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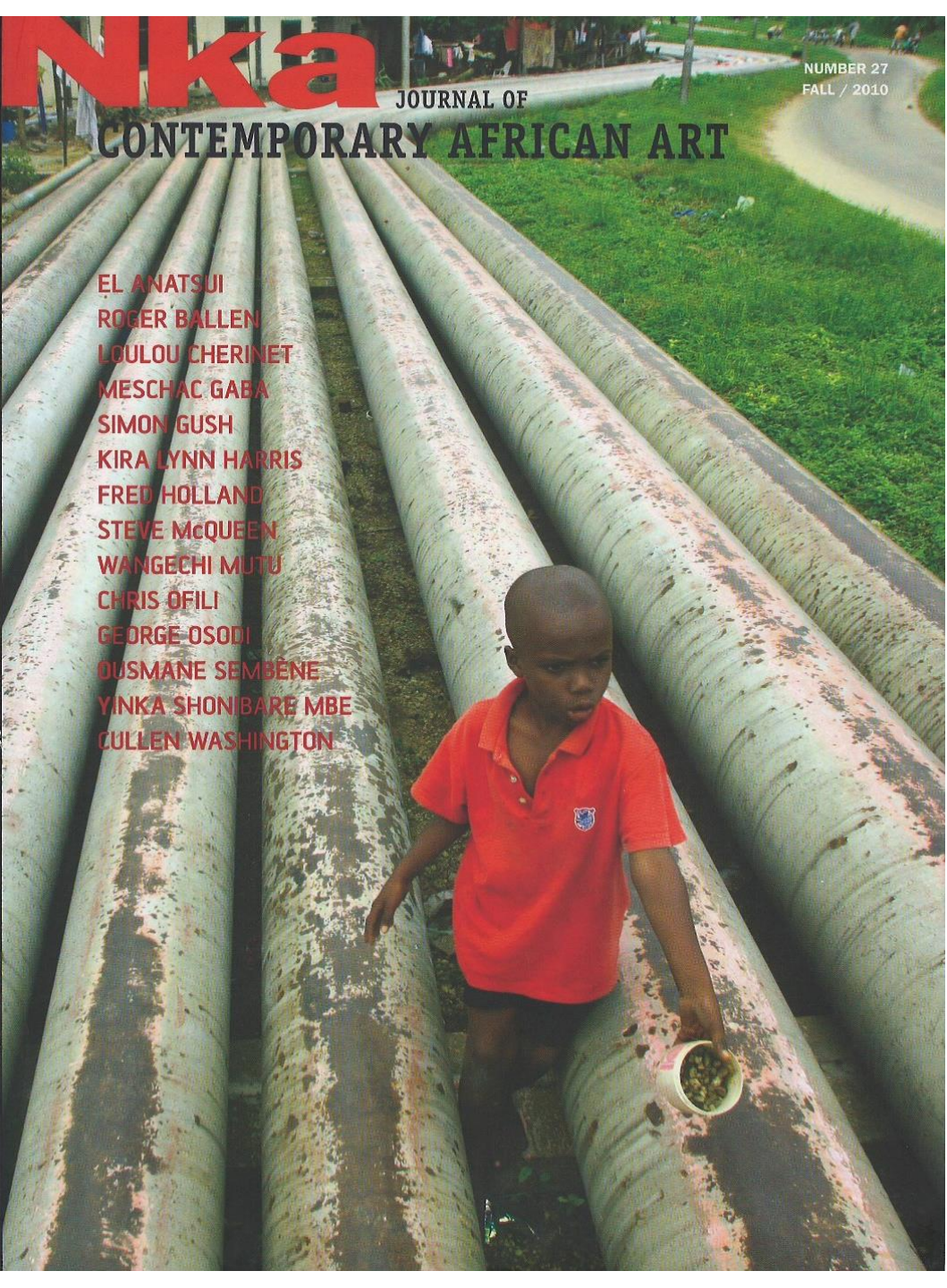
EL ANATSUI
ROGER BALLEN
LOULOU CHERINET
MESCHAC GABA
SIMON GUSH
KIRA LYNN HARRIS
FRED HOLLAND
STEVE McQUEEN
WANGECHI MUTU
CHRIS OFILI
GEORGE OSODI
OUSMANE SEMBÈNE
YINKA SHONIBARE MBE
CULLEN WASHINGTON



MESCHAC GABA'S

Two for the Price of One

Ivor Powell

One

Meschac Gaba recalls somewhat wryly that when he took his latest artificial hair sculptures walkabout in his native Benin, mothers pulled their children off the streets. No doubt they feared this was a masked secret society traversing the shared social spaces with an arcane agenda that boded no good.

In truth, the mothers' anxiety was misplaced. There was, as evidenced in Gaba's video of the event, nothing inherently threatening about the procession of his assistants, dressed in jeans and T-shirts, with hair extensions fashioned into the shapes of vehicles atop their heads and masking their faces. Nor was there any menace in the procession itself as it made its way past the museum of arts, around the traffic intersections, taking in the grandiose monuments of the old Marxist-Leninist regime; as it rubbed shoulders with matrons in stately passage, kids on the loose, men in languid conversation, dudes in their finery hanging out in cars, along reddish clay pathways under the giant shadow of ancient tropical trees, taking in the whole of the life of Cotonou. Gaba's procession had the feel of a private festivity—eccentric, maybe, but not invasive or demanding of attention. What was noticeable in the general public response was the opposite of a fearful overreaction: for the most part people glanced up, then went back to their business, leaving Gaba to get on with his.

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THE STREET

Meschac Gaba, *Colours of Cotonou*, 2007–9. Found objects, Beninese bank notes, wooden frames, glass, installation dimensions variable. Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

Beetle, from the *Car Tresses* series, 2008. Braided artificial hair and mixed media, 66 × 63 × 30 cm. Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

Still, the mothers were not absolutely wrong. Gaba's *Tresses* are more than merely wig sculptures. They draw—though playfully, humorously, and satirically—on masking traditions invested with intense psychosocial power and magic throughout the commonwealth of West Africa. In some instances such masking traditions can be genuinely life-threatening—particularly those dedicated to the overtestosteroned gods of iron and hunting, or celebrating the role of the blacksmith in society. Devotees of such cults routinely (in the traditional frame) cut secret and dangerous ritual paths through sleeping villages, and not infrequently mete out random punishments to those they encounter. By and large, however, the mask is a more benign presence, and masking a socially subscribed and highly conventionalized mechanism for satire and the ritual ordering of things.

Via the mask, the head is semantically transformed. A type of metonymy is effected: what is in

Mercedes, from the *Car Tresses* series, 2008. Braided artificial hair and mixed media, 56 × 48 × 24 cm. Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

the head (in metaphor) comes to be rendered on the head in the mask's represented forms.

At the same time that Gaba's *Tresses* invoke the quasi-magical semantics of masking traditions, they are equally rooted in the secular frivolities of fashion. The other reservoir of reference in Gaba's wig heads is the vanity of hair extensions, the styling of artificial braids to create more or less elaborate and sculptural coiffures. Though, historically, they emerged in African and particularly West African societies, these deliberately artificializing fashions have, in recent years, been enthusiastically taken up and given a baroque expressiveness in the African diaspora of North America and Europe.

Not insignificantly, it was in this diaspora—during a residency in New York—that Gaba first started to explore the use of these hair extensions as both a material and a subject matter within his work. According to his account of the *Tresses* series, he discovered that a remarkable number of West

Africans were making a living in the Big Apple (as they do in South African cities) by braiding hair. Gaba then set about appropriating the experience of the high-rise magnificence of the American city through the medium of the artificial hair extension—both literally and in its cross-culturally restless plays of reference. The Empire State and Chrysler buildings, both inside and outside the head, gave rise to a staggered series of building tress sculptures, developing (and, in the gesture, appropriating) symbolically laden architectural icons in London, Paris, and South Africa.

The new *Tresses* cycle—while still insisting, via the use of emphatically artificial fluorescent hair extensions, on the diasporic character of the sculptural articulation—inverts the relationship between First and Third Worlds. Here the represented subject matter is that of vehicular transport—"wheels," in the street vernacular—as a metonymic element within consciousness. On one level the underlying metonym is captured in the consumerist mantra: what you drive is what you are. On another, Gaba is wise to a multitude of ambivalences and ambiguities that either are specifically African in character or become positively febrile in the African context. In South Africa as I write this, an ongoing scandal is playing out in the media over the multimillion-rand vehicles that senior government officials, in a time of economic recession, have acquired for themselves at taxpayers' expense. This is part of the reality that Gaba alludes to. Across the borders, in countries like Angola, you can still see ancient trucks laboring at less than ten kilometers per hour under the weight of humans and their worldly goods and chattels piled up in pyramids like pineapples. This too is the reality that Gaba registers, as is the militarized warlord's tank-head sculpture.

Gaba operates in the space that opens up in the exchanges between the First and Third Worlds—between Europe and the United States, on one side, and Africa, on the other. It is perhaps a little glib but nonetheless vividly illustrative to note that the material from which the *Tresses* works are assembled—the artificial hair itself, with all its African overtones and resonances—is made from a kind of plastic, which the technologized West makes from raw materials plucked out from the developing or underdeveloped parts of the world. And, of course, it was acquired in the United States, not in Benin. It is itself a product of identities characterized by deferral, aspiration, and the second remove.

The point is that, like Gaba himself, the *Tresses* operate in the spaces in between what is specifically African and what belongs to the second life of Africa in the developed world, and in the spaces where the developed world has imprinted itself on, and has been appropriated by, the experience of Africa and of Africans. In his work nothing is either one thing or the other. His deeper subject matter lies in a zone of virtuality perpetually caught between the two: an unstable, ever-shifting virtuality, a radioactive half-life of the spirit and of culture.

Two

I am indebted to Michael Stevenson for a traveler's insight into the society and the lived realities of Benin. His take on Benin is that, as a society, it operates more or less exclusively on the business of trading per se. He notes the virtual absence of any intensive exploitation of natural resources, of any large-scale manufacturing or, for that matter, of any significant agricultural production. Tropical, fertile, blessed with a basic sufficiency of food and subsistence material for survival and shelter, the society has evolved (unusually, if not uniquely) as a quintessentially mercantile economy, in which the fact of trading becomes its own justification and, in ways that sit uncomfortably with economic theory, sustains itself in anomalous defiance of economic fundamentals.

In such an economic climate, what is bought and sold, exchanged or bartered, is less significant than the fact of the transaction. Surplus value—not in the classically Marxist sense of capitalist exploitation by captains of industry, but nonetheless not unrelated to this—comes to be the stock in trade, as value abstracted from and not directly predicted by labor or the production of economic value in the first place. The real currency here, surplus value itself, is entirely abstract; what is being bought and sold is hardly more or less than buying and selling itself.

In his *Colours of Cotonou* installation Gaba takes objects like his old painter's smock, well-worn jeans, and the flag of Benin, then flattens and fixes them into two-dimensional surfaces textured and

Vernissage, installation detail, 2009.
Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

patinated by use and encrusted history. These he fits into frames that themselves have been encrusted with carefully shredded and sorted banknotes—now useless as currency because they have been shredded (and because they are from discontinued series). Removed from the business of buying and selling, Gaba's "banknote confetti" is turned into texture and impasto, still redolent, though, of material memories of what the mulch was made from.

This mixture becomes the frame—both literally and suggestively—into which the objects of use are fitted. In one way the framing evokes a meditation on art and value in a relatively traditional postmodern context. But it goes beyond this in two ways. One rises from the conscious play that Gaba makes between the two meanings of the French word *cadre*—one literally meaning "frame," the other referring to the human instrument of a political movement. The latter meaning arises from Gaba's lack of concern with offering critique in and through his work. He occupies the zone of ambivalence; his work begins inside, and embraces, the condition—the existential diaspora—of contradiction, and the deferred realities that define the dance of contradiction are turned into an existential strategy.

A case in point is *Vernissage*, the participatory performance played out at the opening of this exhibition. Here a nail bar such as you find in *spaza* stalls where hair braiding is also done, bought *voetstoets* off the street in Cotonou, is reinstalled in the gallery: colors and colors of nail varnish, row upon row of vibrant artificial intensity; false nails of every hue and design; glues and the affixing agents. There is a busy traffic in painting the nails of opening-night visitors to the exhibition: vanity made trenchant, high culture colliding with the cadres of the street. And, of course, with the *cadres* of the street—the frames, the *povera* materials.

Vernissage rests on another French double entendre, as the word evokes both the painting of nails and a preview or private view of an art collection. It all depends on your frame of reference. And here, as in *Colours of Cotonou*, Gaba provides a spare frame. Two for the price of one. Good value because, at the end of the day, the frame is not different from what is caught inside it.

Ivor Powell *began his working life as an academic art historian, then moved into art criticism—and subsequently political and investigative journalism—with the founding of the* Weekly Mail *(now* Mail and Guardian*, published in Johannesburg) in the mid-1980s. Between 2000 and 2008 he was a senior special investigator with South Africa's now-defunct Directorate of Special Operations (better known as the Scorpions). He lives in Cape Town and is group investigations editor for Independent Newspapers Limited, South Africa's largest newspaper group.*

Note

This essay was originally published in the exhibition catalogue *Meschac Gaba: The Street* (Cape Town: Stevenson, 2009).