

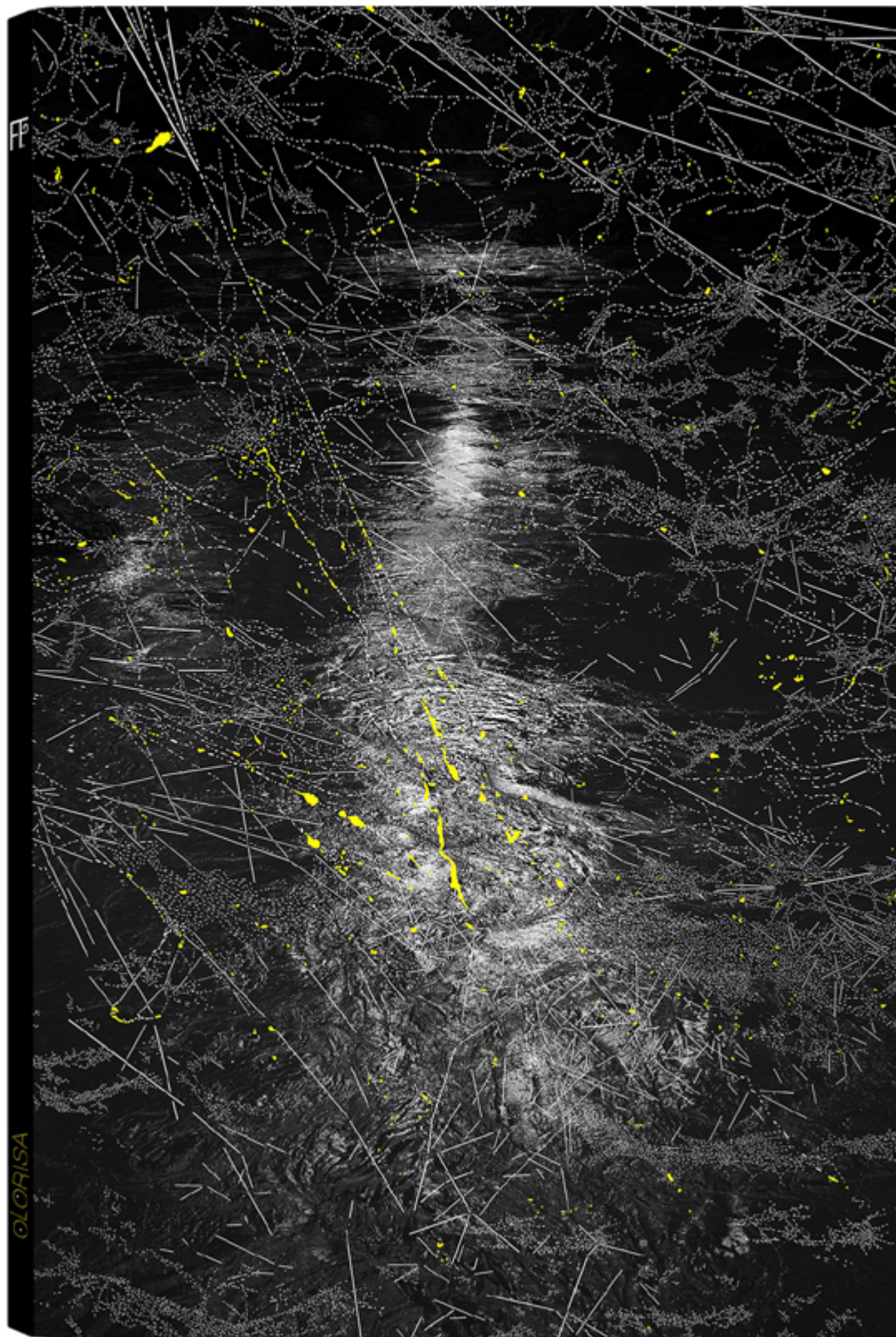
2020  
OLORISA

The OLORISA book project investigates the complex relations of art and spirituality in terms of cross-cultural contexts by revisiting the revitalisation of the sacred grove of the Yoruba Orisa (deity) Osun, located in Osogbo, Western Nigeria. The four contemporary artists involved – Rahima Gambo, Eva Maria Ocherbauer (initiator of the project), Adeola Olagunju and Roberta Stein – revisit the Osun grove to investigate how Susanne Wenger in collaboration with Osogbo artists and craftsmen achieved a synthesis of sacred architecture, Yoruba religious iconography and modernist forms. The preservation and transformation of the Osun grove is the ultimate culmination of holistic creativity that used modern art to pursue spiritual transcendence.

OLORISA is a contemporary search for similar spiritual synthesis, this time between the collaborative protocols Wenger and the Osogbo community used to rebuild and renovate the Osun grove, and those of the four artists involved. They explored Osun's grove and documented traces of the historical work, as well as developed personal artistic approaches to contemporary photography, video and sound – inspired by its spiritual essence. Osun is associated with fertility, prosperity and healing. Their interrogation of the sacred grove's unique symbiosis of Yoruba and European aesthetics is in essence a spiritual pilgrimage, a search for Osun's benevolence, for creative fertility and for spiritual healing in our tumultuous times. OLORISA thus heralds the return of the sacred in modernist narratives that have for too long effaced how the search for spiritual transcendence gave birth to modernism in its divergent expressions.







## OLORISA

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Numerous b/w and color illustrations, accompanied by various texts, including an extensive essay by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie on Yoruba culture, Susanne Wenger and the OLORISA project in detail.

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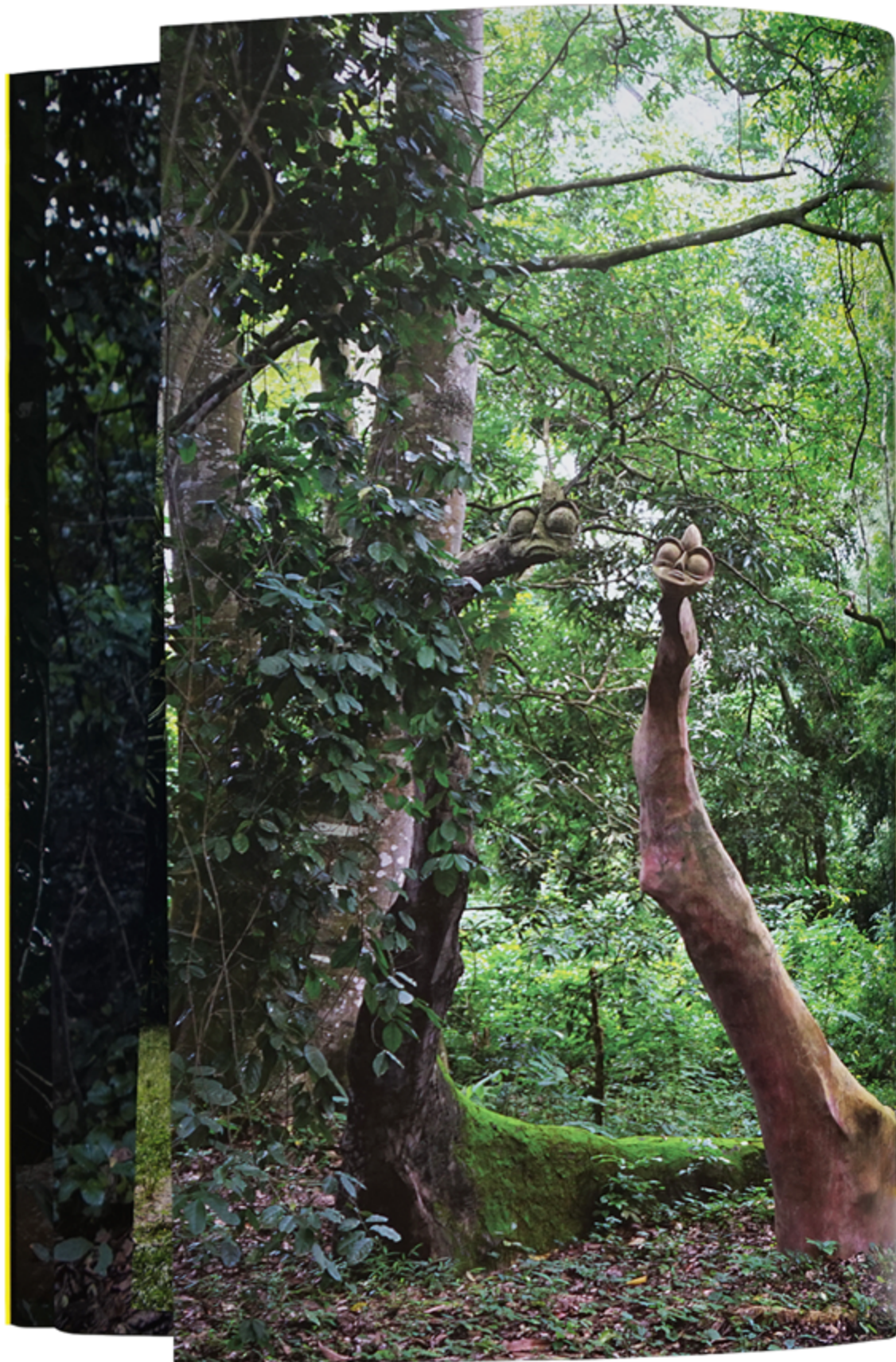
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## TOTEMS

The mind is obsessed with the unknown, afraid of that which he cannot see or predict. Exile — either forced or voluntary has often meant for artists the creation of an oasis, a space from where they can re-imagine where they are coming from. "Where I am is German culture" declared Thomas Mann from exile in Europe as he fled Nazi Germany. James Joyce, having removed himself from a stifling Ireland, created his greatest works, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, as imaginings of Ireland, visualized in terms of a capital Dublin, and Dublin imagined in terms of an encyclopedic cultural history embracing Europe. Dante Alighieri, preceding Mann and Joyce by centuries, having escaped for his life from Florence, created his *Commedia* as a vision of the cosmos from the perspective of a Florentine, a person seeing the world from windows enabled by the vision beyond the walls of the great city, windows through which the universe converged in Florence and expanded outwards into the leaves of possibility constituting the cosmos.

I was at one of the most important junctures of my life, where I had to take a leap of faith into the unknown. I was moving from one country to another, two nations in which the conception and experience of nature are significantly different and I was choosing my fate by uprooting myself from the familiar. My soul was divided between the new zone and the old place and I wanted to have a glimpse into my future.

At the intersection of aspiration and puzzlement, when desire and intellect, vision and calculation becomes a tangled web of confusion, people have sought help from sources beyond the limitations of the mind. Mired as one's ratiocinative faculties may be in the "dark wood" where Dante finds himself at the beginning of the *Commedia*, with "the right way wholly lost and gone."

Two birds sit on the same tree. One eats of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree. The other, eating of neither, simply observes, states the Indian *Upanishads*. How may one see with the eyes of the bird that observes without partaking, thus rising above the flux of pain and pleasure, seeing entanglements of past, present and future *sub specie aeternitatis*, in terms of the ambit of eternity within the circle of being and becoming, the spiral of transformation, in which we return to where the journey began and see that starting point as if for the first time. The Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" puts it in lines incidentally encapsulating insights about the circle and the spiral from the Yoruba Ifa symbolism.















as a blanket term to denounce all forms of modern art.<sup>6</sup> This meant she was unable to exhibit or sell her artworks during this period. Wenger was also integrated into the avant-garde circle of artists in Vienna, Paris, and Rome, and she essentially subscribed to the avant-garde idea of modern artists leading "the people" towards new forms of enlightenment, which played itself out in radical artistic transformation and political activism. Many of these avant-garde artists were Marxists and/or members of the Communist party. In Nigeria, Wenger fought furiously to defend the Osun sacred grove and prevent its destruction by farmers, businessmen, and fundamentalist Christians and Moslems. These battles brought her into direct conflict with powerful Osogbo palace chiefs and with Osogbo citizens who thought her modernist aesthetics and radical politics directly undermined Yoruba artistic, cultural and spiritual traditions. Wenger's campaign for preservation of the sacred grove leveraged her expansive local and international political contacts, and was quite instrumental to the eventual UNESCO designation of the grove as a world heritage site. She was a master of the politics of affect whose participation in various social, cultural and political contexts counters usual descriptions of Wenger as an apolitical artist focused on her own spiritual interiority.

Wenger nurtured three generations of artists during the six decades she spent in Osogbo. She adopted and raised many Osogbo children as her own and created a lasting testament to her intercultural encounters with spiritual forces. She was an Austrian who became a Nigerian, a European who became a priestess of Yoruba-African deities, and a seeker who found in Yoruba spiritualism a deep repository of the sacred that sustained her for life. Susanne Wenger died in 2009 and was buried in a secret location within the Osun grove she had devoted her life to. According to Oloye Oyelami – her student and one of her sons – Adunni Olorisa was buried with full honors according to Yoruba customs, and her name was incorporated into the oriki (praise-songs) of Olosun, the lineage of Osogbo's revered priestesses of Osun. As Wenger requested in her final days, the exact site of her grave within the sacred grove remains a closely guarded secret.

## II: Contemporary Photography and Numinous Encounters

Contemporary narratives of modern art resolutely marginalize the avant-garde notion of art as a search for spiritual direction, promoting instead an interpretation of modernist abstraction devoid of references to spiritual forms. For Susanne Wenger who saw the artistic process as a journey into sacred metaphysics and numinous realities, the secular orientation of Austrian and Parisian modernism proved unsatisfactory. She found a greater integration of art and spirituality in Nigeria, and her work on the Osun grove enabled a symbiosis of art, architecture, and the sacred that produced a modernist Gesamtkunstwerk built on African spiritualities.

The OLORISA Project is a contemporary search for similar spiritual synthesis, this time between the collaborative protocols Wenger and the Osogbo community used to rebuild and renovate the Osun grove, and those of four contemporary Nigerian and European artists – Eva Maria Ocherbauer, Rahima Gambo, Adeola Olagunju and Roberta Stein. The four artists use photography to explore Osun's grove and document traces of Wenger's historical work, as well as develop personal artistic approaches to contemporary photography inspired by its spiritual essence. Osun is associated with fertility, prosperity and healing. Their interrogation of the sacred grove's unique symbiosis of Austrian and Yoruba aesthetics is in essence a spiritual pilgrimage of the sort Wenger herself made, a search for Osun's benevolence, for creative fertility, and for spiritual healing in our tumultuous times. The OLORISA Project thus heralds the return of the sacred in modernist narratives that have for too long effaced how the search for spiritual transcendence gave birth to modernism in its divergent expressions.

<sup>6</sup> The Nazi Party adopted the term "Degenerate Art" (Entartete Kunst) in 1920 as a derogatory term used to describe modern art that the Nazis considered un-German, Jewish, or Communist.









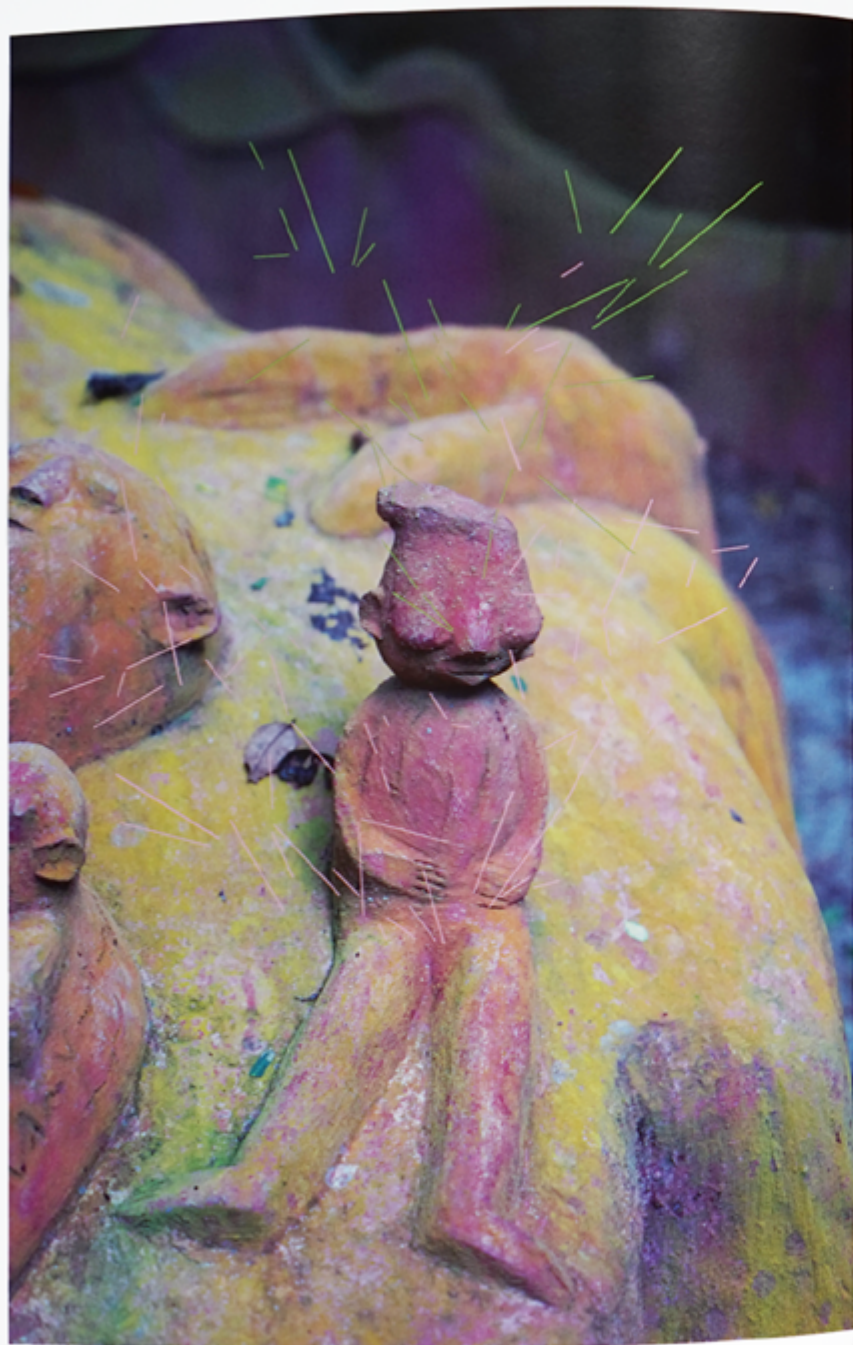




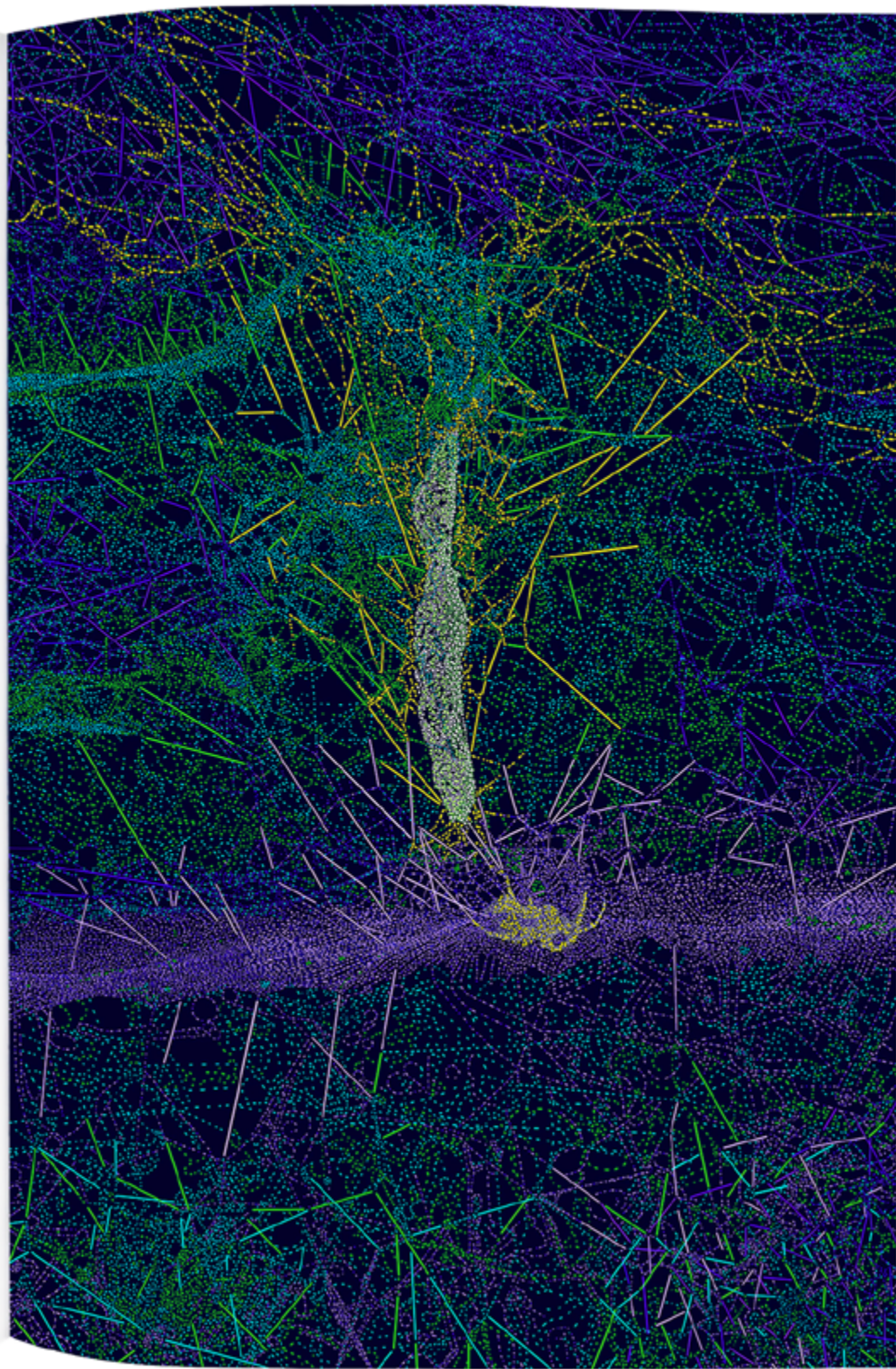


















RAHIMA GAMBO came to artistic practice by working independently on documentary and photojournalism projects in Nigeria. Through her work she explores the moving cartographies of long-form documentary storytelling as it intersects with her inner life, psycho-spiritual-geography, socio politics, urban and rural environments. Selected exhibitions include “FOAM Talent“, Kühlhaus, Berlin and Fondazione Sozzani, Paris / “Have you seen a Horizon Lately?” MACAAL, Morocco / The Lagos Biennial of Contemporary Art / The 11th and 12th Edition Rencontre de Bamako, the Biennale of African Photography, Mali / „African Cosmologies - Photography, Time and the Other“ Fotofest Houston, Texas / “Resisting Images, Images Responding” at Coalmine, Winterthur, Switzerland.

EVA MARIA OCHERBAUER is an Austrian born photographer, curator and lecturer based in Berlin, Germany. Coming from a theatric background she is accustomed to interdisciplinary processes, integrating sculpture, painting and performance into her photographic practice. Selected exhibitions include “One Fine Day Soon” Fotohof, Salzburg / “Kreuzberg - Amerika“ CLO Berlin / “Geniale Dilletanten“ Haus der Kunst, München / “Milk Drop Coronet” Camera Austria Graz / “City Pity” DAAD Galerie Berlin / “Fotografie Des Unsichtbaren” Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach - Kunsthalle Krems - Fotomuseum Winterthur / “Stadtspark Eins” Fotofest Houston, Texas. Publications include „Ten Cities“ Spector Books, Leipzig / “BERLIN WEST”, selfpublished / “FICTION” Superlabo, Japan / “One Day-Ten Photographers” Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg / “la vie et la mort” Fotohof edition Salzburg / “STILL ALIVE” Edition Camera Austria, Graz.

SYLVESTER OKWUNODU OGBECHIE (Ph.D. Northwestern University, 2000) is Professor of Art History and Visual Culture of Global Africa at the University of California Santa Barbara. He is the author of Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist (University of Rochester Press, 2008: winner of the 2009 Herskovits Prize of the African Studies Association for best scholarly publication in African studies), Making History: The Femi Akinsanya African Art Collection (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2011), and editor of Artists of Nigeria (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2012). Ogbachie is also the founder and editor of Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture. He has received prestigious fellowships, grants and awards for his research from the American Academy in Berlin, Getty Research Institute, Rockefeller Foundation, Institute for International Education, Smithsonian Institution and the Ford Foundation. His current research focuses on the role of cultural informatics and new media in analysis of the art and cultural patrimony of Africa and its Diaspora in the age of globalization.

ADEOLA OLAGUNJU is an artist working with photography, video, sound and installations. Much of her artistic work has involved considerations of the self, memory, spirituality, healing and the social landscape. Her works have been shown in festivals, museums and galleries in many countries, she was the recipient of the Seydou Keïta Grand Prize Award for the best photographic creation at the 12th Edition Rencontre de Bamako, the Biennale of African photography, Mali, of the Lagos Photo Festival Award in 2012 and the Young Art support Amsterdam Award in 2013. Olagunju was one of the selected Mentees at the 5th Edition of the Forecast Platform Berlin in 2020. She currently lives between Germany and Nigeria.

ROBERTA STEIN is an Italian photographer based in Berlin. Her photographs are evolving as deeply personal documents, drawn from the emotional life of lived experience. Stein’s interest in photography began after her studies in graphic design in Milan, when she moved to Rome and explored the potential of photography as a form of visual expression, learning the history and the magic of the darkroom. In 2013 Stein moved to Berlin to study at the Neue Schule für Fotografie and graduated with the exhibition of her project “How Long is Now” in 2017. She works as an editor and freelance photographer.

