6. Copper's Suppressed History Unearthed in Otobong Nkanga's Sensual and Embodied Art Practice

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"Copper . . . has been at our side since civilization began and has helped us thrive at every step of human history. It was used in almost everything . . .," Clarkdale's Arizona Copper Art Museum boldly asserts in its mission statement (Arizona Copper Art Museum). While the museum exudes pride about its dedication to artistic and artisanal applications of a metal that has been valued, financially and aesthetically, as one of the key material contributors to the realization of humanity's most impressive achievements, recently, more critical voices regarding the ways copper has been adapted to human ends have emerged within and beyond museum walls. Parallel to the flourishing in the humanities of new materialism, posthumanism, and decolonial studies, a number of artists has employed copper in ways that have highlighted the more disturbing—suppressed—side of people's engagements with the metal, some proposing alternative ways of coexistence with natural materials in the process. Chinese-American artist Mel Chin has, for instance, foregrounded the toxicity of metals like copper in gardens with accumulative plants that draw heavy metals like copper from contaminated soil. The metals are extracted from the plants and sold, bringing in money that Chin subsequently uses to cover the expense of regenerating toxic landfills. In his photos of metallic orbs in abandoned excavation sites of former South African mines, photographer Dillon Marsh reveals copper extraction's adverse environmental and humanitarian effects. Anishinaabe sculptor Michael Belmore employs materials like copper to examine the damaging effects on the landscape of human activity for capital gain. Last on this list is Belgium-based Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga, whose work will be the focal point of this chapter. Nkanga has unpacked the ecological damage and human suffering caused by the extraction of materials like copper for the sustenance of our excessive lifestyle. The following pages investigate how several of Nkanga's installation, sculptural, and performance works bring to light the uneven distribution of resources like copper in the circulation of raw materials in the globalized world. Examining how Nkanga's works critically explore the mutilated landscape of a former Nigerian copper mine,

the chapter also demonstrates that Nkanga's works poetically, or "poethically," in Denise Ferreira da Silva's words (245), articulate copper's sensory and aesthetic qualities, in some performances even following minerals' own forces and flows with her bodily movements, entangling human and nonhuman agents in reciprocal ways that strongly resonate with Timothy Ingold's notions of "improvisation" and "emerging meshwork" (435; 437).

A metallic material with a cubic crystalline structure, copper (Cu) owes its reddish-brown color to its reflection of red and orange light. When situated in moist air, it however acquires a protective greenish surface film called patina. Copper is a malleable, relatively soft, yet durable and ductile material, which is easily worked, can be polished to a shiny finish, and is an excellent conductor of heat and electricity. As the affordances of copper are many (Gibson), it has been applied in industry, agriculture, transportation, architecture, at home, and in museums. Most copper is used for electrical equipment, wiring, roofing, plumbing, industrial machinery, medical equipment, and energy conduction. It has also been utilized for weapons, cookware, tools, architectural moldings, roofs, paint pigments, engravings, and statues, in some cases combined with other metals into alloys like bronze and brass (Adamson et al.).

Though many people are aware of the fact that our daily lives, as well as our cultural and artistic practices, depend on materials like copper, which form society's foundation in the Marxian materialist sense, this interdependence has recently become the topic of scrutiny in publications and artworks that inquire into ways in which human and nonhuman actants have "emerged together" (Biemann 43). Increasingly, critical investigations have challenged the tendency of people in capitalist, (post-)industrial, and (post-)colonial societies to exploit "raw materials" and the landscapes from which they are extracted, practices that are based on an implicit view of the primacy of people amongst all beings, both organic and inorganic. Such anthropocentric views have led primarily Europeans and North Americans to a sense of entitlement involving claims of ownership and control over nature, part and parcel of a perspective that considers domination, colonization, and subjugation of people in other parts of the world legitimate as well. Similar to, but not building on, new materialists like Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti, contemporary artists such as Nkanga explore such unbalances through material and visual means, using materials like copper to imagine and embody other, more entangled, sustainable, and "response-able" ways of connecting human and non-human agents (Haraway 2). They tend to advance imaginative forms of cohabitation that do not exhaust ecosystems and people but are instead built on an awareness of the "reciprocal fragility" of Earth and human bodies (Wood 77).

Fig. 1: Otobong Nkanga, In Pursuit of Bling, 2014. Installation exhibition To Dig a Hole that Collapses Again, MCA Chicago, 2018. Photograph: Nathan Keay, MCA Chicago.

In 2014, Otobong Nkanga (born in Kano, 1974) gave copper and the mineral mica center stage in *In Pursuit of Bling*, an installation first exhibited at the Eight Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art and recently acquired jointly by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Museum Arnhem (fig. 1). The work consists of two tapestries hung back-to-back, surrounded by thirty metal tables that are assembled according to the structure of a mineral atom. Some tables hold specimens of copper, malachite (a copper carbonate), and mica, the silicate mineral that grants shine to makeup, the cosmetic product providing luster to human bodies while contributing to the destruction of what Nkanga tends to conceive of as the body of our planet (Campbell-Betancourt 58). Some tables present archival photos or built-in monitors, showing images of mineral extraction and various uses of copper and mica (Ginwala 93). One tapestry represents a faceted mica stone and locations where the mineral can be found, while the other, *Transformation*, pictures humans' self-serving involvement in the extraction of copper ore. *Transformation* shows two schematic, truncated figures who seem to be standing on mineral-rich mountains and whose upper bodies have been replaced by structures containing molecular bonds and platforms that resemble the surfaces of both landscapes and mineral stones.

Fig. 2: Otobong Nkanga, Reflections of the Raw Green Crown, 2014 [video still]. Single channel HD video projection, color, sound, 2:52 min.

One of the videos shown in the current installment of *In Pursuit of Bring*, entitled *Reflections of the Raw Green Crown* (fig. 2), features the artist conversing with the copper spires of the late nineteenth-century Gethsemanekirche and the WWII-ruined Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche), both situated in Berlin, her conical, malachite headdress similar in shape to the edifices' cop-

per spire roofs (Kholeif 74). In the video, the artist's copper crown empathizes with the copper of the churches' spires, addressing it as follows: "you have traveled a long way through land and sea to be here to crown the tops of your captors' roofs. . . . Who would have guessed the process you have been through. Uprooted, melted, polished, reshaped, and integrated to crown the finest in town." The voiceover also surmises that its deracinated and labored, silent material conversational partner "might remember Tsumeb," "the land of malachite," "[n]ow empty for all is gone," referring to the place of origin of the church's copper (Nkanga, *Reflections of the Raw Green Crown*).

The Namibian mining town Tsumeb was founded by the German colonial empire in 1905 to facilitate the extraction and subsequent transportation of resources like copper ore that prospectors found in high concentrations in a nearby mineral-rich deposit in 1875. Due to the oxidized copper's visual effect on the landscape's surface, this deposit was dubbed Green Hill. Before the German colonialists started blast-mining with dynamite, exploiting the land and the local population, the local San people had carved out small pieces of copper ore in less intrusive ways and engaged in small-scale trade with the Ovambo people. When Nkanga visited the former mine, which had been closed in 1996, she encountered an open pit rather than a hill, in addition to abandoned mining buildings, a patch of ore smelting refuse (Nkanga, *Remains of the Green Hill*), and the now disused railway that had been constructed to transport ore from Green Hill to the harbor in Swakopmund. The natural resource copper had been melted, transported, and given a destination in shining European monuments, displaced from and with no visible connection to its now depleted and contaminated place of origin (Kholeif 76).

Nkanga conceives of the raw copper stones and the photos of Green Hill on the tables of *In Pursuit of Bling*, as well as of the copper steeples of the Gethsemanekirche and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in the video, as silent material witnesses that remember the past in the present (Nkanga, *Reflections of the Raw Green Crown*). The materials—once situated in Northern Namibian land, now topping European monuments and on view in European museum spaces—bear traces of colonialism, capitalism, and (post)industrialism, embodying memories of unfair labor, displacement, and ecological destruction. The minerals have come to index avarice and human and environmental injustice through their subjection to invasive extraction modes, circulation in the globalized world, and eventual use in grand, opulent monuments and multiple other applications. Though the copper on the spire of the damaged Gedächtniskirche was not part of the late nineteenth-century church design but applied between 1957 and 1962 as part of the efforts to preserve the church's remains as a ruin commemorating the allied bombings, chances are high

that the copper that was added later also originates from Namibia: Germany has continued to import large amounts of copper from the country, up until today.[1]

In Pursuit of Bling confronts European museum visitors—consumers of the end products of raw materials and frequent passersby of copper-roofed buildings that speak of a heroic past—with the reality of the remote, voided mines. This confrontation is cogently established through a direct, palpable encounter with the mineral that is one of the essential material sources of out-of-balance relations between (formerly) colonized and colonizer, poor and affluent, and nonhuman entities and controlling humans. The work shows that in a globalized world, places that are far apart, like Tsumeb on the one hand and European cities such as Berlin, Amsterdam, and Arnhem on the other, are inextricably connected, disallowing an exoticizing, imperial gaze that locates the problems elsewhere.[2] One way in which this connectedness is enacted is through the inclusion of stones that have been in both places. In Nkanga's work, the material has obtained the power to speak, even literally in the videos. It invites viewers to consider how to coexist on Earth, now and in the future. *In Pursuit of Bling* forces us to consider the gaping wound left elsewhere, a void bestowing us with abundance: the presence of copper in western Europe is a direct result of the absence of the ore in the now cavernous Tsumeb landscape, implicating our excessive lives.

Another work of Nkanga's, *Solid Maneuvres* (2015) (fig. 3), is intended as an antimonument to the damaged landscape and negative space at Green Hill, an inverse variation on the artist's characterization of monumental buildings as pedestals of the copper that tops them. *Solid Maneuvres* is a series of sculptures composed of stratified layers of pressed, metal sheets resembling topographical maps on metal poles, two mountainous, one containing a depression. The surface of the sculptures and the floor below are sprinkled with crushed traces of materials with subterranean origins, like salts, mica-containing makeup powder, and copper particles—residues of an injured hill that are now imaginatively restituted to the land. In a 2015 performance by the same title, Nkanga activated the sculptures by enacting a kind of ritual in their midst, rubbing the pulverized elements between her fingers and scattering the dust onto various parts of her body, touching the material in an intimate,

1 I am thankful to Nkanga's studio manager Wim van Dongen for referring me to two sites providing recent data on international trade, including copper imports and exports: https://tradingeconomics.com/germany/imports/namibia/copper and https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/deu/partner/nam.

2 Jessica Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo similarly observe that the (indigenous) artists whose material-oriented work their article analyzes "locate their practices in an extensive and shared contemporary landscape that includes the space of exhibition, thus short-circuiting a romantic gaze that might locate indigenous art or bodies in nature somewhere else" (20).

sensual fashion. Through this performance, Nkanga ceremonially re-enacted the engagement with, or maneuvering of, materials and land of laboring bodies. Yet where the miners at Green Hill had operated under inhumane, alienating, and ecologically unsound conditions, incited to manipulate and exploit rather than responsively interact with the extracted ores, her own contact with the material was respectful and affective, receptive to what the artist calls the materials' own "performativity" (Nkanga, "Solid Maneuvers"). The suggestion is that in a postcolonial and post-anthropocentric world, our engagement with matter could be more in line with ritualized interactions with ancestral soil and lands of indigenous cultures.

Fig. 3: Otobong Nkanga, Solid Maneuvers, 2015/20 [video still]. Performance at exhibition There's No Such Thing as Solid Ground, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020. Performed by Nkanga, July 1, 2020, 40 min.

In the performance *Solid Maneuvres*, Nkanga's interaction with copper surpasses the discursive, though it makes viewers critically aware of the dialectical relationship between our daily, material lives and the socio-economic structures that support them. Nkanga's relation to the material in the performance is emphatically tactile. The artist has disclosed that, before she starts working with a material, she tends

first to feel it with her body, sometimes even singing to it: "My heart has to palpitate, my skin has to have goose pimples/ I have to struggle with it, fight with it" (Arundhati Thomas). When visiting Green Hill earlier in 2015, she had also sung to the land, apologizing for all that had happened since the arrival of "foreign invaders" (Arundhati Thomas) in a spontaneous, sensuous, and healing performance of which footage can be found in the video *Remains of the Green Hill* (fig. 4). During this performance, Nkanga stood barefoot on a rock overlooking the Green Hill crater, practicing a kind of yoga while balancing stones from the mine pit on her head. Such caring and sensory encounters between body, landscape, and minerals exude respect for natural materials. Nkanga's intimate communion with minerals is an implicit counterforce to the violent and imposing ways of political and economic systems that have perpetuated social, global, and environmental injustice. In her performances, Nkanga does not act as an agent unilaterally, forcing a final form on inert matter, but in her "gestural dance with a modulation of the material" follows the minerals' own agential and sensory properties and flows, enacting an Ingoldian embodied ecology of materials (434).

Fig. 4: Otobong Nkanga, Remains of the Green Hill, 2015 [video still] – Performance Tsumeb, Namibia. Single channel HD video projection, color, stereo sound, 5:48 min.

Through her discursively critical yet also affective and sensuous interactions with—rather than actions upon—copper, Nkanga imagines alternatives to the ways of the Anthropocene, which, as Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin have argued, might be characterized as a primarily "sensorial phenomenon: the experience of

living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world" (3). As such, she willingly takes on the burden that, according to Amitav Ghosh, all storytellers, including artists, should embrace: recovering in imaginary ways the agency and voice of non-humans (204).

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