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SCAVENGING THE FUTURE OF THE ARCHIVE

A Conversation between Henriette Gunkel and Daniel Kojo Schrade

Henriette Gunkel: I would like to begin this conversation with a focus on the archive as a source for the future-oriented and the speculative since the archive was one of the first aspects we discussed in relation to your work. In your abstract paintings you tend to bring in otherworldly figures and narratives that inspire you and that seem to be familiar to an Afrofuturist canon, like Lee "Scratch" Perry or Jean-Michel Basquiat, for example. But you also focus on narratives and figures that reflect on your geopolitical positionings often ignored in the context of Afrofuturism — narratives and figures that are often hidden and out of reach of public knowledge, and in a way reference art practices that are not widely considered as part of black cultures. One example is your *Brother Beethoven* series for which you turned to classical music and researched the history of the Afro-European violinist George Bridgetower and the inspiration and challenges he posed for Ludwig van Beethoven. You understand this archival work as a retro-futurist approach, as a way of digging

the future out of the archive — which also means that you look at archival material differently, as always already including the futuristic (either in terms of form or narrative) which seems to allow you a certain level of fictioning in your art practice.

Based on the conversations we had, and my engagement with your art practice, I began to rethink my own approach to Africanist science-fictional interventions and became increasingly interested in temporal strategies and the aesthetics of time, in forms of the futuristic that do not refer to typical science-fictional or Afrofuturist tropes, such as Martians, spaceships and hyper-technology, to name a few. I shifted my focus on forms and senses of otherworldliness that we could draw from the past and that would help us to develop a genealogy, if you wish, of futurist interventions in art practices on the African continent that do not necessarily announce themselves as such. Art practices that precede recent science-fictional interventions which received much attention on a global scale, such as Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005), for example, or Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009), which are widely considered as the first African science-fiction films. So I invited you to the University of Bayreuth, Germany where I was working at that time and which has a long history of African Studies (with all its problematic implications). The idea was to visit an archive of African art, images and objects together and to explore, over a period of two weeks, what a genealogy of the futuristic could look like. We entitled these two weeks *Scavenging the Future of the Archive*.

Daniel Kojo Schrade: The idea of digging the future out of the archive has been around for a while, but continues to be an extremely relevant strategy. There is still a lot of material to dig out and to re-contextualise. Afrofuturism immediately has to do with research, bringing the future and the past together, while activating the space in-between. Claiming that space in-between is a very research-heavy endeavor. Looking backwards while imagining oneself in the future and being aware of the space in-between requires a lot of discipline.

The archive of the University of Bayreuth's IwalewaHaus consists of an art section, an audio and video archive, a poster section, and an ethnographic collection foremost from Africa. The main geographical focus of the collection is Nigeria, though some important pieces are from Sudan, Mozambique, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Our focus in the two weeks in the archive together was on collections of contemporary, popular and modern art, the audio archive, and selected pieces from the ethnographic collection. One of the reasons why the IwalewaHaus archive is a great research field is its lack of a consequent collecting strategy. The many sections of the collection have multiple nuclei, shaped by "collectors" with a wide range of capability. It was therefore exciting, specifically from my point of view, my artistic perspective, to dig into this extravagant collection. We had to work like foragers. We rummaged through the archive trying to find the courage that would matter on our mission to do fundamental Afrofuturistic research: *Scavenging the Future of the*

Archive. We first studied all the visual components we were able to find in the audio archive, which contains more than two thousand CDs, LPs, singles, MCs and tapes of the work of foremost African composers and musicians from the 1950s onwards. This rather unconventional engagement with the audio collection led to a four-minute, animated slide collage, which uses twenty of the LP covers and Arthur Russel's composition *The Platform on the Ocean* as the sound track. The graphic design of these selected covers depict space in a very futuristic way, whether this is a photographed or painted urban space, a landscape, an interior, or the light in the background of a portrait.

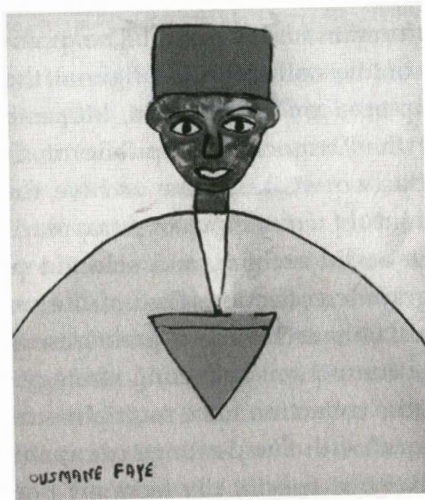


Figure 1. Ousmane Faye (1980). Painting on glass, 14cm x 12cm.

Back in the main collection we came across several works that were interesting for us, including a beautiful little 14cm x 12cm painting from the 1980s, on glass

by the artist Ousmane Faye. The digitised archive catalogue describes the piece as follows:

Portrait of male in front of white background. The figure wears a yellow dress with white v-neck, which merges into a blue triangular pattern, pointing one of its edges downwards. In addition the figure wears a red fez on their head.

While there is nothing wrong with the description, which foremost aims to make the piece identifiable, it misses out on equally relevant facts. Faye's painting additionally represents the most substantial basic components of colour-theory and geometry. The four geometric basic shapes — the circle, the rectangle, the triangle and the square — are key to the composition of the piece. The dress represents the circle, the fez represents the rectangle, the triangular pattern represents the triangle, and a line surrounding the entire piece represents the square. The colour composition of the painting is just as consequent. Faye used the basic colours Cyan (red), Magenta (blue), Yellow and Key (black). Every imaginable colour can be mixed based on the CMYK colour model. While Faye's colour choice stands for the fundamentals of human visual perception; circle, rectangle, triangle and the square are the basis for the calculation of volumes and areas. They are the basis for geometry and astronomy, central for the calculation of shape, size, relative position of objects (planets) and the properties of space; the foundation for the digitisation of space (Ehrhart-Polynomial).

HG: The discussion we had around Faye's piece allowed us to think more specifically around the aesthetic forms of time. Time as a form. The futuristic. We came across, for example, images of the works by the late Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez who built these fantastic utopian city models, which we can easily recognise as futuristic, as urban fabulations of a Kinshasa to come. Or the works of Méga Mingiedi, who in a way follows in the footsteps of Kingelez and creates large-format drawings of imaginary takes on Kinshasa that include elements of collage. In a way Mingiedi creates his own forms of skylines which can also be understood as urban timelines. In some of his drawings/collages you can find colonial figures like Leopold II next to Patrick Lumumba, or Mobuto Sese Seko next to skyscrapers and images and signs of capitalism and commercialisation/advertising. One of the works we looked at is Mingiedi's *Kin Delestage* from 2010, which is a drawing-collage in extreme landscape format (45cm x 245cm). In addition to the presence of historical events, Mingiedi maps out a potential future for Kinshasa represented by skyscrapers with antennas and satellite dishes on their rooftops. In the foreground his intense layering of drawn lines produces a multi-layered information highway that refers to futuristic tropes/concepts of speed and acceleration that he envisions for a city such as Kinshasa, while remaining committed to history and the struggles for independence and its aftermath. As such, the piece can be read as a "seismographic skyline". So of course, Kingelez and Mingiedi's art works were easier and more accessible than the image that you referred to by Ousmane Faye.

One of the most challenging moments was the interest in masks that the archival work triggered — which, as we know, occupy a rather problematic object of study in the field of African Studies, but also more broadly in white conceptions of "Africa". In the course of our workshop and through your reading I became interested in masks, for the first time, really, and in particular around the notion of fictioning in your reading of them. So we dared to ignore anthropological or religious knowledge production around those objects and produced our own reading. And maybe our focus on masks is not so surprising after all as it also developed out of our interest in the Dogon cosmology — the Dogon in Mali who understand themselves as descendants from Sirius B which they could astronomically reference correctly long before any Western technical devices could capture the star that was only photographed and hence "proven" in its existence in the 1970s. Every fifty years — this is how long it takes for Sirius B to complete its orbit — large-scale festivities take place in which the mask becomes an

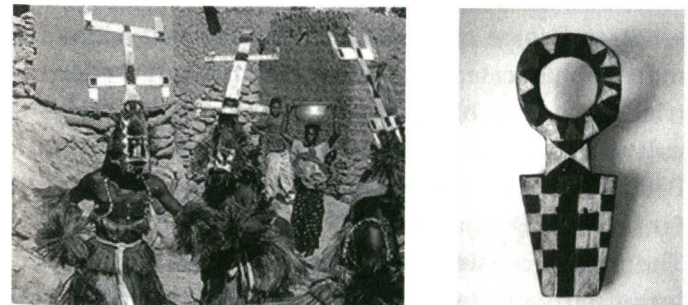


Figure 2 and 3. Dogon Masks (West-Africa) and Bedu Mask, Nafana (West-Africa).

important element.

One image that we came across shows such celebration and ritual. The masks here, as you pointed out, are not only disguising the face but the main part of each mask extends above the head and as such extends the body and connects it with something broader. It can thus be understood as a communication device. As such this image and the masks resonate with Sun Ra's myth-science and how artists and performers re-create themselves — in Sun Ra's case in times of experienced oppression and discrimination. The Dogon masks further point to the fictioning aspect of technology, or an understanding of technology that moves beyond a common understanding of science and which refers to different, possibly spiritual ways of making use of the tools available. We can also find this approach in your own paintings in which you use analogue antennas, umbrellas, or even a flat iron.

DKS: Communication is indeed another key component in my reading of the masks of the archive we have studied. Masks are communication tools in a broad sense and some of them seem to have extensions for more sophisticated communication beyond the terrestrial space. You have already mentioned the Sirius B cult of the Dogon people of Mali. We also looked at a Bedu mask of the Nafana people, which are located not far from the Dogon, in north-west Ghana, Bukina Faso. The mask consists of three sections, a trapezoid lower part, a rectangular centre part and circular top. The geometric-abstract painting of the piece is limited to triangles and squares. Two holes in the lower sec-

tion and support structures on the back indicate how the mask was worn. So the circular top, sitting on the rectangular central section, is actually in the position of an antenna. The mask turns into an emanation-tool, a receiver, a communication device.

I am applying this reading to many Senufo and Dogon masks, as well as to selected architecture, objects and two-dimensional works from West Africa. My Ghanaian background is not the only reason for my interest in the re-reading of these charged cultural keystones. Through my own work, I permanently negotiate extended communication, the navigation of spaces and the complexity of time. One of the repeated motifs I am using in my painting, drawing and performance work is the umbrella. I read a lot into the umbrella. It is a mobile device and you can carry it. It is a communication device as well because if you invite someone to walk with you under your umbrella, for example, you come into very close contact and can talk. It is a crafted space, with immediate exceptional conditions and it is a space that can travel. Also, if you flip the umbrella around, it could function as a satellite dish or a container, a vessel, so it has multiple meanings depending on how you position it.

HG: This focus on technology and communication devices in your art practice and your research is really intriguing — how you strategically repurpose existing technologies to re-engineer a collective understanding of politics and diaspora. In your work you seem to demand an investment in technological innovation irrespective of the market, consumerist needs and SF

capital by focusing less on new forms of technology, but, more importantly, on new forms of using existing technology. I read your work as fictioning technology but also as pointing to a spiritual use. In that sense you seem to bypass the question of access and the technological/digital divide, for example, and refocus our attention to what is already easily available to us.

What I could see from your research, though, is that you do not approach devices such as the umbrella naively, in that you conceptualise them as uncontested and unmarked devices. You seem to be aware of the violence and risks built into these devices, and their potentiality to create inequality and exploitation. In your research around the umbrella, for example, you trace their racialised uses and repurpose them from a theoretical and political diasporic position. In another conversation, you argued that these mutated technologies tap into “survival strategies that were, and still are, existential in the depths of the (Black) Atlantic, in outer space, or in social spaces that aren’t clearly defined — in spaces in-between”. Maybe you could talk a bit more about these spaces in-between, also in relation to your own work.

DKS: As we all know, the dimensions of space and time are far from being set in stone. In our current, rather linear-functioning society, I am interested in concepts that have the potential to help shape important aspects of the future. The technological aspect of Afrofuturism is not so much of interest to me. I try to re-contextualise the past in order to better understand the challenging present, while considering future concepts.

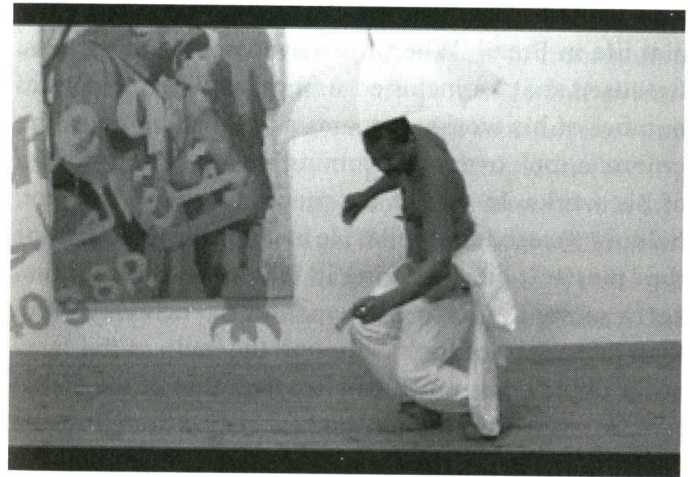


Figure 4. © Daniel Kojo Schrade (2010), *Blueberry Hill*, video still. Performance: Bayreuth.

I am an artist working mostly with mediums like the body and paint. In many of my performances, I use my body movements to spin a “net” throughout the performance space. At certain locations they get tied together and these intersections serve like synapses where, instead of neurological signals, various sounds get communicated by me talking, singing and creating noise. The “net” then functions similar to the strings of an instrument with the exception that its soundbox is the space.

Devices such as the umbrella that I can literally attach to my body, and extend my body with, are important within my work. As you mentioned, socio-culturally the umbrella has a very rich and complex history and artists seemed to be interested in them long before me. For example, the French painter

Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848), who depicted colonial life in Brazil. When I discovered his lithographs, I realised that he included umbrellas in a substantial number of his works. It seems as if at some point the umbrella took over by becoming the main narrator in/ of his works. In one of the pieces there is a servant, holding a closed umbrella. He is not just carrying it for the “master”; he is wearing it. It is almost like a musket, a safety device, a weapon, and as such way more than just a service tool. Although the body of the servant is depicted as much smaller than that of the “master”, extended by the umbrella and positioned in the centre of the print, the servant ends up being taller. We do not know whether this image composition means that Debret consciously considered the subtext of the piece, or whether he was rather a rapporteur, a witness of a moment. Besides its technical practicality — providing shadow, or shelter from rain — the umbrella is certainly a status symbol. Potentially extending the height of a body, marking and extending the space a body can claim while walking or sitting. The Ghanaian Aschanti people use umbrellas as such a signifier, to mark the social status of those who walk or sit within their space. So the dimensions of these umbrellas really matter.

For me painting was never just about depicting an object or a landscape. It is very important for me to go beyond that. So I start with information that comes from my own cultural archive and negotiate these complexities in a limited space, a canvas or a performance space. My work is heavily research-based and nurtured by a complex culmination of information

stored in my own cultural archive. One would not necessarily be able to reveal all the layers of information that are present in most of my paintings and performances. Painting allows me to work with layers, I can take advantage of the synergy of multiple interacting layers. If I prime a canvas yellow and, after several layers, end up painting it blue, the yellow will still matter. A colour will generally have a very different presence depending on what other colour is underneath. This is true for all items that come from my archive, not only in relation to colour. All layers and their content, abstract or representational, simultaneously matter — independent from their materiality and position.

HG: I want to follow up a bit on this complex layering of paint in your work — which allows a colour to disappear and reappear elsewhere, to resurface differently, as you mention. In addition to the layers of paint, you include charcoal lines, defining scriptural fragments and figurative elements. The scriptural fragments are often visible as sequences of letters that refer to fragments of a word that we cannot see in full but can often still make sense of. It draws our attention to the idea of fragments, of what is left — the residue, in a way. This way you create this in-between space that you referred to earlier and that you relate to the diasporic experience which first and foremost means moving in and out of space differently, understanding space differently. An experience that in a way extends beyond the canvas and can be found in unlikely spaces, in the extraterrestrial, for example — or as Jared Saxton puts it: “Black life is not lived in the world that the world

lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space” (2011: 28).

So we clearly have this spatial dimension in your work. But your art practice, the conscious layering of paint, also produces a complicated temporality. Whether you use over-sized canvases or miniatures your work is created in stages. As Tobias Nagl has pointed out, your work is “separated by breaks, in which [Daniel Kojo Schrade] applies layer upon layer of paint, demarcates, sticks, modifies, scrapes away, or recontextualizes through added figurative or scriptural elements” (2010: 17). So you literally leave your work for days and weeks before you add another layer to the work, which brings in the element of duration (in a Bergsonian sense of conceptualising time) to your art practice, in itself a temporal process that allows the palimpsest of time to emerge in your art works. In addition to your use of archival material, your work produces its own force to think about and act upon time (not only on space) and hence provides a very specific form of time-travel — a time-travel that is not understood as moving between clearly distinguishable dimensions of time. In fact, your painting practice subverts the layers of time as clearly distinguishable between past, present and future. As such your abstract paintings operate similarly to montage and collage — both used as conscious temporal practices in Afrofuturist works, as the works of Wangechi Mutu or Ellen Gallagher, for example, show, or the essayfilms of John Akomfrah.

We have mentioned earlier the practice of collage in relation to Mingiedi’s work which combines practices



Figure 5. © Daniel Kojo Schrade (2008), *Afronauts (Brother Beethoven) o8Co4*, oil-acrylic paint on canvas: 215cm x 380cm.

of cut-up of existing images, which also always means cutting the line of association, and the subsequent, at least partial re-assembly of new associations, a form of montage of previously disparate fragments, that are reassembled into new worlds. Hence, we have an understanding of collage as possibly creating visual fictional spaces from fragmentation, as a form of world-making in mutation. It is this fictioning element of montage and collage that interests me and that I can also see in your art practice. You have elements of this in your painting — in your use of the archival figures, for example, in your inclusion of references to inspirational figures and texts, such as the crown as a reference to Basquiat, in your layering and reassembly of fragments that provide a complicated temporal relationship between the different elements. Similar

to the practice of collage, you also propose worlds within worlds while consciously working against a linear understanding of time by proposing a rhythm, in a way, that presents itself as an open-ended narrative that visually enters our historical consciousness.

DKS: The repeated stacking and overlapping of various layers within the painting above (*Afronauts 08Co4*), indeed works like a painterly palimpsest. The viewer is asked to sense the content in-between the layers. My paintings provide space for multiple cultural dialogs in which the consideration of the conditions and options of such a dialogue is just as important as the dialogue itself. Icons, signs, letters and figurative fragments, which aggregated appear homogeneous, carry subtexts within multiple semantic levels. They allow a flip-flop between heterogeneity and ambivalence. Similar to Lee "Scratch" Perry, who confronts his vis-à-vis with mirrors, this painting holds a mirror up to whatever the viewer is able to decode and pigeonhole.

My non-representational painting is challenged by rather obvious icons, letters and figurative elements, while the painting as such refuses to be decisive. In 1999, after I had produced my first painting entitled *Afronaut*, I turned this title into a leitmotif for an ongoing series of *Afronaut* paintings. Although the *Afronaut* often appears as a figure that can be interpreted and read as human, carrying some kind of tool or device, *Afronauts* function as icons on the same level as symbols or written texts. Before the *Afronaut* series, other series entitled *Brother Beethoven*, *Du Bois*, *Gong Gong* or *StopLookListen* contributed and still contribute their

leitmotif to my painting. A motif is something that is moved, like a locomotive, a place that moves. In painting, the motif is thus something that has been moved, maybe something that has been moved into the picture from a different context. There are not only motifs in painting, but also in songs, in music of course, but the accusation that motifs can deceive is mainly restricted to the visual arts, to painting — to the "icons" in pictures. The *Afronaut*, however, symbolises/stands for the stranger on the fringes of society, in-between cultures. The stranger who can use this position of exceptional strength to unhinge topoi, symbols and fragments; alienate them and present them beyond common rubrics.

So the multiple layers within the subject can be explored in many ways, beyond fascinating space travels outside of the solar system. Tricksters, similar to *Afronauts*, for example, are traveling space and time in different, actually more sophisticated ways. They are not limited to conventional measures of time and space. Tricksters are not restricted to conventional technologies; they are very creative in their traveling.

HG: I think you are right, your *Afronaut* is in a way a trickster and hence operates differently from the *Afronaut* figure proposed, for example, by Christina de Middel in her photograph essay book *The Afronauts* (2012) — in which she visually tells the story of Zambia during independence, alongside this historical moment's hopes and aspirations, hinged on the person of Edward Makuka Nkoloso. Nkoloso, founder and director of the Lusaka National Academy of Science,

Space Research and Philosophy, and an elementary school teacher with many futuristic visions, imagined a “space-age Zambia”, which he formulated in a 1964 newspaper article with the title, “We’re going to Mars! WITH A SPACEGIRL, TWO CATS AND A MISSIONARY”. He trained ten men and a woman, who was supposed to be the first woman in space. The missionary was warned “not to force Christianity on the people of Mars if they didn’t want it”. Nkoloso’s aim was to launch the rocket from Zambia’s Independence Stadium — Zambia would have been on Mars only a few days after independence. Nkoloso’s dream was never realised, because, among other issues, the *spacegirl* as well as the two cats had gotten pregnant, and the seven million pounds applied for to the UNESCO were not granted. This past future project is also taken up by Frances Bodomo in her film *Afronauts* (2014) — a still of that film is the cover image of this book.

de Middel, however, takes this narrative as a starting point and translates it into an imagery which uses familiar references to an astronaut figure into an “Africa” context by fabricating the space suit with supposedly “African” cotton textile and next to an elephant. In a way, there is a resemblance to Yinka Shonibare’s *Space Walk* (2002), in which the space explorer is similarly identifiable as an Afronaut due to the “African” fabric used — and here it is important to remember that Shonibare was already working with African cloths in the 1990s, so long before de Middel. What is not acknowledged in *The Afronauts* photo essay — and what is so visible and compelling in your work — is the alternative ways of moving in and out of space. You do

not seem to be really interested in space travel as such — or whether projects like the one by Nkoloso were in any way realistic or (rather) disillusional. This is not what you are interested in in your own conceptualisation of the Afronaut figure, as you have just pointed out. Your work points to a different conception of space altogether — acknowledging that the violence that constitutes blackness necessarily means moving in and out of space differently, which is also clearly articulated in your insistence on the in-between space. As such the normative dimensions of space — and time as we discussed earlier — do not hold any longer, and your work forces us to theorise and acknowledge both concepts differently. Your work insists on a sense of otherworldliness — in a temporal and spatial sense — that is always already implied in blackness — through movement, alienation, conscious mutation and practices of disidentification in fabulation.