

Olu Oguibe

Artist's Dossier

Olu Oguibe

Olu Oguibe è uno scrittore e artista multimediale il cui lavoro si ritrova spesso a cavallo fra il formalismo minimalista e l'impegno sociale. Sue opere sono state ampiamente esposte in gallerie e musei, così come in biennali e triennali. Ha inoltre realizzato diversi interventi di arte pubblica in molti paesi: fra i più importanti si distingue il *Monumento agli Stranieri e ai Rifugiati*, una scultura pubblica eretta a Kassel in Germania nel 2017, e che ha ricevuto il premio Arnold Bode Preis in occasione di documenta 14.

Nel corso della sua carriera Olu Oguibe ha collaborato con personalità autorevoli della cultura come Salah Hassan, con il quale ha curato nel 2001 la mostra *Authentic/Ex-centric* alla Fondazione Levi nell'ambito della 49° Biennale di Venezia, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, tra i curatori di documenta 14, e Okwui Enwezor, dalla cui sinergia con Oguibe e Hassan nacque nel '94 la rivista *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, oltre a diversi interventi curatoriali e pubblicazioni significative.

Olu Oguibe è stato Docente di Pittura alla University of Connecticut fino al 2017, quando si è dimesso per dedicarsi a tempo pieno alla pratica artistica.

Olu Oguibe is a writer and multimedia artist whose work often straddles the line between minimalist formalism and social engagement. His works have been widely exhibited in galleries and museums, as well as in biennials and triennials. He has also realised various public art interventions in many countries: among the most prominent is the *Monument to Foreigners and Refugees*, a public sculpture erected in Kassel, Germany in 2017, and which received the Arnold Bode Preis award at documenta 14.

In the course of his career, Olu Oguibe has collaborated with influential cultural figures such as Salah Hassan, with whom he curated the 2001 exhibition *Authentic/Ex-centric* at the Fondazione Levi as part of the 49th Venice Biennale, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, one of the curators of documenta 14, and Okwui Enwezor, whose synergy with Oguibe and Hassan led to the creation in 1994 of the magazine *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, as well as various curatorial interventions and significant publications.

Olu Oguibe was Professor of Painting at the University of Connecticut until 2017, when he resigned to devote himself full-time to art practice.

Education:

PhD, Art History, University of London, 1992

Selected Honors, awards and Fellowships:

2017 Arnold Bode Prize for documenta 14
2013 Fulbright Award to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India (Declined)
2013 Governor's Award for Excellence and Lifetime Achievement, State of Connecticut
2006 Senior Fellowship, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
2001, 2002 Senior Fellowship, Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School
1998 Resident Fellowship, Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, Bellagio, Italy

Selected Exhibitions:

2022 Do Animals Go To Heaven?, Chiesa del Purgatorio, Matera, Italy, curated by the Collezione Agovino
2020 Project on sex work for sonsbeek20-24, Arnhem, Netherlands
CUBA PROJECT, Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, Milan, Italy
2019 Rios Intermitentes, Matanzas, Cuba
2018 RuhrTriennale, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany
2017 documenta 14, Athens, Greece and Kassel, Germany
2016 11th Shanghai Biennial, Shanghai, China
2014 Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut
2013 FiveMyles Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
2011 Rupert Ravens Contemporary, Newark
2010 Real Artways, Hartford, Connecticut
2009 International Women Artists' Biennale, Incheon, South Korea (Guest Artist)
2007 52nd Venice Biennale, Africa Pavilion
Stenersen Museum, Oslo, Norway
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
2006 Trienal de Luanda, Luanda, Angola
Center for Book Arts, New York
2005 Anyang Public Art Project, Anyang, Korea
Object Not Found, Monterrey, Mexico
III World Ceramics Biennial Workshop, Yeosu, Korea
2004 Busan International Biennial of Contemporary Art, Korea
Tri Postal, Lille, France
New Museum, New York
Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Bronx, New York
2003 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
2nd Biennial of Ceramics in Contemporary Art, Liguria, Italy
Migros Museum, Zürich, Switzerland
BPS 22, Chaleroi, Belgium
Casino Luxembourg, Luxembourg
Washington Square Gallery, San Francisco

- 2002 Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut
Lazzaretto Sant'Elia, Cagliari, Italy
Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway
M21, Langenlois, Austria
En Ruta, Loiza, Puerto Rico
Tramway Gallery, Glasgow
- 2001 Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin
Charlottenborg Museum, Copenhagen
Apex Art, New York
- 2000 1st Echigo-Tsumari Public Art Triennial, Tokamachi, Japan
7th Havana Bienal, Havana, Cuba
PS1, New York, 2000
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada
Castello di Rivoli, Turino, Italy
Koldo Mitxelena, San Sebastian, Basque Country
Bonnenfantenmuseum, Maastricht, Netherlands
Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York
- 1999 Palazzo della Triennale, Milan, Italy
BildMuseet, Umea, Sweden
World Health Organisation Headquarters, Geneva
United Nations Headquarters, New York
- 1998 SESC Pompeia, Sao Paulo, Brazil
University Galleries, FAU, Boca Raton, Florida
- 1997 2nd Johannesburg Biennale
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C
The Bronx Museum, New York
Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida
Schlossmuseum, Linz, Austria
Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida
- 1996 Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen
Uppsala Konstmuseum, Uppsala, Sweden
Malmo Kunsthalle, Sweden
Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan
Institute of Contemporary Arts, Johannesburg, South Africa
University Galleries, Gainesville, Florida
- 1995 Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

- 1986 - 1994 Solo and Group Exhibitions and Projects in Africa and Europe



BELIEVE IN ARTISTS

Berresford Prize | USA Fellowship

Olu Oguibe



He // Him // His

IID: A headshot of a Black man with short locked hair wearing a grey shirt and a light green preppy jacket.]

Conceptual Artist
Vernon Rockville, CT
2022 USA Fellow

This award was generously supported by
the Barr Foundation.

Olu Oguibe is an award-winning multimedia artist and writer whose work often straddles minimalist formalism and engagement with global social issues. Oguibe has been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world and has participated in several international biennials and triennials, including the Venice, Havana, and Busan biennials. He has also created permanent public works in many countries and curated or cocurated several significant international exhibitions.

His writings on art, literature, and cultural theory are widely published. He has been a fellow of the





While Olu Oguibe's project in Athens, *The Biafra Time Capsule* (2017), deals with an archive of the human tragedy of the Biafra War (1967–70), his work in Kassel refers to a critical humanitarianism toward victims of war in general. Reaffirming the timeless, universal principles of care for all under persecution and for all that have had to seek refuge, his project takes the monumental form of an obelisk placed on Königsplatz with an inscribed text in four languages. *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument* (2017) takes its cue from Oguibe's experiences as a child who survived the Biafra War, which claimed the lives of some two million civilians in just thirty months.

Königsplatz—constructed in 1767 and named after Landgrave Friedrich von Hessen-Kassel (1676–1751), also the King of Sweden—is often a site of assembly, festivities, and political demonstrations; for example, the protest in 2015 about the living conditions of refugees. It is also where Goethe was famously refused a hotel room when he arrived there one night because he first spoke French to the innkeeper. Oguibe's obelisk on this site is a repudiation of the anti-immigrant bigotry that certain world leaders and their followers have been fanning around the world lately, and an acknowledgment of the life-saving hospitality and refuge which others have offered to counter this bigotry. The work evokes and materializes the current crisis of humanity and is a call for action.

documenta14.de on documents 14, Kassel, 8th April - 17th September 2017
Photo-credits: Michael Nast

*The mirror is a window.
It offers a glimpse
Of where we are from
But cannot return.
We are all travelers
On this endless road
Condemned to roam
Without repose.*

Olu Oguibe's poem "Conversation," excerpted above, engages an imaginary individual on the meaning of personhood, nation, wanderlust, and eternal damnation. Over a multidimensional art career that spans nearly three decades, Oguibe, born in Nigeria in 1964, intersects the personal with the collective in his writings and paintings; he creates poignant narratives of which the human condition is the central leitmotif. He acts as a seer, a troubled recluse, or a confident bohemian at home in a perilous world.

One of Oguibe's earliest pieces, the watercolor *The Present Is a Dangerous Place to Live* (1987), presents two individuals deeply engaged in discussion and standing before a deep void. The metaphor is not lost. The work is as relevant today as it was in the 1980s when it was painted, and it mirrors a recurring theme in Oguibe's practice—its renewed mandate appears in the artist's recent and ongoing work. Figures lie in repose, weathered by the precarity of their last moments as objects with active social lives, and by what they now represent: corpses. It is a sobering reflection of the unceasing cycle of violence fueled by economic special interests and political schizophrenia that attends our current reality. Body bags, body counts, and military parades in the spirit of nationalism or in pursuit of dogma have become a permanent feature in an abrasive news cycle.

Though the Igbo system of thought and existential principles play a critical role in Oguibe's creative endeavors, dictating his approach to conceptualism, abstraction, and the form of the art object, the vital force of his art is his experience as a child in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War in the late 1960s. This monumental human tragedy has shaped his social self. We see Biafra today as refugees cross into Europe from the many trouble spots in the Middle East and Africa. We see the pains of Biafra as humanity drowns in huge numbers in the high seas approaching the Strait of Gibraltar. In their cold repose, the figures no longer roam. They are monuments of our time; asking us to chew on our Anthropocene, and to contemplate the many disastrous events in history with enduring consequences. The past is the mirror of the present.

—Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi

documenta14.de on documents 14, Kassel, 8th April - 17th September 2017



Olu Oguibe, *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument* (*Monument for Strangers and Refugees*), 2017, concrete, Königsplatz, documenta 14, photo: Michael Nast



Olu Oguibe, ***Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument*** (*Monument for Strangers and Refugees*), 2017, concrete, Königsplatz, documenta 14

Sonsbeek | *SEX WORK IS HONEST WORK*

Sonsbeek 20 - 24

Arnhem, Netherlands

From 2nd July to 29th August 2021

This public installation and series of gatherings call attention to the need to recognise sex work as labour, and to protect sex workers' rights to work safely. The work highlights the right to earn a living without the historical and perennial challenges that have demonised and subjected sex workers to a precarious existence at the margins of society. Olu Oguibe aims to open up the conversation with Arnhem residents and the wider Dutch public around sex work as everyday work, especially in light of the ongoing global pandemic.

Sex Work Is Honest Work is animated by the death of a young woman named Nokuphila Kumalo who was kicked and stomped to death on a Cape Town street by a man later identified as renowned South African artist Zwelethu Mthethwa. Kumalo was only twenty-three-years old. She also happened to be a sex worker and her murderer is believed to have been a client. The first iteration of the work, an outdoor live installation called *Pink and White Flowers* in Potchefstroom, South Africa in 2018 consisted of 4,500 live flowering plants to commemorate Kumalo and, by extension, bring up pertinent subjects around sex work, sex workers' rights, and sex- and gender-related violence.

Oguibe's project for sonsbeek departs from this work and unpacks various notions that emerge in the public debate around sex work in Europe and the Netherlands specifically. *Sex Work Is Honest Work* explores the confluence of morality, legality and capital around sex work looking into the historical denial of this form of labour as work and examining its complexities as migrant or indentured labour. In addition to the prevalence of continued violence towards sex workers, the work is an intervention in public space that confronts patriarchal biases. It ultimately foregrounds the agency of sex workers to emphasise people's freedom to work in any domain.

More info at: <https://www.sonsbeek20-24.org/en/artist-list/olu-oguibe/>



Olu Oguibe

SEX WORK IS HONEST WORK, 2021

Installation view at miart 2021

Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco

CUBA PROJECT

Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, Milan

Opening Tuesday 8th October 2020

From 9th October 2019 to 15th January 2021

"Olu Oguibe's recent work in Cuba exemplifies his approach and respect for people. He worked with simple materials, scrap products of a labor-intensive manufacturing process, and re-configured them in a way that brought to mind the meaning and rough beauty underlying the process of making, and the hands and souls involved in it. A respect for working people, for labor, for process, all come through, along with the nearly alchemical ability to transform quotidian materials into objects suffused with meanings."

- Will Wilkins

The 25 pieces in this body of work are the result of a few weeks spent at UEB "Noel Fernández" Conformat steel factory in Matanzas, Cuba in February 2019.

I first visited the factory in December 2018 in the company of Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and decided to return soon after and work with the scrap metal from the factory floor which is usually discarded or sent for recycling. Steel is a medium that I have not used much in the past, and working at the factory offered an opportunity to explore the material without the encumbrances of fabrication. I did not intend to "construct" objects, but rather, to follow the material as found, and whatever it suggested, which in my thinking, is a very liberating way to work.

Over a period of nine days or so my translator Mr. Matos and I scoured the factory grounds for scrap metal which we then assembled in a large storage wing of the facility. Beside form which was my primary focus, I was interested also in the broad spectrum of color possibilities in industrial steel that do not require additional intervention. Even the range of rust is fascinating, and certainly suggests that the monochrome tendency of much minimalist sculpture is perhaps mannerist and unnecessary.

This body of work is significant in many ways. While it does not represent an entirely new direction in my practice, this is, nonetheless, the first time that I've put together such a large body of sculptures or sculptural installations in a single project, and as already noted, it's certainly my most significant venture into steel as a material.

The work may be viewed in any number of different ways; as minimalist sculpture, as creative recuperation of "poor" materials, or as an exercise in the archaeology of labor. It all still revolves around the potent resonance of form, but the objects will always record a unique period in the history of industrial labor in late revolutionary Cuba.

Olu Oguibe



Olu Oguibe
CUBA PROJECT, 2019

Installation view at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio - SPAZIO22

Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco



Olu Oguike
CUBA PROJECT, 2019

Installation view at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio - SPAZIO22
Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio
Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco



Olu Oguibe
CUBA PROJECT, 2019

Installation view at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio - SPAZIO22

Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco



Olu Oguibe
CUBA PROJECT, 2019

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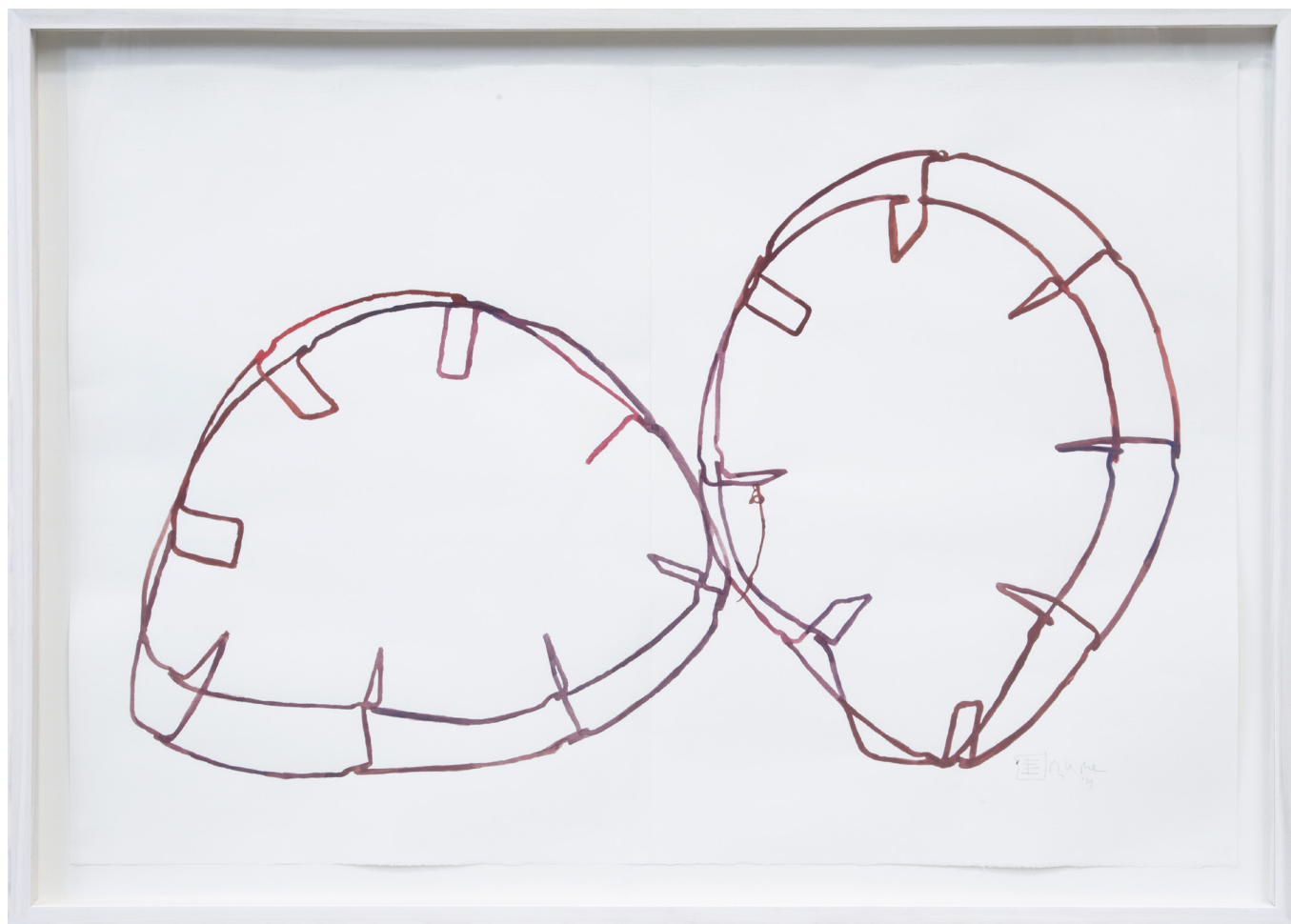


Olu Oguibe
CUBA PROJECT, 2019

Installation view at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio - SPAZIO22

Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco



Olu Oguibe
CUBA PROJECT, 2019

Installation view at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio - SPAZIO22

Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco



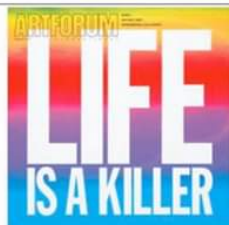
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CUBA PROJECT, 2019

Installation view at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio - SPAZIO22

Courtesy the artist and Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

Photo-credits: Antonio Maniscalco

*Critics and **R**reviews*



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Olu Oguibe, *Composition with Blue, Red and Yellow*, 2019, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Olu Oguibe

GALLERIA GIAMPAOLO ABBONDIO

The works in Olu Oguibe's "Cuba Project," 2019, which developed out of a visit to a steelworks in Matanzas, Cuba, in February 2019, were made mainly out of discarded metal elements left over from the factory's manufacturing process. In this exhibition, the artist presented them as he found them, without any modifications, albeit in carefully calculated groupings that suggested he has a scholar's taxonomic instincts. It was not by chance that his introduction to the show was a display case, *Untitled* (all works 2019), filled with small rusty objects, salvage on a miniature scale, which he also preserved as painted images in watercolor on paper.

ARTFORUM, February 2020

Review by Giorgio Verzotti

For the most part, however, Oguibe lent the objects he had collected new life through the multiplication of identical elements, often in site-specific installations where the exhibition context contributed to their formulation. *Form in Arrangement of Twelve*, for example, consisted of twelve rusty basins, perhaps parts of gas tanks, each resting on a cylindrical metal base. *Composition with Steel Discs* covered the floor with more than forty disks, arranged in no apparent order, while in *Form with Steel and Wood*, a series of steel rings placed upright on the floor, some painted white, others brown with rust, were supported by a wooden beam to form a ramshackle, stretched-out cylinder. Other smaller rings made up *Composition with 24 Steel Rings*, in this case hung one next to another on the wall, in an orderly and elegant grid.

While Oguibe's materials brought to mind Arte Povera installations, the serial organization of the works recalled Minimalism. The artist's statement was revealing: "Beside form which was my primary focus, I was interested also in the broad spectrum of color possibilities in industrial steel that do not require additional intervention. Even the range of rust is fascinating, and certainly suggests that the monochrome tendency of much minimalist sculpture is perhaps mannerist and unnecessary." In fact, what interests the artist when he rummages through piles of discarded metal forms is the morphology of the found material, and above all "the potent resonance of form." He finds the essence or potential of this resonance when he observes what passes through his hands, even by chance, and it is strongest when such found objects are installed as artworks in an exhibition.

"Cuba Project" also included more self-contained works that have a powerful iconicity. *Altar (for Olabisi Silva)* consisted of a skeletal steel cylindrical structure that served as the pedestal for a basin of the same material; the rust that pervaded the entire structure allowed the viewer to think of it as an archaic tribal object connected to some long-forgotten ritual. *Forms with Blue Tower* evoked an urban landscape, juxtaposing two low, misshapen objects with what seemed to be an old blue furnace with several large holes in it. *Composition with Blue, Red and Yellow* was a grouping of four elements on a shelf; two containers with residual traces of yellow and red paint were positioned in front of a blue vertical metal sheet pocked with holes and abrasions. In keeping with the modernist-style title of the work, the assembled objects assumed the immobile composure of a Giorgio Morandi still life.

Translation from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

— Giorgio Verzotti

ARTFORUM, February 2020
Review by Giorgio Verzotti

documenta 14 Gespräche

OLU OGUIBE

Die uralte Lehre der Gastfreundlichkeit



Olu Oguibe, Foto:
Heinz-Norbert Jocks

Olu Oguibe, 1944 in Abe, Nigeria geboren, sowohl Künstler als auch Intellektueller, Kunsthistoriker, Kurator und Professor für Kunst und African-American Studies an der Universität von Connecticut. Er verfasste bedeutende Beiträge zur postkolonialen Theorie. 1988 machte er seinen Abschluss in Fine- und Applied Arts an der Universität von Nigeria und 1992 seinen Doktor in Kunstgeschichte an der School of Oriental and African Studies University in London zum Thema: „Uzo Egonu: Ein afrikanischer Künstler im Westen“. Er lehrte kritische Theorie am Londoner Goldsmiths College, bevor er in die Vereinigten Staaten zog. Er lebt in Rockville, Connecticut, und erhielt am 10. September den mit 10.000 Euro dotierten Arnold-Bode-Preis. Zu den letzten Preisträgern gehörten Ghahka Macuga, Thomas Bayle und Hiva K und Nairy Baghramian, die auch auf der documenta 14 vertreten sind.

Heinz-Norbert Jocks: Wie würdest du deine Arbeit auf dem Königsplatz in Kassel beschreiben?

Olu Oguibe: Du blickst auf einen großen Obelisk mit einer Inschrift aus der Bibel, die auf allen vier Seiten steht. Darauf ist zu lesen: „Ich war ein Fremder, und ihr habt mich aufgenommen.“ Die Inschrift ist in den vier Sprachen übersetzt, die in Kassel am meisten gesprochen werden, also Deutsch, Englisch, Türkisch und Arabisch. Die Botschaft ähnelt denen, wie sie auf antiken Obelisk zu finden sind. Demos Form ist zu einer so universellen wie zeitlosen geworden. In Kassel ist der Obelisk mit einer Botschaft über Gastfreundlichkeit gegenüber Fremden versehen, die, vor ihrer Verfolgung Flüchtling, Zuflucht gefunden haben und ihre Dunkelheit gegenüber ihrem Gastgeber bekunden. Der Grund, warum ich dieses Zitat auswählte, hat nichts mit Religion zu tun. Ich bin nicht gläubig und hätte ebenso gut einen Satz von Shakespeare oder aus den Schriften des Buchbinder zitiieren können. In einem Gespräch zwischen Jesus und seinen Jüngern erzählt dieser von einer Rede des Menschensohns am letzten Tag. Darin sagt er: „Ich war hungrig und ihr habt mir zu essen gegeben; ich war durstig und ihr habt mir zu trinken gegeben; ich war fremd und obdachlos und ihr habt mich aufgenommen; ich war nackt und ihr habt mir Kleidung gegeben; ich war krank und ihr habt mich besucht; ich war im Gefängnis und ihr seid zu mir gekommen.“

**Jede Kultur teilt dieses
Verständnis für die
Verantwortung, die man
für die Bedürftigen
und Verfolgten trägt.**

Darauf erwiderte ihm die Gerechte: „Herr, wann haben wir dich hungrig gesehen und dir zu essen gegeben, oder durstig und dir zu trinken gegeben? Und wann haben wir dich fremd und obdachlos gesehen und aufgenommen, oder nackt und dir Kleidung gegeben? Und wann haben wir dich krank oder im Gefängnis gesehen und sind zu dir gekommen?“ Darauf antwortete der König: „Was ihr für einen meinen geringsten Bräuer getan habt, das habe ich mir getan.“ Diese Lehre ist über 2.000 Jahre. Jede Kultur teilt dieses Verständnis für die Verantwortung, die man für die Bedürftigen und Verfolgten trägt. Aber Wohlthätigkeit und



Der Königsplatz in Kassel mit der Arbeit von Olu Oguibe, *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument*, 2017, Beton, 9 x 3 x 16,8m

Gastfreundschaft schließen gegenseitige Anerkennung ein. An der Stelle kommt Dankbarkeit ins Spiel. Und Jesus war sogar dankbar für Dinge, die nicht für ihn getan wurden.

Dass du von den Fremden sprichst, signalisiert, dass du die Aussage nicht auf die Aktualität beschränken möchtest, sondern weiter fasst. Offenbar geht es dir um Humanität.

Ja, damit sprichst du den zentralen Punkt der Arbeit an. Heute wird das Flüchtlingsthema problematisiert. Dabei ist es kein Problem, vielmehr eine Gegebenheit des Lebens. Es gab immer Menschen, die einen Ort verlassen haben und anderswo Zuflucht fanden. Hunderte, Tausende, wenn nicht sogar Millionen verließen Europa, um ihr Glück in Nord-, Süd- und Mittelamerika zu versuchen, und zwar nicht nur während des laufenden Jahrhunderts. Die Pilgerväter brachen nach Nordamerika auf, suchten dort Zuflucht. Andere hofften auf Zuflucht in Europa. Irgendwann in seinem Leben ist jeder von uns ein potenzieller Flüchtling,

der Schutz sucht, oder ein Reisender, der eine Unterkunft benötigt. Es ist Ausdruck unserer Menschlichkeit, einem in Not Geratenen beizustehen. Alles in allem eine Eigenschaft von vielen, die uns als Menschen auszeichnet und uns zu Menschen macht. Die Politik ist etwas vollkommen





Nationales Museum für Zeitgenössische Kunst (EMST), Olu Oguibe, *Biatra*
Time Capsule 2017, Dokumente, archivariische
Objekte, verschiedene Materialien

Andres und irrelevant, wenn es auf die Sorge für einen Menschen ankommt. Wer jemandem beisteht, denkt in dem Augenblick nicht über Politik nach. Du spürst einfach, dass du es tun musst. Erst danach befasst du dich möglicherweise mit Politik. Wenn jemand dir seine Tür öffnet, liegt es an dir, dafür dankbar zu sein, und derjenige, der dir Gastfreundschaft gewährt, muss akzeptieren, dass er ein Risiko eingeht, wenn er einen Fremden beherbergt. Es ist ein Naturgesetz, aber auch ein Risiko. Letztendlich haben alle, sowohl der Fremde als auch der Gastgeber, ihren Anteil zu leisten. Die Idee zu dem Obelisk bezieht sich weniger auf die aktuellen Probleme als auf etwas Grundsätzliches. Übrigens ist Gastfreundschaft etwas Fundamentales in der Geschichte von Kassel. Im Jahre 1685, noch vor den ersten Erlassen in Frankreich, die darauf zielten, die Hugenotten zu verbannen, ordnete Karl von Hessen an, dass die Hessen für alle Hugenotten, die Zuflucht

brauchen, ihr Haus öffnen sollten. Eine seiner großen historischen Leistungen bestand darin, dass er als einer der ersten deutschen Fürsten protestantische Glaubensflüchtlinge aus dem Königreich Frankreich zur Ansiedlung einlud. Im Laufe der Zeit gewährte die Stadt auch anderen Communities Zuflucht. Dieser Wesenszug ist wie das durch die Adern der Stadt fließende Blut. Gastfreundschaft ist ein Vermächtnis, das es verdient, anerkannt und weitergeführt zu werden und etwas, wofür man dankbar sein sollte.

Ist Gastfreundschaft angesichts der reaktionären Forderung nach sogenannter Grenzsicherung etwas Utopisches?

Nein, denn als Menschen haben wir keine andere Wahl. Gastfreundschaft oder Koexistenz ist keine utopische Vision. Ob wir es wollen oder nicht, uns Menschen bleibt gar nichts anderes übrig. Denn der Mensch hört nicht auf, umzusiedeln. Irgendwann werden auch

die Europäer sich wieder anderswo ansiedeln. Als Menschen befinden wir uns in dauernder Bewegung. Alles Verharren an einem Ort ist vorläufig. Sobald du die Stadt wechselst, stehst du, egal wo, vor dem Problem, dass du irgendwo übernachten musst. Du musst kein Flüchtling sein, um damit konfrontiert zu sein. Es reicht schon, wenn du auf Reisen bist. Und wenn du dich auf einer Wanderung verläufst und außerstande bist, den Weg zu finden, bist du auf Hilfe, Beistand und das Eingreifen anderer, eben darauf angewiesen, dass man nach dir sucht, dich findet und rettet. An der Stelle möchte ich nicht auf Europas und die komplizierte Geschichte in anderen Teilen der Welt eingehen, die die aktuellen Probleme der Flüchtlinge mitverursacht haben. Zum Flüchtling zu werden, ist nichts Außergewöhnliches im buchstäblichen Sinne. Es betrifft nicht nur postkoloniale Bevölkerungen, und es ist auch keine Besonderheit der Europäer, sondern ein menschlicher Imperativ. Läge die Sorge um den anderen nicht in der menschlichen Verantwortung, dann hätte Jesus nicht schon vor 2.000 Jahren ein Wort darüber verloren. Der Titel der documenta „Von Athen lernen“ lässt sich auch darauf beziehen, dass vor mehreren tausend Jahren in Athen das Gesetz zur Gastfreundschaft gegenüber Fremden kodifiziert wurde.

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Danach bist du verpflichtet, deine Tür für Zufluchtssuchende zu öffnen. Diese starke Lehre erteilt uns Athen. Nicht nur die documenta, auch Künstler aus aller Welt sind derzeit Gäste in Athen. Die uns so am Herzen liegende Idee der Demokratie sowie die Erhebung der Gastfreundschaft zum Gesetz verdanken wir Athen. Was können wir Besseres lernen als das.

Widersprechen die Grenzen, nach denen man jetzt wieder ruft, dem Gesetz der Natur?

Nein, Grenzen sind sehr menschlich, denn der Mensch ist ein selbstschützendes, auch ängstliches und besorgtes Wesen, und das ist vor dem Hintergrund des Risikos verständlich, das Gastfreundschaft in sich birgt. Jeder versucht mit Grenzen zu schützen, was er hat. Das gehört zu unserer tierischen Seite. Tief in uns sind wir nach wie vor Tiere, und diese teilen das Fressen nicht miteinander. Aber als Menschen arbeiten wir an uns, um eine andere Ebene zu erreichen. Wenn Menschen Grenzen bauen, ist dies ein tierischer Reflex. Diesen haben wir aus Angst vor dem Verlust des Unsrigen nicht überwunden. Es verhält sich aber so: Entweder du hilfst dem Anderen, oder ein anderer tut es für dich. Entweder du nimmst Fremde auf, oder diese finden einen Weg, in deinen Raum zu dringen. Folglich ist es besser, den guten Geist aus der Erkenntnis heraus walten zu lassen, dass jeder Zuflucht braucht. Keiner wird mit dem Wunsch geboren, seiner Heimat, seinem Zuhause und seiner Kultur den Rücken zu kehren, um sich eine neue Existenz in einem anderen Land aufzubauen. Niemand möchte freiwillig in eine Situation geraten, wo er vor einem Krieg, vor Konflikten oder Verfolgung fliehen muss. Das ist ein schweres Schicksal, dass Menschen auf sich annehmen.

Es scheint, als hätten wir vergessen, dass wir Nomaden waren, die sich seit ihrer Sesshaftigkeit mehr über das Haben als über das Sein definieren.

Ja, das ist wahr. Aber auch als Nomaden waren wir territorial. Von einer Zeit zu träumen, in der die Menschen alles miteinander teilen, ist schon eher eine Utopie.

Deine Überlegungen beruhen wohl auf eigenen Erfahrungen.

Ja, als Kind erlebte ich den bitteren Biafra-Krieg in den späten 60ern, in dem Hunderte, Tausende, womöglich Millionen von Menschen vertrieben wurden. Dieser Zwang zur Flucht. Auch meine Familie war gezwungen, mehrmals umzusiedeln, und darauf angewiesen, dass Fremde das Wenige, das sie besaßen, mit uns teilten, selbst in schwierigen Zeiten. Diese Erfahrung sitzt tief in meinem Gedächtnis. Seit jeher reagiere ich sensibel auf diese Frage der Gastfreundschaft. Schwer zu sagen, ob dies auch ohne diese Erfahrung der Fall wäre.

FRIEZE

The Curious Case of Olu Oguibe's Monument for Strangers and Refugees

From its secret removal to its celebrated resurrection, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung explores the lives and afterlives of the Kassel statue controversy

BY **BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG** IN **EU REVIEWS, THEMATIC ESSAYS** | 22 MAR 21



Exposing the Question the Answer Hides

It was what we call, in German, a 'Nacht und Nebel Aktion'. The concept, which translates literally as a 'night and fog action', signifies a secretly planned act that is quickly carried out at night without prior warning. In Kassel, on 3 October 2018, German reunification day, government contractors arrived like the proverbial thieves in the night to dismantle and remove a monument and art work that had been commissioned by documenta 14 from the artist Olu Oguibe. The sculpture carries the enigmatic title *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument* (Monument for Strangers and Refugees, 2017) and bears – in Germany's four predominant languages: Turkish, Arabic, English and German – the biblical verse (Matthew 25:35): 'I was a stranger and you took me in.' Hardly has an art piece in recent history solicited so much controversy, leaving no one lukewarm. Oguibe's work will occupy artists and scholars for several generations to come and I hope one day to afford myself more time and space than *frieze* can grant to write about it.

When, in 2014, Adam Szymczyk invited me to join his documenta 14 team as curator-at-large, I knew immediately that one of the artists I would invite was Oguibe – an artist, scholar, curator and poet I had known from afar and whose seminal works in all these domains had greatly guided me towards becoming a curator.



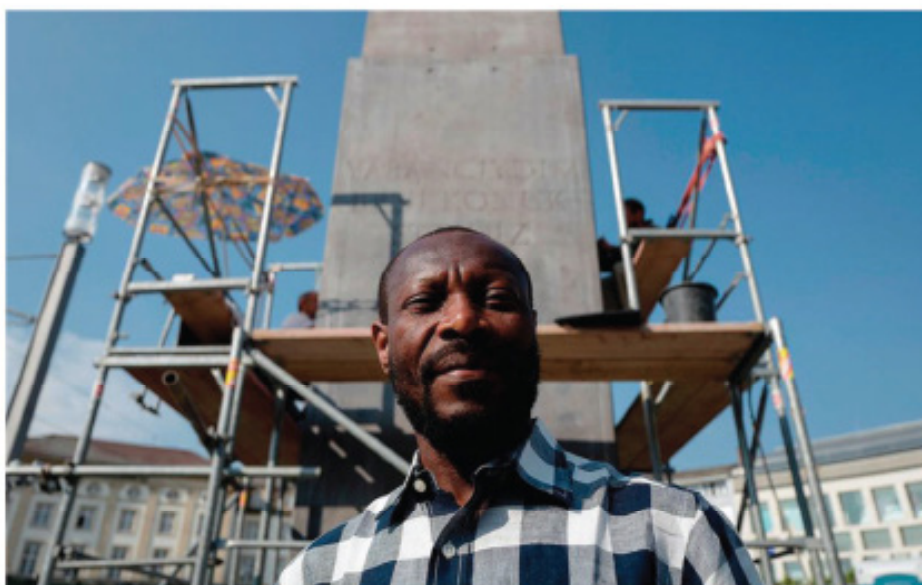
(Olu Oguibe, Monument for Strangers and Refugees, 2017, installation
© The Monument for Strangers and Refugees, 2017, installation
photograph: Thomas Ruff)

FRIEZE issue 219, March 2021

"The curious case of Olu Oguibe's Monument for Strangers and Refugees" by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung
<https://www.frieze.com/article/olu-oguibe-monument-strangers-refugees-controversy>

The invitation to Oguibe led to two pieces that can only be described as monumental and timely: the *Biafra Time Capsule* (2017), presented at the EMST National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens to commemorate the Biafran War (1967–70), and the *Monument for Strangers and Refugees*, which manifested itself majestically as an obelisk on Kassel's Königsplatz. The works were conceived during what was derogatorily referred to by many as 'the refugee crisis' in of 2014/15 – a critical period in German history in particular and European history in general, when hundreds of thousands of humans fled wars, poverty and other atrocities daring to cross the Mediterranean Sea and walk through Southeastern Europe to countries like Germany. While some refugees were warmly welcomed initially, the tide soon changed and migrants faced hostilities as national borders were shut and Europe became a fortress again. When German chancellor Angela Merkel famously said 'wir schaffen das' (we can manage this) in 2015, as way of motivating her citizens to stay strong during this humanitarian crisis, violence against migrants in the country skyrocketed – not only at the fringes of extreme right-wing parties, but also institutionally. It was in such friable times that Oguibe produced his obelisk.

The gold-plated inscription – 'I was a stranger and you took me in' – can be understood from multiple perspectives. Foremost, as an expression of gratitude for hospitality and care, in instances where that was the case. But the use of a biblical phrase in this context could also be seen as an affront by those who never wanted to be hospitable in the first place and expressed hostility instead. It could also be perceived as rubbing salt into the wounds of a society that claims to be founded on Christian and democratic values. As if each letter, each word, served to remind the reader of the hypocrisy of nationhood, religion, democracy and other values of Germany's so-called 'Leitkultur' (guiding culture).



Olu Oguibe in front of *Monument for Strangers and Refugees*, 2017, Kassel. Courtesy: AFD/Getty Images; photograph: John MacDougall

For the 100 days of documenta 14 and afterwards until its infamous tearing down, the obelisk became a pilgrimage site for pro-migration and pro-democracy activists, as much as it became a meeting point and selfie-backdrop for the large Turkish, Eritrean, Syrian and other migrant communities in Kassel. However, the monument was also used by right-wing extremist groups as a metaphorical screen on which to project their hate. This was most famously done by Germany's right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), whose principal political agenda is anti-immigrant and whose foundation is racist, antisemitic and revisionist towards Germany's Holocaust history. In a meeting of Kassel's cultural committee, an AfD city councillor said the obelisk was 'ideologically polarizing distorted art' (entstellte Kunst) – reminiscent of the Nazis' use of the term 'degenerate' to describe modern art (entartete Kunst). Indeed, this makes the 'Nacht und Nebel Aktion' by no means farfetched, since the expression goes back to Adolf Hitler's December 1941 decree to the Wehrmacht High Command that led to the sudden transfer of resistance fighters in occupied territories of France, Belgium and the Netherlands to the German Reich, who were then sent to concentration camps or executed. During the Nuremberg trials of 1945–46, this command was

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Olu Oguibe's *Monument to Strangers and Refugees* (2017) was dismantled early on 3 October following orders by the city of Kassel. Courtesy and photograph: Regina Gerberling

What provoked so much tension, so many emotions – varying from excitement to rage – around Oguibe's monument, besides its conceptual and aesthetic brilliance, was the fact that it was audacious. The obelisk had the audacity to stand on the city's 18th-century Königsplatz, which was named after Friedrich I, King of Sweden and Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel. The obelisk had the audacity to point at Germany's Achilles heel: the question of migration. The obelisk had the audacity to reveal the bigotry hidden behind religious claims and democratic flags. The obelisk had the audacity to betray an essential and fundamental unspoken truth in this construct called Germany: that it is a conglomerate of tribes and peoples who fought against each other for hundreds of years. United to combat the Romans in the Teutoburg Forest in 9CE, to form the German Empire in 1871, to repair the devastation of World War II in 1945, and to reunify East and West Germany in 1990, the country's common denominator – its underlying truth, too often denied – is its strangeness and pluriversity. One might say, the obelisk revealed that we are all strangers – physically, philosophically, spiritually. But, above all, Oguibe's obelisk had the audacity to utter, to preach and to disseminate that most unfathomable of all things: love and compassion.

The sadness that seized me upon hearing the news of the removal of *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* was soon dislodged by the certitude of the illimitable potential of art – its propensity, by or even beyond the will of its author, to divulge certain truths, mysteries, things unseen and unheard. As James Baldwin wrote in his seminal essay 'The Creative Process' (1962): 'A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.' With *Monument for Strangers and Refugees*, Oguibe exposed several questions hidden by the plethora of answers we find in our societies.

FRIEZE issue 219, March 2021

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Olu Oguibe, *New Monuments Series*, 2020, acrylics on acid-free watercolour paper, 2 sheets, each 76 x 107 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Kandhofer, Vienna; photograph: Manuel Carreón-López / kunst-dokumentation.com

The obelisk was later afforded an afterlife, when it was resurrected and remounted alongside other historical documenta works on Kassel's Treppenstraße in April 2019. But this is just one of its many afterlives: the idea has metamorphosed into varying forms exploring issues of displacement and hospitality. Oguibe's *New Monuments Series* (2020) acknowledges personalities like Domenico Lucano, the former mayor of Riace and the German ship captain Carola Rackete, who has been arrested docking vessels carrying migrants – people who have pushed themselves beyond their privileged bubbles to help humans – refugees – who are in dire need. Faced by today's precariousness as we fight to survive a global pandemic, works like *New York, April 2020* (2020) are markers and witnesses of the pains and crumbling of social infrastructures in these times.

This essay is part of a series on public art that will appear in the May issue of frieze.

Main image: An artist's picture letters onto Olu Oguibe's Monument to Strangers and Refugees, 2017, Kassel. Courtesy: AFP/Getty Images; photograph: John MacDougall

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MOUSSE
58

KEEPING IT REAL

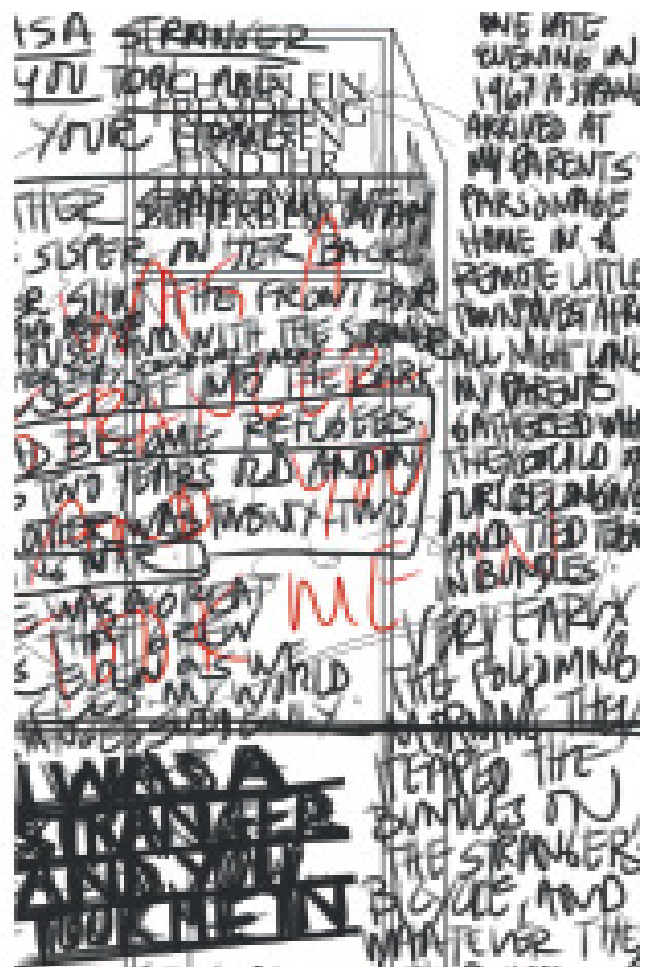
THE ARTIST'S
WORKSHOP AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ARTS

The artist explains how long for abstraction has been a constant in his production: from his interest in games and the way they represent human activity, to his painting and drawing, to his study of African patterns, predating the formalism of a canon of abstraction in the West. And the fact that, even though he left Christianity behind, he still believes that equality, fairness, and hospitality are worth living for and fighting for.



THE ARTIST'S
WORKSHOP AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ARTS

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MOUSSE 58, April 2017

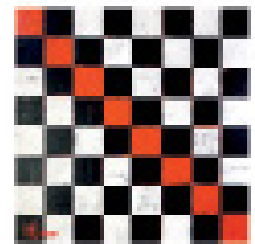
Olu Oguibe and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in conversation



Installation view of MOUSSE 58, April 2017, Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, Milan

MOUSSE 58, April 2017

MOUSSE 58 is a large-scale artwork by Olu Oguibe and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, presented at Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio in Milan. The work consists of numerous small, light-colored, human-like figures standing on a large, black and white checkered floor. The figures are arranged in a grid-like pattern, with some standing on the white squares and others on the black squares. The figures are made of a light-colored material, possibly wood or plaster, and have a simple, stylized design. The overall effect is a dense, rhythmic composition that suggests a social or political commentary.



Detail of MOUSSE 58, April 2017, Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, Milan

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MOUSSE 58, April 2017

Olu Oguibe and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in conversation

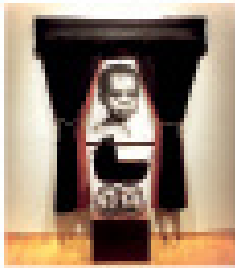
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RECENTE
O. MOUSSE

184



Recluse (detail), 2017. Mixed media, 100x100x100 cm.



Recluse (detail), 2017. Mixed media, 100x100x100 cm.

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RECENTE
O. MOUSSE

185



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MOUSSE 58, April 2017

Olu Oguibe and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in conversation

There is a lot of talk about the fact that the Internet makes the Web a global village. But my experience tells me that it only has the potential. With a few exceptions, it is still the place where those who are doing themselves in come from and those who want to stay are trying to keep themselves from going there. It is a place where the Internet is used to keep the Internet out and the Internet in. It is a place where the Internet is used to keep the Internet out and the Internet in. It is a place where the Internet is used to keep the Internet out and the Internet in.

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