

## Artist conversation

### *Festina lente:<sup>\*</sup> A Conversation on Speed and Slowness in the Photographer's Environment*

This is an edited and supplemented version of a conversation between Koffi and Tsapayi at the annual Visual History and Theory International Workshop – *Power: Remaking Selves, Archives, Environments*, held at the CHR's Iyatsiba Lab, Woodstock, Cape Town on July 27-28, 2023.

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<sup>\*</sup> Latin, *make haste slowly* – an adage that advises work be done with the proper balance of urgency and carefulness.

**Rory Tsapayi** I see on your workshop programme that you've crossed something out. You've replaced the word 'artist' next to your name with something else, what's that?

**Ange-Frédéric Koffi** *Plasticien*.

**RT** What's a *plasticien*?

**AFK** It's a term that's been around since at least the mid-nineteenth century, around 1860 or so. People were using it to designate 'artists'. But in the middle of the twentieth century, after the second world war, people started to use a lot of plastics and *plasticien* came to mean people who had a lot of knowledge about these materials and their processing.<sup>1</sup> If you want to make a bottle or a glass or a chair, it's not the same plastic, not the same techniques. Step by step, the word began to be used for artists working with 'mixed media' but specifically those who express a close knowledge of materiality. It's why I prefer to be defined as a *plasticien* because I have studied art *and* design, and a central focus of my practice is the materials I work with. Each time I make something, I am trying to find a good way to express what I want to say, to find a kind of good material for the work. So I'm not just linked with photography, not just linked with paper, for example.

**RT** You're moving between different mediums, leveraging materialities. I couldn't see it in person but your exhibition at Galerie Cécile Fakhoury in Abidjan is a great example of this plasticity in action. Would you like to share a little bit about that?

**AFK** This was an exhibition I did in Ivory Coast in January called *Territoire des perceptions, Sérénade des formes*.<sup>2</sup> A lot was going on. It was the end of two years of research for my master's degree which was about the role of museums in Africa, the places in Africa where contemporary art is showing, whether private or public, and also the place of commercial galleries.<sup>3</sup> The show was the end of a journey and a long discussion I had been having between art and design. I was always in tension between making objects and making pictures. When I was in design school, I was making pictures and sculptures and people didn't understand at all. And when I was in art school, I was making furniture and people were screaming. This exhibition really helped me to show how these two hats of a producer can work together.

**RT** There are two striking moments in the show that suggest you are wearing more than two hats. First, there's your shiny and well-travelled suitcase containing African masks wrapped in tissue paper, and then a trio of orange shipping crates on the roof

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<sup>1</sup> *Plasticien/ne* – definition and history via Centre Nationale de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales.

<sup>2</sup> Ange-Frédéric Koffi, *Territoire des perceptions, Sérénade des formes*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, 26 January-31 March, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ange-Frédéric Koffi, *Territoire des perceptions, Sérénade des formes*, MA thesis, European Art Ensemble, ECAL/Ecole cantonale d'art de Lausanne, 2021.



Ange-Frédéric Koffi, *Territoire des perceptions, Sérénade des formes*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury - Abidjan, 26 January – 31 March 2023 © Ange-Frédéric Koffi. Photo © Galerie Cécile Fakhoury / Issam Zejly.

above the gallery entrance. The behind-the-scenes world of art logistics comes to centre stage.

**AFK** There's also the mise-en-scène of a silk square I made in a shipping crate.

**RT** Of course.

**AFK** Something that I question constantly is how exhibitions are made and how they are moving, all the things involved behind the final product. I had the wonderful chance to be at Zeitz MOCAA for a year in 2022 and worked on several exhibitions and saw by myself how it *costs*.<sup>4</sup> When you produce something, when you move a

<sup>4</sup> Zeitz MOCAA exhibitions included *Indigo Waves & Other Stories: Re-navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora*, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Natasha Ginwala, 30 June, 2022–19 February, 2023; and *When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting*, curated by Koyo Kouoh and Tandazani Dhlakama, 20 November, 2022–23 September, 2023.

picture or a sculpture, when you put something in storage or destroy an exhibition copy, there is an environmental cost. So much single-use material like tissue paper and foam and bubble plastic and latex gloves, and of course the international shipping, and the paint and ... yeah. All these questions of production, packaging, storage, and transport are an integral part of my thinking and working process. I wish to make this aspect of my research visible.

RT These are all really important questions, but maybe before we dive off the deep end, I can cut in and contextualise what inspired this conversation.

Last month I had the pleasure of attending a conference on *Photography in its Environment* at the Photographic History Research Centre in Leicester.<sup>5</sup> It wasn't photography *and* the environment, but photography *in* its environment. So, it was not so much about the relationship of the photographic image to the planet, but more about photographic technologies and materials and their impacts on the planet. This is more aligned with plasticien's perspective, I guess. My big takeaway was that: historically and contemporarily, photography is terrible for the environment. The medium has existed largely through industries that extract metals and minerals, exploit labour and land, decimate forests, and spill toxic chemicals with abandon. The presenters were especially damning of industry giants like Kodak who emerged as ... enemies of the planet.<sup>6</sup> But something that was far less resolved at the conference was what photographers are supposed to do about all this. There was some discussion around the 'concerned photographer'<sup>7</sup> and the type of practitioners who turned their gaze towards the planet and towards the destruction of the planet, some of whom we're familiar with in our own South African photohistorical context with figures like Santu Mofokeng<sup>8</sup> and David Goldblatt<sup>9</sup> or, internationally, contemporary art-documenters like Sim Chi Yin<sup>10</sup> and Nyani Quarmyne.<sup>11</sup>

So what I want to get into with you, Ange, is this question of action. What is a photographer's responsibility to the planet? To ask an awkwardly huge question: how responsible do you feel for the environmental harms of the photographic medium?

5 *Photography in its Environment*, Photographic History Research Centre, De Montfort University, Leicester, convened by Kelley Wilder, Gil Pasternak, Mark Kamusovic, and Beatriz Pichel, 12–13 June, 2023.

6 K. Coleman and D. James (eds), *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction* (New York: Verso Books, 2021).

7 *The Concerned Photographer*, curated by Cornell Capa, The Photographer's Gallery, London, 13 January–13 February, 1971. Presented at the PHRC by Barbora Kundračková.

8 Santu Mofokeng (1956–2022, b. Soweto, South Africa). See: Patricia Hayes, 'Poisoned Landscapes' in *Chasing Shadows: Santu Mofokeng – Thirty Years of Photographic Essays* (London: Prestel, 2011).

9 David Goldblatt (1930–2018, b. Randfontein, South Africa). See: *Asbestos*, series of photographs, 1999–2002. Exhibited at Michael Stevenson Contemporary, Cape Town, 1–25 October, 2003. See also: S. Williamson, 'David Goldblatt: Intersections; Asbestos; Particulars' (2003) available via South African History Online.

10 Sim Chi Yin (b. 1978, Singapore). See: *Shifting Sands*, featured in *Indigo Waves & Other Stories: Re-navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora*, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Natasha Ginwala at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 6 April–13 August, 2023. Sim's documentary project investigates the global depletion of sand, an essential material for ever increasing urbanisation and land 'reclamation'; she focuses primarily on Asia, especially her home country of Singapore, the world's largest importer of sand per capita. ([chiyinsim.com/shifting-sands](http://chiyinsim.com/shifting-sands))

11 Nyani Quarmyne (b. 1973, India). See: Ian Baucom, 'Of Forces and Forcings,' *History 4°: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). Baucom discusses Nyani Quarmyne's photographic series *We Were Once Three Miles from the Sea*. From 2010–2011, the Ghanaian-Filipino photographer recorded villagers' livelihoods affected by a rise in the sea level near the mouth of the Volta River.

**AFK** I grew up with my parents working in sustainable development, so this is something I've been raised into. Something really connected to my life and how I live each day. It's not something I just discovered one day. You're making me think about an exhibition I saw in 2020 – *Le supermarché des images*.<sup>12</sup> It was happening in Paris, at the Jeu de Paume, and what I really liked was that the curator's ultimate goal was to make sure that the viewer is aware of what's happening when you take a picture.<sup>13</sup>

The exhibition was divided into several chapters – stocks, raw materials, work, values, exchange – all these processes behind taking a picture that we are never in a capacity to see. They say that three billion pictures were exchanged each day in 2015, and this exhibition is about the consequences of that excess.<sup>14</sup> What I really like in this exhibition, and what I'm also trying to do in my work is to make sure that the viewer is aware of what they're doing. When I produce something, I know what it does. And after that, everyone can take their own responsibility.

**RT** It's quite easy to point to the environmental impacts of analogue media because there are very clear examples of material accumulation and waste. But I think one of the master strokes of the *supermarché* is that it draws attention to the more obscure and dislocated but equally hazardous excesses of digital media as well. You have a funny relationship with the digital, right?

**AFK** I have a very difficult relationship with computers. I started photography by learning analogue and all the processes involved with it. The temporality of it is something I really like.

From 2015 to 2020 my photographic practice was based in West Africa. Meanwhile, I was studying in Europe. These geographical spaces were important because they defined how I worked.

Photographically, I decided to work between Senegal, Niger, Mali and my home country of Côte d'Ivoire. I was trying to capture something related to the road within this big territory. There, in Francophone West Africa, we have a different connection to that space, everything is happening on the road. Even though I was moving, it was very important to take time to be sure, to be right or accurate, in my own temporality in this landscape.

In Europe (mainly France and Switzerland) and through design and sculpture, I had directed my practice and my thoughts towards another territory, that of the home. To think about the domestic is to cross a wide and poetic history of time and space. As the psychologist and architect Amos Rapoport says, 'What ultimately decides the shape of a dwelling and shapes spaces and their relationships is a people's

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<sup>12</sup> *Le supermarché des images*, curated by Peter Szendy, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 11 February-16 March, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Exposition '*Le supermarché des images*' | Interview du commissaire Peter Szendy, Jeu de Paume YouTube channel, 10 March, 2020. '*Prendre conscience de ce que l'on fait, non seulement quand on prend une image, quand on fait une photo, mais aussi quand on la met en circulation, quand on en reçoit, quand on les stocke, etc.*' Koffi's translation: 'Becoming aware of what we do, not only when we take an image, when we take a photo, but also when we put them into circulation, when we receive them, when we store them, etc.'

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

vision of the ideal life.’<sup>15</sup> So I set about thinking about and producing objects or sculptures that would resonate with the concept of the home.

When I was learning photography, I had friends training for and working in the fashion industry. For me, it was very creepy to work like that. When you take a picture, you have a screen next to you to be sure that everything is good. Straight away you can just check. I didn’t want to do that.

**RT** That’s one of the key differences between analogue and digital, right? And the fashion shoot is a great example because it’s —

**AFK** – efficient.

**RT** Yes, because it’s instantaneous. There is almost no time ‘lost’ between the making and the seeing of the image. Analogue photography slows that down already, but you take it even further, don’t you? You slow down even more.

**AFK** Yeah. Basically, when I take a picture, I wait between two and five years before developing the film. It really helps me to move on. This notion of *image latente* is important for me because it helps me to continue and leave the picture in that certain place where things can happen.<sup>16</sup> I like this. It gives me some liberty to continue to produce and also sometimes, enough space to be happy to go back and have another relationship with the picture when the time comes. It’s not just a mindless consumer-producer relationship.

Something happens quite quickly when you start to work with galleries, when you start to have friends and colleagues in that circuit. Everyone asks you: *what is your next project? What is the next thing? Where’s the next picture?* It’s a kind of emergency of production, a kind of emergency of exhibition where I need to say *no. No, I’m not going to show more pictures, I’m not going to produce more.* And it’s not like I’m not taking pictures, and I do other things: writing, design, curation, I’m working. But this emergency to show and to produce new work all the time for fairs, bienales, exhibitions is a lot. Each Thursday a new event is happening, a new exhibition is opening, and you ‘need’ to be in this dynamic and it’s not something I really want to be inside. I mean, it’s interesting to know what is happening, to be aware of that world, but I don’t want to be a participant.

**RT** And this emergency is a symptom of capitalism, right? The cult of novelty, the never-ending drive to accumulate and privatise that is typified by the contemporary art market.<sup>17</sup> I have come to know a lot more of this world through you, and

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15 A. Rapoport, *Pour une anthropologie de la maison* (Paris: Dunod, 1972), 65. Koffi’s translation from ‘*Ce qui décide finalement de la forme d’une habitation et modèle les espaces et leur relation, c’est la vision qu’un peuple a de la vie idéale.*’

16 A still invisible image produced on or in a sensitive surface by the action of light rays received through a lens and revealed by development. Further processing is necessary to make the image visible. See also: F. Vallos and A. Pétrel, *Essai sur l’image latente / PVL* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2011).

17 Z. Muhammad, ‘The Rise of Creative Industry Group Incorporated,’ The White Pube (<https://thewhitepube.co.uk/texts/2024/creating-incorporated/>), 7 April 2024.



the jetset lifestyle that accompanies it. You take a lot of flights, does this feel like a contradiction?

**AFK** The contradiction here is quite interesting because it's caused by me wearing these different hats as an artist and a curator. As a curator I have this mandatory job to move all the time. To understand what is happening in the world, to see practices, I need to travel to exhibitions, make studio visits. It somehow helps me to engage the subject of my critique – the neverending dynamic of the biennales and the fairs, for example. As a curator, you can work on three exhibitions in three different places in a year; as an artist you can't make three bodies of work in a year all over the place, at least I can't.

Meanwhile, I'm still conscious about the environment and I have a few strategies to make my movements somewhat responsible.

**RT** Like offsetting your emissions?

**AFK** Yes, but that's a very occidental way of making people feel guilty. I'm a bit annoyed by that, I find it a bit capitalistic, or neocolonial, for these airlines of the global north to ask me to compensate when nobody has asked them to do the same, and they put us in this problem in the first place. Likewise, I have bought land to make sure it will not be destroyed, to protect some of its capacity to be 'green'. I take buses and trains when I can, when travelling here to photograph in South Africa for example, I was recently on a bus to Johannesburg via Upington. I plan to do the same to go to Namibia. But it's not really solving the bigger problem. We can't stop everything, but we can try to reduce, to be smarter about things, to think differently.

So, my resistance, as a plasticien at least, is to take my time. And people are really bothered when I show the same pictures three times. But each time it's a new chapter, a new proposal for a new space. It's like a novel, I may use the same characters, but the situations change. It's your job to go and read it.

**RT** You mentioned earlier how, through your exhibitions, you also want people to be aware of the consequences of their looking and so to look at things slowly, read them slowly. To come back to the Abidjan show, can you talk a little bit about how this worked in practice?

**AFK** What happened was that people would come inside, they would understand something ... or not, and then they would leave. Then they'd come back again because they could see that *something* was happening. If that makes sense?

I show my photographs mostly in constellations because it reflects how I took the pictures. There are these various points scattered in a very big landscape. The order of seeing is quite open, there's no sequence pushing the mind, so you need to come back again to see. What I try to do most of the time is touch people, and when I decided to make this exhibition at Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, a luxurious and photogenic white cube frequented by young Abidjanais in search of beauty, it's because I knew it was



Ange-Frédéric Koffi, *Sira ban yôrô*, 2017. © Ange-Frédéric Koffi, ADAGP.



the best place to access people, especially young people. Visitors were sensitive to the tension between pictures, carpets, and screens; they were moving around and making their own links. These were pictures that I took in their landscape, our landscape, and they had a distinct capacity to understand them.

I did get feedback that people needed to slow down to really get what was happening. I take quite evident pictures, nothing crazy, but because I slow down and focus my lens on very specific elements, the viewer has a more subjective recognition, thinking and remembering their own landscape and becoming more aware of what's happening around them.

This slowing down also happens to the viewer because the exhibition is not easy to capture. To take the best photo in the exhibition, they slow down their movements, finding the best angle, the best light, the best reflection of themselves in the space.

**RT** What do you mean when you say your pictures are quite self-evident? I think there's a lot of ambiguity, a lot of ambivalence that shows up in your work.

**AFK** I don't know if I can say anything about that. It's difficult to ask me to talk about my own pictures. When the pictures are stuck, I don't want to see them anymore. Maybe you can talk about that ...

**RT** This picture, for example, of a striped barrier blocking off a road that, if it continued, would improbably extend out into a lake. It's uncanny, framed with idyllic trees and carrying the gaze to a distant hilly horizon, a landscape interrupted by the concrete geometry of development. And it's ambiguous because you are not quite sure if



Ange-Frédéric Koffi, Market, 2017. © Ange-Frédéric Koffi, ADAGP.

it's a record of progress or failure.<sup>18</sup>

**AFK** Or both. I try to create a kind of tension between the landscape and human impact.<sup>19</sup>

**RT** This shows up a lot in your work, sometimes quietly. I might be trying to force a reading here – no doubt influenced by the zeitgeist for ecological discourse in the arts and humanities (ironically a novelty of its own) – but I want to locate your photography within the Anthropocene, or relate it to climate crisis – I see you shaking your head.

**AFK** My subject is people and how they struggle in their landscape. How they exchange, move, grow up ... all the tension happening with and within that landscape. I can tell you about these pictures, for example, we are inside the city, at the market. And the more I was in the space, the more crowded it got, it became darker and darker. You see that here.

**RT** It's great, there's a direct causality between light, what we could call the language of the camera, and the activity of human beings in space. It's a very responsive type of photography.

**AFK** The thing that interests me is how people are moving in their landscape.

**RT** And this interest puts you into constellation with a number of other Ivorian photographers and artists, right? Could you share some of your influences in this regard?

**AFK** Yeah, I have people behind me, before me, alongside me. We have some pictures here. First is Joana Choumali who works with embroidery, stitching into photographic prints to reflect on the history of the Ivorian landscape and to try and mend some of its traumas.<sup>20</sup> Or, further back, we have Paul Kodjo, the 'father of Ivorian photography' who recorded the post-independence development of Abidjan and the youth culture of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>21</sup> And then there's Francois-Xavier Gbré who uses his camera to think about architecture and time, ruminating on ruin and decay.<sup>22</sup> All of them influence me in certain ways.

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<sup>18</sup> *Sira ban yôró*, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Over a number of years, Koffi pilgrimed to this site and photographed the development to document the evolution of life at the end of the road.

<sup>20</sup> Joanna Choumali (b. 1984, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire). Choumali's projects have reflected on issues such as repeated and spectacular flooding in the rainy season, rampant dumping of toxic industrial and e-waste by European companies, and the civil wars of 2002-2007, 2010-2011.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Kodjo (1939 - 2021, b. Banco Forest, Côte d'Ivoire). See: *Je reste photographe*, Ananias Léki Dago (dir.), TSK Studios, 2022. 67 mins. See also: Tiana Reid, "The Quest to Protect the Father of Ivorian Photography," *Aperture* (<https://aperture.org/editorial/the-quest-to-protect-the-father-of-ivorian-photography/>) 7 June 2020. Kodjo's work was almost lost to the literal 'dustbin of history', when it was fortunately rescued by Léki Dago, a photographer who has been restoring, researching, archiving, and promoting Kodjo's images since 2002.

<sup>22</sup> François-Xavier Gbré (b. 1978, Lille, France). Gbré photographs the traces of history. Per his bio (via [francoisxaviergbre.com/infos/](http://francoisxaviergbre.com/infos/)), 'his work summons the language of architecture as a witness to memory and social change. From colonial remains to landscapes redefined by current events, he explores territories and revisits History.'



Joana Choumali, *This is How it Feels to Be Around You*. Series *Albahian*, 2023. © Joana Choumali.

**RT** I'd like to linger on Joana Choumali for a moment because, in contrast to the others, there is a pronounced physicality to her approach.

**AFK** And a strong temporality too. It's important that embroidery is done by hand, it's a slow process, again.



François-Xavier Gbré, *Cité Synacaci #2*, Riviera, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 2013. © François-Xavier Gbré, ADAGP.





Ange-Frédéric Koffi, *Le chant de la terre*, 2018. © Ange-Frédéric Koffi. Photo © Galerie Cécile Fakhoury / Issam Zejly.

**RT** One that disrupts the literal and metaphorical surface of the photographic image, it returns us to things. You have these fascinating screen prints that have a similar effect, can we look at those and talk about how you use materials to communicate these ideas about people and/in their landscapes?

**AFK** Well, this comes from three different references. Two books: John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*,<sup>23</sup> Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*,<sup>24</sup> and a composition: Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.<sup>25</sup> Each speaks about connections with land and how people and life are relating to it. I come from the north of Ivory Coast where there are handmade textiles, *les tissus tissé de Korhogo*. These are produced in panels and then stitched together. And I had this picture of handmade clay bricks drying in Sélingué, southwestern Mali, in 2017. It was important to share the materiality of the subject inside the medium somehow, so I picked this, it both represents and consists of the work of craftsmen, hopefully making some kind of equivalency or relation between practices and forms.

**RT** So we have this natural material of clay that's been reworked by hand and tools into bricks. And the same thing is happening with the cotton. Your beloved Flusser calls this "informing."<sup>26</sup> And of course there is the process of transformation from the

23 J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939).

24 F. Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961).

25 G. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*), composed 1908; published 1912.

26 V. Flusser, 'The Apparatus', *Towards a History of Photography*, translated by Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 23.

film negative to the silk-screened image.

**AFK** There's this repetition, an accumulation of layers, but it all ends up with just one print! What does that mean for the market?

**RT** You take similar transformative consideration with your curatorial work. I've heard you describe this part of your practice as using other artists' work as 'raw material' for your own storytelling? Yesterday, we were discussing pictures in the water, and I was reminded of an exhibition you curated last year in Switzerland.

**AFK** Yes, Noé Cotter. He had taken these pictures in the Neuchâtel Lake and in the underwater caves of the Areuse Gorges. The museum wanted to do the exhibition inside and I was like, *It doesn't make sense. You have this wonderful garden by the lake*



Noé Cotter, *Errance dans les meanders du temps*, Laténium – Parc et musée d'archéologie de Neuchâtel, 9 April 2022–20 April 2023. Photo © Noé Cotter.



*that people use all the time. Let's just put the work outside.* Logistically, it was a bit difficult, but it made sense for the work.<sup>27</sup>

**RT** I see that gesture as a foundation of your practice, this keen spatial and social sensitivity. You know, in the Visual History and Theory course we took last year, in which water was a recurring topic, there was an ongoing conversation around 'decentring the human' to better know the planet and its innumerable forms of life.<sup>28</sup> But that doesn't seem to be the type of project that you're interested in. I'm starting to see your work as refusing to endorse a divide between nature and culture. You are more interested in nuance, or continuities, a melding of temporalities and subject positions.

**AFK** Decentring the human. I don't know. I'm not curating for ants. I'm trying to make work for my people. I don't know how to answer this question, really. How do you see it?

**RT** Well, when we first started having this conversation, I was really interested in plotting your position and your practice within this eco-anthro matrix, with the extent of your environmental responsibility as a reference. But I'm projecting my own anxieties. I'm grappling with ideas of individual agency amid our worsening climate crisis and the impulse to point a finger in blame. It's naïve and inefficient to look at any single person's consumption habits in the scattered struggle for a liveable planet. We have to target powerful structures of 'Fossil Empire' and consider scales of impact as we make our indictments.<sup>29</sup> But that finger-pointing impulse persists, and if I could pull us a little off course here, I want to mention an exhibition that we saw last month at White Cube gallery in London.

**AFK** Anselm Kiefer. Summer blockbuster.<sup>30</sup>

**RT** It was incredible in terms of scale and ambition. The whole high-ceilinged megagallery was full of stuff, room after overflowing room of material. This one, for example, was sort of covered on all four sides with these massive oil paintings. And you could smell the oil paint, still thick in the air and there was this heavy slab of concrete in the middle with these boulderish metallic books, and, yeah, in this room. Exactly. There was this mound of detritus, this pile of rubble.

**AFK** And this isn't even the most crazy room.

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27 Noé Cotter (b. 1993, Switzerland) *Errances dans les méandres du temps*, curated by Ange-Frédéric Koffi at Laténium – parc et musée d'archéologie, Neuchâtel, 9 April, 2022-20 April, 2023.

28 UWC HIS 735: Visual History - Photography and the Anthropocene, theoretical component convened by Patricia Hayes with practical photography taught by Eric Miller; February-May, 2022.

29 A. Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso Books, 2016). See also: Malm, "The Destruction of Palestine is the Destruction of the Earth," *Verso Books* ([https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/the-destruction-of-palestine-is-the-destruction-of-the-earth?srltid=AfmBOor1\\_sPQOKbEem8dOdqxQAzcUJAVkZ6JCupmQ-HSPUSon\\_xi8Mfa](https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/the-destruction-of-palestine-is-the-destruction-of-the-earth?srltid=AfmBOor1_sPQOKbEem8dOdqxQAzcUJAVkZ6JCupmQ-HSPUSon_xi8Mfa)), 8 April 2024.

30 Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945, Donaueschingen, Germany) Anselm Kiefer, *Finnegan's Wake*, White Cube, Bermondsey, London. 7 June - 20 August, 2023.

**RT** That's true. These photographs don't even show the full extent of the exhibition. But the thing that I was really feeling that day and what I haven't quite shaken is that it felt somehow really *distasteful* to produce at that volume.

If you could go back to those oil paintings, actually, I think that one really struck me because, you know, I oftentimes think about practitioners in the African context, maybe specifically in the Zimbabwean context, where painting materials are relatively scarce and there is a loose movement of practitioners who literally work with waste, upcycling and recycling all kinds of scrap material. And then you have Kiefer who's based in ...



Anselm Kiefer, 'Finnegans Wake', White Cube Bermondsey, 7 June–20 August 2023. © Anselm Kiefer. Photo © White Cube/Theo Christelis.

**AFK** The south of France. He has his own village. He bought an incredible piece of land and built his own home and studio there.<sup>31</sup> But you are talking about two different things, two different eras and geographies. Anselm Kiefer was born in 1945, he didn't have *at all* the same notion of ecology or materiality. And his practice has also shifted over time because he was working with polluting elements. Now he's not even able to use all the same materials he once did, for his own health and for the health of his assistants and the land around him. He's not unaffected.

And then you're talking about artists who live in Africa, it's the same notion that you create with what happens around you. If we think about Georges Adéagbo, for example, he made this accumulation of objects around him.<sup>32</sup> Every day, in Cotonou, where he lives, Adéagbo gathers documents and products, which he arranges and meticulously combines directly on the sandy soil of his garden. I often talk of 'compulsive collecting'.<sup>33</sup> But I don't think your comparison is fair.

**RT** That's my thing, I'm trying to figure out how fair it is to criticise any given artist for the ways that they produce. One of the Zimbabwean artists who I'm really

31 M. Prodder, 'Inside Anselm Kiefer's astonishing 200-acre art studio,' *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/sep/12/anselm-kiefer-royal-academy-retrospective-german-painter-sculptor>), 12 September, 2014.

32 George Adéagbo (b. 1942, Cotonou, Benin). See: *Georges Adéagbo - conversations avec Muriel Bloch* (Paris: Éditions au figuré - Le Quartier, 1998).

33 C. Laubard, *Ma personne de Georges n'est pas artiste»: Georges Adéagbo, de la collecte compulsive aux cimaises de l'art contemporain, (from compulsive collecting to the pinnacle of contemporary art)*, (Nantes: Presses universitaires Paris Ouest, 2017): 2.

thinking about in this vein is Moffat Takadiwa, who had a profound solo exhibition at the National Gallery in Harare.<sup>34</sup> He uses exclusively recycled materials and it's funny that you mentioned that Kiefer has his own village because Moffat does too, the Mbare Art Space, the centre of a microeconomy where he's paying people to collect specific items from the streets and landfills, things like computer keyboards and toothbrushes that he then uses to make his intricate and often monumental sculptures and textiles.<sup>35</sup> And I'm not trying to draw a value judgement between these two practices, that's a bit too simplistic. But I have to acknowledge my distaste for excess and an appetite for sustainable practices.



Moffat Takadiwa, *Vestiges of Colonialism*, curated by Fadza Muchemwa, 2023. Photo © National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare / Lifang Zhang.

**AFK** This is also excess. I mean, he's creating with what's happening around him, an excess of rubbish. And, come on, the recycling African artist is a cliché at this point. This recycling could be a very militant gesture, but I don't know, I'm struggling with that. I always say you need to be aware, not that you need to stop. You need to be responsible.

**RKT** And, to be fair, these works are then being shipped around the world to be exhibited, so maybe it's net neutral ...

**AFK** The purpose of the designer, and sometimes the artist, is to know what kind of material you can use, what kind of technique, to be aware of what's happening to be sure of the accuracy and efficiency of your gesture whether it's mass production or an experiment. My work is to be sure. I source all my materials properly and try to be accurate with the knowledge that I have about them. I take *this* mirror, I take *this* paper, I print *these things*.

To come back to photography, I can share the work of Yann Gross for example. He's a Swiss photographer who was in the Amazon jungle, trying to find a trace of an-

34 Moffat Takadiwa (b. 1993, Karoi, Zimbabwe) See: *Moffat Takadiwa: Vestiges of Colonialism*, curated by Fadza Muchemwa at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare, 16 March-30 June, 2023.

35 L. Zhang, 'Moffat Takadiwa's landmark exhibition uses found materials to comment on Zimbabwe's colonial hangover', *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/moffat-takadiwas-landmark-exhibition-uses-found-materials-to-comment-on-zimbabwes-colonial-hangover-203073>), 6 April, 2023.

other Swiss explorer-photographer from over a hundred years before. And he wanted to develop his pictures with what he had there in the jungle, using plant chemistry.<sup>36</sup>

**RT** Reminds me of Alice Cazenave's *Sustainable Darkroom* project.<sup>37</sup> This was partially inspired by the experiments of John Herschel.<sup>38</sup> This type of plant-based photography.

**AFK** And I'm not *there*, I'm not a scientist or an engineer. Maybe it's a way to put the hot potato in someone else's hands but it's also a way for me to acknowledge my limits.

**RT** And I think that's exactly the thing that I've been trying to get at. What is the individual limit? What is the individual responsibility? One can't do it all, so you do what you can. Let's say in your work you draw attention. You rearticulate and slow things down. And at the same time, you're not going to compromise the quality of your objects by using toothbrushes.

**AFK** It would need to mean something in my work. For Moffat, there is a strong statement behind it, but I have nothing to say about that.

**RT** You once asked me if we can even imagine an art practice that doesn't have some type of environmental impact, some consequence for the planet. I don't think we want to imagine art without consequences.

**AFK** To give you a very open answer, I would like to quote Hubert Duprat's long-term work, *Tube de Trichoptère*, 1980-2015. Influenced by their environment, trichoptera larvae are an interesting example for your question. As larvae, these insects create a cocoon from the objects that surround them, such as dead leaves, gravel and sand, in order to protect themselves. Duprat's project involves placing his larvae in a tank full of gold flakes and precious stones. The cocoons created are totally dependent in some ways on the animals, and in other ways on Duprat's intervention. They become art objects, artificial and natural at the same time, but above all, they still fulfil their primary function: to protect the larvae.

And yet the questions of extracting the animals from their habitat and producing the gold flakes still remain...

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36 Y. Gross and A. Escandón, *Aya and Aya (Organic Part)* (Barcelona: Editorial RM, 2020). Escandón and Gross retraced the path of Charles Kroehle, a pioneering nineteenth-century photographer who supposedly disappeared in the Peruvian Amazon, 'an unreal immersion into the dense jungle vegetation, structured by shamanic experiences, and developed a process of organic photography'. According to the sociologist Joel Vacheron 'Aya is also the story of an experiential initiation with the plants, signs, and spirits that permeate the Amazonian jungle. We are not the only "we" and this project can be viewed as an anthropological approach to thinking of the human based on the signs and the forces that go beyond it ... Escandón and Gross offer us ways to imagine what photography might look like beyond the human, assuming that humans are always the products of non-human contexts.' ([http://yanngross.com/?page\\_id=640](http://yanngross.com/?page_id=640))

37 A. Cazenave, 'Legacies of Photographic Silver: Entangled Geologies, Histories and Lives'. Presented at PHRC Conference 2023. See also: [sustainabledarkroom.com](http://sustainabledarkroom.com), a collaborative project by Ed Carr, Alice Cazenave, and Hannah Fletcher.

38 Yasmin Gapper, 'Slow Ecologies: Sir John Herschel's vegetable photographs ca. 1841-1843 and the colonial environments of photography'. Presented at PHRC Conference 2023.