



Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung.
Portrait by Ériver Hijano

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Rising Curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung Casts an International Eye on Berlin and Beyond

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN**

December 15, 2020 1:33pm



What is the formula for work? In physics, where work is defined in terms of energy transfer and displacement, it's force times distance. In the world we inhabit, it's more complicated than that. As surveyed by **Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/bonaventure-soh-bejeng-ndikung/>), an influential rising curator based in Berlin, the notion of work equates with labor and the many social and political issues surrounding it—and it will be the focus of one of the most anticipated

international art exhibitions on the horizon in the coming years.

On course for a planned opening next spring in Arnhem, the Netherlands, “Force Times Distance – On Labour and its Sonic Ecologies” is Ndikung’s entry into the lineage of Sonsbeek, a storied Dutch exhibition that has been presented at varying intervals since its founding in 1949, as the world’s first postwar contemporary art showcase of its kind (predating the acclaimed Documenta in Germany by six years). The next iteration of the show has been branded sonsbeek20→24, signaling its new charge to play out over four years as a quadrennial filled with exhibitions, dialogues, residencies, publishing projects, radio broadcasts, and more as plans evolve.

Though originally scheduled to open this past summer, sonsbeek20→24, like so much else affected by the pandemic, was postponed—but with a refined sense of purpose. “I already was thinking about labor, people’s rights, and sound,” Ndikung said of his curatorial approach at the start. “It was already very charged. Then came Covid—as a kind of sharpener or catalyst to understand some of the things we really wanted to talk about. ‘Force times distance’—the formula for work, for labor—became so important as the incredible inequalities in the space of work became so evident.”

In a virtual panel discussion in September about how biennials are adapting to the ongoing crisis, Ndikung further elaborated on his thinking among a group of peers assembled by the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town. “How do we be together in a period where you are not allowed to be together? How do you think of a collective while being asked to be apart? I think that is the question of our time,” he said. “In the architecture of encounter, giving somebody the elbow these days is as much as giving someone a kiss. It’s the shifting of intimacy. It’s about shifting from what we’ve known until now. Maybe what we’ve known until now is irrelevant.”

Olu Oguibe (<https://www.artnews.com/t/olu-oguibe/>), one of the artists included in sonsbeek20→24—among illustrious others including Lawrence Abu-Hamdan, Ellen Gallagher, Ibrahim Mahama, and Laure Prouvost—said he expects a momentous exhibition with Ndikung at the helm. “Contemporary art curating today is pretty much a vocation of clichés: people do the same things, show the same ever-so-slightly changing grad-school-approved artist lists, cycle through the same institutions and venues, and eventually endorse and uphold the same canon, no matter their pretenses,” said Oguibe, who also featured in an edition of Documenta in 2017 for which Ndikung was curator-at-large.

“Bonaventure is not into any of that. One can see it in the spectrum of artists and projects that he presented in Documenta, for instance. That’s not the traditional trajectory of contemporary art curators who are looking to build a portfolio so they can get a museum position with a pension.”

Natasha Ginwala, an associate curator at Gropius Bau in Berlin and artistic director of the upcoming Gwangju Biennale in South Korea (with Defne Ayas), said that, while challenges mount in our isolated and anxiety-ridden times, sonsbeek20→24 and other undertakings of its kind stand to benefit from finally looking to lead curators from more diverse backgrounds, such as herself and Ndikung. “It is only in recent years that the machinery of biennials, with few exceptions, has moved away from a certain kind of prototype of star curator, mostly heteronormative and white,” she said. “When it comes to a more heterogenous, heterodox, collective vision to stimulate the biennial as a model for our times, we are facing all kinds of crisis. It’s challenging to be the ones who are, in a sense, shattering, remaking, and rebuilding the potentiality of biennials through a pandemic and civic uprisings. But at the same time, it is an opportunity.”



View of Olu Oguibe's installation *Biafra Time Capsule*, 2017, which debuted at Documenta 14 and was recently exhibited at Galerie Kandlhofer in Vienna in a show organized by Ndikung. COURTESY GALERIE KANDLHOFER, VIENNA/PHOTO MANUEL CARREON LOPEZ.

Ndikung's approach to **curating** is best represented by a closely followed space he founded with a team of collaborators in Berlin in 2009. **Savvy Contemporary** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/savvy-contemporary/>), a self-described “Laboratory of Form-Ideas,” privileges experimentation that ventures far beyond white-cube exhibitions into a program involving performances, publications, sound projects, a

record label, archival activities, and more.

“While it’s interesting to present troves of paintings, photographs, sculptures, and so on and so forth, these mediums were not enough to tell the story,” said Ndikung, who in October was awarded the prestigious Merit of Order of Berlin for Savvy’s contributions to the city. “It became evident from the very beginning that we wanted to make exhibitions in which we would always have a performative and discursive arm.”

Akinbode Akinbiyi (<https://www.artnews.com/t/akinbode-akinbiyi/>), an artist and longtime collaborator with Ndikung, recalled the then aspiring curator’s asking him for advice some 12 years ago about how he might get such a space started to show what was not being presented in Berlin at the time. “There were a few institutions in Berlin and in Europe focusing on non-Western art—or the voices of the Global South, so to speak,” Akinbiyi said. “But they were not seriously engaged on a curatorial level.”

A global perspective—one that positions art from Africa, Latin America, and Asia on a plane equal to that occupied by Europe and the United States—is fundamental to Ndikung. “In Bonaventure’s curatorial practice, the global perspective is natural and integral—it’s a core value,” Oguibe, the artist, said. “He brings not just keenness or curiosity but inquisitive depth and understanding. He’s not a sociologist merely using art to illustrate ideology or an agenda. He’s genuinely interested in art, in form, without relegating its social context.”

An expanded sense of context comes easily to Ndikung, who was born in Cameroon and moved to Berlin in 1997 not to pursue art but to study science. It was shortly after moving to Germany that he first heard the word “curator”—in a televised interview with Okwui Enwezor, who had just been named the curator of the 11th edition of Documenta, which opened in 2002 to much acclaim.

After receiving a Ph.D. in medical biotechnology in Düsseldorf in 2006, Ndikung moved back to Berlin, where he worked as a professor (and briefly at a pacemaker company) until 2015—when he received the call to join Documenta and chose to give up his scientific work, to which he said he may still return one day.

Around the time he returned to Berlin, Ndikung began mounting small exhibitions in gallery spaces around the city. As he was ready to be more ambitious, he found that when he approached larger institutions with

curatorial concepts and prospective artist lists for presentations of the kind he wanted to organize, he was often dismissed. “One director of an institution told me, ‘We are not interested in showing African art—we are interested in contemporary art,’” Ndikung recalled. “It was a violent act to take away the contemporaneity of artists who are living and working today. It was clear that I needed to create a space in which we don’t need to justify ourselves for the things we want to do.”

In 2009, Savvy started out in a small space in the Berlin neighborhood of Neukölln and has moved three times since, first to a former electrical transformer station in the same area in 2013, then to the city’s Wedding neighborhood in 2015, and this past fall, to a new location nearby in a former casino that is four times larger. Savvy’s various incarnations proved elemental in its evolution to becoming one of Germany’s leading art spaces. The first location was so small and cold in the winter that it necessitated a sense of community on an intimate scale. But then the context changed. At the time it moved to its second location, Savvy had gained a substantial following, both locally and internationally. By the time it moved to its present home, “it was really established,” Akinbiyi recalled. “The news really spread around.”



Exterior of Savvy Contemporary’s new exhibition space in a former casino.
PHOTO: JUAN PABLO GARCÍA SOSSA.

Many who frequent Savvy have a hard time pinning down a program that plays out as a continuous effort to bring together various voices and modes of art-making that have historically been discounted, pushed aside, and marginalized. “Bonaventure curates like a jazz player,” said Simon Njami, a curator who has followed Savvy from its beginning and has collaborated

with Ndikung. “His exhibitions always look like improvisations. But as we know, in order to be a good jazz musician starting to improvise, you need to fully manage your instrument. There is always a certain musical feeling in what he does, and his vision has no limitations.”

Ndikung has also built a sense of community through collaboration and “celebration of engaging with the audience,” Akinbiyi said. “It’s not done in a kind of idealistic way—it’s matter of fact, down to earth. If you visit Savvy, you are visiting somebody’s home. When visiting someone’s home, you’d be hosted. You will be given food and drinks and a warm embrace.”

Along the same lines, Ginwala, the curator from Gropius Bau, said Savvy’s sense of “collective production” is key to understanding what it means to those who revere it. “We think of it as a refuge as much as an incubator.”

Part of Ndikung’s expansive approach to making Savvy such a refuge involves a focus on archival projects that look to document lived experiences by gathering a wealth of materials—from the historically important to the everyday—that can represent the history of distinct moments in time. One such project is “Colonial Neighbours,” which aims to examine Germany’s colonial history by collecting objects—stamps, bracelets made from ivory, photos from family albums—that are accompanied by stories and anecdotes from donors that add context. Such work is an attempt to “create an archive of the people, by the people, from the bottom up,” Ndikung said.

“Colonial Neighbours” is also activated by artists and scholars who create new projects drawing on the material in its holdings. In 2018, artist Sunette Viljoen created a series of sculptural supports to display some of the archive’s most problematic objects as a way to highlight histories that have often been hidden. That same year, in a reconsideration of monuments, Márcio Carvalho created a series of busts of Otto von Bismarck, the ruler who convened the 1884–85 Berlin Conference that divided up the African continent among European powers.

Ndikung said the impetus for “Colonial Neighbours” came after a meeting with a German politician who had referred to Cameroon as just a French colony. When Ndikung corrected him and pointed out that Cameroon had also been colonized by Germany, the politician responded: but “for just a short time.” As Ndikung recounted, “I was interested in this notion of a short time. How short is a rape? How short is a violent act? It bugged me that he related this very violent act to time.”

Yvette Mutumba, a curator and the editor-in-chief of the publication *Contemporary And (C&)*, called “Colonial Neighbours” a project that aims “to build an archive that shows how much the colonial past in Germany is still a part of our society.” Of Ndikung and his colleagues, she said, “They were really one of the first to make it a point to say, ‘Look, this is something that is part of the history of all of us. It’s still right here.’ In Germany, it’s a big issue that colonialism is not really present—that there’s not awareness around it in a broader sense in society.”



View of Sunette Viljoen’s installation *Support Structures*, 2018, at Savvy Contemporary as part of “Colonial Neighbours.”

PHOTO: MARVIN SYSTERMANS.

Another of Ndikung’s many **areas of interest** is sound and how what we hear can include embodied knowledge that figures in what he calls a form of “corpoliteracy.” In a publication for Documenta 14 in 2017, he described his thinking behind corpoliteracy as “an effort to contextualize the body as a platform, stage, site, and medium of learning, a structure or organ that acquires, stores, and disseminates knowledge. This concept implies that the body, in sync with, but also independent of, the brain, has the potential to memorize and pass on/down acquired knowledge through performativity.”

When he joined the team organizing Documenta 14 at the invitation of that edition’s artistic director Adam Szymczyk, Ndikung was interested in thinking about how he might use sound as a way to expand the purview of the exhibition. Though Documenta was being staged for the first time in two cities—in its historic base in Kassel, Germany, as well as in Athens, Greece—Ndikung wanted the project to have an even wider reach.

So he created a radio program with commissions for new audio-based works (some 50 pieces by the end of its run) and invited the public “to engage in a collective practice of critical listening.” Under the title “Every Time A Ear di Soun”—a reference to a poem-turned-song by Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka—the project was broadcast in partnership with eight radio stations in Greece, South Africa, Colombia, Lebanon, Brazil, Indonesia, the United States, and Germany.

The works were also accessible online, but the primary focus was to broadcast via radio waves since many people in the world do not have access to the internet. As Ndikung told the story at the time, the idea arose while thinking of people like his late grandmother, who was then still living in Cameroon: How could someone like her experience and even in certain ways be a participant in Documenta? All she had to do was tune in.

“Radio became an art medium itself,” Ndikung said. “I was thinking the whole time: how do you curate that? How can you make an exhibition of the ether? Documenta is a very privileged space. How many people can afford to fly Kassel? To me, using radio became a way of democratizing.”

The radio project included such works as Halida Boughriet’s *The Border of the Shadow*, which told the story of young people migrating from Africa to Europe, and Theo Eshetu and Keir Fraser’s *Atlas Radio*, which broadcast the sound components of an engulfing video featuring footage of masks from an ethnographic museum and musings about fragmented worlds.



Savvy Contemporary’s Documenta 14 radio station SAVVY Funk, broadcasting from Berlin.
PHOTO: MICHAEL NAST

Other artwork in different forms that Ndikung brought into the Documenta

fold focused on showcasing major African artists like Akinbiyi and Mahama. “He gave a platform to artists from Africa and the diaspora [who] in our perception are already really important artists but maybe not in the mainstream perception,” Mutumba said. “It was through him that this older generation of important artists for the first time had exposure that made that all so clear.”

Ndikung was also instrumental in showcasing a newer generation, like the South African collective iQhiya. “He brought in a range of highly regarded artists who have been mentors and pioneering figures in the African context and diasporas, yet not been given due recognition and major commissions at this scale—and a lot of younger artists and more experimental practices of sound and radio transmission,” said Ginwala, who was also on Documenta’s curatorial team.

One such artist was Olu Oguibe. In 2015, Ndikung sent Oguibe a message on Facebook asking for information about his work. “There was no further explanation, and, at that point, I had no inkling that he’d been invited to the Documenta team—he made no mention of it,” Oguibe said. “It wasn’t easy to access my work since very little had been written about it. I had no gallery representation and, after 18 years or so, I’d shut down my website a few years prior. So I was happy to send him images and thought nothing of it afterward.”

After some time, Oguibe was invited to submit a proposal for a project—and his contribution to the Kassel portion of Documenta 14 became one of the exhibition’s most provocative commissions. The work took the form of a 50-foot obelisk installed in Kassel’s main square, and its title—*Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument (Monument for strangers and refugees)*—set it in the context of a refugee crisis that continues to see many displaced people migrating to Europe, and Germany, in particular. The work caused a stir, with conservative politicians decrying it as an affront and others praising it for its enduring message of hospitality for those who might be seen as different or other. (After it won the exhibition’s €10,000 Arnold Bode Prize, the city of Kassel later acquired the work and reinstalled it near its original location.)

“This was a subject which most of the curators could relate to personally, and one that seemed apropos to the social focus of Documenta 14,” Oguibe said. “Unlike other Documentas that seem nebulous and fuzzy in their focus, Documenta 14 was quite pointed, and the monument fit right into its tated objectives.”

The obelisk's four sides bore a quote in four different languages (Turkish, Arabic, German, and English) from the Book of Matthew, in the New Testament: "I was a stranger and you took me in."



Olu Oguibe's *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument* (Monument for strangers and refugees), 2017, installed in Kassel, Germany, as part of Documenta 14. UWE ZUCCHI/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES.

While working on sonsbeek **20→24**, Ndikung has been broadening his scope in terms of sight and sound. One rich subject of research is Kassav', a music collective founded in 1979 on the island of Guadeloupe—and nothing less than “one of the most important projects of the 20th century,” he said. Other areas of interest include projects—in collaboration with Natasha Ginwala—to explore “Afro-Asian narratives and histories as plotted through the Indian Ocean, a place where so many hybrid cultures have been created that affect our traditions of food, music, performance, and labor,” said Ginwala.

In 2019, Ndikung was also selected as the inaugural recipient of the International Curators Residency at the Ontario College of Art & Design University in Toronto, where he is working on an exhibition based on a proposal titled “The Cochlea: Sonic by Nature.” It will examine vibration and auditory phenomena in an effort to understand how society, particularly in Canada, is out of equilibrium because of its colonial history and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. “If you damage your cochlea, you won’t be able to walk—you lose balance,” Ndikung said. “I want to look at that in terms of creating balance, in terms of translation, in terms of intelligibility, in terms of the structuring of society.”

Another recent landmark in Ndikung’s curatorial career is the 2019 edition

of the Bamako Encounters photography biennial in Mali, for which he served as artistic director. Under the title “Streams of Consciousness,” his still-resonating edition of the closely followed exhibition surveyed “the flow of consciousness as a metaphor for the flow of ideas, peoples, and cultures that cross and follow rivers such as the Niger, the Congo, the Nile, or the Mississippi,” according to the show’s curatorial statement.

Simon Njami, who was the artistic director of Bamako Encounters from 2001 to 2007, described Ndikung as a “radical thinker” and called his exhibition “a clear wake-up call to African nations, thinkers, and artists beyond photography. He is among those curators who believe that art can help us to dig what James Baldwin once called ‘the evidence of things not seen.’ He understood that time is flow and that, in order to understand today, we need a clear understanding of what happened before.”



View of Akinbode Akinbiyi’s photo installation “Passageways, Involuntary Narratives, and the Sound of Crowded Spaces,” 2015–17, at the Natural History Museum, Kassel, as part of Documenta 14.
PHOTO: FRED DOTT

Among the standout showings at Bamako Encounters was a presentation of work by artists who had been members of the Kamoinge Workshop, which was founded in New York City in 1963 by African American photographers who gathered together for now-famous sessions of critique to contemplate their work. Ndikung likened Kamoinge, which is still active, to a kind of school that went on to train generations in its wake. “The incredible thing about this collective was the amount of strength they could gather,” Ndikung said. “What you learn in school is one thing—what you learn in practice is another.”

Ndikung's interest in collectivity draws in part from his passion for sound and the ways that musical groups work together. "Creating a collective is a political gesture of survival," he said. "When Kamoinge was founded, most of these photographers didn't have spaces to publish their works, so the idea was to come together to be stronger."

And his penchant for intermingling different modes of art-making helps bring newfound kinds of attention to different mediums. Akinbiyi said that Ndikung's iteration of Bamako Encounters was important for what it had to say "not just about African photography or photography from the diaspora but international photography—what photography means to all of us all over the world."

Ginwala, the curator from Gropius Bau, testified to the transformative power of such a practice. "Bonaventure built upon this reputed model of a photography-based biennial with a compelling history and recharged its intentions and expanded role today," Ginwala said. "The strategies that he builds for projects are sustainable bridges and instruments to what those cultural models can be in a vivid and polyphonic future."

A version of this article appears in the Winter 2021 issue of *ARTnews*, under the title "The History of All of Us."



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