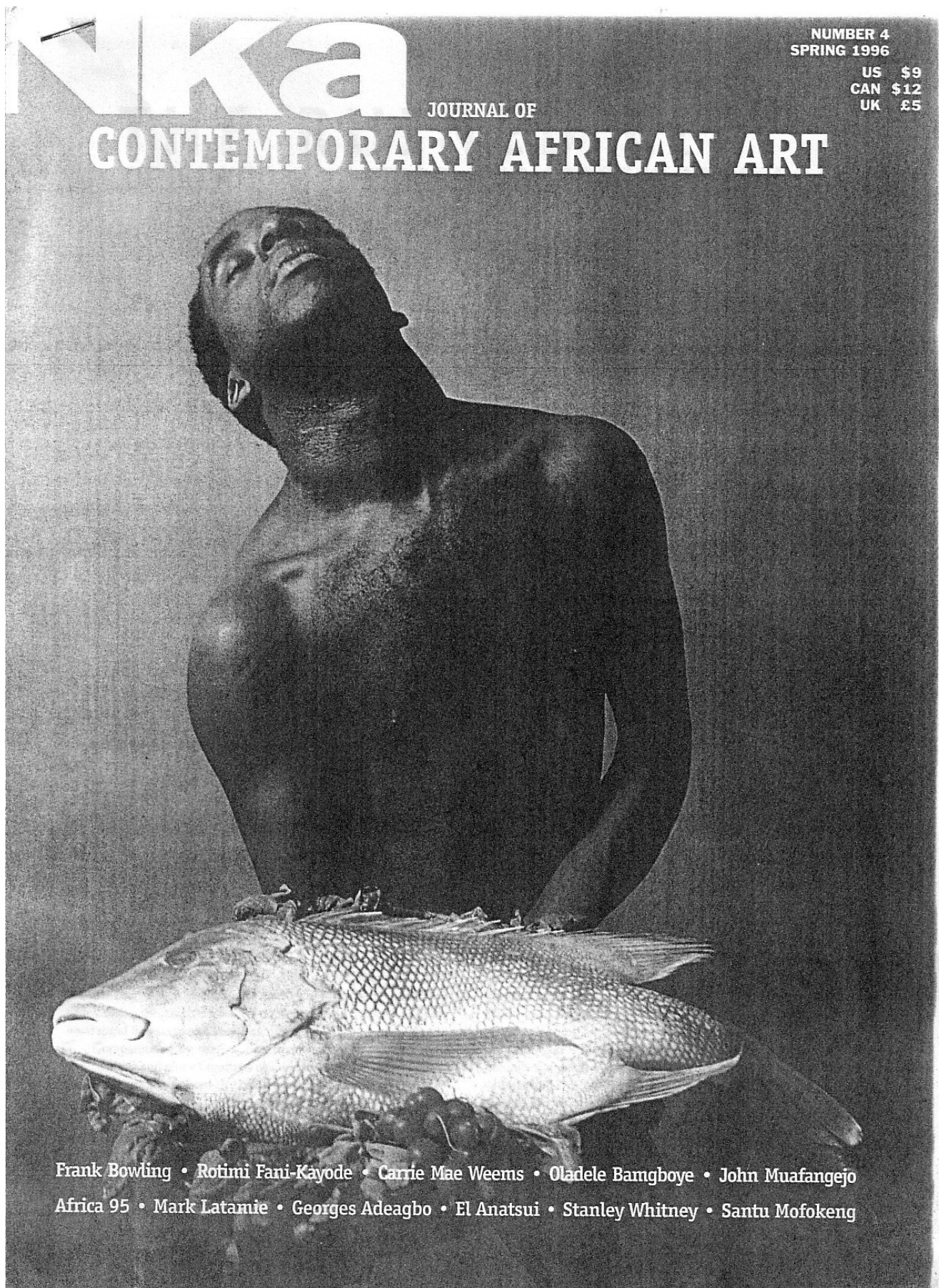


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# THE RUINED CITY: DESOLATION, RAPTURE, AND GEORGES ADEAGBO

Okwui Enwezor

And when, in the city in which I loved you  
Even my most excellent song goes unanswered...

Li-Young Lee, "The City in Which I Loved You"<sup>1</sup>

In New York, December is the cruellest month, "mixing memory and desire..."<sup>2</sup> Here, in the 4pm sunsets, spring's eternal recrudescence seems so far away. I mount the broken sidewalk that takes me down the vacant, bleak, unjoyful backstreets of New York's Lower Eastside. The sharp, salty wind, blistering in its measures of intensity and bone-chilling wintry frost has necessitated that my wool-corseted head stay buried beneath the heavy and uncomfortable pile of so much clothing. Falteringly, in the fading light, I trudge along, lone figure trawling a devastated landscape, sidestepping small eddies of putrid water and piles of uncollected garbage: acrid with modern waste and metropolitan over consumption. The buildings are bulks of massed shadows. Their broken windows and gutted interiors (firebombed for profit or warmth?) make me think of the pictures I have seen of Beirut. But what Beirut once represented to many along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, as the lone archipelago of European "refinement and taste," and desire in the peculiar disjunction of the Middle East, seems so completely absent in the Lower Eastside's Third World ambience; a living paradox in the towering edifice of high capitalism. Up in Harlem the sliding scale of life expectancy cracks the odometer backwards, in a downward spiral that surpasses even Calcutta's.

Companioned by these ghosts that weave themselves around the narrative and glut of modern obsolescence, in this "storied, but-tressed, scavenged, policed city I call home, in which I am a guest..."<sup>3</sup> I can't help thinking of Georges Adeagbo. Adeagbo makes artworks, or as it were, masterful installations that accrue from the devastation and sadness evident in the twin histories of cities like Beirut and New York. Cities plunged into decay and confusion, pallid with hunger

and death, terror and tragedy. For now I want to speak of nothing else, not even the weather, but to think only of the frontiers into which Adeagbo's work leads me.

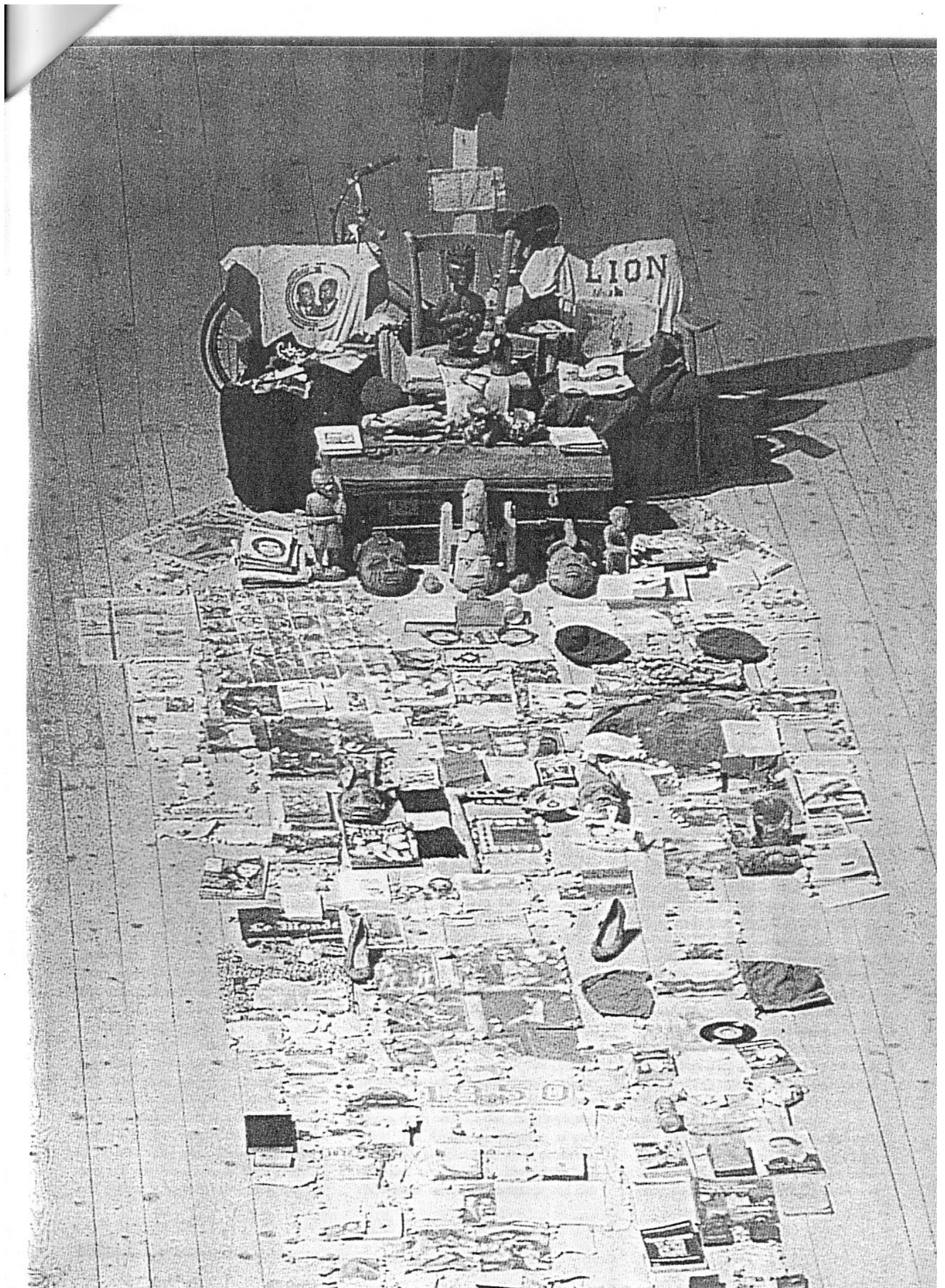
Out there, where the frontiers end, roads are erased. Where silence begins. I go forward slowly and I people the night with stars, with speech, with the breathing of distant water waiting for me where the dawn appears.

Octavio Paz "Prologue"<sup>4</sup>

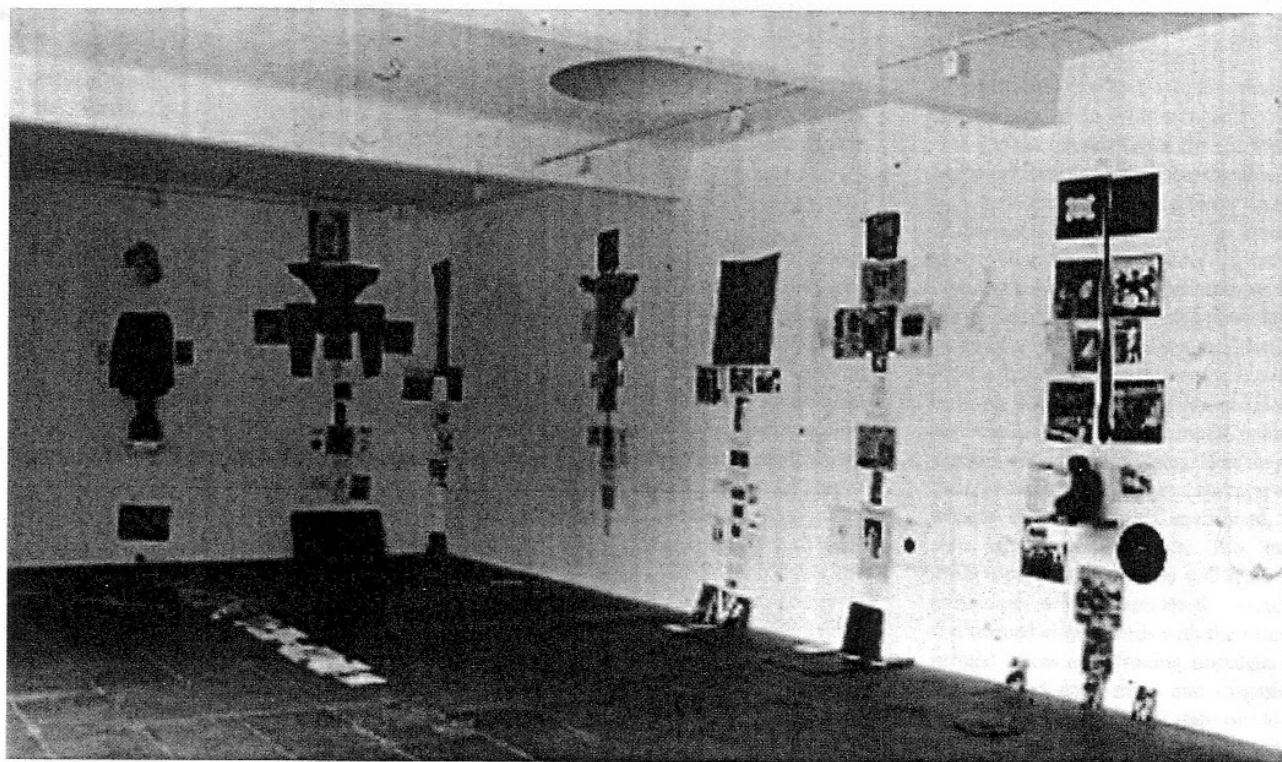
Georges Adeagbo makes stranger music than this. And inasmuch as I am enthralled by Paz's music, it is to Adeagbo that I listen to tonight. To his scatological compositions, his incomprehensible *jouissance* in the midst of the fin-de-siècle's disconsolate mood. My surprisingly keen senses, sharpened by this insistent music playing in my inner ear, cannot help rousing the dust of memory, specifically the memory of my last encounter with his installation: *Art and Evolution* (1995), in London's Serpentine Gallery last October. The controlled chaos Adeagbo assembled here thoroughly reveals both an impudent iconoclasm, an idiosyncratic and quirky brilliance. Made out of a dizzying assortment of carefully chosen, sorted and arranged detritus gathered from urban environments, this epic commentary on waste and transcendence, mutation and ossification, stands in stark contradiction to the lush arcadian vista of Kensington Gardens that a viewer glimpses as she looks out through the gallery's glass-paned double doors. What ardour, this awkward, disjunctive, yet well-organized agglomeration, pitched to the cadence of a different kind of music which insists in feeding the scrawny fires of desire, a longing for a kind of artistic process free of cant.

Adeagbo is a forty-seven year old artist from Benin Republic. Initially trained as a lawyer in France, he started making these installations in 1973, two years after his return to Benin. For the past twenty two years he has, without interruption, kept up a daily ritual that takes him plunging into the streets of Cotonou in search of discarded objects, out of which he crafts artworks of such melancholic brilliance, poetry, magic, and tragic beauty. The pictures (I find that

Opposite page: *L'Archeologie*, 1994, installation, photo: T. Dalban.







*Art and Evolution*, 1995, installation (detail), courtesy Serpentine Gallery, London.

Adeagbo's work functions most effectively pictorially, than as assemblages) which he paints out of these iconical detritus illuminate his uncanny method through the narrative trope of left-overs, the leavings of the orgy of modernity, upon whose decimated corpulence we see the corporeal body laid bare; shocked and disembodied.

No place on earth could be more representative of this condition than present-day Africa. An Africa where the idea of progress has today become so perverted and is predicated on the perpetual "newness" of things. An Africa in which history is lived almost like a bad dream, then recycled and discarded according to the logic of what may be deemed a current style. In such a climate, it is not a surprise for work like Adeagbo's to be easily misunderstood. Or for it to be read as so much solipsistic nonsense, as postmodern schizophrenia, as the autistic ramblings of a mad man, a character delivered flesh and blood from any of Ayi Kwei Armah's existential novels. Read through this impulse, the dominant attitude towards such work is to ignore its internal logic and engage it as non-art. Or better yet, to say like some critics have recently insisted that Africans don't regard such work as art is an obviously patronizing dismissal, even though, bricolage, as both process and method is nothing new to contempo-

rary art.

This inevitably leads me to consider the contingent and the fluctuating patterns (like tributaries run wild in a riverbed) of Adeagbo's work; the ritual and daily dismantling, reassemblage, and reinvention of the same installation on street corners in Cotonou. This acute postmodernity bears the same aspects of and the impermanence of an African marketplace. The analogy (by no means a facile delectation) leads one through different sets of questions, but even more, to muse on the coding of what is today construed as postmodern, and how African cultural producers participate in its debates. For me Adeagbo's work anticipates these debates (which certain critical quarters undoubtedly will inveigh against as a misalliance) by means of its transcription, translation, and transformation of a cultural sphere into an aesthetic one. Thus the cultural space (the marketplace) represents a shifting, unfixed universe which the aesthetic space (Adeagbo's installations) encounters and renders allegorically.

Here, I stop to think of Balogun and Jankara Markets in Lagos, Ochanja Market in Onitsha, Ariaria Market in Aba. In those arenas, daily, occurs a vast changing installation. The African marketplace: as pure contingency, as a perpetual site of accumulation and consumption, dissipation and collocation, mercantile exchange and cul-

tural entropy is the same sensibility which Adeagbo's installations both suggest and replicate. One can for instance look at the heather-grey sweatshirt bearing the imprint of the Swiss multinational Nestlé and see it as a hybridized product logo or sign, as a kind of emblematic metonym of pop-culture which Africa participates in. One might equally use the opportunity the presence of the sweatshirt in *Art and Evolution* insinuates to meditate on the relationship between mineral wealth amongst many other natural resources and colonialism; the crisscrossing of objects of value and the disposable materials that are returned back to the "third world" as equal exchange. The aforementioned, particularly, lends keen insight on the nature of international multinational capital and exploitation. Or one may look at the covert reference to natural produce from Africa particularly cocoa, which arrive daily at Nestlé's plants at a pittance. All these in the end might not have anything to do with Adeagbo's interest in his choice of material, but it does offer an opportunity for multiple readings and interpretations which all "serious" art suggests to a wide variety of audiences or in this case to a critic.

As a figure, whose enormous influence I have no doubt will one day be recognized, it is not difficult to see how much his influence already permeates the practices of

certain young African artists. We see it in the funky sculptural assemblages of Romauld Hazoumé. Paris-based Bili Bidjocka cites him as a conceptual influence. Still, it is Adeagbo's rawness that sets him apart from the formal refinement of Hazoumé and Bidjocka's work.

Amongst other international artists, I can think of no contemporary artist with the possible exceptions of David Hammons, Joseph Beuys, Nari Ward, and Mo Edoga able to confront the dilemma of modernism's entanglement with structures of power and cultural capital, investiture in the unique object, playing with the ghosts of identity and of social sedimentation, with such acuity and vision. And fewer artists are able to change the way one thinks about art, as Adeagbo has for me. Seeing his work was a delight, even as it taxed certain preconceptions and prejudices I carry about the vexed relationship of the bricoleur to contemporary cultural production. I must confess the reason for my initial reticence is that Adeagbo's installations all too perversely refuse to declare their knowledge or function. But why should they? In fact they cannot. They are petrified objects, with this insistent latency deeply enjoined in an organic simulacrum. The installations move no further than the limited attention span of the audience's wandering gaze which Adeagbo assaults with his peculiar information overload, "the irony is their excess of reality."<sup>5</sup> This though, is a deceptive ploy, for what he is presenting us is not just a portrait of our beleaguered selves but a mirror into which we can peer to glimpse the sordidness of our existence, of our culture of regression, of "our world that has failed."<sup>6</sup>

**Translucidity, suspense, fragility, obsolescence: thus the insistence on writing, the insistence of the letter (fringed on the edges), of the mirror and the watch - these are the lost and distant signs of a transcendence that vanished into the quotidian**

Jean Baudrillard, "On Seduction"<sup>7</sup>

What really thrills about Adeagbo's kind of work is its continuous elaboration of the idea of art as a quest for self knowledge and fulfillment. Another thrill is the clarity of his painstakingly graded oddities, so exquisite like the passage of an Indian Raga, they shatter the silence of the gallery space as the organizing framework for certain forms of cultural knowledge. Since he makes his work out of what the world and other people have abandoned and rejected, the measure of his work's

rigour is not in the spectacle that it offers, but in that which it withdraws and refuses: the monstrous fallacy of an Eden. Hence, Adeagbo's work is about lost innocence. If there is an Eden, it seemed long ago overgrown, and now drowns in rubbish, with monstrosities that transport in their furious eddies the discarded dreams of our consumerist desires. Here: the dismembered limbs of a child's doll, there: a man's forlorn coat hanging on the wall, surrogate and host calling attention to the body's diminishment, its absence, its incommensurability. (Where has the body gone?). Then there are the newspaper and magazine stories chronicling the perpetual state of that body at rest (death?). These are images with which to set the world on fire. But no one lights the match. Adeagbo mediates these scenes of disaster (a miniaturist's vaunted haunt) through the word plays with which he marks, decorates, and desecrates each transient fragment torn from reality. His ciphers are like love poems sent out to a fallen world, and to us the soiled angels who must inhabit its ruined cities: desolate and enraptured. What heady hope!

This is the vital scene Adeagbo chose to reenact in the east gallery of the Serpentine in the group exhibition "Big City" as part of the festival Africa'95. To me, *Art and Evolution*, 1995, his contribution to this madness, is a world unto its own, an odd appendage that demands a more exacting interpretation separate and apart from the concerns of the convoluted pretensions of "Big City." Yet, unlike say the epic *L'Archeology*, 1994, or *Histoire de France*, 1992, this particular work seemed to me perhaps, the most contemplative and sedate of all of Adeagbo's creations. Where in the past his installations functioned along the logic of its propensity towards aggressivity in the streets, buttressed against the ordered world that surrounds it, here one senses something lost in the process of its translocation into the formal geometry of the modernist cube. But only to a certain degree is his energy attenuated. Instead, his ironic postmodernity, in a surprising reversal comports itself well in the gallery space. The installation works on viewers slowly. As one approaches, it begins to cast its spell through the exacting and overwhelming detail of the materials deployed across the expanse of the floor and walls, like a surging sea. This vastness finds its form not in the indeterminate sprawl of the carefully sorted "debris," but in the welter of connective tissues that make the work's strength manifest in its embrace of the paradoxical. The material objects suggest, along with their mysterious and opulent mise-en-scenes, a flooded acropolis

of memories, the sort Hassan 'Abdallah insisted "will ignite in bitter sugar."<sup>8</sup>

"What memory does the sea have of her lover?"<sup>9</sup> wrote Christopher Okigbo. This is the question one must insistently demand of this piece. What memories does it bear, if any? What knowledge does it confer? Needless to say, despite its declarative intent, the deeper meaning of Adeagbo's work is in its artful conundrum and renunciation. His objects leave not so much memories as they leave an index, a faint and pliant trace of each chosen object's prior cultural, political, economic and social meaning. Here they tell their own submerged stories. Like carapaced fetishes they are worlds envisioned, not seen, almost unknowable. Too many images, pictures, memories spill from this terrible pile; within them are the scratched and warped vinyl records with their tide of garbled voices and droning nostalgia, the faces printed on T-shirts and magazines, they seem shocked as they stare out to us, nailed on the cross of silence, they can't speak. Their commentaries circumscribe the boundaries of closure. The world of the frozen images (even as they fix us with their insincere smiles) is muteness like the doll's severed head or the kitsch masks and wood reliefs made for tourist consumption as "African art." They lead us to eternal dead ends. The rest, as Toni Morrison once wrote, is "just weather."<sup>10</sup> They float, inseparable from their intermingled histories and events - a vast archive of ambivalence and desire, stasis and entropy - as if from a dream. They tease and make wobbly the architecture of the mind. They beguile us. They abandon us, evoking as much as they repress.

Tomorrow, Georges Adeagbo will return to preside over this hoard in his tireless beginnings that have no end in sight.

#### Notes

1 Li-Young Lee, "The City in Which I love You", *The City in Which I Love You* (Brockport, New York: BOA Editions, Ltd, 1990) p. 51

2 See Li-Young Lee.

3 T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962, p. 29).

4 Octavio Paz, "Prologue", *Early Poems 1935-1955*, (New York: New Directions, 1973) p. 3.

5 Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (California: Stanford University Press, 1988) p. 155.

6 Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971).

7 See Baudrillard.

8 Hassan 'Abdallah, "I Remember Having Loved", in *Modern Arabic Poetry* Salma Khadra Jayyusi (editor) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) p. 113.

9 Christopher Okigbo, "Lament of the Drums III", *Labyrinths* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971).

10 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume and Alfred Knopf, 1987) p. 275.



