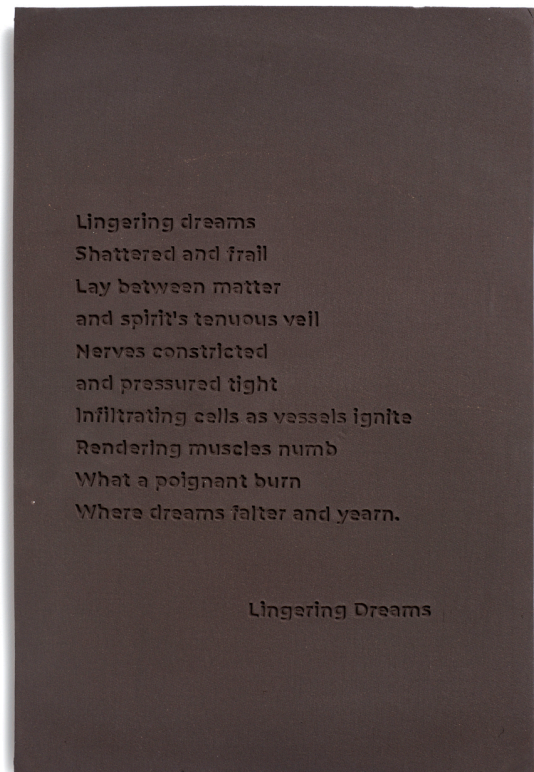


An interview with Otobong Nkanga

Akin Oladimeji



Otobong Nkanga, *Lingering Dreams*, 2023
clay, 62 x 42 x 1.2 cm, courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

Otobong Nkanga is a visual artist and poet born in Nigeria, currently living in Belgium. Her practice has been marked by a focus on the environment and care for the resources that make the earth livable. In that spirit, her first survey exhibition in the United States was at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in 2018, in which she drew on how colonisation went alongside the exploitation of natural resources in works such as *The Weight of Scars* (2015). In this work, ten photographic images printed on Forex plates are inserted into woven textile on four large panels. They depict the remnants of the mines brutally used up in Namibia's northeastern region with 'details of cracked surfaces, holes in the ground and walls, massive abandoned concrete structures, pipelines cutting through the landscape, and so on'.¹ Some of Nkanga's projects are longterm, such as *Landversion* – which she initiated originally in São Paulo in 2014, then

¹ See 'The Weight of Scars', Otobong Nkanga 2015',
<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-weight-of-scars-otobong-nkanga/SQEMsng3SPW1XA?hl=en>

Beirut (2016), Shanghai (2016) and Dhaka (2020) – brought together a range of people connected to land at tables where they discussed their views about how to utilise the land for farming, scientific discoveries and other uses.² Another is *Carve to Flow*, which started in 2017 as a **documenta** project. Here, soap, and sculptures in the shape of soap, were made to fund an arts centre in Athens and an organic farm her brother manages in Akwa Ibom in Nigeria.³ In this interview at the Lisson Gallery in London on 25 May 2024, Nkanga discusses various aspects of her practice, as well as her exhibition at the Lisson Gallery, 'We Come From Fire and Return to Fire' (24 May – 3 August 2024).



Installation view of 'Oto bong Nkanga: We Come From Fire and Return to Fire' at the Lisson Gallery, London, 24 May – 3 August 2024

Akin Oladimeji: Your practice seems to resolve around the topic of care for the environment. Why are you drawn to this?

Oto bong Nkanga: It's not always about the care of the environment. I think the work has gone through different states and changes over time... of observation, and looking at the landscape,

² See *Landversion* on the artist's website: www.otobong-nkanga.com/landversion

³ See Tom Morton, 'Oto bong Nkanga chooses life' on the Art Basel website: www.artbasel.com/stories/otobong-nkanga-chooses-life?lang=en

understanding and trying to understand why things aren't set in places. One of the strongest things that allows me to understand how things shift from one place to another, the connectedness of things, was when I was studying at Obafemi Awolowo University in southwestern Nigeria with Professor Agbo Afolarin. He would take us around and make us understand that the pebbles that are under the ground in certain areas, and the Orisha areas, were also pebbles that were made by people that came in from Brazil, Yoruba Brazilian people. So I think it's a way of understanding the world. And by understanding the world and understanding the materials and things that are here, to make our existence livable. You get to understand that you need to take care of certain things to be able to continue that livability, and that between human beings... we are so connected that our histories have slippages, and those slippages enter Europe and turn to South America and Asia. They have gone through the waters, through the winds, the seeds have been blown from one place to another, and they find fertile ground in many places. So it's a way of understanding that we are in a time that is making us think that we are so different, that our worlds are not at all connected. And the erasure, through wars, through alternative histories that are being proposed to us; the amnesia of things is what is being pushed forward. But the understanding that we can influence the power of knowledges that have slipped through times, through many times, have been able to create the world of livability. And that's what I'm interested in understanding... and that incorporates the caring for things, people, lands, all life forms.

AO: So *Landversation*, in which you facilitated conversations with participants in Brazil, Lebanon, China and Bangladesh between 2014 and 2020, which looks at their connection to the land, seems to have an ecological message. Do you see yourself in a line of activists, people who are drawn to the way that, for example, capitalism has contributed to the climate crisis?

ON: I'm someone that is not interested in labels. Not really. Because I always feel that those terminologies have been the things that have also caged us. People use the term *activist* and it's such a weight to carry. But I think that it's just... what do you contribute to this planet? How are you contributing to it? How can you meet with people, connect people, open all kinds of platforms that allow for conversations, allow for actions, allow for different possibilities of understanding... of how someone who is working as a farmer, but working with chemicals and all kinds of GMOs and all that, can converse with someone who works with organic farming? How do you put those two together? How do you find a place where a conversation can take place and start understanding how two minds that have the same interest, how they have gone in separate ways? These kinds of conversations are not about finding people that are doing right for the planet only, but it's about finding people that are in conversation with the landscape in one way or the other, from people who are landless people, homeless people, people that are dealing with water, people that are dealing with hyper-industrial processes on the land, to people that are really micro-farmers, to

people that are geologists. Conversation is very important, because most times you're looking for like-minded groups of people. And those like-minded groups of people praise each other and say they're doing good. And then those that you do not like, those whom you feel are doing wrong, you don't want to have conversations with, yet those are the most crucial people to have conversations with.

AO: Very true. How can you understand people if you're not having those conversations?

ON: So when you have conferences and everybody's nodding and saying: yes, yes, I agree. If you're not with someone that you can really have a debate with, then how are you changing things and how are you thinking of an evolution, right? So, I'm not going to say I am this, but I would like a word that can have a way of opening questions, conversations, rethinking how we are doing things. If I was a fulltime... I think you want to say 'artist', I don't think I would be here. I wouldn't be sitting here. I would be on the farm somewhere. My family has a farm in Nigeria, but it's so hard to be abstracted from the system. You can comment, you can shout about how evil capitalism is and then you go back home, and you're having access to all the things that pollute the whole planet. That's why it's very hard for me to call myself that [an artist], because I am part of [capitalism], because I am part of that system. And you're finding ways to minimise it, but there's only a certain percentage of minimisation.

AO: Fair enough. We can rage against capitalism and all sorts of things, but then if you're using a mobile phone, the exploitation that's gone into the production of that...

ON: It's like everything. There's not one thing that is not tainted by that kind of production, no matter what. If you're looking at the world, you're looking at how the African continent is just a producer of raw materials. Already, you're in that capitalist system that has completely reduced the possibility of wealth to certain groups of people that have the core material that you need to make things. And so where do you start? And how do you kind of find a way? That is the kind of thing I struggle with. Do you stay here? And even if you stay here, what do you do? When you go back to, let's say, your own country, aren't we also seeing the kind of residues and remnants and an amplification of a colonial structure that is so embedded in our lifestyle? And it's an ideology that has spread like a virus that does not allow for positive changes to stick, and people that could change that way of thinking are constantly eliminated.

AO: True. It's quite difficult to stay out of the system. I totally agree with that. My next question has been answered really, because I was going to ask: what's at stake? What do you gain from audience participation? But you've said that it's not just audience participation for the sake of it, but a way to learn more from a variety of viewpoints, not just people with the same kind of standpoint. My next question is: very recently, it seems like you were a catalyst and participant in

the group show at London's Hayward Gallery, 'Dear Earth' (21 June – 3 September 2023), which also had a message of sustainability and conservation of the environment. Do you believe those kinds of shows shift the dial? How confident are you that audience members come in and that they think more deeply, and maybe change their modes of behaviour?

ON: Well, I like to use all means possible. I believe that shows like that *could* change things. You never know how a kid, or whoever, comes into that exhibition, and just reads a phrase or sees an artwork that completely changes the way they thought about things. I feel that artwork, films, books... many things... should be there to be able to at least make a hole, and that hole is already something that starts growing, or something slips in to be able to adjust and shift. When we think of ideologies, or we're thinking of, you know... we talk about white supremacy, we talk about communism, we talk about all these kinds of movements that have been happening, or even when we look at the Islamist... it doesn't just start with people coming in and say 'now you have to do this'. It starts with little holes that are slowly built up over time. And then as a child, you hear things your parents are saying... certain repetitions that happen, and before you know it, you're thinking that way. I feel that if there were more and more voices, that kind of echo makes a difference. Often people only get to a point of a change when something's happening close to them. Suddenly, your uncle dies of multiple sclerosis and you become a fighter for multiple sclerosis cures. Your nephew has symptoms of a syndrome, and then you see people wake up because all of a sudden, it's getting too close; it's getting uncomfortable. I just feel that shows like this are important.

AO: I know. It makes sense. Okay, so... there was a question about the Venice Biennale and this focus on 'decolonisation and decarbonisation'. I read the scholars, Maja and Reuben Fowkes, who wrote about the Biennale for Third Text, and they talk about the way the curator, Adriano Pedrosa, doesn't seem to have considered non-humans – the animals, plants, rivers, trees.⁴ They say that he doesn't seem to have considered them as part of his definition of foreigners. And they are also critical of the amount of artworld travel, and all these numerous shows that are part of the Biennale. They mention 'the choking disaster of fossil fuel emissions'. This made me think about a solution that was thrown around during the COVID-19 pandemic, because during the lockdowns you had artworld people discussing in podcasts and articles the climate crisis and their contribution to it. Some said, maybe there's too many international shows, and maybe one thing that can be done is to make them strictly regional. What do you think about that?

ON: What I think about it is, like you have a disease that is deep in the body, right? It's showing as a little bit of gangrene. All you're doing when you amputate that body part is just treating the surface, okay?

⁴ See Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'Interspecies Solidarities at the Carnival of Extinctions: The Non-Human foreigner at the 60th Venice Biennale', *Third Text Online*, 8 May 2024, a downloadable PDF version is available, <http://www.thirdtext.org/fowkes-venicebiennale2024>

AO: Right.

ON: It is not about the artworld. It's not about all these things. The whole thing is about the system and the design of the system that has been put in place – no matter what we do, capitalism is above that. If we fly or we don't fly, if we're using fossil fuels or if we don't. We're stuck on the treadmill because the design of things will not allow for a certain kind of opting out, unless you have a certain kind of capital or privilege.

AO: So opting out of the system completely can't be done?

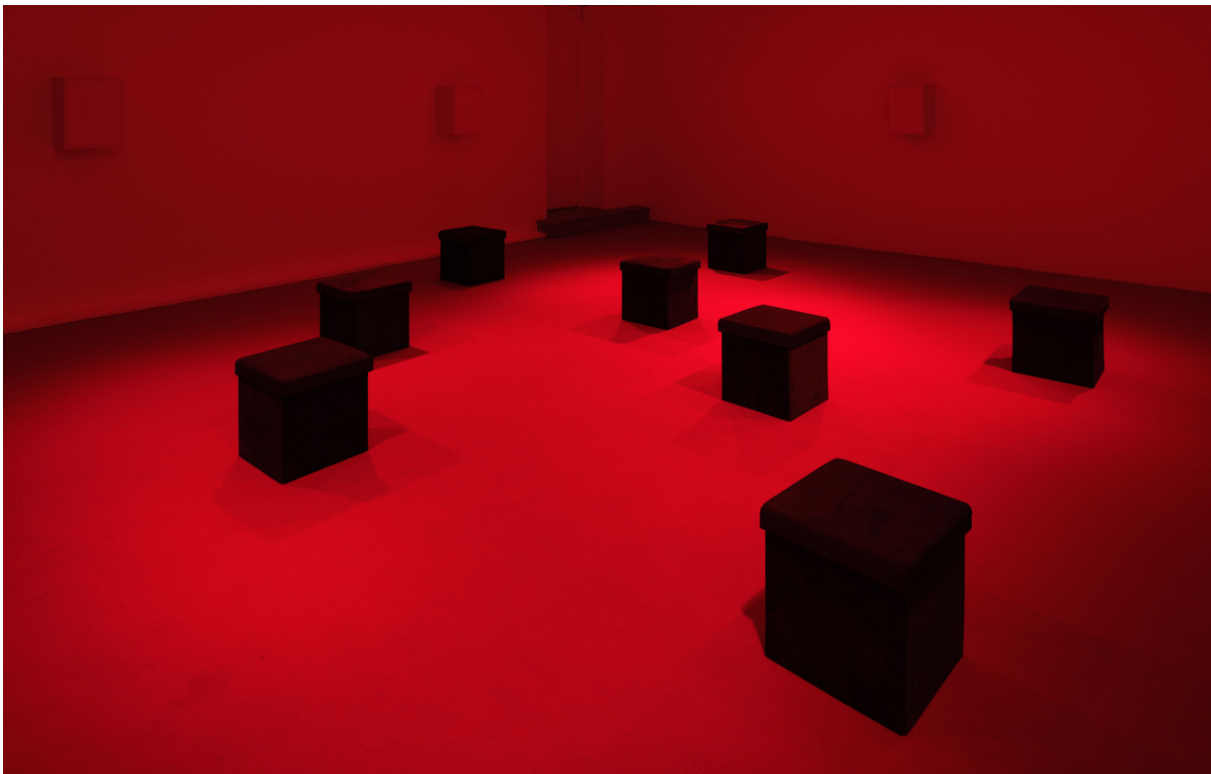
ON: During the pandemic, I was watching all these things, and people saying, yeah, we're going to slow down. I was looking at the galleries, looking at all these institutions. And I thought: yeah, okay. And then I got to realise that they're still struggling to show something, you could see that kind of struggle. And at the end of the day, when everything kind of relaxed, everybody came out in full force, because the system fell apart temporarily, but we did not allow it to totally fall apart so that we can see what the other possibilities are. And it was only certain things that fell apart. Other things grew... if you think of Amazon, for example. If you think of all the other kinds of, say, bigger corporations that could work in a certain way, they could go through all that period and even accumulate more wealth, right? I don't know. It's like what I said earlier, we don't have the imaginary... if it was a world in which you had different groups of knowledges of people from, let's say, the Amazonian or the Ibibios in modern Nigeria, all kinds of groups of people that did not go through this kind of colonisation – there isn't that multiplicity of imaginaries to compare with. The British Empire, the French, all these empires, at that time, when they arrived somewhere they erased all alternatives. And so we are living in a time that, yes, we want to plant more trees. Yes, we want to do all these things. But at the same time, the next day those trees could be chopped down. They could be cut down faster than the time it took them to grow.

AO: Unfortunately, yes, you're right.

ON: I think we're so little in relation to all those things. But I believe that other things, other elements are stronger than us in many ways. And we are quite fragile. So whatever we are going through, the artworld is a part of that. Because that's the system that is in place and no matter how much you're trying to break it, shake it, it seems to swallow it up and then it brings it out as capital. You have artists that make certain things that are anti-capitalist and all of a sudden, even those works can fetch lots of money. The financial markets survive on exponential growth. So even if the Biennale brought in works that are looking at other life forms and other things, it enters into a system of capital again. I understand that, but I also think that the curator's position is a deficient way of understanding the world, because it should also be about other things that even make humans exist. I mean, we can't do without these natural resources.

AO: It's the essence of Yoruba cosmology: living in harmony with other things, definitely. So let's move on to some of the formal aspects of your exhibition at London's Lisson Gallery. Why was it important to include the 'Lingering Dreams' poem that greets visitors as they enter the show? I found it very beautiful, but what's the rationale behind that?

ON: The way I write about my work is through poetry. And I felt like this 'Lingering Dream' kind of opened up the exhibition in a psychological way, a physical way, an emotional way and in a metaphysical way. The notion of faltering and yearning, of yearning for something, and at the same time feeling that it's almost like a dream. It's like you're living in a world that makes you think: is this really the reality of where we're going? Is this the place that we want to go? Is this real? It talks about matter, talks about veins, talks about all these things that are so related to many parts of the exhibition, and I thought that that was a good way to start.



Otobong Nkanga, *Wetin You Go Do? Oya Na*, 2020, six channel sound installation, 20:28 min loop on 6 speakers, edition of 3 + 1 artist's proof, courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

AO: So, moving on to the spoken-word piece *Wetin you go do? Oya na*. I enjoyed, having grown up in Nigeria, the bits in pidgin. That polyphony with the singing and the way the work is constructed, and even the room and the way you've got those red lights there that maybe depict the rage and the confusion that comes when there's so many overlapping voices... and even the red carpets as well. They all seem to work perfectly, but I did wonder about the accessibility of language, the broken English for people that are not African, for example.

ON: I'm not concerned with that. Just like where I pointed out in our walkthrough that there are messages meant in the tapestries that are only meant for those that can understand them, I feel the same way about the broken English. It's not made for people that don't understand it, and that's fine. What they will understand is the emotion of it. It's like you're listening to someone, but don't understand what they're saying. What I understand – and that's what's common to everybody, you understand emotions. You understand that this is someone that is going through some mental state. I also feel that when I'm in Nigeria... I don't fit in. I come from Nigeria and lived a long time there, but I've lived out of it. People look at me differently when I visit. You're not fitting in there, and here in Europe you definitely don't fit in, even if you have the nationality. And that's what happened with colonisation. We gave access to the core and the being of who we were. And the access to our lands, prodding, digging, taking out extracts, and the access to our bodies to check to see are we normal or not. Those anthropologists of our religion that come to sit and sleep among us, some stay with us for up to seven years, observing our festivals and other sacred things that our great-grandfathers and our ancestors have given to us. We gave the anthropologists that core of who we were and then they took it and flipped it and said what we were doing was evil. So, I'm not interested in giving everyone access. There's some things I can expose and show. But there are many things that are not meant for them.

AO: Would you say it's a form of resistance as well?

ON: I don't know if it's resistance, I don't know if that's the word... but I think it's a form of, of... because resistance means there's something that you're fighting against. It's a form of dominancy, a form of capacity. I don't need this resistance. Just capacity. I'm not interested in your understanding.

AO: I've read some contemporary novels where writers insert bits of another language without a glossary, and they're, like, 'well, if you don't get it, you don't get it'.

ON: I think people are getting to a point where they want to have other audiences. There are other groups of people that would understand that you want to talk to them. You want to open up other ways of thinking to other groups of people. Language can dwell in multiple ways, it can have multiple ways of existence, and of telling someone something while telling another group of people another thing. But I feel that with this work with broken... I don't say pidgin English because I find that word problematic, I think 'broken English' is better. You break the language and twist it into another form, and you can say things that sound familiar, but they are not familiar to everyone.

AO: So, would you be able to expand on the psychological connotation of the title of this Lisson Gallery show? Because in our walkthrough you talked about the physical dimensions, there are lots of burnt objects and charred vessels and things in the show, but you did allude to a psychological dimension, but I just didn't get a chance to write it down.



Otobong Nkanga, *Between Embers and Ashes*, 2024, woven textile with hand stitching, 163 x 356 x 2 cm, courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

ON: I think there are many ways of thinking about it in the psychological way. Even birth: just becoming comes from a certain kind of explosion. And that explosion and the heating, there is something that is quite heated: the body. And then we are pushed out into this world. After sitting in this kind of warmth, I don't know how great it is to live in a belly. And then you come out and the first thing you do is cry, then you're gasping for air. I feel like there is a certain kind of... a different stage of making and becoming, there is a certain stage of burn, fire, explosion, violence. So that's the first half of the title. With the second half, I was really thinking of it in a way that, you know, as you grow older, we return to the earth. But if we're looking at it in a kind of deep time, we become a mineral, and that mineral becomes heated by the Earth. Another kind of element could be a rock. It is all mixed up with burnt organic matter. And when we think of charcoal, things that come through fire... the core of the Earth is fire, burning magma. So, I was thinking, we return to a place that is constantly burning. And if we don't have that balance of that fire burning at the core of the Earth, the Earth does not exist. But in a psychological state, also, the hunger to exist, you need to have that fire, the hunger to still stay on this planet; there needs to be a certain fire.

AO: Fire in your belly. Isn't that an expression?

ON: Yes, a fire in your belly. And once that fire quenches, that's where I think we enter into a place of depression. The fire, you even need it just to wake up, because waking up for me is a big thing. I love sleeping. If I was paid to sleep, I would do it. And sometimes just waking up and having the fire to do something is important. You know, I'm someone that's motivated. I have fire, I have that. But there are some days... and then I can imagine when you're in a situation where you don't



Otobong Nkanga, *We Come from Fire and Return to Fire*, 2024, hand-tufted carpet, glazed and smoked raku ceramic, shungite, tourmaline, handmade rope, metal connectors, 720 x 270 x 340 cm, courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

have that fire, what happens to the body? So, it was just thinking of that mental and emotional state, how we become and where we return to.

AO: That's great. So, one final question. Congratulations, first of all, on winning the Nasher sculpture prize.

ON: Thank you.

AO: And I know you've got a show coming up in April 2025 in Dallas as part of that. What are you most excited to be showing at that exhibition?

ON: Oh, we're still in discussion. There are many things where I'm interested in seeing how we can develop further *Carved to Flow*, the project that I started in Akwa Ibom in Nigeria, produced by **documenta**. We also have with *Carved to Flow* a way of thinking of sculpture, but in engaging within social spheres, engaging with material, thinking of ways in which residues of, or what other remains of the sculptural work can enter into other places. So, it's a much more complex kind of exhibition format, I think, that is not just about an object in the space. And that's what I'm

interested in, in pushing forward and developing with the Nasher prize. But also, one of the things I put on the table was that we do not ship anything. We need to work from the space itself, and to develop something or even some works that are very much local-orientated, and to work with craftsmen or people in the region, to see how we can make things in situ rather than to ship it in. Then the money can go to the people in the local areas, not to people in other places. So it's looking at the way that the sculptural work can go beyond the exhibition space and enter into other realms and other spaces. That's where we are at in the discussion, but I don't know yet how that will develop further.

AO: I know performance seems to be integral to your practice. Something else that has just occurred to me is whether there'll be a video, any recording of your performance that's going to be created for the Nasher space? A past performance? Or do you think you might activate the installations and sculptures with you performing?

ON: I don't know yet. But I might. I mean, I'm looking for a way that... because I think why I was given this prize was not necessarily because of only sculpture, but because the way of thinking sculpture and the way of thinking expanded sculpture that incorporates ways that, you know... if I make this object, the object is a sculptural work, but that is not the end of that object. We can use the object to be able to think through soil, plants, oil, the economy, knowledges, that are being transmitted. I want that spirit to enter into the way of showing my work with the Nasher prize exhibition. So, we can have maybe a sculptural object but it has to have slippage beyond the exhibition spaces into other spaces.

AO: Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with me today.

Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is about to start a PhD funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at University College, London.