Why Afro Asia

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Thinking about the difficulties posed by the term *diaspora* prompts reflection on models of belonging *not* governed by dispersion. Referring mostly to histories of institutional cooperation among newly independent countries in Africa and Asia and interracial solidarity between Blacks and Asians, the concept of *Afro Asia* hinges on various forms of representational assembly. Its extraordinary scope—as manifested through the conferences, leagues, fronts, and alliances joining representatives from Africa and Asia in the 1950s and '60s—exerts lasting appeal, especially for those invested in counter-hegemonic histories. But what if Afro Asia was repurposed as an intentionally unspecifiable heuristic? Could it then be better equipped not only to cross borders solidified by racial, linguistic, regional, national, and even temporal categories but also to emphasize how such borders cross out living bodies as well as bodies of thinking? Might Afro Asia be put to more effective use as a lasting provocation to received cultural and political geographies?

Allowing such an Afro Asia to exert gravitational force on art-historical methods and structures brings to light artworks whose creators, audiences, methods of facture, and circumstances of display are unaccommodated by current histories of art. Examples include mediations of Ashanti approaches to pattern in 1960s Korean printmaking, Black engagements with Japanese experimentalism, and the enmeshment of Igbo considerations of line with those of Chinese ink painting from the 1970s to the present. Afro Asia thus calls for the "institutional arrangements and intellectual competencies" that theologian Corey Walker considers necessary for reframing the connection between ethics and epistemology in such a way that "rethinking the analytics of race, gender, and nation" might become possible.[1] As a case in point, Afro Asia summons the concept of a "global majority." A term whose use in white-majority countries as an alternative to "non-white" or

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1. Corey D. B. Walker, "'How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?': (Local) Knowledge, Human Interests, and the Ethics of Opacity," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 2011), p. 106.

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Zhou Ruizhuang. "Vigorously Support the Anti-Imperialist Struggle of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America!" Ca. 1964.

"Third World" depends on affirming the scope and vigor of diasporic populations, "global majority" is also defined not only in reference to race, class, nationality, or place of residence but as the sheer number of people in the world for whom personal and cultural autonomy are perpetually compromised or denied outright.[2] Although rarely applied to discussions of visual art, the concept of a global majority is at odds with many histories of art that focus only on a select minority of artworks, artists, events, and institutions.

I have discussed some of these questions before through the language of geometry, which focuses on relationships among various bodies and the shapes those relationships take. But I may have been hasty in not mining the possibilities of words used in the events associated with the term "Afro Asia." Especially if the premise of a "global majority" is a necessary step towards a more equitable distribution of recognition among the world's inhabitants, it would be negligence, I think, to bypass those attempts to consolidate Afro Asia into a political presence representing a supermajority of the world's inhabitants. The best-known instance

2. Historian James Roark, for example, argued that the "global majority" was not exclusively concerned with race but must also include states and groups struggling for national independence. James L. Roark, "American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1943–1953," *African Historical Studies* vol 4, no. 2 (1971), p. 258.

is the Asian-African Conference of 1955, which drew representatives from most of the newly independent Asian and African countries together for the first time. Commonly known as the Bandung Conference for its location in the Indonesian city of Bandung, it spawned long debates over matters of representation and hierarchy crystallized through frequent mentions of self-determination, coexistence, and sovereignty.

Staple ideas in political science and modern history, the three terms have surfaced increasingly in the study of art, namely from countries or by groups for whom these words remain deeply contested. I argue, however, that this triumvirate of concepts so enshrined in the study of international relations can activate an art-specific field of international relations based on the inconceivability of political thinking outside of aesthetic operations. It might then be possible to move away from models of inclusion that can mistake the imposition of uniformity for evidence of an affirmative group unity; cue the overapplication of identity categories such as "Global South" and "people of color." Implicating political self-determination in matters of visual representation conveys how the independence of an artwork—its right to be considered as a self-sustaining entity—entails lasting struggle. But as with nation-states, independence is never the only, or even primary, concern of an artwork. How can artworks that differ from, clash with, or even appear to undermine one another coexist without capitulating to the logic of domination and subordination? Relations among artworks may not directly involve supranational associations, governments, or ruling bodies, but they nonetheless insinuate a politics that encourages drawing from histories of political interaction. Recasting art-historical comparison through the debates over coexistence that characterized the Bandung Conference highlights the enduring problem of deciding which questions to prioritize when building a common field of interaction. Folding comparison into the issue of coexistence paves the way for thinking about sovereignty not as a synonym for artistic control or individual will but as a pretext for valuing interdependence.

Contests of Self-Determination

Among the failures of globalization as an art-historical mandate is its inability to respect how art worlds outside former imperial metropoles and present institutional centers participate in their own self-determination. The tiny fraction of non-Euro-American artists accorded sustained critical and commercial attention from Euro-American institutions and markets does not necessarily align with what the supposed peripheries consider foundational. Which is why I linger over the work of artists such as the Chinese Trinidadian painter Sybil Atteck (1911–1975) and the Igbo painter Obiora Udechukwu (born in 1946), formerly of Nigeria. Though neither is particularly well known in Europe and America, both were pivotal to the artist communities they helped form and to the identities of the places they called home. Both also suggest an Afro Asian internationalism that emphasizes cultural production as an instrument for advancing political self-determination.

Yet Atteck and Udechukwu also pose the question of whether an artwork is itself capable of self-determination, whether it can attain a figurative statehood able to determine its own priorities, especially when it disrupts the coherence of a collective social or political project. Few iterations of Afro Asia make space for visual art, and even fewer consider the non-interchangeability of an artwork, or how artworks resist operating as an illustration, a backdrop, or a receptacle of predetermined meaning.[3] Indeed, much art writing having decolonial aspirations paradoxically echoes the categorization of liberated regions as "trust territories" and "non-self-governing territories" à la the 1945 United Nations Conference on International Organization. The assumption—usually inadvertent but sometimes intentional—is that works cannot be trusted to self-govern, that is, to command a kind of viewer attention that does not first express itself by demanding from the maker an explanation of its meaning.

Consider, for instance, the poster captioned "Firmly Support People in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the Struggle against Imperialism" by Zhou Ruizhuang, originally published in 1964 by Shanghai People's Fine Arts, which has graced countless articles and publications focusing on Afro Asian encounters.[4] Small wonder, for it has few peers when it comes to attention-seeking at its most compellingly blatant. Bodies of color press insistently in one direction as they swarm pictorial space, stalking an unseen target. With ambush on his mind, the Black warrior in the extreme foreground betrays no awareness of either the stage he occupies or the audience toward which the large rectangular picture plane is turned. Putting his training in oil painting at the Zhejiang Art Academy to good use, Zhou draws attention to the contoured drapery that barely clings to the fast-moving bodies pressed against the pictorial surface. But even with the flurry of activity, the overlapping bodies read increasingly as a visible barricade that obstructs viewing into

3. Younger scholars invested in considering the possibilities of Afro Asia as an intellectual provocation have since delved into some examples of image-making other than film or theater, including architecture, its photographic documentation, and drawings intended as political caricature. See, for example, Taomo Zhou, "Global Reporting from the Third World: The Afro-Asian Journalists' Association, 1963–1974," *Critical Asian Studies* vol. 51, no. 2 (2019), pp. 171, 189; Y. L. Lucy Wang, "'Masters in Our Own House': Architecture in the Visual Culture of the Bandung Conference, 1955," *Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context*, Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives, MoMA website, June 8, 2022; Polly Savage, "Avenida Mao Tse Tung (or How Artists Navigated the Mozambican Revolution)," *Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, ed. Jacopo Galimberti, Noemi de Haro García, and Victoria Scott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 249–68.

4. Recent examples of Zhou's poster used as a frontispiece or accompanying image include Brian Hioe, "Is Taiwan a Third World Country?," *New Bloom*, April 26, 2016; Jean-Christophe Servant, "Vers l'Afrique, un 'soft power' qui tourney au 'hard,'" *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 14, 2019; Kevin Anderson, "Maoism and the Global Left," *LA Progressive*, February 4, 2021; "Relocating Africa: Representations and Memory of Africa in 20th and 21st Century China," online symposium at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, May 7, 2021; "The History of Race in East Asia," spring 2022 course at Ohio State University, "Imperialism and Culture Annual Lecture" series at the University of Kent, "Terre (R)esistenti," OG Zero, https://ogzero.org/studium/terre-resistenti/; Afro-Asian Networks, https://afroasiannetworks.com/about/, October 14, 2022; "Afro-Asian Visions," https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions, October 14, 2022.

space, and I suspect this is where the work breaks away from the rhetoric it was so explicitly meant to illustrate.

Riven with conceptions of autonomy that regard such works as permanently susceptible to ideological posturing and therefore irredeemably compromised, most histories of art do not register these works outside of their ideological associations. Huxian "peasant" painting, which enjoyed a brief moment of glory in 1976 amidst the radical ferment stoked by Maoist sympathies in Britain and France, offered existing histories of modern and contemporary art an opportunity to frustrate Western art-historical desires for expansion and universalism. Continuously reusing styles, colors, and arrangements without intending to develop any of these ideas further, the creators of such paintings worked against the push for constant expansion through formal innovation. Although they employ compositional techniques sourced from European, and especially Soviet, oil painting, they are collectively indifferent to what is coded in the Western canon as "international" or, more recently, "global." Yet these works failed to affect art-historical thinking in any substantial way because such history, as Yve-Alain Bois has written, presupposed "an identical and linear development of time . . . conceiving the synchronic picture as a totality without an outside."[5]

"Is there an outside?" may be the most enduring question Alan Copeland's heraldic portrait of Kathleen Cleaver asks. Caught in mid-exhale, the Black

5. Yve-Alain Bois, "La peinture des paysans chinois d'aujourd'hui," *Critique* 337 (June 1975), p. 622.

Alan Copeland. Kathleen Cleaver. *1968.*

Panther communications secretary is the picture of revolutionary chic. Flanking her from behind are a North Vietnamese poster and a well-circulated Chinese propaganda poster by Zhou Ruizhang's colleague Cao Youcheng urging citizens of the People's Republic of China to support the civil-rights movement in the US. Copeland photographs Cleaver from below and from an angle. The resulting view appears to emphasize Cleaver's uprightness, as if to help her stay aloft despite the myriad pressures brought to bear on one of the very few female leaders of the Black Panther Party.

Iconicity consigns the image of Cleaver to a background populated by countless images of other revolutionaries, from Che Guevara to Mao Zedong. That is the predicament outlined so intently by the Paris-based Icelandic artist Erró. On a trip to Cuba in 1967, he discovered a cache of American magazines in a factory previously owned by the US government that featured images of kitchens, dining rooms, and other domestic spaces.[6] The found images became the substrate for his distinctive collages that also included excerpts from or copies of Chinese and North Vietnamese propaganda posters. Inserting or copying such images into aspirational interior sets so that they appear as part of the architecture, Erró insinuates that the ideal of solidarity is fated to recede into the walls. Armed Vietcong and Maoist troops invade a heavily stylized bourgeois American home, itself the site of endless battles over status. Somehow the liberation front merges all too well with the saccharine boudoir. Collective activity is reduced to a decorating choice, leaving the image of liberation defenseless against the subsuming forces of media. Suffusing the work is an even deeper pessimism as to whether it can exist outside this morality play pitting unreflexive solidarity against crassly selfish individualism masquerading as consumer self-expression.

That cultural independence need not wait for national liberation is well documented; take, for instance, the Society of Independents of Trinidad and Tobago. Founded in 1929, more than thirty years before the islands won their independence from Great Britain, the Society brought together artists whose paintings often negotiated European modernism through the syncretic religions of Trinidad, including Shango Baptism and Trinidad Orisha. But acts of self-determination can lapse into preemptive overdetermination. Recognized as a leading midcentury figurative painter in the Caribbean who also contributed to the visualization of a national identity for post-independence Trinidad and Tobago, Sybil Atteck observed to Derek Wolcott: "Why do we have to be surrounded with preconceived ideas of what West Indian art is going to be, when it has not yet arrived? No one can form a vision for you."[7] It makes sense, then, that she should turn to self-portraiture, the genre that is distinctly shaped by the will, or at least the impulse, towards self-determination.

6. Danièlle Kvaran, *Érro: Chronology, His Life and Art* (Reykjavik: Mál og menning and Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2007), p. 186.

7. Atteck quoted in Derek Wolcott, *The Journeyman Years, Occasional Prose 1957–1974*, vol. 1, ed. Gordon Collier (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), p. 436. Originally published in the *Sunday Guardian* on November 27, 1960.

Sybil Atteck.
Self Portrait. *1943.*

"Waiting" might very well describe one of Atteck's earliest self-portraits. Painted in pre-independence Trinidad in 1943, just before she left to study at Washington University in St. Louis, it quivers with barely concealed restlessness. Shoulders tilted as if to telegraph just enough impatience to dispel any suggestion of tranquil repose, Atteck appears to look in two directions. What reads as her right eye gazes directly at us while the left studies something located outside pictorial space. About half of her face is swaddled in shadow, cleaved not into equal halves but into two modes of address, an effect amplified by the obfuscating brown thicket of paint on the left half and by the ocher clearing on the right. Cover the light-flecked half of Atteck's face and we feel even more the force of her penetrating eye on the right.

"Confidence" is one word to describe the effect. Atteck was a precocious talent who at seventeen became a colonial-government employee helping to inventory plant life through botanical illustration—a not-unimportant task in an island ecosystem whose fragility was recognized in 1940 by the Plant Protection Ordinance.[8] Yet the portrait is no youthful declaration of independence. Placing herself quite close to the picture plane while keeping a studied distance from the viewer, Atteck is motivated by an utter rejection of stasis. Knowing she was again headed somewhere else, she deduced that the only logical end was to paint herself as an assembly of incongruous parts. Swathed in a shapeless white dress that is

8. Attesting to the enmeshment of artists and ideas, one of Atteck's early sculptures was a bust of Arthur Hutton McShine, president of Trinidad Co-operative Bank and mayor of Port of Spain, who was related to Kynaston McShine's father Austen Hutton, also a former president of Trinidad Co-operative Bank.

Atteck. Self Portrait. *1973.*

somewhere between loose and ill-fitting, Atteck's body appears somewhere other than where the contour lines indicate. Thin black lines depicting creases suggest the flimsiness of the dress. Conversely, the finely shaded arms are well-turned limbs belonging to a sturdier trunk. Atteck silhouettes their roundedness with a thin outline of rich golden brown. The rhythmic play of abbreviated yellow brushstrokes nipping at her shoulders and neckline try to hold her still. Yet her left eye already wanders outside the space of her temporary confinement. It is only a matter of time before the rest of her follows.

The space that Atteck determines herself inhabiting feels stubbornly private, as if intended to rout the surfeit of expectations for disclosure typical of self-portraiture. Our inability to fully describe how the portrait feels is one instance of artwork self-determination, a deficit amplified by the striking turn Atteck makes in her last self-drawn likeness. Completed a few years before the artist succumbed to cancer in 1975, it is among her most protracted reflections on how light both illuminates and consumes flesh. Cropped closely so that the face dominates pictorial space, the portrait reconfigures Cézanne's faceting of shapes into patches competing for optical precedence through their capacity to gleam and glint.[9] Streaked with frosty light blue, the hair reads as a series of undulating vertical waves. The left cheek is suffused with a deep reddish orange that lets us glimpse the living tissue pulsing below the epidermis. Atteck makes sure we attend to this by letting blue-green paint pool aquatically under her nostrils and around her slightly parted lips, which emerge as two pale-pink mountain ridges.

9. Atteck wrote a thesis on Cézanne while studying with Max Beckmann and Philip Guston at Washington University. Keith Atteck, interview with the author, April 10, 2023.

The work imparts the force of a rupture, of a release from the studied restraint characterizing earlier works. In 1963, Wolcott applauded Atteck for opening up "the color valve."[10] He might have lavished even greater praise in this last portrait where everything is aglow. The orange flame that might have caught Wolcott's attention in works like *Burning the Cane Field* seems brighter, and altogether more ferocious. On the right, an interlacing of short, thick, linear brushstrokes in brown and gold tinged with green initially pass as background scenery, perhaps as abbreviated tree forms. The head is highly compressed and appears to expand the more one beholds it. Deep green brushstrokes under her lower lip merge with the rosiness of her right cheek. The eye looks as if it were carved rather than depicted with a brush. Rimmed emphatically in black, the lines tracing the eyes look more like deep grooves, while the reflective sheen of Atteck's face relates more to polished wood. The tactility advocates an erotics of knowing in which we imagine touching the work, holding its parts, and sharing our most personal spaces with it; we can understand why Atteck never exhibited this work publicly during her lifetime.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Atteck deployed various combinations of highly saturated blues and greens in her work. But their use in her last known self-portrait appears to bring her visage more in line with her 1969 portrait of Althea McNish, the legendary Trinidad-born British textile designer, than with Atteck's younger self. Both of Atteck's parents were Chinese, but the high rate of intermarriage between the Chinese and Black communities yielded a general cultural landscape consisting of what Patricia Mohammed has identified as "largely African and Chinese domestic and social practices."[11] The geographer David Lowenthal wrote of a "color tolerance" in Trinidad that facilitated relatively fluid contact between different racial groups, as opposed to Barbados, where a "color-consciousness" inhibited social mobility.[12] I am reminded even more of Atteck's invigorating depictions of Yoruba Shango dance, which impart a strongly commemorative air, almost as if to recuperate what was suppressed until the 1940s, when freedom of worship was finally guaranteed in Trinidad. But if Lowenthal was right in noting that perceptions of racial color depended "on the company one keeps," Atteck's self-portrait in vibrant dark colors further distinguishes her from the anonymous working-class Trinidadian who believed one could become lighter by choosing a lighter-complected partner.[13]

Anthropologist Hans Guggenheim once contended that Atteck's paintings "represented a means for allowing the Chinese artist to identify herself as a true Trinidadian willing to accept Creole culture."[14] His statement dutifully applies to

10. Wolcott, *The Journeyman Years*, p. 438. Originally published in the *Trinidad Guardian*, November 21, 1963.

11. Patricia Mohammed, "Intersecting Trajectories: Chinese and Indian Artists in Trinidad in the Early Twentieth Century," *Circles and Circuits: Chinese Caribbean Art*, ed. Alexandra Chang (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 163.

12. David Lowenthal, "Race and Color in the West Indies," *Daedalus* vol. 96, no. 2 (Spring 1967), p. 596.

13. Ibid., p. 598.

14. Hans Guggenheim, "Social and Political Change in the Art World of Trinidad During the Period of Transition from Colony to New Nation," Ph.D diss., New York University, 1968, p. 85.

Atteck's work the well-known prescriptions of Prime Minister Eric Williams, whom Atteck had painted as a young man: "There can be no Mother India . . . no Mother Africa . . . no Mother China . . . the only Mother we recognize is Mother Trinidad and Tobago."[15] Undermining the national will to integration were examples of exclusion, including the formation of an alliance in the 1960s by Black and Chinese painters to block East Indians from taking over the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago, a quasi-national organization for the promotion and study of art whose founders included Atteck.[16] By 1970, the year of the nation's Black Power Revolution, the most important political event to occur in post-independence Trinidad and Tobago, to be Chinese was to experience real epistemological issues. As V. S. Naipaul contended, "Black Power means Cuba and China; it also means clearing the Chinese and the Jews and the tourists out of Jamaica."[17] Made only a few years after the revolution, Atteck's self-portrait appears enmeshed with the Afro-awareness that was then being expressed in music, literature, and even clothing.[18] Aware of her own imminent mortality, did Atteck paint herself so that she would not only be remembered without the encumbrances associated with the word *Chinese* but also to exercise the powers of self-determination that *Black* had accrued by the early 1970s?

Carlisle Chang, another Chinese Trinidadian artist central to the production of national identity in Trinidad and Tobago, recalled how in the mid-1950s Atteck

> was drawn into the sweeping nationalism which accompanied the move towards the West Indian Federation, and later to Trinidad and Tobago independence. . . . [During this time] the intellectual community, such as it was, moved to patronize, to record, and to interpret the native culture, establishing its validity and consolidating its central role in engendering a sense of nationalism.[19]

Community building was never far from Atteck's mind, even if she found it burdensome. As she wrote in 1962, "The artist finds himself a controversial figure in a newly independent country with enormous cultural responsibilities."[20] Though she never explicitly stated her political beliefs, Atteck was keenly aware of the role visual repre-

15. Williams's celebrated quote is from *A History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, published in 1964; Bridget Brereton argues that it was a call to "suppress" cultural uniqueness for the national interest. Bridget Brereton, "Contesting the Past: Narratives of Trinidad & Tobago History," *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* vol. 81, nos. 3/4 (2007), p. 176.

16. Guggenheim, "Social and Political Change in the Art World of Trinidad," p. 162.

17. V.S. Naipaul, "Power to the Caribbean People," *New York Review of Books*, September 3, 1970, 33.

18. Victoria Pasley, "The Black Power Movement in Trinidad: An Exploration of Gender and Cultural Changes and the Development of a Feminist Consciousness," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 3:1 (November 2001), pp. 29–30.

19. Carlisle Chang, quoted in Helen and Keith Atteck, *Sybil Atteck: Artist: A Brief Biography* (St. Catharines, Ontario: HED Atteck, 2014), p. 17.

20. Sybil Atteck, quoted in ibid., pp. 13–14.

sentation might play in relaying an iterable sense of national independence; after all, she participated in the selection of Trinidad and Tobago's national flag.

Still, Atteck abstained from making paintings that could be instantly assimilated into a legible representational politics. Far less self-appraising than the depiction produced a quarter century before, Atteck's later self-portrait comes as a gut punch. It may have signaled the unlearning she considered fundamental to artistic self-determination. As she warned painter Jackie Hinkson before he left Trinidad to study in Canada in 1965: "when you come back to Trinidad, you're going to have to unlearn much of what you've learned."[21] For Atteck, unlearning did not mean forgetting what she had studied overseas. Instead she taught herself to rework what she had learned so that such knowledge would retain a measure of formlessness that was both susceptible to new stimuli and inoperable as an endpoint. The stark differences between her two self-portraits mark the circumferential condition of being diasporic, whereby each move, each transfer, each uprooting helps measure the length of a nation's perimeter.

In the catalogue accompanying a 1972 exhibition of contemporary Caribbean art at the Art Museum of the Americas that included Atteck's work, José Gómez Sicre, chief of visual arts and crafts at the Organization of American States, characterized the "three small English speaking island countries" of Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago as thriving on "living forms of cultural expression deriving from far-off Africa and Asia."[22] By describing such dependence as "cross-fertilization" Sicre lapsed into mere botanical metaphor, but he was right to liken nation-building to a process of diversification that could improve a country's ability to adapt to external social, political, and cultural change. But although Black faces and bodies decisively shaped Atteck's sense of corporeality, as seen in her extensive depiction of Black sitters and Shango dancers (indeed, the relative absence of Chinese, Indian, and white figures is notable), her blues do not partake of racialized darkness. While the work relates broadly to interracial marriage and fraternization, it unleashes an entanglement of bodies, liquids, and spirits that cannot be explained away through concepts like hybridity or even syncretism. In contrast to her earlier self-portrait, this last work forcefully distinguishes self-determination from the separatism of organizational and discursive structures whose meaning and value depend on corralling the world into identitarian holding pens. But even more vivid is a sense of presence being freed, one unconsciously aligned with the priority given to emancipation in discussions of self-determination during other crucial Afro Asia–themed assemblies such as the Afro-Asian Women's Conferences in Colombo in 1958 and Cairo in 1961. Freedom inheres in how Atteck released her likeness from the servitude of symbolic representation.

21. Jackie Hinkson, *What Things Are True: A Memoir of Becoming an Artist* (Port of Spain: Paria Publishing, 2012), p. 272.

22. José Gómez Sicre, untitled foreword, *Contemporary Art from the Caribbean: Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago* (Washington, DC: OAS, 1973), n.p.

Comparison, or the Problem of Coexistence

Self-determination cannot thrive in isolation. Representing Lebanon at the Bandung Conference, the philosopher and diplomat Charles Malik memorably asked if the West and the communist world could peacefully coexist with Asia and Africa.[23] What are the available "modalities," to use Malik's term?[24] Asking similar questions of artworks puts commensurate pressure on acts of comparison. The history of comparative methods is inextricably entangled with efforts to determine which works might attain, per Erwin Panofsky's familiar division, the status of a monument while others are relegated to permanent evidentiary status.[25] When a work from outside the West is compared with a Western counterpart, it can result in a situation similar to the way in which former colonies deemed insufficiently ready for full independence became "trust territories" of existing world powers.

A distant relative of Edward Said, whose early intellectual formation he helped shape, Malik claimed that "nothing is easier, nothing is more falsely relieving, than to contradict and reject."[26] The impulse to reject is inherent in comparisons that adjudge works made by the global majority as derivative of those already granted canonical or para-canonical status. How might comparison be retooled so that it is no longer the source of psychic and cognitive depletion? How might it promise a modicum of independence from a world that constantly subjects artworks and their makers to overdetermination?

Known for his work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a United Nations document first ratified in 1948 that proclaimed certain rights to be universally applicable to all humans, Malik formed his thinking in light of the possibility of total destruction. As pro-Zambia-independence theologian Colin Morris observed, "the whole world is the smallest unit of survival in the nuclear age."[27] In the push to consolidate agreement, Bandung Conference participants doomed the Afro Asian solidarity axis by refusing to countenance disagreement. Writing of the conference, Malik noted that a meeting is judged not by what its participants say but by what "it, as a meeting, faces or evades."[28] What passes for global art history is not unlike a conference bent on assuming harmonious co-existence even if it results, as Malik observed of Bandung, in "the dulling of the intellect, the blunting of the moral sense . . . the

23. Charles Malik, "The Bandung Conference," *The Problem of Coexistence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1955), p. 17.

24. Malik, "The Problem of Coexistence," ibid., p. 3.

25. Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, [1940] 1974), pp. 1–25.

26. Malik, "The Problem of Coexistence," p. 3. Malik is also known for later aligning himself with the right-wing Lebanese Front during the Lebanese civil war; Said described him as "the great negative intellectual lesson of my life." Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 2012), p. 260.

27. Colin Morris, *Unyoung, Uncolored, Unpoor*, (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 41.

28. Malik, "The Bandung Conference," p. 29.

weakening of the power to challenge."[29] Coexistence entails more than affirming the existence of opposing and antagonistic ideologies; it demands taking seriously the possibility of adversarial collaboration, of what even enemies can produce together. Thus, instead of focusing on what something is or is not, one should expend the bulk of one's energy on searching for a range of possibilities as to what sustainably peaceful coexistence might look like. To quote Malik:

> Where, on this vast spectrum of possibilities, from war on one end to love on the other, may one reasonably and practicably aim, having regard to all the concrete factors in this terrible world? It is assumed that it could not be love and, because of the atom, it could not be war, and therefore the search is continued somewhere in the intermediate region.[30]

Malik sees coexistence not as a stationary goal but as a condition of constant pursuit. The same might be said of the American artist Senga Nengudi's reasons for moving to Japan for a year in 1966. She recounts how, while studying at California State University in Los Angeles in 1965, she saw illustrations of performances, paintings, and installations by the Gutai Art Association in a book and promptly told herself, referring to Japan, "That's where I want to go. I never saw [Gutai] when I was there; I searched and searched, could not find them. But that was the reason I chose to go to Japan."[31]

Nengudi's pursuit of Gutai introduces another equation into the Afro Asian conceptual fold. With a few notable exceptions, such as Joseph Love, a Tokyo-based art critic and frequent contributor to *Art International*, and Trinidadian-born MoMA curator Kynaston McShine, US art writers and curators until at least the 1980s tended to regard Asian artists who had the audacity to exist after the mid-twentieth century as ageless craft workers or as derivative copyists without hope of redemption.[32] By contrast, what Nengudi described in a response to a questionnaire prepared by Marcy Phillips for "The Abstract Continuum in Afro American Art" as the "Japanese art of the avant-garde of the late 1960s" continued to be at

29. Malik, "The Problem of Coexistence," p. 11.

30. Ibid., p. 3.

31. Elissa Auther, oral-history interview with Senga Nengudi, July 9–11, 2013, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. While Gutai did have their nineteenth annual group show at the Central Museum in the Tokyo neighborhood of Ginza in 1967, which is not far from where Nengudi was living at the time, they were based around the town of Ashiya, several hundred miles from Tokyo.

32. Perhaps spurred by what he saw in the *New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* exhibition that originated at MoMA in April 1965, McShine wrote to a colleague that "I have become extremely interested in the Gutai movement in Japan," observing that Gutai was "not well known in the Western world." Kynaston McShine, letter to Porter A. McCray, May 27, 1968. Kynaston McShine Papers, I.9, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. McShine, an associate curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA at the time, applied for funding to visit Japan for two months to document Gutai activities. Kynaston McShine, letter to Alan Campbell, July 9, 1968. For his part, Love could not bring himself to fully acknowledge all Gutai artists as equals to their European and US counterparts: Despite praising Sadamasa Motonaga's work, for example, he diminished Shimamoto Shozo's paintings as "having no lasting value as art," even though they manifested the "energy that propelled the group." Joseph Love, "The Group in Contemporary Japanese Art, Gutai and Jirō Yoshihara," *Art International* vol. 16, no. 6 (June–July 1972), p. 124.

the forefront of her thinking.[33] Some of the works Nengudi may have seen in reproduction included those of Sadamasa Motonaga, whose water-filled pouches seemed keyed to the same balletic contests between sinuousness and bulbousness that Nengudi would stage in her nylon sculptures.[34] In *R.S.V.P. I* (1977/2003), for example, skeins of fabric stretch into spokes connecting one wall to another. The work requires striking a spatial balance between individual components, including attention to their distance from the floor.[35] In her detailed instructions about the work's installation, Nengudi stressed that "all units should be as taut as possible, to the point [where] you can barely attach them to the wall."[36] Elongated tentacles of nylon hose support a sequential group of seven sacks gathered close to the floor; two additional sacks are "hung at a height for the average person to meet it at eye level."[37] The artist

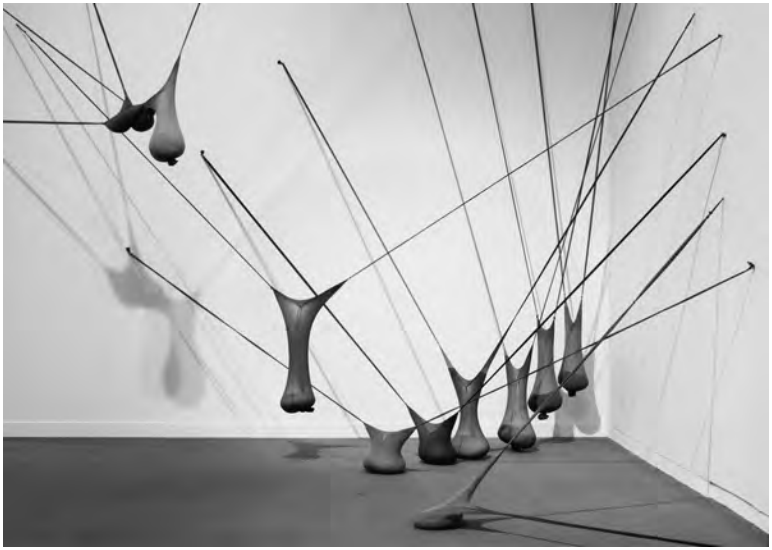
33. Senga Nengudi, response to questionnaire, Just Above Midtown Gallery Records, 1977–1987, box 9, folder 5. Other influences cited were "Dada," "Environmentalists?," "modern dance," and "African total theatre." Senga Nengudi Papers, 1947, circa 1962–2017, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

34. Nengudi cited the works of Gutai as a chief stimulant for her own transversal explorations of form across medium categories in O. Donald Odita, "The Unseen, Inside Out: The Life and Art of Senga Nengudi," *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Summer/Fall 1997), p. 27.

35. Senga Nengudi, "R.S.V.P. I-1977-2003, Installation Instructions," unpublished manuscript, Painting and Sculpture Object Study, MoMA.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.



Senga Nengudi. R.S.V.P. I. *1977.*

Sadamasa Motonaga. Work (Water). *1955. Installation view, First Gutai Art Exhibition, Tokyo, October 1955.*

instructs that the tenth sack be installed away from the main assembly such that it appear to possess "the energy of a hockey puck that landed," further adding that the working title of the installation was "Flying."[38] Many of the instructions read as a call to heed scalar concerns. Install *R.S.V.P. I* in too large a space and you risk losing the friction between the centrifiguality of the work and the white cube of the exhibition space; install it in too small an area and the work turns into an octopus, swallowing the viewer whole.

Tautness concerned Motonaga as well. For the first Gutai Art Exhibtion—in Ohara Hall in Tokyo in October 1955—he bundled flat sheets of vinyl into pouch-like forms that he partly filled with water dyed red, blue, and yellow. Suspended at various heights against a clear window, the pouches appeared to glow from the water's refraction of indoor and outdoor illumination off the vinyl, a highly reflective material. Simply titled *Work*, it expanded on what Motonaga had improvised three months earlier for the Gutai group exhibition *Experimental Outdoor Modern Art Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Burning Sun*, held in a pine forest in Ashiya. As he explained in an interview,

> I was suddenly called up and told to show something at Gutai's first outdoor exhibition . . . but I had no money. I went to the site, wondering what to do. I saw a water faucet there. 'Water is free!' I bought some vinyl sheets, into which I poured water that I colored with ink. Then I hung the sacks from pine branches.[39]

38. Ibid.

39. Sadamasa Motonaga, interview with Mizuho Kato and Hiroko Ikegami, Sadamasa Motonaga Oral History Part 1, Japanese Art Oral History Archive, December 9, 2008.

Motonaga. Work (Water). *1955/2015. Installation view, Dallas Museum of Art.*

Gutai patron, teacher, and fellow artist Yoshihara Jirō called it "the world's first water sculpture," a description that was entirely in keeping with his love of the unprecedented but which falls rather flat given the viewing experience Motonaga's works offer.[40] Dwelling on the suncatcher effect of Motonaga's work, Joseph Love offered a more precise reading, calling it a "kinetic project."[41] The indoor installation appears initially static but, over the course of a single day, manifests a wide spectrum of sunlight intensities via the colored water, which can appear to burn, sparkle, or glimmer, depending on the hour.

Though made almost a quarter century earlier, *Work* might best be conceived of as the response that *R.S.V.P. I* unconsciously sought. The very suggestion violates conventional ideas of time, but the forward slash in the date of the piece, indicating both the years of *Work*'s creation (1955) and subsequent re-creation (2018), loosens some of the temporal binds. To see *Work* with *R.S.V.P. I* raises hope for comparison as a way of bracketing space outside forward linear narratives. Associative pairing sets up a simultaneity that diverts attention from whatever economic or symbolic value each work might have accrued prior to the comparison. In its stead is a tentative equilibrium realized when we attend to how each work in the pair attracts, repels, undermines, and reinforces the other.

40. Ibid.

41. The tubes "all moved with the breezes and the weights shifted, catching the sun's rays." Love, p. 124.

Motonaga's *Work* is likewise made more specific through a consideration of what Nengudi does to the properties of liquid, transparency, and stiffness in her *Water Compositions* (1970) series. It is her own take on the transparent vinyl bag, which here is drastically enlarged as to overtake human, or even room, scale. Nengudi fastens the bag to the wall with rope that is thick enough to suggest the mooring of a ship. One of vinyl's key characteristics, in addition to its low cost (and its reflectiveness), is its resistance to moisture, a property Nengudi takes advantage of by filling the bags with a substantial amount of blue-dyed water. As with *Work*, the stillness of liquid infuses the assembly with a strong sense of capture. But *Water Composition II* lives up to its name by "composing" water so that it appears to settle into a semi-solid mass. No longer able to run, seep, or bleed, the colored liquid is deprived of its temporality. "Floor-based" here is a euphemism for the triumph of the slump. At this scale, the stiffness of the vinyl becomes starkly apparent in the inability of the bags to sit upright on the floor. Loosely connected, they buckle under their own weight. Yet the effect of the entire assembly is leavened by the unexpected tenderness of the way in which the vinyl encasement acts as a primordial pouch, carefully protecting its vital internal fluids.

Nengudi. Water Composition II. *1970/2019*.

Exhibition view, Nul 1965.

It matters that *Water Composition II* was remade (or reanimated, given how the shiny newness of the vinyl and the richly saturated color have the look of excessive aliveness that only artificiality can bestow): It reminds us that the past is a function of noncontinuous leaps made from a present that cannot envisage the coexistence of Nengudi and Motonaga to one in which their pairing ignites hope that instances of artistic kinship can be detailed beyond temporal concurrence, shared origins, or stylistic alignments. Nengudi left Japan in 1967, when performance took account of the rituals of industrial life in Tokyo, just before Motonaga returned from New York in October of that year.

There is the slight possibility that Nengudi glimpsed *Work* in *Nul 1965*, a highly publicized multi-group exhibition that showed Gutai works alongside those of the Zero and Nul groups at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1965.[42] Arguably Gutai's first successful international outing, it showcased *Work* as an indoor installation, echoing the much smaller version Motonaga displayed at the second Gutai Art Outdoor Exhibition. Long vinyl tubes suspended high above the space of the exhibition traversed its lengths. Bent at obtuse angles to form basin-

42. On Gutai participation in *Nul 1965*, see Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 128–30.

Nengudi. Swing Low. *1976/2014.*

like nodes holding small amounts of colored water, they constituted a tubular armature that claimed the vertical space above the floor. And yet even here *Work* remains scaled to an outdoors framed by limitless sky and continuous land. Yet, when entering the gallery, the dip of the tubes also suggests the idea of mid-air as its own distinct spatial condition.

One of the tubes in *Work* swoops so low as to hover just above the head of a particularly tall viewer, a move reminiscent of Nengudi's *Swing Low*, which baits photography into mistaking sculpture for painting so as to mercilessly prod the division between two- and three-dimensionality. (When photographed, the stretched hose in this work look like two distorted check marks—except that here, the weight of the sand softens the points into curves that defy the straight edge produced by joining the flat walls. Nengudi continues Motonaga's rejection of white-cube neutrality by suggesting how curvilinear forms appear to bend the rectilinear space of a gallery. Pantyhose legs still read as legs, but now they double as bendable arms connecting adjoining walls. The work's title, *Swing Low*, invokes the famous anthem of liberation by Choctaw composer Wallace Willis about a chariot that bears mortals heavenward. Can one say that *Swing Low*'s limbs bear the weight of the sick, the injured, the

despairing, and all the others who can no longer stand upright? The hose cast shadows on the wall that, depending on available illumination, might induce us to liken the work to a slingshot, ready to be fired.

As with nations, peaceful coexistence among artworks is never easy. The animating impulse of comparison is frequently a death drive of sorts where lesser-known works daring to look too much like a more well-established referent must be extinguished, whether by intentional effacement or systemic neglect. This is the subtext of Yves Klein's demand that Gutai be removed from *Nul 1965*. His own indebtedness to judo and Japanese calligraphy notwithstanding, Klein opposed Gutai's inclusion out of fear that he and other "Western artists" might be accused of being indebted to them and not the other way around.[43] In this Klein endorsed a scarcity mindset rather than a comparison intended to expand upon the associations a single work might spark.

If we think of comparison as an expression of coexistence, the works of Nengudi and Motonaga appear to model what the philosopher Mogobe Ramose calls "unfoldment," or "incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes of being."[44] As an act of ideological and intellectual self-determination, Ramose mobilized the pan-Bantu concept of *ubuntu* and its oft-cited definition of *humanity* ("a person is a person through other persons") to champion a distinctly African philosophy rooted in the principle of non-domination.[45] On one level, *ubuntu* philosophy explains the resilience of the anti-apartheid movement, whose cohesiveness across substantial geographical, religious, and racial divisions eluded Afro Asia–themed conferences, which were often hobbled by ethno-nationalism and anti-secular interests. *Ubuntu* philosophy elaborates what the literature scholar Saunders Redding claimed was Bandung's true aim: to restore "true self-consciousness" to the majority of the world's population, who have been denied full human status.[46] Widely circulated in connection with post-apartheid reconciliation efforts in South Africa—one of the most critical challenges to harmonious coexistence, needless to say—*ubuntu* philosophy applies to comparative thinking as well. Arguing against gendered asymmetries of power, Sophie Ọlúwolé, another significant commentator on *ubuntu* philosophy, proposes

43. In his "Chelsea Hotel Manifesto," Klein contended that Gutai (to whom he referred not by name but as "that group of Japanese painters") used his method "with great refinement" but "in a strange way." With what might be called petty snobbery intermixed with racialized contempt, Klein added that he would "rather put on my tuxedo and don white gloves" than "smear paint over my body and thus become a living brush." Yves Klein, "The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto, New York, 1961," *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, trans. Kaus Ottmann (Putnam: Spring, 2007), p. 199. On Klein's relationship to Japan, see Terhi Génévrier-Tausti and Denys Riout, *Yves Klein Japan* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta, 2020).

44. Mogobe Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond, 2005), p. 36.

45. For a succinct criticism of how *ubuntu* thinking has been misappropriated as a call for national and interracial unity without problematizing colonial histories, see Mogobe Ramose, "The Ethics of *Ubuntu*," *The African Philosophy Reader*, eds. P. H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 383–85.

46. Saunders Redding, "The Meaning of Bandung," *American Scholar* vol. 25, no. 4 (Autumn 1956), p. 420.

a view of the comparative method as an ongoing process of nonhierarchical and multidirectional actualization between the entities compared.[47] She emphasizes comparison not as an instrument of cultural domination and subordination or as a tool for relationship accumulation but as a means of relation-building.

Not so fast, says Noi Sawaragi. For the Japanese cultural theorist, comparison is an act of displacement, in which the entities compared are removed from their social and historical contexts.[48] Refusing connectivity as the overarching paradigm for thinking of relationality, he is deeply skeptical of globalization projects that are incapable of reckoning with Japan's imperialist past and its ongoing relationship with the US, which he asserts did not end in 1945 but in fact belongs to an extended Cold War. For Sawaragi, division, misalignment, and outright hostility characterize more relationships than do solidarity and consensus. In addition, his idea of displacement resists a model of global contemporary art that refuses to countenance its totalizing tendencies or its predatory undertones of accelerated accumulation masked as radical inclusivity.

Sawaragi makes no provision, however, for movement enabled through displacement. "You begin to see only when things are displaced," wrote Catherine Francblin in 1976 of *Chinese Paintings*, the series Erró made of a peripatetic Mao Zedong.[49] In the context of Motonaga's and Nengudi's distortion of materials, I think the more productive term is "deformation." A common engineering term used to denote how different pressures change the shape of a body or object, "deformation" comes closer to describing what comparative looking does. The stretched nylon legs of Nengudi's work both support and undercut the corporeal allusions of Motonaga's long plastic tubes. The tubes may be seen as analogous to bent human limbs. But the color of pantyhose, intended to approximate the tone of human flesh, can work to estrange the thicker clear plastic from the realm of the human. Rather than a settled material fact, plastic in Motonaga's work becomes a point of interpretative breakage.

Artwork Sovereignty

Comparison gives space for challenging the isolationism that often attends notions of artistic autonomy. As Kwasi Wiredu notes in his discussion of how not to compare African and European thought, it would be "extremely injudicious . . . to philosophize in self-imposed isolation."[50] If we extend Wiredu's observation fur-

47. Sophie B. Ọlúwolé, *Socrates and Ọrúnmìlà: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (Lagos: Ark, 2017), p. 142.

48. Noi Sawaragi, *Nannimo naitokoro kara geijutsu ga umareru* [Art comes from nowhere] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2007). Kenichi Yoshida offers a helpful gloss on Sawaragi's general position in "Deactivating the Future: Sawaragi Noi's Polemical Recoil from Contemporary Art," *Review of Japanese Cultural and Society* 26 (December 2014), pp. 318–40.

49. Catherine Francblin, cited in Danielle Kvaran, Erró and Olo[]Eldjárn. *Erró Chronology: His Life and Art*, trans. David Ames Curtis, (Reykjavík: Reykjavik Art Museum Kjarvalsstaðir, 2007), p. 240.

50. J. E. Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought," *Transition* 75/76 (1997), p. 326. "J.E. Wiredu" refers to the philosopher formerly known as Johnson Emmanuel Wiredu and more widely known as "Kwasi Wiredu."

ther, we see that comparison brings to light the question of artwork sovereignty: Like political territories whose sovereignty is partly defined by their ability to enter into treaties with other territories, the sovereignty of artworks stems not from their supposed ability to be supremely indifferent to the conditions external to their physical existence but from their ceaseless interdependence.

Commenting on the legacy of Bandung, the anthropologist and historian Partha Chatterjee contends that the instability of national governments suggests the persistence of an "immanent notion of a constituent power that has still not been subdued into the banal routine of everyday governmentality."[51] This is not unlike how the ink paintings and drawings of Obiora Udechukwu appear to ratify their own connections outside of official mandates and beyond audience expectation and artistic intention. If Bandung's visions of sovereignty failed in part because they did not sufficiently interrogate existing models of political sovereignty based on mutual recognition by equal nation-states, artwork sovereignty necessitates recognizing the instability of the discursive supports on which to figure materials, things, ideas, and events as art. "If you want to get a good view of a masquerader dancing, you do not stand in one place," wrote Udechukwu.[52]

My view of artwork sovereignty differs from that of "visual sovereignty," an influential phrase introduced by the Tuscarora art historian Jolene Rickard. Arguing that "visual expressions of Indigenous artists are as crucial to the sovereigntist's agenda as legal reform," Rickard enlists visual artworks in an ongoing struggle against the annihilation of Indigenous communities.[53] Her definition aligns with how questions of cultural specificity coalesced with questions of national survival in countries whose sense of sovereignty remained fragile. Twenty years after Nigeria won independence from Great Britain and a decade after the end of the Biafran War that saw over one million of his fellow Igbo perish, Udechukwu argued that "it becomes imperative for the creative artist to launch an intellectual and revolutionary war against the vestiges of the colonial past."[54] Looking beyond Euro-American exemplars of modern and contemporary art, Udechukwu studied the forms of Chinese ink painting, which he initially encountered at the British Museum and the Art Institute in Chicago during his travels in Europe and the United States in 1976 and while researching his master's degree in painting at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, which he received in 1977.[55] With "Line, Space, Simplicity, and Spontaneity: Aspects of Igbo and Chinese

51. Partha Chatterjee, "Empire and Nation Revisited: 50 years after Bandung," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* vol. 6, no. 4 (2005), p. 493.

52. Obiora Udechukwu, "Notes from the Field: Tradition," *Art Bulletin* vol. 95, no. 4 (December 2013), p. 58.

53. Jolene Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 110, no. 2 (Spring 2011), p. 478.

54. Obiora Udechukwu, "Obiora Udechukwu: Toward Essence and Clarity," *Nigeria no.* 132–133 (1980), p. 44.

55. Simon Ottenburg, video interview with Obiora Udechukwu, Nsukka, June 4, 1994. Unpublished transcript, National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, p. 9; see also Ulli Beier, "An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu," *Okike* no. 20 (December 1981), p. 64.

Drawing and Painting," a paper he delivered in November 1976, Udechukwu put forward another set of Afro Asian cultural and intellectual connections independent from the political and economic interests that had led Nigeria to establish diplomatic ties with China in 1971.

Udechukwu's comparison of Uli drawing and Chinese painting proposes a model of artwork sovereignty starting from the recognition of interdependence rather than from default assumptions of aesthetic independence. Chika Okeke-Agulu, the most incisive of Udechuwkwu's interlocutors, briefly proposed complementarity as the angle through which to consider such interdependence.[56] His touchstone was Augustine Shutte, the influential theorist of *ubuntu*, but it is Mogobe Ramose who makes a stronger case for illuminating Udechukwu's comparative approach to Nigerian Uli and Chinese art. In what reads as a reconsideration of sovereignty as a paradigm for thinking about relationality, Ramose defines "the boundary" not as "the point of exclusion of 'the other.' Instead, it is contemporaneously the moment of the reaffirmation of the 'I' and the coupling point of the 'the other' and the 'I.' The boundary then underlines the originary relationship of complementarity subsisting between the 'I' and 'the other.'"[57] Anticipating recent philosophical interest in how Chinese and African traditions often have more in common with each other than with the so-called Western liberal tradition, Udechukwu initiated his own set of international relations by positing as neighbor forms principles of Uli, or body decorations and drawings made by Igbo women, and aspects of Chinese ink painting, especially from the Song Dynasty.[58] In his essays he described the relationship between Uli drawing and Chinese ink painting as mutually affirming, or what geometers might consider an example of *coincidence*, where any visible resemblances reinscribe the indelibility of both approaches to picturing, with each reinforcing the other.[59] Yet he resisted drawing neat parallels between the two systems of depiction. Nor did he indulge in the sort of glancing apprehensions of visible formal similitude that a lesser thinker would consider probative of some global Zeitgeist. Udechukwu's focus lay in identifying "areas of correspondence between Igbo and Chinese traditions . . . that more or less confirmed me in what I was doing."[60] While he cited Uli as his primary frame of reference, he regarded Chinese painting as a welcome validation of his efforts to "abstract the sign of the object stripped of all unnecessary details and paraphernalia" so that its "'soul' . . . is deemed to have been arrested and impressed permanently on the two-dimensional surface."[61]

56. Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 10.

57. Mogobe Ramose, "Transcending Cosmopolitanism," *Diogenes* vol. 59, no. 3/4 (2014), p. 30.

58. Prominent examples of this philosophical interest include Daniel A. Bell and Thaddeus Metz, "Confucianism and *Ubuntu*: Reflections on a Dialogue between Chinese and African Traditions," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* vol. 38, no. 1 (December 2011), pp. 78–95; and Heinz Kimerle and Hans van Rappard, *Afrika und China im Dialog: Philosophische Süd-Ost-Dialoge aus westlicher Sicht* (Reinbek: Lau Verlag, 2013).

59. Udechukwu, "Obiora Udechukwu: Toward Essence and Clarity," p. 43.

60. Beier, "An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu," p. 64.

61. Udechukwu, "Obiora Udechukwu: Toward Essence and Clarity," p. 43.

Worth noting here is how Udechukwu sidesteps the problem of abstraction even as he is putatively discussing it. In an article for *New Culture*, the journal founded in 1978 by Udechuwkwu's close associate Demas Nwoko, the art historian Ola Oloidi wrote about how some Nigerian artists rejected abstraction lest they divorce themselves from an African audience of "literates," in his ironic phrase, who are "the greatest antagonists of abstraction," interested only in work that either competes with or reflects photography.[62] Criticizing this attitude, Oloidi instead proposed a "non-fraudulent" abstraction that might help sever "the cord of our neo-colonialistic values." [63] By this he insisted on attending to the responses of "traditional communities" to visual imagery as a species of vital intelligence.[64]

Udechukwu writes in a studiously dispassionate tone that underscores its author's effort to reflect on Uli in a wider context and from outside the discursive thicket forming around Nigerian art in the 1970s. Yet even as he approaches Igbo and Chinese painting as distinct systems of picturing, he also reads the latter contrapuntally, referring to both Japanese haiku and the Black American poet Nikki Giovanni to complicate the texture of what he calls a "cult of simplicity."[65] Udechukwu's expressions of interest in Chinese ink painting also strike me as amounting to a tentative case for the possibility of another kind of universalism, one outside the penumbra of imperialist and racist ideological use. The quality of line that Udechukwu seeks perhaps comes closest to expressing what the writer Alfred Mendes missed in the paintings of his friend Ivy Achoy: that which "makes the whole world kin."[66]

But as historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza notes, one must "resist both the tyranny of hegemonic models and the romance of the local."[67] Such resistance helps clarify why Udechukwu repeatedly circled back to the Chinese word *qi*, loosely translated as "vitality."[68] Life inheres in what cannot be seen yet is always palpable; this may be the

62. Ola Oloidi, "Abstraction in Modern African Art," *New Culture* vol. 1, no. 9 (1978), p. 11.

63. Ibid., pp. 11–12.

64. "Intelligence" is Oloidi's word. Ibid., pp. 11–12.

65. Obiora Udechukwu, "'Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo & Chinese Drawing & Painting," *Nigeria* no. 134–135 (1981), p. 49.

66. Alfred Hubert Mendes, *Alfred H. Mendes: Short Stories, Articles and Letters*, ed. Michèle Levy (Kingston: University of the West Indies, 2016), p. 155. The description resonates strongly with Udechuwkwu's own measure of value, in which "the finest artists" are those who "can reach everyone, the blind, the deaf, the old, the young." Beier, "An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu," p. 67. The Chinese Trinidadian artist and critic Ivy Achoy was known for her controversial review of the first all-Black exhibition sponsored by the Harmon Foundation in 1928. In it, she urged Black artists to refuse the "mediocre imitation of the art of another race," singling out Palmer Hayden, Sargent Johnson, and Aaron Douglas as exemplary in demonstrating aesthetic independence. Ivy Achoy, "International House Gives Modern Negro Artist a Stage Upon Which to Display His Craft," *New York World*, January 15, 1928.

67. Paul Tiyamba Zeleza, "African Diasporas: Toward a Global History," *African Studies Review* vol. 53, no. 1 (2010), p. 2.

68. Udechukwu, "'Uli' and 'Li,'"; Udechukwu defines *qi* as the "vibration of vitality," p. 46.

closest definition of what the artist called the "inner logic" of a work.[69] The aptly named *Mirror Mirror* from 1989 is perhaps the artist's most reflexive engagement with both Chinese ink-painting technique and his intensely felt encounters with Uli drawing. The oversize oblong in the center takes after cell structure, with very fine lines resembling a plasma membrane encasing a nucleus also surrounded by a nuclear membrane. Edging the cytoplasm-like outer layer is a thick continuous flow of black ink whose perceptible bleed hints at a fractal geometry found on a different scale in abstract ink painting undertaken elsewhere.[70] It may be what El Anatsui is getting us to see when he says that Udechukwu's "Mirror" works require viewers "to move from the far distance, where the louder statements are laid in, successively to within small-text-reading distance to take in the fine threads of the artist's weaving."[71] Within the inner nucleus there is a tempest of ink whose luxurious blackness almost upsets the work's balance of formal powers. But Udechukwu strikes a compromise between enclosed and open areas by recognizing the equal importance of positive and negative spaces, a common principle of Chinese and Igbo painting.[72] *Mirror Mirror* tentatively whispers of a fractalist art history in which supposed derivations, translations, and resonances are more accurately classified as recursions happening at different scales of operation.

Outlines of people converge in the lower right of the work, yet they soon recede into a cursive doodle. Thin lines become liquid and serpentine, a water snake in motion. Where does it swim? On, or through, the picture plane? The questions become more insistent when we consider Udechukwu's use of wash. Do those broad strokes shimmer on top of the paper ground or under it? Irresistably supple, Udechukwu's line encourages consideration of the paper support itself as pliable, as if the artist were drawing on skin that stretches, withers, and folds. His line makes nothing happen. By "nothing" I do not mean inert absence, but rather that his command of line relieves the work of the demand that it mean a particular something. Artwork sovereignty here includes becoming stateless, or detached from the geographic divisions entrenched in the academy, the museum, and the market.

Sovereignty through an *ubuntu* filter involves rescripting a dynamic that codes autonomy as morally desirable and non-autonomy as a kind of complicity with a hegemonic entity. Udechukwu's articles endorse interdependency as crucial for an artwork sovereignty able to withstand forms of interpretation that can feel like annexation. The lack of artwork sovereignty can be measured by how often decisions about how to classify, interpret, and display an artwork are made without recourse to, as Wole Soyinka wrote, "what the artworks themselves, often yoked

69. Udechuwkwu, "Obiora Udechukwu: Toward Essence and Clarity," p. 43.

70. I am thinking particularly of Chung Chang-sup's *Return 77-O* (1977) in the collection of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea.

71. El Anatsui, "Introduction: Three Decades, Three Phases," in Obiora Udechukwu, *So Far: Drawings, Paintings, Prints 1963–1993*, (Bayreuth: Boomerang Press, 1993), p. 8.

72. Udechukwu, "Obiora Udechukwu: Toward Essence and Clarity," p. 43; "'Uli' and 'Li,'" p. 42.

together from the most incompatible cultural matrices, are saying."[73] In choosing to highlight the adjacencies of Igbo depiction and Chinese ink painting without submitting to epochal or dynastic time, Udechukwu withholds his consent to the detention of his work in chronological and geographical enclosures designed to maximize institutional and market legibility. Artwork sovereignty requires recognizing how works, and bodies of work, establish their own laws outside state-sanctioned categories of difference, that is, through categories that uphold the political sovereignty of one group at the expense of many others. Moreover, the mode of artwork sovereignty threading through Udechukwu's work and writing depends on artist non-sovereignty, namely, the disarticulation of artist intention as a source of interpretative control.

Obiura Udechukwu. Mirror Mirror. *1989.*

To understand the world only through forward linear timescales and received geographies betrays a smallness of vision akin to a large sphere's looking like a flat plane if the viewer is small enough. By identifying how Igbo and Chinese art coincide, Udechuwkwu defies the planar geometry of colonial geography that posits certain distances as fixed. Works like *Mirror Mirror* presume a geography based on a curved surface. What some examples of a so-called decentered or decolonized art history might regard as simply parallel in a Euclidean sense Udechukwu's work displaces in favor of an elliptic geometry in which otherwise parallel lines bend towards one another and intersect. It may even be that the work is itself residual. The imagination responsible for its enactment dwells in another dimension where geography can be specified beyond regional areas, portfolios, markets, and other fixed entities serving the interests of a dominant minority. Afro Asia persists as an imprecise category of analysis because it is but the shadow of a world whose disclosure would make all too clear the meagerness of what presently qualifies for "world" status. Whether we are prepared for what Afro Asia signals is what *Mirror Mirror* and its companions imply is a question whose politics cannot be ignored.

73. Wole Soyinka, "Ritual as the Medium: A Modest Proposal," *African Affairs* vol. 96, no. 382 (January 1997), p. 6.