



*Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* 2011, Lagos, Nigeria PHOTOGRAPHER: Jelili Atiku

## African Roots Bear Artistic Fruit: Catching up with Wura-Natasha Ogunji

*Alec De León, director of NPN's Visual Artists Network (VAN), talks with artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji about cultural anthropology, the history of photography, her recent Guggenheim award, and party-crashing in Nigeria.*

Wura-Natasha Ogunji is an Austin-based artist who has participated in international residencies from Spain to the Dominican Republic. Her work has been shown in New York, Austin, Palestine and Australia. In April 2012, she was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. Alec De León, Program Specialist for the Visual Artists Network/National Performance Network, spoke with Wura about her process and recent artwork.

*Alec De León (AD): Hi Wura. It's nice to catch up with you again. So Wura, you first came into contact with the Visual Artists Network in the Summer of 2009 when you had an Exhibition Residency at Diaspora Vibe in Miami. And then I had the opportunity to meet you at the NPN Annual Meeting in Knoxville, right?*

Wura-Natasha Ogunji (WO): Yes.

*AD: I see that you just performed at Women & Their Work (Austin, TX), and that you just received a Guggenheim Fellowship. Congratulations!*

CONTINUES ON PAGE 05



Creative Exchange awardee Tatiana Mejia of the Dominican Republic with Bates Dance Festival (BDF) fellow at BDF August 2011 PHOTO COURTESY T. Mejia

## Creative Exchange Projects Selected for 2012-2013: Performing Americas Announces New Awards

Five companies were selected for international travel and artistic exploration in the latest round of Creative Exchange grants: Double Edge Theatre (Ashfield, MA), El Centro Su Teatro (Denver, CO) and Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland, OR) will host theatre companies from Mexico and Argentina while they develop new work during 3- to 4-week residencies. From the U.S., Austin musician Chris Cogburn and dancer Rebeca Hernandez of Los Angeles will travel to Mexico City to work with two different arts organizations, and Cedric Thomas and Rose Cano (Seattle, WA) will travel to Lima, Peru.

Annually, NPN's Performing Americas Program accepts applications for its Creative Exchange residency program from organizations across the hemisphere to host artists-in-residence. This program funds extended international artists residencies of three to five-weeks' duration to develop a creative work with a host organization abroad. The Creative Exchange is flexible by design, and supports a wide variety

CONTINUES ON PAGE 07

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# ***99 Times: A Site-Specific Composition for Unspecified Spaces*** **An NPN Performance Residency**

BY: Lisa Choinacky PHOTOS COURTESY: Women & Their Work



*99 Times*, a new performance work by Emily Lacy, took place in collaboration with Women & Their Work and the Fusebox Festival in Austin, TX, in April 2012. Within the context of a one-week residency NPN Performance Residency, this Los Angeles-based artist was able to design and present a new work, and engage an entirely new audience in the process.

Lacy, whose background is in filmmaking and music, has arrived at a point in her practice that fuses multiple media. Combining the

effects of painting, textiles, sound, and image, she produced a performance within the NPN Performance Residency structure that was ritualistic and hypnotic. Having worked with site-specificity for performances in the past, where a particular physical space helped define the aesthetics and content of a piece of music, for this project she opted to design a performance that could work in any context. She wanted to make something of a portable art and sound experience that could resonate in any environment.

Part of her inspiration came from the content of the music that she was hoping to present to her audience. *99 Times*, as a work of art, was about the sounds that cultures can create when they reach a boiling point. Lacy was inspired by the energy of global protest movements that arose out of both the Arab Spring and Occupy movements in the past year. As the sound and music being researched in this context was intrinsically populist in nature, it seemed appropriate to design a performance that was not meant to be presented in just one gallery space,



## NPN Matches On-line Fundraising

*NPN is pleased to announce a \$1000 Matching Fund, on a first-come, first-serve basis, for NPN/VAN artists raising funds on USA Projects. USA is a Los Angeles-based grant-making, artist-advocacy organization dedicated to supporting artists working across diverse disciplines. All artists who have been supported by NPN or VAN may now participate in USA Projects. Learn more by visiting [usaprojects.org](http://usaprojects.org).*

*If you are a NPN or VAN supported artist who would like to participate, contact [Will@npnweb.org](mailto:Will@npnweb.org).*

or museum hallway, or other designated environment (working site-specifically as she has in the past) but to actually make something that could work in any environment. She sought then to create a work in 99 Times that could debut in Austin, but then travel throughout the globe. The freedom to work in this way, as generated by collaboration with NPN and Women & Their Work, truly created a physical platform for Lacy to engage with new possibilities in the figuration of her work at large. Lacy now has larger aspirations and hopes to perform this new work 99 Times, exactly ninety-nine times, in different locations throughout the world.

While in residence Lacy visited the Khabele School, an arts-based high school not far from the Long Center in Austin's downtown area, where 99 Times appeared for its first two nights. Lacy shared videos with a small group of students from a painting class. These videos are a way for her to articulate an experience of her work that is somehow satisfying. She finds the medium of video conducive to producing mythology within her music. Performances made specifically for the camera are of unique interest to her, as they capture certain lucid facts about a moment or a gesture within a music or a time.

In addition Lacy shared with the class an artistic device made by Sara Roberts, a Los Angeles artist and colleague with whom she

shares many interests in sound. As Lacy's long-form compositions often involve looping and repeated vocal sounds, Robert's device, which is largely manufactured by her and her husband and is affectionately titled an Earbee, also loops and records sounds. A black plastic box, about half the size of a VHS tape, with only punched-hole impressions of an ear for major visual design, allows you to make sound into a game. Earbees are almost always dispersed in groups because of this. Earbees were distributed to the class and a song was sung to engage the aspects of reverb in the room, to many young people's delight. The tiny recording machines were a huge hit with the students as they were so easy to jump in, operate, control, and manipulate. Students also improvised a large performance in the round, and sound was the dominant artistic endeavor in the room.

Connecting artists with communities, spaces, festivals, and schools, in such a direct manner, was a very enriching experience for all. In this case, art was truly supported and a new work was made available to a fresh audience. This unique opportunity was made possible by the artist, the flexibility and support of the NPN Performance Residency Agreement, Women & Their Work, and the Fusebox Festival.

Support for the NPN Performance Residency comes from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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# African Roots Bear Artistic Fruit: Catching up with Wura-Natasha Ogunji

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 01

WO: Thank you.

*AD: It sounds like you've been quite busy. What else has been going since we last spoke?*

WO: Well, about a year and half ago I went to Nigeria for the first time with a travel grant from the Dallas Museum of Art. When I was there I started building the work that I did at Rosie's (Gordon-Wallace) space, Diaspora Vibe. While in Miami, I made paintings as well as a performance piece called *Soundings* which was about the presence of black women and personal gestures and movements related to power.

In Nigeria I started making performances that arose from questions I had about the presence of women, especially in public space. People would ask me if I was married and if I had kids. These questions were how they started to understand who I was as a person. Being an artist was out of the realm of possibility for a lot of people, especially being a performance artist.

I created a piece called *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* I had two water kegs — square containers for carrying water — and I filled them up and tied them around my ankles. Then I crawled along a dirt road in Lagos for about 10 minutes, among the townspeople. I was trying to pose this question: When do women have time to think and talk about politics? What does it look like for women to change society, when so much of their time is consumed with daily work - work that extends from early in the morning to late in the evening? The work that I'm going to do with the Guggenheim grant was inspired by this experience. I will explore what it means to have lots of women performing and moving through public space, interrupting space to talk about relevant issues.

*AD: Most of your videos feature a solitary figure in a natural setting, such as a field or desert landscape or in a lagoon, as in the case of Ife head walks on water. But Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman? takes place on a busy street in Lagos, Nigeria, with people all around. At one point in the video a motorcycle drives by. All the while, the people of Lagos are watching very intently, curious about what you are doing. How did this change in setting develop? Did they know what you were working on? Did they know you were an artist?*

WO: Performance art, as we know it in the U.S., is a very new genre in Nigeria. There is a deep history of performance, of course: theater, festivals and traveling theater, not to mention daily life being very performative. But performance art is not something that people are very familiar with. Still there are a couple artists who are doing it in Nigeria. One of them is Jelili Atiku and a lot of his work is very political. I met him in Lagos and he asked me if I wanted to make a performance in a town on the outskirts of Lagos: it's a place where he has performed before (as well as a few other artists). The people there have seen performance art and they know that it's kind of different, so there's a generosity from the audience. They are starting to become familiar with the vocabulary, as much as any person can be familiar with the vocabulary of performance art. Anyway, he helped me choose that site and the street I performed on. I can't remember the name right now, but it means something like "the place where an idea manifests." He picked this particular place because of that deeper meaning as well as its physical location. He thought it would be a good place for me to crawl on the road. It's actually a little side street because there is so much traffic on the main roads.

*AD: So, your new work is going to continue to incorporate these kinds of public settings?*

WO: Yes, it's definitely going to include more public settings because of the questions I'm asking and because I'm interested in working with other women performers. And also because I'll be working in Lagos. I'm really interested in this kind of interaction.

But I think, the reason the videos changed in Nigeria, from those I made previously in the U.S., was because my questions changed. When I was here in the U.S. and I started making the *Ife head* series, I was thinking about the concept of "homeland" and wondering "does homeland long for us?" And how would it look if our ancestors came from West Africa to look for us in the Americas? How would they get here? They would have to fly. Fly across water, fly across land. So when I went to Nigeria, those questions were answered for me in many ways.

The people in Nigeria were interested in what I had to say as a person and as an artist. So there wasn't only the longing I had for them. They also had, in a sense, this longing for me. Being there, in the real physical space, the relationship changes...being connected to the ground and crawling on the ground, it makes more sense in that context. There is no need for me to fly because I've already arrived in this place.

Also, there is a very different sense of community. I did a couple of solo performances while I was in Nigeria and people begin to interact and interrupt. So performance art doesn't happen in Nigeria in the way it happens here in the U.S.

*AD: Also, it is interesting to note that your work is based on Ife heads, which are archeological artifacts. I noticed that you have a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a master's degree in photography. I thought to myself, "Wow, that makes perfect sense," because you are mining this really rich territory and it seems to me that you are merging these two disciplines in your artistic practice. Can you tell me a little about that development?*

CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE



*Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* 2011, Lagos, Nigeria PHOTOGRAPHER: Jelili Atiku

WO: I studied anthropology because it allowed me to connect these seemingly disparate histories. I studied African History, African American History, Mexican and Mexican American History and Art History. I felt like all of these worlds I occupied in California could come together in this way, in anthropology. I was also very interested and obsessed with artifacts, and these ritual objects as they are presented in the West. When you find them in a museum in London, for instance, these precious, ceremonial objects are completely taken out of context. I would look at masks and objects and think, “wow, they are just so beautiful.” I would also think about the history of these materials and the life that preceded them.

During that time as an undergraduate, I was also studying photography, taking a lot of portraits. When I went to graduate school, I started to think about the power of photographs and the absence of people of color in the history of photography and what that meant to my own conception of the world, and my own understanding of history, as well as my personal history. During that time I took a history of photography class and there were very few pictures of people of color at all. When I asked my professor about this, his response was, “Well, they just don’t exist. I can’t show them because I don’t know where to find them.” But, I knew we existed. And I also knew that people have been seeing the world photographically, for thousands of years. You know, you could observe a camera obscura effect from the light coming through a small opening under the trees or into a cave...without technology as we know it today. Then I started to think about photography as way to access lost images and how I could use my own body to invoke these pictures and this history. I wondered if I could take a photograph of someone who existed before the invention of photography and what that would look like? And could I create a mask that would invoke that person and that spirit?

AD: *So you are almost making up an alternate history... filling in the gaps?*

WO: Yes, it’s an alternate history but it’s really just another layer, in a sense. Another way of understanding what the narrative is when you are told that there is no narrative. How do you conceptualize that history in your head? What does it look like in your imagination? How does it affect how you move through the world? And then how do you create those physical documents that can use visual power to convey these ideas? The body is a powerful archive not only for information, history, but also for the visual.

I really started to access something when I was living in Spain in 2007. I was reading about people crossing the Strait of Gibraltar from Africa to get to Europe. I started to think about what those people carried with them when they crossed over. In many cases, all they had were their bodies, no possessions. In the body there is everything, the history of the world. It is not only the archive of our individual, lived experience. We carry our ancestors in our bodies, their gestures, memories and knowledge. Performance allows us to access this information.

AD: *It’s a fascinating set of ideas that you are working with. What’s next for you? You’ve been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship which is going to give you some time and space and energy to make work. As a result you are going to Nigeria again. How long are you going to be there and what’s the plan?*

WO: I’m going to be there for nine months. I’ll be making performance videos that focus on the presence of women in public space. There’s a Yoruba phrase *mogbo mo branch* which means “I heard and I branched myself into the party.” It describes a party-crasher but also the party itself. And as a party crasher you arrive looking fabulous. I found this phrase really amazing, ingenious. It captures the boldness of Nigerians, particularly Lagosians, people who live in Lagos. The series of performance videos is going to be entitled *Mogbo mo branch*

because I’m thinking about what it means to boldly insert oneself into a place, what it means for women to be take up space — both physically and via how we think about the world. The performances, the videos will then be screened/projected back into/onto the city at various sites, so that people have the experience of seeing the images in the spaces they occupy on a daily basis.

AD: *Wow, that sounds really great. I’ve noticed that your blog (<http://goldeniron.blogspot.com>) is very comprehensive. Are you going to blog about your work in Nigeria as it progresses?*

WO: Yes, I’m definitely going to blog and post images and video about the experience and the work itself. It’s going to be a very rich experience because Lagos is such a mythic mega-city of over 12 million inhabitants. So yes, I will be blogging.

AD: *Wonderful. I’ll be sure to check it out. Thank you, Wura, for taking the time to talk with me. And good luck in Lagos!*

WO: Thank you, Alec.

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# Creative Exchange Projects Selected for 2012–2013: Performing Americas Announces New Awards

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of activities, such as the creation of new work by an artist, research, creative collaborations between two companies, workshops and master classes, and technical theater intensives. Projects are required to take place in the United States, the Caribbean or Latin America, and are open to independent artists across the hemisphere. In order to apply, artists and host organizations must together submit an application for a specific proposal. For more information on how to apply to the next round of Creative Exchange, visit the NPN Performing Americas webpage.

Since the program began, Performing Americas has supported 27 Creative Exchanges from all reaches of Americas with artists in a multitude of disciplines and geographical origins. Artists and hosts alike have expressed how meaningful and important the program has been to their work: the diversity and flexibility of the exchanges is truly unique. Even though the number of awards is modest — the Creative Exchange supports 6–8 projects — the impact of the projects is incalculable. The projects are selected through a panel process including panelists from the NPN Partner base, La RED ([www.redlatinoamericana.com](http://www.redlatinoamericana.com)) (NPN's Performing Americas partner network) and independent artists. Below are panel selections for 2012–2013:

## **Artists from Latin America with U.S. Hosts**

**ARTIST:**  
Jorge Onofri Cipolletti,  
Argentina (2 artists)  
**HOST:**  
Double Edge Theatre Ashfield, MA  
**DISCIPLINE:**  
Theater/Puppetry  
*Double Edge will host Argentine puppet designer/director Jorge Onofri (La Caja Magica) at The Farm — DE's rural/international center for performance, collaboration and research in western Massachusetts. This three-week visit will be the 2nd phase of a multi-year collaboration between Onofri and Double Edge, which was funded by NPN's Creative Exchange in 2011 as well.*

**HOST:**  
El Centro Su Teatro Denver, CO  
**ARTIST:**  
Grupo Cultural Zero Cuernavaca,  
Mexico (1 artist)  
**DISCIPLINE:**  
Theater/Spoken Word  
*Lalo Lopez will conduct a four-week residency with Su Teatro to transmit knowledge and skills related to Mexican popular performance (the foundation of Teatro Chicano), provide free community performances in Denver, and provide long-term exchange planning time with Su Teatro staff.*

**HOST:**  
Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) Portland, OR  
**Artist:**  
Mariano Pensotti Buenos Aires,  
Argentina (2 artists)  
**DISCIPLINE:**  
Theater  
*Pensotti will spend three weeks in Portland at PICA to develop the work I Sometimes Think, I Can See You for TBA 2013, a site specific performance involving local Portland writers. Pensotti will offer workshops for local artists and students about creating site-responsive performance. During his residency, Pensotti will also present informal lectures about his work at PICA's Resource Room.*

## **Artists from the U.S. with Latin American/Caribbean Based Hosts**

**HOST:**  
Centro Cultural Universitario de Tlatelolco D.F., Mexico  
**ARTIST:**  
Chris Cogburn Austin, TX (1 artist)  
**DISCIPLINE:**  
Electronic Music  
*The Unidad de Vinculación Artística (UVA) will host Chris Cogburn for five weeks as part of Cerro de Arena, a contemporary art festival organized by the UVA. Apart from his festival participation, Cogburn will teach public workshops along with Mexico City sound and visual artists, and conduct research on contemporary trends in Mexico City sound art with the intention of curating for his No Idea Festival 2013–2014 in Austin, Texas.*

**HOST:**  
Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura de Mexicali Mexicali, Mexico  
**ARTIST:**  
Rebeca Hernandez Los Angeles, CA (2 artists)  
**DISCIPLINE:**  
Dance/Performance  
*Based at the Municipal Institute of Art and Culture of Mexicali, Hernandez will create a new work, Jaripeo Cabaret, a site-specific collaborative performance that brings together Jaripeo (Mexican Rodeo) with performance art and dance. This three-week collaboration will combine the forces of Los Angeles based artists, the Mexicali performance art collective Fundacion Wanna Winni, and local jinetes (rodeo horsemen).*

**HOST:**  
Teatro del Milenio Lima, Peru  
**ARTIST:**  
Cedric Thomas & Rose Cano Seattle, WA (2 artists)  
**DISCIPLINE:**  
Multi-disciplinary  
*This three-week residency is a continuation of ongoing collaborative work between Teatro Del Milenio and the ConeXion AFricana of Seattle, WA, which aims to create a bilingual musical work titled Callejon. The work will feature bi-lingual texts in Spanish and English, and focus on the relationship between Peru and the United States. The work will be written, staged and presented as a work-in-progress by the U.S. collaborators and cast of Teatro del Milenio in the company's theater and bilingual schools in Lima in its first phase.*

Performing Americas Program is supported in part by the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs.

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## Calling All Emerging Leaders

*The Emerging Leadership Institute is an intensive three-day seminar that provides participants with many of the critical leadership skills they need now and in the future. A cohort of up to 25 emerging leaders is invited to participate in ELI, taking place in the days leading up to APAP|NYC in January. To learn more and apply, visit ELI at APAP|365. If you are not currently an Affiliate Member and would like to find out more, contact Sue Noseworthy, membership manager, at [snoseworthy@artspresenters.org](mailto:snoseworthy@artspresenters.org) with 'APAP-Affiliate Membership' in the subject line. Artists who have been supported by NPN are eligible for affiliate membership at a discounted rate.*



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### **NPN Board Member Recognized**

*Rosie Gordon-Wallace, director of Diaspora Vibe Gallery in Miami, FL, was named one of South Florida's 100 Most Accomplished Caribbean Americans. She was honored at a reception in late June at the Broward Center and will be featured in a full-color, coffee-table quality publication profiling selected honorees.*