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Theo Eshetu in Conversation with Selene Wendt

Selene Wendt

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THEO ESHETU

in Conversation with

SELENE WENDT

Having worked with media art for over thirty years, Theo Eshetu is internationally recognized as a veteran in his field. His ongoing investigation of the manipulation of the language of television is inspired by anthropology, art history, scientific research, religious iconography, history, and personal experience, seamlessly brought together in multimedia works that reveal how electronic media shapes identity and perception. Eshetu's work consistently stems from the combined sensibilities of filmmaker, photographer, documentarian, and sound artist. Theo Eshetu's thoughts and reflections about art, photography, television, and video are revealed in a recent conversation with Selene Wendt.

Selene Wendt: Although a lot has changed within media art since you started out in the early eighties, the essential elements of your work have remained fairly constant through the years. Before we go into detail about the specifics of your work, please tell me a little bit about your ongoing commitment to video in particular.

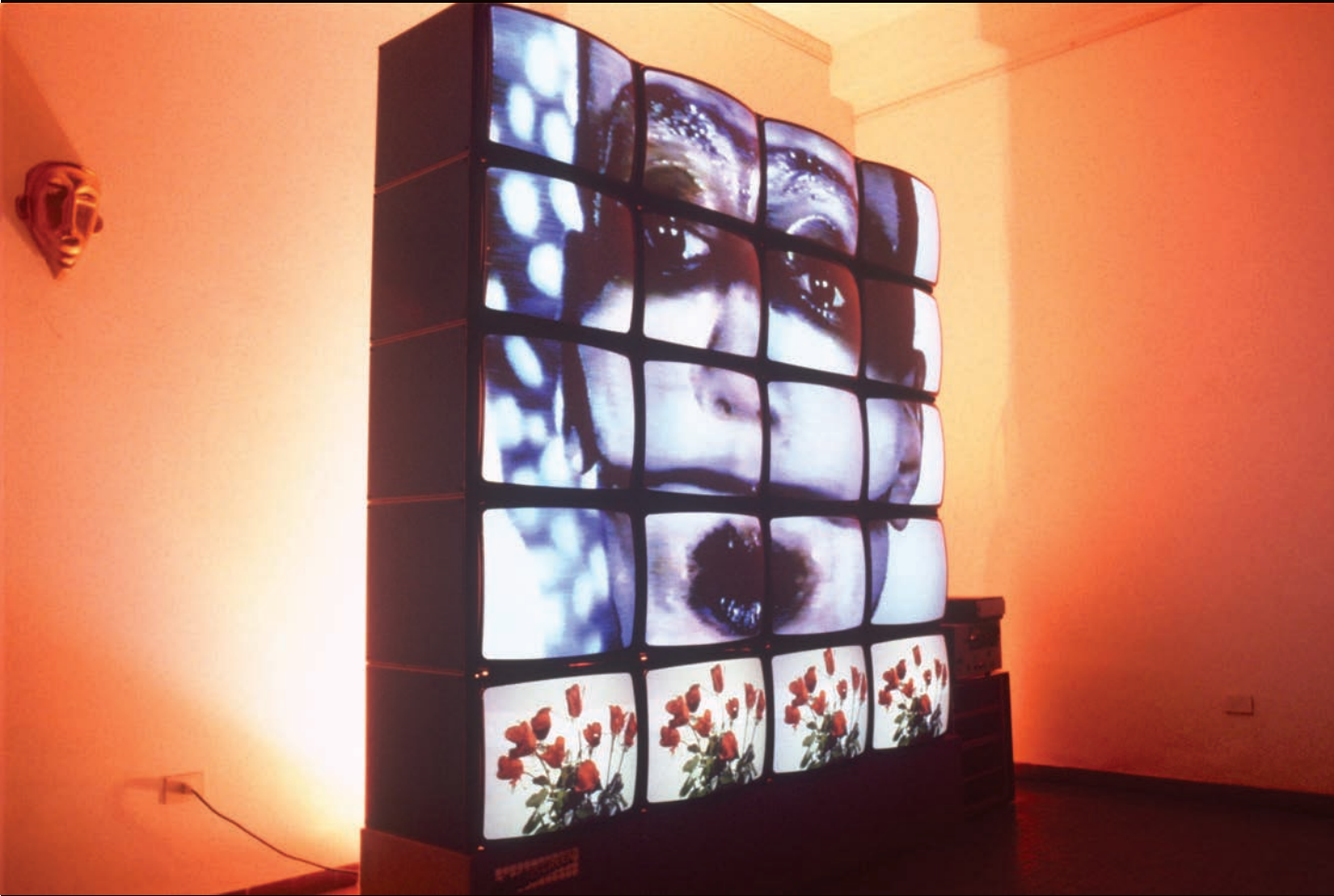
Theo Eshetu: One of my very first projects was *Till Death Us Do Part* (1982–86). The title was a sort of declaration of faith, a marriage vow to using video, but it also referred to the idea of seeing video in the light of its relationship with other media. I was particularly interested in the idea of re-creating the gestures and forms of ritual to explore the interrelations between video and other forms of expression, such as photography, theater, cinema, documentary, and music. I think it's generally true that when you want to discover something new and explore the unknown, you have to enter its ritual dimension. It's through ritual that we can enter the mystery of the unknown.

SW: What did you discover in the process?

TE: I soon discovered that I was also exploring my own transnational identity and that images that at the time seemed instinctive and spontaneous were charged with biographical elements. Video, being the sum of influences from other forms of expression, reflected my own multicultural perceptions, while its capacity to influence other forms reflected my passion for making works in different fields, from museums to television and cinema, from the theater to the concert hall. More importantly, however, I was exploring ways to bring an African, as well as Afro-American, sensitivity to a creative medium that was seen as a cutting-edge technological medium with which to express our distance from humanity. Marshall McLuhan defined video as a cool medium, and I was interested in regaining the "lost" humanity and exploring it as a hot medium.

SW: In other words, a multidisciplinary approach that simultaneously addresses issues of your multicultural upbringing. This is quite evident throughout your work, ranging from *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* to *Brave New World* and *Africanized*, and also including *Trip to Mount Zuqualla* and *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*.

TE: Naturally, my African origins are important and many of my works reflect this, but biography was not my prime concern. Initially I wanted to counterbalance what I perceived as a Eurocentric attitude in the arts and a tendency, especially with television broadcasters, to be nationalistic and to view Africa in a negative light or to exalt its exotic fascination. So actually my interest in incorporating an African sensitivity starts with an interest in video as a hybrid



Theo Eshetu, *Till Death Us do Part*, 1986.
Video installation. Courtesy the artist

medium and a desire to express stories and ideas outside the mainstream. I was attracted to video because it was an unexplored medium, and one with which I could explore things that hadn't been done before in the arts—at least not with video. Using video to delve into the subconscious and the unknown was a way of attempting to understand the medium. Video was a tool in the hands of individuals, as opposed to television, which is a state-run medium, and I thought that an individual approach, no matter how abstract, could be more truthful than the artificially constructed realities shown on television.

SW: You have developed and honed your approach in step with the technological advancement and evolution of video as a medium. How has this affected your work?



Blood Is Not Fresh Water, 1997. 56 min.
Video still, courtesy the artist

TE: I have followed its development since the birth of the VHS, and with every technological development there has been a conceptual shift. The ugliness of VHS brought about an exploration of its conceptual basis, and working with broadcasting media brought about a dialogue that highlighted a more subjective approach in contrast to the so-called objective approach of television. The introduction of digital technology brought about reflections on the relationship between originals and copies and on the preservation of dying ideas. However, I always find myself investigating the same questions with regard to the relationship between experience and its representation as an image.

SW: Well, in all fairness, while you have maintained an interest in investigating similar underlying issues, your work is definitely not the same as it was thirty years ago. Let's start from the beginning. Is there an early work that has particular significance to your artistic development?

TE: My early twenty-monitor video-wall installation, *Till Death Us Do Part* (1982–86), in part inspired as a critique and fascination with the Nuba photographs of Leni Riefenstahl, was my first large-scale work. I had worked two years on that project and even collaborated with the inventor of the video-wall. Through reenactments of *Rites of Passage* I was simultaneously discovering what could be done with video that couldn't be done with any other medium and exploring the idea of liberating the image out of the constricted box of the TV set.

SW: *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* is among your most iconic works, and seems to signal an artistic breakthrough for you. In fact, much of the footage is reappropriated in later work—for instance, the boys swimming in the river. At the time, how conscious were you that this would become a seminal work?

TE: After about ten years of making video art I shifted to exploring a visual language in which art and television could coexist, trying to unite two opposites. I was initially disappointed because I felt it leaned too much toward television and also because I felt that the overwhelming experience I had by visiting Ethiopia and reconnecting with my grandfather did not really come across with the desired fluidity. I guess this also had to do with the tremendous success of the earlier work *Travelling Light* (1992), in which the balance between artistic expression and biographical portrait were more sealed as a single experience.

The subject of *Travelling Light* was the cult figure Lindsay Kemp, who provided a unique opportunity for me to really experiment with the interdisciplinary qualities of video making. Kemp was the mentor of David Bowie who helped shape the Ziggy Stardust persona. As mime, actor, and director he studied under Marcel Marceau and Kazuo Ohno, and his outlandish theater is an extraordinary cocktail of diverse styles and references. Not only was I a great admirer of his work, I saw in his multidisciplinary approach to theater a parallel to what I was trying to achieve with video. Ultimately, with *Travelling Light* I managed to demonstrate a complex network of ideas where theater, real life, and mythology could enter into a dialogue in a light-hearted yet visually stunning way.

SW: Sounds more like a successful ending than the beginning of a lifelong career.

TE: Unlike *Travelling Light*, when *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* first came out it didn't get broadcast, nor was it shown in art shows, but ended up being well received in many African film festivals, and I suddenly became known as a filmmaker rather than a video artist. It transcends traditional categories of film and documentary, which I thought was a good thing, and introduced the gender of the visual essay.

SW: And what did you discover about your grandfather in the process?

TE: The truth is that I rediscovered my grandfather by making the film about him. I reconnected with him after many years and reconnected with my Ethiopian self. It was a remarkable experience to discover the aspects of my Ethiopian identity which my European upbringing had erased. I appreciated the value of safeguarding one's memory as a way of connecting with people and finding a position in the world. I think that was the biggest lesson learned both individually and as an artist.

SW: Although you were initially unhappy with the results, everything else suggests that it was an incredible experience.

TE: It was, but I felt the experience was greater than the video I made about it. In hindsight, however, I was wrong to undervalue the results of *Blood Is Not Fresh Water*. Though very much a documentary, it did point to a new direction in video making, and though it was not as radical and visionary as *Travelling Light*, it is a more personal work and all the better for it.

SW: What changes occurred in your production method as a result of creating that work?

TE: Up to that point I had treated Africa as a metaphoric space, a place I valued for its inspirational and creative qualities, in some way challenging and playing with stereotypes, but nonetheless a powerful place of the imagination. The great thrill of making that film involved going to the continent and seeing the relationships between an imagined Africa and a real Africa, going to Ethiopia physically and to the places of lost childhood memories, just at the time when those memories were fading. It was a way of recuperating those memories and juxtaposing them with the real, yet equally imaginary, images of Ethiopia generated by television.

I based the film on the essay-like tradition of travel writing and updating the archetypal African tradition of a grandfather transmitting his culture to his grandson. I wished to reveal the rich cultural heritage of a country known to the general public as a place of war and famine.

SW: The video takes us on a journey to your grandfather's house in Addis Ababa and to various places around Ethiopia. Among other details, we learn of his involvement with the Italian occupation, and his relationship with Haile Selassie. In fact, your grandfather played a very important role in Ethiopian history. How is this captured in the video, and what kind of stories unfold in the work?

TE: He had written numerous books based on the lives of emperors, earning him the title of Ethiopia's leading historian. During the film we visit his birthplace in Ankober, see tombs of emperors he had written about, and embark on a journey to visit the site of the lost Ark of the Covenant, which takes us to the islands on Lake Tana, to the source of the Blue Nile. We visit the keeper of the Ark in the church of Mariam of Zion in Axum and learn of the legend of the Queen of Sheba, and Ethiopia's origin myth. We learn of how Menelik, the first son of King Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba brought the Ark to Ethiopia for protection. We witness the celebration of Timket, commemorating the baptism of Christ, and also visit Lalibela, with its twelve rock-hewn churches supposedly built by angels. This is where the symbolic tomb of Adam is said to be. Our journey proceeds to the south of Ethiopia, where we meet the tribal populations of the Hammar and the Murzi, and we also visit the site where anthropologists discovered Lucy, or *Australopithecus afarensis*, the earliest human remains. This is the personal, historical, mythical, and anthropological story that unfolds in *Blood Is Not Fresh Water*. I never wanted to let the biographical element dominate; rather, I wanted to invite the viewers to take the journey with me to our communal ancestor.

SW: How did your grandfather respond to the work?

TE: Part of the challenge was that he didn't even want to be in it. I spent a period of several months trying to convince him. During that time he told me the stories of Ethiopian history and his own life as ambassador in various European nations, as well as his complex involvement with Haile Selassie. But he did not want to be filmed talking of these things, treating me as the lost grandson who doesn't know. It was true that I really didn't know him at the outset, but of course I did get to know him, and his very wry sense of

humor, in the process of making the video. I deliberately tricked him a few times, by filming while he was showing me some old photographs, or inviting him to go for a drive to his birthplace and grabbing a couple of fugitive interviews for the brief minutes he conceded after much insistence. It was a game, and none of this struggle is visible in the video. When he finally saw the end result, he typically complained about the presence of other people in the film, saying that he thought it was supposed to be only about *him*.

There were two issues at play, I was a grandson bonding with his grandfather, but I was also a filmmaker who was trying to bond with his subject. The entire process involved walking the fine line between personal and universal.

SW: Not only did your grandfather play a very important role in Ethiopian history during Haile Selassie's reign, he was also a prominent writer. Please tell me more about the importance of your grandfather in relation to shaping a certain understanding of Ethiopian history.

TE: As a writer he studied Ethiopian history through the writings of foreigners. He absorbed what the Italians, French, and English had written and how it was represented in the Bible and other religious texts, and then proceeded to write a history of Ethiopia for Ethiopians, creating his own narrative liberated from a Eurocentric perception of Ethiopian history. In a sense I tried to imitate his approach by studying different ways to explore the theme of origins, from the religious, historical, and anthropological perspectives, and blending them into one single narrative. In the end, the video became a portrait of him in his own style.

SW: The fragmented compositional approach is also a compelling parallel to the trajectory of life itself, in which aspects of the past influence the present, while our experiences of the present can often change our understanding of the past.

TE: Yes, there is a constant interaction between present-day observation and memory. In many instances the images shot with a video camera represent the present-day journey, and images shot on super-8 film represent the transition into a memory. The editing style reflects a kind of snapshot observation you get while traveling: you look at something for a fraction of a second and recognize that there is a longer story that lies beneath. These fragments are intentionally fleeting, and before you can focus on them, they disappear like memory itself.

SW: Having traveled to Ethiopia myself as a child, the work

triggered a lot of interesting childhood memories for me too. It brought back the full impact of experiencing a religious procession in Lalibela—the colors, the sounds, the heat, the dust, the brocades, the crosses, and the umbrellas. The overall beauty and excitement of that wonderful experience was suddenly right there before me in full force, so I can only begin to imagine how the experience affected you.

It's quite beautiful at the end where you quietly say, "This was the house I lived in as a child. This was my whole world."

TE: That is obviously the climax of the film because throughout the film you don't actually know what the real subject matter is. Only at the end with that statement about my childhood home does one realize that this video really is a personal journey. Up to that point it is never quite clear where these meanderings will lead.

SW: Although there is a hint in the previous segment when the Patriarch says, "You can never be a stranger in your motherland."

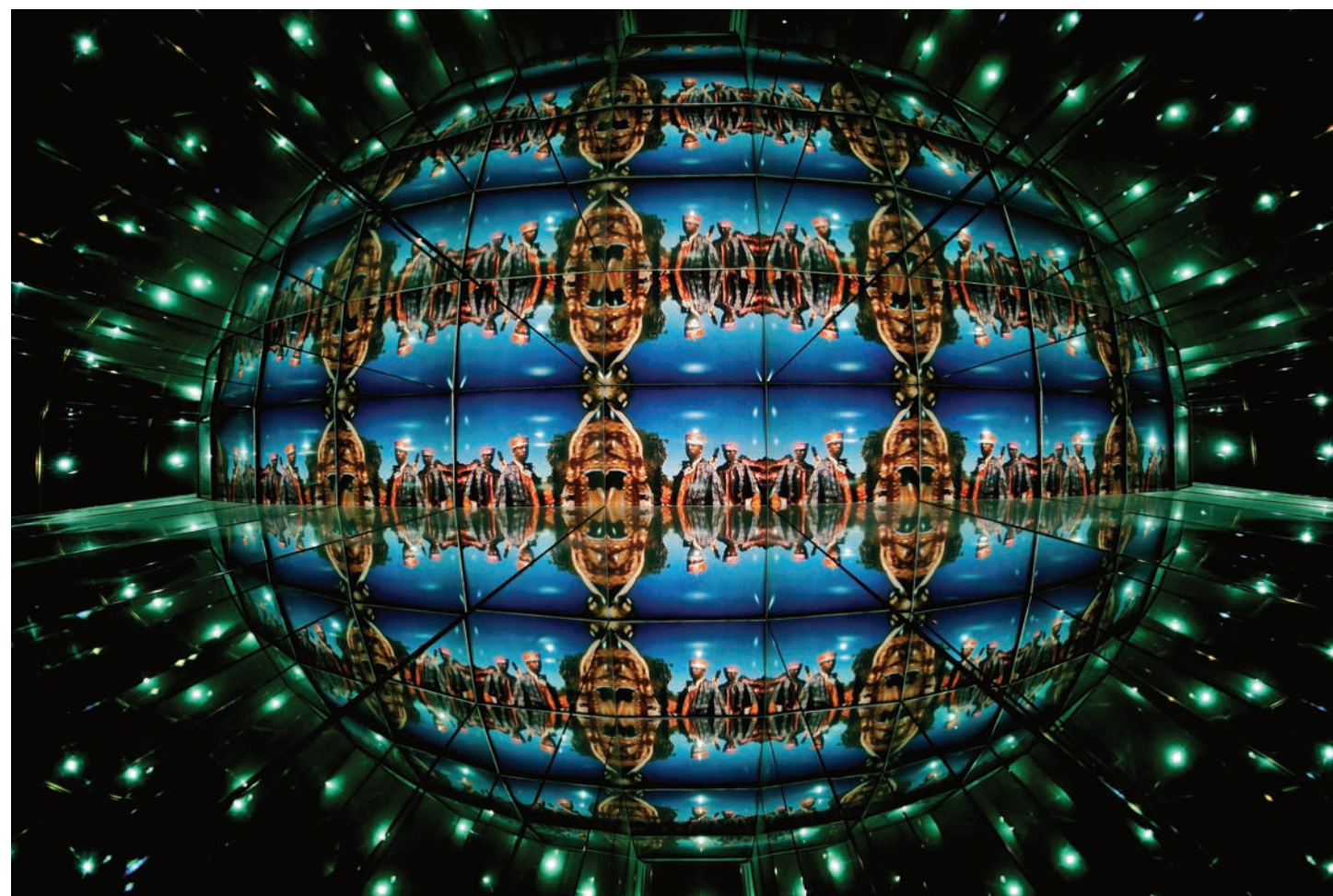
TE: Yes, that is the turning point. The statement captures the whole idea of an outsider who was not a stranger after all because he belongs to the land. My position as both an outsider and an insider is integral to the work. Everyone I saw and every place I visited was part of a forgotten memory.

SW: What can you say about the religious aspect that is prominent in this work, and in almost all your work?

TE: I think that stems from my earlier interest in rituals and symbols and a Jungian understanding of religious imagery as a communal archetype image, which also reflects a deeper, psychological aspect that binds people together. It's this symbolic transversal aspect of belief systems that I find interesting.

SW: Throughout your work there is a strong dichotomy between fiction/dream/memory set against reality/history/documentary. Does this evolve naturally, or are you consciously interested in emphasizing this balance of opposing factors?

TE: This interest in balancing opposing factors is really crucial to my approach in tackling any subject matter. The balance between these two tendencies, however, has changed over time. Initially I was exclusively drawn to a constructed



Procession (from *Brave New World*, 1999).
Courtesy National Museum of African Art

image as a way of transcending what I perceived as the photographically ugly quality of video. This drew me to a world of dreams and fantasy in order to explore the specific painterly qualities of the electronic image. As the image quality improved, it became inevitable to renegotiate this dichotomy in different terms. But it's a dichotomy inherent to the character of the medium itself. Video is after all the medium that most closely imitates eyesight, in that it enables you to see things as they are happening. Yet, at the same time, just like eyesight, it can create illusions. The dichotomy between reality and its representation and the belief that all forms of representation are fictional, has led me to explore the imagination as a more truthful indicator of how we perceive the world.

SW: *Brave New World* is another key work that represents a slightly different approach to symbols that has more to do

with installation than documentary. What do you see as the limitations and possibilities associated with each of these approaches?

TE: My interest in video making is to explore the different things it can do—to explore it as a language of television and as an art form. But I am also interested in the different spaces it can occupy, be it the cinema, the museum space, or people's living rooms through the television set—three very different spaces that require different presentation formats. As an installation it's more akin to sculpture and therefore more suited to the museum or gallery space. However, this doesn't affect my thematic concerns, but it does greatly affect the forms they take.

SW: Whether you are working with documentary or installation, you always maintain your photographer's eye. How

do you perceive your own role as photographer?

TE: I began photographing at an early age, in fact when my grandfather first gave me a camera for my tenth birthday. In my teens I photographed my favorite musicians in concerts, from David Bowie to James Brown, from the Rolling Stones to Marvin Gaye and Bob Marley. Music was my first passion and I think it shows in my videos. Taking pictures at concerts was quite a challenging way to learn photography because of the difficult lighting conditions, the movements, the complication of shooting in a crowd, and the excitement of the events themselves. By the time I was an art student in London I had already been photographing for several years and began to question the relationship between the aesthetic pursuits of traditional photography and the anti-aesthetical approach of conceptual photography by artists.

When I started making videos, however, it was with the idea of reconciling these two tendencies and to unite the approach of traditional photographers with the conceptual approach of artists *using* photography. Of course, the great difference between video and photography is the element of movement and time. Photography freezes time and video watches it flow.

SW: The relation between video and television is also integral to your overall visual language. Why is this particular aspect so important to you?

TE: Well, television is such an influential medium, affecting our understanding and knowledge of the world. I was interested in using this tool of mass communication as a tool for artistic expression, confronting the generally racist and sexist premises of television, its crass sensitivity. Nevertheless, I was attracted to the possibilities of transformation and the vast unexplored areas of video untouched by television. I began seeing video as a container for ethereal, ephemeral images, yet ones capable of greatly influencing our perceptions and our understanding of the world.

SW: Portraiture also figures fairly prominently into some of your works, perhaps most strikingly in *Trip to Mount Zugalla*, in the portraits of various people, especially toward the beginning. How does this relate to your role as a photographer?

TE: These portraits are interesting in terms of the ethics of what can and cannot be photographed: the question of what is gained and lost when photographing a ritual and what is preserved of the original experience in the photograph; also the question of how one's presence as a pho-

tographer influences the outcome of the situation itself. In the video there is a little boy who says "no no" when I film the shaman, yet the shaman himself poses for the picture when he sees that I have a camera.

SW: Isn't there an instance where they brought a girl in a trance over to you to be filmed?

TE: Yes. At a certain distance a young woman entered a trance. A conventional photographer might have gotten up to get a closer shot. I deliberately avoided that, wishing to keep a disenchanted gaze, as it were. I tried not to be invasive, avoiding any gesture that felt unnatural with my surroundings. I try to be invisible, which of course is not possible. In this case she went into a trance about twenty meters away, and when the participants saw that I was not moving toward her, they carried her toward me! In a sense that's the very paradox of photography, how the photographer's presence changes the reality of what is going on. How the mere presence of a photographer influences reality itself.

SW: Let's return to *Brave New World*, a work that literally mirrors the world we live in, right down to the globe shape in the center of the installation. How did it evolve?

TE: I had been invited to participate in a large exhibition at Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Rome and didn't have what I felt was an appropriate new work to show. So I had to think of something new that could be made briefly within challenging limitations. I hit upon an idea while looking at a three-way mirror in the bathroom and noticed a circular effect when the mirrors were moved closer, so I decided to construct a box of mirrors that re-creates this circular effect. Then I made a fairly rough nonlinear montage with the many hours of super-8 footage that I had gathered during various travels, which gave it a dreamlike quality. The structure was placed behind an artificial wall and a gilded frame mounted around the opening. It looked like a painting on the wall showing a kaleidoscopic image when it was viewed from a distance, but as one moved closer there was an effect of a giant globe made from the reflections on the mirrors, and finally, when viewers stuck their heads inside the installation, they would see themselves reflected as the sole spectators of a giant world. The viewer as God! This is a work that addresses the interconnectivity of cultures.

SW: The kaleidoscopic effect is something you have also returned to in later work?



Trip to Mount Zuqualla, 2006.
Video installation, courtesy the artist



Trance, 2004. Fine art print, courtesy the artist

TE: It relates to treating the images as a physically malleable object, which can be cut and pasted and multiplied or dissected, as something immaterial. It's a constant reminder that images are just representation, tricks for the eyes, but also pointing to something very real.

SW: The soundtrack rarely coincides with the images we see, for instance a Balinese dancer and jazz music. What is the significance of this?

TE: I'm not necessarily interested in just the image or the sound, but a third meaning that is born out of that combination. You might see an African mask and hear soul music, but it's not really about the mask nor the soul music, but the idea that emerges out of the combination of the two.

SW: The interconnectedness between seemingly unconnected things?

TE: Yes, and a way of going beyond outward appearances. There is a certain type of experimentation in music that relates to a boundless space of sound. I try to evoke that

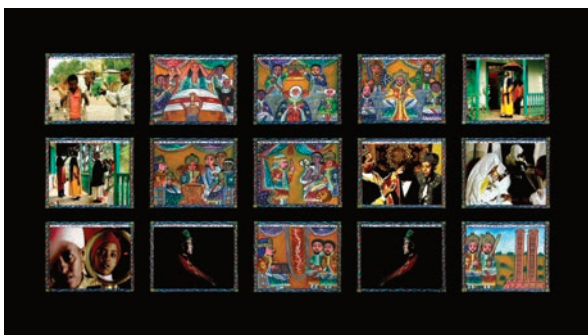
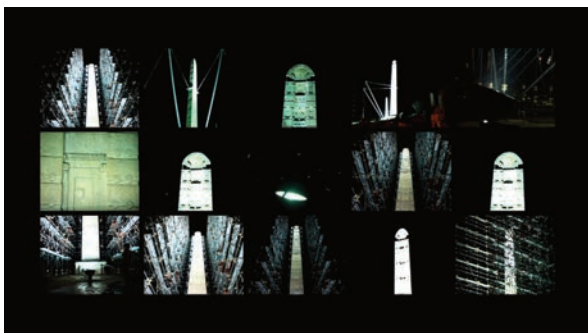
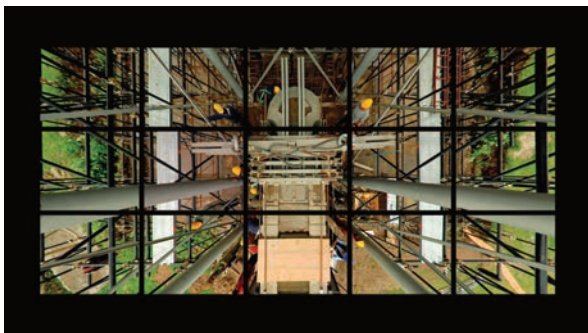
through images. In *Body and Soul* there is a huge distance between the images and the sound, often showing images of people dancing to music that they are obviously not dancing to. I think that through this unexpected combination we "see" the soul or the spirit that animates the body. Sound is a very integral part of video, and the harmonies and counterpoints with the images are very much a part of the magic.

SW: You thereby heighten our awareness of the underlying significance of the various images and open up to a questioning of and reflection of the balance between fiction and reality, or even a nonreality.

TE: And capturing nonreality is precisely what I aspire to. Or I should say capturing the imagination. It's not that I'm not interested in reality; to the contrary, I'm interested in what the image disguises.

SW: *Africanized* is another work that combines your various approaches into one complete work. You once said that the film signals a need to value the spirit of Africa in the context of globalization. Could you elaborate in more detail on the strategies you rely on to get this message across?

TE: A lot of the videos come about as the result of trying to solve a visual problem. *Africanized* came about because I had gathered a lot of footage in diverse places around the world and could not find a link between them. Eventually I noticed that there was something African that linked them. I decided to not worry too much about the interconnectedness and created a collage in the style of a William Burroughs cut-up. Each situation was not rich enough to stand on its own, so I created a global vision out of the fragments. People typically say that the world is becoming Americanized, and I was interested in flipping the idea to hypothesize an Africanized world. It was kind of a joke but also quite



The Return of the Axum Obelisk, 2009.
Video installation, courtesy the artist

serious in terms of the idea that the world could be a much better place if it were bit more Africanized.

SW: The work certainly conveys a sense that the spirit of Africa is everywhere. For me the segment from Brooklyn really stands out in particular, and interestingly enough it all plays out right near the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM).

TE: I presented the work a few years later at BAM, on the same day that I had filmed the original scene of the Dance Africa festival. People came to the cinema at BAM and could see in the video the events that were taking place outside and when they stepped back into the streets found themselves in the midst of what was shown in the film. Bringing distant places closer to home and turning the

exotic into the familiar, the Other into the self, that is my interest in art.

SW: I would describe *Africanized* as a highly fragmented, non-narrative, visual story in the spirit of Pier Paolo Pasolini or Fellini.

TE: After years of living in Rome and being exposed to their work I have absorbed some of that influence. To go back to what you were saying about my use of religious imagery, I think that the essay-like films of Pasolini and the ironic biographical memoirs in the cinema of Fellini were quite formative. The same is true for painters and musicians that I admire. I soak it all up.

SW: With *Africanized* the story line shifts quite unexpectedly throughout the video; it all begins at an airport and continues toward the Balkans, to you doing a headstand by the harbor, to a conference in Ouagadougou, to an afternoon in Brooklyn. In the end you were rewarded for your decision to not worry so much about how it would develop, but I am still interested in hearing a little more about the process.

TE: Throughout the editing I kept asking myself what is the relationship between these images. Well, there isn't any, but when I gave the video the title *Africanized* it all made sense. The title itself made everything click into place. The scene in the Balkans, which is possibly the odd sequence out, is actually quite meaningful because there was a group of Gnawa musicians and dancers that were invited to an official presentation that I was participating in. You see people in suits and ties in a very formal setting suddenly reacting wildly to the hypnotic music of the Gnawa musicians. They were literally Africanized, and I tried to reconstruct this transformation through the very rapid editing of the images.

SW: The work really does provide a powerful counterpoint to the idea of the Americanization of Africa, to the extent that there are barely any visible references to the Americanization of Africa.

TE: Well, knowing an Americanized world is what the video plays against. Maybe the rap music is something Americanized, but even that is ultimately seen as an Africanization.

SW: Or more specifically a Jamaicanization, influenced as it was by the tradition of Jamaican sound systems and dancehall music, but that is a topic for another discussion,

which I look forward to returning to some other time.

Naturally, I am particularly interested in the *Trip to Mount Zuqualla* segment that I featured in the group exhibition *Equatorial Rhythms* in 2007. At that time I had only seen *Trip to Mount Zuqualla* as its own work. Yet, for quite some time you had not been working with video installation, and returned to investigating the possibilities associated with video installation with this work. How did that come about?

TE: It really came about through Okwui Enwezor's suggestion to make a work for his *Snap Judgments* exhibition at the International Center of Photography. He had seen *Africanized* at BAM and suggested to focus on the Zuqualla episode in the film. So I developed it into a three-screen installation with a series of photographic compositions.

SW: Your ongoing interest in rhythm and sound and the musical component as integral to almost all your work is quite interesting. Particularly in *Trip to Mount Zuqualla* there are chimes, Bach's *Passion of Saint Matthew*, Ice Cube, and the distorted sounds in the beginning, which is very interesting in terms of breaking from a very straightforward narrative in time.

TE: The distorted slow-motion sounds at the beginning are yet another way of playing with the element of time. The idea was to use so-called imperfections and faults to capture the human experience. The camera looking is basically just a metaphor for my eye; rather than the idea of capturing a pretty picture or a specific reality, it reflects the act of seeing. There is almost a distracted, uninterested gaze on the events, but of course it is never totally uninterested.

SW: In *The Myth of the Flaneur* Walter Benjamin speaks about allowing your observation to just be an observation and realizing that there is vitality and strength in that disenfranchised observation. The importance of this role as observer is brought to another level with *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, where you weave a historically meaningful event into an evocative visual tapestry of universal relevance.

TE: This video installation about the return to Ethiopia of war loot taken by Mussolini during the Second World War was intentionally conceived as a monumental installation to commemorate an event which itself was a major engineering feat. My interest in making *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* began in 1996, while filming the biographical portrait of my grandfather, who was on the committee for its restitution at the time. The filming of the whole process, from its dismantling in Rome to its transport to Axum and

the subsequent phases of its reerection, is the visual basis for the video installation.

There is a dazzling array of stimuli in which the real and the mythological are fused as one. Past and present are intertwined around this monument that for years has been the focal point of much heated debate and to this day still ignites animated discussions in the political and the cultural arenas. The monument itself is of historical interest, but we also realize that we are also watching history in the making.

SW: How does the compositional structure mirror the underlying messages in the work?

TE: I was interested in a traditional Ethiopian narrative painting, which tells the story of the Queen of Sheba and the founding of the Axumite Empire, and I was interested in transforming this painting into a video installation by using its visual structure to bring the narrative into the present day through this transformation.

SW: Please elaborate on how you translate the narrative of the painting into the language of video.

TE: In the painting, time and movement are expressed as a series of tableaux in which the narrative recounts a tale of the obelisk's origin and the founding of the Axumite Empire. In the installation, time and movement are transformed into a nonlinear narrative that shows how the obelisk was returned, in the present day, to its original site in Axum.

SW: At its most basic level, viewers are invited to reconsider a naive artisan painting that can be found in most tourist shops in Ethiopia as a highly complex work of electronic art. Visually the work is highly celebratory, yet conceptually there is a darker subtext that permeates the work. How do these aspects play against each other?

TE: The aesthetic qualities are but a surface to an intriguing interplay of signs and symbols, while the polemics surrounding the subject of cultural restitution and postcolonial responsibilities are kept at a safe distance. This not only allows for an individual reading of the events but also draws the viewer into a labyrinth of concrete and abstract ideas anchored to the factual representation of the actions taking place. The viewer is invited to enter a dreamlike state, where memory and remembrance have undefined contours.

SW: And once we enter into this dreamlike state, what kinds of issues and questions are addressed?



Kiss the Moment, 2014. 18-screen video installation, courtesy the artist

TE: The irony of focusing our whole attention on the re-erection of an evidently phallic monument is not casual. A careful observation of the patterns and designs on the fifteen-screen structure will reveal that the only time a single image is repeated on all fifteen screens is with the apparent insignificant image of a truck, its two large wheels strategically composed beneath the proudly erected obelisk. The religious ceremonies invite us to reflect on the ideas of forgiveness and repentance, sin and absolution. Irony and visual puns abound throughout the work; the stylish umbrellas of the Italians on the worksite echo the multicolored umbrellas of the Ethiopian clergy, the three chief engineers parading around the work site on camel-back deliberately allude to the biblical Magi, while the image of a hand rais-

ing up to reveal the obelisk can be seen as a parody of a fascist salute.

SW: Overall, how does this work reflect your own personal vision and understanding of Africa?

TE: Ultimately, in treating a delicate subject such as the Axum Obelisk my aim was to place its significance within the greater framework of intercultural relations. Obviously, the return of war loot from Italy to Ethiopia is interesting on many levels, but there is a lot more at play that gives the work added depth. For instance, I am fascinated by how the monument itself has changed in significance over time. It was born as a phallic symbol of power and became a sym-



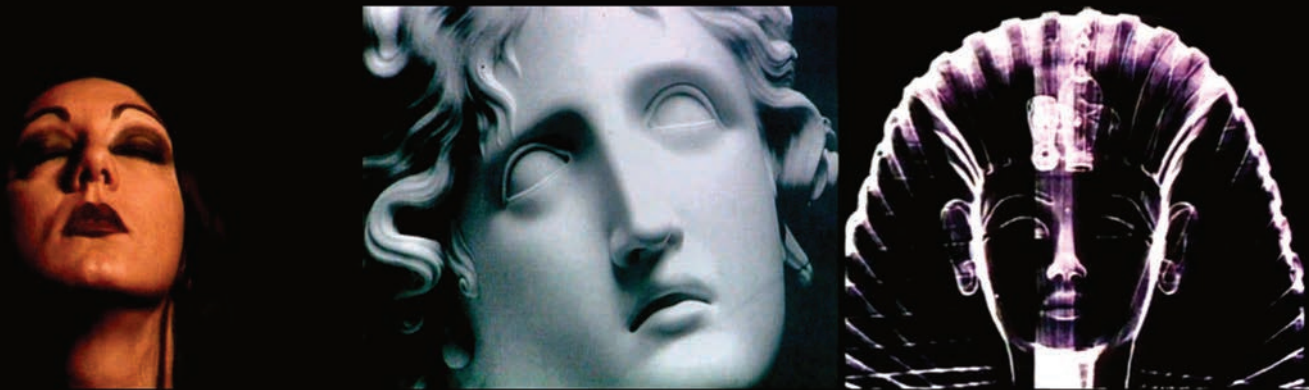
bol of religious presence in Ethiopia. It then became a symbol of colonial aggression when it was brought to Rome, and subsequently a symbol of postcolonial aid to Africa, placed as it was in front of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Finally, its dismantling and return to Ethiopia becomes yet another symbol. Maybe this signals the end of a postcolony or the beginning of something else. Certainly the interrelations of cultures have been affected by a series of violent events and some wounds will never heal, but it's also interesting to see the mundane aspect of the real-life interrelations that take place on the work site during this historic moment when the obelisk is being brought back to its rightful place—an event that was not widely covered by mainstream media.

Because Africa is often imagined through images, it is in art, photography, and video that powerful changes can take place and the realities, not covered by traditional media, can be exposed.

Everything seems to come full circle with this work.

SW: Speaking of things coming full circle, before we finish our conversation, please tell me about your newest work.

TE: My most recent work, *Kiss the Moment*, is the result of my artist residency in Berlin in the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Artists-in-Berlin Program, and stems from a desire to make something about my experience in Germany. The idea started in my studio, where



Roma, 2010 (still image from the film *Roma*). Courtesy the artist

there is a very large window overlooking a small park. It struck me that this view of the park actually looks like an artwork in the German Romantic tradition of a fascination with nature. I thought it might be interesting to imitate that view as a starting point for an installation about Berlin, taking the window as a structural starting point and creating a work for eighteen video screens.

SW: So it's conceived as a large-scale video installation?

TE: Yes, the work imitates the window of the studio, but it also contains a collage of impromptu events, from parties to artistic performances and improvised Weimar-style burlesque dances that took place inside the studio, so it's both a window and a mirror, not just of the actual view and events but expanded to include other situations shot in the city. Taking its cue from the 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, it uses improvisation and improvised music to create a portrait of the city.

SW: Is *Kiss the Moment* similar in approach to previous work, or does it signal a shift?

TE: There is a subtle shift from the instinctual construction of diverse ideas, present in previous works, to just relying on pure improvisation as a form in itself. There is also a

stronger reaction against the cold conceptual basis of an art about art, a distancing from relying on easily definable concepts. I'm not Africanizing Berlin—that wouldn't be possible—but showing its eternal qualities and aspiration to being a cultural meeting ground. Visually the installation is a return to the pure sensual pleasures of the early modernist painters, but obviously revisited. It's clearly the result of a relaxed year in a highly stimulating town and again uses history and memories as springboards. Aspects of the work, however, are somewhat similar to *Roma*, another portrait of a city, which I made a couple of years earlier. *Roma* opens with a quote from Jung, who famously said that he never wanted to visit Rome for fear of the effect the city would have on his consciousness. It's interesting to think that there can be something so powerful about a city that it can actually hurt or damage one's perception. I do believe he was right, in that there are things inscribed in its memory that can have this effect, things maybe not visible to the naked eye. When we go to Rome we might see the traffic and the outward beauty, but we don't see the terrifying contradictions, the blood, and the darkest aspects of human nature, glossed over by the splendor of a Bernini fountain.

SW: You are essentially Roman, having lived there for so long, and with *Roma* you capture images that most Ro-

mans would take for granted, many of the sites that tourists would typically visit.

TE: Yes, the monuments are charged with a history that the Romans are blind to. There is a wandering approach reminiscent of Fellini's *Roma*, but the presentation on three screens and the field-recording composition made by Alvin Curran make it a film about the effect of the city on the perceptions of a foreign visitor. Again in this film I'm both an outsider and insider, having lived in Rome for thirty years. The fearful element is the natural coexistence of contradictions—between good and evil, poetic and vulgar, and so on. When they coexist so naturally it is also very terrifying, and that is what I tried to show. *Kiss the Moment* conveys some of these aspects. I often approach a subject as an outsider, someone not expert on a given subject, and try to enter its essence through a reconstruction of my impressions and subjective experiences. I make videos about subjects I know very little about, in order to learn and find out about them rather than pretending to teach anybody anything. This is evident throughout my approach, and can be seen in *Ways to a Void* on Tibetan Buddhism, shot in the Himalayas, or the series of video installations made on the Islamic island of Lamu, or even *Travelling Light*, where I knew very little about the dance and theater world I was portraying, and *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* for that matter, where I knew very little of Ethiopian history and close to nothing about my grandfather's role as a historian, since I had lost contact with him years before making the film about him. I think this approach keeps things fresh.

SW: You are now working as an advisor for a documentary filmmaker who is filming a documentary about Rastafarianism. The dream of the Promised Land of Ethiopia is integral to Rastafarian belief. This seems a very fitting project for you to be involved in. What is your role in the creative process?

TE: It is a classic documentary, and I am helping to find ways to visualize the idea of a dream of the Promised Land, in a way that cannot be captured through words or interviews. Capturing imagery that evokes the longings of the deeply felt Rastafarian sentiments.

Of course, the whole idea of an imagined heaven represented in the dream of returning to Ethiopia would not necessarily differ from existence in Jamaica. The dream doesn't really exist outside of the imagination, so it's interesting to explore the power of the imagination over reality. One could even go so far as saying that the imagination of the Ethiopian people is greater, more important, "more

true" than the image in the media of the hunger, the starvation, and the war. The spirit of the people and what they believe about themselves and how they relate to the world, that spirit is what enables people to live and survive. These are the things that don't normally get shown while focusing on the hardships of reality. My aim is not to ignore this reality but rather to contextualize it within the framework of people's dignity.

SW: In conclusion, if we were to sum up your work so far, what began as a very personal inquiry into the communication mechanisms and aesthetic qualities of video, combined with a more personal outlook on the ideas of a transnational identity, has evolved into an investigation of the pressing issues that play out in today's media-saturated world, in which national boundaries have lost their relevance. Your ongoing interest in the influence of communication technology, on our perception and the possibilities of a worldview made up of the interactions of diverse cultural inputs, has become an increasingly central question, albeit still a problematic one, in a postcolonial globalized world.

Selene Wendt is an independent curator and founder of The Global Art Project. She has curated many international exhibitions, including Art Through the Eye of the Needle, A Doll's House, Beauty and Pleasure in South African Contemporary Art, Equatorial Rhythms, The Storytellers: Narratives in International Contemporary Art, and Mind the Map. She is currently working on The Art of Storytelling for MAC Niterói in Brazil, as well as a thematic exhibition that relates to Jamaican music and contemporary art.