

# Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on “African” Conceptualism

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## Is There Such a Thing as African Conceptualism?

The term *conceptual art* has been so institutionalized that it has come to occupy a narrow strip of territory encompassing only discourses flowing out of very specific practices. Most of these practices are connected to or subsumed within the artistic discourses of postwar Western Europe and the United States. Moreover, the established meanings of these activities have often proceeded from the idea that what makes such art *conceptual* begins with the notion of the dematerialization of the object, as well as the privileging of language-based art, institutional critique, the nonvisual, and on the litany goes. My intention here is neither to rehearse this litany nor simply to displace its firmly rooted meanings, but to add to it and, where possible, to enlarge its constricted art historical certitude. Hence, what would it mean, this late in the day, to nominate as “conceptualist” something that acts like, looks like, and resembles those practices, but whose chief concerns may lie elsewhere? Such is the question one must pose for anything called African conceptualism.

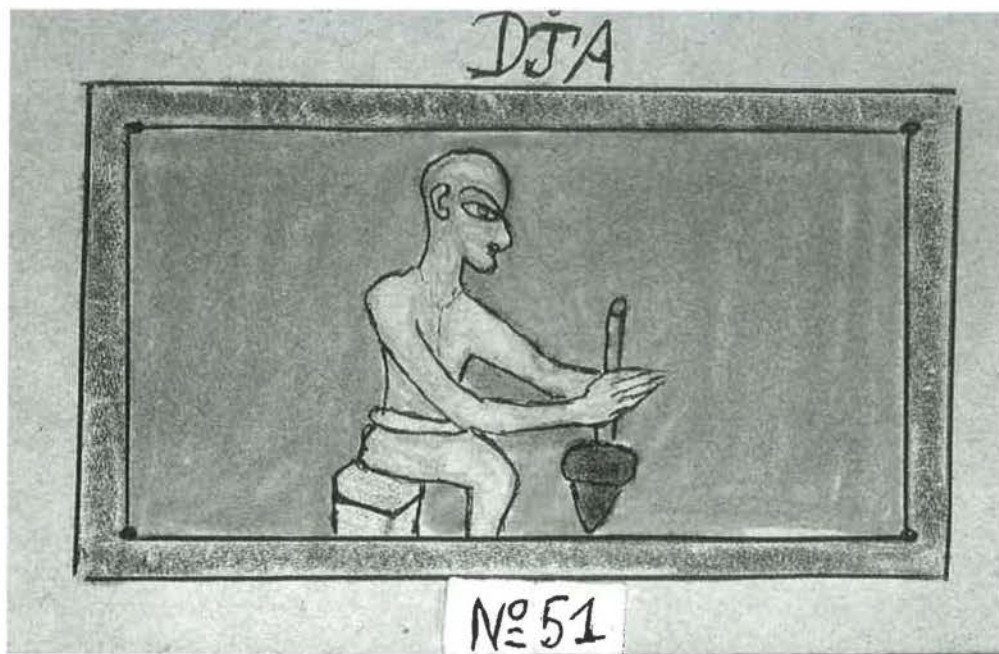
Given the complex perceptual issues that are its fundamental organizing principles, conceptual art, as elaborated in the U.S. and Western Europe, would seem to exclude Africa. Such an exclusion would, of course, be in line with the already prevailing disqualification of African aesthetic thought from the broader argument of modernism. Despite the different experi-

ences of modernity globally, this art historical conceit remains firmly entrenched in different institutional and epistemological operations. Thus the notion of pleading a particular area’s case for inclusion remains a fraught one. There has still not been a way to remedy that neglect, and here will not be the venue to do so.

It is crucial to state this from the outset, because our assignment as curators for this exhibition is to locate the particular point at which the attitude called *conceptualism* made its first appearance in different areas of the world. If the claim for conceptual art has always been made in reference to its relationship to the dominant language of modernism, and if its institutional valorization has situated it as the most significant artistic breakthrough of the 20th century after cubism, then it must be allowed that this shift is deeply engrained in the earlier opportunity which African sculptural objects offered the early modernists to escape the convoluted *mise-en-scènes* of impressionism and classical European art. This is an old story, but worth reiterating. Indeed, how does Africa participate in this exercise in constructive revisionism at the core of which resides the idea of the *avant-garde*, with so clear a history located in the metropolitan identity of the Western city?

To ask this invites a series of other questions. To wit: What *is* conceptual art as applied to the conditions that exist in Africa? So identified, would these artistic practices, which might

**FIGURE 75.** Willem Boshoff, page from *Kykafrikaans*, 1980, 95-page, soft-cover book. Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami.



**FIGURE 76.**

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, *Relevés des signes observés sur noix de cola* (*Readings from Signs Observed on Kola Nuts*), 1981–94, colored pencil and ballpoint on cardboard. Contemporary African Art Collection (C.A.A.C.), in collaboration with André Magnin, courtesy of Frédéric Bruly Bouabré.

also be “corroded” and “contaminated” by other cultural and political/ideological principles, alter the definition, indeed the material and intellectual manifestation of what is or is not conceptual art? Would conceptualism in Africa, like its Euro–North American counterpart, constitute a significant shift within the dominant institutional framework as to posit a new language or paradigm? If so, what specific labels were applied to this shift, how were they received and discussed? Do these labels constitute a movement in which many artists participated? Quite simply, is there such a thing as conceptual art in Africa, or is it just a term imported as part of a neocolonial enterprise of modernist art history? Most importantly, in deciding what is conceptual in Africa, whose model of thought and what methods of distinction should be applied in dismissing or admitting works, attitudes, actions, and propositions?

These are vexing questions, yet pursuing them is key to broadening the place of African modernity within the larger discussions of 20th-century art. One way to address these questions is to ignore all preset rules. But a more promising strategy is to set up a critical correspondence between the disjunctive temporalities of the African imaginary and the

highly differentiated space of Western institutional and epistemological reflections on modern art.

Conceptual art, as commonly understood, attempted a fundamental restructuring of the viewer’s relationship to the art object. First, its critique of systems of representation and presentation pitched artmaking toward the dematerialization of the object, thereby placing less value on the perceptual codes through which art is traditionally received. This strategy sought to challenge the autonomous value placed on objects, which value is, in turn, connected to cultural ways of looking. Second, conceptual art privileged linguistic, informational, and philosophical systems over materialist modes of production, making communication, performance, documentation, process, actions, and the world outside the studio part of the intensive phenomenology of process. It should be added, however, that this understanding of conceptual art—in view of alternative information that has since become available—is only a partial account. Still, there is a reality—hegemonic or not—that is not so easily evaded.

My task, then, is to examine how this understanding of conceptualism relates or corre-

sponds to the fundamental philosophical questions of African systems of signification. And we find that in classical African art, conceptualism would seem oxymoronic. While many African cultures produced exquisite objects, many of which clearly permitted early Western modernists to explore different forms of representation through spatial disembodiment, it bears remarking that African objects were never ends in themselves, nor did they acquire any form of autonomy as sculpture through their objecthood. While in Western art, the cycle of art is completed in the aesthetic realm of display, in African traditions this finale is achieved through a desublimination strategy that perpetually displaces the object and places greater significance on non-visual codes and performative actions, particularly through linguistic puns and aphoristic utterances. By repeatedly making contingent the status of the object as an autonomous signifier, the artwork functions within a fluid system of exchanges and relationships among object, artist, and audience.

In African art, two things are constantly in operation: the work and the idea of the work. These are not autonomous systems. One needs the other and vice versa. A paraphrase of an Igbo idea will clarify this relationship: where there is something standing which can be seen, there is something else standing next to it which cannot be seen but which accompanies the object. In its material basis, African art is object-bound, but in its meaning and intention it is paradoxically anti-object and antiperceptual, bound by the many ways of conveying ideas whereby speech or oral communication are highly valued. The work of an artist such as Frédéric Bruly Bouabré is an extension of this idea. And if Bouabré sought to put his words and ideas on paper, there is a clear ideological motivation for doing so. Yet

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evidence of the dematerialized object does not in itself mean that the object is not valued or that the culture of visual memory is deadened by the weight of sight. I certainly cannot identify a self-reflexivity in which artists deliberately sought to remove their work from functioning on the visual level. More to the point, in African art there is an interpellation of the object and language.

While the argument laid out so far would seem to ground conceptualism in the classical art of Africa, contemporary practice is actually a much trickier and even contradictory enterprise. The conceptual work of the Senegalese group *Laboratoire Agit-Art* and the South African artists included in this exhibition was never directed at maintaining a relationship with older African philosophical systems, as in Bouabré's case. In many ways, they deploy the same conceptualist strategies prevalent in the West. The reason for this perhaps is their shared relationship with concepts of modernity. But this is where the comparison ends, since the motivations supporting each strategy were different and the results sought were

widely divergent. Malcolm Payne, for example, resorted to conceptualist tactics—dematerialization, language works, and a process he calls “confusion acts”—as a response to political conditions under apartheid. In African conceptualism, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of politics and responses to political institutions by artists operating under dictatorships.

As far as I can tell, there has never existed anything that can be definitively declared a conceptual “movement” in Africa, at least one in which everybody agrees as to its parameters. A sustained investigation has yielded only a few artists, and in the case of *Laboratoire Agit-Art*, a single group. Hence, conceptualism in Africa is a practice associated with scattered, isolated, and solitary examples and never blossomed into a full-fledged artistic discourse. Along with the received definitions of conceptualism as propagated by the Euro–North American axis, the mid-1960s has often been “universally” accepted as its point of periodization and entrance into “art world” currency. For the artists considered here, the conceptualist moment begins in the early 1970s.

**FIGURE 77.** Malcolm Payne, *Past, Present, Future*, 1973, still from videotape. Collection of the artist.



### **Laboratoire Agit-Art: Excavating the Social and the Political in the Postcolony**

The 1960s was the moment of Africa's emergence, a decade of incredible political, social, and cultural ferment. As many countries agitated for and gained independence from years of debilitating colonial domination by Europe, it is fair to say that they shared a political context connected to the processes of decolonization and the struggle against Western hegemonic influence. Throughout Africa, the urgent political and ideological questions of the postindependent nation-state, accelerated and pressurized by rapid urbanization, gave rise to new concepts of identity and the individual. Linked to this sociopolitical complexity was the tense relationship between ideas of modernity and a nationalistic sense of tradition and culture. At one end of the continent, a Pan-Africanist notion of modernity, led by Ghana's first prime minister Kwame Nkrumah armed with scientific socialism, became a readymade context from which the significant reformulation of Africanism was proposed. In North Africa, the Suez Canal crisis launched Gamal Abdel Nasser's Pan-Arab movement. Nasser's aim, like Nkrumah's in Ghana, was to rally unity against Western imperialism.

But by the mid-1970s, the political transformation that swept the colonial powers out of Africa was in crisis. The prospects of, and euphoria over, the social and political reconstruction of the independent countries had dimmed considerably as a series of dictatorships and repressive regimes entered the scene. It is within this troubled era of the postcolony that the most significant expression of avant-gardism, and a practice that can be labeled conceptual, would emerge.

The Dakar-based *Laboratoire Agit-Art* was founded in 1973–74 by an interdisciplinary group of artists, writers, filmmakers, performance artists, and musicians. *Laboratoire's* aim was to transform the nature of artistic practice from a formalist, object-bound sensibility to practices based on experimentation and agitation, process rather than product,



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**FIGURE 78.** Issa Samb of Laboratoire Agit-Art, 1994.

ephemerality rather than permanence, political and social ideas rather than aesthetic. Audience participation was of paramount importance to the group's work, which privileged communicative acts over the embodied object. Neither utopian nor self-referential, Laboratoire grounded its actions in the immediate sociopolitical situation (fig. 78). Whether or not the group was aware of similar practices in the West, Laboratoire's position on art after the object is supremely consistent with Lucy Lippard's assertion that conceptual art was "emerging from two directions: art as idea and art as action." In this sense, according to Ima Ebong, Laboratoire Agit-Art

has attempted nothing less than a reshaping of both the language of Senegalese art and the terms on which artistic production occurs in that country ... the group engages aspects of Western modernism, but it concerns itself with the conceptual ideologies of the avant-garde rather than with Modernist formalism. Its tactics of provoca-

tion and agitation in keeping with its name, suggest a connection with the Western anti-art performance aesthetic. These artists work outside the government-sponsored system of galleries and museums, distancing their collaborative creations from the painting on canvas, an art form subject to a deeply rooted system of commodity control.<sup>1</sup>

An important precursor to Laboratoire Agit-Art can be found in the work of Nigerian musician, performer, political activist, and social iconoclast Fela Anikulapo Kuti. From the mid-1960s, Fela's relentless critique of the postcolonial state and his challenge to the corrupt political order were exemplary links to the strategies later adopted by the group. Throughout his career, which included founding a political party and running for president in 1979 (before being disqualified by the military regime), Fela never made a distinction between his music, life style, and political resistance. Revered by the public and constantly censored by the government, in the early '70s Fela declared his complex of buildings in Lagos—living quarters, a nightclub, and a recording studio—an independent territory, which he named Kalakuta Republic. All actions, he stated (especially as related to drugs and sex), were legal in his republic, and all applicable Nigerian laws declared null and void:

In 1977, two members of Laboratoire Agit-Art, El Hadji Sy and Issa Samb (a.k.a. Joe Ouakam), visited Kalakuta Republic. According to Issa, they were drawn by Fela's courage and his avant-gardism, which went well beyond mere aesthetic reaction.<sup>2</sup> Laboratoire's focus on the impermanent, contingent character of actions informed by a critique of institutional power "corresponds in great part to this notion of the socialization of an aesthetic, in the form of an activist avant-garde that inserts itself within the wider cultural discourse of Senegal but refuses to follow its institutional and formal criteria."<sup>3</sup> This aggressively contextual relationship to regimes of legitimation and power distinguishes Laboratoire Agit-Art from many other African groups of the same period which

were operating within a proto-modernist framework directed at recovering lost origins, rather than problematizing the meaning of "origin" in the broader analysis of contemporary culture in the postcolony.

### Signs and Systems: Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

While the practices of Laboratoire Agit-Art were concerned with communication through the "socialization of an aesthetic" and activism against the postcolonial state, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré's work is embedded in the traditional conceptual issues of classical African art. His interest in signs and systems, language and symbology, subjectification over representation, vision over sight, classification, documentation, lists, codification, etymology, archival practices, and experimentation with written text as opposed to the production of images—all are related to his attentive transcription of the oral culture of his people, the Bété.

Bouabré was born in 1923 in Zéprégühé, Ivory Coast. Originally a translator and colonial informant for Western anthropologists and ethnographers, in 1948 he was convinced by a vision to abandon this work and dedicate himself to recording, transcribing, and translating the rapidly disappearing oral culture of the Bété. According to the dictates of his vision, Bouabré christened himself Sheik Nadro (One Who Does Not Forget), and his activities shifted completely and permanently to that of taxonomist and artist. Language, for Bouabré, is the supreme tool for preserving memory and reconstructing history, and also serves as a model of representation through which ideas and the everyday life of a dynamic society can be explored and explained. This commitment to instrumentalizing language ultimately led to his invention of a Bété alphabet. His quest, it seems, is to make transparent the meanings buried in obscure phenomena, to make them available as source material for the writing of history. Bouabré is a decipherer of dreams, of images that hover at the edge of consciousness. He is equally a cosmologist of signs and numbers, a taxonomist

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of ethnographic knowledge, a recorder of his people's history.

In Bouabré's work, there is a cabalistic attention to the structure of numbers and words, their multiple associative meanings and permutations used to delve into the murky depths of the unconscious. He proposes theories and explanations, constructs maps, compiles indexes, writes compendia. He has created a pictographic alphabet of more than 450 characters, dedicated to excavating and preserving the disappearing oral history of his people. Bouabré's unique narrative form, composed on tarotlike cards, often combines text and image in a detailed elaboration of complex systems of communication (fig. 172).

However, Bouabré does not only make images in the quasi-naïve form that has led many to view him as some kind of mystic of the primeval African world, or as an untutored curiosity. For almost fifty years, he has produced an astonishing array of books on classical African systems of representation, for instance, *Le langage des symboles africains dans les musées* (The Language of African Symbols in the Museum, 1975), *Le calendrier du "monde noir" d'origine* (Bété) (The Calendar of the "Black World" of [Bété] Origin, 1982), *Le musée du visage africain* (The Museum of the African Face, 1975), etc. But the singular character of his work lies in his sensitivity to the most mundane elements. For example, he sees in discarded leaves of kola nuts (fig. 76) and orange rinds signs and meanings that could be transposed to readable visual propositions. As an archivist and deconstructionist, he has studied the staggering meanings of scarifications on African faces, revealing them to be as much a linguistic form as a communal rite of passage.

### The Language Project of Rachid Koraïchi

Born in Algeria but now living in exile in Tunisia, Rachid Koraïchi has relentlessly produced works in which he utilizes the Arabic script to delineate urgent political questions. Like the classical forms of Islamic art,

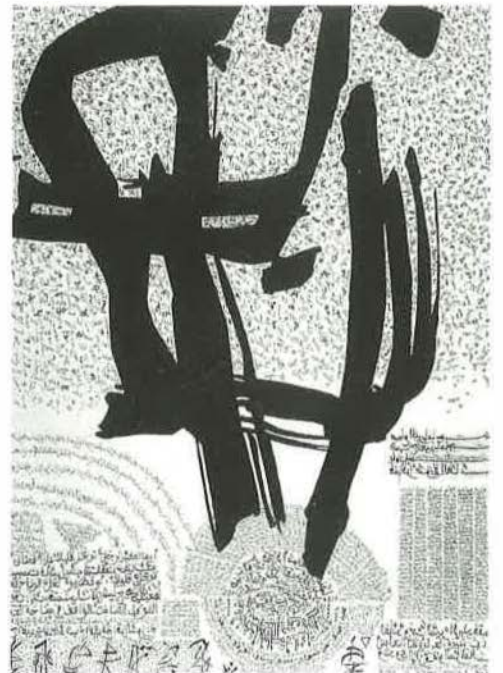
Koraïchi's art is devotional but resistant to ideological fundamentalism. Spare and austere, his works are rendered on expansive sheets of paper, fields of black text on white laid out in alternating vertical and horizontal bands that surge, deviate, retreat, invert, detour, and veer all over the page like a musical score (fig. 79). The structure of Koraïchi's work is both graphic and calligraphic, expository and nonsensical, what Abdelkebir Khatibi characterized as the "metamorphosis of the visible ... these transmutations, these translations from one sign system to another, one image to another ... a spatial paradigm oriented towards all languages, from pictographs to a form of writing resembling ideographs, by way of Arabic graphic (here exquisite), whether it be legible or illegible, whether it be inverted or even rove in all directions ... as if seeking escape from the confines of the unframed images."

Yet Koraïchi's art is not to be reduced to writing alone. His investment in signs and symbols means also that he has worked assiduously to decompose the script, to turn its cursive elegance into personal codes and concrete poetry. It would appear that with this decomposition, Koraïchi writes on the margins of his own psychic exposition, sublimating his public political concern into the limits of the individual voice. His program is often both romantic and grand, as in his banners of gold-decorated texts that may seem like propaganda productions. Or it can be caustic and pensive, tough and combative, melancholic and mournful, as in his responses to political injustice and exile.

Throughout a career that has spanned at least three decades, Koraïchi has set out a rigorous intellectual program from which he simultaneously works inside and outside the parameters of institutional authority. His drawings and writings, at once lyrical and iconoclastic, borrow from classical Islamic texts and the work of contemporary writers and poets. His attentiveness to language as the repository of individual and collective action is manifested in his adoption of both traditional lyrics and subversive political rhetoric to critique the

repressive regimes of his region. Yet Koraïchi is not a heretic, nor is he interested in that ugly, stereotypical image of Islam as fundamentalist, obdurate to new forms of discourse. He comes from a tradition of "enlightened Islam," which in recent years has begun to gather steam in many Islamic countries where the subject of Islam's ethical humanism is vigorously debated.

Still, in encountering Koraïchi's work in the realm of contemporary art, how do we resist the temptation to read it as decorative motif and not language? Because non-Roman-derived script may be confused with the decorative (what I will call the recourse to the sign as calligraphy), it is often difficult to assess the proper place of art that works inside its formal basis. In the context of this exhibition, then, Koraïchi's work is somewhat of a paradox. It raises the question of what to do with works which, if we strictly adhere to the judgment of classical conceptual matrices in Europe and the United States, both understand and deracinate that judgment. This



**FIGURE 79.** Rachid Koraïchi, *Print and Calligraphy from A Nation in Exile* (Amman: Darat al Funun, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, 1997).







FIGURE 81.  
Kendell Geers, *Brick*, 1988, mixed media  
installation. Private collection.

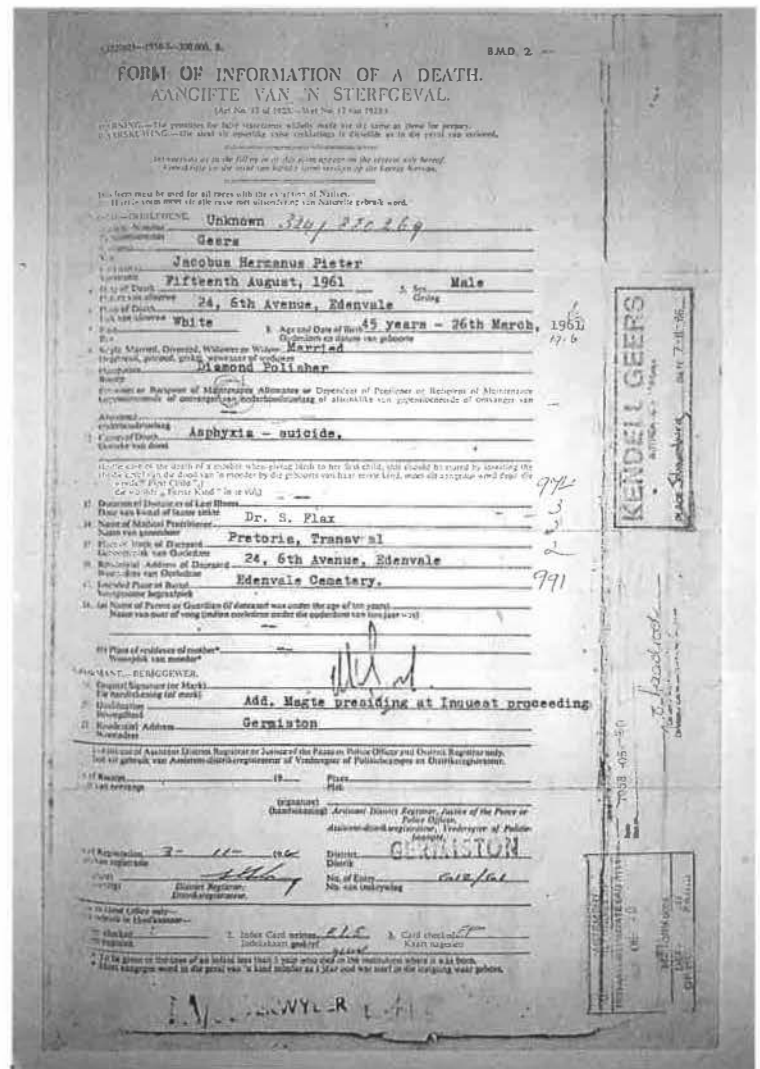


FIGURE 82.  
Kendell Geers, *Death Certificate*, 1961–88,  
found object. Private collection.

### South Africa

Until the official end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa suffered under an often violently enforced system of racial segregation, and was for years culturally isolated from the rest of the world. The work of the South African artists in this exhibition—Willem Boshoff, Malcolm Payne, and Kendell Geers—must therefore be considered in the light of this unique history. The reason for such an examination is not to fetishize what is obvious about South Africa’s historical memory and its exile from the rest of Africa, but because of the ways in which the work of these artists critically implicates and interrogates that history.

Willem Boshoff’s conceptual practice is an elaborate effort dedicated to the study of ignorance, that is, pushing to the point of dissolution the idea that the world is knowable. Imprisoned by South African authorities for his refusal to serve in the military (the

micrographic work, *Kleinpen I* [fig. 171], was produced in prison as a way to maintain mental equilibrium), Boshoff considers rational knowledge a useless mechanism for mapping its revelation. Described as an orthodox conceptualist, in the sense that he keeps, in Gerardo Mosquera’s apt phrase, a clean concentration on language, Boshoff finds in obscure and obsolete words a way to construct a map that denies sight but empowers knowledge.

Boshoff compiles extensive dictionaries and encyclopedia of names, words, plants. The laborious exactitude of his compositions (fig. 194), collocations, and accumulations does not operate on the thrill of esotericism, but on the recognition of the vastness of the world and the ideological systems that circumscribe it. Paradoxically, Boshoff insists he is not interested in teaching: “I write dictionaries of words that I hope nobody will understand.”<sup>4</sup>

The very invention of these dictionaries, far from reanimating interest in what they seek to represent or reveal, is first intended as a detour, a way of denying the rationalist’s persistent will to knowledge. Mosquera has characterized this process as a kind of imaginary travel: the artist in his room, ruminating, chewing over, constructing and deconstructing, calculating, as “he stages the relations between words, meanings, and visual and tactile images, and discusses language and its material base and representation. ... possessed by insomnia ... he navigates dictionaries, and tries to open routes through the oceans of language.”<sup>5</sup> Here language becomes buried in language, referring only to itself.

But Boshoff is not content to leave things as they are. He seeks other strategies for making available what words represent, how their semantic meaning might be reconstituted. His study of linguistics and Wittgensteinian

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**FIGURE 83.** Malcolm Payne, *Good Mourning; Good Night*, 1973, slide projections.

philosophy led him to explore other ways of rendering words into pulsating signs, resulting in *Kyafrikaans* (1980; figs. 75, 80), a serial work of concrete poetry and his most sustained inquiry into the nature of words and obsolescence.

If Boshoff, like Bouabré, keeps a clean concentration on language, Malcolm Payne's very complex and critical work keeps a clean concentration on the political and subversive. Here the political functions not on a literal level, but as an act of contamination. Rather than responding to an oppressive regime via the clichéd fist-and-guns of the revolutionary artist, Payne engages in acts of subterfuge by penetrating ideological spaces, "carefully contrived confusion ... [as] the only weapon to keep my creative impetus vaguely alive."<sup>6</sup> This struggle to maintain creative independence has typically been perceived as anarchic. For the 1973 Aquarius Art Festival in Durban, for instance, he proposed to explode underwater a huge quantity of red dye as part of the festivities marking the Afrikaner celebration of Blood River Day, during which they commemorate their defeat of the Zulus. According to Payne, "The idea was further

nuanced to include the ultimate irony, to sell the idea to the organizers, explaining to them that they could achieve for themselves and followers an enhanced spiritual and religious experience if the river ran red."<sup>7</sup> The organizers rejected the proposal.

Of all the African work included in this exhibition, Payne's early projects seem conclusively *conceptual*, in their orientation and rejection of the material base of what he called "an overdose of Greenbergian and late Caro modernism." This he endured as a student at St. Martin's School of Art in London in 1973. Partly because of his early exposure to the critical discourse of Western conceptualism, and his contact with the work of artists like Beuys, the practices of Art & Language, and others who were seeking broader spaces for their ideational propositions, Payne sought ways to transpose some of their theories to the situation in his own country.

Upon his return to a South African art scene still enthralled to Clement Greenberg, Payne turned increasingly to performance, using endurance as a metaphor for the individual's quest to transcend the political and intellectual fragmentation imposed by apartheid (fig. 83). Payne was among the first young artists to explore systems of representation of the self, and the state's overwhelming control over defining that self. Identity as an intense site

of subjectification thus became a basis for resistance. Appropriating the tools of surveillance, Payne began to meld video, slide projections, photographs, and facsimiles of his body and face into a conceptually sophisticated practice, the goal of which was to deny the state's final right of adjudication in the **construction of identity (figs. 77, 170)**. Payne's intense meditation on the political possibility of subversion laid the groundwork for many artists who would delve into similar questions twenty years later.

One such artist is Kendell Geers. Following Payne's stellar example, Geers has channeled his provocative and vigilant sensibility into an art that acts as an incendiary device within systems of representation (fig. 81, 82). If art is activity, then Geers has made his own existence the signal vector of its convergence, completely blurring the distinction between his life and art, and by extension, self-regulation and institutional administration. Hence, Geers's art is an activity located not inside the solitude of the studio but in the rough-and-tumble world of actions, of political, social, and cultural engagement. In 1995 Geers was invited to exhibit his work at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the institutional showcase of South African art, its classical architectural design by Edwin Lutyens a reminder of the country's ugly and continuing colonial domination. Rather than making



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anything that might be construed as an object or merit consideration as an artwork, Geers offered *Title Withheld (Boycott)*, in which he emptied an entire room within the museum of its contents. With this attack on the institution (and by extension, some of his fellow artists), Geers asserted that art could refuse and resist the ideology of museological practice. Thus, the seemingly empty room questioned the pervasive modernist hunger for market-oriented postcolonial objects. As an amplification of this debate, *Title Withheld (Boycott)* returns us to the vault of the museum, to its ethnographic storage rooms and holding docks, where art and cultural objects await dispersal into the myriad networks of institutional recontextualization. It is precisely what has been cleared and evacuated from the gallery's walls that is the subject of this intensely aware intervention.

Moving away from Geers's longstanding relationship with the traditions of the modernist avant-garde (an example is his alteration of his birthday to May 1968 as a gesture of solidarity with the students who initiated the summer of civil disobedience in Europe), we return to his position via postmodernism as it neatly converges on the question of identity. In *Untitled (ANC, AVF, AWB, CP, DP, IFP, NP, PAC, SACP)* (1993–94), a work whose genesis is directly linked to the political chaos and violence that ravaged South Africa in the months leading to the country's first democratic elections, Geers staged an elaborate set of political actions in the wake of the murder of a member of the Inkatha Freedom Party. On July 19, 1993, the day of the killing, in defense of the political rights of the individual within an intolerant political culture, Geers decided to join all the official parties of South Africa. He would comment that, in this way, it would be impossible to lose. Of course, this response to the institutionalization of politics through party affiliation is an ironic one, for it is the very basis of belonging that produces the kind of rigid fetishization of identity that continues to plague his country with violence. By joining all these parties—culminating on February 7, 1994, when the ultra right-wing Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) issued him an

identity card—Geers sought not only to claim all these false identities, but to mark them suspect beyond measure.

As we begin to sift through the material that accompanies this exhibition, we will find new networks and connections will emerge, some familiar, some obscure. In this way, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* will have accomplished its goal of illuminating the forces that propelled artists to find a detour and, in effect, change the ground rules regulating art production and the very language of art itself. At their most critically aware, the African artists considered here have met those challenges, and the richness and acuity of their interventions have left their own indelible mark. Perhaps now we can begin to embrace other accounts of conceptualism that do not always adhere to the strict regimes of orthodox conceptual art, but document the multivalent strategies and diverse motivations behind its appearance globally. This section on African conceptualism should thus be seen as a source for future investigation, which no doubt will uncover other practices that I have overlooked.

## Notes

1. Ima Ebong, "Negritude: Between Mask and Flag, Senegalese Cultural Ideology and the 'Ecole de Dakar,'" in *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, ed. Susan Vogel (New York: Center for African Art, 1991), 198.
2. Interview with Issa Samb by the author, Dakar, April 1998.
3. Clémentine Deliss, "7+7=1: Seven Stories, Seven Stages, One Exhibition," in *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1995), 19.
4. Quoted in Ashraf Jamal, "Willem Boshoff: Blind Alphabet," in *Object Lessons* (São Paulo: 23rd São Paulo Bienal, 1996), 4.
5. Gerardo Mosquera, "Important and Exportant," in *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (Johannesburg and The Hague: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Africus Institute of Contemporary Art and Prince Claus Fund for Culture, 1997), 270.
6. Malcolm Payne, "Fault Lines—Breakwater Conference," speaker's notes for a visual presentation at the Breakwater Conference, Cape Town (unpublished).
7. Ibid.

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