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**Stacking the (Extra) Ordinary:
Wholesale and Resale Market Installations in Bariba and Bonoland**

When I agreed to talk about stacked objects in market installations two days ago, I thought I would run a brief slide show and informally discuss questions inspired by the pictures. But after Hilde Heynen's introduction yesterday, I thought it fitting to write a few pages so as to integrate these images into to the experience of architecture today. Before looking at the images, I want to foreground the presentation with the important and ever present *casse-tête*: "What is African architecture?" or better yet, "What is architecture **in** Africa?" While it will be difficult to inch towards a satisfying definition for architecture on the continent, it might be a useful first step to think about defining architecture itself. What is it, after all? As architects or architectural historians, this audience is perpetually faced with this question when drafting spaces and considering the human lives, which the designed spaces influence. Since the opening of the conference, I have been concerned with this question and have talked with many of you about it. Over plates of jollof rice and glasses of Castle milk stout our exchanges have helped reshape my understanding of what architecture can be. Already, I have begun to conceive of it as a network of distinct entities and connected experiences, which extend beyond the material. Architecture, as I have come to see it, is more than walls, floors, rooftops, and the relationship between positive and negative spaces. More fully, its definition

necessarily includes immaterial and non-construction entities such as conference conversations, travel journal entries, and printed matter. Architecture, as one of my new Dutch friends explained last night, is more of a composite environment than an edifice. It actively intermingles the intangible and tangible, the concrete and ephemeral. While these are likely basic conclusions for the architects assembly gathered here, for me, as an Art History student working in West Africa, particularly in Benin and Ghana, this recent dialogue has been a fruitful one and has sparked similar, but slightly different sets of questions which pertain specifically to Art History in Africa. What is sculpture? What is art? What are the limits of each? And how do they overlap or define one other? Even more, how do the academic institutions, which drive these fields of inquiry and purportedly nourish them, define and negotiate concepts like these? Finally, how are power, culture, and racial politics expressed through terms and definitions used to describe architecture, sculpture, performance, and art within an African frame?

Before attending this conference, my understanding of sculpture, architecture, performance, and art was significantly destabilized five years ago. Concepts, which seemed relatively simple and straightforward to me at the time, became twisted and topsy-turvy after a single encounter. The year was 2002, and like many stellar encounters I have known, this event occurred while riding a bicycle down the road. I had left my then-home town of Nikki, located in the heart of Bariba land (northern Benin Republic), to fetch fresh milk at a nearby Fulani camp north of the neighboring hamlet Sakabansi. While riding past a series of houses serendipity struck. Along the roadside, I came across an un imaginable and unforgettable stack of yams. This meticulous construction, composed of a near thousand tubers towered three-meters into the sky. Still today, I can't

understand how the stack could structurally rise above the mud brick homes just beyond it. Each individual yam making up the massive assemblage was accorded a specific position and placed in a calculated manner. As if they were natural bricks, perfectly set yam modules swirled upward and around creating a shape that visually recalled the structure a coiled-up, Leviathan snake or ancient Mesopotamian ziggurat.

Here, before this mountain of tubers, a series of questions arose. What was this thing? Was it a building? It was monumentally sized like a house, but it was uninhabitable. Did the lack of internal space within the stack deny it house status? Since it was not a house, did it then become a piece of monumental sculpture? Was this mass of yams just a stack or did it have more to it? Did the precise, self-conscious arrangement, express individual creativity or broader collective cultural norms of its maker? To me, the art history student, it recalled Robert Smithson earthworks and numerous Land Art projects in the U.S. Because of this, I asked myself, “Could this be art or an installation project, performance piece involving the body, time, and space?” “If this object were de-contextualized and set within the walls of a white-walled gallery in Chelsea, New York what would art historians and art critics have to say about it?” While I still don’t know how to define the yam pile or think of it in terms of architecture, sculpture, or installation art, the “Sakabansi stack” unveils the cultural constructedness and arbitrary delimitations of terms and concepts like architecture, sculpture, performance, and art. Such terms are fluid, tenuous, and changing entities and are in need of periodical reassessment.

I forgot to mention that the stack was beautiful. Especially, two hours after the initial encounter when the yam builder carefully covered the mound with overlapping

teak leaves to protect it from the afternoon sun. The velvety leaf blanket, which was placed on top of the stack, looked much like fish scales. Watching the covering process itself seemed to recall a slew of performance art process pieces within the Fluxus art movement. Of course, my personal aesthetic predilections and educational background inform by vision, ideas, interests, and research pursuits. And, with this in mind, I admit that the Sakabansi stack and its massive, dusty-brown, visual appeal captivated me at first glance. But as time went on, the visual appeal subsided and questions metaphorically lying behind the stack became more interesting than the object itself. Why make the stack? Why the cone shape? Why a gargantuan scale of one mound, not three?

The yams at Sakabansi led me to take a closer look at more humbly scaled roadside displays where wholesale commodities are sold. I looked for wood piles, charcoal stacks, maize bags, and pepper strips that line rural villages. These informal and individually managed roadside “selling-points” are important commercial nodes. These are the sites where raw materials like wood are converted to timbers and charcoal fuel for cooking and where they meet their purchasing public. There are myriad economic implications in these mounds and roadside stacks. Converted into visual terms stacks are manifest in different arrangements depending on the material, location, and merchant stacker. This summer, I have made an effort to track stylistic differences in wholesale and retail stacks of wood, shoes, and other market products from northern Benin, across Togo, and into Ghana. Next summer, I will continue my comparative study of retail stacks within central markets.

After looking at large wholesale constructions, I became interested in another important economic and aesthetic center for agricultural display, the institution of the

central market. From what I have observed in my experience looking at stacks in hamlet to urban markets across West Africa, some women and men arrange selected retail goods in alluring, inventive, and geometrically inspired ways. Seriation in tomato pyramids, mini-mango mounds, and okra constructions first solidified my interest in market geometries and organic advertising strategies. I began to see that “African art” spanned beyond the wooden sculpture or masquerade, expressions of African art have defined and continue to drive the field of African Art History.

I contend that a majority of merchants construct attractive visual displays as a daily priority that is in balance and integrated with economic pursuits. In my mind, food, fuel, cloth, and cosmetics become objects of professional creative play whereby the ordinary and extraordinary fuse. Looking at how creativity is expressed in markets might also be an added boon to the field of Art History as it will engage an underrepresented constituency of installation makers who are often women or from rural areas and could potentially integrate them into the respectable and established field of Art History. In order to better sell their goods, installation makers work in open spaces, market stalls, or with itinerant structures making their creative assemblages available for all to see. Focusing on everyday constructions could also help broaden the field of visual art studies in Africa in a positive way by, for example, destabilizing popular misconceptions and false dichotomies suggesting that art in Africa is either a) sacred, ritualistic, and occluded or b) public, spectacular, and performance-based. Looking at market installations might further call into question recalcitrant 19th century concepts of the artist genius, the singular masterpiece, and the import of object permanence, which continue to be uncritically superimposed onto creative culture in Africa today.