Position as Desired: A Conversation with Kenneth Montague

By Noa Bronstein

Kenneth Montague, a curator and collector based in Toronto, is the founder and director of Wedge Curatorial Projects. Since 1997, Montague has been exhibiting photo-based work with a strong focus on work that explores black identity and the African diaspora in boundary-pushing exhibitions in Canada and internationally. Currently, Montague sits on the Advisory Board of the Ryerson Image Centre, and on the Africa Acquisitions Committee of the Tate Modern. He has sat on the Photography Curatorial Committee of the Art Gallery of Ontario (2009–12), is a frequent panelist at international art symposiums, including the Bamako Encounters, and has lectured on photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal. I interviewed Montague on September 29, 2014, at the Royal Ontario Museum about his unique curatorial practice and recent exhibitions.

NOA BRONSTEIN: Wedge was initially a commercial gallery. What was the impetus to transition into a not-for-profit curatorial project?

KENNETH MONTAGUE: I started Wedge Gallery in my home in 1997. This was part of a new trend in Toronto to reuse old industrial buildings as residences, and I was in one of the first of these loft spaces, which was originally a knitting factory from the 1930s. As part of my space I had a fifty-foot-long hallway that started at the entrance at four feet wide and ended at the living room with a fifteen-foot-wide opening. The architect, Del Terrelonge, and I called it the “wedge space,” and the idea was to use this hallway to exhibit my burgeoning art collection. Surprisingly, I was one of the only Canadian collectors focusing on black identity in photography and, for me, this was a way of looking for reflections of self in the contemporary art world. And because I seemed to be one of the only collectors committed to this subject matter, it was necessary to open the collection up in some ways. The Wedge space took on the double entendre of being a physical wedge and also a way to wedge artists into the mainstream of contemporary art.

The commercial gallery emerged out of the first exhibition in the space, which featured Michael Chambers’s works. Three hundred people attended that first Sunday afternoon opening and we sold out the exhibit. I continued on this track, and as I was showing different artists I was also incorporating their works into my own collection. It became clear that exhibiting in my living room and making the artworks accessible to the public was a special phenomenon that permitted a more intimate viewing experience than that in art galleries and museums. But after five years Wedge outgrew the space and, in all honesty, I wanted my house back. So Wedge became a nomadic project, and we partnered with various institutions to showcase our projects.

Ultimately, it was an organic transition from being an art dealer to someone who realized they were more committed to storytelling than to selling.

NB: Speaking of which, Position As Desired / Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge Collection (at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2010), seems a seminal exhibition for Wedge in terms of considering your role as a storyteller. How did that exhibition materialize?

KM: I was asked by the Royal Ontario Museum to curate a project at the museum, and I knew immediately that I wanted to curate the project within the Canadiana section, a space I had often visited on school trips. The exhibition was really an intervention into this staid gallery. I inserted works from my collection within the gallery that I knew would speak to other works in the space. For example, a contemporary work by an African Canadian artist would be, for the first time, in conversation with these grandeiose portraits of our European forebears or images of canoes and beavers. Position as Desired was about positioning ourselves where we wanted to be within this massive institution, within Canadian history, and within contemporary art. Equally, the exhibition explored the many ways of being black in Canada, considering identity as related to queerness, mixed race, immigration, and so on.

Dawit L. Petros’s Sign (from the 2013 Transliteration series) was the seminal image for the exhibition. The large portrait of a young black man dressed in a fur-lined parka, holding his hand in an enigmatic gesture, was critically important to my theme. The gesture is hard to place: it could be a welcoming gesture, it could be a greeting of some kind, or it could be read as a gang symbol. This sign becomes a sign for how we navigate and negotiate issues of our own identity and how these play out publicly and within institutions.

NB: For many of the exhibitions that Wedge curates, there is a recurring theme of place and diaspora. There is an interesting resonance here with Wedge as an institution that does not operate out of one site; instead, exhibits are mounted in various institutions, such as the Power Plant in Toronto and the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, to name a few. As such, collaboration is a vital part of Wedge’s practice. Can you talk about the nature of Wedge’s collaborative approach and what impact these collaborations have?

KM: It is really about wanting to collaborate. When multiple viewpoints are absent in exhibition planning, I think the results are less interesting and less exciting for audiences. Wedge was never intended as a purely solo undertaking; from the beginning it was important to privilege sharing and inclusiveness, and that
starts with the curatorial process. That said, these collaborations do take patience and often demand a kind of “go with the flow” attitude. We know, going in, that some situations will prove trickier than others, but conflict is often necessary in driving the conversation forward.

One of the key people in helping me understand the value of collaboration was Camilla Singh, the former curator at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto. She invited me to participate in the exhibit Dyed Roots (2008) and I curated an intervention around the idea of hair as a marker for black identity. Camilla and I spent an afternoon sitting on the floor of the gallery discussing how to make the work that was inside this room that we built within the space—which housed an exhibition called head room—have some kind of visibility outside of its walls. After a while she took a hammer and just smashed a hole through the newly drywalled room, and there it was: a visible link between interior and exterior. Besides being fearless, she also imparted to me the value of mixing “high” and “low” art. She came to my house for our first planning session, and I was showing her work I was thinking of including in the exhibit. After looking around, she noticed a shopping bag from a recent trip to South Africa, and she said, “What about that? Include that.” Since that pivotal moment, I’ve started to think differently. Although not everything should be used, everything should be considered. There is real value in not overlooking those ideas or items that might benefit a project simply because it is not a traditional way to approach an exhibition. In the end, the head room was a real mix—there was a Chris Ofili watercolor next to that shopping bag from the African craft store, with an image torn from a fashion spread in W magazine of Canadian model Linda Evangelista dressed up as an “African queen.” The result was a much more powerful narrative than simply showing framed works from my collection, because it showed process and gave away a bit more about my personal take on the subject of hair and black identity.

Another very influential figure in helping to formalize Wedge’s curatorial framework was Thelma Golden, the Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. She commented once that Wedge was able to make the global local, and so she suggested that I start to
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consider how to make the local global, and how to tell my own story as an African Canadian. This became an essential part of the Wedge mandate.

NB: Back to the theme of diaspora. There was a nice cross-generational conversation happening about diaspora between the exhibits Home: Photographs by Jon Blak (2014) and Reggae or Not: The Birth of Dancehall Culture in Jamaica and Toronto: Photographs by Beth Lesser (2013), both of which were exhibited at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto. Can you talk about the relationship between these exhibitions?

KM: Being Jamaican Canadian, I have a desire to show work that explores identity related to being from more than one place. I was born and raised in Windsor—Canada’s southernmost city—across the river from Detroit, which I would visit several times a month. As well, I spent my entire summer holidays in Jamaica with my parents’ families. Something that was very much part of this tri-cultural experience was music. For example, I listened to rock, soul, and reggae—so I grew up loving Iggy Pop, Marvin Gaye, and Peter Tosh. As music was an important part of my childhood, it similarly became an important trope for Wedge.

I was first introduced to Beth Lesser’s photographs through the records I listened to, as her photographs were featured on many reggae album covers. I was amazed to discover that she was living in Toronto, and it just made sense that this be the exhibit I finally curated around Jamaican identity in Canada. I could also relate to Beth’s experiences, which for me is very important as a curator. As a white photographer documenting the fledgling dancehall and reggae scene in the 1970s and 1980s in both Toronto and Jamaica, it was impossible for Beth to be a fly on the wall. There was no way to blend in. I can certainly relate to this, as I was the only black kid in my class in Windsor. Not only could I relate to the people in the images, but I could also relate to the person taking the photographs.

I felt that it was important to exhibit Beth’s photographs, as she captured the scene in a way no one else did—documenting the fashion and the people behind the music. She amassed a vast collection of portraits, which become an archive of a movement, a culture, and a place. While Beth’s images are significant, they represent a very specific moment in time. I was introduced to Jon Blak’s work and was immediately interested in his similarly hybrid perspective as a Jamaican Canadian. Yet his images of youth culture in Jamaica and of Toronto’s Little Jamaica along Eglinton Avenue West document current communities. While each project is unique, there is a shared consideration for thinking about the relationship between the local and global.

NB: I was very fortunate to play a small role in Beth Lesser’s exhibit through my role at the Gladstone, and it seemed there was a very interesting process in taking that exhibit out of Beth’s archive and into a gallery space, as she had not necessarily planned to share these images in an exhibition. What was the process like?

KM: It was a very long process that was full of discovery. Wedge Exhibitions Coordinator Maria Kanellopoulos and I visited Beth’s house five or six times, and we would sit in her kitchen for hours, looking over her photo albums from the 70s and 80s, the kind with the clear cover and binder rings. This was a forensic process, to dig out and unearth images from this immense archive. We would sticky note here, and sticky note there, trying to pick out appropriate images. The process was not so much about building up but more about taking away, essentially a process of photo editing and idea editing. We dissected the archive carefully and in the process put together a new organism that told a cohesive story.

It was an interesting collaboration that required a great deal of trust. I would select an image and Beth would say that it wasn’t representative of that individual, it was some kind of anomaly. Even though it would be something I would want to see in the show, I had to respect Beth’s relationship to these images and to what was or was not essential. There was certainly give-and-take, but it was not a difficult process because we had a mutual goal of establishing a legacy for this work, of having it seen.
NB: Continuing on the topic of place, Wedge seems very astute at considering ideas of place-making by linking artworks to the architectural spaces in which the works are exhibited. I am thinking specifically about exhibiting Guy Tillim: Avenue Patrice Lumumba (2011), which explored the failed ideals of modernist architecture in Africa, at the Design Exchange, a museum operating out of one of the most important modernist complexes in Canada, Mies van der Rohe’s Toronto-Dominion Centre. Can you walk us through Wedge’s consideration of the site for this exhibition?

KM: The planning for the exhibit started with a conversation with Bonnie Rubenstein, the artistic director of the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. She and I agreed that Tillim’s large-format images needed a similarly large space, and since the exhibit was exploring issues around architecture, the Design Exchange—Canada’s national design museum—seemed an appropriate choice.

Tillim’s photographs feature derelict modernist architecture set against the backdrop of a postcolonial Africa. The buildings are on streets in Mozambique, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo named after Patrice Lumumba, one of the first democratically elected African leaders of the 1960s. The images, therefore, explore the failure of modernist architecture as allegory for colonialism, but also of a faded idealism: the loss of the African dream of seamless independence.

This modernist architecture in decay, exhibited in the beautiful, pristine vessel that is Mies van der Rohe’s TD Bank Tower, was the best example of our use of space within the story-telling process. Tillim’s images capture a lost paradise or a dream that has shifted beyond recognition. These buildings, with their crumbling walls and façades overtaken by plants, are vestiges of crushed spirits, of so much promise and hope in an African independence, and so much despair and disappointment. The images are full of pathos, loss, and memory, but were perhaps made even more powerful when viewed within the context of the Design Exchange, which is located within the heart of the financial district, in one of Canada’s most recognized modernist buildings. Audiences were able to look at these images of professionals set against these crumbling but once impressive structures, while looking out of the exhibit hall windows to the bankers and businesspeople moving about the street below. There was so much difference and yet so much sameness that this quiet series of photographs was able to take on new meaning through the context of the exhibition.

NB: Although Wedge is focused on exhibiting photography, there was an interesting shift with the design exhibition Stephen Burks: Man Made Toronto (2012) at the Design Exchange. I am curious to know what precipitated this shift?

KM: It started with thinking more deeply about contemporary African art. I had been acquiring new work discovered at contemporary African art events such as the Bamako Encounters in Mali; this culminated in a photography exhibit, Always Moving Forward (2010), at Gallery 44 in Toronto. I kept coming back to the idea of Africa now, but wanting to do something more visceral and not necessarily photo-based, while also maintaining the hybrid approach that has always been important for Wedge.

With this in mind, I became interested in Stephen Burks’s practice, which involves a contemporary rethinking of traditional materials and processes. The exhibit featured lamps, shelves, tables, and other objects that were developed with Senegalese basket weavers in a village outside of Dakar. Burks collaborates with artisans in the developing world to transform raw and recycled materials into functional products that are then distributed and marketed by global design brands such as Artechnica, Cappellini, and Moroso. In doing so, he is both introducing new forms into contemporary design and simultaneously helping to bring economic and social support to makers in remote locations.

These exhibits at the Design Exchange were connected in many ways and, like Beth Lesser’s and Jon Blak’s exhibits at the Gladstone, were tapping into similar ideas. Guy Tillim’s exhibition was, in some ways, of an Africa lost, and Man Made, of an Africa found, through use of traditional materials in the service of beauty and function. So, really, it was not a departure but a continuation.

NB: As both a collector and curator actively engaged with photography for many years, have you seen any interesting shifts in how the public engages with the medium, as opposed to how the market engages with it?

KM: In some ways, yes, I have seen a big change with contemporary African art. The market was slow to give legitimacy and value to what I thought were important works. It was surprising because I would be, for example, at the Bamako Encounters, and there would be such excitement from the audience about the work, and then I would head over to American art fairs and there would be a total disconnect, and work that I felt was very relatable was not being represented.

That said, it is catching up quickly now, and I do think that public excitement is pushing the market. It is not only the top collectors’ but also the general public’s interests that can no longer be denied. I also believe that social media has helped encourage awareness. Certainly new developments such as 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London are significant in providing a more mainstream platform. I am really glad to see that artists whom I have been championing for years are finally getting more exposure.

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