

CUMMA PAPERS #22

CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

Bonaventure
Soh Bejeng Ndikung

ONEST
ENSEMBLE
ET ÇAVA
WAKA

*A Few Reflections on
Navigating the Xenopolis*

How can we understand concepts and spaces of flight, spaces and concepts of escape, as spaces and concepts of creativity and artistic expression? And conversely, how can we think of exhibition-making as an act of assembly of notions, peoples and histories?

I would like to use two concepts of motion, *Ça va waka* and *on est ensemble*, to reflect on notions of togetherness. *Ça va waka* takes its cue from a Cameroonian pidgin and Franglais expression that means “all will be good.” *Waka* in itself means to walk, to journey, to be in motion. From that same context, a popular phrase upon farewell is “*on est ensemble*” or “we are together,” which is an almost frantic invocation and incantation of an eminent (re-) assembly. On the one hand, an outward movement, a divergence, a kind of detachment and dissent in the form of *waka* that at the same time also stands for an affirmation *Ça va waka*, and on the other hand, an inward movement, an assembly and a get together *on est ensemble*, to deliberate on what exhibition-making could also be—with an emphasis on *also*.

This text will take you on a few detours around Simon Njami’s concept of the *Xenopolis*², Moten and Harney’s *Undercommons/Fugitivity*, Henri Lefebvre’s and Edward Soja’s concept of the *Thirdspace*, and James Baldwin’s reflection “The Creative Process,” all in a bid to elaborate on the exhibition of and in the everyday, the exhibition of and in precarity, the exhibition in the state of flux, and the exhibition as we know it.

“Some people want to run things, other things want to run. If they ask you, tell them we were flying. Knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a break. This is held close in the open song of the ones who are supposed to be silent.”¹

Stefano Harney
and Fred Moten

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- ¹ Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013. 51. Print.
 - ² *Xenopolis* was an exhibition curated by Simon Njami at the Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle. <http://db-artmag.com/en/90/on-view/city-of-foreigners-xenopolis-at-the-deutsche-bank-kunsthalle/>

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Ça va waka,
Nassim Rouchiche

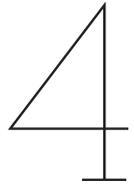
It is appropriate to use the photographic works of Algerian artist Nassim Rouchiche (1977) from the series *Ça va waka* to buttress, to substantiate the ideas that will unfold in this paper. The series *Ça va waka* is a ghostly double exposure peeping into a settlement of illegal migrants that made their way through the Sahara Desert, found an oasis in Algiers, and prepared to leap into that unknown jungle or paradise called Europe. What I call an oasis here is a hole, that place each guerrilla fighter needs to retreat to in order to plan the next steps. It is oblique, opaque, gloomy and dodgy. The settlement evidently becomes a resting spot, a spot of assembly, where the people on their journey revitalise, rejuvenate, reorganise, reconsider and pre-refuge. Interestingly, in Rouchiche's images, the 'inhabitants' of this space, the fugitives, are almost always absent or



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condemned to that state of undecidability between living and dead, as Derrida would have put it. A space of uncertainty, fragility, precarity, but of strength and determination, inhabited by life. Rouchiche's work becomes important here not only as an art piece, but as a revelation of the layers that such spaces embody, and the performativity within such spaces. The state of fugitivity is a state of utter performativity. A denial of non-performativity and stagnation. It is a state of an extended penultimumness. If one were to look at things from the etymological point of view, i.e. the "ex" and the "habere" which literally means to hold out or to hold forth, then Rouchiche's work—like this paper—is about looking again at the crux of the exhibition which could be the holding out, forth or bare of the 'being,' as well as their condition, demeanor and appearance, which is what makes up the habitus and also the habitat. This is to say that the aero-habitat in Rouchiche's *Ça va waka* will serve here as the undefined assembly—sometimes of one person—that makes a *Xenopolis* and conceptualises the fugitivity of the undercommon.

The Performativity of Evanescence

One of the possibilities of reading Njami's concept of the *Xenopolis* is through the prism of the non-inhabitant: those who are on the run, who have no chance or have decided not to settle, who embody,



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live or are in the state of fugitivity. The proposal being, every place has its own xenopolis made up of those that are not seen or made invisible by society, those whose vibrant existence is underneath the third layer of shells, or those that exist within the *Thirdspace*, those that assemble not because they are told to come together, but whose assembly is a matter of survival, emergency, or conviviality in states of emergency and precariousness. This position—it might be taken voluntarily or enforced from outside—is at the same time one of great constraint and of great liberty, and has therefore always been one that enabled radical and independent thought, most poignantly encapsulated in the notion and world-making practice of *fugitivity*.

Therefore, the *Xenopolis* might be that space vividly described by Moten and Harney, when they write:

“To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons.”³

An appropriate way of understanding the concept of xenopolis and thereby the concept of fugitivity will thus be to look at all those that live off-beat, arrhythmic in relation to the ‘norm’, as in the concept of the refugee, the dishwashers, squatters or



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¹ Ibid, 28.

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the System D (*débrouillard*), which is essentially the ingenuity economy, the economy of improvisation and self-reliance, which apparently accounts for \$10 trillion of the planet's GDP and employs millions of people around the world⁴ as citizens of the xenopolis. Cogitating on the idea of the fugitive, Jack Halberstam talks of those spaces and modalities that exist separately from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned, which Moten and Harney call “being together in homelessness”—a sought after state of dispossession, a state wherein the refusal of what has been refused reigns.

The idea is to imagine fugitivity as an act of radical thought that departs from the societal context it is fugitive towards—and as a framework in and from which to imagine conviviality, mutuality and creativity beyond well trodden paths. One could think here of a space where the tempo and the sense of context are not determined by a norm, but by the dynamism of the ‘fugitive public’. For every society there exists a reflection or a parallel *Xenopolis*, whereby if the *Xenopolis* is the ungovernable, then the society in question is the governable or the governor. It is in this *Xenopolis* that the fugitive enlightenment is enacted, and actually where the shots are fired, as “knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a break⁵.” Fugitivity is time-warping, proliferating and erasing, breaking temporal and geographical bounds. It is Haiti's slave revolt, the 2012 London riots, the millions of refugees from Syria to Europe, it is the thousands of Icelanders demonstrating

⁴ Rabinowitz, Marco . “Rise of the Shadow Economy: Second Largest Economy in the World.” *Forbes*, *Forbes Magazine*, 7 Nov. 2011. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/benzingainsights/2011/11/07/rise-of-the-shadow-economy-second-largest-economy-in-the-world/>

⁵ *Ibid*, 51.

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against their leader after the publishing of the Panama Papers, but it is also the man talking to himself on the street—the notion of insanity, and many more.

It is in the divergence, the ‘waka’, that the fugitives converge. It is in the motion of assembling that the third space is created. It is in such spaces, public and private alike, that art finds its meaning and in which art manifests itself. It is in such spaces, more than in galleries and museums, that actions, operations, and other iterations reveal or feed art. I guess what I am trying to say here is that at least in my practice as an exhibition maker, I am interested in the complicated manifestations of evanescence, the subliminal and ephemerality within the quotidian... especially the quotidian of those that inhabit those spaces under the radar, behind the curtains. Those dwellers of the *Xenopolis* and other *Thirdspaces*.

Accommodating the Social and the Lived Space

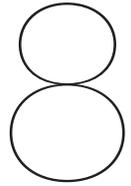
A friend of mine was doing research for an art project on food and eating habits of African migrants in Berlin. What he immediately noticed was that in his investigation, there was only a certain depth he could plumb. There was a certain way people would talk to him in the restaurant if he presented himself as an artist, or just as a Nigerian seeking to be part of his community



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in the diaspora. But what also became evident was that the restaurants he visited were often the first layer, under which a lot of other practices, societies, and businesses existed. Interestingly, if I were to ask a Cameroonian in Berlin to recommend a Cameroonian restaurant in Berlin, they would most likely give me the name and address of a barbershop. The idea being that the barbershop I would go to actually functions as a barber shop, but the layers that exist underneath the barbershop might include a church and then a restaurant. Needless to say, not everyone can access these different layers.

This analogy I am using points towards spaces in flux, spaces that are continually and rapidly changing—not only in their physicality and conceptualisation as space, but also the way they are accommodated and experienced as spaces of assembly and also dissonances. From a Lefebvrian perspective, as elaborated upon in his “Production of Space⁶,” (social) space is a product of many a complex social construction which have an impact on the way spaces are perceived and accommodated, and how practices unfold within these spaces. My interest and reflections on the concept of exhibitions has always been to see how spaces like the restaurant behind the church and behind the barber’s shop are produced, what are the social intersections, and in what degree do these need to relate to produce and maintain such spaces. My interest is in the fragility and temporality of such spaces. The complexity of the spatial existence of such spaces can be seen in what



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⁶ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith trans. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. Print.

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one might call pop-up restaurants. With ‘pop-up,’ I do not mean something like the fancifulness and the economy of pop-up design stores, but rather the pop-up-ness of fugitivity. This is to say, the restaurant that opens up, runs for a few months, is the cultural centre and social hub of a group of people, until the police or *Ordnungsamt* discovers their existence. As soon as the restaurant is closed down, it pops up like a mushroom in another place... and without advertisement on the internet, radio or otherwise, people that have access to and inhabit such spaces of fugitivity know where to head.

In his reflections on space theory, Lefebvre described the triad of spatial existence which Edward Soja expatiated upon in his theory of spatial trialectics in “Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places⁷”. According to Soja, *Firstspaces* are physical spaces that are measurable, plottable and mappable: spaces of cartographic nature. They are spaces one sees from a bird’s eye view, which is a wide and compartmentalised view of space. *Secondspaces*, on the other hand, are spaces one creates to conceptualise the *Firstspace*. The *Secondspace* is where we would normally situate our art world, as it is that space of representation, be it through art or advertisement. It is that space we conceive of on a daily basis in our thoughts and ideas.

But what has become extremely important for me in terms of thinking about exhibitions is what Soja termed his *Thirdspace*, i.e. a social and lived space. The *Thirdspace* to me is a space that

⁷ Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Print.

evolves from the subversive, a space that pops up out of an agency and urgency. It is a space that gives refuge to the marginalised and power to the sidelined. It is a space of whisper, and in this whisper is knowledge. The *Thirdspace* is not the centre, but the corner of the room from which energy is generated but overlooked. It is that kind of space, both physically and conceptually, that we see in Nassim Rouchiche's work *Ça va waka*, and it is also the *Xenopolis*. To me the *Thirdspace* is that space where other epistemologies are negotiated and disseminated, where hierarchies are questioned, where histories intersect with the various assemblies of peoples. It is a space of and for art rather than a representation of anything.

This is also to say that for me an exhibition should be or have that potential of a *Thirdspace*. If one were to read this from Soja's perspective, The *Firstspace* would be the museum or artspace, the *Secondspace* would be the fact that in museums, art works are shown maybe for people's entertainment or otherwise. And the *Thirdspace* then, the assembly of people, the social relations that emanate between the people and the art works, the political discourse that arises within such contexts, the way hierarchies could be reversed in such a context, and especially how power structures could be subverted within such frameworks.

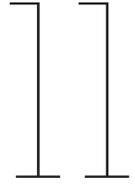
If Baldwin was Right

If, in his seminal essay "The Creative Process"⁸, Baldwin was right that the primary distinction

8 Baldwin, James. "The Creative Process." Creative America. New York: Ridge Press, 1962. <http://thenewschoolhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Baldwin-Creative-Process.pdf>

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of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state of being alone, then I think an exhibition should be the place where an assembly of aloneness could be staged and interrogated in relation to the situation of our socio-political realities.

IF BALDWIN WAS RIGHT that besides the fact that there are forever cities to be created, mines to be exploited, children to be fed, but that the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty, as he is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself, then an exhibition should be that place where the wilderness of humanity can be put forth for others to explore and discover.

IF BALDWIN WAS RIGHT that the precise role of the artist is to illuminate darkness, blaze roads through vast forests, and make the world a more human dwelling place, then an exhibition should be a manifestation of these endeavours. A space for elucidation, a space for struggle—not just to walk the beaten track, but to pave new ways—and above all, a space for conviviality.

IF BALDWIN WAS RIGHT that the artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, then an exhibition should be that space where the laboratory deliberations, the processed and maybe results of the experiments could be presented and discussed.



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IF BALDWIN WAS RIGHT that the artist must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our actions and achievements rest on things unseen; that a society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. (...); the artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides. Then an exhibition is a space where complex questions should be posed, and where parallel realities could be scrutinised, and where the beauty of the complexity of the world is exposed. And as Baldwin so aptly put it, the state

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and the role of the artist is to correct our delusions and expose to us the beauty of the states of birth, suffering, love and death, which are extreme states: extreme universal, and inescapable.

Conclusion

In conclusion I will come back to the issue of the assembly and art by taking another detour to religion. What Mathew narrated—“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”—could be reformulated as, “where two or three are assembled with the spirit of what Baldwin proclaimed as the epitome of the creative process, there is a potential exhibition”. And it is irrelevant if it is within an announced art space, on the street or in a kitchen. Exhibition-making is an act of assembling the singular, in the sense that it is an act of collecting personal stories and histories, personal struggles and celebrations, but it is also an act of assembling pluralities and divergences. It is a space for the multitudes of inhabitant fugitives of the xenopolis.

BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG,

PhD (born in 1977 in Yaoundé, Cameroon) is an independent art curator and biotechnologist. He is founder and artistic director of the art space SAVVY Contemporary Berlin and editor-in-chief of the journal SAVVY Journal for critical texts on contemporary African art. He is Curator at Large for Adam Szymczyk's Documenta 14.

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EDITORS

Nora Sternfeld

EDITORIAL WORK

Alina Belishkina and Katie Lenanton

PROOFREADING

Katie Lenanton

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Alina Belishkina

ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Nassim Rouchiche

DEPARTMENT OF ART

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