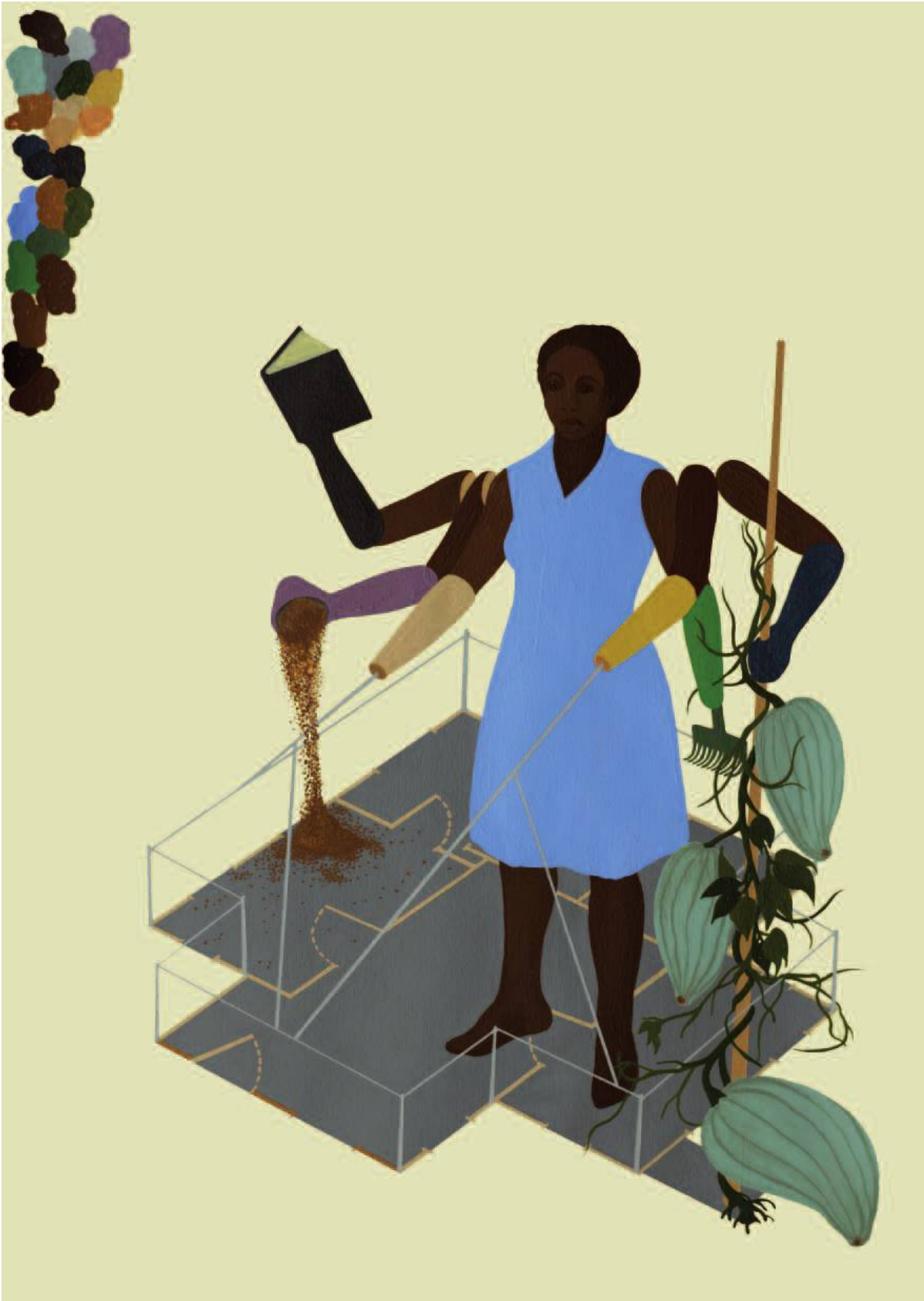




Otobong Nkanga,
Filtered Memories,
1990–92: *Survival*,
1990–91, *F.G.C.*
Shagamu, 2010,
acrylic on paper,
42 × 29cm. All
images courtesy the
artist; Lumen Travo
Gallery, Amsterdam;
and In Situ Fabienne
Leclerc Gallery, Paris

Otobong Nkanga: Nothing Is Like It Seems, Everything Is Evidence

– Yvette Mutumba

*The authentic artist cannot turn [her]
back on the contradictions that inhabit
our landscapes.*¹

– Robert Smithson

Otobong Nkanga operates like a scientist. With a forensic gaze, she looks at objects and environments that trigger memories, thoughts or emotions. These are the entry points for her in-depth research into broad historical contexts and engagement with a wide spectrum of disciplines, from political theory to philosophy, sociology and the natural sciences. She submerges herself in archives, examines raw materials and consults experts on their respective fields. Pivotal to her work is examining and altering ideas of land, home and displacement, and how they are connected with memory. ‘Memory is not only an autobiographical state,’ she argues, ‘but also an important notion in relation to objects that leave traces’; however,

objects and bodies: factory buildings, dwellings, barbed wire, mother-and-child figurines and apparitional scenes of sexual encounters function as allegories of labour, domesticity, feelings of belonging, possession, security and the loss of innocence. The drawings include single legs, levitating, marching or carrying objects; flying arms, appearing like torn-off dolls’ limbs, human-object-hybrids or prostheses; bodies without heads or faces; anthropomorphic trees and plants; piercing needles; floating architecture and bits of soil. Their conglomeration brings forth the painful resonances of lost moments – the phenomenon of phantom pain. Although fragmented, the bodies and scenes are connected through conceptual threads, creating a complex picture of how the exploitation of resources and people can shatter basic existence. Nkanga’s drawings – functioning either as preparatory studies or presented in installations that also include everyday objects, unspecified built environments, flora or geological samples – offer an introduction into the artist’s iconography, designed to spark memories beyond her own.

When, in 2011, she was invited to work with the ethnographic collections of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, Nkanga proposed to examine the relationship between the present context of the artefacts in the museum’s Africa collection and their original cultural setting. Nkanga decided to focus on money, weapons and jewellery from West, Central and Southern Africa because of their multiple purposes: jewellery and weapons, for example, as accessories of prestige, were often used for monetary exchange. In order to connect to the objects, she took photographs of herself

Yvette Mutumba unpacks Otobong Nkanga’s interest in the environment, bringing her relational approach to land into focus.

she also concedes that ‘nothing is like it seems and everything is evidence’.² For her, intangible elements such as smell are as important as objects in the narration of who we are. While Nkanga scientifically researches broader contexts, it is, in the end, non-written evidence she is most interested in.

In the dreamlike sequences of Nkanga’s drawing series *Social Consequences* and *Filtered Memories* (both 2009–10),³ the artist recollects both her native Nigeria and her adoptive Europe via fragmented

1 Robert Smithson, ‘Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape’ (1973), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (ed. Jack Flam), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.164.

2 Conversation with the artist, 5 April 2014.

3 The series of drawings *Social Consequences I*, *Social Consequences II*, *Filtered Memories 1977–81* and *Filtered Memories 1987–96* were published together in the artist’s book *No Be Today Story, O!* (Amsterdam: Lumen Travo Gallery, 2010).

dressed in black and holding them with gloved hands. She also drew diagrams explaining the origins and functions of the artefacts, and wrote texts describing their imagined contexts. The different elements were designed and printed as compositions on placards to reference so-called *calendars* — posters that are widely found in schools, shops and other public spaces across Nigeria and that illustrate a broad spectrum of topics for an illiterate audience, from politics, social criticism and health advice to the newest film releases and fashion trends. Just as Nkanga had to reconnect with these historical artefacts despite their being, to some extent, part of her cultural heritage, she assumed that other Nigerians would also not be able to immediately identify their context and function. By distributing these picture sheets in Nigeria in addition to showing them as part of the exhibition ‘Object Atlas — Fieldwork in the Museum’ (2012) at the Weltkulturen Museum,⁴ Nkanga facilitated new access and understanding of these objects for a Nigerian audience. The *calendars* became, then, re-narrations of the objects’ histories with regard to both their current housing in the museum’s collection and their original cultural context.

The ethnographic artefacts are evidence of past plundering and accumulation of material objects, a by-product of colonialism. In *Limits of Mapping* (2009–10), a table in the shape of a map representing fictional countries has been pierced through with huge wooden rods, recalling how African borders were once drawn up around a table in Berlin.⁵ The map stands here as an abstract and disembodied reference to wrecked livelihoods and exploited resources, while the rods are connected to a central visual motif in multiple works by Nkanga: the needle. In the 2008 installation *Contained Measures of Land* (2008), for example, the work *The Operation* (2008) showed an orange-tree root pierced with oversized, stainless

steel pins and needles, while a series of accompanying paintings depicted enormous thorns that penetrated floating landscapes of lakes and woods. The act of piercing references the procedure of targeting land in the framework of colonial enterprises as well as in today’s corporate exploitation of natural environments. Every time a needle penetrates matter it simultaneously destroys and creates: it produces a hole, which in itself is a new construction. Nkanga’s reiteration of this violent act across her drawings and sculptures reflects on the infinite process of destroying and rebuilding that defines our relationship with the material environment, while also condensing the unresolved entanglement of people and geographies.

Nkanga’s practice can be seen as part of a resurgence of interest in land over the last decade⁶ amongst artists from Africa such as Sammy Baloji, George Osodi, Mame-Diarra Niang and Jo Ractliffe, whose practices attempt to map historical and geo-political traces of memory, narrative, identity and ownership.⁷ From the exploitation of the oil-drenched Niger Delta captured in Osodi’s photographs

Nkanga defies the prejudiced views that African artists should necessarily address the cultural and social specificities of their localities, a phenomenon that needs to be seen in the context of the debate around the ‘authenticity’ of art from Africa.

to Niang’s chronicling of the permanent cycles of destruction and reconstruction that make up the urban landscapes of African cities such as Dakar, the works of this group of artists can be seen to focus on visually capturing the scars on the environment left by colonialism, war and exploitation — that is, on the changing

4 ‘Object Atlas — Fieldwork in the Museum’, curated by Clémentine Deliss, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 26 January—16 September 2012.

5 At the Berlin Conference of 1884—85, also known as Congo Conference, diplomats of European governments, the Ottoman Empire and the United States met in Berlin to unscrupulously divide up the African continent amongst each other, marking what is commonly known as the Scramble for Africa.

6 For an overview of artists’ engagement with land since the turn of the millennium, see Kelly Baum, ‘Nobody’s Property’, in *Nobody’s Property: Art, Land, Space 2000—10* (exh. cat.), Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, pp.11—43.

7 The importance of land for practices from African perspectives was recently acknowledged in the extensive exhibition ‘Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa’, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, 22 April 2013—23 February 2014 and Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, 23 April—14 September 2014.



Otabong Nkanga, *Facing the Opponent*, 2012–13, viscose, wool, mohair, bio cotton, inkjet print on laser-cut forex plate, 165 × 187cm. Installation view, 'Trading Style', Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 2012

faces of natural and urban environments. While Nkanga is concerned with the devastation of resources and past and present violence throughout Africa, she shuns the monumental echoes of the past. Rather, with her characteristic forensic ethos, she produces counter-memorials: she zooms in on particular elements that make up our surroundings — particularly sand, stones and plants — to portray the struggle to (re-)define the environmental conditions in which we live.

Having lived in Europe for nearly two decades since leaving Nigeria, Nkanga's material landscapes span from Antwerp to Lagos, and reflect the interplay between the inescapable histories that

still mark the former colony and enduring mechanisms of exploitation. By working across different contexts and landscapes, she questions the dialectics between what is 'indigenous' and what is 'foreign', thereby revealing complex entanglements. In this way, she defies the prejudiced view that African artists should necessarily address the cultural and social specificities of their localities — a phenomenon that needs to be seen in the context of the decades-long debate around what defines the 'authenticity' of contemporary art from Africa and the Diaspora.⁸ The authenticity debate has pitched two irreconcilable definitions of art from African perspectives against each other, according to which artistic

8 For different views on this debate, see Rasheed Araeen, 'Modernity, Modernism and Africa's Authentic Voice', *Third Text*, vol.24, issue 2, 2010, pp.277–86; Jean Pigozzi and André Magnin, 'Two Conversations', in A. Magnin et al. (ed.), *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*, London: Merrell, 2005, pp.10–33; John Picton, 'Made in Africa', in Simon Njami et al. (ed.), *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005, pp.53–63; Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Nine Contradictions in the New Golden Age of Contemporary African Art', in *African Arts*, vol.35, no.3, Autumn 2002, pp.1–6; Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, 'Introduction', in O. Enwezor and O. Oguibe (ed.), *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, London and Cambridge, MA: Iniva and the MIT Press, 1999, pp.9–14; Salah M. Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art: Toward a Critical Understanding', in Philip G. Altbach and S.M. Hassan (ed.), *The Muse of Modernity: Essays on Culture as Development in Africa*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996, pp.37–61; and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow', *African Arts*, vol.25, no.2, April 1992, pp.41–97.



practices should either represent the exotic ‘other’ or conform to the aesthetic parameters of the Western canon (itself an ideological construction). Although the quest for ‘authentic African art’ has always been problematic, today’s digital exchange and the relative ease of international travel make it more difficult than ever before to maintain reductionist views.

According to Edward Said, the ‘plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions’ so that ‘habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment’.⁹ In her investigations, Nkanga does not focus so much on the differences between distinct objects and environments as on their similarities and connections: ‘Going from one region to another, there are elements

that I am familiar with and most times just take for granted, such as trees, sand, stone, water, etc. What we need in our lives is basically the same — food, shelter, love, clothing — what makes us different or unique are our mythologies.’¹⁰ What mythologies, emotions and memories do trees, sand, stones and water provoke in each of us? The topographic landscape of Nkanga’s installation *Taste of a Stone* (2010) presented a space for possible answers.¹¹ On a floor of black gravel, large stones of different sizes were set atop a hump of natural iron oxide magnetite sculpted to imitate the contours of a topographic map. The stones were accompanied by epiphytes, plants that do not feed on the earth but rather moisture in the air, which thus are able to grow in the most inhospitable places — mirroring our capacity to use common elements to make ourselves at home in new contexts.

Otobong Nkanga,
Taste of a Stone, 2010,
installation of
treated black gravel,
large rocks, natural
iron oxide magnetite
and epiphytes, detail.
Installation view,
‘Make Yourself at
Home’, Kunsthall
Charlottenborg,
Copenhagen, 2010

9 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, p.186.

10 Otobong Nkanga, ‘Artist Statement’, in Charlotte Bagger Brand and Koyo Kouoh (ed.), *Make Yourself at Home* (exh. cat.), Copenhagen: Kunsthall Charlottenborg, 2010, pp.57—58.

11 Site-specific work for the exhibition ‘Make Yourself at Home’, curated by C.B. Brand and K. Kouoh, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 4 September—21 November 2010.

The creaky sound created by stepping on the gravel, the scene's visual effect and the cold, hard feel of the stones offered up a synaesthetic experience that underscored the commonalities in our perceptive responses to everyday materials regardless of the divergent affiliations we might have with them. In another room, six fragmented, visual narratives offered glimpses of what happens outside the contained zones of our personal realities. On six wooden tables, Nkanga placed photographs of different stones printed on pieces of limestone and accompanied by poetic texts and images also printed on slabs of the white stone. Maps of unidentified territories and photographs of deserted landscapes reflected on the consequences of land demarcation and exploitation, while a drawing depicting hands grasping for soil referenced the race for resources. The texts printed on the limestone pondered our individual relationships with land and natural materials. Choosing not to disclose locations or even regions, Nkanga invited viewers to relate their own experiences and associations to these images.

***One cannot claim any territory,
not even through memory,
Nkanga suggests.***

For *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok* (2013), the most recent iteration of this project, Nkanga created another landscape of contemplation for the courtyard of the Bait Khaled bin Ibrahim Al Yousif in Sharjah, a traditional Emirati house recently repurposed as an exhibition space for the Sharjah Art Foundation.¹² She animates this new installation of images and poems printed on Galala limestone, large rocks and plants placed on white gravel by spending hours in the space, either performing or holding a placard with questions addressed to the audience. What would they like her to do — sing, dance, talk? As visitors put

down their answers, she stood up and walked around the courtyard singing and reciting personal narratives while wearing a plant — the *Cestrum nocturnum* (Queen of the Night) — on her head. She chose this plant because it is not, as she had first assumed, specific to the region around the Nigerian city of Kano, where she grew up; the Queen of the Night can also be found in Sharjah, originates in the West Indies and is naturalised in South Asia. One cannot claim any territory, not even through memory, Nkanga suggests.

In this and other performances, Nkanga maps and connects the socio-economic, cultural and political implications of her chosen artefacts — often objects that present no evidence of a specific event or process. As she holds an item and employs her voice to speak or sing, Nkanga adds a subtle layer of meaning, as if body and object are coalescing. The relationship between Nkanga as a performer and the audience has changed over the course of her artistic practice. In her early performance *Perfect Measures* (2003),¹³ for example, she used objects such as towels, face creams, scissors, pins and oversized needles to examine her idea of the ideal place for working, cleansing, exercising, eating and resting. But in the quest for the perfect home, the performance consistently revealed defaults and flaws. In Nkanga's perception, the actual content of her performative work was hardly considered; her black female body became the landscape onto which stereotypes and fantasies were projected. In contrast to this stage-like setting, in more recent works she has attempted to shift the audience's gaze by making her performances part of the exhibition setting, and by using her voice as well as engaging the public directly. In the installations-cum-performances *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* and *Contained Measures of Shifting States* (both 2012),¹⁴ she sat for hours at a table that displayed a landscape of objects,

12 'Itiat Esa Ufok' is Ibibio language for 'The Stones of a Courtyard'. The work was commissioned for the Sharjah Biennial 11, curated by Yuko Hasegawa, 13 March — 13 May 2013.

13 *Perfect Measures* was an installation and performance commissioned for the exhibition 'Transferts', curated by Toma Muteba Luntumbue, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 2003.

14 *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* was an installation and ten-hour performance commissioned for the exhibition 'Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants', curated by Mélanie Bouteloup and Anna Colin, Bétonsalon, Paris, 20 April — 21 July 2012; *Contained Measures of Shifting States* was commissioned for 'Across the Board: Politics of Representation', curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose, The Tanks, Tate Modern, London, 24 November 2012.



Otobong Nkanga,
Diaspore, 2014,
installation and
10-hour performance.
Performance view,
'14 Rooms',
Messe Basel,
13–22 June 2014

images and archival materials — catalysts for dialogue with the viewer. In the former work, she invited guests to taste the kola nut, while in the latter she asked visitors about processes that could alter common ideas of identity, memory and perception. With their emphasis on participation, Nkanga's performances have become temporal sites for negotiating such notions and attempting to magnify their physical presence.

More recently, Nkanga has invited others to tell their own stories related to land, home and displacement while holding the objects that trigger these

personal narratives. In *Diaspore* (2014),¹⁵ six black women talked or sang, one at a time, while wearing the Queen of the Night on their heads and standing on an invented topography painted on the ground. This interest in representing multiple viewpoints is also at the centre of a work in progress, in which a mineralogist explains her latest scientific findings, a homeless person talks about her definition of home and a migrant gives an account of her journey. As well as bringing into focus Nkanga's dialogical approach to history, these polyphonic performances mark the artist's attempt

15 *Diaspore* was a performance commissioned for the exhibition '14 Rooms', curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach, Art Basel, 14–22 June 2014.



Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014, installation consisting of 30 metallic modulated structures; woven textile pieces; video; mica; malachite minerals; images and text inkjet printed on Galala limestone; and mica insulation sheet. Installation view, 8th Berlin Biennale, 2014

to act outside binaries and to consider instead the many perspectives that define us. Consider her project *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014), which focuses on the myriad transformations that natural materials go through as they move from being raw matter through extraction and manipulation.¹⁶ At the centre of the installation were two large elaborated tapestries, which rose up towards the ceiling: one of a gem pierced with needles and the other of a man and woman metamorphosing into abstract shapes reminiscent of mining landscapes. On a modular metal structure, Nkanga placed geological samples and photographs of minerals such as mica, malachite and copper, as well as texts printed on limestone. Embedded within this structure were two videos showing her presenting shiny materials to the camera and walking through the streets of Berlin wearing a crown of malachite. All these elements traced the connections between past and present desire for raw materials: from the green, copper domes of Berlin's churches to the mica used in industrial products ranging from

electronic appliances to rockets and missiles. And while this focus on our material surroundings allowed for reflection upon the commodification of nature, Nkanga's installation also addressed the ambivalence of bling: at the same time that it showed how the magnificent façades of Berlin's imperial architecture shine only superficially, concealing the dark side of colonial and capitalist exploitation, it also conveyed a much more common fascination with glitter and shimmer as that which makes us, as individuals, feel out of the ordinary. As much as *The Pursuit of Bling* is about the exploitation of resources, then, it is also about the constant pursuit for the better and the brighter, for those moments in which we all can finally shine.

16 *In Pursuit of Bling* was commissioned for the 8th Berlin Biennale, curated by Juan A. Gaitán, 29 May–5 August 2014.