

## **Why Sculpture, Why Here**

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Co-organised by Tate Modern, Iniva and Henry Moore Institute

Participating artists: Subodh Gupta, Abel Barroso, Dilomprizulike (The Junkman from Africa), Huang Yong Ping, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Mamiko Otsubo, with a conclusion by Sarat Maharaj

### **Dilomprizulike (The Junkman from Africa)**

Good morning. Okay, it's night in America now, so good night too. I'm known as The Junkman from Africa and I accept that name, because I was formerly called a madman from Africa, so when I had to make a choice, I said okay, let me choose the junkman. But there is a joy in madness that only a madman knows, and 21 years ago, I chose to do fine art. I started drawing and moulding clay, using my immediate environment, making lizards and elephants. My uncle trained me, I mean, paid my fees. One day he asked me, what do you want to do? I said, I want to be an artist. He said, what, an artist? Look, my boy, you are very intelligent, you should either be a lawyer or an engineer. But if you want to be that kind of thing then stop thinking of training yourself. If it weren't for those who have been standing by me and believing in me, I would have proven my uncle right, but I thank those who have been behind me and Stephen Feeke for the hyper-tension that he had when the British Embassy was on duty for my visa, I thank the Henry Moore Institute, I thank the Tate, the Iniva. There are certain human beings who are my backbones, and they might not like me to mention their names, but I also thank institutions like the BBC and others.

Today I'm gonna show you some of the things I've been doing. I started making sculptures sand welding and carving and trying to prove to myself that I'm a good artist. Now I argue, when you have proven to yourself that you're a small champion, what do you do with it, and that takes me to another level where I'm not just doing sculptures, but making statements, and I see concepts like pots of soup. So what I do is get the ingredients and make some soup and throw the soup out and it's being tasted and everybody makes their comments, and again, I see the creation of works as vomit, when the stomach is rumbling and something is not right, and no matter where it is, even inside a limousine, you throw up.

I make sculptures, I do writings, make performance and make installations, but these are just words for me, they are all part of the same soup. When I place a concept

on a table to see the three-dimensional aspect of it, I discover that sculptures only, or performance only, or writing only cannot say what I want to say, so for every work or every concept or every rumbling, I try to look at other ways to put depth and some kind of clarity to it. At times something comes up; at times it just remains as raw as it is.

That was a concept I started with in 1993, when I first exhibited at the Goethe Institute in Lagos. Before then I had to make a choice, my life has been full of choices. I did a Master of Fine Arts for five years at the University of Benin. I was teaching as a graduate assistant and I didn't get the degree for five years, and the works I had prepared for each candidacy each year were first exhibited at the Goethe Institute. That was what took me out of Nigeria to some international kind of level, and I went on a journey in Germany as a scholar in the studios of some foundations.

In Nigeria, when you don't have money to talk to somebody on the mobile phone, you flash the person, which means you just call, and as it starts ringing, you cut off. The person will call you back and use his money, well, you know. So this is 'The Face of the City', which I exhibited at the Biennale last year.

On finishing my Master of Art in Scotland, at the University of Dundee, I returned to Nigeria in the year 2000 and started building a place I call 'The Junkyard', and this was supposed to be an art centre which I wanted to use to encourage young local artists who have so much creative energy, but at the same time so many frustrations, and there is no space for children and for young ones, for ambitious ones, because we have a lot of oil. 'The Junkyard' couldn't be finished, because I didn't have the kind of money I needed to finish it, and nobody wanted to support what is called a 'junkyard'. It took two years to register it, because the government refused to register that name. A junkyard is where you throw things out.

What I do in Nigeria mostly is to talk about the city, and that's my general concept now. I talk about the city as a pot of soup. In a debate we had in Barcelona, a young student was asking, what is the difference between a city in Africa and a city in Spain? And one of us said that a city is a city, and we had a hot argument about that, and that's how I became conscious of the issue. I tried to find out what ingredients make a soup you call a city different from the other.

I've worked in Nigeria for six years trying to talk about 'The Face of the City'. If you go along our main roads, you see young boys and girls, who are supposed to be in school to learn things, carrying things and selling them to the cars in the traffic,

because it's just like being in a market place, the traffic doesn't move. So the criminals come and rob the ones that sell, you just stay there, sweating. I try to talk about the city as a vessel in a fairytale, as a journey in an unsafe direction, a yet to be defined destination, vultures in the street, saints in the church. I talk about the frustrations in the city, the agitations, the overflowing, overwhelming madness that we encounter in the city, but this is particularly in Nigeria, in Lagos. And this is the protest march and we are tired of all this. Now the journey out of Africa has a writing on it, safe journey, Nigeria, and I use this, this is Nigeria and we are on a journey and there's no engine, all we have in the place of an engine is a gallon of oil, so oil carries us and while our property for the journey is on top and four human beings are inside simplifying our leaders and our drivers, the rest of us are in the boot. This was exhibited for a long time, abandoned in the French Cultural Centre, until I had to go and collect it. I abandoned it, but I had to go and collect it, because one good thing about junk is that nobody wants it. I sleep in my house with the doors open, there's nothing to get there except junk...

This work was very significant to me, because I was invited to exhibit at the National Museum in Lagos as part of a book fair, because these people want to spice it up, and then they look for champions, football stars, so when they invited me to put up a work, I dragged this in my car for seven hours, it was like moving the whole of Nigeria, the tyre would fall off, we'd get it and put it back, we'd go and beg for a stone to jack it up, and I was dragging my jeep for seven hours from the junkyard to the museum and got there, and the security man came to the gate and said, where are you taking this thing to? I said, it's a piece of work. He said, I don't care, please take this away from here. So we argued and he refused to open the gate, it was evening and there were no officers in the office. So I had to abandon this, I had to turn my car, then I hooked up the rope and then abandoned it there in front of the place and ran away. So when I came back the next day, I heard a lot of argument, about why should you allow him to leave it here, you should have let him push it to the back of the kitchen, instead of leaving it here, people are passing by. So I took it in and after three days I came back to collect it and I saw a heap of plywood on top of it, they were trying to cover it so that visitors from outside would not see that.

Anyway, this is 'The Day We Played for the President', and there was a performance and a writing going with this, and when we play for the president we are protected because we are inside on the fiftieth floor, where they sit to talk about how

to stop mosquitoes. The one on the left side is the MOPOL. MOPOL is the mobile police, the heavily armed mobile police with machine guns, making sure that nobody enters; this is the refugees. We are all on a journey and we are all moving at our own different paces too.

This is a work that was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery, it was just four pieces by the time I sent these pictures in and it ended up 17 pieces. It's now exhibited at the *Africa Remix* show. This was actually extracted from the internet, it is only hope that keeps us going as we suffer, and smile, as we love to hear by chance.

This is 'A Washer Man's Dream', the picture is taken inside a junkyard, and this is the 'Junkyard Museum of Awkward Things', which was the first museum of awkward things that I built; it's built by the beach, as you can see. When I came in, one of the politicians of the place approached me and said, I heard you did art in Britain; I have empty land everywhere, so you could come and put your art in one of them. So I went to put this, but after one week of assembling the junk, he called me up and said, I thought you were going to make art in the place? I said, yes I'm still gathering my materials. He said, it's not materials, please come and take away this rubbish. In the end, we didn't talk for six months while I was building this.

Unveiling the scary, the ugly and the beautiful and presenting the unpresentable, values are worthless, depreciated takes the outcast inside and then embraces the untouchable and there's this wear and tear. The concept is about elements in the Nigerian environment, world powers which influence the environment for the better and for the worse, and these powers which control the environment were now moulded into some sculptures. This is the politician, you know with five heads, he says one thing and he does another and he's always confused. For instance, one of our governors in 1979 was axed in his state; his state produces a lot of minerals, and he was asked, what kind of minerals do you have in your land, and he said, mineral, well, we have Coca Cola now, we have Fanta, we have Miranda, Pepsi, well, what do you mean by mineral? And later on, when the military came and caught him and found three million under his pillow, and the journalists came, he said, it wasn't only three million, those people are thieves, they've stolen the rest. God knows how much he had under his pillow.

So we have 'The Hungry Pastor and the Rich Pastor'; this is a performance, because it's all a performance, Nigeria itself is all drama. The hungry pastor screams a lot, makes a lot of noise. The rich one is so soft with money that he doesn't need to

talk and then his suit is so starched that he can't put his hands inside again, and his cross is so large and colourful that the price can feed a village. There is National Electric Power Authority on the left, which is a ghost in the environment. These exposures are the nobodies in the environment who are girlfriends and wives of commissioners and ministers who really influence the place, dictate what happens, and when you strip them naked, you discover that they are just empty inside. And this is the baby dress for the so-called sophisticated ladies in our environment who bend down in the market place, they're so short, and the small girl in orange, selling oranges will be looking at the TV, hey when I grow up, I will be like this. The muscle man is on the left and the pink girl, the pink dress is about black ladies or girls in the environment who want to bleach themselves to look like whites, so it's a dumping ground for all kinds of chemicals which you use to bleach yourself, to look like white. The lighter you look, the more beautiful, and I try to depict that. And the drawings at the back on the wall are drawings I made during the creation of the concept, because each time I have to have different ways of making that. The first tailor delayed the job, the second tailor ruined the cloth, the third tailor left the machine to die, we were vexed, we have wept, we have searched, and now we say, let's give the tailor's job to the carpenter. The world of the orange girl, it's a story about a present Nigerian city girl whose wall has been thwarted into shreds of nightmares, illusions and disillusion, hopes, a mirage of unfulfilled dreams, a hole full of forms.

And this was far north of Scotland when we went on an excursion. We got to the sea, the North Sea, and the breeze was so strong, the wind was so strong that the heaps were all leftovers, or junk of evidence of human traces, ropes for fishing and all kinds of things, fabrics and so on. So it was like graveyards, like small tombs, so what I did was a quick reaction of 30 minutes installation paying tribute to whoever it might have been, and then I took pictures of that and I'm sure the next morning what I've collected would belong to me. 'The House of the Neglected', I think I should do what the TV people do now. The above was in Germany, I lived in Bonn and other places, doing artist residency programmes, and then on the picture above I was collecting and on the one below I was peeping out of the junkyard.

Then I thought I had done my job as far as Nigeria is concerned for the moment, and for the past one year I hit the road, just hovering around, calling myself a nomad. Stockholm, Paris, Brussels, I landed, I saw myself in Germany, I saw myself in New York and then a friend of mine, an acquaintance of mine was in Michigan and

he heard I was in New York and said, I'm coming to collect you, you are going to help us build a museum. And so I ended up staying in Michigan for seven months. I started being a consultant in the making of a museum, very interesting, and I had to sleep in one of the old rooms of the museum, because we were waiting for grants to come to give me accommodation. I had my bath four times in two months, and they were always supplying me with these kitchen tissue papers; as I used them to have my bath, I discovered that all these pieces of towels were telling me things, so I made some assemblages, which very fortunately you're not going to see. You know why you're not going to see them? Because they were thrown in the dustbin by those who came to sweep the place... I left the place without saying bye bye, and as I was mentioning to one of my admirers that I was leaving the place, he said, I'm running the artists' village in Detroit, why don't you come and walk with us, we're cleaning the street, walking with the community, walking with children, you can come and stay with us. I said, okay, yes, so I went to the place and stayed there for four months with them and at the end of four months, one of the ladies called me and said, I have to talk to you, we have been thinking of how you've been managing without getting money anywhere, you just take pictures, you are in the street, you work with children (I used to go to school to teach poetry, teach creative writing, teach this and that), and he said, I have an envelope for you, so after four months, he gave me an envelope and said, take this and do whatever you like with it. I said, thank you very much, and then I opened the envelope when I got to my room, and there was 25 dollars. But they kept wondering what I was doing, without asking for money, without asking for anything, just coming out in the morning and going off; I just needed shelter.

When I left Lagos, 'The Junkyard', I decided to travel a lot of places; it became very important to me not to talk about Lagos alone, so I set out on a journey to go from one big city to another around the world, to be able to observe and collect the ingredients of that soup and try to have a basis on which I can compare, because most of the time the media make some news higher than the others, but I wanted to see by myself.

So I was crawling around Detroit for seven months, getting close to the people, going to the school, teaching people how to carve wood, going to the meetings and all that, trying to fill the up halls, because when you enter a place like Lagos, everything is thrown into your face, but when you enter a place in Europe, you're seeing painted windows, and if you don't get through to the people, a lot of

things remain covered. For instance in New York, you see that the gutters are all covered by metal, the only difference in Nigeria is that everything is open like this and is ten years old... in Europe you have coverings, so how come you stand in some places and you have some new kind of perfume coming up to you? So what I did in one of my sessions was start to dip in the 'nose' of my camera between the cracks or the metals along the street, and I got the same effect like when you go to Nigeria, only that it's covered. So I said, okay, as the windows are painted and the walls are painted, the subway is very significant, because you see traces, you see some scribbles, it's not graffiti, it's scribbles, imprints of what I call now looking at a psycho-cultural element of society, because thoughts precede actions, and most of the time, when you have social security and it looks like everything is right, there are some grumbles which you cannot hear, you pick them from the signs you find in the corners or on the wall or imprints.

And to this moment I have taken seventeen-thousand pictures of Soho in New York. I went first to talk with people, it was impossible, so I made some prints of these and took them with a table, and I would sit in the market with the vendors, I even went to get a tax ID, because the police would come and say, you must show us that you're paying tax. So I would sit with the people, and in two months I sold £60, but I have taken seventeen-thousand pictures, and then I would talk with the people, I would show them my pictures first and then we would start talking, some were willing to talk, some were not, but they see me as an artist, not a journalist, and that's how I try to get to people. A couple told me, yes, in the oldest part of the subway, me and my wife do them a lot. I asked, why? And he said, the society is very manipulated, and this is the only way we can fight back. Noted. Thank you.

### **Question**

Most of your works were exhibited outside. I wondered whether you preferred to show your work out of a conventional gallery setting, or inside, or if it makes no difference to you at all?

### **Junkman**

I work with kids a lot, and what they do is, when they finish scribbling and making art, they walk away. It's you, who know the value of art, who will keep it for your child, so that when he's thirty years old, he'll see what he was drawing. It is similar

with me; it does not matter to me, but it's the institutions and people who see something in my works that want to exhibit them, whether it's high or low, but you can see it cannot bring much money because I do not have money myself, so it cannot go commercial. I think people who see meaning in it, whatever it is – conventional or unconventional is rhetoric.

### **Question**

I was wondering if the site-specific situation of the pieces as they were in 'The Junkyard' is a definitive point of end for them; is it a kind of translation for those pieces in the context of a gallery or a museum? In the history of two-dimensional art that precedes some of your practice, some of the translation has taken place, for example people from *Arte Povera* started doing pieces with collecting material that was discarded, but they ended in institutions maybe such as this one, and so the difference here and the way you document your work, it's always indoors, outside a specific location; is that something you intentionally do or something that could be translated in some sort of other presentation?

### **Junkman**

In Germany I had a friend who is the artist for one culture museum, and one day I saw a pencil in his hand and said, what are you doing? He said, I'm trying to reform the art we have in our archive that went bad. And what happens is, when I have finished talking about a place like Nigeria and I get myself soaked in the place, like foam, so when you squeeze me, all you see is the liquid of that running out, and when I have finished with that, I have finished with it. Actually, I was thinking that it would be better to finish with it, document it and burn it off. So that he lives there and dies there. It could come when I have a lot of money to be radical about that, but at the moment I'm not talking about site, I'm talking about condition. If you carry a Nigerian to Australia, he's still a Nigerian, he still has the characteristics. If you carry an artwork from Nigeria to elsewhere, it still has the character, now what matters is what is he saying, and where he ends up is either in a place where the public sees it, like a museum, or in the hands of an entrepreneur, a businessman or business people, so I don't care about where it ends up or where it is exhibited. What I care about is what I've said, have I said it right, do I know it very well, well enough to be able to

defend what I've said. Do I know it enough to argue on it, so when I've finished with that, it's finished with me.

### **Question**

Is it important for you that the material comes from Nigeria, so when you find material in junkyards in Nigeria and you make your sculpture and you want to make the same piece for example in Germany, is it important for you to have the same material so it has the same poetry in it, or do you just go to a junkyard in Germany?

### **Junkman**

Every soup has its own ingredients; if you want to cook a chicken soup, you look for ingredients to cook chicken soup. If you want to cook a carrot soup, you look for the ingredients, if you want to make potato soup, you look for the ingredients, and every city to me is a pot of soup, so if I talk about Lagos and Nigeria and I go to New York to make the same concepts, you will see that there's a conflict, because the ingredients of the soup are for Nigeria and the soup should taste Nigerian. That's why I started collecting the ingredients of the soup that you call New York, for example.

### **Question**

Now that you have left Lagos, what happened with your museum?

### **Junkman**

Very interesting. I was in Brussels exhibiting the work I showed you, 'The Face of the City', when I got a phone call, you must hurry back now, they are destroying your 'Junkyard'! You shouldn't be surprised, because I was almost every day on TV and in the newspapers and on the radio, the media people wanted excitement, so they came recycling the things I had saved, and I didn't say what things should be saved, so I wasn't surprised when I was called to say they were destroying your junkyard. It's my own land and my own property, so nobody has a right to do that, but it was possible, because they raised the rumour that I was caught with eight human heads, as a ritualist, and then I was in the prison in Nigeria, therefore, if he's a ritualist, he must be brought down. To cut the story short, 'The Junkyard' went back to where it came from – until I go back.

**Question**

There's something incredibly poignant about your work, but I do have a question that's based on my anxiety about what happens to a work made in a country with the kinds of problems you've described in Nigeria; when that work then gets shown in a Western gallery or museum, do you have an anxiety that maybe it just gets treated in the end as entertainment for a Western audience?

**Junkman**

I don't have this anxiety, because I don't chase what is out of my reach, so I don't care what happens to a work once it is out of my reach, otherwise I would have hypertension, worrying about it.

Transcribed by Jackie Howson and edited by Marion Endt.