Apsara DiQuinzio: Much of your practice involves an extended engagement with landscapes, whether natural or social, and in particular landscapes in Nigeria, where you are from. Can you tell us more about what initially inspired this interest and motivation?

Otobong Nkanga: Within my practice my interests touch on many different aspects, from performance to sculpture, painting, and poetry. A lot has had a big impact on my artistic practice. One of the aspects of growing up in Lagos was the possibility to be outdoors and explore, create, experiment, and play with elements such as stones, plants, and in short everything that one could. This landscape has been a very important formative part of my life, work, and sensibility—encountering other landscapes continues to inform, enrich, and expand my reflections on the social, political, and ecological in my work. I am also interested in working with people and geographies that I have encountered and lived in, which have opened up different ways of engaging with the social, environmental, and ecological impacts that in one way or the other have influenced my practice. I remember one of my visits to Ille-Ife, Osun state, Nigeria, in 1998 when I was following a course at the Obafemi Awolowo University on African art archetypes, and the lecturer made us visit Brazilian Yoruba architecture that had the same features I later discovered when I visited the University of California, Berkeley Museum of Art and Pacific Film Archive.

Philippe Pirotte: I’d like to ask you about the notion of exploitation in your practice and how it circumscribes many subjects in your work, ranging from the exploitation of the land, to the exploitation of rare goods, and even to the exploitation of a people during the colonial and postcolonial era. Furthermore, how does exploitation relate to artistic production in general, and in particular to the performances you create?

ON: I think that comes from different kinds of experiences that I have had or seen. Exploitation is not only limited to the era of colonialism or postcolonialism, but it is a part of society and also a feature of contemporary society. Empires, nations, and economies have been built through exploitative means. The exploitation and destruction of natural resources and habitats is causing a growing discontent in different parts of the world. It is hard to be insensitive to what is going on in different parts of the world when you visit an old mine that has been emptied out: What remains? What is the correlation between the environmental decay and displacement of the people? Do we know what and where our processed products all come from, and what kinds of exploitations and labor have taken place just to have a piece of metal? Everything is interconnected and we are all implicated to different degrees. The performances are not only made for discussions but they are structured to bring together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and possible future. There isn’t always a fixed way to approach it, but I am interested in bringing together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The performances are not only made for discussions but they are structured to bring together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and possible future. There isn’t always a fixed way to approach it, but I am interested in bringing together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and possible future. There isn’t always a fixed way to approach it, but I am interested in bringing together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and possible future. There isn’t always a fixed way to approach it, but I am interested in bringing together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and possible future. There isn’t always a fixed way to approach it, but I am interested in bringing together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and possible future. There isn’t always a fixed way to approach it, but I am interested in bringing together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language.

PP: Likewise, I’m interested in how your work relates to a postcolonial, nomadic life, particularly in relation to the uprising of both the landscape and people. You have made performances about the uprising of the mango and the papaya, for instance.

ON: The performance Taste of a Stone—this is Ufok Sharjah Biennial in 2013 focused on the Queen of the Night plant, mango, and papaya tree. These plants were part of my childhood when growing up in Lagos. So when I saw these plants in The Emirates it triggered some questions about how they all got there since they were not native to that region. The performance expanded on the displacement of each plant and how it entered different lands and cultures, and I also told stories of the three different plants and my experience with them. There were more questions that arose from the performance, such as what was the future of the plant and the generation afterwards. Storytelling, songs, text, and dance were the means used to expand not only on the plants but on human condition, its displacement and integration in new circumstances.

ADQ: Could you elaborate on the nature of storytelling in your work—it seems to anchor much of what you do. Does this connect to Nigerian culture in terms of the importance of oral histories?

ON: Most of the performance pieces are partly scripted but they are prepared in a way to allow for reactions to the moment. There is a structure, but it is a loose structure, so that in a way I can react to what people say or to the feel of the wind or the heat of the sun, the bird that sings or the heat of the sun. I also told stories of the three different plants and my experience with them. There were more questions that arose from the performance, such as what was the future of the plant and the generation afterwards. Storytelling, songs, text, and dance were the means used to expand not only on the plants but on human condition, its displacement and integration in new circumstances.

ADQ: One of the performances you will do at BMWF as part of your MATRIX exhibition is Contained Measures of a Kolanut. What made you want to make a work about the kolanut and what is its significance in relation to Western African culture? You’ve made several performances that begin with the phrase Contained Measures… , how is this phrase important to you, and are these performances related?

ON: In West Africa and the Sahel zone, most of everyday life and many man events are shaped by the use of the kolanut, which represents an important socio-integrative element. Kolanuts are offered to every guest as a gesture of respect and deference; they are presented to a lover as a token of one’s feelings, they are exchanged at the end of business negotiations to seal the contract, and they are offered to the ancestors, orichas, spirits, and gods. The stimulating nuts are ingested at social and religious events. They are chewed during these occasions or given to others at funerals, naming ceremonies, baptisms, and sacrifices. They are also used by long-distance commercial drivers as stimulants to keep them awake and alert.

I was invited in 2012 to take part in the exhibition Tropeosophie: The Social Life of Plants at Bitontik as part of the Triennale in Paris and there it was possible to look into the archives of Agronomic Research for Development (CIRAD) [Center for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development], where I knew there would be a lot of information and documentation about plants indigenous to regions in Western Africa. I came across different kinds of plants but the plant that I was most interested in was the kolanut. I had eaten the kolanut on different occasions and my knowledge of the kolanut was quite limited to my experience. I have always been curious about the different seeds, plants, or elements that are so particular to Nigerian culture and how that has entered into other parts of the world. So when I began the research for the project Contained Measures of a Kolanut in the
component is as important as the other. Different kinds of physical armatures which include the body engages with the person that brings to life the part of the table just as much as the elements that are very much connected in one way or the other but they are contained in a measured space.

PP What about the tables in Contained Measures that envelop you during the performance, which seem to act as an extension of the body. How are these different kinds of physical armatures which include the body to find their place within the installation.

ON From Where I Stand (2015) is a large carpet inspired by the graphic shapes and facets of minerals. The patterns that are in the different facets of the carpet are based on enlarged scenes of electron-microscope images of different mica sheets. The idea was to use layer different types of graphic languages to emphasize the terms that are used to describe a mineral: terms like fracture, etch, cavities, cleavage, flexural, sectile, elastic, hackly, splintery, even or uneven; these terms fit into the language we used to describe the human body or mental and psychological states.

From where the body stands, be it as a spectator or a performer, these states are being evoked by the pattern that one sees on the carpet. I remember my visit to The Thumb mine in Namibia—while standing in front of this deep hole in the earth that had been fractured, hacked, and emptied I was thinking of the workers, miners that had gone through the same process that the space had been through. It was not possible to disassociate the land, material, object, and the body, all enduring the same condition: a slow break down with moments of resistance to stress or transformation. From Where I Stand (2015) indirectly relates to my trip to Tsumeb, in addition to a manifold of other things. I have made three different performances that relate to From Where I Stand (2015)—the carpet is the foundation on which the performances take place. The performances grow through the acts of experimenting with combinations of multimedia elements such as language, voice, objects, and movement. There is also a great degree of improvisation which is impossible to explain. An element of surprise should always remain.

ADQ The other work you will perform for this project is From Where I Stand (2015), and this project develops from a large carpet whose patterns are inspired by the form of a mineral. Is this a specific mineral, and how do the performances relate to this mineral? To what extent (if at all) do your performances grow out of the objects (in this case the carpet), which work as platforms for the performances to develop?

ON From Where I Stand (2015) is a large carpet.