

Journeys and gestures:

The work of
Serge Alain Nitegeka

–

Allie Biswas

Earlier this year Serge Alain Nitegeka presented *Structural-Response II* as the central work of his first solo museum exhibition in the United States. The vast, site-specific installation occupied the entire space of a long, narrow gallery at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia, stretching out of view and giving the impression that it might continue endlessly. This immense work comprised an amalgamation of thin wooden planks, painted black, which had been joined together at various angles. The planks jutted upwards, touching the ceiling in a spiky, towering manner.

Among them, at certain intersections on the ground, rectangular panels of bare wood could be seen, the end surfaces of which Nitegeka had painted bright red. At one point the installation traversed from the floor onto the wall. Then, after some distance, the woven network of black wooden lines commenced again in the middle of the space.

Other than revealing the artist's powerful aesthetic - grounded in abstraction, geometry and colour - *Structural-Response II* was an unequivocal signal of the critical role that movement plays within Nitegeka's art. In order to examine the work in its entirety, the viewer was required to step over and hunch through the structure, from beginning to end, carefully navigating their way through the uneasily determined spaces available to them. And, while the passage here may have been permeated by obstacles, mobility was not halted altogether - the final outcome was that of progression and, ultimately, resolution. What is more, *Structural-Response II* underlined the relationship Nitegeka has developed between form and experience, whereby representation of a frame of mind or bodily sensation is inferred through the arrangement and treatment of the physical object.

Structural-Response II is one of several monumental interventions that Nitegeka has devised since exhibiting his first sizeable structure, *The Tunnel*, in 2010. These installations form part of a wider body of work that encompasses painting, sculpture and drawing. Regardless of the medium, wood and paint could be understood as the artist's principal materials, and the overall image that is created by the works underlines his interest in minimalism. His process of creating, while governed by order, also stems from an inclination towards unplanned exploration. Discussing the formation of his installations Nitegeka explains: 'I approach the site with a blank mind. I don't walk in with preconceived ideas or expectations of what I am going to make or how it is going to look.'¹ And while the materials and architectural layout dictate certain aspects, he is



1

1
Structural-Response II
 2015, installation, SCAD Museum
 of Art, Savannah

2
Barricade I
 2014, installation, Marianne Boesky booth,
 Armory Show, New York

adamant that 'my formal aesthetic plays a part too', adding that while 'there isn't a correct geometry as such, there is a correct aesthetic appeal'.

Nitegeka has been concerned with exploring the relationship between the body and its surroundings since he began exhibiting in 2008, cementing a particular commitment to experiences based on oppression or discord as part of the specific context of forced migration. Nitegeka's own history within this realm - involving continuous episodes of fleeing inflicted by conflicts of war and genocide in Africa - cannot be ignored in this process: 'The migrant experience, and its narratives, influences my work immensely,' he has asserted. 'Like trauma or a life-changing experience, it's hard to forget or do anything else.' The journey - a life understood through transit - underpins Nitegeka's



2

manifestations, which simulate the continuously shifting and fraught environments that must be endured by refugees. Crucially, the journey that is evoked is both physical and psychological. As the artist has pointed out, he is interested in both the *space* and *state* of liminal experiences, which alludes to landscape (inhabiting a place) and emotion (the mental repercussions). The role of the journey appears to have come to the fore in the artist's present practice, suggested by the title of his latest exhibition (*Black Passage*) and the room-scaled, walk-through installation that dominates it. It is a theme he has returned to in successive works. *Barricade I* (2014), for example, consists of a giant web of conjoined black beams containing cargo boxes seemingly in mid-air. When installed at the Armory Show, New York, the construction was placed by Nitegeka in such a way as to prevent direct access to his paintings, which were displayed in a room nearby. To view these works, navigation through *Barricade I* was imperative. Nitegeka's interest in complicating spatial dimensions was even more transparent in *Structural-Response I* (2012), created for the French Institute in Dakar. This work is one of the most pervasive explorations into issues of negotiation and survival that Nitegeka has made to date. Composed solely of the painted black plank in tumultuous, manifold configurations, a mesh

of sharp intersections swelled to fill the whole gallery and then - exerting its bustling presence even further - spilled out of the entrances to the building, hindering the approach of those trying to enter or exit the gallery.

As the role of the journey is so vital to - and, in essence, intertwined within - these large-scaled, site-specific installation works, the viewer's physical participation is required in order for them to be 'completed'. Only when the structure is used or manipulated in this way - with the viewer's body being forced to locate itself and move in very particular ways, compromising with the space as they go along - can Nitegeka's intended expressions be comprehended. Outlining the process, the artist has described his installations as prompting the body to 'rehearse and outline certain movements ... I'm sharing my story with you, and you're completing it as a performer. The installation can be interpreted as a stage.'²



3

As if to concretise how vital physical engagement is to his practice, Nitegeka made a film, *BLACK SUBJECTS* (2012), which depicts a group of figures circulating inside a familiar grid of coated black planks and boxes, set against a stark white background. Dressed in black, covered entirely from head to toe, these anonymous humans silently manoeuvre themselves through openings in the space, moving together closely as a unit. As they pass through the crossings created by the geometrical arrangement, the figures pick up loose sections of the grid, such as a curved piece of wood, and collate them. The film is centred upon demonstrating the feeling of community that arises during adverse situations, as well as the action that is instinctively sensed to (collectively) survive through the formation of shelter. Nevertheless, the critical nature of movement is highlighted by this magnified focus on the body. The performative aspect of Nitegeka's installations can be elucidated further by the framework of Mieke Bal's term 'migratory aesthetics'. Interpreting 'aesthetic' as 'a condition of sentient engagement', the concept attempts to 'establish an active interface between viewer and artwork'.³ Under this term, an artwork is considered 'empty' if the act of viewing is not innate to it, and if that act is not used

3

Structural-Response I
2012, installation, Galerie Le Manège,
French Institute, Dakar

4

BLACK SUBJECTS
2012, digital video, sound,
duration 6 min 56 sec



4

to carry out a political dimension. In this instance the term 'migratory' does not refer to the actual migration of people, but is instead used to indicate 'a quality of the world in which mobility is not the exception but on its way to becoming the standard, the means rather than the minority'.⁴ Therefore, Bal argues, if aesthetics is considered to be above all an encounter in which the subject, including the body, is engaged, that aesthetic encounter is defined as migratory if it takes place due to, or on the interface with, the mobility of people as 'at the heart of what matters in the contemporary, that is, "globalised" world'.⁵

The migratory framework that informs Nitegeka's art is, then, critical to the meaning of the works. But the artist has been clear to identify his simulations as 'imagined spaces', perhaps aiming to detract from biographical readings that stem from his own history of migration. Indeed, the complex aesthetic concerns of his works make them resistant to attempts to collapse their meanings

into a single (autobiographical) narrative. Nitegeka has even commented that he possibly 'subconsciously chose to go the abstract route so as to avoid divulging personal migratory narratives and being literal'.

The experiences drawn upon by Nitegeka are more precisely related to those of the refugee, and in order to locate his work contextually it is important to make this distinction. Whereas the term 'exile' was positioned within the historical framework of modernity, contemporary art practices are now associated with the figure of the 'migrant'. Migration, while synonymous with displacement and uprootedness, is still associated with a level of choice and, consequently, freedom. This is mirrored by the way in which the term has been connected to notions of travel, associated with 'nomadic artists' who participate as part of a globalised art culture that is determined by mobility. The refugee narrative referred to by Nitegeka is, if anything, governed by persecution and an absence of autonomy,



5

and the artist agrees with the necessity to separate these definitions, saying that 'the line between the two terms is very thin, and at times they get intertwined and inseparable in contemporary cases of forced migration'.

Nitegeka's visual language, though emphatic and often dramatic, maintains a preoccupation with simplicity and precision. While his installations, and his sculptures too (in particular the ongoing *Fragile Cargo* series initiated in 2012, which portrays box-like structures outlined by black planks), are architecturally proportioned, the forms utilised are minimalist and repetitive, and the colour palette rarely exceeds red, black and white. The new paintings exhibited in *Black Passage* reveal for the first time the introduction of blue and yellow into Nitegeka's tonal range. Presented as an inverse to the highly charged experiences he evokes, the artist's method of 'untangling and ordering the chaos of

multiple narratives of lived experiences' is through this 'simple system of unpacking' which results in 'clean, single, concise lines' being delineated.

While journeys play a pivotal part in Nitegeka's installations in an immersive and abstract manner, transit, when examined through formal means, is most explicitly represented through allusion to the landscape. The works often resemble buildings and other large-scale, man-made constructions, and also make reference to modes of transport specifically through their titles, which include words such as 'cargo' and 'tunnel'. This acts both as a reflection of the artist's encounters while in literal transit on the road, and his continuing interest in the architectural nature of certain environments. Nitegeka confirms the effect that buildings, roads and bridges have on him, describing them as 'majestic and monumental sculptures ... they cannot be ignored. I look to these for inspiration.' These sources are especially relevant when contemplating them in relation to other artists Nitegeka has stated as important to his own development, including Richard Serra (born 1939) and Richard Deacon (born 1949).

5

Adapt-Mode I
2013, installation, Stevenson,
Cape Town

6

Tunnel IX
2014, installation, Stevenson,
Johannesburg

7

Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipses*,
1996-7, installation view,
Dia:Beacon, New York

Adapt-Mode I (2013), which was installed in Nitegeka's *Black Cargo* exhibition in Cape Town, comprises three large, curvilinear pieces of painted black wood that have been pressed into a narrow section of the gallery with a wall on either side. Positioned one in front of the other, at intervals, each object can be viewed separately as well as in succession. From afar the smooth flat surface of the wood gives the impression that the object is made from metal, and the overall shape and layout is reminiscent of a tunnel or passageway. A year later the artist made *Tunnel IX* (2014) for his Johannesburg exhibition, *Into the BLACK*. Based on the same principle, the curvature of the wood is this time more significantly articulated and its overall size is colossal. Overtaking the entrance to the gallery, two slender slabs of wood were positioned adjacent to each other, bent at opposite angles, which provided a confined path through the space. Unlike the works made up of planks, these structures enable the viewer to undertake a more linear journey that does not encourage as much physical contortion or direct contact. Instead, the impact here is mostly formed by the considerable manipulation of the material, which appears daunting precisely because it remains at a distance, hovering directly over the body.

Both of these works are reminiscent of Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* - huge sheets of thin metal shaped with a slight bend and positioned to stand upright on the floor. When interviewed in the late 1980s, Serra recalled a childhood memory of a ship launching at the yard where his father worked: for the artist, the ship went through a transformation, 'from an enormous, obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat, and adrift'.⁶ As a result, qualities such as weight and gravity were, as witnessed in this incident, able to provoke psychological effects, as



6

well as physical imposition.⁷ Similarly, in Nitegeka's work transformation is also thematised, whereby physical constructions he has interacted with in familiar habitats - such as the cargo crate, the crossing and the tunnel - are envisaged as symbolic of migratory narratives.

The importance of space to the making of the *Torqued Ellipses* also matches Nitegeka's concerns, in that (empty) space is often his starting point for the work, and is as critical as the areas of the object that contain physical matter. The most 'active' role played by the void is consequently as a passageway. Serra reflected that the *Torqued Ellipses* were generated entirely by body movement, intimating that although it was necessary for the viewer to be alert to their surroundings, their body was 'already reacting without even thinking about it'.⁸ As with Nitegeka's sculptural interventions, the



7

substance of space is used as a material in itself, and while movement is forced - even choreographed - by the structure, the viewer's bodily responses are instinctual.

Deacon, who is best known for his interest in manipulating materials as well as his continuously changing methods of construction, is an easily decipherable reference point in Nitegeka's practice. The sculptures from the beginning of Deacon's career are particularly pertinent, depicting a continuous succession of alternations between inside and outside, access and barrier.⁹ Perhaps most prominent in the approach taken by both artists is their sensitivity to the textural properties of material, and the ways in which material is developed into structure through the act of fabrication. Discussing the creation of his site-specific installations, Nitegeka says that they come into being by a process of 'on-site structural engineering without sketches or mathematical planning', which results in the artist spontaneously 'drawing' in three-dimensional space, executing a self-generated plan. He continues: 'I like to not know. I feel free and within the mind-set to experiment, fabricate and make do. My practice is very technical. There is quite a bit of fabrication using crude, improvised methods honed at art school.' Nitegeka's comments allude to the labour that is clearly decipherable in his art - the exertion that went into producing works with his own hands - along with the role played by architectural and engineering techniques in informing his understanding of structure and material.

Nitegeka in fact once expressed an interest to study engineering, a motivation that emanated 'when my installations and ambitions started to get bigger and bigger'. Underlining the considerable impact that this

8

Richard Deacon, *Band*, 2009,
wood and steel, 106 × 230 × 85cm

9

Louis Kahn, National Assembly Building, Dhaka,
Bangladesh, 1987

10

100 Stools
2011, intervention, Refugee Reception Office,
Marabastad, Pretoria



8



9

discipline has on his art, he cites the work of architect Louis Kahn as one of his most significant references: 'His structures have a deep simplicity. He creates spaces that meditate on form.' While Nitegeka's works have a unitary, all-at-once impact at first sight, like Kahn's creations they can be divided into much smaller elements, with each component retaining its own shape. And, as with Nitegeka's structural vocabulary, the abstract elements Kahn utilises in his buildings are unadorned and fundamental, arranged so as to impose order.¹⁰

Constituting part of Nitegeka's concern for the architectural is the evocation of 'home' in his installations. As well as referencing vehicles related to transportation, and the landscape as viewed in transit, each structure could also be considered as a place of shelter. While not necessarily formally alluding to the configurations of a house or domestic building, Nitegeka's structures operate as makeshift areas adapted for the purposes of dwelling. The artist describes the narrative he simulates as one founded 'primarily in transit but also in settlement' which indicates this engagement with inhabiting spaces, whether temporarily or long-term. Nitegeka's own sense of settlement (he has lived in Johannesburg for over a decade) and the urban landscape of the city (with its architectural layers) continue to inform his art. He notes in particular the city's 'broad highways, complex



10

flyovers, elaborate use of cast concrete on roads and skyscrapers, and the grid layout of the city centre' which he terms 'rational and beautiful'.¹¹

One of the first interventionist works carried out by Nitegeka was his *100 Stools* project, originally realised in December 2011 and revised for the 2015 Göteborg Biennial. In its initial iteration, the artist had arranged for 100 handmade pine stools to be delivered to an open plot of land in central Pretoria, where groups of foreign migrants arrive early every morning to queue outside the local Refugee Reception Office. After facing resistance from security officials, he finally succeeded in distributing his stools to the asylum seekers, offering them both mental and physical respite from the adversity they were forced to endure. Nitegeka commented that his work was intended to acknowledge the asylum seekers, 'to humanise them, to give them a bit of dignity'.¹² Using Umberto Eco's term 'open work' as its starting point, the Göteborg Biennial's theme of 'A story within a story'

examines the possibility of viewing history as incomplete, indeterminate and in motion.¹³ From this position, it questions how the collective memories and inner worlds of the marginalised can be made relevant.¹⁴ Nitegeka's practice is, of course, resolutely embedded with such a purpose – recovering subjectivity through shared experience – and *100 Stools* acts as a literal formation of such intentions, in that it is documentary by nature – an engagement situated within representation.

Edward Said, writing in 1984, stated that refugees are a creation of the 20th-century state, our age being the age of the refugee, the displaced person and mass immigration. Three decades later, Europe is experiencing its 'worst refugee crisis since World War II'.¹⁵ This predicament, which, at the time of writing, has involved thousands of people fleeing war zones, oppression and economic disadvantage on a daily basis, suggests that this crisis is likely to become a defining issue of the 21st century too. This contemporary setting of the refugee crisis, and its repercussions to all, is where Nitegeka's work is to be placed. His art urges us to make connections with this global sphere of personal and collective disjuncture and trauma, where life is ruled by uncertainty and enforced readjustment. In doing so, his work becomes representative of a fundamental part of the present-day human condition. What Nitegeka ultimately reminds us is that the significance of a journey, whatever form it may take, lies in the process of allowing ourselves to enter into that which we cannot always control.

- 1 Author's discussions with the artist, August-September 2015. All quotes from Nitegeka in the essay arise from this conversation, unless stated otherwise.
- 2 Kat McDaniel, 'Sharing a Difficult Journey: The art installations of Serge Alain Nitegeka'. See: <http://synkroniciti.com/2015/02/15/sharing-a-difficult-journey-the-art-installations-of-serge-alain-nitegeka/>
- 3 Mieke Bal, 'Lost in Space, Lost in the Library', in Sam Durrant and Catherine Lord (eds), *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (Rodopi, 2007)
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Hal Foster, 'The un/making of sculpture', in Hal Foster (ed), *Richard Serra* (MIT Press, 2000)
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Richard Serra, in an interview with Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan, in *Richard Serra: Torqued Ellipses* (Dia Center for the Arts, 1997)
- 9 See P Schjeldahl, 'The Tone of Labor', in Vicky A Clark (ed), *Richard Deacon* (Carnegie Museum of Art, 1988)
- 10 See A Isozaki, 'Sparks of Creation', in *Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn: Play Mountain* (Watari-Um, 1997)
- 11 Serge Alain Nitegeka interviewed by David Brodie, *Africa and Abstraction: Johannesburg – Blom, Hlobo, Nitegeka, Rhode* (Stevenson, 2012), reproduced here (pp 149-154)
- 12 Darren Taylor, 'Serge Alain Nitegeka: From refugee to acclaimed artist'. See: <http://www.voanews.com/content/serge-alain-nitegeka-from-refugee-to-acclaimed-artist-141570273/181386.html>
- 13 See the curatorial statement for the Göteborg Biennial: <http://www.gibca.se/index.php/en/gibca2015/a-story-within-a-story>
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Al Jazeera, 'Record number of refugees enter Hungary from Serbia'. See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/hungary-serbia-refugees-150825081801664.html>