

## One Work

# Meschac Gaba *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997–2002)

Amid the 90s' wish to multi-culturalize the white cube, Meschac Gaba asked what a museum — a colonial form that invents truth by partitioning life — of contemporary African art could be. Riffing on Marcel Broodthaers and Duchamp, his response, distinctly “un-African” and rife with jokes, assembled twelve conjectural rooms that subverted (Western) expectations of what a museum is for.  
*By Jeppe Ugelvig*



View of “Meschac Gaba: Museum of Contemporary African Art”  
Deutsche Bank KunstHalle, Berlin, 2014

Museums are not (and have never been) ideologically neutral structures — this much we’ve learned from several decades of conceptual art and institutional critique. Western artists of this lineage have successfully evinced that a museum is an institution not only where cultural value is produced, but where power is distributed. The nodes and channels at issue are plentiful: funding (or the lack thereof), real estate, board members, collection holdings, labor practices, corporatization, and social representation continue to trouble, as well as to enliven, both the business of museums and their critics. I say *business* purposefully: Rooted in a romantic (and not entirely accurate) history of democracy and non-commercialism, “the museum” today is less a temple of knowledge than a free-floating form, available for deployment by a range of individual, public, and corporate players.

Artists have known this for quite some time: In the 1930s, Marcel Duchamp mass-produced

museums in suitcases (*La Boîte-en-valise*, 1935–41), while three decades later, his namesake, Marcel Broodthaers, played out the entire life cycle of a museum (from its inauguration in his own house to its eventual bankruptcy) over a four-year span (*Musée d’art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1968–72). One natural successor to this sub-lineage of institutional critique is Meschac Gaba, who, beginning in the 1990s, cheekily *détourned* the museum form once again, by turning its frigid, Euro-Western gaze back on itself.

The Beninese artist, noticing the conspicuous absence of contemporary art museums on his native continent, took it upon himself to build one: *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1996). The context was the globalizing, “multi-culti” environment of the 90s, coinciding with both the much-discussed “democratic awakening” of Africa and the global expansion of the art system, as marked by the exponential growth in international biennials and



## “I use money because I refuse to use the word colonialism,” Gaba stated.

fairs. What began as an open question – What would a museum of contemporary African art contain? – led to a systematic, if highly playful, investigation of the “museum function” amid the globalizing and neoliberalizing terrain of the time.

Gaba’s museum comprises twelve discrete installations branded as rooms or departments of said institution, which can be exhibited separately, in modular groups, or in their entirety. The first, *Draft Room*, was created during his residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 1996, which served as a kind of marketing suite for the museum to come. Void of any artworks, the room instead sought to recruit visitors as museum patrons by selling lapel pins fashioned from scraps of Beninese banknotes. A refrigerator hummed in one corner, while ceramic sculptures of bread, vegetables, and other food items, laid out on cloths across the floor, evoked a West African marketplace – a far cry from the white cubes populating museum culture of that time. Subsequent rooms elaborated this fictional narrative over the span of six years, from 1997 to 2002: *Architecture Room* invited visitors to propose models for the future museum via wooden building blocks, *Museum Shop* sold limited edition merchandise such as t-shirts, jewelry, postcards, and photographs by Gaba and his artist friends; *Museum Restaurant* offered affordable meals prepared by a rotating team of artists and curators, and came complete with movable lamps and plastic tablecloths; and *Library* displayed exhibition catalogues, periodicals, children’s books, and monographs on African art. Such performative mimicry of a museal institution was complemented by more idiosyncratic rooms, such as *Game Room*, where a number of artist-designed games were available to play, or *Marriage Room*, where the artist was wed to his wife, the Dutch curator Alexandra van Dongen. Gaba’s museum immediately acquired documentation of the entire ceremony, as well as the marriage certificate, the wedding dress, the guestbook, and wedding presents, which came to form a core of its holdings.

That Gaba pays equal attention to the museum as a space of cultural heritage and as a forum for business, consumption, and sociality is provocative: The work says less about African traditions than it does about Western ones. “My museum doesn’t exist,” Gaba explained. “It’s only a question . . . What I do is react to an African situation which is linked to a Eurocentric problem.” If the additional functions he proposed for the museum seem peculiar, it is because they hint at something deeper, as the very gesture – to *musealize* – is itself rather strange: majestic storage units of knowledge where people go to be “civilized” (as art historian Carol Duncan once described it) by engaging with cultural artifacts severed from life. As a European export, it is ridden with specters of coloniality in its insatiable mission to collect and categorize, to make everything legible, representative, and permanently “true.” Ethnography museums, now rebranded as museums of “world cultures,” are emblematic of this dynamic – they claim to represent realities to which they have always been profoundly Other. If Gaba’s museum functions as a post-colonial corrective to the Western museum, it is in the shape of a practical joke, with an unwieldy and highly idiosyncratic program that refuses its (predominantly European) visitors any stable or cohesive image of Africa past or present. The tribal and traditional African iconography that one is conditioned to expect in such a museum is noticeably absent. This observation, already loaded with prejudice, was cheekily commented upon by the artist once in an interview: “I was born in a city and I honestly don’t know the traditional art of Benin . . . On the contrary, I am a painter.” Through rhetoric as well as design, Gaba playfully and repeatedly turns the museum function on its head: Rather than displaying “authentic” African artifacts, the artist – to highlight one of many elements in *Museum* – crafted a money tree for *Architecture Room*, with custom currency emblazoned with the faces of Western artists, such as Brâncuși and Picasso, who “took inspiration” from African traditional art.



All images: Courtesy of the artist and STEVENSON, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Amsterdam

Views of “Meschac Gaba: Museum of Contemporary African Art”  
Deutsche Bank KunstHalle, Berlin, 2014





View of “Meschac Gaba: Museum of Contemporary African Art”  
Deutsche Bank KunstHalle, Berlin, 2014

If there is a through line in Gaba’s labyrinthine and performative museum, it is not colonial history or even art, but rather, money – abundantly present not only as a sign, but as plain coin and cash. Realized during the aggressive devaluation of the West African CFA franc in the 90s (which tumbled alongside the currencies of Mexico, Thailand, and other developing nation states), Gaba’s museum transformed bills into confetti and glued it to everyday objects, clothes, and accessories. “I use money because I refuse to use the word colonialism,” Gaba stated, alluding to an even deeper truth: Museums are always symptomatic of capital, and capital is *prima facie* colonial. To *truly* untangle the two is a project doomed to fail, while financialization, which boils down to an art of dematerialization, is a concept perfectly suited for the white cube.

“Minimally, an institution is only a convention,” anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote in 1986, presaging mutations to come, artistic and otherwise. The weight and poignancy of Gaba’s museum drag can only be fully appreciated in view of the many kinds of appropriation of the museum form

by non-artists since the work’s completion in 2002, in those early and naïve days of millennial neocapitalism. “Museums” and “institutions” are perfect flagship spaces for brands of any kind, even if they must be filled, still, with contemporary art – as evidenced by Gucci Garden in Florence, or the already bygone Red Bull Art Space in New York. Today, it is not so much artists, but corporations and their art-collecting CEOs, who have begun side-stepping traditional institutions to erect museums of their own. By constructing monolithic, private, non-profit institutions to suit their personal tastes, mega-collectors like Miuccia Prada, Roman Abramovich, Victor Pinchuk, and François Pinault are redefining the meaning and role of art institutions in the 21st century; namely, that they work at the service of individual oligarchis. Even if these institutions are often technically not-for-profit, they are usually still lucrative for their owners, providing excellent publicity for sponsors and their commercial operations. The museum, in other words, is big business, an economy based not only on the public, but on its appropriation.

MESCHAC GABA (\*1961, Cotonou, Benin) is an artist living in Rotterdam and Cotonou. Recent solo shows took place at STEVENSON, Cape Town (2021); Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; Le Centre Atropocodji, Cotonou (all 2017). Recent group shows include “Imaginary Friends,” Joan Miro Foundation, Barcelona (2023); “This is Not Africa – Unlearn What You Have Learned,” ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum (2021); “Leaving the Echo Chamber, Making New Time,” 14th Sharjah Biennial (2019).

JEPPE UGELVIG is a curator and art historian based in California. He is the founding editor-in-chief of Viscose Journal.



GALERIAPLAN B

Adrian Ghenie

1 April - 13 May

Strausberger Platz 1, 10243 Berlin