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The Defiance of the Artisanal and the Unmaking of Wax-Print Textiles in Contemporary Art

Wax print textiles are an important point of reference for a growing number of contemporary artists. Some of them are world stars like Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962), while others are less well known, like Hassan Hajjaj (b. 1961), Lili Reynaud-Dewar (b. 1975), Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977), Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983), or only emerging like Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga (b. 1991). This article aims to look at African wax print cloth through the prism of the artists' understanding of the material. How do they incorporate the strongly patterned fabrics, with their long and complex histories, into their works? What conceptions of identity does their usage of this peculiar material manifest? And, lastly, how do the artists position themselves between the conceptual and artisanal by incorporating fabrics and their aesthetic into their work? These questions will evolve around the concept of the artisanal and along the four notions of making, identities, ready-mades, and remediations. This essay will build up to the hypothesis that the artist's use of the wax prints disappoints expectations of the artisanal on a technical and cultural level. Furthermore, the incorporation of African print textiles as a ready-made commodity into artworks and the remediation of the cloths in painting, photography, or performance challenge ideas of textility and accentuate the ontological tension of the fabrics between images and textiles.

1. Makings

None of the contemporary artists analyzed hereafter produce wax print textiles. This observation seems surprising only initially; but when one looks closely into the medium of wax print itself, the artists' use of it reflects well the fact that the wax prints are nonartisanal, but machine-made, in obscure production conditions in geographically and cultural far-away realms. Wax prints are intercultural chameleons, mimicking another textile technique, namely batik, an Indonesian technique of wax-resist dyeing.

To understand the contemporary artist's reference to wax prints, it is key to reflect on the very nature of this material from the world of design and everyday cloth with its multilayered

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"history of production and use."[1] What is wax print? Where between the conceptual and artisanal could we place its making? And what does this fabric stand for symbolically? A posthumanist conception of matter as enlivened, as exhibiting agency, and as reengaged with both the material realities of everyday life and its broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures has become seminal in a theory of things of the last decade.[2] Already in the 1990s, anthropologist Alfred Gell coined the concept of the material as agent, inherently dictating to the artist the form it is to assume.[3] When we apply this inversional scheme, we might ask: What do the wax prints do to the artists? It is a fruitful mind game to think of the wax print as a material with inherent agency, meaning, and iconography in the vein of Monika Wagner's material studies. The art historian framed the concept of "material iconography," following the idea that artistic materials themselves bear a specific meaning and history: material, in this case wax print, is not just "a technical given," but should also be understood and evaluated "as an aesthetic category."[4]

When looking at African wax prints one can almost sense the printer's hand in the misalignment of colors and woodblock outlines; fine irregular cracks seem to have resulted from imperfect tying and wrinkling; white bubbles indicate persistent wax before the dye baths. Yet, all this ado is a trick to simulate a handcrafted textile. Wax prints are produced through a mechanized resist-dyeing process that employs a resin mixture—rather than wax—for printing a foundational resist pattern simultaneously on both sides of a cloth (historically cotton, but nowadays increasingly synthetic fibers) using a duplex-roller system of engraved metal rollers.[5] However, nowadays the term wax print is often used as a generic term for African print textiles, including the so-called fancy prints that are printed without any resin-resist and dye-bath process. One could claim that the wax prints are not the artisanal product they evoke, but a craft without a hand. The artisan is nevertheless present, embedded in the design following a deceitful aesthetic of imperfection: African wax prints are executed in a style copying the labor-intensive practice of batik textiles and are thus intercultural and intertextual. Despite the mechanic printing process in the making of this peculiar fabric, the designer's hand becomes tangible in its colorful and often geometric designs, which are "classic" patterns and motifs from the nineteenth century. It is also apparent in new designs that refer to recent trends and, in the case of the commemorative prints,[6] from the 1920s onward,[7] showcase counterfeits of political leaders and historical events.[8] Meaning is embedded in visualizations of proverbs, and wearers can use their attire as a means of expression of their taste and social and political standing. The wax prints are often given specific names; together with the designs they sometimes bear puns and can, for instance, articulate the love or desire of a person or the state of mind of a woman who knows her husband is cheating on her.[9] In recent decades, the waxes have become globally popular in fashion and fine arts. As a specific textile medium, the wax print calls for a different historiography and mode of storytelling than other textile media within the framework of the textile turn in contemporary art and theory. It is a material heavily loaded with diverse pictures and symbolic meaning.

2. Identities

When the former president of the United States Barack Obama had to pick an artist to paint his official portrait for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, his choice fell on Kehinde Wiley (fig. 1). In his "representation of urban, black and brown men," Wiley merges vibrant street style with a synthetic baroque. He positions himself confidently within art history's portrait-painting tradition "as a contemporary descendent of a long line of portraitists, including Reynolds, Gainsborough, Titian, Ingres, among others."[10] Indeed, he shares with these canonical artists the visual rhetoric of the heroic, powerful, majestic, and the sublime,[11] which is much appreciated by his other famous sitters from the hip-hop world, such as the Notorious B.I.G., LL Cool J, Big Daddy Kane, Ice T, Grandmaster Flash, and the Furious Five, among others.[12]

Instead of choosing yet another template from art history's "former bosses of the Old World,"[13] Wiley opted for a contemporary, rather casual pose of Obama sitting with arms folded on his knees amid various climbing and flowering plants.[14] The floral backdrop is connotated as a feminine aesthetic, whereas the former First Lady Michelle Obama was portrayed by Amy Sherald with an emphasis on the geometric forms on her gown, the official portraits thus reverse gender stereotypes within art history. The flowers in Obamas portrait form a dense web and fill the picture frame entirely, growing partially over the president and conjuring the aesthetic of the African wax-print fabrics. We can find ornamental backgrounds throughout Wiley's large-format oil paintings. Dressing up to impress is an important trope for the artist, and by embedding his protagonists in a web of textile print designs, he is yet adding another layer of dress. Hence, his painterly practice distinguishes itself by a reinforced transmediality with photography as the base of his portraits and a transformation of the whole picture into a fabric pattern. Interestingly, Wiley translates some of his textile-inspired art back to contemporary streetwear and sells printed hoodies, pajamas, t-shirts, and scarves in his online shop—it is like a mise en abyme of his consistent switching between fashion and art, street and royalty, as well as present and long-past times.[15]

The choice of the first Black president of the United States to have his official portrait painted in an aesthetic reminiscent of African wax prints underlines and confirms the strong political symbolism of this fabric for Africans and people of African descent.[16] In the wake of the Afrocentrism of the 1980s, African Americans and Black British people embraced shirts, robes, headscarves, and caftans made of the intensely patterned wax-print fabrics as a symbol of African culture and solidarity. Curator Okwui Enwezor has also commented on this phenomenon: "In Brixton, African fabric is worn with pride amongst radical or cool youth. It manifests itself as a fashion accessory with Black British Women in the head wrap form and it can also be found worn by Africans away from the home country. It becomes an aesthetic of defiance, of reassurance, a way of holding on to one's identity in a culture perceived as foreign or different."[17] Or, as Yinka Shonibare has put it in a nutshell: "The fabrics are signifiers, if you like, of 'Africanness' insofar as when people first view the fabric, they think of Africa."[18] Yet, the cultural roots of the textiles are much more complex.

1 Kehinde Wiley, *Barack Obama*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 213.7 × 147 × 3.2 cm

Shonibare has repeatedly described how, as a young artist in London, he was confronted with the narrow-minded and stereotypical expectation to reflect "authentic African art" in his works. It was like an epiphany of what he wanted to work with when he visited Brixton Market and stumbled upon African textiles, only to find out about their entangled history spanning across three continents and various cultures. Shonibare grew up believing the colorful fabrics were genuinely African; in reality, the fabrics were produced by the Dutch and English. Hence the textiles became for the young artist a reflection of his own personal "post-colonial hybrid"[19] identity. The textiles functioned as "the ideal metaphor for" the "kind of global contemporary citizen"[20] that he embodied as a London-born son to Nigerian anglophile parents who were raised mostly in Nigeria and attending art school in bustling London.

The wax print's beginnings lay in colonial Indonesia, where the British and later the Dutch seized upon the potential trade value of generating machine-made imitation wax-batik cloth to avoid the painstaking Indonesian dye process, carried out entirely by hand.[21] However, the earliest attempts in the 1810s to emulate wax prints were not successful, and it was

only in the 1860s, after technological improvements, that fabric sales rose to a record level in Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the Asian market experienced a decline after 1867, because the Indonesians preferred handmade batiks, now more cheaply available due to new, more economical handcraft techniques. Moreover, new markets had to be found for the wax prints. Around 1890, the Scottish merchant Ebenezer Brown Fleming successfully introduced wax prints of the factory Haarlemsche Katoen Maatschappij to parts of British-controlled West Africa. He was the first to adapt the Indonesian designs to the tastes of the people on the Gold Coast and neighboring territories, who had a long-standing appreciation of high-quality cloth and were no longer satisfied with cheaply printed Manchester cottons. Wax prints are today not only worn as an everyday gown within the continent but are thriving in fashion and appear on catwalks in Lagos, Nairobi, Paris, London, and New York.[22]

African print textiles are nowadays manufactured worldwide. But, despite the fact that printing companies were inaugurated within Africa after nations gained independence, most wax-print textiles are manufactured in Asia and shipped elsewhere. Also, in a postcolonial world, the global market dynamics make sure that, ironically, only a meager percentage of African wax prints is produced in Africa. The fabrics might be made after African taste, but only a few are designed with direct African participation, unless one counts the market power of consumers and the communication of consumer preferences through sales agents. Hence, it is important to Shonibare not to buy the fabrics in Africa, because by obtaining them from the company Vlisco,[23] which was founded in 1844 and is the most widely known supplier of quality fabrics, known as "Dutch Wax" or "Wax Hollandais,"[24] he shows that "all this African hullabaloo is nothing but a fallacy."[25] The designers at Vlisco were and are overwhelmingly Dutch or Dutch-trained and of non-African origin, which has been reproached as an example of cultural imperialism and the legacy of colonial domination.[26] The company, however, has stressed that their design production is not primarily focused on the Africanness of the consumers, but should be seen as a service to the African consumers, who are the final arbiters of the designs. Thus, the entanglement of the fabrics could also be analyzed under the premise of a complicity and shared interest in "good design," considering meaning-making practices as appropriation by West-African consumers.[27] And yet, this is not only about the generation of cultural value, but monetary profit, that flows predominantly into European pockets.

The machine-made hybrid wax-print fabrics prove any artisanal quality wrong. Wax prints are neither the result of a craft conjured through their image language nor are they representative of a locally and artisanally produced indigenous cultural authenticity, as often imagined regarding textiles. Intriguingly, the textiles bear a material iconography that is hybrid and stands nowadays for Africa and at the same time its complex colonial history, cultural adaptation, and a long-standing artistic paternalism and African identification. On these grounds, and in the wake of discussions surrounding cultural appropriation, it has recently been asked who is entitled to wear them.

Accordingly, the question arises who can incorporate the material into their artworks. Performance artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar, for instance, deployed African wax-print fabrics and

2 Lili Reynaud-Dewar, *Some Objects Blackened and a Body Too*, 2011. Installation: video, sculptures, textiles

insignia of African American culture like grills (*Machines Future Society*, 2016), the Afrofuturist musician Sun Ra (*Interpretation*, 2010), and also refered to maroons and Rastafarians (*The Center and the Eyes*, 2006) in a variety of her works.[28] She has pointed out that rather than focusing on the question of "who" can address issues of racialized relationships of domination, we should be asking ourselves "how" one does this, with what means, what artistic gestures and strategies, and to what effect.[29] However, Reynaud-Dewar's own artistic answers sometimes generate controversy. In *Some Objects Blackened and a Body Too* (2011) the artist builds with her black-colored skin on the performances of Bruce Nauman, who applied white, pink, green, and black paint to his chest and face (fig. 2).[30] Two years prior to this work, Reynaud-Dewar, having painted her body in many different colors for various performances, described her thoughts on the act of blackening: "I didn't at first see the racial connotations of this black 'mask'; I used it more as an abstract sign, a play on polarities that was almost mathematical. The stereotypical and caricatural form of blackface was absent from these performances, but the act of blackfacing oneself up was still there."[31] In the video *Some Objects Blackened and a Body Too* (2011), shot in her studio, she is covering not only her white body, but also white objects, like plaster casts, a pad of paper, a small sink, and a polystyrene bust, in black paint. The artist describes this operation as follows: "By painting these objects black,

I'm also trying to make them less neutral. It's still, however, an intellectual exercise, which doesn't do anything to change existing power relations."[32] Viewed from a contemporary perspective of critical *whiteness*, it is of course highly controversial to set *white* as a neutral color. The artist stated that she thereby contemplated her own privileged position, trying to show vulnerability and enforce discourse.[33] In the exhibition installation, the video is accompanied by the partly blackened body parts on pedestals and wax-print sheets hanging somewhat uselessly from the wall, juxtaposed with the artist's nudity. The print design "Don't get married empty-handed" with the black-and-white drawings of isolated hands holding coins and rows of individual fingers pairs well with the artist's painted limbs. The fabric might also symbolize the urge of earning money through body work and speaks to a constructed cultural identity, because the art installation is intended as a homage to Josephine Baker's performance of the 1920s, her withstanding and simultaneous construction and owning of exoticized stereotypes.[34] In retrospect and in the course of the discussions on cultural appropriation, the artist distanced herself from this work in 2023: "I made a mistake, I think it's important to admit it. I have learned a lot from criticism of these early works. I don't believe they should be destroyed, or that it is even possible to completely discard a work of art, however, I discourage their public display."[35]

3. Ready-mades

Yinka Shonibare embraces the material iconography of the African print textiles that have become the trademark of his art when he first introduced them in 1994 to his mannequin installations after historical events and canonical scenes in art history. Museum director Thorsten Sadowsky has summarized it: "The objective of Shonibare's playful visual grammar is to show hybridity, while at the same time consistently frustrating any desire for authenticity in the sense of a longing for immediacy, originality, genuineness and purity."[36] Shonibare acts like a trickster when unfolding a hitherto unseen narrative of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his *Scramble for Africa* (2003), a restaged Congo Conference (1884–95), men discuss the partitioning of Africa wearing Victorian-style costumes made of wax prints (fig. 3). Especially in this era, cloth was a way of showing distinction and conveying class, gender, and descent. Shonibare breaks this multisectionality and unambiguousness of cloth in his theatrical installations of figures, whom he typically depicts with missing heads and an allegedly uniform light-brown skin tone. Redressing means, in this context, Africanizing as well, and inviting the viewer to question the Eurocentrism of art, history, and image and knowledge production in general. The appropriation of canonical works of art, especially through photography, was an artistic strategy employed by various contemporary artists of the time, such as Yasumasa Morimura and Cindy Sherman.[37]

What role does the artisanal play in the practice of the physically handicapped artist Shonibare? During his first year at art school, Shonibare contracted a viral infection that

3 Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Scramble for Africa*, 2003. 14 life-size mannequins, 14 chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, 132 × 488 × 280 cm

lead to a severe neurological disorder, due to which the left side of his body has remained impaired. His bodily condition has affected his method of art making: "I've become very good at delegating and have a number of people who facilitate my priorities."[38] Shonibare's life-size pieces are a material battle. The *Last Supper (after Leonardo)* (2013), for instance, consists of thirteen life-size mannequins, Dutch wax-printed cotton, a table and chairs, silver cutlery and vases, antique and reproduction glassware and tableware, fiberglass, and resin food. All of it is executed in precise detail: no unruly seams or loose strings disturb the perfection of the slick appearance. The artist's hand becomes invisible in the professional work of specialists in and outside his workshop. In any case, the vast range of media with which he works—installation, painting, photography, sculpture, textiles, photography, video, and performance—makes teaming up with specialists a necessity. Like many other contemporary artists, Shonibare generally delegates the material execution of his works. In this vein, the making itself becomes absent in the literature on the artist, instead revolving around the concepts and ideas in his works. Nevertheless, sympathizing with the "craftivist" do-it-yourself movement, he has recently trod new paths with his series *Creatures of the Mappa Mundi* (2018) by working with various local groups of marginalized people to produce textile pictures of pieced-together fabrics.[39] This has resulted in eye-catching traces of making, such as loose threads, visible seams of the appliqué, patchwork, etc.

The textile medium and the notion of the artisanal are closely intertwined. Woven or stitched textiles are archetypes of artisanal mastery. Social anthropologist Tim Ingold built

his concept of textility on the textile as a prime example of a thing whose processual making is comprehensible in the thing itself.[40] For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the tissue even accounts for as a model of technique.[41] Implicitly, they bring to mind the etymology of "textile" (woven thing, gauze, web), which goes back to the Latin "*texere*" on which the Greek word "*téchnē*" (technique) is based, by which we understand skill, craft, and artistry.[42] Intriguingly, none of the contemporary artists analyzed in this article could be described as textile artists in the sense that they have an artistic interest in the specific "textile" qualities of fabric, as Ingold described. The artist's focus lies not on the undulating materiality nor on the texture of the wax prints, their structure, and the tactility of their surface, such as the striated grain formed out of various threads rhythmically woven into a fabric.[43] It is—besides the wax print's complex history and identity—rather the color or image adhering to the textiles in which they are interested; it is in the first place the designs to which they are referring, and not the textile image carrier.

Shonibare is, despite his heavy use of textiles, not a textile artist; he is not preoccupied with an artisanal approach or interest in the making of the textile as a binding of fibrous material, or its related techniques of sawing, sticking, and weaving. Shonibare cites the commodity wax print as a marker of hybridity given its strong material iconography. His hyperrealistic figures and everyday objects rub shoulders with the Duchampian ready-made, Neo-Dadaism, the environments of the 1950s, Duane Hanson's hyperrealism, as well as Pop Art in general. The artist deems his art conceptional, but has always had a great interest in material and materiality. Starting off as a painter, he cherished the "tactile aspect to it and the use of materials."[44] His early paintings featured wax-print designs, and the artist mentioned minimalism and neo-geometric conceptualism as sources of inspiration, while the artist's later rich installations are far from the minimalist language of conceptual art.[45] His installations mix the different categories of decorative art and costume with painting and sculpture, the medias from which his image quotations are drawn.[46] Neither Shonibare's art nor the wax prints are textile in the sense of having a traceable making. Wax print, with its strong designs applied to cotton carriers, somehow dwell in-between textile and graphic reproduction.

4. Remediations

The print's ornaments have subsequently become itinerant in Shonibare's works, as if the patterns were detached from the cotton carrier. The artist transposed them to the gigantic metal *Wind Sculptures* (2018) and even to his own skin, as in the series *Self-Portrait (after Warhol)* (2013). Due to his recurrent use of the fabrics, the material iconography of the wax prints within contemporary art have come to stand in for Shonibare himself, an artist surfing the wave of success in the art world with his easily recognizable token. In his *Alien Flag Drawings* (2011), Shonibare not only projected the wax print's design to his artworks but also mimicked the style of the prints in a different medium. Together with his collaborators, he fabricated

4 Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Alien Flag Drawings 4*, 2011. Paper, ink, Dutch wax printed cotton, found paper, 22-carat gold leaf, 76.5 × 95 cm

collages of floral patterns from paper shavings found in magazines and newspapers as well as fabric pieces. The looks as well as the mixture of design and political news are reminiscent of wax-print textiles (fig. 4).

Other contemporary artists are working in a mode of wax print by adapting properties of the designs to their artworks. Kamuanga Ilunga, for instance, depicts on the one hand splendid, almost photorealistic wax-print cloths in oil on canvas. On the other hand, he takes the all-over aesthetic of the wax print and expands it to other parts of the image space (fig. 5). Scribbled patterns, derived from traditional Mangbetu garments, span from one side of the paintings to the other in the otherwise empty background. The ornament unfolds also partly over the figures and adds a textile appeal to the paintings. Kamuanga Ilunga replaces the skin of the figures with black circuit boards—a reference to the metallic ore coltan, an important component in modern electronic devices and arduously mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), from where the conflict-laden mineral is exported to the world. It is also due to this specifically ornamented skin, which evokes robotics, stellar constellations, and body painting, linear tattoos, and scarifications, that his figures appear like ornaments: isolated, silhouetted, and reminiscent of wax-print motifs floating on a finely patterned backdrop.

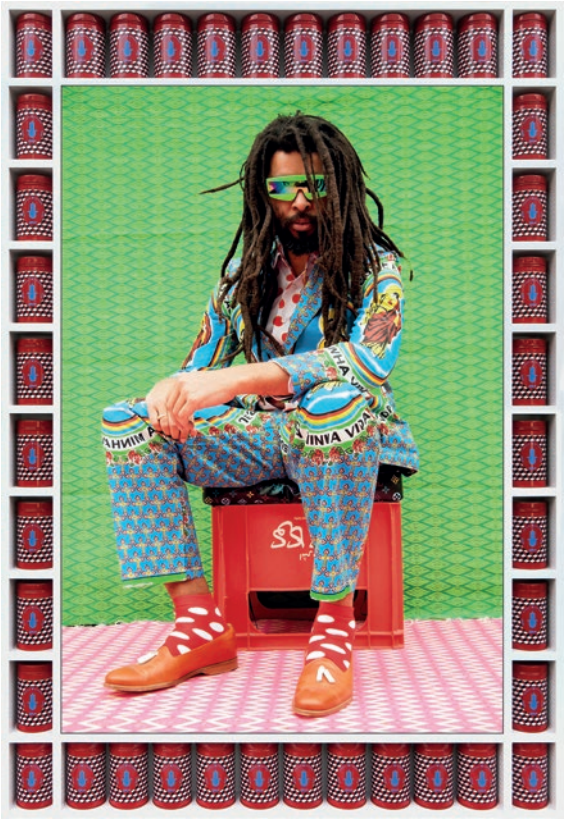
5 Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, *Fragile 6*, 2018. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 180 × 196 cm

Njideka Akunyili Crosby, in turn, creates multilayered, large-format works on paper. Her precisely composed vintage-style spatial arrangements incorporate architecture, interior design elements, and everyday objects and echo architecture magazines of the 1970s. Plain, sleek architectural surfaces contrast with realistically rendered objects, people, and furniture. Objects as well as the recurring architecture are, for her, carriers of meaning and socioeconomic status, a specific time and place, forming identity as part of a "banal nationalism,"[47] as described by social scientist Michael Billig. Using a mixed technique, consisting of acrylic paint, colored pencil, photo transfers, charcoal, pastel, and partially collaged image material,[48] she produces superimposed layers forming a "lucid mosaic,"[49] a "sociocultural, political, and historical portrait of Nigeria,"[50] or, as the artist herself puts it, "background noise."[51] These assemblages mimic, aesthetically as well as thematically, African wax prints. The repetition of the motifs is related to the repeating textile patterns and mixed themes—from politics to objects of everyday life—that are reminiscent of the wax print's universal topics. In *Home: As You See Me* (2017), the reference to wax prints is particularly strong (fig. 6): the artist's mother, Dora Akunyili's, portrait appears in a painted print-fabric wall covering. The genuine fabric she has had printed for her political election campaign for becoming director general of Nigeria's National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control.[52] Crosby describes

6 Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Home: As You See Me*, 2017. Acrylic, transfers, colored pencil, charcoal, collage, and commemorative fabric on paper, 213 × 211 cm

these essential parts of her art as "providing a sort of tissue of memory,"[53] because "thinking of an immigrant's experience, you bring the place here you are from with you no matter where you are."[54] For her, the cultural hybridity of the Dutch wax prints symbolizes that tradition is always evolving, that places and people always have been in contact and exchange, and that this exchange has always created hybrid cultures.[55] Namely, she interprets the wax-print structures in her art as "a texture which constitutes hybrid identity."[56]

Stylistically, Crosby's paintings bear similarities to French-Nabis artist Édouard Vuillard's contained, closed spaces, created at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which tissues und figures, background and motifs become interrelated in a dense web of psychologized interior. In Vuillard's as well as Crosby's works, carpets, wallpapers, and textile patterns seem to be identical with the surface of the painting—contrary to their actual, figural meaning.[57] At the same time, the stillness of Crosby's protagonists—the lack of movement, flattened surfaces, and the universe of everyday objects—are reminiscent of Tom Wesselmann's Pop Art. Flatness



7 Hassan Hajjaj, *Marc Hare*, 2013. Metallic lambda on 3mm dibond in a poplar sprayed-white frame with red HH tall tea boxes with blue fatma hand, 141.6 × 97.3 × 8.3 cm. Edition of 5 + 2AP, 2013/1434

is not only a stylistic property in Crosby's paintings. It is also a way of conflating different worlds and identities together: "But just thinking of the correlation of what is happening formally with the work, with content. . . . Someone like me is someone who is one person but actually has these multiples that flatten into who I am, that complicate the story."[58]

The contemporary artists evoked in this article are not making wax prints, nor are they interfering with the textiles or their specific patterns directly. The artists are not merely depicting the wax cloths as motifs; rather they encompass a style in their work. Regardless of the uncountable different motifs of the wax prints, they all share a genuine aesthetic of visually strong patterns, repeated ornaments, and often bold, sometimes contrasting colors spanning over a mostly ornamented background. These artists internalize this aesthetic conception and transpose it into other mediums, like painting, where the fabric's aesthetic invades the picture plane. Hassan Hajjaj uses the same mode in photography for his exuberant portraits of people wearing wax prints, often posing in front of boldly patterned studio textile backdrops (fig. 7),

as in the 1950s studio pictures of Malinese photographer Seydou Keïta (1921–2001). By framing his photographs with staked packed goods, like tuna or tea tins, Hajjaj adds another layer of pattern repetition and commodity consumer culture with an obvious reference to Andy Warhol's screen-printed series of *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962). In addition, just like Crosby, Hajjaj mixes different media and objects from the everyday world. All of the abovementioned artists borrow strategies of wax-print designs and operate in the mode of wax prints. By transferring properties of the fabrics to the world of painting or photography, they simultaneously remediate the waxes and contextualize their artworks in the rich cultural heritage of the African print fabrics. Despite this stylistic transfer, they draft their patterns individually from scratch and thus create individual design universes. They not only introduce wax-print style to the world of fine arts but also own the prints as African authors—a gesture of empowerment, given the centuries-long history of European companies' cultural paternalism, enacted through designing for African clients.

5. Deconstructions

Resuming the initially raised question about the agency of African wax prints, we ask once again what they do to the artists and their art making. The fabrics appear as ready-mades within contemporary art and evoke issues of hybridity through their complex history, which ties three continents together, conveys African identity, and attests to colonialism. The waxes spread their aesthetic, pictorial form, as well as their content and motifs, to various other media. Especially painting seems susceptible to being "waxified" by this textile art, which distinguishes itself through enthralling designs unrooted within the textile web, but independent dye applications.

The batik-copying images already make the wax prints a one-of-a-kind category of textile, while the industrial fabrication process adds another special property to the cloth. Hence the African cloth's defiance of the artisanal is twofold: they are neither artisanally made nor meet expectations of local indigenousness. Instead, they are aesthetically as well as culturally entangled things. Their appearance in contemporary art and discourses reflects this material iconography strongly. On these grounds, this article was less about investigating fluid borders between design, craft, and art or different articulations of art making, like deskilling, reskilling, etc. Similarly, few critics realized first, when Shonibare started to contaminate the pure space of modernism with nonart—i.e., "ethnic" fabrics—that this gesture was not a way of naive folklorist expression, but a conceptual choice and critical tool.[59]

These artists, all circling around wax prints, are not making fabrics; rather, they are unmaking them in that they transform them into other media, unravel their aesthetics, colors, iconography, and symbolic load, and weave them into their works. As they are unmaking the tissue, they are also deconstructing ideas of the cultural purity and African identity of wax prints. Or, as Shonibare himself asked under the spell of Jacques Derrida's notion of decon-

struction: "How do you make non-Western contemporary art, or how do you challenge the Western canon?"[60] Looking at African wax prints in contemporary art challenges our own conceptions of authenticity, African art, and the interplay of textiles and fine arts in general. In all of the analyzed artistic positions, the colorful fabrics become utensils of destruction of the canon of art history, aiding to alter stereotypical imagery. Artists are turning the wax prints into markers of playful post- and decolonial criticism of the Eurocentric gaze and biased cultural production. Hence, the colorful fabrics as well as their artworks are not just adorned with hybrid ornaments, but become bearers of political patterns, ways of seeing the world and art making.

Notes

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1 Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001), p. 14.

2 See Ruth Chambers and Mireille Perron, "Re-Negotiating Materiality: Craft Knowledge and Contemporary Art," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 42, no. 1 (2017): 23, https://doi.org/10.7202/1040837ar.

3 See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), pp. 28–31.

4 Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst*, p. 12.

5 For a comprehensive terminology of African print cloth with its variants fancy prints, Java prints, Imi-wax, and commemorative or occasional prints, see Suzanne Gott and Kristyne S. Loughran, "Introducing African-Print Fashion," in *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, ed. Suzanne Gott et al., exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2017), p. 32.

6 On commemorative or occasional print textiles and her understanding of them as operators of "political technology at the scale of the human body," see Catherine P. Bishop, "African Occasional Textiles: Vernacular Landscapes of Development," *African Arts* 47, no. 4 (2014): 74.

7 See John Picton, "Über uns selbst lachen," in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch*, ed. Gerald Matt, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: NAI; Museum Bojmans Van Beuningen; Kunsthalle Wien, 2004), p. 53.

8 See Jean Allman, *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004) and Jacqueline Atkins, *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

9 For different names and meanings of various fabrics, see Vlisco, "Fabric Stories," undated, https://www.vlisco.com/world-of-vlisco/design/fabric-stories/.

10 See Wiley's homepage: http://kehindewiley.com/.

11 Ibid.

12 See Sonaiya Kelley, "Kehinde Wiley Will Paint Obama's Official Presidential Portrait," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-entertainment-news-updates-october-2017-htmlstory.html#kehinde-wiley-will-paint-obamas-official-presidential-portrait.

13 See Wiley's Homepage: http://kehindewiley.com/.

14 See Vinson Cunningham, "The Shifting Perspective in Kehinde Wiley's Portrait of Barack Obama," *The New Yorker*, February 13, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-appearances/the-shifting-perspective-in-kehinde-wileys-portrait-of-barack-obama.

15 See Wiley's shop: https://kehindewileyshop.com/.

16 Various commemorative wax-print cloths adorned with Obama's likeness were printed in Kenya in honor of the president. See Gott, "African Prints Made in Africa," in *African-Print Fashion Now!*, p. 98.

17 Okwui Enwezor, "Tricking the Mind. The Work of Yinka Shonibare," in *Yinka Shonibare. Dressing Down*, exh. cat. (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1999), p. 8.

18 Yinka Shonibare, "Setting the Stage. Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, ed. Rachel Kent (Munich: Prestel, 2014), p. 43.

19 Hugo Bongers and Gerald Matt, "Vorwort," in *Yinka Shonibare. Double Dutch*, p. 8.

20 Yinka Shonibare, "Paul Gilroy in Conversation with Yinka Shonibare CBE," in *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, exh. cat., ed. Thorsten Sadowsky (Munich: Hirmer, 2021), pp. 65–66.

21 For the resumed history of wax prints in this paragraph I referred heavily on the expert Helen Elands' basic research on this topic. See Helen Elands, "Dutch Wax Classics: The Designs Introduced by Ebenezer Brown Flemming circa 1890–1912 and Their Legacy," in *African-Print Fashion Now!*, pp. 53–61.

22 See Hansi Momodu-Gordon, "In the Making: African-Print Fashion and Contemporary Art," in *African-Print Fashion Now!*, pp. 263–64.

23 It was estimated that, in 2006, 75% of all wax fabrics sold in Africa were adorned with designs originating at Vlisco. Notably, their patterns are also widely reproduced illegally by numerous Asian and African companies. See Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, p. 33.

24 Sadowsky, *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, p. 18.

25 Yinka Shonibare, "Unterhalten und provozieren: Westliche Einflüsse im Werk Yinka Shonibares: Jaap Guldemond und Gabriele Mackert im Gespräch mit Yinka Shonibare," in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch*, p. 41.

26 See M. Amah Edoh, "Redrawing Power? Dutch Wax Cloth and the Politics of 'Good Design,'" *A Source: Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016): 258–59.

27 See ibid., pp. 267–70.

28 Textiles as a bearer of text, part of installations, and costumes are essential to Reynaud-Dewar's work; namely, wax-print fabrics are a recurring phenomenon in *Black Mariah* (2009), *Antiteater* (2010), *Interpretation* (2010), and *Interpretation Recalling* (2013).

29 Lili Reynaud-Dewar, "Interview: Élisabeth Lebovici in conversation with Lili Reynaud-Dewar," in *Lili Reynaud-Dewar*, ed. Élisabeth Lebovici, Diedrich Diedrichsen, and Monika Szewczynk (London: Phaidon, 2019), p. 31.

30 Ibid., p. 13.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 20.

33 Ibid., pp. 20–21: "Indeed I do it from my own privileged position. It does not disrupt these power relations. . . . I do like it when the exhibition, or museum, or art center is a place for discussion. . . . I'm trying to show vulnerability—my own vulnerability or that of art."

34 See ibid., p. 14: When mixing blackness with Baker's movements, the artist was aware of the highly problematic convergence of blacked-up body and nudity and that it could connote racist

conceptions of the body, for instance as a "naked savage." Despite this risk, she chose to proceed with the work: "But I was keen not to avoid the racialized body of Josephine Baker, and to acknowledge her ability to turn racism on its head and use it as a tool of her own autonomy."

35 Lili Reynaud-Dewar, quoted in Wilson Tarbox, "Artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar: 'I think we attribute too much power to art,'" *Financial Times*, October 13, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/a4487be0-5adc-4b30-80c9-cd4eb2034199.

36 Sadowsky, *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, p. 19.

37 See Courtney Tanner Wilder, "Staging Display in the Sculptural Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE," master's thesis (University of California, Riverside, 2011), pp. 33–36, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1nh5w2rt.

38 Yinka Shonibare, quoted in Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," p. 29.

39 See Sadowsky, *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, p. 25.

40 See Tim Ingold, "The Textility of Making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34 (2010): 92.

41 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 593.

42 See Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert, "Editorial," *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 6, no. 1 (2015): 5.

43 See T'ai Smith, "Texture," in *Textile Terms: A Glossary*, ed. Anika Reineke et al. (Emsdetten and Berlin: Edition Imorde, 2017), p. 273. For the adaption of texture to poetics, see Pamela McCallum, "Texture," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Stephen Cushman and Clare Cavanagh, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1430.

44 Shonibare, "Setting the Stage," p. 46.

45 See ibid., p. 47, and Shonibare, "Yinka Shonibare: Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnivalesque and Power: A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, ed. Laurie Ann Farrell, exh. cat. (Gent: Snoeck Publishers; New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), p. 164.

46 See Wilder, *Staging Display in the Sculptural Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE*, p. 43.

47 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Thousand Oaks, 2004 [1995]).

48 See Anna Schneider, "Interiorities: The Cosmos in a Room," in *Interiorities: Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Leonor Antunes, Henrike Naumann, Adriana Varejão*, ed. Anna Schneider, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel; Haus der Kunst, 2020), p. 15.

49 Ibid., p. 14.

50 Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, "Home and Away: Njideka Akunyili Crosby's Space of Familiarity," in *Interiorities*, p. 29.

51 Njideka Akunyili Crosby, quoted in ibid.

52 See Schneider, *Interiorities*, p. 16.

53 Njideka Akunyili Crosby, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby in Conversation with Anna Schneider," in *Interiorities*, p. 38.

54 Ibid., p. 39.

55 See ibid., p. 40.

56 Ibid., p. 38.

57 See Regine Prange, "Flatness," in *Textile Terms*, p. 103.

58 Crosby, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby in Conversation with Anna Schneider," p. 42.

59 See Shonibare, "Yinka Shonibare. Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnivalesque and Power," p. 164.

60 Shonibare, "Paul Gilroy in Conversation with Yinka Shonibare CBE," p. 66.

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