

## The Aesthetics of Production, A–Z

Adéagbo Aéroport Architecture Art concepts Biography Cotonou History  
Legend of the artist Materiality / Mediality Photography Television Zemidjan

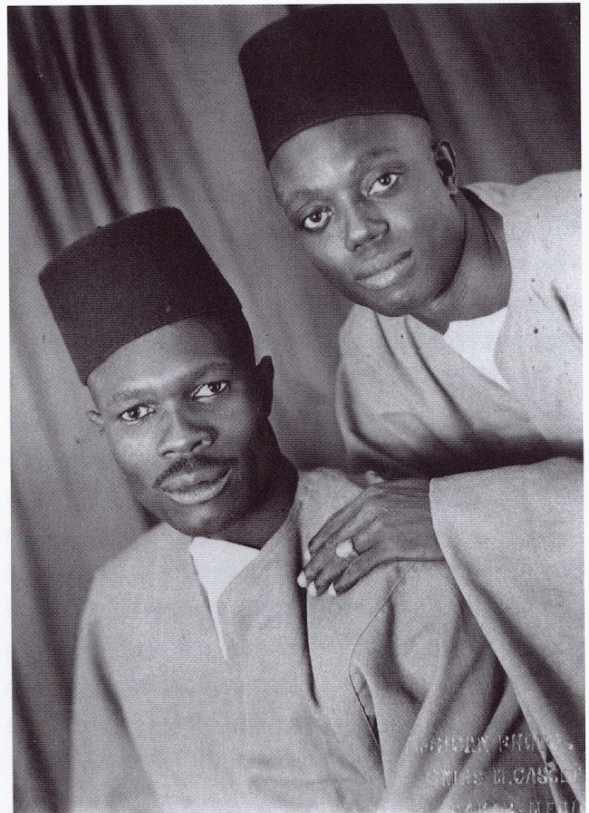
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### Adéagbo

Georges Adéagbo (born 1942 in Cotonou, lives in Cotonou) has been acclaimed as one of West Africa's foremost artists ever since his contribution to the documenta in 2002 – “The explorer and explorers confronting the history of exploration”. Following his “discovery” in 1993 by a French art agent, this autodidact's installations have been exhibited in Europe, the two Americas, and even Japan, but remained virtually unknown in West Africa itself. His commissioned works tackle such subjects as cannibalism, slavery, socialism, religion, war, art, or mostly male historical personages. He builds his installations up from artefacts, *objets trouvés* from everyday cultures, as well as from paintings and sculptures that he orders from the sign-maker Esprit or from wood carvers. These multi-part assemblages are then further structured by means of handwritten notes, and the topics he has worked on in Cotonou are varied at the exhibition space by adding locally found objects, tales and images, which in some cases he transports back home and has translated into other media. In this way the artist-author commutes back and forth between the continents with his exhibits before assigning them a place within the aesthetic space of an installation – one that is no more definitive than his temporary, local interpretation of the subject matter. This elaborate procedure repeats the historic circulation of peoples, objects, signs, images, media, and languages, and traverses the boundaries between continents, epochs, cultures, classes, generations, arts, and genres with a

brehtaking virtuosity whose seeming effortlessness and playful grace reminds us of the Mannerist ideal of the *sprezzatura*.

Western art criticism – for there is no other at present – has lauded Adéagbo's work for exemplary paradigms that have become mainstream during the past decade: hybridisation, in-between, and translocation. The artist's reception – as evidence of a Euro-American



Mama Casset: Untitled, (see p. 23), cf. Mama Casset et les précurseurs de la photographie au Sénégal, 1950; 37 photographies, Nr. 36



Postcolonial discourse – has emphasized the radicalism with which he adheres to a specific place, without the critics paying any attention to Cotonou itself or deeming their lack of knowledge even worthy of mention. Key words like “lives in Paris” or “lives and works in Podunk and in New York” suffice to give an artist’s cultural context, because art critic and reader alike know the art-political topography too well to demand further comment. The contraction “lives in Cotonou” is, however, dis-nominative, for it renders unreal the place where Adéagbo’s site-specific art is produced, and arrogantly asserts Euro-American reception to be universal. A journey to Cotonou, which I undertook for other purposes, convinced me (incidentally, unavoidably) of the true import of the city’s production aesthetics for the installations I previously had seen in Cologne, Munich, Berlin, and Kassel. For art historians, sketching out the local, cultural context is a boring duty. The fact that in this case the context has been systematically excluded makes banal observations seem spectacular.

#### Aéroport

The airport at Cotonou has been enlarged by an extension that reminds Stephan Köhler of the boarding station at the bottom of a ski lift. The half-finished, dimly-lit concrete building, the wooden sheds and provisional entrances and exits contrast sharply with the “non places” in Frankfurt and Paris: instead of shiny surfaces and a functional sequence of operations in a milieu that stifles emotion, we encounter the pathos of parting and return, as exciting as the railway stations of Impressionist paintings and silent movies. No one can escape the physical contacts and powerful emotions which are brought to fever pitch by hours of waiting. Whereas the airports of Europe and North America resemble one another in a truly disorienting way – their similarity could be used as a metaphor for “dis-location” – the airport of Cotonou is a *rite de passage* which no one passes through unchanged.

#### Architecture

The buildings of Cotonou are only taxed once they have been plastered and painted, so the predominant colour of the architecture is cement grey. This construction material, whose production constitutes the country’s sole industry, distinguishes the town from the warm, reddish ochre tones of the ancient Royal Cities Abomey, Porto Novo, and Ouidah. Beyond the grey we find: patterned plastic and metal surfaces, speckled imitation marble, anodised copper staircases, Renaissance and Baroque balusters, and Doric colonnades and Ionian portals made of concrete, plastic, and ceramic. From the caved-in roofs of uninhabited houses to the storage yards full of construction materials, from the abandoned husks of newly-made buildings to the bustling construction sites, the signs of ruin are indistinguishable from those of upswing.

Gabriele Muschel and I assumed that the tropical climate was responsible for the rust-red and sulphur-yellow cracks, the crumbling plaster and the rampant patches of mould on *Hotel Croix du Sud*, which is scarcely thirty years-old. Later we learnt that it is due to the shoddy building material: cement is cut with sand and sold twice or three times over. Solitary architectural grotesques tower above the flat shanty landscape. Styles and materials are combined with a fantasy unbound by architectural rules, making the tastelessness of post-modern architecture in Europe seem quite staid.

In Cotonou the architecture does not structure and contain the extravagance and profligacy of urban life, it is itself extravagant and profligate. Which in turn questions the hierarchies involved in western concepts of space.

#### Art concepts

Benin does not have an art college. There is a lot of talk about the plans for setting up an academy, which is expected to be located in provincial Abomey. The Beninese artists who are currently the most successful in the West are autodidacts. In the catalogue to the exhibition



"L'Harmattan 2000", Florent Couao-Zotti explained the popularity of recuperating the waste products of industry and the cultural machinery – a procedure interpreted as a symptom of poverty – by the aesthetic education provided by the city, which substitutes for academic training.<sup>1</sup> In the same catalogue, Joseph Adandé underlines the artists' efforts to free the "génie créateur africain" from the primitivist legacy of an "art premier", and characterises the latter's neo-colonial presentation in the Louvre as: "Africa as Europe likes it".<sup>2</sup> These authors (the pioneers of a future Beninese art criticism) champion a universalist art concept that allows them to counter the unconscionable ethnisation of western exoticism.

In an interview in 1997, Adéagbo defined his art concept as language under the condition of speechlessness, as an indirect dialogue, staggered through phases of mediacy and retrospection. His metaphor "Art as language and writing" does not derive from the ideas of western avant-gardes, but from his experiences with a debasing colonial culture, from multilingualism (Fon, Yoruba, Adja, Mina, Somba, Dendi, French), and from the ostracism and pathologisation meted out by his family. "What induced me to make these installations? My family never accepted that I talk. But I have something to say. I want a passer-by to see what's there through what I write, say, or show. He can ask himself why someone does something like that and what he's trying to convey. He can read and study what I want to say. That's the reason I began making these installations."<sup>3</sup>

I translated a text for him that carefully suggested that Adéagbo wanted to question the western concept of art. He shrugged, the western concept of art means precious little to him. Time and again he stresses that he is not an artist and not a part of the corrupted "art world" (although he is by no means indifferent to the way this world acknowledges him as an artist). His distance to the art system, his autodidacticism and psychiatric categorisation led to his works being referred to as "outsider art". This is refuted by his statements and installations, which actually focus on the concept of art and self-reflexively account for his distance to

the art system: "Ils sont des artistes ... et ma personne de Georges Adéagbo est artiste faisant des installations sur l'art ... œuvre d'art qui est écriture."<sup>4</sup> Outsider- and meta-art are irreconcilable opposites because the one is seen as ultra-naïve, the other as ultra-intellectual. There should be no mistake, the installations are commissioned as art by Western art centres, but while they simultaneously undermine and reflect on the client's art concept, they avoid dadaist gestures of deconstruction. Adéagbo's negation of art does not feed vampire-like on the glory of art history's grand narratives. Two particular resources and models for his art concept are: fetishism – as a variant of the *objets trouvés* – and Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?"<sup>5</sup> I know, as he tells, that Jean and Marcellin (two servants who cannot read French) look at my installations while I am away from home, and think about them. And they know that I know. We would never mention it, but it's as if I am talking to them and they are listening.

## Biography

Adéagbo's written construction of *Ma personne de Georges* is reminiscent of Else Lasker-Schüler's scriptorial and drawn performances of the self as Prinz Jussuff.<sup>6</sup> For both Lasker-Schüler and Adéagbo, the autobiography is more than poetic text material, because they present authorship as an act of self-constitution that relates directly to reality without mimetic duplication or allegorical encoding. The reconstruction of a biography from the wreckage of collective and individual catastrophes is no child's play, not a jolly game of free-floating signifiants. Georges Adéagbo is not dismantling a male European self with a fashionable nod towards the post modern critique of the subject, but is genuinely restoring a damaged person as mask (*per-sona*).



## Books

Books are a vital element of the installations. Important are the pictures and the typography of the jacket. With a disciplined, old-fashioned hand the author adds commentaries to the opened pages, or energetic arrows to guide the viewer's eye over the page's edge to rubber sandals, African sculptures, European bric-à-brac, T-shirts, record covers, or a message in a bottle we found yesterday evening on the beach. In his documenta installation, a boy's adventure novel entitled *Kai in Kamerun* dominated the ensuing discussion. However, the question as to whether Adéagbo reads German and English, which books he selects for their contents and which for the pictures on their jackets, what or indeed whether he reads, is the wrong one. His concern is with the book as object, which has a different status in the oral cultures of West Africa to that in Europe, which Ernst Robert Curtius describes as originating in the "Latin middle ages".<sup>7</sup>

Georges Adéagbo showed me his library in the house in which he grew up and lived from 1971 to 1999. The room is painted a pale blue, cool in the half-shade behind a veranda opening onto an unpaved courtyard where children play and women do the laundry. The dust-coated books are arranged at loose angles in beautiful, crudely constructed wood shelves: travel guides, Marguerite Yourcenar, Camus, Sartre, Kant, whodunits, Rimbaud, Racine, other classics, *The Communist Manifesto*, rare exhibition catalogues, books in languages he cannot read. The books in his installations evoke an impression of overwhelming generosity. They betoken wealth, richness and unlimited access to all the knowledge that Adéagbo wishes for, and which he is wholeheartedly willing to share with the beholder. There is no bibliophilic awe here: the traces of use and the gritty dust reduce costly encyclopaedias to the same level as dime novels; old books are no more valuable than newspapers, magazines, brochures, or pamphlets. Books as fetishes of colonial culture essentialise the superiority of the European written record over the African oral tradition. Adéagbo lets the books loose for a wild, eventful, social life; these abandoned gifts criss-cross the con-

tinents constantly provoking new readers and readings. No canons, and nobody's property.

## Cotonou

Founded in 1830 by Gezo, the King of Abomey on the advice of Don Francisco de Souza, the most powerful of the slave traders and Viceroy of Ouidah. After trading was prohibited, illegal shiploads of slaves continued to be despatched from the harbour to Brazil; nowadays the containers spew out the Biblical plagues of city life: fossils of automotive history, antique cars, mediaeval trucks, motorbikes, mopeds, Vespas, scrapped minibuses from Germany whose inscriptions ("Elektro-Knäble/Wanne-Eickel") create mirth among travellers to the rural north. At first sight the city, which spreads like a tumour under the wreathes of poisonous exhaust fumes, is of a breathtaking hideousness. On second sight, different social topographies can be discerned: the administrative and diplomatic district *Cadjehoun*, and the upwards-aspiring white districts *Bonne Pasteur* and *Coconatière* with their broad avenues, offices of international concerns, and European pizza parlours (the *Livingstone* is the last, oppressive port of call on the way to the airport). Wide, dusty parks in which coconuts, rattan furniture, batik garments and sunglasses are sold. Only a few of the main streets have names – *Boulevard St. Michel*, *Boulevard de France*, *Boulevard Steinmetz*, *Avenue de la Francophonie*. The city map assigns numbers to many but by no means all of the nameless streets, but they don't count.

The cafeteria at the entrance to the campus, in which mostly nothing is to be had, is called *Palais de Gouverneur*, a miserable little tailor's goes by the name *Haute Couture Yves St. Laurent*, a hairdresser's promises the impossible: the *Eternelle Coiffure*, while a photographer's with a snow-clad panorama of the alps promises *Love*. Nowhere is the stench of urine so overpowering as by the walls embellished with the letters: *Défense d'uriner*. This urban synaesthesia knows no norms or hierarchies, but is far from disorderly. It is not difficult for me to



recognise its underlying logic in Adéagbo's installations: the kinship between things and people, the equality of image and word, the endless chains of associations, the ephemeral and the provisional, the reversal of shortage into plenitude, the materiality and corporeality of the media, the extravagant profligacy and the *bricolage*, the vitality of popular and the sterility of high culture, the greedy, disrespectful piecemeal assimilation of the Western commodity world, the denial of exoticism and folklore, multilingualism as a visual principle, the power exerted by the past and the invisible.

### History

Topics: slavery, cannibalism, war, democracy, socialism, the history of colonisation, religion, ideas and art, heroes, and the legends of the martyrs: Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King etc. Just one woman: the resurrection of Edith Piaf. Plus the local history of Cotonou, Ouidah, Porto Novo, Abomey, Nattitingu, Berlin, Munich, São Paulo, Chicago, Johannesburg, Innsbruck, Rome, New York etc.

Methods: archaeology, archives, collections, data storage, museum, fragmentation, montage, securing evidence, correspondences, analogies, geomancy, ancestor cult, dream, working through variants, relation between key data of personal and collective history.

During our evening stroll to *Hotel Cauris Coquillages (Chez Rada)*, Adéagbo surprised me by comparing the Royal Palace in Abomey with the park and palace of Versailles. The architecture of both palaces, he said, is strong and vital, but the museumized interiors with their subsequent furnishings are dead: they lack the historical breath of royal rule. In 1670 Louis XIV received the ambassador of the King of Allada, Don Lopez. Dahomey conquered Allada and the smaller domains to the south, and turned the growing European demand for slaves into a profitable business. The fateful role played by their own elites is nowadays mostly countered by transferring the trauma of slavery into a rational, collective historical awareness. The clay reliefs and textile appliqués at the court of

Abomey (Dahomey) show scenes of the slave hunt that are omitted from the iconography that the arts and crafts market borrows from Abomey.

It is notable that Georges Adéagbo avails himself neither of a positive national identity, nor indeed of any other. A colonised person – fearlessly confronting colonial history – but at the mercy of the memories he captures in his installations. As an aesthetic “conceptual space” in the sense used by Aby Warburg, they allow the artist and his audience to expose themselves to the horror. On another evening while returning from *Chez Rada*, he ardently invoked the beauty and magnificence of Versailles, saying nothing in Africa measures up to it, before explaining – agitated and embittered – that it was paid for by the profits from unpaid African slave labour.

### Legend of the Artist

“Georges Adéagbo, who was mad because madness was inside him and was ill because there was illness inside him, has become the artist Georges Adéagbo...! after 23 years of hardship and suffering, without a family, who could have imagined that someone would come and see me, this person Georges Adéagbo the same way my person Georges Adéagbo is seen today...? Art means suffering, and only he who can and could accept suffering, and could suffer in order to suffer, could be regarded as an artist and call himself an artist... The creator god and the creation...!”<sup>8</sup>

Adéagbo's sad fairytale success story was spurred on by the fact that his biography brings together the topoi of the western “legend of the artist”<sup>9</sup>: his family's underestimation of his talent, his ability to withstand adverse circumstances, the chance discovery of the autodidactic artist, his unmarried state, poverty, loneliness, Christ-like stature, and madness. *Ma personne de Georges* presents a cascade of classical roles depicting the artist as social outcast: mage, prophet, priest, explorer, nomad, martyr, victim, redeemer. As heavy-handedly as art criticism employs these patterns in its biographism, just as little can we accept a concrete effect



from the mythology of the artist: the “lived biography” as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz term it – the identification of the future artist with the topoi of the “lives of artists” which he is compelled to emulate if he is to fit society’s image of the artist. Adéagbo’s life predates his European career as an artist, both chronologically and conceptually. A variant of a topos: whereas Cimabue discovered Giotto as a shepherd boy and brought the child prodigy from a distinctly non-art milieu into the male genealogy of a community of geniuses Adéagbo was “discovered” as a mature adult by the art manager Jean Michel Roussel after having already spent twenty years honing his installations to the point of virtuosity. He has no pupils and would scarcely ever found his own school, and yet his œuvre sets standards and draws on paradoxically linked traditions. His relationship to the obsolete western artist myth, which nowadays is upheld solely by the market, is ambivalent. He wavers between rejecting the artist’s role and accepting affinities suggested by Western friends and curators. On the poster in Kassel advertising his 2001 exhibition in Innsbruck we see, above a photo portrait of Georges Adéagbo in a hat, a wooden sign painted by Esprit based on a photo portrait of Joseph Beuys with hat.

### Materiality/Mediality

There is not a trace in Benin of the mediated “ethnoscapes” and ethnicised “mediascapes” that Arjun Appadurai describes as effects of globalisation.<sup>10</sup> The imaginary does not convey virtual images, but rather the materiality of the things: the *objet trouvé* as fetish. No one would think to claim here that media produce or substitute for reality. Which is not to say that authenticity or some pristine state prevails, but rather that other media dominate: the bodies and gestures, hairdos and textiles, the sign paintings, the cell phones, the Zemidjans. Electronic media have no part in Georges Adéagbo’s installations, although he regularly enjoys watching TV. The book-like plastic video boxes are included in his installations, but not video art. Not e-mails but handwritten letters, and likewise we find photos and Xeroxes but no dig-

ital images. Reproductions, copies, replicas, imitations, parodies, inversions, citations and self-quotes, a never-ending recuperation of the culture industry – but all bound to tactile materials and media which display the marks of their histories like scars, and whose corporeality deeply moves the art audience. The main aesthetic theme dictated by urban culture in Benin is the relationship between materiality and mediality. There would be no deeper significance to this simple observation were it not systematically ignored. The negation by the digital media of a media reality (still) bound to materiality is neo-colonial, because it anticipates the latter’s disappearance and exoticises its conservation in the artwork.

### Photography

A standard feature of the hotels and museums are the reproductions of Pierre Verger’s photographs from *Dieux d’Afrique*,<sup>11</sup> often sealed in yellowed plastic foil. His most famous shots are of a Voodoo priest in Benin and of another in Brazil bearing the double axe of the deity Xangô. Their astonishing similarity shows that the cultural identity of the West African slaves was not erased in Brazil, but preserved by the transformation of Voodoo into syncretistic Candomblé. During a brisk tour of the exhibition, Adéagbo casts a quick but assured judgement on Verger’s photographs, dismissing them as European exoticism. The noble savage drawing his bow, the women’s naked breasts, the white patches on the black skin of the possessed, the postures of trance are now part of the iconography of neo-colonialism adopted by the culture industry to market Voodoo. Significantly Verger’s otherwise omnipresent photographs are missing from Adéagbo’s collections and installations.

Instead he has a rare vintage print from the Senegalese portrait photographer Mama Casset. The exposure – in a large format with a slender wood frame for hanging on the wall – shows two Muslim men wearing fezzes. The older, bearded man is seated, the younger, beardless man is standing behind him, his right hand with a large ring resting lightly on the



older man's shoulder (see p. 17). The composition creates a careful balance in the similarities and differences between the two men and circles round the gentle hand contact. The men attentively watch the procedure for their own iconisation, in full consent with the camera that transforms them into a double portrait. This is not colonial photography. Unlike Pierre Verger, Mama Casset is as good as forgotten in the West.

### Television

Stephan Köhler drew my attention to the folds in the blue drapes behind the corpulent TV newscaster with her audacious hat: they had not been straightened. The series *Rosalinda* and *Beauté du diable* are Mexican and Brazilian imports. Most of the news is about Benin, with just a little information on West Africa and the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, and even less international news, for it is prohibitively expensive. An advertising spot for toothpaste is backed by a panorama of New York showing the World Trade Center still intact. December featured lengthy *table ronde* programmes on the first-ever local elections, held under the motto: Decentralisation is Democratisation. A film financed by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung teaches fairness in electoral campaigns: it is wrong to tear down the other parties' posters or beat their supporters with sticks. The amateurishly acted scenes are shot front-on. On New Year's Eve, President Mathieu Kérékou addressed the citizens ("Béninois et Béninoises!") with a firm, beautiful voice, urging them to work and be peaceable. During the long speech his face was faded out from time to time to show meditative pans through the park of the presidential palace. Few households in Benin have electricity, and televisions in bars and restaurants are a rarity. Television has next to no influence on politics, bodies and desire in public life.

### Zemidjan

The moped taxis are called *zemidjans*, the drivers *zems*. The young men wear loose, bright yellow shirts bearing printed numbers, rakish neckscarves that give them a piratical air, and surgical masks or Lufthansa eye masks to protect them from the fumes. Zemidjans have replaced the smooth functioning public transport system of old and, as the fastest and cheapest means of transport, are responsible for over fifty percent of the deadly air pollution. While accelerating and braking, taking the curves around the pot-holes and dunes, or pitching over the ridges of sand along the *Route des Pêcheurs*, driver and driven communicate with the energy and rhythms of the machines. Zemidjans are centaurs: their torsos, faces and hands are male, their lower bodies metallic. Their world is one of constantly flowing motion, daredevil acrobatics, open gazes, the risky game of driving on each other's tails and the competition between these bold, youthful mythical creatures who mutually pursue, overtake, and playfully challenge one another, without ever actually touching or injuring anyone. Showing their solidarity in the hopeless struggle to survive, they demonstrate the artistry of a hybrid social body which stakes its very life as it turns poverty into art. I would have to have been blind not to recognise this same artistry in Georges Adéagbo's installations.



## Notes

- 1 Florent Couao-Zotti, "Etats et éclats d'une nouvelle generation", in *L'Harmattan 2000. Art contemporain au Bénin*, Cotonou 2000, p. 9.
- 2 Josph Adandé, "Regard sur l'art contemporain Béninois", in *L'Harmattan 2000*, op. cit. Adandé, "Traditional African Art in The Louvre: A Peaceful Revolution?", in Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff (ed.), *Postkolonialismus*, Jahrbuch der Guernica Gesellschaft, 1999, p. 91.
- 3 Georges Adéagbo in an interview with Thomas Fillitz on 23.9.1997 in Cotonou, in Thomas Fillitz, *Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Afrika. 14 Gegenwartskünstler aus Côte d'Ivoire und Bénin*, Vienna 2002, p. 158.
- 4 Georges Adéagbo, handwritten text, reproduced in Silvia Eiblmayr (ed.), *Georges Adéagbo. Archäologie der Motivationen. Geschichte neu schreiben*, Ostfildern 2001, frontispiece, unpag.
- 5 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?", in W. Patrick / L. Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory. A Reader*, New York 1994, pp. 66–111.
- 6 Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Imagination und Politik. Else Lasker-Schüler als Zeichnerin", in C. Keim et al. (ed.), *Visuelle Repräsentanz und soziale Wirklichkeit*, Herbolzheim 2001.
- 7 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, (Bern 1948), trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton 1953.
- 8 Georges Adéagbo, cited in *Documenta 11\_Plattform 5*, Ostfildern 2002, p. 545.
- 9 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artists*, (1934), Trans. Alastair Laing and Lottie M. Newman, New Haven and London 1979.
- 10 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimension of Globalisation*, Minneapolis/London 1996, p. 31.
- 11 Pierre Verger, *Dieux d'Afrique. Culte des Orishas et Voudouuns à l'ancienne côte des Esclaves en Afrique et à Bahia*, Paris 1954.