

Unearthed: prologue

Some months ago,
while she was working on a new exhibition and I was falling into an obsession with
solar-powered boats,
I called Otobong Nkanga
to check in.

My throat became hot and dry and I felt a slight headache as I tried to explain to her my
excitement about a solar-powered boat I had recently seen.

I write now—
from the experience of walking through that exhibition with that conversation in mind,
also now knowing that Nkanga privileges poetry over intelligence—
“to ponder to dream to think”—
as the artist hopes this exhibition will elicit viewers to do . . .

That day on the phone, I learned from Nkanga that even a solar-powered boat in its
technological super-magic sustainability has an undeniable earthliness. It is constructed
from materials. Materials come from minerals. Minerals come from the earth.
How do corporations who make boats get minerals from earth? They extract them, and
moreover, the transference of one material into another and the conduction of energy
through those newly forged conduits (transmitters, engines) creates waste.

The hazardous wastes emitted by the extraction of fuel energy are well known to those
living in Europe, where incentives posit the purchase of electric vehicles as a
sustainable option. But so-called clean energy electronics also require extraction from
the earth, just in a different place—maybe a place that we who live in Europe don't
know much about.

Which is not to say that fuel energy is not a problem, but while “clean energy” denotes
that it is clean where we live (Europe), it doesn't preclude radio-active or life-threatening
emissions from occurring at some other point in the supply chain. Waste is a
constitutive aspect of the transference of energy, including for savior-sustainables like
solar, electric, and hydro power.

Then, as my solar-powered bubble had been irrevocably burst and I made all of these
connections to which Nkanga was already privy, I was left wondering how I could
understand this web of entanglement and make the material choices that replenish the
earth and its stewards. Is there really such a conflict between the joy of innovation and
the duty to preserve our ecosystem?

Nkanga's *Unearthed* exhibition unravels a four-fold narrative that I imagine as having a
square-shaped logic. In astrology, squares suggest unresolvable tension between two

entities in the same mode. An actor can only move forward with the convergence of tensions in place, she cannot dissolve it. She must accept that two things can be true.

In the exhibition, those two entities might be life and death, energy and waste. These passages of waste to energy and energy to waste are placed on a grand scale. As she speaks about her inspirations for this work, Nkanga points out that as a material breaks down when it is discarded in the earth, even if it takes ten years to fully degrade into other matter and within that ten years toxicity is being released, at the same time the degrading materials are also regenerating other matter. Toxicity is a by-product or a constitutive element of creating other energies, other forms. Some of those other forms give us life. This cycle has become unmanageable due to our tendency so far to behave in a way that encourages the expansion of forms that actively damage our lives.

_____ : **abyss**

ground floor remains dim,
darkening winter dusk a
spot-lit theatre

*

When asked why she hadn't represented any heads or torsos in her tapestries, Nkanga's response demonstrated her deprioritization of the thinking mind. She stated that, instead of representing them, she rather wants to "cut the head off," eliminating altogether that which is responsible for "making a difference" and the valuation of rational thought over embodied knowing.

Embodied— knowing

Embodied knowing

Embodied— knowing

Embodied— knowing

Embodied— knowing . . . !

. . . Like standing there, stunned but submitted, when a reed bush tells me what to do!

In the tapestry, a pile of arms signals the loss of human life. Moreover, the loss to which Nkanga refers could be more specifically referred to as expenditure. Coral reefs feed on the expended human limbs of would-be laborers who were lost at sea, never reaching soil.

It's the origin story of global capitalism, integral to the understanding of what events have preceded and caused critical shifts in the quality of the weather—for example, the lack of snow in the Netherlands over the past decade.

The argument for reparations made by cultural commentators is tied to the idea that the debt repays what was taken from a group of people.¹ Also, a lawsuit for reparations

¹ The thinking that there is a debt owed to descendants of those who were transported, and that this debt should be cleared via payment today to all those who share this ancestry.

surely has grounds in how these critical shifts to the earth have exacted damages on populations of workers, who have often been forced to live in vulnerable areas, regardless of whether those workers are descendent from this two-hundred-year (and ongoing) event.

This is an example of our contemporary (but, in many cases, born in the 1600s, when transatlantic slavery started) legal formations folding in on themselves, as the very system which facilitated this unprecedented extraction of material from a place is also the system that can facilitate the proof that the act was illegal.

Statement of the fact that the loss of millions of people at sea is grievous and sad is so often repeated that it risks losing meaning,² though at the same time it never ceases to wobble me, the sheer number of varied disciplines of study—visual art,³ culinary arts,⁴ banking,⁵ scuba diving,⁶ botany⁷—in which this origin story is constitutive to not only the nature of the profession, but also its most urgent subjects of focus today.

Two things are true. First, the mass loss of lives as people were transported from West Africa to the Americas is a fact of grief that is still being processed, broken down into manageable bits. Second, throughout all these centuries of processing, those people's limbs fed the ocean floor and contributed to the mineral richness of the bottom of the ocean, providing material that is in use by subsequent generations of workers. It is the end of something that provides a translation into something else: death shifts human beings into mineral, soil and plants.

_____ : midnight

“To unearth is to reveal.”

² For example, the association with Black History Month is a revenue driver for the same companies who built wealth on the slave labor that created the social disparities that the “month” was conceived to redress.

³ John Barnes, Chair, Dillard University Department of Art, researches sculptors from the antebellum era who used slave labor to create artworks; art historian Jeremy K. Simien researched a painting, a portrait of a group of aristocratic children, in which the depiction of a young enslaved boy next to the family was covered over by conservators.

⁴ *High on the Hog*, dirs. Roger Ross Williams, Jonathan Clasberry, Yoruba Richen

⁵ Fatima Sheik, *Economy Hall* (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection, 2021), p. 69; in antebellum Louisiana, “property banks” secured the value of deposits through mortgages on land and enslaved people. The banking industry in pre-Civil War Louisiana began to prosper when enslaved people outnumbered Free Europeans. From 1830 to 1840, there was an increase of 58,000 enslaved persons, all through reproduction as the trade had been abolished in 1808. Between 1840 and 1850, there was a 76,000 increase in enslaved persons mortgaged, and in 1861, 331,726 enslaved persons had been mortgaged.

⁶ Scuba divers research wrecked slave ships: www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/a-divers-hunt-for-lost-slave-ships-led-to-an-incredible-journey; www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/diving-unfolding-history-wrecked-slave-ships. (accessed 20 Feb 2022)

⁷ Zakiya McKenzie, *Testimonies on The History of Jamaica*, Vol.1 (London: Rough Trade Books and the Garden Museum, 2021).

At Nkanga's exhibition at Kunsthaus Bregenz, ascending from the ground-floor abyss to the first floor felt like ascending from a hole. Into the first glimmer of light, up from the deep sea. A stark shift:

I'm met by the pitter pitter patter pitter patter pitterpatterpitterpatter
 pitter patter pitter patter pitter patter pitter patter
of schoolchildrens' footsteps in this hollow, wet grey-space,
the rammed concrete of this building
lends itself for being made an analogy of water,
itself like a frost, crusting off the southern rim of the Bodensee.
Outside I skirted around the thin ice, the curtain wall, glazing
faced the grey lake.

Inside, limbs are lifted out of the tapestry's water
while the ropes also draw rudimentary weaves on the floor
and mirror the
topographic drawing of the seabed.

*

By splitting a tree across four floors, Nkanga gives the viewer an uncommon opportunity to scale the full length of the tree. Hence, we climb this tree that is taller than the combined height of the four floors of the exhibition space, but, installed at a 60 degree angle, fits within KUB's gallery floors.

The artist also presents an ethics for extraction and regeneration of the earth's materials: she removed one tree and planted four more, as well as preserving one, a baby pine, in a terrarium on the second level of the gallery.

By not looking to understand the removal of the pine, or more specifically the death of the tree, as *terrible*, but to acknowledge that waste also is a transformation of energy, allows us to understand the artist's gesture. The waste and death of materials such as this pine is not only necessary but, echoing what happened on the ocean floor in the tapestry below, gives rise to other living things like plants, mineral, soil, other humans, bacteria, animals. What is extracted from the soil needs to be replenished with minerals that give life if we are to expect to remain a viable species. Regardless of how actively we participate to ensure it, all of these cycles of life, death, and regeneration into some other elements "will survive longer and better than us . . . no matter how much we are putting it under stress . . . creating unlivable and unbearable systems and structures. Plants and trees will find a way of continuing without even our care" ⁸

I remember now that, when my solar-powered boat obsession grew this past summer, I was on a beach watching not the ocean, but a forest fire behind me.

⁸ Otobong Nkanga, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=id4Kh-Ts6lw&t=25s> (accessed 4 Jan, 2022)

I was there on the beach because of low energy: my own. I sat there, looking at the plumes of smoke, having taken some weeks away from work and traveled to a seaside town which I had found using whatever algorithmic suggestion sprang forth from my smartphone. All winter I had been teaching, via Zoom, various groups of harried, downcast, and disgruntled students who are on the short end of the dysfunctional transaction that art school now proffers to aspiring artists. The term ended and I resolved to never teach again, and quit. My age group was called in for vaccination; I took it in the left arm and then downed elderflower tincture to try to flame out the damp fluid that hung around in my throat and ears for the next two weeks. My body was asking me for somewhere hot.

Now, on this beach, in temperatures in excess of 40 degrees Celsius, I realized that my self-identification as someone who loves hot weather had its limits. From a disaster-preparedness course for herbalists, I learned to brew a cold infusion of hibiscus flower, dashes of lemon, honey, and sea salt for extreme heat. In this seaside town, I drank that every day after the fifteen-minute ferry ride from the town square out to the beach, doing my best to ration myself and drink only half of the liter bottle, leaving the other half for when I emerged from under the umbrella to head back to town. On the ferry, I dared not remove my mask. The ferry workers, all seniors, looked as if they could be my grandfather, reminded me of my grandfather, on account of their leathery, crinkled, tawny skin. The mark of someone who spends consistent days working outside in the blazing sun.

Although we were all technically outside on the ferry, these sun-dried grandfather men would pace back and forth about the ferry, looking for exposed nasolabial folds. Anyone with their mask askew, either not properly covering the nose or momentarily unhinged from the ear, would receive a quick and effective tongue-lashing in a language I don't speak but whose sentiment I understood. The message I got from this: the town had a majority senior population, all working and doing the best they could to protect themselves from cavalier tourists.

On this day, as I walked to find a spot to sit and do nothing, I thought it strange that above me, within an otherwise entirely blue sky, was one solitary grey cloud. Having found no isolated shower forecast in my weather app, I traced the shape of this ominous cloud to a cliff of dunes, where I stood and realized that this raincloud was actually a plume of smoke emanating from the parched mountains behind me. In the morning, I didn't see anyone else looking at this cloud as intently as I was. By the afternoon, a single-file row of spectators stood atop the dune peering at the forest fire. It flamed into the night, when the proprietor of the vacation rental woke me up from my sleep, yelling my name through my open bedroom window. She was standing in the street, looking up at the red glow—closer than she had expected to see it—considering whether to evacuate and take me with her.

Nkanga connects the simple, scary fact of how many trees have burned to the tapestry's depiction of falling hands: the breakdown of an eco-system, what that "slow

breakdown does to the people that live in these regions where the trees are burning as well as to the economy”⁹ and the possibility of generating capital.

In other words, as Nkanga is pulling this dying tree from the region, she is also meditating on the loss of materials, such as pines, to fires. This loss of materials could mean that there is less work for the craftsmen who use, for example, pine as a source of livelihood. The loss of work could then lead to the lack of knowledge, wherein the unavailability of the material to do the work leads to a loss of understanding, regionally, culturally, of what the work is at all. Culturally, because our crafts are related to what we learned to do with materials from our ancestors (whose energies, mind you, have transformed into earth and minerals, too!), the growth of those material traditions is beyond the capitalist value that can be extracted from that work. Meaning, industries that are empty because of the loss of materials are also echoed by cultures that are experiencing a loss of connection to their heritage, a connection that is forged through materials, minerals.

A loss of economic viability of certain material traditions, both preceding and coinciding with the loss of viability as a species, is suggested when the artist asks, “Who are we worried about? Other life forms, or are we worried about ourselves?”

_____ : twilight

Extracted minerals, at one point, lived in people’s limbs.
The near stifling heat is apparent even there at the skim of the sea’s edge.

The consuming hand of this extraction method.
“Arms in inaction.”
In this tapestry,
limbs wash ashore
making clear what is being lifted out of the ocean.
Open clam-shell-shaped minerals,
beached on the shore amongst fallen limbs
and a recurring pentagram—decahedron shape.

Arms in inaction.

“The hand is the first [information]”¹⁰ and a mode of discovery. The hand is becoming lost. The machine, made from the minerals sourced from our bodies, does what hands used to do. The hand foreshadows an understanding of what the machine should eventually do. The moving arm is the gesture that signifies work and the mechanism that the machine must learn to mimic. In doing so, learning to mimic work, the machine surpasses the capabilities of what it had needed to mimic, people’s hands, to become economically viable in the first place.

⁹ Otobong Nkanga in conversation with Thomas D Trummer, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18Tmaw6KsIY> (accessed 20 Feb 2022)

¹⁰ Ibid.,

[Embodied— knowing
Embodied knowing
Embodied— knowing Embodied— knowing
Embodied— knowing . . . !
. . . or, why I'm learning to repair hand-cranked film cameras.]

_____ :sunlight

This top gallery is a waste land
energy lost—transformed—burned
a roasting environment, fire is a transformation
and what burns up disappears before our eyes.
If we weren't slightly stagnant, we would cease to exist.
We would burn up in constant transformation.¹¹

Pondering art materials
I wonder what this rammed earth that I'm walking on
would look like with a ceramic glaze as I would be accustomed to seeing
clay being treated, to prevent it from drying out.

It is otherwise silent at this stage, except that
my gait shrills up scraping noises in the room.
Tiny stones gather and are dragged centimeters forward with my every step
I purposely wobble
the sole of my [waterproof] shoe about the edge of this parched clay pit's perimeter
taking small liberties as I already understand myself to be walking on the work.
Under these former craters,
this dry clay pond,
scored by desiccation
is sand.

The tapestry that hangs is a lava shower on burning grass.
The limbs are now roasted.
And the top of this pine is burnt.

As I retrace my steps back down to the ground floor,
The taste in my mouth is of a situation that
escalated quickly towards an unlivable heat.

loss of human labor
feeding the ocean floor
growing into minerals
snatched out of the rising water

¹¹ This is herbalist Regina Pritchett's defense of tamasic energy. Tamas is the quality of dullness or inactivity, apathy, inertia, or lethargy.

placed into a rapid transformation
whose waste contributes to more loss of labor

Nkanga said that her poem explains the work
Amplifies emotions and the thoughts
not reduced by languages [economy].

Biography:

Taylor Le Melle, born in 1988 (USA), currently lives and works in the Netherlands. In 2021 they edited and published Orion J. Facey's science-fantasy novel *The Virosexuals* (PSS) and completed a three-year term as co-director of not/nowhere, an artists' workers cooperative based in East London. Le Melle is currently a Research Fellow in the Design Department at Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam.