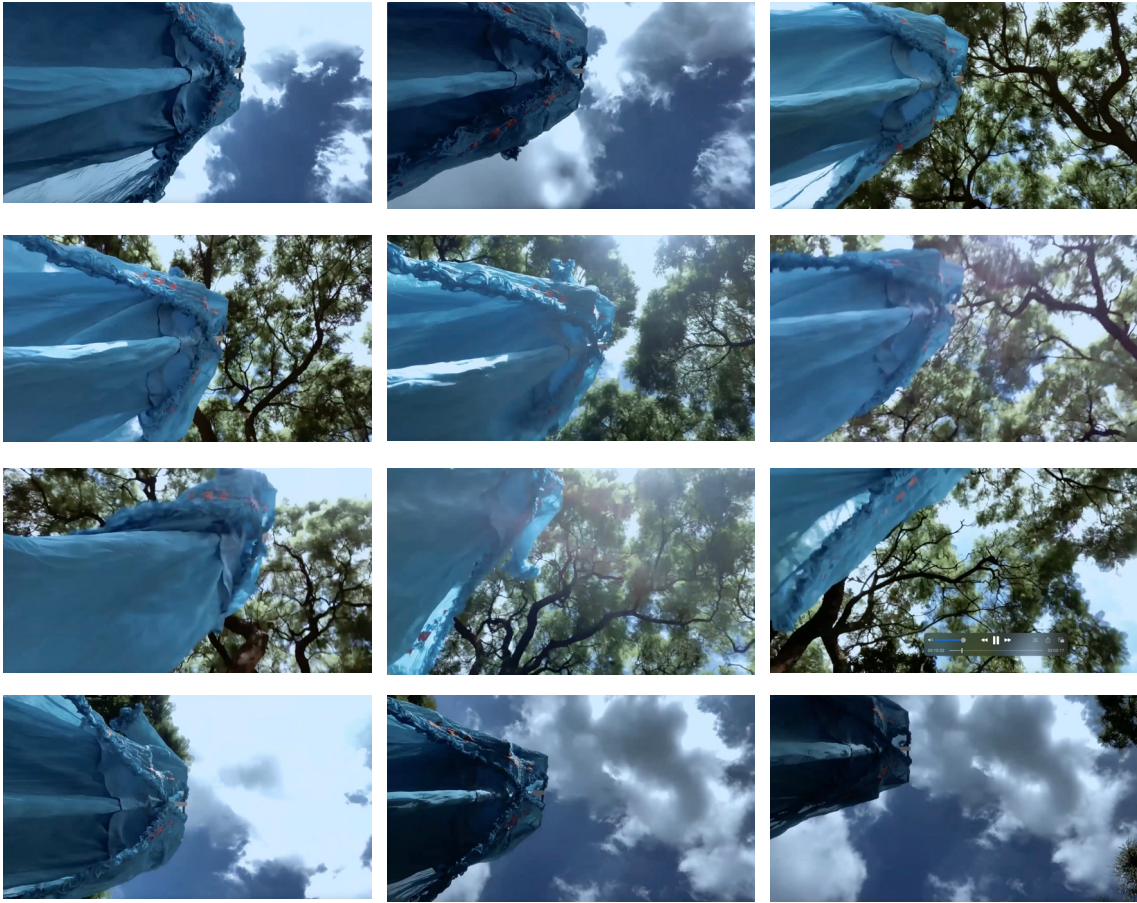
[Read by the artist]

*Screening of a section from Autoportrait (2022), by Johan Thom.  
A three-channel video on infinite loop.  
Cinematographic credit: Gareth Fradgley and Alet Pretorius.*

One of my most vivid memories of my mother is a photograph of her son as a small child, somehow standing with both of her feet on my grandfather's outstretched left hand. Frozen in the moment, she appears as if precariously balanced between the forces of gravity and light, youth (hers) and old age (that of my grandfather) and finally, that of human care and joyful carelessness.

For *Autoportrait*, this photographic image serves as a prompt for a more in depth investigation into the poetics and mnemonics of death and loss. This is brought forward in the artwork through my performative interaction with a number of material objects: a human skull; the skin of a Livingston's Turaco bird that abruptly drops to the floor as I let it fall every sixty seconds; and finally, the channel shown here depicts a dress my mother loved, raised high above my head with a simple wooden contraption and taken for a walk through the streets where I live in Pretoria, South Africa. In it, the dress seems to float like a ghost, light and free, swaying in flashes of blue, pink, and green.

[The film starts to play. It plays for 2 minutes, 12 seconds, without interruption, before Thom speaks again.]



I read from my diary, 24 June 2016. An entry.

Mother, motherland. You have changed. But we, we are all the same. I am the same. We are visitors. Now, dense soft clouds patrol the borders between us, like fine grains of sand that burrow their way in between the gaps of your toes at the beach.

A holiday.

Sometime in the mid-80s, we were driving around KwaZulu-Natal. A red Toyota Corolla. Suddenly, we are surrounded by people, a horde, a host. A volatile, angry crowd. Some are carrying pangas. Others carry guns, sticks, stones, and some shout. This must be a protest of sorts but I am too young to understand. I know my father has his gun. It's hidden in the cubbyhole. How many people, how many shots? My mother turns around and she says, 'Stay calm.'

Second entry, 2019:

An image, a scan, an MRI. White spots. Little clouds in the night, or stars on a cloudless night. Too many to count. What do they mean? We don't know. We don't know exactly what these things are, but certainly, they show signs of growth. This could account for loss of memory. No, it does not represent a negative prognosis. We simply don't understand what it means.

On Saturday, I will go home. I will go back to my country. I will be back inside the spotted skull of my motherland.





### **Part three:**

*[A live-feed camera, held in portrait, captures a red brick suspended from a rope at head height above a concrete floor, set against a white wall. Thom steps into view, between the brick and camera, wearing a hat and holding two identical hats, one in each hand. He steps back, looking pensively away from the camera, before turning back to the camera and speaking, as if thinking aloud].*

All bodies have weight, and volume.

*[He steps out of the frame, then back in, moving towards the brick, his back turned to the camera. He then pushes the brick in an arc, upwards and away from the camera, before pushing it. The brick swings, orbiting dangerously close to his head. He is not looking at the brick, but faces away from it, towards the camera.]*

Space.

*[He swings the brick once more, stepping out of frame to collect the two hats, which he places on either end of the brick, once stabilised by his hands. He swings the bricks / hats in a small arc. One falls. He picks it up and tries again, this time in a bigger arc. They swing, the hats balancing on either end].*



Johan Thom, *Things appear and disappear*, 2022. Performance lecture and sculptural installation at the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, 24 September 2022. Photos: Alet Pretorius.

[Reading from Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 2007, pp. 51 and 56]

"Seeing" atoms or other entities with the aid of a microscope is not a matter of simply look – of passively gazing on something as a spectator – but an achievement that requires a complex set of practices to accomplish. To "see," one must actively intervene: "You learn to see through a microscope by doing, not just looking. [p. 51]

Experimenting and theorising are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning. [p. 56]

[Reading from Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 1994, p. 118]

Flesh, a raw, formless, bodily materiality, the mythical "primary material," through corporeal inscriptions (juridical, medical, punitive, disciplinary) is constituted as a distinctive body capable of acting in distinctive ways, performing specific tasks in socially specified ways, marked, branded, by a social seal. Bodies are fictionalized, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses,

which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives, narratives not always or even usually transparent to themselves. Bodies become emblems, heralds, badges, theaters, tableaux, of social laws and rights, illustrations and exemplifications of law, informing and rendering pliable flesh into determinate bodies, producing the flesh as a point of departure and a locus of incision[...]

And finally

[Reading from Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, 2001, pp. 16 – 17]:

This time that is *appearing*, this *passing time*, meant abandoning conventional views[...] This time is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones[...] [We] follow a great variety of temporal trajectories and a wide range of swings, only reducible to an analysis in terms of convergent or divergent evolution at the cost of an extraordinary impoverishment of [our] reality.

Thank you.

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Johan Thom lives and works in Pretoria as a visual artist and a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at the Department of Visual Art, University of Pretoria. Thom works across a variety of media including sculpture, video, performance, drawing, printmaking and photography. He is also an active artist-curator who regularly engages with the question of art-as-research, conceptually driven art and the body. From a broader focus on the body in his earlier work Thom's interest have gradually shifted to a more specific exploration of the material relationship between the body and found objects. For example, in *The Animal Series* (2013) Thom explores his body's relationship to an African elephant skull. In other artworks he engages with pencils, fishing gut, soil, gold, broken glass, wood, polyurethane foam and oil amongst others. Solo exhibitions include The Goodman Gallery (2015), Nirox Project Space (2014), Iwalewa Haus (2010), the Johannesburg Art Gallery (2008) and the Bag Factory (2008), and Kalashnikov Gallery forthcoming in 2023, amongst others. His works have also been included in group exhibitions at the Venice Biennale (2003), the Canary Islands Biennale (2006), and at the Palazzo delle Papesse (2008). He is an active presence in the art research community and has participated in conferences and workshops at the University of Pretoria (2013/14/15 & 21) Documenta 13 (2012), the University of Cambridge (2009), GradCam in Dublin (2010), the Finnish Academy of Fine Art (2010), the Slade School of Fine Art (2010, 2011, 2012), "Real Presence" at the Venice Biennale (2005), the University of Bayreuth (2010) and elsewhere. In 2014 Thom completed a PhD in Fine Art at the Slade School of Fine Art (UCL) on a Cannon-Collins Commonwealth scholarship.





## “The Question of ‘Africanness’ and the Expanded Field of Sculpture”

Olu Oguibe

I'd like to thank all the folks who've joined us today. I'm an old fashioned believer that Saturdays are for families or, at least, doing yard work or visiting museums or the small farmers' market. So, thank you for taking the time out. A lot of thanks also go to the organisers of the event, most directly to Dr. Thom and his colleagues, who've been working on this series for a while, and to all the different institutions involved.

I'd also like to give some general remarks around the topic of our discussion, and then, time permitting, talk about a recent work or two that might demonstrate some of the points or issues pertinent to the subject matter.

At this point I should make a small confession. My confession is that our topic today, namely the “Question of ‘Africanness’ and the Expanded Field of Sculpture,” is a somewhat peculiar one for me. The peculiar aspect is not the bit about the expanded field of sculpture, but rather the question of Africanness. I have to confess that the question of Africanness is not one that I entertain too often or with much enthusiasm. I should call to mind that nearly thirty years ago, I published a quite contentious paper at the time called “In the Heart of Darkness,” in which I contested the very notion of Africanness, or at least, the received notion of Africanness up to that moment.

Until then, the prevailing notion of Africa and Africanness — especially in the West, but also elsewhere outside the continent — had been exclusively sub-Saharan Black. This seemed incongruous to me for several reasons, the first being that the ancient town or city from which the continent takes its name was not sub-

Saharan. It was the Berber city or kingdom of Ifriqiya in present day Tunisia that the continent was subsequently named after, with the sub-Saharan part still mostly referred to wholly as Ethiopia until well into the eighteenth century AD. In broad historical time, that's quite recent.

While today this might seem one quibble too many, my second reservation was that the continent is still a vast terrain of almost innumerable groups, cultures, and languages of no less vastly disparate migratory histories and delineations. So, the then prevailing notion of an almost given homogeneous Africanness, literally marked with a line in the sand at the bottom of the Sahara, struck me as rather simplistic, by which I mean that term in its proper English form, rather than the corrupted American understanding of the adjective.

That was nearly thirty years ago, and I believe my questioning of that notion did occasion a significant revision in the way it would subsequently be applied to narratives and critiques of contemporary art from the continent.

About a decade or so after “In the Heart of Darkness” was published, I had a rather interesting experience which brought up, once more, the question of Africanness. This time it was, in fact, in relation to what we refer to in this discussion as “the expanded field of sculpture.” In 2005, I was invited along with several contemporary artists from different parts of the globe to make new public work for an urban regeneration project in Korea. The Korean project director was a friend and colleague with whom I had participated in other previous international projects. I travelled

to Korea and, with the project director, visited several sites in Anyang Valley where the project was sited. The old resort-town of Anyang is located between Mt. Anyak and Mt. Samsung, outside Seoul. This is the mountain from which the giant electronics company takes its name.

When I returned to Connecticut, I spent a great many long nights in the studio hashing out ideas for a public sculpture which I then sent to the director. He had already accepted my initial idea, which was to make a work that would acknowledge a small group of ancient Buddhist monks, known in Korean mythology as the Three Monks of Great Virtue, who once had a monastery not far from the site. My work would take the form of an altar comprised of a seat placed on a large boulder we found on site. This was pretty much in line with my practice of situating public work historically within its site, rather than shopping the same idea around or, to quote Trinh Tin Min-ha's seminal essay on the subject, "from one place

to another." To reflect that this work was a gift from my culture to the site in honor of the monks, I gave it the Igbo name for an altar or shrine. So, now, it came down to what form this altar seat would take, and my idea was decidedly modernist and very minimalist. In architecture and furniture, those are my preferences.

However, when I sent the sketches to my friend, his response was quite brief. We would like something "African," he said. Now, that took me aback. What did he mean by something "African"? I'd innocently presumed, or rather taken for granted, that today, in the twenty-first century, anything I make as an African is inherently and invariably African, as well. But not so my colleague. He determinedly wished for a form or object which is easily and clearly visually distinguishable as "African" in reference and origin. Authorship alone, or even along with concept, was not enough. The form had to be identifiably African. But how?





Olu Oguibe, *Okwu Muo: Seat for Ala, Anyanwu the Three Virtuous Monks*, 2005. Anyang Public Art Project, Anyang, Korea. Image courtesy of the artist.

In discussion, it soon became evident that this was not an argument I could win if I wanted the project to succeed. I had made other major public work in Asia where the question of Africanness did not arise, and was not an issue. This time, however, I felt like I could almost understand why, in a large field of artists that was, in fact, bound to increase over the years as the project expanded, my friend wished for a certain variety in approach and languages that might reflect different cultures from different geographies. So, a somewhat predictable or easily recognisable Africanness seemed in order to expect. Which in itself still did not address what this Africanness might entail or visually resemble.

In the end, given the importance of the concept in both of our views, I chose to drop the idea of modernist sculpture and instead interpret the

seat for the altar in easily identifiable form by modelling it on an Igbo stool, which we then had cut in crystal and backed with a separate “back” of mirror-finish stainless steel, not visible in the image. It wasn’t entirely clear to me that the new form would translate Africanness any more than my participation in itself should, but it did satisfy the desire or wish, and we made what, in my thinking, was a successful work.

What all this implies, to me, is that there inevitably has to be several different ways of interpreting or demonstrating “Africanness,” one of which is to offer references to, or reinventions of, traditional or precolonial forms from the continent. But that’s only one way of seeing. There is a more important understanding of the defining place of Africanness in the expanded field of sculpture, one which, it could be argued, may or may

not have been apparent to my colleague. And that is the fact that almost all modern and contemporary sculpture bear an element of Africanness, irrespective of where they're made or who by.

I say almost all because there are extant traditions and tendencies in modern and contemporary sculpture that may have parallels in traditions of form in Africa, but do not owe to those traditions or influences directly or indirectly. It is a huge world. Most, however, owe directly along quite brief lineages to traditions of form that entered global modern art and creative practices round about the turn of the twentieth century.

In many respects, this is ground that's been plowed over one too many times, and not always for the right reasons. The more salient points can, in fact, be easily summarised.

The encounter between African art and European art, especially at the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries, stripped the latter of its pretentious and often misinformed allusions to classical Greek and Roman art, especially in sculpture. And, while leading European artists directly modelled their new forms after objects and traditions from Africa, the most significant change was that those objects and traditions from Africa liberated European and eventually all modern and contemporary artists globally, and gave them license, as it were, to think of art and form and colour and concept in entirely new ways and without inhibition or limitations on the imagination. Looking at objects and art traditions from Africa and realising that a sculptor did not have to hew stone like Michelangelo did or like Phidias was mistakenly supposed to have done, or create formulaic bronze figures and groups narrating or approximating romanticist, neo-classical allegories along stiflingly narrow and often repetitive parameters, but instead, could break

out and re-imagine form and discard singular perspective and use or incorporate hitherto decidedly non-sculptural materials going by European academic standards, and create assemblages and collages and animated situations once consigned to puppetry or the circus, and recombine these with dance and theatre like West or Central Africans do, and bring it all under art with or without delineations.

This realisation also encouraged artists to then return to other traditions within their own cultures that they were otherwise wont to ignore in favour of the Western academic tradition, and rediscover and study and try to reclaim those other traditions and reinsert them in extant practice.

That is the ultimate element of Africanness in the expanded field of sculpture, that freedom and liberty to stretch the definitions of sculpture and the sculptural beyond traditional ideas of making or imaging, and produce integrated, multivalent new creations that draw on not just form and space but multiple realms of existence and experience and impact on all the senses. And that element of limitless possibility, that African element of infinite daring and jest and subterfuge and implausible inventiveness, is what most contemporary art still rides on, be it sculpture in all its expanded dimensions or performance or new forms of painting or digital imaging, all the way down to NFTs. The very idea that an electronically-resident algorithm could be art — that's African. And this Africanness defined modern art, as it still defines global contemporary art on and from every continent.

I would argue that this is the more important element of Africanness which is evident in my own practice, especially because I decided or chose quite early in my career, or perhaps, it was chosen for me by a natural rebellious temperament, to make work which





Olu Oguibe, installation view of *Pink and White Flowers*, 2018. Botanical Gardens of the North-West University, South Africa. Image courtesy of the artist.

is not predictable, particularly with regard to form. My work would in essence explore the full freedom that sculptors and artists in old African societies demonstrated in their eclectic and uninhibited choices, letting theme and purpose and occasion determine my methods rather than stick to a formula or work within any restrictions. I think this aesthetic freedom may be seen in the recent and still ongoing projects that I've been working on, and I think we just saw that in Johan's presentation. We see it all around in contemporary art. You go back to the fourteenth century, the fifteenth century, right up until the nineteenth century, and hardly any of that would be accepted

within the definitions of sculpture within the Western tradition, but today that's what we do. We keep pushing the envelope and we keep pushing the limits because African art gave modern and contemporary art the licence to do so.

At this point, I would like to try and bring up some images of a particular work and round out with a discussion of the work itself. It began its journey in South Africa in 2018, when Johan and Benji Liebmann, the founder of NIROX, invited me to do a residency there. I wanted to do something specific to South Africa. There was no shortage of ideas and subject



matter, but the more important project which really brought me to NIROX and to South Africa, with Johan's help, was to address a very contentious issue in South Africa, one which eventually took controversial form in the figure of a young woman named Nokuphila Kumalo, who was murdered in 2013, and who happened to be a sex worker.

*[Shows a digital rendering or sketch of Nokuphila Kumalo, published in an article by Ra'eesa Pather in the Mail & Guardian on 1 December 2016]*

Some of you might be familiar with the story of this young woman, whose photograph, we are told, does not actually exist. Nokuphila Kumalo was a sex worker in Cape Town. As some of you might remember, she was murdered by someone who turned out to be a very prominent South African artist, someone whom I knew quite well and someone whose career many of us had contributed to promote in some way, because he was a fantastic artist, but it did turn out that he was much more than the artist that we all used to love at some point and all supported. Now, Nokuphila was brutally kicked to death on the sidewalk on an early morning in April 2013, and I wanted to address that. I wanted to do something, to make something that centres around her, but uses that to address, not just the question of sex work itself, but also the subject of sexual violence in South Africa, in Africa, and wherever else it still occurs (and it does, at an astronomical level).

I took my lead from an interview that Nokuphila's mother gave after she died, when she explained that she had no photographs. The one thing that her mother remembered was that she loved pink and white flowers, so I wanted to make a public memorial of sorts using pink and white flowers. We explored several ideas and finally I settled on the idea of using live flowers. The other side of the

idea is that, because these were live plants which we couldn't just leave there (I didn't want to make them permanent because that then becomes a burden), I decided that we would encourage visitors to take these plants home, and take care of them, and plant them in their gardens or keep them in their kitchens, and, insofar as they do that, to remember this young woman and remember her story, and remember how she came to such a violent and abrupt death at such a young age. And perhaps use these flowers in their home, as a teaching tool — as something that someone can use to explain to their children why this plant is in their home and how they got it, and then to tell the story of this young woman.



At any rate, I used 4,500 plants to create this installation at the University of North West in Potchefstroom. Eventually, people did take the plants. I thought it was a good way to realise what I had in mind, however, I did not want this to be the end of the project. I wanted it to be a living project that could be revisited again and again in different contexts. The next opportunity came in 2020, in the form of an invitation to





Olu Oguibe, *Sex Work is Honest Work*, 2020. Neon light. sonsbeek20–24 . Photo: Django van Ardenne. Image courtesy of the artist.

participate in Sonsbeek, which is a public art festival in the Netherlands. The project director this time was Dr. Bonaventure Ndikung. For Sonsbeek, I thought I might recreate the monument in South Africa on a much larger scale, given the nature of the festival, but sticking to those pink and white flowers.

That was my initial proposal. As it happens — and you have to be flexible — we could not realise that initial proposal for an interesting reason, namely that I wanted to use live Tulips. I wanted us to plant a whole field of them, pink and white varieties, but I was told after much consultation that, given the time we had and because of climate change, we could

not predict how the flowers would turn out. They might not turn out pink, they might not even bloom, they might bloom at a different time, but we needed them to bloom for the show, so it was made clear to me that, to meet the deadline, we could not pursue that idea. That's how I decided to do the work differently, taking the path of more or less traditional public sculpture. The result was these neon sculptural forms; in a way using neon to reference sex work, to a certain degree.

The second version was in the centre of town. Finally, this work is ongoing. It's returning to South Africa in November in a number of different forms, as a work on paper but also

as a smaller sculpture. Myself, Johan, and a number of collaborators also hope to bring this back to South Africa next year, which would be the tenth anniversary of Nokuphila's death, and perhaps convene a symposium, conference, gathering, or seminar to address the issue of sexual violence, as well as the challenges of sex work in South Africa.

I'll probably round up there, and I think the whole point of this presentation — mine or Johan's — is really to point out that what African art or Africanness brought to our practices, and contemporary practice, is that licence to explore beyond stone or bronze sculpture or white alabaster, and explode the very idea of what sculpture is — to make it live; whatever needs to be used to convey a certain idea in sculptural form. That idea of the sculptural being completely blown apart, that's the Africanness in modern and contemporary practice. It's the Africanness in my own practice that I stick to, rather than the predictable ideas of what Africanness is. So thank you, and I hope that we get some questions and comments.

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Olu Oguibe is an artist, author and curator. Oguibe a seminal figure in contemporary (African) artistic practice with artistic, curatorial and theoretic outputs that include exhibitions as part of the Venice, Johannesburg and Havana Biennales, Documenta in Kassel, Sonsbeek and numerous others; the curation of major national and international exhibitions and projects; and the authoring of key texts in relation to the study and dissemination of contemporary African art such as "The Culture Game" (2004) and "Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace" (2000) among others. Oguibe is a senior fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at New School and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. Amongst his many major works are *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* (2017), *Biafra Time Capsule* (2017) and *Sex work is honest work* (2021).

## Q&A

**Carolyn Jean Martin [CJM]:** Thank you so much Olu and Johan for these wonderful presentations. I'm overwhelmed and struck by the art that you showed us. I'm struck by the lack of images of Nokuphila, and the way in which you, Olu, used flowers, and how people could take the plant away, give it care, and remember and share the story, creating this dynamic sense of story. Johan, I'm struck by the dress of your mother that moves through that space, recalling memories. And I think that part of that *Autoportrait* that you showed us also involves that Tucaro bird; this idea of an object moving through space. In conjunction with seeing that work, what is still on my mind is the last two weeks of spectacle that we saw with Queen Elizabeth II; the objects that moved through the United Kingdom — the casket, the orb, the sceptre, moving through the streets, and the way that the visual is used to maintain and create empire.

In terms of this discussion, I think about how objects are used in that way, and I think both of you have this beautiful ability to harness the energy of objects to remind someone of historical narratives, and how the object can reinforce ideologies, and how we have these perceptions of one, but also the other, and how we engage these personal constructions of memory through objects. I'd love you both to speak a bit more about the trajectory of the work, expanding on this kind of intentionality that happens with the shifting geographies, the imprint the body leaves on a place, and conversely, the imprint of place on the body within sculpture or performance.

**Johan Thom [JT]:** Olu, I wonder if you would permit me to say some words first? [Laughs] So because of the nature of my presentation I didn't get to say thanks to everyone. I would

like to say thanks very much to everyone who organised the talk; to Sven, who presented a part of my talk for me; and in particular to Olu. But let me explain that by way of some answer to your question.

As a young undergrad student, I found that we weren't really studying African art. What counted as African art certainly weren't contemporary African artworks. They might have concerned the Khoisan's artistic practice, for example — we had things like classical African art — but they really didn't form the core of our syllabus. By the time I started doing my Masters, I was working from a university slap-dash in the middle of the city. It had a completely different demographic from my previous university, so I felt this incredible need to connect better with my place of living.

One of those connections has to do with the simple realisation that, as a young white Afrikaans boy, you are suddenly surrounded by urban city dwellers, most of whom have slightly darker skins than yourself and speak other languages. So there was a real need on my part to say, how do I fit into this world? This is the bigger world. It's not that quiet, domestic space that is familiar in some ways, so I decided to re-educate myself. I went to the libraries and took out every book on African art that I could find, every book on African philosophy. At the time, those books had only been checked out once or twice. Strangely, it was during this process that an American curator at the Museum for African Art in New York sent me a lot of books about African art.

**Olu Oguibe [OO]:** From New York? [Laughs]

**JT:** Yes, I mean, Olu, you know what I'm saying. [Laughs] So these books — which were

published in New York; some of the authors are still very much current — land here in large packages. They're on anything from classical art to so-called modernist African art, and along the way, I start to receive all the books about rituals, but it's that fantastic encounter with the performative that says to me, 'Hey, I don't have to produce work that sits easily inside the gallery. I don't have to think about the confines.' So it links very nicely to what Olu was saying.

I'll never forget the preface in one of Kwame Anthony Appiah's books. It starts with the idea that 'Africa is largely invented by Europeans.' That always stopped me right in my tracks. So to dispel this idea for me neatly to begin with, although I saw the currency of it sitting around, I kept hammering away at what counted, not necessarily as African art, but as 'cultural practices.' That opened up the world for me on a very broad level. Suddenly I understood ritual — its seminal space within African cultures, broadly speaking — but more specifically about how the object itself didn't function as an isolated, singular object. It operated more as a functional, symbolic object within a ritualised performative space. It wasn't purely aesthetic, for example.

Finally I receive a book by a certain professor on this panel, Olu, called *The Culture Game* [2003]. There are a number of essays in it, but one touchstone was this question of Africanness and how it played out in the work of Yinka Shonibare, specifically *Double-Dutch* [1994], which is kind of a central work. At that point a number of things clicked in my head, which is this fantastic conceptual daring-do that you could combine with uses of materials that somehow signify belonging, no matter how complicated. That set me on a path of really freeing myself up from a largely Eurocentric art education. Suddenly I'm thinking about how things are dynamic in different ways. It makes me acutely aware

of the power structures that play out in the art world. And I take these things forward finally with a focus on the body as a dynamic thing, and the nature of found objects.

I mean, these hats [gestures to the hat on his head] are from New York, but they're sold here in Pretoria, and they're sold here for a specific group of people, Black South Africans who purchase them as wedding gifts. So you get this hat with a trench coat, a pair of shoes, and a bottle of whisky when you propose and meet your father-in-law. Suddenly these objects are pregnant with meaning in ways that I'd never quite considered. But I also understand that these objects are pregnant with meaning, and as such they require activation. That suddenly breaks the isolated notion of the artwork as sitting on a pedestal, being quiet. So there's a long story there, and I would like to hand over to Olu now.

**OO:** Quite frankly I think you've addressed it all. The idea of the hat and its story speaks directly to Carolyn's question regarding the body: how objects of clothing — not even just symbolically, but also biologically — preserve the body that's been in them. That's why I'm usually quite sceptical about used-clothing, you know? Because there's an encrustation of a body, and perhaps bodies — their cat, their family, friends, places they've visited — all physically, microscopically imbued and embodied in that object. And it's the same on a more metaphoric level with just about every other object. I think that's what became apparent to modern artists; that this is what is going on here, and what we've been missing in academic traditions.

The other thing to point out — you would notice this when you go to say Germany or Ireland, to Bavaria — is that the traditions that we're referring to in Africa can actually be found in Europe. It's just that they were ignored.



When I began to understudy El Anatsui, not just as his student, but also as a critic — someone who was interested in writing about his work and other people's works — he always talked about a performance he did in northern Germany. He had discovered some kind of wooden bowl that the people there used to invoke rain. It was a rain-making bowl that they would bring out if there was drought or whatever, and they would do these performances. This is in north Germany, not West or Central Africa, so it's this idea that had been stripped from the academic tradition, this idea that all things — and I don't mean this in a particularly metaphysical way, because I'm not very metaphysical myself — but all things embody other things. Every object has stories around it, people who have touched it, its uses. And all these can be activated, as you say, in a different space. The kettle, which is traditionally active in the kitchen, can be reactivated in an artistic and creative space where it then speaks to cooking, or the people who used it... There are perhaps many other things that enlarge its ramifications, and all the things that it invokes.

I didn't personally have to learn this in school. I was actually thinking about it when preparing my presentation, but I wrote about this at the very beginning of my career in what you might call a manifesto, published in 1989. It was called "My feet have found the path," and it went into how my academic training was in many ways very European, although I was studying under people like El Anatsui. We still had to do life drawing, and we had to use charcoal and oil paints. I mean, imagine oil paints in Nigeria! We had to get them from Europe. We had to wait on friends who went to Europe to pick oranges and apples during the holidays to bring back oil paints, because they don't make them in Nigeria and they don't exist. So why were we making work with oil paints? This is what I addressed in "My feet have found a path."

I realised that my mother, and all the other women painting mud walls — that's painting. They were making murals, right? I had almost been moved away from understanding that that is art. I had to get back to it, and think of all the other things that I'd learnt growing up in a rural, still very traditional Igbo society.

My father made mask faces for these masking societies, while being a preacher of the Church of Christ and making images for Catholics. He also made images of Saint Mary and so on for them. He sort of dipped in every bowl that he could find. Which is relevant to what we're doing, because the eclecticism in Johan's work and my own derives from that kind of awareness; that it's what you make out of it because of your sensibility and sensitivity toward what things actually represent. You don't always have to create new things in order to evoke these sentiments and emotions and narratives and histories and memories. They're already there, if you know where to look.

**CJM:** Hearing you both respond to that question, and thinking about this idea of freedom within these expanded definitions of sculpture; this idea of Africanness as being woven through almost all art production; and the education that one goes through to arrive at that place — it makes me think of Sylvia Winter, who says that we are disciplined into thinking along lines that reinscribe our annihilation, and that we have to become undisciplined. In becoming undisciplined, we have to think about the idea of Africa and Africanness in these much larger, dynamic, global ways. Certainly the ways in which Olu put forth in "In the Heart of Darkness" and "Double Dutch and The Culture Game."

It makes me think of Felwine Sarr, the philosopher, economist, musician. He spoke about this idea that Africa will always be the future. Implicit in such claims is the idea that

Africa's co-presence with the present is not there, it rings hollow. So this idea of Africa in this ongoing perpetual future creates this idea of Africa and Africanness as an object itself, right? And it's that idea of the object, and how the Western world thinks about Africa. They don't think about it in this global, dynamic way, and the way that cultural production happens. Both of you capture these global dynamics, and that internal sense of place that we call home, working through those western signifiers of what is African. You both provoke viewers to recognise the reality of immigration, migration, and, importantly, this idea of not just focusing on the African diaspora, but the idea of the diaspora within any given place. So thank you so much for the work that you have done.

Before I get to the audience's questions, I'm intrigued to ask: Olu, you started as a painter and you've moved into thinking of, for lack of a better term, social sculpture, and the engagement of bodies around fixed objects; around that sign in *Sex Work is Honest Work* [2020] or *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* [2017]. Johan, that brick gave me tension and stress as it moved around you... I want to ask, how did you move away from fixed objects into this space of thinking about sculpture in this more dynamic way, and about how bodies interact with it and how you interact with it as well?

**OO:** In my case it's quite easy. I think about this all the time. I actually thought about it yesterday or the day before: how, having trained formally as a painter, I'm making my reputation as a sculptor or installation artist. I haven't given up painting by any stretch of the imagination, but the oldest things that I made as a child were sculptures, because my father was making them.

Yesterday I thought about this with a certain sense of sadness, because the earliest things I made used Gmelina bark. Gmelina is a tree

that was introduced in some parts of West Africa because people use the wood. It's white timber. So it lines the streets, even in the villages, and it has a thick bark which I would use, when I was six, seven years old, to make what we would refer to as passport masks; masks without the eyes. Real figures, you know? Faces.

From there I progressed to making small busts, because my father was making these things and I was understudying him. But he was also painting signs, so I also learnt about paint. At the same time, art wasn't something I wanted to do. For one, I had no sense of professions as a child, but when I became a little older — in my teens — it wasn't art that I wanted to do. I had other ideas. That's where the social part comes in. I actually wanted to be a journalist.

My sense of journalism was sparked by correspondence with a man who had been jailed as an investigative journalist, perhaps before I was even born. I met him when I went on a school excursion at a coal mine where he happened to be the information officer. He told the story of his trajectory and career and how he went to prison. Now, I wanted to do that. But when I eventually chose art, some of that came into it, in addition to what Johan pointed out — that in the kind of rural society where I grew up, art is still a social vehicle. You use it for those purposes, so it all manifested as sculptural installations, performances, and so on. But it's really all together, because the monuments I'm now making are pretty much graphic — they're all about typography. There's no static space that I wish to occupy, or do occupy. We have to straddle all available spaces, and all available languages, and all available cultures, because my work hasn't just drawn from El [Anatsui] and the people I studied with, but from Picasso and Brancusi and so on. I take from wherever, but it's my work. It's still the point that I want to make.

**JT:** I wonder if I can say two short things. The

first concerns the nature of time, temporality, and the kind of encounter with Africa by Europe and the nature in which that encounter is complicated by a rather narrow view of time, of history itself. Immeasurably complicated by it. One of the books I read while dodging that brick was *On the Postcolony* [2001], where I specifically mentioned the question of time and how how multitudes of temporalities seem to co-exist within not only Africa, but the world. It's just that, in that initial encounter, there is a very set notion of what time this is — it's dark Africa, backward Africa.

As that encounter deepens there is an awareness of these numerous temporalities that now seem to co-exist, but rather than accept that as a state of the world, the word 'chaos' is typically used to describe Africa. The kind of terms utilised to described the continent are negative in origin, rather than attending to the dynamic things that happen or the fact that this is actually a good foundation to start from; that these multiple temporalities are part and parcel of life. This is how it is. I take that with me in the world, but I also want to talk about it because of this question of Africanness and where it finds its roots.

One of the things is that, when I depart from this space and go elsewhere, I always go with a rather open mind. I'm open to experiences around me. I think the old term for this was being a 'citizen of the world,' and most contemporary artists try to be this. They don't try to lock themselves into a particular cultural tradition. Whether you're a musician or any other kind of cultural practitioner, we steal from each other continuously. The word is 'appropriate,' I suppose, which is a much nicer word, but we do this.

**OO:** It's actually a word that I don't approve of. And I wrote about this in an essay called "God's Transistor Radio" [2011]. Culture doesn't appropriate. The very nature of culture

is that it absorbs, right? It has no rules. It doesn't listen to anybody. Children are going to wear what they're going to wear because they see other children wearing it, and they're not going to ask your permission or where it comes from. So culture has a dynamism of its own. It's a speed train without a driver. It just does its thing, whether you like it or not. In France they fight English, but it's not a battle you can win, because language doesn't respect that. It just takes from wherever. Culture is not appropriation. I can understand the construction of that term, but I think it's very much abused by people who don't understand the dynamics of culture.

**JT:** I think it fundamentally positions some kind of dishonesty in that dynamic. That dishonesty perhaps has its place when you're looking at straightforward cultural imperialism, sure, but cultural imperialism is very rarely interested in taking something from its so-called subjects — that I think is the very definition of imperialism. All it wants to take are resources, but it's certainly not interested in adopting anything.

It can't necessarily stop that process from happening, because as you rightly say, culture is dynamic. So something will slip in from the side and you will bring those other cultural signifiers with you. You simply can't stop that from happening. I mean, we had apartheid, and they tried everything to stop the races from intermingling, unsuccessfully. We simply can't stop certain things from happening, no matter how strongly we may oppose them.

**OO:** People are going to take out Chinese whether you like it or not, you know? They might insist on their Britishness and hate the Chinese, but they'll still take out Chinese food. It's the nature of culture.

**CJM:** We have many, many questions. Here's the first: 'Thank you for this wonderful exploration. My question is for Dr. Oguibe,

and it's with regard to the origin in reference to Africanness. Are you explicitly saying that origin is precolonial, and therefore Black, and is it this Blackness in actuality that influenced modernity and the definitions of contemporary art as it relates to freedom?'

**OO:** Blackness doesn't even come into it. That's one word that I don't make much reference to. Having pointed out that I went into the subject of Africanness back in the early '90s because there was a misinterpretation of Africanness, a received ethnographic understanding of Africa which thought about it as sub-Saharan only, when in fact the continent itself is named after a town in Tunisia. So the idea of sub-Saharan Blackness as synonymous with Africanness; that's where I actually started out part of my public intellectual life. I was contesting that, and pointing out that it did not make sense; that Africa is a vast continent of different cultures and languages, including white people who have been there for over 400 years, and Asians, and Arabs, and Black Africans who don't understand each other, who are just as diverse from one another as these other groups are from people who have darker skins. So I've never actually accepted the idea of Africanness, or Africanity, as being exclusively Black.

As far as modern and contemporary art is concerned, the reason I said it's a much ploughed over topic that probably doesn't deserve to be returned to is that the facts are very plain. It was *work from Africa* — and that's the phrase I used. I did not say Black work or sub-Saharan work, but work from Africa. You can then try to trace where in Africa, which cultures in Africa, but it's work from Africa that European artists encountered and engaged with, especially in Paris, that transformed all modern and contemporary practice. There have been exhibitions, even at the Metropolitan Museum, showing side by side the African sculpture and Brancusi's

work, the African sculpture and Picasso's work. They were not only inspired by, but in many instances copied, the work. So we needn't spend time on that. It's not Blackness that influenced them. It's a different understanding of form, of the creative imagination, one that, we might say in our modern terms, *seemed* — and *seemed* is important — entirely uninhibited.

I have a book here, for instance [see *following page*]. On its cover is a sculpture from which entire traditions of modern and contemporary art were born, for example, those artists who made careers wrapping things. Before they were able to wrap bridges and buildings and all the other things that they wrapped, they began with this particular sculpture. This very work. You can see its influence on people who recently won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale. That's what I'm talking about. This isn't Blackness.

More important for me is that it's this kind of work in which you find paper, rope, paint. There was no paint on Western sculpture by the nineteenth century. It had all been stripped. The only colour that you could find in the accepted academic tradition was bronze. Colour was taken out of it, but people saw these things, and noticed that it didn't all match — they saw the ropes, the paper, and were like, 'Why are we making this boring stuff when we could do that?' That's the licence that I'm talking about, which drives all modern and contemporary art. It doesn't matter who you are making art today, it's the licence that came from this kind of work that drives what you're doing. Even if you're just making watercolours. That's a fact. And it isn't about Blackness.

**CJM:** I also have a question for Johan: 'I was interested to hear about viewer reception to *CONTAINER*, particularly the town officials who missed seeing the turmeric beneath the surface. Were there, or could you please expand upon, interactions as a part of the art,





Susan Vogel and Francine N'Diaye. 1985. African Masterpieces from the Musée de L'Homme. Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

with the public who routinely visit the park for ablutions?’

**JT:** So as Sven explained in his reading of that text in third person, I first visited the park and walked around. I saw who was actually using the space, who the space was for. So there’s a dam in that space but it’s used by tourists and it’s really poor fair. Very few tourists visit it, but it does service the local community. It gives them

a place to wash, to do their cooking, to go to the loo — it’s a disaster on that level, but this is how it is. One area of the dam is used for that, another for something else. Kids play there every day. So I quickly realised that this was the function of that space.

The park itself is not very active, at least not that area where I was given a site to work. It’s a very beautiful, open, grassy area, but it’s

more like a function area. Of course, what happens is that this area is regularly crossed by all the local inhabitants, because it's not utilised by the so-called tourists. So once there I realised that these are my people. They are the people I have to deal with. Whatever work I think I'm making here, this work will go for them. They must feel like the work belongs to them, that they have some ownership over this work, because really the one or two government officials who will come and visit on the opening day and look at the work and clap their hands — this work will have very little meaning for them.

After spending a couple of days there, talking to the locals, sitting and seeing what they do, kids then becoming friendly and coming to speak to you to find out who you are, why you're here, what you're doing... At that point I realised, ok, let's make something for this group. Something they can see as they wake up in the morning. This thing that is changing. At night, it's changed again, and slowly but surely there's this transformation of their ordinary landscape. By the end of it, it would be a secret that they would keep with them. They would understand the entire process. When we started working, the local community became very interested. They would come by. The kids would run around in the pit. You'd come back in the morning and it would be a disaster because they had played in it. By the end of it, we had yellow footprints all over the park, which I thought was absolutely delightful. So they see this thing unfolding, they know it's there, and the work, I hope, belongs to them and their particular memory of that place and that time, without necessarily having to understand it.

The official delegation who came for the opening were less pleased about it, because this was a government initiative and so on. But, to his credit, the national secretary of the province did listen to the story and

laugh about it. It didn't necessarily please him, but he could understand the gesture. The rest of them were less pleased about having spent all this money on someone who made something hidden, but for me it was a wonderful experience to work with the labourers: to just be there, be present, be visible, not ask too much from anyone else. Of course, the work has now completely disappeared. It only appears in a couple of photographs, which is a different discussion.

**CJM:** We're coming towards the end of our time together, but before we conclude, I want to address one more collective question: 'There is a lot of activism and discussion on changing the museum from its colonial roots. I'm interested in your perspective or vision on museums as a dynamic African place. In what way would current museology change to perpetuate this understanding or practice of Africanness?'

**JT:** What do you think, Olu? You've been in the game longer than I have. I'm slightly less optimistic about this particular idea, unless you reformulate the very notion of a museum.

**OO:** I think the museum has its place. I actually think it can be a fantastic institution, but it's also an institution with a history. We have to remember how museums began, as collections of the privileged class who made so much money from either slavery or other forms of trade — oil in America, for instance — who then travelled the world with this wealth and collected things for themselves, for their homes, to entertain people with these things that represented their ideas of different cultures but also their worldliness. Eventually, they decided to donate those collections for the public enlightenment of the lesser classes, but also as manifestations of their ego, you know? They either donated them *in situ*, in which case they would make the collection a museum, or they would endow or build a public space for their collection, for the rest

of the community to have access. That's the history of museums.

Over time it has been slowly transforming, but that crust of history is still there. Like, where were these things collected from, and how? They weren't always stolen by colonial governments. Some were spirited away by individuals. The black market is a big, nasty, dark, vicious market that will steal anything if there's someone who's willing to pay good money. But I think the onus is on the people who work in these spaces.

In a sense I share some of Johan's, I don't want to say pessimism, but doubt. Looking at the generations that have succeeded the generations that were there when I began to engage with these institutions, the almost certainty was that a younger generation was going to come up and take over and transform things, and they're going to take into consideration all of the work that many of us did to call attention to questionable practices. But I don't really see much of that happening as yet. You have to keep hope alive, as one famous preacher said. But museums can do that. As potential, why not? Individuals can set up museums that do things differently, and I think such museums probably exist, but at the end of the day, to be a prestigious museum... It's almost like what Jesus says in the Bible, that it's easier for a horse to pass through the eye of the needle than for a wealthy man to see the kingdom of God. So it's going to be very hard for anyone who is going to set up a prestigious museum to be immaculate.

**JT:** You know, Olu, when I finished studying, during the late '90s, there was a spotlight on South Africa and a lot of artists made it onto international shores and so on, and they weren't producing commercial work. The art world, if you like, was much less formalised than it is these days. That, for me, is a real pity.

I liked the less formal art world. I liked the fact that you had freedom then.

Moshekwa Langa said that he had the best time of his life before someone discovered him, because he could do all the works that he wanted and there was no market pressure. These days I even see it effecting young students. They can almost not think for themselves outside of the formalised market, which now includes museums. That's the hilarious thing for me, because it's about your own agency. It's still possible to have great exhibitions in your small flat. Invite good artists to do it. Although, more and more I'm wondering if artists would agree to do those shows. Now they all get big budgets for things, but it's still possible, and I think that's something that's very close to my heart.

**OO:** What is sad is that many museums actually began that way, and then transformed. The New Museum began in the kitchen. Hans Ulrich Obrist also started showing artists in his flat, and then became Hans Ulrich Obrist, you know — St. Peter at the gate, deciding who gets in and who doesn't. So it's still being done, but it transforms very quickly. There's the market and the market's sensibility, but there's also the practicality of sustainability. Even if it's your flat, you still have to pay bills. Very quickly people learn how to monetise this and that. So there's room for all those things, and I believe they continue to exist in certain places, but when the market comes in — and some of us are to take the blame, for bringing all those New York curators to South Africa in '97; there was a bus load of them — but it was good to see the wealth of creativity that existed in the place, and to give people opportunity, and enable them in their individual practices to take care of their families and hopefully their communities. So I certainly see the family aspect, and I'd like to see more of the community, but some of my



own generation who were picked up by the market, and who could adapt to the market, are giving back to communities and setting up residencies. Sometimes I think that I should have done that, because I prefer to provide opportunities for other artists, with residencies and foundations and grants, rather than being a poor artist who can't pay my own bills. But there's room for all kinds of positive things to happen. Whether they're happening or not is a different question.

**JT:** By way of some humour, and to return to the topic of our conversation: when I mentioned to a friend, who's an art critic, that we were discussing the expanded field of sculpture, he said, 'Well, when are people going to discuss the retracted field of sculpture?' By which he means the easy work which dominates. I see there was a comment at some point about easy figuration, and of course that's the market, but the market is powerful. I think we have to understand it and that it needs certain things.

**OO:** And people have needs as well. Not everyone has a university job like I used to have or like you have. Not everyone has the qualifications to get those jobs. They're very competitive. So I always make the point that art practice can also be a profession, because it's always been that way. In my presentation I sarcastically mentioned Phidias, in Greece. He was a professional sculptor. He had commissions and was a wealthy man. That's how he made his living. The court painters of Renaissance Europe, that's how they made their living. One of the reasons, as far as I'm concerned, that Vincent van Gogh took his own life had nothing to do with regular illness. Although he had illnesses like everyone else, it was the frustration of feeling worthless, because people were constantly buying work by his contemporaries, his friends, and simply ignored his no matter what he tried.

He came from the second most influential art market family in Europe. His uncle was the second most powerful person in the global art market at that time, yet they couldn't sell a single work of his. Not his brother, not his uncle, nobody could sell a thing. That did damage to his sense of self worth and value as an artist. So he began to give his work away or throw them away. Very frustrating, but practically, for artists who have to survive as artists, and who do not have qualifications to do other jobs, it's important to be able to make a living. So, when the market comes calling and says your work is valuable, and it's *this* valuable — it's not just valuable but it's actually *this* valuable — that's particularly positive for a person's sense of worth. While I may feel that my work, by its very form and nature is enough for me to understand my sense of worth, for others, just being validated is important. And people abuse it. It's in the nature of the market that things get abused.

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Transcribed and edited by Sven Christian.

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## The Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture

NIROX Sculpture Park,  
24 Kromdraai Rd (D540),  
Kromdraai,  
Krugersdorp,  
South Africa

### Opening hours

Monday – Thursday: appointment only  
Friday – Sunday: 10AM to 5PM

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