

## Senam Okudzeto and Markus Schwander Wouldn't it be nice to meet a sculpture you would like to talk to?



First Love, 1998

*A discussion between Senam Okudzeto (S.O.) and Markus Schwander (M.S.) that had started out with a list of titles of Markus Schwander's works.*

S.O.: The first thing that struck me when you sent the list of works, is how poetic the titles are. Then I had to laugh because I realised that they are very often exact descriptions of the contents of your works. Dogs and Flowers are drawings of dogs and flowers, Untitled, chewed, I imagine corresponds to your enormous chewing gum sculptures. I remember these pieces as meditations on motifs of 'the ordinary'. But somehow I would resist describing them as having a 'Pop art' aesthetic, there is a funny zen equilibrium between the titles and the subjects in your work, no clever attempts to trick or mislead the viewer, but in the end because of simple truth, the works have a great weight.

M.S.: In fact, most of the titles are programmatic: So, when in 1989 I did *Die Verdauung* [digestion], I was actually asking myself if it was possible to digest through art, and the phrase *Untitled, chewed* tries to be as abstract as a chewing gum. I do not want to make more sense than the sense that is in the thing. I try to reject the symbolic implications. That's why I am not interested in labels, but in chewing gum as a material that can take any form.

S.O.: So would it be right to say you are more interested in 'the thing' as opposed to the commodity? The thing before or after it is given value? I have been reading a lot about 'things' lately, in particular the writing of Bill Brown and Arjun Appadurai, it's a hot topic. Most theorists agree that the 'thing' can be defined by its useful- or uselessness, the idea of 'value' that is given to the thing when it is exchanged,

bought or sold. But these two thinkers go on to expand the idea so far as to say that things have 'social lives' and a culture of their own, and that this relates to the way they perform in society, and this status is something that is always changing. A good example might be to say that in the time of slavery, people were nothing more than things, it was outrageous for people to imagine that their slaves were anything more than objects, but now we would be horrified to think that anyone thought of a person as thing. We have grown up with



Die Verwandlung, 1999

the idea that people control things, that they have no spirit or power, but now in our culture, there is the potential for things to control people, this idea could be expanded to say that things have the potential to be people. Things now carry a political and social power that can influence and change the lives of the people they encounter, this is particularly apparent in your work. Where the things occupy the social space of people.

M.S.: I ask myself which things are close to me and which ones are far away. Coca Cola for example is very far away, because I have to think about it all the time when I see the

publicity. It does not touch me at all. Close and really ordinary are the things I always forget about. That's why I like Jasper Johns painting numbers. Something we use constantly to define values loses significance when isolated. It is just shape. But suddenly I ask myself, if I like 2 better than 5, as if they were persons.

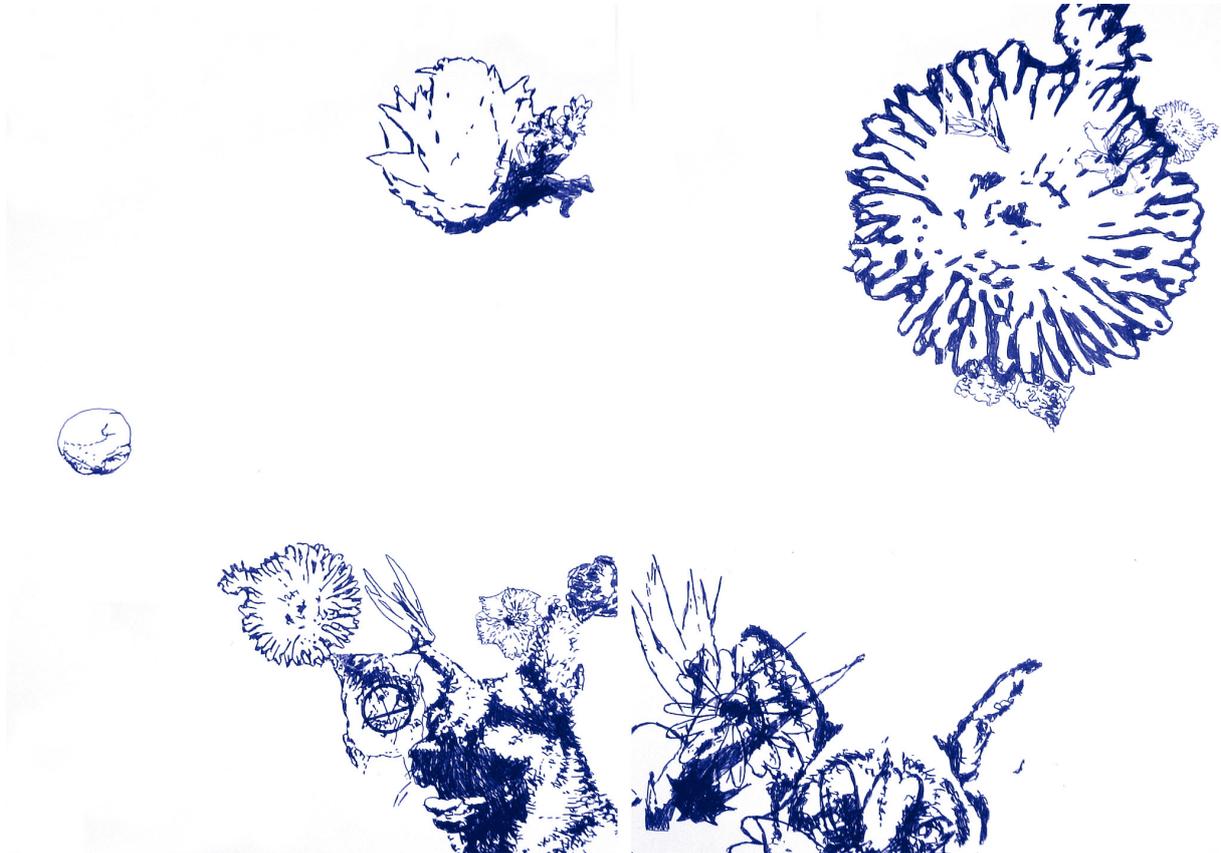
S.O.: I see you have a different concept of Pop to the one I had in my head, which is a Pop as a celebration of the everyday in a modernist commodity culture, the classic example being Warhol. I read a critique of this approach into the Untitled, chewed series. Because here you had made a sculpture, out of a spent commodity. You turn the most useless thing into an object of beauty, the chewing gum that has been completely digested and spat out. I like the idea of 'recycling' that is present here, not only do you recycle the subject of the art, the chewing gum, you also recycle the concept of 'Pop'. I had totally forgotten about Jasper Johns, and it makes sense to raise the example of his work, as the 'quiet' face of Pop which is less caught up in the surface of consumer society and more critical of the mechanisms that construct it. The 'Banana' sculpture corresponds again to the idea of the everyday spent commodity. I wonder if the way you give this funny object a personality, sitting on the bench, sprouting little bananas, doesn't in the end, emphasize its 'thingness'. The thing that is there, familiar, but alien at the same time, – as it is no longer useful – starts to become dangerous. It becomes a potential threat. This work makes me think of all these Hollywood movies where tech-



untitled, chewed #2, 2000

nology goes crazy and the robots come to wipe out humanity. In your works, it's as if the 'things' have taken on new life, they are multiplying, growing and threatening to wipe us out. The things are symbolic of the end of humanity. In the end, will we be suffocated by things?

S.O.: This being the great paradox of making art. On one hand we want to break with our practice, and 'evolve', or move in a new direction, and on the other hand we are constantly fighting the idea that a single piece of art will never be able to resonate with the strength of the entire body



Dogs & Flowers, 2002

M.S.: When I did *First Love*, the Banana piece, I had Beckett in my mind. He wrote a story called *First Love*, where two people meet on a park bench. Their actions and the way they talk are so simple, that to me it is at the same time attracting and frightening. They feel inhuman, almost like living puppets. So I did not think about machines, but tried to find something which is between the things and our bodies. Wouldn't it be nice to meet a sculpture you would like to talk to? We were talking about curators and their tendency to use art-works for their own stories. I think it is true that all those thematic exhibition tend to fragmentize the body of our work. It seems to be our duty (as artists) to keep our works together – this is one of the reasons to finally make this book.

of work. That is the threat we face when the curator grabs a work and puts it in a 'themed' exhibition... Will the original narrative intent still be there? Can an individual piece of work ever live up to the body of work from which it is a fragment? By that I mean, we don't ever really make individual works. The whole process is circles upon circles of thought, overlapping, going backwards, rewriting, reworking, never quite finishing, in an attempt to make sense out of nonsense and nonsense out of sense. We want to be clear and unclear, profound but not pretentious, enigmatic, but methodological nonetheless. It's a schizophrenic way to live. The big nightmare is that some curator rocks up and says your wonderful profound Banana sculpture which might be a fragile commentary on human relations

is really about armageddon and the end of humanity, what do you do then? I, in my pessimism, despair and run off to make a new art work that will be bullet proof and un-corruptible, what do the optimists do in this situation?

M.S.: If we don't give certain information – as I did now, while writing about *First Love* – we leave the interpretation to the audience. We know how much we ourselves read our own stories into other artists'

works. So let us see this as a normal process. Misunderstandings can be very creative. The question would rather be: Why did I correct you? I did because I thought that the two stories might not be so different, rather coming from different backgrounds. I like Beckett's work and I think it is very pessimistic. The danger in his work does not come from outside, every horror we can imagine is inside us. It's the minor things, those that are neglected, which reflect this horror.



Model (landscape) 2000