



Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

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. Le 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 2025 ha preso parte alla 36a Biennale di San Paolo.

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 2025, he participated in the 36th Bienal de São Paulo.*

*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.

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



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

Solo Exhibitions

2024

Lines of Sight, Part III: Olu Oguibe, Sex Work is Honest Work, Nirox Foundation, South Africa

2023

Olu Oguibe, MiArt, Milan, Italy

2020

Olu Oguibe, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Galerie Kandlhofer, Vienna, Austria

2019

Cuba Project, Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, Milan

2014

Olu Oguibe - iPad Prints, Real Art Ways - Hartford, CT, US

2010

Olu Oguibe, Real Art Ways - Hartford, CT, US

2002

Olu Oguibe, Newman Popiashvili, New York City, NY, US 1994 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Group Exhibitions

2026

Domestic Displacement, curated by Giulia Ingarao e Antonio Leone, MAC Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Gibellina, as part of the programme Gibellina Capitale Italiana dell'Arte Contemporanea 2026

2025

36th Bienal de São Paulo, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, San Paolo, Brazil
Nigerian Modernism, Tate, London

2024

Echoes of the brother countries, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany

2023

O Quilombismo, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany

2022

Rewinding Internationalism, Scenes from the '90, Today, Van Abbe Museum, Netherlands
A Different Now is Close Enough to Exhale on You, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, Johannesburg, South Africa

2021

12th Edition Sonsbeek, Sonsbeek International Sculpture Exhibition, Arnhem, Netherlands

2019

13th Bienal de la Habana: La construcción de lo posible, La Bienal de La Habana, Cuba

2018

Feedback: Art, Africa and the 1980s, Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth, Germany
RuhrTriennale, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

2017

Documenta 14, Benaki Museum of Greek Culture, Athens, Greece

Documenta 14, Kassel, Germany

2016

11th Shanghai Biennial, Shanghai, China

2015 Arte contemporanea Colecao Sindika Dokolo - You love Me, You Love M..., Municipal Gallery Almeida Garrett, Porto, Portugal

2013

The Art of Translation: The Simon Ottenberg Gift of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art. Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NJ, US

The poetic line, Makerere Art gallery, Kampata, Uganda

2010

Outsight Inn, Rupert Ravens Contemporary, Newark, NY, US

2009

International Incheon Women Artist's Biennale, Icheon, South Korea

2008

Speak to Me: The Connecticut Biennial 2008, The Mattatuck Museum Arts & History Center, Waterbury, Connecticut, US

2007

52nd Venice Biennale, Africa Pavilion

Shadow Show, Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT, US

Equatorial Rhythms, Stenersenmuseet, Oslo, Norway

In the Color Line, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY, US

2006

Report (Not Announcement), Basis voor Actuele Kunst, BAK, Utrecht, Netherlands

Trienal de Luanda, Luanda, Angola

2005

Anyang Public Art Project, Anyang, Korea

2004

Black President - The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo - Kuti. Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center (CAC). Cincinnati, OH, US

Camoufleurs, Kunstverein Springhornhof, Neuenkirchen, Germany

Global Priority, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA, US

Busan Biennale 2004, Busan, South Korea

2003

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 2nd Biennial of Ceramics in Contemporary Art, Liguria Italy

Black President-The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, New Museum, New York, NY, US

The African Exile Museum, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, Switzerland

Next Flag - Reexistencia Cultural Generalizada, BPS22, Musee d'art de la Province de Hainaut, Charleroi, Belgium

2002

Family, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT, US Binary Code, Akus Gallery, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT, US

2001

Mirror's Edge, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark Benefit 2001 Raffle, Momenta Art, New York, NY, US

Mirror's Edge, Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

2000

Greater New York PS1 New York

7th Bienal de La Habana 2000, Havana, Cuba

Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial 2000, Nigata-ken, Japan

Mirror's Edge, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy

Continental Shift, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany

Insertion: Self and Other, Apexart, New York, NY, US

1999-2000

Mirror Edge of Awareness World Health Organization Headquarters, New York, SESC Pompeia, San Paulo, Brazil, Palazzo della Triennale Milano

1998

The Poetics of Line - Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, Nigeria, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, US

1997

Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 196..., Bronx Museum of Arts, The Studio Museum in Harlem and Caribbean Cultural Center, New York, NY, US
CROSS/ING: Time, Space, Movement, USF Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, FL, US
2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa

1995- 1996

Interzones Kunstforeningen GL Strand, Copenhagen, Denmark

Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen

Uppsala Konstmuseum, Uppsala, Sweden

Malmö Kunsthalle, Sweden

Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

Institute of Contemporary Arts, Johannesburg, South Africa

University Galleries, Gainesville, Florida

Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, Whitechapel Gallery, London Malmö Kunsthalle, Sweden

An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

1986 - 1994

Solo and Group Exhibitions and Projects in Africa and Europe



Olu Oguibe, *M23-IV*, 2023, Acrylics on Fabriano Watercolor Paper.



Olu Oguibe, *Bochum II*, 2017, Acrylics on Fabriano Watercolor Paper.

From June 26 to September 27, 2026, the **MAC Museo d'Arte Contemporanea "Ludovico Corrao"** in **Gibellina** hosts *Domestic Displacement*, an exhibition curated by **Giulia Ingarao** and **Antonio Leone** included in the program of **Gibellina Capitale Italiana dell'Arte Contemporanea 2026**. The project brings together fifteen international artists to construct an articulated reading of the transformations of contemporary living, with particular attention to the phenomena of uprooting, vulnerability and identity instability that traverse the global present.

The works of Anya Gallaccio, Regina José Galindo, Mona Hatoum, Paolo Icaro, William Kentridge, Anna Maria Maiolino, Shirin Neshat, Olu Oguibe, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Amalia Pica, Mustafa Sabbagh, Santiago Sierra, Holly Stevenson, Zehra Doğan and Akram Zaatari confront themes such as trauma of uprooting, precariousness of memory, political conflict and transformation of visual languages. What emerges is a set of artistic practices that traverse intimate experiences and global historical tensions without tracing them back to a single narrative.



Olu Oguibe, *Composition with Red Stool (Homenaje a Danilo)*, 2019, Mixed media.
Olu Oguibe, *Composition with Steel Discs*, 2019, Steel.

The section *Inhabiting Dislocation* addresses uprooting as a structural condition of the present. In this context, dwelling is defined by mobility and contamination between languages, memories and symbolic practices. Mustafa Sabbagh, with *Made in Italy© - Handle with Care* (2015), explores cultural plurality and the tension between belonging and transformation. Regina José Galindo, with *Raíces* (2015), addresses the relationship between roots and coexistence, questioning the possibility of maintaining a connection to one's origin within contexts of dislocation. María Magdalena Campos-Pons constructs a visual language in which genealogy, diaspora and Afro-Caribbean spirituality are intertwined, bringing out the persistence of colonial legacies in the present. Olu Oguibe develops a reflection on the postcolonial and migratory condition through an interweaving of language, history and Afro-Descendant aesthetics.



BELIEVE IN ARTISTS

Olu Oguibe

Berresford Prize | USA Fellowship



He // Him // His

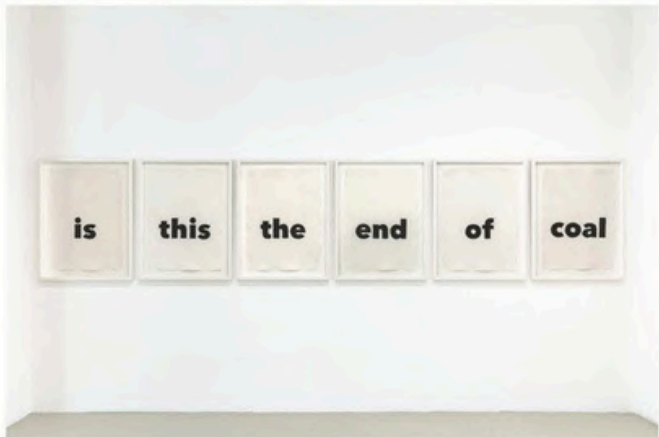
[ID: A headshot of a Black man with short locked hair wearing a grey shirt and a light green preppy jacket.]

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





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.

*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

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.



Olu Oguibe
Sex Work is Honest Work
miart 2021
Courtesy: artist and Galleria
Giampaolo Abbondio

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, *Untitled*, 2019, Watercolor on paper.



Olu Oguibe, *Form with Steel and Wood*, 2019, mixed media.

Olu Oguibe, *Form in Arrangement of Twelve*, 2019, steel.



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.

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.

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

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.

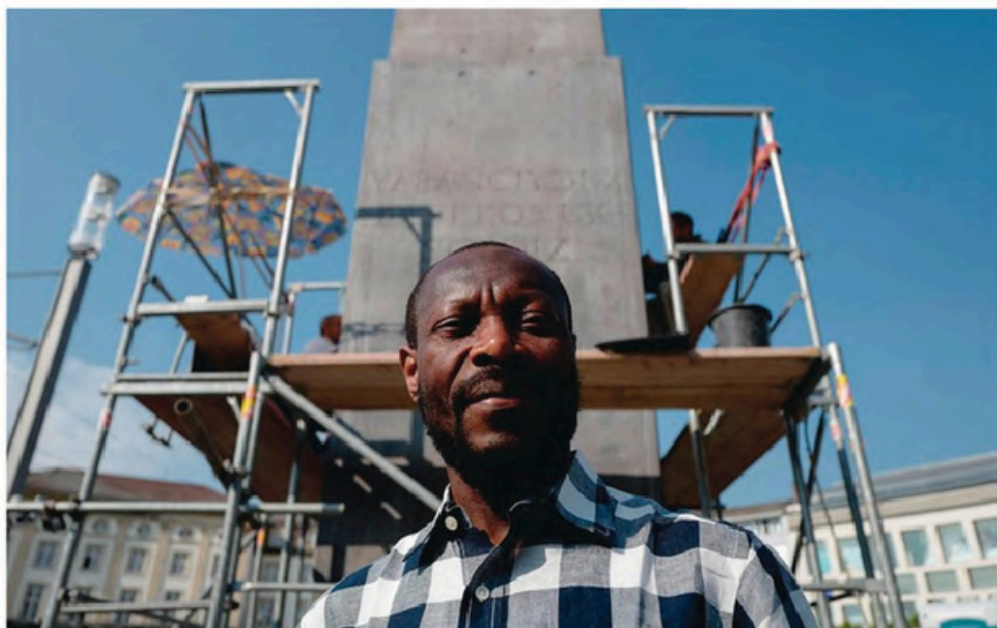
When, in 2014, Adam Szymczyk invited me to join his documenta 14 team as curator-at-large, I knew immediately that one of the artists I would invite was Oguibe – an artist, scholar, curator and poet I had known from afar and whose seminal works in all these domains had greatly guided me towards becoming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



Olu Oguibe, *Monument for Strangers and Refugees*, 2017, installation view, documenta 14, Kassel. Courtesy: documenta, Kassel; photograph: Michael Nast

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 to Strangers and Refugees*, 2017, Kassel. Courtesy: AFP/Getty Images; photograph: John MacDougall



KEEPING IT REAL

OLU OGUIBE AND
BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG
IN CONVERSATION

The artist explains how love for abstraction has been a constant in his production: from his interest in games and the way they can parallel human activity, to his painting and drawing, to his study of African patterns predating the formulation 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 by and fighting for.



Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung is curator at large, documenta 14; artistic director, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; and editor in chief, *SAVVY Journal*.

Olu Oguibe has practiced for nearly four decades as a conceptual artist and thinker who deals with wide-ranging issues including formal and social concerns. His work has been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, as well as biennials and triennials such as Venice, Havana, Busan and Johannesburg. His permanent public works may be found in Germany, Japan and Korea. Oguibe has also curated exhibitions for numerous venues including Tate Modern and the Venice Biennale, and his writings on art, literature and theory have appeared in a long list of books, journals and magazines. He lives and works in the small village of Rockville, Connecticut.

Top - Early concept for Kassel monument, documenta 14, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist
Bottom - *Biafra Time Capsule*, documenta 14, Athens, 2017.
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist



Game (detail), 2003. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist

BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG

Let's start with some older works of yours before getting to your current practice, and your work for documents 14. It would be like to talk about your use of games, especially a board game like chess, as a metaphor. It calls to mind issues of strategy, warfare, but also mathematical methods. Interestingly, the figures you put in place are unlike what one would see on chessboards, but rather like some African plaques or sculptures, or some glass, or plastic objects. At the same time, I am thinking of your interest in sports or battle. Can you expand on this?

OLU OGUIBE

I've always been interested in the figurative versatility of games and how they parallel so much that goes on in human relations, whether in politics, business, or personal relationships. Intriguingly, in popular usage, the popular imagination, games are most commonly associated with disregard, disrespect, or deceit. When someone says "don't play games with me," they often mean "don't take me for an idiot." When they say "this is not a game," they're saying "it's up and be serious." Because game playing is not meant to be a serious preoccupation, in many languages and cultures the word for "game" is synonymous with meaning, fun, or fooling around. Alternatively, it is synonymous with gambling. Very often it is associated with the sophisticated and highly cultivated skills that actual games demand, no matter how popular.

However, as an artist and an intellectual, I'm aware that all games and game playing require surprisingly uncommon skill, and when you project that metaphorically beyond the act itself, to politics or international relations or global economics or commerce, it becomes quite obvious. That's what I was trying to do with the ceramic installation *Game* (2003), which is characteristically encyclopedic because it ranges from the colonial encounter and the Scramble for Africa to immigration at the turn of the twentieth century and the politics of the current global economy. I say "characteristic" because many of my works are encyclopedic or sweeping in subject matter. The work, of course, was inspired by an incident at the Group of Eight meeting in Geneva in 2001. You find that in 2001 or 2007, the alignment of forces that control the global economy hasn't changed much from where most things were at the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, and they can't mirror the structures of the gaming industry in that they're tightly and efficaciously organized at the top, but also very opaque, while employing an astonishingly loose and diffuse paucity of agents at the bottom, from immigration and customs officials to large land-owners as well as small-business owners to international human traffickers. The poor folks at the receiving end are the millions of pawns on a humongous, elaborate global game board on which the pieces are constantly moving and chips are falling but the players are mostly invisible.

When you go under, you have nobody in particular to hold accountable or even just hold onto. Desperate West African migrants are drowning off the coast of Libya or Italy, South American immigrant laborers getting raped by their supervisors on farms across California and Texas, Hispanic house helps murdered by their employers in the Arab Emirates, Syrian refugees swarming up as bodies in European borders, or even just your plain old worker on a Chinese electronics assembly line or checking people in at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—these are all pieces in a sophisticated game the likes of which only the imagination of someone like Umberto Eco or even Dante Alighieri could supersede, forget your Thomas Paine. It's impossible not to be engrossingly fascinated by this.

Needless to say that such complexity is also aesthetically captivating in the same way that advanced mathematics or theoretical physics are aesthetically engaging, and even more so because games are always visually and conceptually simple in their graphic representation. I especially love the abstraction a handful of squares on a piece of paper or board or a wooden wheel, with a handful of pieces or chips to move around. As language, it is the very epitome of efficacy. There's a sense in which that then connects to my interest in sports. On the ground you have this very simple layout: a simple rectangle divided in four. Two players engage in a duel to the death seeking a little ball back and forth across that simple rectangle, and around that rectangle a trillion-dollar global industry is built. I'm fascinated by all the facets the deceptively but also the intellect that go into that sport, the deceptive simplicity of the graphic representation, and the complexly opaque political economy that uses it as a form to prey on our human thirst for entertainment.



Chessboard, 2007. Courtesy: the artist

Historically, artists have often been drawn to games. For instance, in 1944 at the height of World War II, New York galleries Julius Levy and his friends Marx Ernst and real-life chess master Marcel Duchamp invited twenty-nine other artists to join them in reimagining and redesigning chess pieces. Among the artists were Man Ray, Alexander Calder, André Gorky, André Breton, Robert Motherwell, Maria, and Hans Noguchi, the token artist of color since Duchamp and most people around him never admitted black artists in their circles despite their debt to African art. The result was a historic and most fascinating group show at the Levy Gallery called *The Imagery of Chess*. I was there at all good at chess myself, but back in the 1970s I was quite into it, for all the different reasons, and I believe that comes through in my work.

BSSB

Some of your earlier paintings seem to be exploring abstraction as form and idea. You have talked and written about African patterns aesthetically and conceptually. This form of abstraction you are dealing with goes far beyond a Western conceptualization of abstraction, which as the Museum of Modern Art claimed in an exhibition a few years ago was invented in 1911. Interestingly, when Alfred Barr did the seminal exhibition *Color and Abstraction* in 1935, in that same institution, he was intelligent enough to map a geography that included Japanese prints as well as "Negro sculpture." I would like to see you talk about the abstraction you explore in your works and the genealogy, or ethos, you situate yourself in.

OO

This is in some ways related to the previous question regarding my fascination with the abstract nature of most game representations, and the fact that I relate abstraction to communicative efficacy and even elegance. Having been a child preacher and having been raised by a father who is a Christian evangelical preacher, I was quite early in life to strategy, rhetoric, and the different mechanics of eloquence if you will, and for me abstraction, in the proper definition of the term, directly relates to those mechanics. I think abstraction is one of the most widely misunderstood and misused terms in existence. People draw words or blocks of color around or across a twist of lines or marks together and call it abstract, but what does it abstract? *Abstraction, abstraction, and abstraction* are very similar nouns in the sense that they describe processes of deriving one thing from another. You abstract from something just as you do from something, and in that sense, winning is obviously the purest yet most common example of abstraction.

I am Igbo by ancestry, and unbeknownst to many, all Igbo graphic art—that is, all two-dimensional Igbo art from known antiquity to the mid-twentieth century—is abstract. All, without exception. Besides the school drawings that British colonial art teacher Kenneth Murray had his pupils at Government College, Umuahia, make in the 1930s and 1940s, one of them being the young Ben Enwonwu, there is not one instance of Igbo drawing, painting, or marking making from antiquity until modernity that isn't abstract. So, who knows, perhaps abstraction is the "West" was invented in 1911, although Paul Klee copied Mushi abstract drawings well before then. That's of less interest

to me given that drawing, painting, and design in my own culture were always abstract until the 1970s. That's what I mean.

Also, I studied in the art program at Nsukka, which encouraged students to investigate extant but precolonial art traditions, although we were also taught the regular Western academic tradition. In the early phase of my career I became part of what is now widely known as the Nsukka School, which emphasized references to precolonial Igbo graphic traditions, especially in wall and body painting. After that, I studied several other traditions, ranging from rock art in different parts of Africa to Akan glyphs and Yoruba emblematic graphics, both from Ghana and Australian indigenous art. These varying references are evident in different phases of my work. Some of the paintings that you mentioned, which are mostly from a decade or so ago, draw considerably on traditions of abstraction from the Congo, on one hand, and Australian indigenous painting, on the other. In the late 1980s most of my references were Igbo, but in the 1990s I made a series of paintings that drew also quite considerably on the aforementioned Ghanaian traditions, including the body of paintings that I made in Rwanda during the early and mid-1990s. Many of those paintings are lost somewhere in Munich where a gallery has held them hostage since the 1990s. Pertinent to your question, what you find in those traditions or cultures of abstraction is a potent that skillfully and conceptually distill the immediate environment into a visual vocabulary of marks and patterns, and it always found that transition rather akin to the finest poetry. For the Igbo or the Mushi or the Congo or the Ananyem of

likely to apply all your gifts and skills without concern for focus. It is prodigious over a lucky lifetime, but not necessarily practical or even productive. There's also the danger that you'll spread yourself so thin that you'll leave little or no significant or substantial traces. Being aware of all that makes it quite a struggle.

I visualize it through the analogy of the craft of basketry, which I learned from an older cousin when I was little. In weaving or tapestry the elements run in only two axes: vertical and horizontal. The warp is vertical and the weft passes horizontally across it. In basketry, however, the warp is radial while the weft is concentric. In other words, the axes of the warp spread out in all directions while the weft circumscribes a concentric path around those radial axes. If you're lucky and you have time to complete it, the object becomes a basket, but if not, then you're left with nothing. Whereas in weaving, an unfinished piece of fabric is still a usable piece. If I'm lucky to be around long enough to get my work done, it might eventually all come together in some form, like a completed basket. As I said, that's the wish. Or it might not. In the end it might be strewn all around without coherence or meaning, and it would obviously be too late to do anything about it. I suppose that's the price we pay when we don't specialize.

There are other costs, also, one of which is that people who don't specialize are difficult to manage or market, so, many of us in the pool and are quickly forgotten. There's a strong connection between the market and memory, and it's often an artist's or even an intellectual's market presence that inscribes their work in the collective memory, and not necessarily the strength or depth of the work itself. For people who come from cultures that are still considered marginal to the global intellectual enterprise, this becomes a conundrum, because few of us have the visibility to get things done, so we're often compelled to do everything. Most Western art historians focus on some very limited area of interest, sometimes even just one artist. Compare that to someone like Salah Hassan, who has to triple up as a teacher and a scholar engaging multiple and vast study areas, and also as one of the most prodigious curators of global contemporary art over the past three decades. Both Fernando Alvim and Kendall Green spent an almost greater part of their careers curating and advocating and helping build collections—and in Green's case, writing as well—because there weren't so many others available to do it. In other words, the burden isn't just one of having several gifts but of laboring under numerous great expectations, also.

One of the intriguing things you might notice is that in spite of the large amount of work I've done, there's very little written about it. Because I'm usually approached for texts. Even when there's interest in my art, people expect me to write about it. That's not something that anyone expects of Damien Hirst or Anish Kapoor or Nick Cave. As James Baldwin might put it, the burden of that Cross is always upon me. Would I have it any other way? Man, I don't know. Sometimes I think I might.

BSSB

Although I wouldn't call you a performance artist, performance plays an important role in your practice. Besides works like *Sermons* (2007) or *Bridge, Puerto Rico* (2002), I consider works like the Jamaica Flux community art project in New York a performative gesture or exploration. This latter piece is a huge poster with the caption "Have you read a book today?" and with almost two hundred artists, carrying a James Baldwin book. I will like to see you invoke your last titled *Estuaria* (2014), which is *The Philosophy of the Sea* (2006) brilliantly wrote about the body as a site of discourse. How does your body function as a site of discourse within the premises of your performative practice?

OO

I tend to engage every form, as we noted before, but, yes, I have done a lot of performance work going back to the 1980s, much of which is undocumented. The performative is important in my work. Even installation, in my thinking, is performative in the sense that Marina Abramović and I happen to agree on. Also, in your ancestral culture and mine, art was almost always performative. Mask faces weren't just sculptures to hang on the wall but part of often elaborate ceremony along with fabrics and body paint, and all that was activated through dance and sometimes wide musical accompaniment. Also, they were stored away up in the rafters or shown



Jamaica Flux Project, Photo booth bill, Jamaica Avenue, Queens, New York, 2004. Courtesy: the artist



Untitled, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist



Buggy: Memorial to the Unknown Child, 1992. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist

away. All sculpture was experienced through performance, including propitiatory ritual objects. In Igbo lore, body painting or what we might call tattoo was considered the very highest form of art and was celebrated in songs. In some parts of Igbo land, they have the legend of Asole, who was a body painter to both humans and spirits. Uche Chika was a devotee of Asole, after whom his museum and research center, Asole Institute, is named. So, you almost always encountered art in motion, brought alive through human agency. In those cultures, most art was meant to be inhabited.

This very much informs my work even when it's stationary. There's almost always a sense of a bodily presence. Several of the sculptures that I've been making since 2013 involve the figure lying in state or inhabiting the sculptural form, but all my sculptures or sculptural installations have always incorporated the absent figure. This in fact includes the *Gone* ceramic installation, which frames two empty chairs for viewers to sit in. Sitting in the chairs is not important, however, their presence already invokes a human presence. *Keep It Real* (1996-2007), the piece that I exhibited in the Venice Biennale in 2007 and which Marina exhibited earlier in her performance-art group show at the Irish National Museum of Art in 2001, invokes the spirit presence of a deceased youth as well, of course, as the bodily engagement of mourners. Every memorial does so, and memorials are an important element of my work. I have another work called *Buggy* (1997), which incorporates a real antique baby stroller, and viewers often look in there as though they might find a baby inside.

Interestingly enough, my own body is always absent in my work, even when I use an image of myself. I always imagine it to refer to or represent someone else—in other words, to serve only as a surrogate. In *Buggy*, for instance, there is a large image of a child. It is my image, but I always meant it to stand in for my late little brother, of whom there is no surviving image. I sort of drew on the Yoruba *ogbun* photographic genre, which I wrote about in "Photography and the

Substance of the Image" (1996), whereby the photo image of a living twin is duplicated and used to represent a deceased twin (although my brother and I were not twins; he was much younger). So, the image in the work is no longer me; that's my little brother.

Same thing with the Jamaica Flux image, which is intended to represent generic urban youth, hence the resort to stereotypical except in one crucial respect: the Baldwin look. So I guess you might call it a role playing. I do, however, try to avoid performing the self.

BIBLIO

In your work you do not shy away from all kinds of sociopolitical issues, or historical subjects that inform our contemporary. I am thinking for example of *Women of Substance* (2000), *Many Thousand Gone* (2000), *Atlas* (2002), or even more recent works on the Chibok Girls. You are also quite outspoken about the politics of the quotidian, be it in your artworks or on social media. Please tell us about how current affairs, the political, and the historical inform your work—and, if I might add, your activism!

OO I often begin by recasting that art and artists should bear no special social burden. I reject the rather popular notion that artists are some kind of moral guardians or the conscience of society. I did hold that view when I was younger, but it was a received notion, which in time I came to question and ultimately discarded. I believe that artists should make whatever work they please.

That said, I also believe that art should reflect all aspects of the times in which it was made. When we encounter the art of an epoch or civilization it should give us a sense of the people who lived in that period, what they were like, what engaged or captivated or preoccupied them, and ultimately what happened to their epoch or civilization. How it does that is not for us to predetermine.

I became involved in activism at a very young age, long before I became an artist. In my very first week in grammar school, students were caught in street battles with police, resulting in casualties on both sides. Some of the senior students who led the protest, which the police typically turned violent, had fought as soldiers in the Biafra War a few years earlier, so they weren't afraid of police. The rest of us, some of us still literally kids, learned that day about courage under fire. There are times when you must stand your ground and stand up to authority, and if necessary, even up to armed police.

I also learned rather early from my father the lesson of the Gospel according to Matthew 23:5, which, as you would notice, I have returned to again and again in my work, including now with *documenta 14*. A great many people swear by the so-called golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For me, however, that's not enough. "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you gave me a place to stay." Matthew 25:35. I'm not at all religious. I left my child-teacher life behind once I turned twenty-one. But equality, fairness, hospitality: those are universal principles that go beyond culture or faith, and I learned pretty early that they are worth living by and fighting for.

Armed with that early preparation, I got into student activism at university and earned a reputation as a daring leader. As a result I was suspended from university as an undergraduate, and a few years later I was expelled from graduate school. That's how I left Africa. Ironically, Britain gave me another chance, though once I got there, I quickly joined the Pan-African pro-democracy movement then active in London, as well as immigrant welfare advocacy. Interestingly enough, my engagement with cultural activism began in Britain and for most part was secondary to my social and political activism.

So, it followed rather predictably that my art would in some way reflect those inclinations. As a young art student I was drawn to Francisco de Goya and Gustave Courbet, as well as a number of African American artists: Charles White, Jack Lawrence, Jean-Michel Basquiat. And, of course, I also studied under a number of artists who were socially engaged in their work. Influenced by Chimua Adubele and the experience of the Biafra war, a community of artists emerged in Nsukka in the 1970s and 1980s that used art to address social and political issues. Among the more prominent were El Anatsui and Chibok Udehukwu. Students were not taught or compelled to follow their example, but it was only natural that I would be drawn to it. I will make a great deal of work that is concerned purely with form or aesthetic



Bridge, Puerto Rico, Inauguration performance, Leiza, 2002. Courtesy: the artist



Keep It Real: Memorial to an Unknown Youth, 1996-2007. Courtesy: The William Benton Museum of Art, Storrs. Photo: Safi Sotiriou

ideas. These days I pursue that mostly through painting. I would like to devote more time to it, and to design, because the Igbo heritage in painting and design is all about beauty and form. I'm very strongly invested in that. At the same time, having led a life of social and political engagement, my work as an artist strongly aligned with and became part of that engagement. So did my writing, scholarship, and the rest of it. It's not widely known, but I wrote the first feminist critique of modern Nigerian art in 1987. That was about thirty years ago, when "feminism" was not a word most people mentioned in that part of the world, nor was it on any college curriculum. I then went on to write my graduate dissertation on the representation of women in modern Nigerian art, looking at the preponderance of defective stereotypes and the meaningless investment in golden figures and dance imagery as the expense of engaging the reality of women in contemporary society. Unfortunately, I was expelled before I could defend the dissertation—not for my feminism, mind you, but for my regular political activism. So, it's buried somewhere at the University in Nsukka.

When I got to the UK in 1989 to write about the artist Uzo Egonu, I was rather unaware of the true nature of the contemporary art world. *Reality* kicked in quickly and the activist instinct took over, and that's how I became involved in the broader issues. My writings drew Okwui Enwezor and others to art criticism, curating, critical theory, and cultural activism, and the rest, as they say, is history. So I guess that resonates in the nature of non-specialization. The burden of the Cross is heavy, but perhaps it's been worth something.

BIBLIO

Tell us about the pieces you are presenting at *documenta 14* in Athens and Kassel, which in my opinion encompass many of the aforementioned points. Maybe you can start by talking about the children of Biafra conference, then the monumental publications on and for Biafra in Athens, and finally the obelisk in Kassel. The three works are deeply personal, but at the same time concrete reflections about humanity or humanitarian values, as well as how societies are or could be constructed in this postcolonial era in which we still feel reverberations of coloniality in forms of the nation-state or statelessness, migration, displacement, and more.

OO Our conversation so far, I think, foregrounds the work in *documenta* quite nicely. The Biafra War is a central theme in the work. For some background, the war, as you know, broke out in 1967 when the eastern region of Nigeria declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra. The previous year, tens of thousands of people from the region had been massacred in other parts of Nigeria, especially in northern Nigeria, because a few young and visionary military officers had removed Nigeria's corrupt regime. Some of the officers happened to be of Igbo ancestry, the Igbo being the largest group in eastern Nigeria. As a result all eastern Nigerians living especially in northern Nigeria were targeted in vast ethnic cleansing pogroms that slaughter claimed nearly thirty thousand killed or maimed. The country's senior military officer was brought in to stem the crisis, but he too was assassinated. With no signs of the massacres abating or Nigeria's new government doing anything to protect the targeted civilians, and with millions of the pogrom survivors streaming back to the eastern region in hopes of safety and the government offering no such assurance, they decided they had a duty to seek sovereignty in order to procure the means to defend themselves.

When they did so in May 1967, Nigeria declared war on them. Soon after declaring war, Nigeria also imposed a total blockade of the breakaway nation, thus cutting it off completely from the rest of the world by land, air, and sea. The war lasted thirty months and claimed more than two million lives, most of them children who died from starvation and disease. I was two years old when the war began, and it was my generation that took the greatest toll. It's believed that half the children my age in Biafra perished.

This is the background to the Biafra archives installation we're exhibiting in Athens. It's very important because not only are there probably billions of people around the world today who know little or nothing about Biafra because they weren't born yet or were too young to remember, but a great deal of effort has gone into actively erasing the act of ethnic cleansing and genocide that led to the war. For an unconscious example, only a few months ago, I came across a German *quä* game called "Das Quä des 20. Jahrhunderts" published by Harenberg Verlag

in Dortmund. One of the quiz cards for 1967 has the question: "Über welchen nationalistischen Rebellen verlor Biafra, das 1967 den Ausruf 'Aus dem Staat Nigeria erkläre!' The possible answers? 'Edel', 'Gold', 'Kamancha', 'wuh' 'Edel' designated as the correct answer. It literally made me sick. There are thousands of schoolchildren out there studying with that, learning nothing about the truth, and some adult put that disgraceful stuff out. That makes the installation piece all the more pertinent to that hopelessly more people will be curious, and their curiosity may lead them to the truth.

Beyond the bloodshed that led to its founding, Biafra came to symbolize a great deal more. Around the world, people saw it as the first true attempt at effective decolonization in Africa, almost all the continent's formerly independent nations having already failed to live up to the promise of the struggle against imperialism. It came in no surprise that both the East and the West colluded and colluded in preventing its survival, with the Soviet Union and Britain taking the lead, and the rest of the world major powers watching.

Rigoberta Menchú, *Women of Substance*, 2000. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist

When it all came to an end in early 1970, many felt that Africa had lost its one great opportunity to build a truly independent nation with a promise of success driven not by aid or ideologies from the East or West, but by the people's ingenuity and determination. That's why a group of radical young artists in Nsukka named themselves Biafra in 1971, for instance. The other pertinent aspect of the Biafra experience is the critical importance of humanitarianism. In late 1968, the *Times* Star reported that about six thousand people were dying daily from starvation in Biafra, most of them children. Nigeria's blockade on Biafra and Britain's and the Soviet Union's active participation in the war were taking an even greater human toll than the pogroms that led to the war. People around the world were appalled, and many of them stepped up to offer what aid they could where their governments offered nothing. Some countries also began to open their doors to Biafran refugees, especially nursing women and children. My family and I were only internally displaced, but we still owe our lives to poor, struggling people in towns after towns who, though they too were besieged and had little to eat, let alone to spare, nevertheless opened their homes and disused schools and marketplaces and town squares to receive us, just as Switzerland, Ireland, Canada, Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Gabon, and a number of other countries took in Biafran refugees. Their affirmation of those timeless, universal principles of caring for the afflicted and offering refuge to the persecuted or fleeing informs the public work that we're making in Kassel, the monument to strangers and refugees. The monument takes the form of an obelisk that is studded in the Küssgipfel, with the words "I was a stranger and you took me in" inscribed on it in four languages. It's a repudiation of the anti-immigrant bigotry that certain world leaders and their followers have been fanning in some parts of the world lately, and an acknowledgment of the life-saving hospitality and refuge that others have offered to counter that bigotry. So, there's the personal learning on the timeless and universal, as well as the historical informing the quotidian, as you rightly point out.



Child Bride II, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist



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