The Relational Archive of Georges Adéagbo

Kerstin Schankweiler

I visited Georges Adéagbo in Cotonou in September 2003 with the intention of making myself familiar with his artistic practice and researching his aesthetic resources and connections to art histories and visual culture in Benin, like the aesthetics and concepts of altars, the market, sign painting and the phenomenon of récupération (see Schankweiler 2012a:chap. 6, 2012b). One day during my stay, Adéagbo became interested in a book I had brought with me called Colonialism’s Culture, by Nicholas Thomas (1994). In the introduction, I had just read Thomas’s criticism of postcolonial theorists for their lack of awareness and engagement with the reality of the “others”: “It is striking … that many writers stress, in principle, the localized character of the colonial and postcolonial subjectivities, while resisting much engagement with either localities or subjects” (Thomas 1994:ix). Adéagbo asked me if he could take the book; however, he didn't want to read it, as I had first assumed. Instead he used it as the starting point for a complex system of references. He went inside his house, where he keeps his collection, his archive of heterogeneous artifacts, books, etc., brought out to the porch different objects that seemed to him to be related to the book, and started to install them (Fig. 1). Behind the book on a small white stool he positioned an old, white plastic jar, probably initially used for cream or soap. The label on the jar showed three dark-skinned girls in white clothes. The combination of objects made me think that Adéagbo was drawing attention on the photograph on the cover of Colonialism’s Culture, which also showed three children. In the center was a little white girl in a white dress and a broad-brimmed hat, holding hands with little black boys wearing only their underwear. While the girl smiled, extending out her leg coquettishly, both of the boys looked rather anxiously toward the camera. The caption says, “A Study in Black and White.” The juxtaposition of black and white is echoed in the graphic design of the book cover. The picture of the three children represents the asymmetry of power and the construction of the colonized as “infantilized” and “uncivilized” subordinates, which Thomas describes in his analysis of colonial culture.

Adéagbo brought further objects into play, too. On each side of the book he added an image with a religious theme: a Christian crucifixion scene and a depiction of the Kaaba in Mecca (Fig. 2). This juxtaposition made me think of missionary work in the context of colonial conquests. Below the newly installed Colonialism’s Culture, a book entitled Les Siècles Obscurs de l’Afrique (Africa’s obscure centuries) suggested notions of the “dark” and “unknown” in the stereotyping of Africa. In this way, the installation came together, gaining in complexity as it generated ever more associations.

By the end of the day the installation spread across the whole porch (Fig. 3). While the instigation of the piece, the image on the cover of the book, initially appeared to occupy the center of the ensemble, as the work expanded it gradually became decentered. As a consequence of endless associations, Adéagbo departs from the starting point, which by the evening might end up at the edge of the installation. A day's work can spread out in different directions and take on ever-expanding forms and dimensions.

The only audience to the piece were the people who happened to be present that day: Adéagbo’s domestic staff, his curator Stephan Köhler, and myself as his guest. Adéagbo’s property is walled and not directly accessible to the public, with the exception of special events such as the Benin Biennale, when his studio becomes a site for public exhibitions. The assembling of objects as a daily working practice seems to be quite private, although he interacts with occasional guests. Adéagbo doesn't comment or even speak during the process of assembling; he works with con-
centration (singing occasionally), and only starts talking to guests again in the evening after he has finished working. Nevertheless, he includes handwritten texts in his system of references, which he writes consistently throughout the day. These seem to provide a commentary, or fragments of thought that might have provided the impulse for certain combinations of objects (on Adéagbo’s writing see Schankweiler 2012a:121–25, Köhler 2012). One of these notes about my presence at Adéagbo’s house and studio was also adopted into the installation: “Kerstin and the preparation of her doctoral thesis at Georges’ place, Togbin-Beach, Cotonou-Benin.”

Experiencing Adéagbo’s work process in Cotonou, on this occasion and others, made me gradually realize that his rhizomatic arrangements of things can initiate a chain reaction (Schankweiler 2012a, esp. chap. 5). One is provided with the opportunity to both discover and create connections involving form, motif, and theme; links between the objects can produce meaningful associations, references to the here and now; even after hours of viewing it is still possible to discover something new.

What especially struck me during my stay at Adéagbo’s house and studio was his rigorous daily practice of creating installations and writing. This has a strong performative character—also in the strict definition of execution—that a viewer of one of Adéagbo’s completed museum pieces cannot really experience. Each morning he starts an installation, and in the course of combining heterogeneous objects, he writes texts. The ephemeral compilations at his house never last longer than a day and are never identical. He seems to be testing different combinations in endless variations, as if he would like to learn more about the objects before including them in an installation that will be exhibited in an institution abroad. This practice is like a rehearsal that is already part of the performance. After finishing his work in the afternoon, he takes a break, and after sunset he dismantles everything, storing all of the objects inside his house again. This process of disassembling characterizes his working practice as a neverending task, a kind of Sisyphean challenge, which Adéagbo accepts anew each day. He performs even in hotel rooms or other temporary accommodations, building small works with the objects available to him, such as a picture on the wall, the daily newspaper, or a matchbox from the restaurant where he had dinner the night before.

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1 Georges Adéagbo (b. 1942, Ouidah, Benin)
One-day installation, September 3, 2003, Cotonou.
Photo: Kerstin Schankweiler; © Georges Adéagbo and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
In his house in Cotonou, Adéagbo keeps an impressive corpus of objects, which forms the nucleus of his collection and includes an extensive library. His daily work in Cotonou feeds on this archive. While, due to maintenance work, it has since been moved to one of the former guesthouses, during my visit in 2003 it was still located in the main house. In the central and spacious room of the sparsely furnished house, the objects could be found directly on the floor, on carpets, on the walls, and on bookshelves, giving the impression not of storage, but of a mega-installation. Adéagbo seems to have memorized where the objects are stored and he can locate them without help of an external system of indexing (as applied in an archive). Some groups of objects are stored separately—like the books on the shelves, or the newspapers and handwritten texts that are arranged in piles on the floor—but otherwise his storage system seems to be similar to his installation practice, following the principle of association of related objects. This private archive is continuously growing and subject to rearrangements. Some things, such as the book by Nicholas Thomas or the things he finds or buys for exhibitions he is preparing, only stay in the house for a short period of time before leaving again. The reverse is possible, too, when he brings home objects from his travels. Adéagbo’s archive undergoes constant modifications, and the things he works with are extremely versatile. The mobilization of things is a central strategy in his archival practice. My objective is to interpret Adéagbo’s artistic practice as work on a relational archive of the twenty-first century—a kind of Mnemosyne Atlas (following Aby Warburg) of globalization—that might afford an alternative to universalist, European master narratives, conceptions of history, and regimes of power.

The following is a summary of Adéagbo’s working methods as I have observed them (see Schankweiler 2012a:81–93). In his installations, Adéagbo combines countless found objects of diverse provenance, based on his travels and a daily practice of collecting and arranging. In his hometown of Cotonou, as well as in places he travels to, he keeps his eye peeled for things that attract his interest. This might be a valuable sculpture in an antique shop, records or books from a flea market, discarded objects by the roadside, or items that have washed up on the beach. Adéagbo collects rarities as well as off-the-shelf articles, cult objects as well as consumer goods, used as well as new things. His research on the places and institutions in which he exhibits can include browsing the archives (such as the documenta Archiv in Kassel and the archive of the Gallery Wien Lukatsch in Berlin). Apart from found objects, he also includes works commissioned from craftsmen in Benin, who produce paintings and sculptures based on source material that Adéagbo provides for them (such as photographs, photocopies of book illustrations, and archival material). His work can be characterized by two major strategies: on the one hand, he mobilizes things by taking them from one place to another (from Cotonou to the places where he exhibits, and vice-versa, or even within the spatial terrain of the cities themselves), working with them and putting them into new contexts; on the other hand, he works site-specifically and sets up a relationship between the objects in the installation and a network of associations with the site. This tension between “global” and “local”—involving connections between cultures in networks of ever-increasing complexity, while also emphasizing one particular place—is a quality that is characteristic of his archive (cf. Harney 2001:22). Adéagbo challenges the binary of this conceptual pairing by showing how local contexts already incorporate global elements or aspects, while global coherencies always find local expressions. By arranging and combining the objects according to his own designations, Adéagbo presents a novel network of contemporary and historical relationships between different cultures.
A BELGIAN EXAMPLE

First, I would like to focus on another installation, which Adéagbo created in 2000 for an exhibition at the Banque Bruxelles Lambert in Brussels: La Colonisation belge en Afrique noire (The Belgian colonization in sub-Saharan Africa) (Fig. 4). In 2005, Adéagbo modified and expanded the work for the exhibition “La Belgique Visionnaire” (visionary Belgium) at the Palais des Beaux-Arts (Fig. 5). An exhibition at the Sint-Lukasgalerie in April 2008 presented a third site-specific version under the title La Belgique au Congo (Belgium in the Congo). This re-installation—which always requires the artist's presence and the adaption of the work to a new site—creates intertextuality in his work that depends on the shifting of space and time. For instance, Adéagbo's famous Documenta piece (2002) was reinstalled two years later after the Museum Ludwig in Cologne had acquired it and presented it in a solo exhibition (see Schankweiler 2012a:126–33). This kind of intertextuality between installations—although in slightly weaker form—is present in his other works, too. Adéagbo repeatedly includes references to former exhibitions, like catalogues, posters, invitation cards, reviews, etc., or mentions curators he has worked with. His installations not only reveal the originating process; they also unfold the history of his exhibitions and reception of his work, and reiterate his own positionality connected as it is to all the places he has worked in and the people he has worked with.

The late Swiss curator Harald Szeemann initiated the first two exhibitions of the work La colonisation belge en Afrique noire. Both the title and many of the objects in Adéagbo's installation refer to colonialism, and it may be assumed that through Adéagbo's work, Szeemann wanted to introduce a postcolonial perspective into public discourses on the Belgian Congo. The role of Leopold II (1835–1909) in Belgian colonial endeavors is widely known. He mercilessly exploited the so-called Congo Free State, which he declared his personal property in 1885. Despite this knowledge of the colonial past, there still stands a public monument to Leopold II in Brussels—although, of course, its continued presence has been criticized as incomprehensible and offensive. Adéagbo used a photograph of the equestrian sculpture of Leopold II (Fig. 6) as the basis for a small bronze work, which he commissioned from a craftsman in Benin and showed as part of the installation (Fig. 7). A further commission referencing the colonial past of Brussels was the wooden sculpture based on a bust of Baron Léon Lambert (Fig. 8). Lambert was the founder of the Banque Bruxelles Lambert, where the installation was exhibited. With a book entitled Congo placed in all three exhibitions on a wooden African seat beneath the sculpture, Adéagbo's installation enables us to make an association in which Lambert, who partly financed Leopold's colonial ambitions in the Congo, is also implicated in Belgium's colonial history (Köhler 2007:656–57). The two lions on either side of the wooden seat are also found in sculptures throughout the city, as well as on the coat of arms of the city of Brussels. Moreover, in a chain of linguistic associations typical of Adéagbo's work, the word “lion” can be activated as a cipher for Lambert's first name—Léon—as well as for Leopold. The coup de grâce of this associative procedure emerges when one discovers that a century after the bank was actively involved in the colonization of the Congo, it financed the exhibition project to which Harald Szeemann invited Adéagbo (Fig. 9 shows the exhibition poster, which was included in the installation with a handwritten note on it). From his historicizing, postcolonial perspective, Adéagbo seems to critically expose the Banque Bruxelles Lambert and its founder (who was a great art lover and collector). He does so by placing the institution in the larger context of Belgian colonial history, which he traces with a complicated network of objects that seem to materialize social relations, thereby expertly linking past and present.

The second version of Adéagbo's installation likewise consti-
tuted an artistic intervention in a Belgian collection that can be seen as an archive of Belgian colonial history. In this work he integrated objects from the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, which he borrowed for the duration of the show, such as a large leopard skin (Fig. 5), a smaller stuffed predator, and various bones (Fig. 10 shows some photographs documenting Adéagbo’s visit to the museum’s storerooms). All of these objects had made their way from the Congo to Belgium during the colonial period. They were exhibited in the museum that Leopold had inaugurated on the occasion of the 1897 International Exhibition in Brussels, where they were used to stage a Belgian view of the colony, consolidating its own standing as a colonial power. The stuffed animals on display were intended to illustrate the dangers and symbolize the supposed savageness of the continent, and, by inference, of its subjugated population. In his installation, Adéagbo positioned a copy of a video of Alfred Hitchcock’s movie *Frenzy* next to the leopard skin (Fig. 11), whose former “danger” is now only distantly evoked by its static, bared teeth. Like the leopard, the woman on the cover of the video is open-mouthed; however, the woman’s mouth is distorted by fear. Through the exaggerated and almost absurd facial expression of the actress, and through the genre of the thriller, which uses suspense, tension, and excitement as its main elements, the juxtaposition of the leopard skin and the cinematic fiction underlines the theatrical, staged quality of the colonial museum displays.

The presentation of this installation as part of the exhibition “La Belgique Visionnaire” becomes more relevant if one bears in mind the context in which this exhibition was initiated: it was part of the festivities for the 175th anniversary of the Belgian state and was intended to promote the formation and stabilization of a national identity. In the program for the anniversary, which otherwise extolled the country’s praiseworthy achievements, Adéagbo’s subversion was to invoke critically Belgium’s colonial history. However, Harald Szeemann, as the curator of the show and a non-Belgian, was surely engaged in pointing out less laudable aspects of the state and Belgian history. And just as the curator played this role, Adéagbo also seems to have fulfilled the role assigned to him—namely, to provide a postcolonial reading of Belgian history. This was a double-edged sword: while Adéagbo’s installation unsettled the hegemonic politics of mem-

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4 Georges Adéagbo
La colonisation Belge en Afrique noir (detail) (2000)
Installation at Banque Bruxelles Lambert, Brussels.
Photo: Vincent Everaerts, courtesy jointadventures.org. © Georges Adéagbo and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
ory and critically addressed political sensitivities such as the public monument to Leopold II, it can also be seen as a calculated critique and “hired” subversion. In this sense, Adéagbo is reduced to what Miwon Kwon has called a “cultural-artistic service provider” (2004:4). However, as calculated as the criticism might have been, the artwork produces a kind of surplus, which appears in its unpredictable interactions with the audience. I will return to the performance of the viewer required by Adéagbo’s installations.
Before examining how Adéagbo organizes the material he works with, I will first take a closer look at how the archive relates to concepts of history. The construction of history is closely related to the practice of collecting and its institutionalization. Besides archives, which preserve documents and other materials produced in the past, other institutions devoted to the preservation of memory, such as libraries and museums, also fulfill the criteria of material historiography (Jardine 2001:203). Documents and objects are used as evidence for histories. As opposed to the notion of a canon, which is based on an evaluation of the past, the archive implies a kind of neutrality that does not make distinctions or judgments. Underlying the archive and its apparent factuality, however, are subjective processes of selection and interpretation that are shaped by certain cultural conventions and epistemes. *Créer le monde en faisant des collections*
(creating the world by making collections) is the telling title of an installation that Adéagbo executed for an exhibition in Ulm in 2007. To make collections means to create the world on one's own terms. It points to Adéagbo’s own artistic practice of collecting, which raises questions concerning the organization and preservation of knowledge and the construction of history, as the Belgian example has already shown. However, Créer le monde en faisant des collections also dealt with a famous private collection in Ulm belonging to the seventeenth-century merchant Christoph Weickmann—a so-called Wunderkammer (cabinet of curiosities), which forms the core of the modern Ulmer Museum that had invited the artist. Adéagbo’s interest in the history of collecting in Europe is also present in other installations (such as the exhibition in Brussels, with its references to the museum in Tervuren). While the Wunderkammer was the product of an encyclopedic tradition of collecting that can be linked to a pl-

narr description of the existing order (Bredekamp 2002:16), this changed significantly during the eighteenth century with the rise of a Eurocentric universal history that was conceived as a linear sequence, a canonical and singular historical narrative. This philosophy of history also had an impact on cultural practices of collecting; the inventories of museums were temporalized, so that a chronological system of ordering became prevalent in the nineteenth century. What had been presented as coexisting in the cabinets was now interpreted as a succession of chronological sequences based on the idea of progress and evolution (Macho 2000:74), which, of course, also had consequences for the evaluation of “foreign” cultures. Europe imagined itself in the frontline of the supposed development—with effects that are still in evidence today.

Considering the close connection between collecting, the construction of history, and power structures, archival practices in art can be seen as “private archives [that] question public ones: they can be seen as perverse orders that aim to disturb the symbolic order at large” (Foster 2004:21). I want to take a closer look at the orders that Adéagbo’s artistic method seems to put forward.

The subjects Adéagbo addresses in his works appear through a multitude of books, newspapers, audio documents, etc., whose different producers and authors present multiple voices and per-
perspectives on a range of topics. It thus happens that a book such as Julien Vanhove’s 1943 *Regard sur notre Congo* (a look at our Congo), with its examination of colonial culture from a Belgian perspective, is presented next to a tourist guidebook to the Congo edited by Air Afrique, the memoirs of a Belgian military officer from the middle of the nineteenth century, and Barbara Emerson’s critical biography of Leopold II from 1979. Although Adéagbo acts as a kind of curator whose choices are not random but deliberate, the artist does not privilege any of the presented “voices” and thus evades the didactic. It is not possible to discern in the installation any sort of moral evaluation upon anyone or anything, even upon the founder of the bank, Baron Lambert, or the brutal colonial ruler (at its most didactic the installation deprives these figures of their monumentality—for instance, by including a miniature version of the equestrian monument). Adéagbo does not aim to “correct” history or accuse anyone via his installations; rather, he lays bare the architecture of history (Eiblmayr 2001:9). The variety and heterogeneity of the things integrated into the installation represent a simultaneous plurality of positions. Adéagbo’s installations seem to aesthetically transform the complexity of historical networks of cross-cultural relations. His work formulates and re-presents the plurality of histories, which interact, overlap, and interweave with one another and which are ultimately no more than fictitious and subjective constructs. Adéagbo, I suggest, reveals the selective character of collections and archives, thus exposing history as a fiction made out of fact, as one might put it.

The epistemic indeterminacy of these histories is aesthetically mediated by the “nonhierarchical spatiality” (Foster 2004:4) of the installation, which presents all materials equally. On closer inspection, the first impression of disorder, of random combination—primarily caused by the diversity of objects—gives way to one of careful and systematic composition. Despite this sense of order and the emphasis on certain areas or objects (such as the bust of Baron Léon Lambert), the arrangement as a whole seems nonhierarchical, as the different groups of objects are evenly distributed in a careful manner and the overall view preserves a functional homogeneity that highlights the synopsis. There is no predetermined entry point, reading direction, or narrative. Rather, the viewers have to find their own ways to make connections between the things across the room. Moreover, the objects do not appear to be categorized: a newspaper clipping crops up in a *mise-en-scène*, which affords it the same compositional importance as a wooden sculpture or an old glove. Within the aesthetic arrangement, therefore, there is no obvious hint at any sort of epistemic order or any cues for the traditional (European) categorizations of “high” and “low,” “African” and “European,” etc. Adéagbo’s nonhierarchical assemblages can be seen to promote a model of historiography that is neither chronological nor linear and which subverts the canonical and singular historical narrative by emphasizing the simultaneity of (different) intertwined stories.

**THE ARCHIVE AS A MODEL OF MEMORY**

Memory is also profoundly related to the ways history is imagined. Both concepts are hard to separate. Archives not only affect the conception of history, but also the constitution of memory. Public, collective, and national as well as private collections and archives serve the creation of identity, the key to which lies in the past (Ellwanger 2005:8). Because collecting is a selective procedure, it is also a matter of demarcation, of the construction of identity and difference. The remembrance of the past is, of course, central to identity politics, and therefore the archive is involved in the question of power and the politics of memory. Whoever maintains knowledge can determine what should and what should not be remembered. Furthermore, power is wielded through questions of access to the archive.

As Aleida Assmann has pointed out, both individuals and cultures organize memory with the help of external storage media and cultural practices (Assmann 1999:19). She distinguishes two modes of memory: function and storage. The first, *Funktionsgedächtnis* (functional memory), is embodied (*verkörpert*); the
second, Speichergedächtnis (storage memory), is not embodied (entkörpert) (Assmann 1999:133–42). While functional memory is tied to a subject (an individual or a group regarded as an acting subject), storage memory is a "second-order memory” that is "uninhabited" and therefore latent or concealed (but not forgotten). The storage memory functions as a “background” for the functional memory, which can feed on it (Assmann 1999:136). Both modes interact and are capable of stabilization or change.

In this context, Adéagbo’s installations can be considered storage memory because they can serve to diversify the predominant, canonical functional memory. The artist feeds in all kinds of objects from different cultural contexts that might not have been locally known before. He also raises themes that might otherwise have remained hidden, as shown in his participation in the exhibition for the 175th anniversary of the Belgian state. Storage memory is the reservoir for future functions, a resource for the renewal of knowledge, a condition for the possibility of cultural change, and, as such, it prevents the ossification of memory (Assmann 1999:140). But how does this transformation process from storage to functional memory proceed? As Assman writes:

Functional memory ... is an appropriated memory that emerges from a process of selection, connection, and meaningful configuration. ... In functional memory, unstructured, unconnected fragments are invested with perspective and relevance; they enter into connections and configurations, compositions of meaning—a quality that is totally absent from storage memory2 (Assmann 1999:137).

The storage that Adéagbo generates can be activated by different agents: the curators, exhibition visitors, art historians, and other viewers of his work. The stored knowledge has to be appropriated and transferred to the functional memory (of the viewer, the Belgian state, etc.), before it can begin the work of modification. Adéagbo’s installations ask the viewers to perform. To produce meaning one has to connect, configure, and compose—a process that Adéagbo accomplishes for himself when arranging the objects. But the artist himself does not prescribe how to read his installations. At most, he “edits” his installations with accompanying texts; however, these are themselves cryptic and ambiguous fragments of thought.

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Photo: Kerstin Schankweiler; © Georges Adéagbo and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
An apt characterization of Adéagbo’s archive can be derived from a text by the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman on the rhizomatic archive of heterogeneous things that cannot be controlled, organized, or understood (2007:8–9). Didi-Huberman argues that archives are so confusing because there are as many gaps as there are presences. This is an aspect of the archive that Adéagbo seems to work on. He “risks” creating a kind of patchwork whose pieces will always be heterogeneous and anachronistic, because they originate from different eras and spaces. “This risk bears the name imagination or montage” (Didi-Huberman 2007:9). Participation and imagination are central to the appropriation of the “material depository” (Assmann 1999:345) of the storage memory. The artist’s daily arrangement and rearrangement of objects as described above initiates a process of constant negotiation between functional and storage memory. The storage memory invites viewers to produce functional memories through engagement with its connectivity. At the same time, Adéagbo himself too performs the process of selection, connection, and meaningful configuration. The knowledge his collections generate is part of Adéagbo’s “story” (Assmann 1999:134–35) and is recognizable as a form of self-archiving. For example, the installations show photographs of the artist, or catalogues and posters of his exhibitions, even private correspondence with curators. Thus, Adéagbo does not deny his subjectivity, but marks his perception of objects as particular. He seems to investigate his own entanglements in the structure of meaning and reflect on his position within the field of knowledge production, which his artistic practice defines as polyphonic, divergent, yet integrated. Adéagbo’s work is a complex version of an archive that can always be expanded. It shows that what is relevant to knowledge production can be shifted, and that there are alternative modes of organization, extension, and displacement in a society’s storehouse of knowledge (Assmann et al. 1998:9). By approaching his environment—be it Cotonou, Cologne, Brussels, or New York—through a complex, artistically staged system of things, Adéagbo opens up for the viewer a cross-cultural field of exchange, entanglement, and discursivity. In this sense, his installations are a model of globalization, a very relevant ver-
sion of an expanded and relational archive. As I understand it, the combination of site-specificity and connectivity in his works marks their relations between one place and another (as well as one time and another) and questions how places and eras relate to each other. The local relevance of a place is juxtaposed with the global network of cultures and places, including their temporalities. I propose the term “relational site-specificity” for the model that Adéagbo’s installations embody (Schankweiler 2012a:254).

TRANSLATION

One last aspect I would like to discuss is the process of translation in Adéagbo’s work, which further complicates the appropriation of images and objects, as well as the relations between things from different contexts.

As has already been said, Adéagbo always selects certain source material he finds during his research in the places where he will exhibit. These are brought back to Cotonou and given to local craftsmen. Sometimes, he commissions sculptures, such as the wooden bust of Baron Léon Lambert and the small bronze statue based on a photograph of the equestrian sculpture of Leopold II in Brussels. However, for each installation Adéagbo commissions work from sign painters, who reproduce illustrations from books used by Adéagbo or photographs he found in archives or the like. Examples in the Brussels installation are a portrait of curator Harald Szeemann on the right (Fig. 12) and several documents that refer to Patrice Lumumba and the independence of the Congo (Figs. 13–14). These paintings are a form of intermediarity—a translation from one into another aesthetic and functional tradition. These hybrid images question categories of “one’s own” and “the foreign” because, even if the motif might be known to a European viewer, the conventions of its depiction might be unfamiliar to that viewer (i.e., the stylization, the reduction of details, the use of color, etc.), while the reverse might be true for viewers in Cotonou. It is significant that Adéagbo integrates sign painting; the translation of (foreign) images has historically been important for this kind of modern painting, which developed out of the advertisements for consumer goods introduced during colonialism (Wendt 2002). With the recourse to sign painting, Adéagbo also seeks to reactivate local archives that have always incorporated or actively appropriated globally circulating images. The de- and re-contextualization of things in the course of their mobilization is made even more complex through this process of transformation, which transcends categorical boundaries and points toward the effects of exchange among people, places, and cultures.

To conclude, let me remark how Adéagbo juggles playfully with discourses that are not fixed but that proliferate, due to the countless associations of meaning he invites the viewers to create. The proliferation of meaning is also conveyed aesthetically through the wealth of objects that Adéagbo’s installations present. Understood as an archive, his work generates new knowledge as an ongoing process initiating a multiplicity of relational positions and perspectives, transforming storage memory into functional memory. The mobilization of things also includes a translation process that complicates the attribution and categorization of the objects. Adéagbo’s installations show cultures as products of worldwide relations through which people, places, and objects are connected to each other—they provide a model for a relational archive not only for the present but also for the past.

Kerstin Schankweiler is a research associate and lecturer in the arts of Africa at the Institute for Art History at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. kerstin.schankweiler@fu-berlin.de

Notes

1 Parts of this essay have been previously published in German in Schankweiler 2012a.
2 My translation from the French.
3 “Beim Funktionsgedächtnis ... handelt es sich um ein angeeignetes Gedächtnis, das aus einem Prozeß der Auswahl, der Verknüpfung, der Sinnkonstitution ... hervorgeht. Die strukturlosen, unzusammenhängenden Elemente treten ins Funktionsgedächtnis als komponiert, konstruiert, verbunden ein. Aus diesem konstruktiven Akt geht Sinne hervor, eine Qualität, die dem Speichergedächtnis grundsätzlich abgeht.”

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