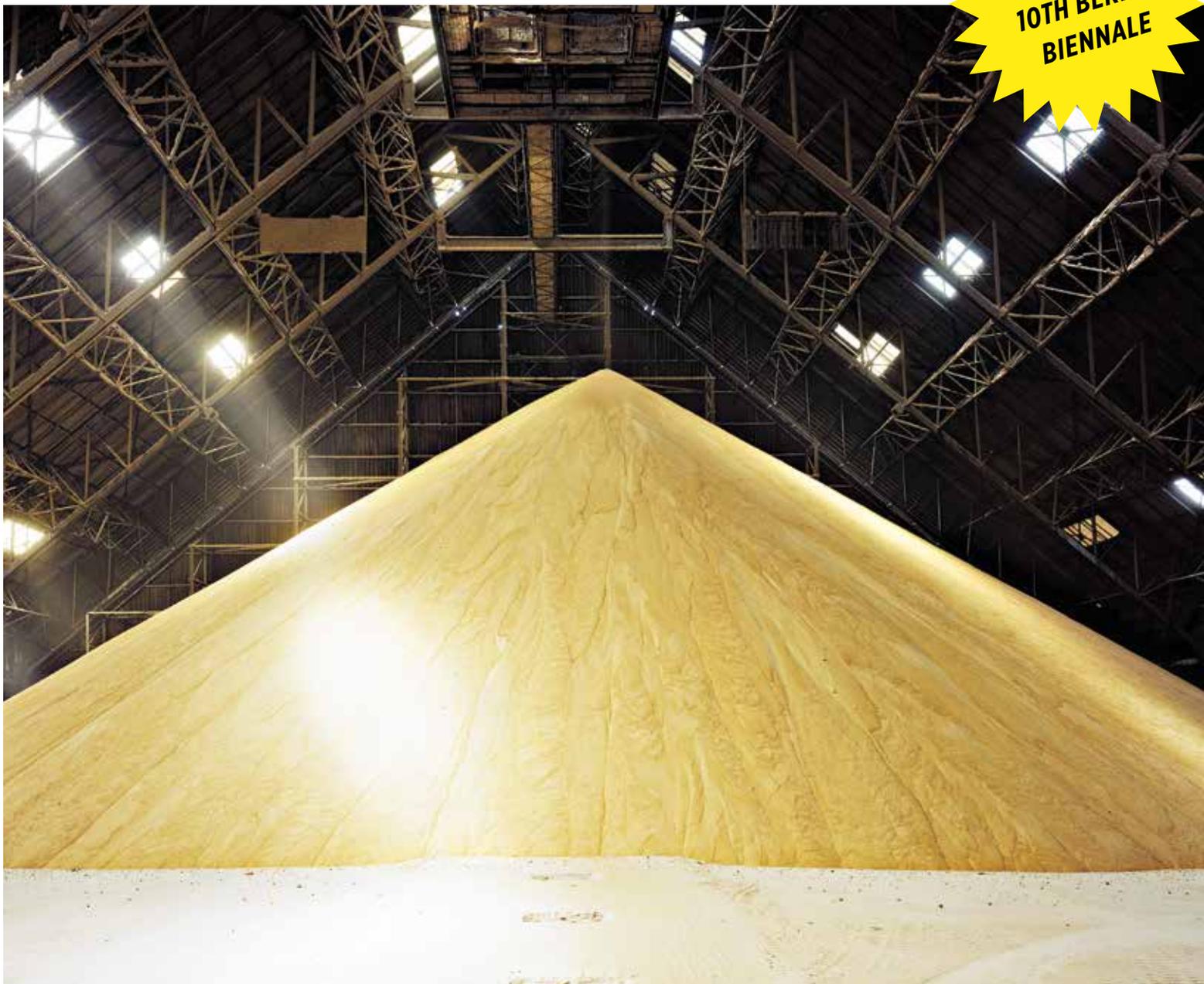


C&

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PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL ART
FROM AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

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LOOKING AT A GLOBAL DIASPORA

The Burden of Representation

In our ongoing series of round-table discussions we ask a selection of artists and art practitioners to answer a set of questions on a specific topic. This time around the theme is “identity” and the invited artists include **ELISABETH EFUA SUTHERLAND**, **FAITH RINGGOLD**, **ZINEB SEDIRA**, and **KELVIN HAIZEL**. Visit our website for the full list of contributions and other topics.

“Identity” and “identity politics” are terms with which artists from Africa and the Diaspora are often associated, whether they like it or not. This has been the case for decades, or rather ever since there has been a debate around artistic production by artists from African perspectives. The idea that those artists are working on “identity” may be one of the assumptions made by a “Western” audience – and this applies just as much to Black communities. But is this fair? Is it not also leading to a “burden of representation,” as Kobena Mercer once called it? What does it really mean to make work on our “identity”? And who gets to decide that? And what about those artists with African perspectives who aren’t addressing the issue of “identity”? Their work and viewpoints are relevant and important, as they move away from this “burden to represent.” In this round-table discussion, four intergenerational artists discuss the problematics of these terms and their usage.

identity – what’s in a word?

01

ELISABETH EFUA SUTHERLAND

*“It’s about the power of the narrative.
People ask you, ‘Who are you?’”*

02

FAITH RINGGOLD

*“I am very inspired to tell my story,
and that’s my story.”*

03

ZINEB SEDIRA

*“Identity is very much at the core of every
artistic practice, whether painting flowers
or exploring one’s culture or politics.”*

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KELVIN HAIZEL

*“The question points to the overburdened subject
every artist from the Global South has had to
grapple with in the last thirty years.”*

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It's about the power of the narrative. People ask you, 'Who are you?'

Elisabeth Efua Sutherland's practice is always rooted within her current environment, which at the moment is the streets of Ghana. Yet the co-founder of the Accra Theatre Workshop refuses to let her subject be reduced to "identity." Through local perspectives she wants to gain insights into the social microcosms that surround her. Be it the behavior of agitated drivers on the road or of young women trying to balance work and family life. She talks with C& about dissecting her surroundings without losing sight of the bigger picture.

CONTEMPORARY AND (C&) In your work you examine the way culture can shape identity and you often engage with your local environment in Accra. How important is this local perspective to you and your practice?

ELISABETH EFUA SUTHERLAND My practice is very reactive. A lot of what I make, especially in choreography, comes out of what I see, hear, or feel as I move around – when I listen to the radio, or when I walk on the street. So in one sense my practice is always local, because the physical and social geographies of my environment play an active part. And as I spend most of my time in Accra, that is the locality I bring to my practice at the moment. What draws my attention in those day-to-day moments is how culture shapes the ways people move, interact, and behave in social situations – for example, the physical and verbal interactions between drivers on the road, or the struggles of young professional women balancing career and family, and the traditionalism and stereotypes that still affect how gender roles are played out. In all of this there is a culturalization that causes individuals to behave the way they do, especially in public situations and in smaller relational units like family or circles of friends. I try to constantly unpack and

explore this. Who are we as a people? Where did we come from? And why are we where we are today? That's what I want to know.

C& Why do you think "identity" – in the broad sense of the word – is a recurring topic with artists from Africa and the Diaspora across generations?

EES I think because other people know so little about us, and they put the burden on us to explain ourselves without necessarily giving us the power to do so. It's about narrative. People ask you, "Who are you?" Then they interrupt your reply to negate or edit what you just said because it doesn't fit into their perception of what you should be, based on their own prejudices and previous exposures. I think it's about power and about narrative. Who gets to tell the story? Whose version of the story is heard? Whose version is accepted? You have to keep asserting who you are until people have the stomach to take it. And that's not only an external thing but an internal one as well.

C& How specifically relevant is it to your practice that you speak about subjects related to your culture or identity?

EES I believe in somatic history, embodied history. I believe you carry the cultural marks of where you originated from in your DNA, and that these can manifest in your spirit and in your fleshly life. So for me it's important to look at the history of a person and a people and the objects and practices and lived histories of that lineage in order to explore the ways they manifest today – as road rage at rush hour, or as a struggle to choose between having a job you care about or answering the combined call for reproduction by your ovaries and your church auntie. In a roundabout way I do believe you can never really escape or

transcend your history, and that it may just morph into a different manifestation in your current life. You may embrace or reject it, but either way it remains part of your self-identification.

C& When a conceptual artist from Accra focuses on non-identity topics, such as Bauhaus for example, they are often questioned in a way white artists aren't. How do you think this can be challenged?

EES By refusing to engage with that questioning, by engaging the people and structures doing that questioning and challenging why they feel the need to question – it says more about them than it does about you. Just continuing to do the work.



both images Paa Joe and Elisabeth Efua Sutherland, *Ake yaaa heko* // *One does not take it anywhere*, opening. Courtesy Gallery 1957, Accra. Photo Nii Odzenma

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I am very inspired to tell my story, and that’s my story.

Born in Harlem, Faith Ringgold is a veteran US artist who’s been making political art since the 1960s. Ringgold’s oil paintings and posters have often carried strong messages of freedom that have won her fans, including James Baldwin, who wrote her first exhibition review. One of her most iconic paintings, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), depicting a street massacre, hangs at MoMA in New York. Being socially engaged both in her art and life, in 1968 she demonstrated against the exclusion of Black and female artists by New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. That episode led to her being called the N word for the first time in her life, to which she responded with multiple artworks. In 1970 she made the poster for the *People’s Flag Show* at New York’s Judson Memorial Church, resulting in her arrest for desecrating the US flag. Never one to quit, in 1971 Ringgold cofounded *Where We At*, a group for African American female artists. Constantly experimenting with different media, Ringgold has worked extensively with African crafts while breaking with the hierarchy that limits what crafts can do in the fine arts. Another series, which has become her trademark, is of quilts combining images and handwritten text to tell the lives of African Americans. One of these, *Tar Beach*, was turned into a children’s book published in 1991, the first of Ringgold’s eighteen children’s books. Today, Faith Ringgold is still making art and has even ventured into children’s games, proving that her imagination and prowess have no limits. In April 2018 the artist had her Berlin solo debut, where we met to discuss her life and career.

CONTEMPORARY AND (C&) Your work often deals with race, gender, and social status. Why have these themes remained important

to you and how has your approach to working with them evolved?

FAITH RINGGOLD Well, they remain important to me because they are part of my life’s struggle. I can’t get through the world without recognizing that race and sex influence everything I do in my life. So I’ve spent my life finding and dealing with these issues in a way that will not inhibit my privacy. And so I continue. It continues to be a problem and I continue to struggle.

C& Why do you think “identity” is a recurring topic with artists from Africa and the Diaspora across generations?

FR Across different cultures, ethnicities, is this an issue? I don’t know. Actually I’ve never been asked that question. I’m sure it’s not easy being green [laughs]. No, I don’t think so. So I think it probably isn’t. I know it isn’t with African Americans, without a doubt. The visual art world is kind of racist. I’m convinced of that. And not only racist but sexist. In fact, I think it’s more sexist than racist. We have to struggle against it the best we can and see what happens.

C& So you think, because of that, we will always have artists who want to explore this issue of identity in their own work?

FR I think there is a choice that you can make to ignore that and do something else like everything is ok, or you can use that problem to create art that imposes it. I mean, you have a choice – you don’t have to. A lot of artists don’t, like for instance Ed Clark. He’s great but he doesn’t do it. He ignores it and a lot of Black artists don’t think about it. They don’t want to deal with it. Or maybe that is a way to deal with it, I don’t know. But I don’t choose to do it that way and I always do what I want.

C& How would you refer to your practice when you’re exploring subjects related to your culture or identity? How is it relevant to speak about it in these terms?

FR It is important because that is who I am. And it is what inspires me. I am very inspired to tell my story and that’s my story. And I can’t imagine just acting like it’s not there, although I have works that don’t fit this situation. Because I really do what I want. So I do it and I don’t do it. I’ve done a lot of work. Not all of it is an expression of racism and sexism, some of it is.

C& When artists from Africa and the Diaspora explore themes beyond their “identity,” a conceptual artist from Accra focusing on Bauhaus for example, they are often questioned in the way white artists aren’t. How do you think this can be challenged?

FR You have the right to do everything you want as an artist. Your expression, your artistic expression, your visual expression is whatever inspires you. You don’t have to do anything. You can do what you want. And artists have done what they want, or we wouldn’t be here. African artists create all the kinds of ways African American artists do. And that is because they don’t see themselves limited by their race and/or their sex. And they are not! It is only if they miss it, if it inspires them, if it brings them something unique. Other than that, no. You don’t have to do it. Do it because you want to, because you have something special to say. You want to add something, learn something and you are free to do so. Free. You can do what you want. And you go.

The first time I was called NIGGER was at the Whitney Museum in New York City. I was passing out flyers about the Whitney’s discrimination against



Faith Ringgold, *Hate Is a Sin, Flag*, 2007. Dyptich, silkscreen 4/10, 57 x 56cm. Courtesy the artist and Weiss Berlin

FREEDOM On Tuesday
Morning we faced

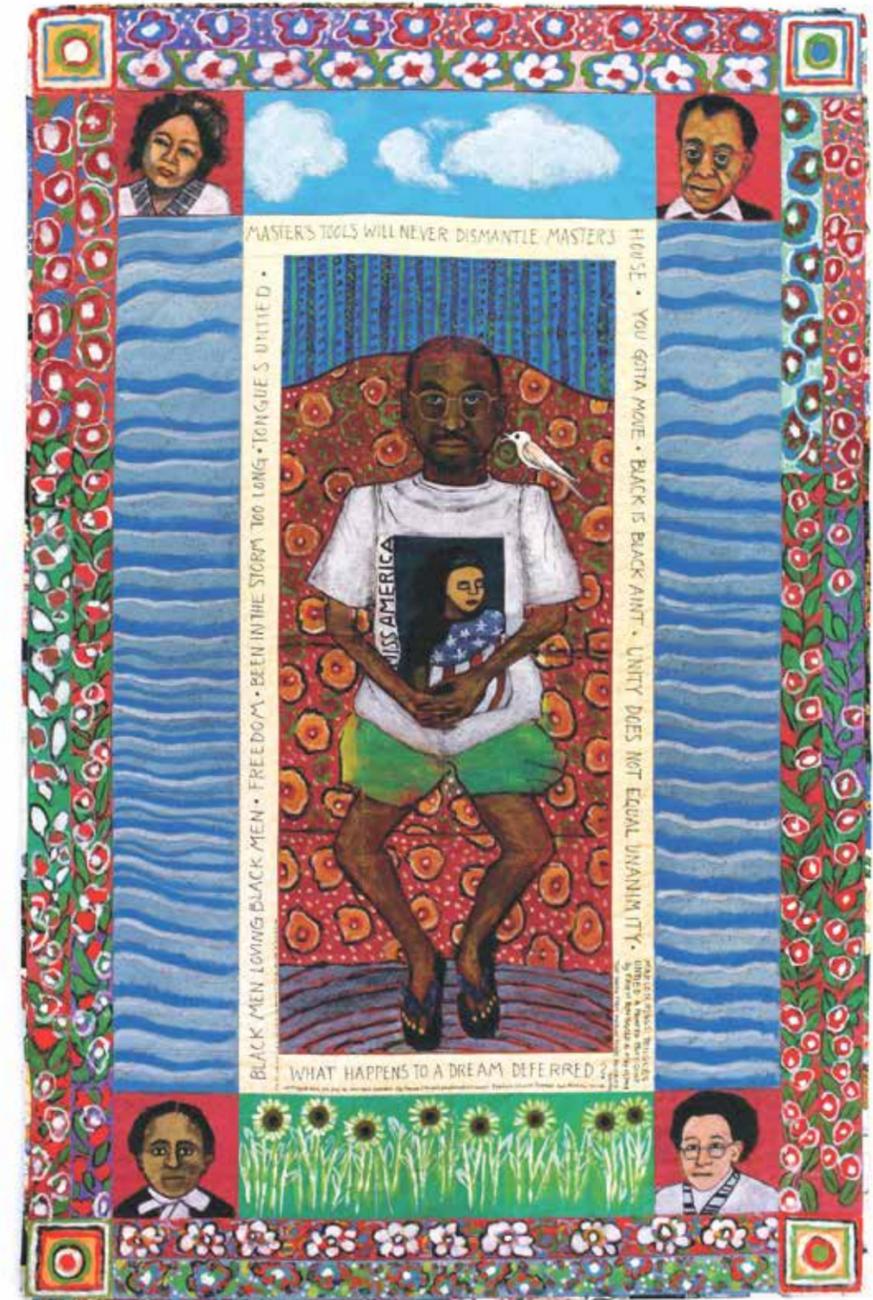
the Devil in the sky and told him

that... Freedom will never die Ringgold
9/11/01

Faith Ringgold, *Flag #3*, 2003. Felt pen and gouache on paper, 22 x 25 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Weiss Berlin



Faith Ringgold, *Feminist Series: We Meet the Monster*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas framed in cloth 12/20, 127 x 83 cm.
 Courtesy the artist and Weiss Berlin



Faith Ringgold, *Marlon Riggs: Tongues Untied*, 1994. Storyquilt, 226 x 151 cm.
 Courtesy the artist and Weiss Berlin



Identity is very much at the core of every artistic practice, whether painting flowers or exploring one's culture or politics.

Zineb Sedira is an Algerian French artist currently based in London. For two decades Sedira has consistently worked with themes related to oral history, migration, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Using various media including video, photography, and installation, the artist has explored Algeria extensively—its history, its people, and how they relate to the world – often informed by her North African and European identities. In *Mother Tongue* (2002), one of her best-known works, Sedira depicts herself with her mother and daughter, finding a common mode of communication despite speaking different languages. Currently, she has a retrospective show with older and new works at the Sharjah Art Foundation until June 16, 2018.

CONTEMPORARY AND (C&) Why do you think identity is a recurring topic with artists from Africa and the Diaspora across generations?

ZINEB SEDIRA I think all artistic works are about identity, not just for artists from Africa or the Arab world. Identity is very much at the core of every artistic practice, be it painting flowers or exploring one's culture or politics. Isn't the personal political? However, often artists from Africa, the Middle East, and other continents create work about what is called "identity politics." Often issues of a social/political nature, like imperialism/ colonialism or wars/conflicts, are explored or exposed because many of these countries still struggle with these issues.

In my case – and I can only talk for myself – the reason I'm still very much interested in the politics and history of Algeria's past is because I believe the country hasn't dealt with its colonial history. In the same way, France (and this extends to the "West")

has not really dealt with its colonial past. I am resisting a form of aphasia and amnesia intrinsic to these colonial pasts and feel the need to reveal unspoken histories and their inconsistencies through self-exposure.

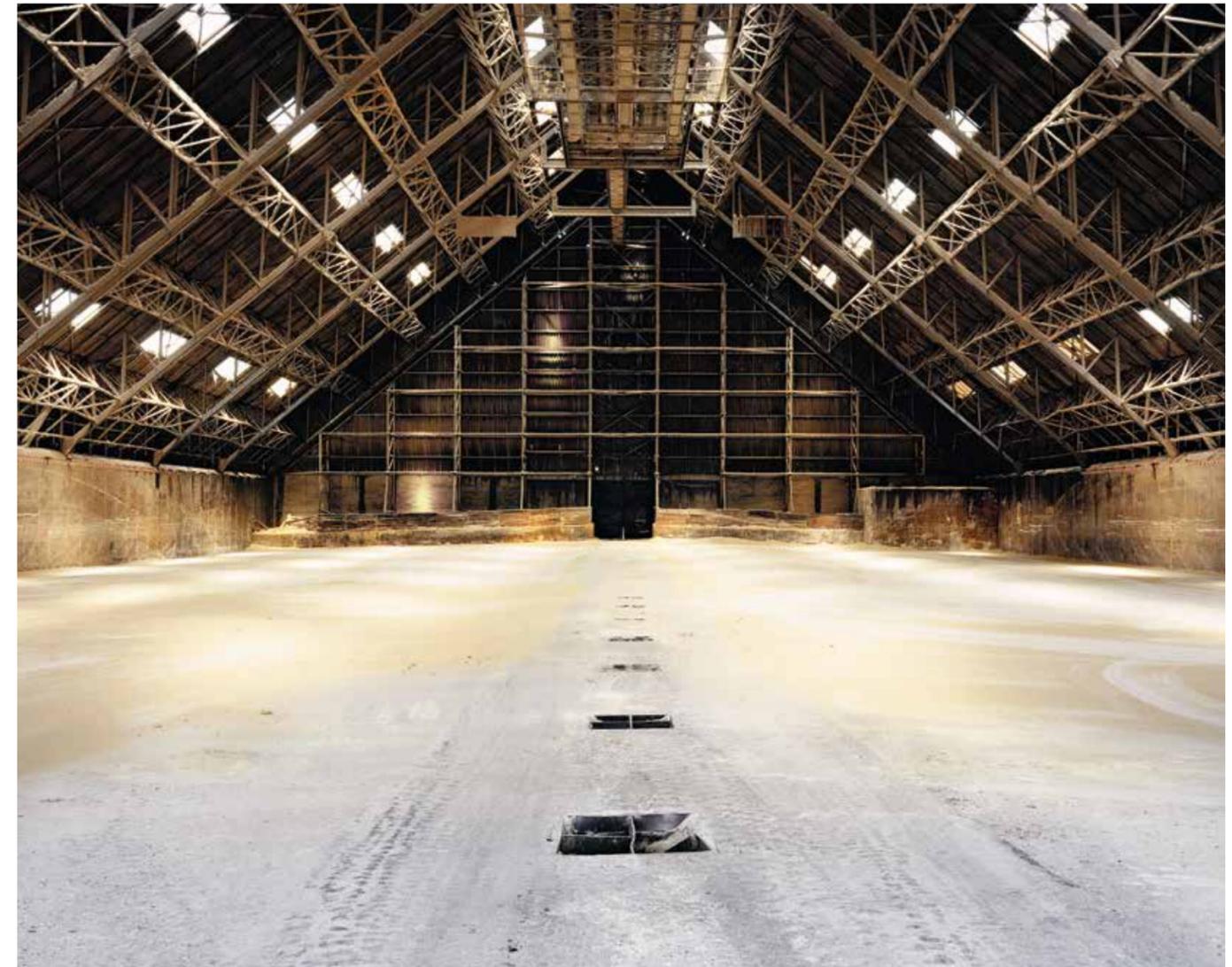
C& How would you refer to your practice when exploring subjects that relate to your culture or identity?

ZS It is very difficult for me to "brand" my work as it varies according to the places and subjects I am looking at. Yet I see myself as a storyteller. In the art world, my practice is often defined and narrowed into work on "immigration" and "memory." But when, for example, a white American artist creates work about identity politics, he is not only defined by his country of origin or history. Artists are interested in similar issues and they can be found in many different cultures or countries! But depending on where you come from, your work is read or received differently. Once a curator asked me why my work wasn't about politics, assuming that because I am "African" or "Middle Eastern," my artworks should be about social or political issues. As if I ought to be an artist activist because of where I come from. For me the personal is essential to politics and I always try to combine them. I am also interested in political poetry and bring both elements into my work.

C& How do you think we can challenge this double standard?

ZS I believe that, as artists, we need to find a way to speak about our work outside of what is expected (stereotypes) and anticipate the expected. For example, I understand the earlier work of Anish Kapoor to be about his Indian culture. However, he has never written or spoken about it in those terms only: he discussed his work in a more

universal manner. Somehow, he escaped categorization, the labeling that other artists experience. So for me, it is important to develop a way to still speak about the personal, the collective, the politics, without being confined to a geographical context. At the beginning of my career, I used to be invited to many geographical group shows on account of my nationality, but it doesn't happen anymore. This may have been good for visibility, but it did limit my work to that specific context. After the proliferation of so many Arab, African, and Chinese exhibitions in Europe and the US, there is no need for art institutions to curate these shows anymore. Regional contexts are forever changing: new borders and countries are created or disappear ... Nations with their cultures, traditions, languages, and even religions are evolving, making it impossible to synopsise and reduce them using curatorial Eurocentric discourses. The situation changes when you exhibit in international solo contexts – like my current show in Sharjah – where my practice is seen and read beyond my Algerian, French, and English identities. The interpretation of my art is then anchored within the context of the region hosting the work, thus creating new readings. The artwork extends its scope and is more universal, opening up to an inclusive audience. This is what I want; this is what artists want ...



Zineb Sedira, *Sugar Silo II*, 2014. Diptych, C-Type, 180 x 200 cm.

Commissioned by Marseille-Provence 2013, European Capital of Culture and the Port of Marseille.
Courtesy the artist and the galleries: The Third Line, Dubai, and Plutschow Gallery, Zurich



Zineb Sedira, *Maritime Nonsense and Other Aquatic Tales*, 2009. Triptych, C-prints mounted on aluminium, 100 x 120 cm each.
Produced and commissioned by Iniva – Institute of International Visual Arts, Rivington Place, London.
View of the installation, 2009. Photo: George Torode. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris



Zineb Sedira, *Haunted House I*, 2006. Color photograph, 100 x 80 cm.
Commissioned by the Photographer's Gallery, London.
Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris

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The question points to the overburdened subject every artist from the Global South has had to grapple with in the last thirty years.

What do pictures want? W. J. T. Mitchell asked that question over ten years ago. But we now live in times when 3D printers produce food, and images become objects that one day may be able to “act back” at us. Which is why Kelvin Haizel, exploring physical and cultural landscapes from his home in Ghana, is interested in the condition of the image. The artist talks with C& about potentially dangerous images and an identity discourse that desperately needs change.

CONTEMPORARY AND (C&) In your work you examine the condition of contemporary images extensively. What do you observe in them these days?

KELVIN HAIZEL Images, in many ways, have become objects in and of themselves. Consequently, the image has become “matter” that is not to be perceived only with visual apparatuses and faculties – a wide range of sensibilities are needed to engage the image now. If, as with Hito Steyerl, the image has literally crawled out of screens, canvases, walls, and billboards and has materialized as a part of our reality, then it is equally plausible to say that it may also become something we may bump into when backing up to see the expanse of a blank wall. One can already imagine, with the advent of 3D food printers, the image becoming something that can even be eaten and digested. Just imagine food from around the world advertised on the internet, edited in Photoshop, and printed for lunch! We soon might no longer edit only visual temperature but temperatures of the image that can literally burn and bruise your tongue or give

us novel culinary experiences. That is an exciting world to anticipate.

C& How does this image-to-object reality influence your personal practice? And how does it relate to subjects that explore culture and identity?

KH Images have crossed from the screen into our reality and become objects in our daily experience. They come to us from almost every geographical location possible, therefore the environment I talk of in my work is already at once local and global in every sense. For example, when Toyota recalled some 6,000 of its Camrys, Siennas, and Highlanders due to the faulty vacuum assembly in their breaking mechanism, a number of the cars were already running on our roads in Ghana, cars which were probably never recalled. And that may actually have played a role in the record high of 20,444 accidents on our roads in that period. So the errors of such a giant multinational company contribute to cumulative deaths in my local context, affecting the texture, literally, of the social and cultural landscape. My participation in this is to critique these neoliberal lapses and invite the wreckage, via image-become-objects, into my work.

C& Why do you think “identity” is a recurring topic with artists from Africa and the Diaspora across generations?

KH I don’t necessarily think anyone enters their studios and says to themselves, “I’m going to produce work about identity.” No. And sometimes it is simply those reading the work who wish to decipher the “identity”

of the artist. I am wondering if anyone ever considers that this very notion of “identity” is also at play with Koons or Hirst, with all the furore that the latter’s Venice Biennale work sparked. I tend to believe the question points to the overburdened subject every artist from the Global South has had to grapple with in the last thirty years, if not more. It is as if all artists that fall within your above-named category must define and defend their artistic interventions based on a certain rootedness.

With the benefit of hindsight, we see that by the multicultural turn of the late 1980s and 1990s, artists in the so-called African Diaspora were asserting their equality partly by routing their interventions via the same identity-DNA narrative that “inventive” curatorial mishaps had engineered. Those on the African continent also erroneously believed they had to refer their subject matter to some “originary” notions in order to participate in the “global” conversation. So we are far from a differentiated discourse of identity.

C& What could be done about the fact that many curators still crave the “authentic” from artists in Africa and the Diaspora?

KH Having studied at the Department of Painting and Sculpture in Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, my practice is premised on starting with the void. Like many of my colleagues, I don’t privilege any particular medium, form, or material, nor one singular genre. All the histories are tested so that maybe we will be able to invent practices for futures ahead of us.



above and below Kelvin Haizel, *things and nothings*, 2017.
Installation view at the 11th Bamako Biennial. Courtesy the artist

