THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
NEUBAUER COLLEGIUM FOR CULTURE & SOCIETY

THE OTOLITH GROUP
Mascon: A Massive Concentration of Black Experiential Energy

Artists' Discussion
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Neubauer Collegium: Let's start with an introduction of the Otolith Group. What do you do, and why do you do it?

Anjalika Sagar: So, hi there. We are the Otolith Group. That's myself, Anjalika Sagar, and Kodwo Eshun. We inaugurated the idea of the Otolith Group in 2002 in response to a work that we made called *Otolith 1*, which was a film commissioned by the Arts Catalyst in London, an organization that took artists into zero gravity with the Russian Space Agency to respond to microgravity as a site of exploration for cultural practices. And so we made a work there – which is our first film, basically – and we discovered that otoliths are little crystals that sit on your inner ear that guide your sense of orientation and balance in the world. In order to maintain balance and orientation, one needs to kind of have their gaze on a horizon of some kind. And so, when floating in microgravity, I made sure to keep my eye on a line in the plane in order to prevent nausea.

After 9/11, and what we knew was going to happen to the world after that event, we felt that we wanted to think with this device of a kind of orientation stone in the ear that would help us release ourselves from our humanness – human history, human culture – and think of ourselves more as oriented bodies or bodies that produce orientations, and think about the idea of microgravity as a way to think off-world as well as on-world within the world. So, that's a brief background to the term "otolith."

Actually, the inspiration for the group came from bands – the idea of being in a band of some kind, kind of failing as a musician and wanting to be in a band, but then being able to re-create the idea of a group as a band in a way, and also in excess of ourselves as individuals. But also in response to the history at that time of many different new media groups – be they bands, be they film documentary groups. Across the country, documentaries and experimental documentaries were being made by lots of different groups. In walks [London-based gallery owner Charles] Saatchi, with all his money, and creates the YBA movement, the Young British Artists movement, with Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst and all these characters, and it just seemed very at odds with everything

that had happened prior to that, which were a number of collectives basically making all kinds of different work. Obviously this marked a kind of neoliberal moment, so we responded to the idea of this by creating the Otolith Group as a way to think beyond ourselves and to be able to think with others.

NC: The medium with which you're most deeply associated is not just film – the moving image – but the film essay in particular. Or the essay film, the essayistic film. Can you briefly talk about your investment in the form?

Kodwo Eshun: Sure, yeah. I think the essay film offers the opportunity to, first of all, suspend the distinctions between creation, that which artists do, and then criticism, that which critics do, and then curation, that which curators do. There's a certain indeterminacy in the essay film which we like. It's not clear whether it's creation, criticism, or curation. In fact, it's floating between all of those three qualities. That's what we like because a lot of our work has to do with studying other works, like older artists from different geographies, and responding to that work. So there's a kind of analytical dimension, and the essayistic form allows for that. It's a work of thought imagined through editing. It's not necessarily or only about going out into the field and documenting this or that or filming this and that. It's a lot of sitting at the desk, looking at images and sounds, and working out how to use images and sounds to talk about images and sounds. That's how we learn about what it is we are doing. And that's a thread running through a work called *Otolith III*, which is an analysis of an unmade film by Satyajit Ray. It's there in our work on the poet Etel Adnan. It's there on our work on the group Codona. And I would argue it's also at play in the new work, *Mascon*.

NC: About which we want to hear more, of course. Can you recount for us the genesis of *Mascon*?

AS: It all began with, obviously, a love of Parallel Cinema in India, a love of experimental cinema in Japan, and a love of the similar movement of cinema in Senegal with two figures, Djibril Diop Mambéty and Ousmane Sembène, whose work we've always admired for all kinds of reasons. When we were asked to make a response to [the Panafrica-themed exhibition] *Project a Black Planet* at the Art Institute of Chicago, it seemed very clear to us that you cannot focus on purely the paintings or a kind of document-oriented visual culture of the continent. I learned when we curated the exhibition on Chimurenga in London – They are a group from Cape Town who were looking at flows of connection in the continent between different countries and communities. They were looking at oil, FIFA, they were looking at all kinds of different contemporary flows of connection that kind of replace a sort of Pan-Africanism in the contemporary sense. But also they were putting these two worlds into relation through their graphics and print material. The signature of their work is that they have a library – a very brilliant, great library, the Chimurenga Library. They came to see us and [Chimurenga founder] Ntone Edjabe said, "Well, you also have a library. You don't really need us." What Chimurenga taught us – what they taught *me* – was the fact that you cannot think of the continent of Africa without thinking of

music. And you cannot think about it without thinking about cinema or film, especially now, because so much is digitally distributed among young people.

We've always made moving image works, but [responding to the Art Institute exhibition] was a challenge. The museum didn't necessarily want that many moving image works in the exhibition. So I thought, Well, why don't we think about a pantheon of forces that might emerge from cinema on a screen? And some friends of ours in Norway – Annette Bush and her colleagues – we've been doing a project with them called "Women on Airplanes," a project we all co-curated in London on women's participation in African liberation movements. And they are real cinephiles. They had hundreds of films from across the continent, something like 1,000 films. And we realized, OK, this is way too much. So we thought, Let's just focus on Djibril Diop Mambéty and Ousmane Sembène. Eighteen films is enough to begin to think about two generations of filmmakers in Senegal, but also about the tensions and projections that are often placed on them and how we might disrupt some of those ideas.

NC: Let's talk a little bit more about Sembène and Mambéty: who they are, what their filmography consists of, and how their work lives in *Mascon*.

KE: Ousmane Sembène was born in the 1920s. He was a dockworker in the docks of Dakar and in Marseille, where he was injured and stopped working in the docks. He joined the Communist Party of France. In the early '40s, he starts writing novels. He writes six brilliant novels. The first novel is called *Le Docker Noir (The Black Docker),* about a dockworker who writes a novel, and the novel is then stolen from him by a white publisher who then publishes it under her own name. It's a brilliant first novel. After writing six novels, he retrains as a filmmaker. He travels to Moscow, learns all the arts and crafts of cinema, and he comes back and in '64 and makes his first short film, which is called *Borom Sarret*, which is Wolof for "Cart Driver." It's what in those days would have been called a neorealist film about a man driving a cart for hire, and his troubles in his daily life and labor across the city of Dakar. It's a black-and-white film, a brilliant 30-minute film. And Sembène carried on making films right through the '60s, right up until his final film in 2004, which is called *Moolaadé*, which is Wolof for "Sanctuary," which is a brilliant film about a woman who defends young girls who are being threatened with female genital mutilation. So, it's a controversial and powerful feminist film, like many of his films.

Djibril Diop Mambéty was born in the 1940s. He trained in theater. He was a theater maker, so he was a self-taught filmmaker. *Contras' City* is his first film: it's a kind of irreverent guide around the city of Dakar, with him providing a very sarcastic voiceover. It's quite brilliant. He becomes famous for a film in 1972 called *Touki Bouki*, which is Wolof for "Journey of the Hyenas," about two alienated teenagers who dream of leaving Dakar for Paris. They scheme and plot and plan their way out of Dakar, and at the last minute the boy Mory changes his mind, backs out, doesn't go, and leaves Anta, his girlfriend, the student, to get on this ship and leave for Paris. His final film was made in the early 2000s. It's called *The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun*. It's about a little girl, a paraplegic girl

with leg braces who has to walk with these crutches, and she's selling a newspaper called *Le Soleil*. It's a brilliant film.

These filmmakers are often posed against each other. Sembène is often posed as the so-called "father of African cinema." He's often characterized – mischaracterized – as a socialist realist, as a didactic, austere, sober filmmaker. Whereas Mambéty is characterized as a Dionysian anarchistic, postmodernist, wild-and-free filmmaker. That's a kind of exaggeration and a kind of crude account of their modes of analysis. When you begin to study their films, you see how much they were in dialogue with each other across generations, and you begin to see how an actor who would appear in a Sembène film would appear in a Mambéty film and vice versa. And so in our video *Mascon*, we are studying not so much the narratives, but we are creating a series of scenes that study certain recurring gestures and landscapes, bodies and spaces that you see across both of their works. We're creating something like a borderless world in which characters from different films meet in the plane of the image. We're creating a series of impossible meetings and impossible dialogues across films separated in time and space, which meet and create all kinds of hybrid combinations and impossible duets. *Mascon* is us trying to envision what a borderless cinema looks like by drawing on the work of these two great filmmakers.

AS: I think it's also in relation to the borderless, this idea of an imaginary counterpower, the kind of necrosis and the redundancy of the nation-state as an imposition due to colonialism on Asia and on Africa, worlds that were in dialogue with each other, that people could move across. Herodotus went to India, Thucydides went to India, Pliny went to India, my father came overland to the UK. As the world goes through the kind of death knells of the nation-state, this horrible time that we are in now, these expansionist horrors are happening. The sense of that borderless world, of the nomad, the imagination of the wanderer.

As we face a kind of feeling of an end time, I think we are more committed to the borderless imagination of counterpower, more than ever. So when we think of cinema and our generation – if you're born in the '60s, you're born with the screen, you are born with music, you're born with headphones, you live a life of television and stereos, and your feelings and imagination are populated by fragments of films. For me, it's *Battleship Potemkin.* That was the first time I felt loss. Or Pasolini. Or various different films I'd be forced to watch by my parents when I was very young. The screen produces a different language, not just the language you learn in the world. And so I think it's our inheritance to kind of re-script that somehow with fragments. This is very much what we are doing with this borderless imagination. We are populating, we are producing portals through surfaces from fragments that go through the films into scenes within scenes within scenes as an experiment.

NC: Can you say a bit more about the forms of the film essay and the mural at the Art Institute? How does the mural relate to the film, and what kinds of ideas are you able to put into tension by working with these two different forms?

KE: Yeah. The mural, when you first encounter it, the scale is epic. It's 36 meters squared. It's three horizontal sections. The nonlinearity of it is overwhelming. But as in the process of making the film, it's actually extremely structured and organized according to certain schemas. There's geometric schema in which we group images according to horizontality, verticality, diagonals and circles. Then there are geographies which we group together across the films: the geographies of the desert, geographies of the Sahel, the Sahel being this zone of aridity that moves across the north and west of the continent. Then there is the recurrence of actors. These large-scale schemas organize the structure, so when we look at it, that's what we are seeing. There are arguments being made in the mural about the interruption of a certain reception of those filmmakers and about opening up a certain dimension of interpretations so that people can look at these works again.

Above all, the mural is a visual study. A "visual study" is a term we take from the French film theorist Nicole Brenez. She says it's about when you have a face-to-face encounter between an image and another image that is dedicated to studying that image. And that's what the mural is. The mural is an opportunity for us to study the work of Sembène and Mambéty according to these schemas, which we do not impose on the work, but which we draw from our study. We're not imposing anything. These things are in the work. We just attend to the work, draw out these ideas through an immanent methodology, and then use those structures to organize everything. So the work of the mural has that organizational structure.

When it comes to making the video, we are dealing with the relation between stillness and movement and a certain kind of intermediate dimension of a still moving image. So we have three types of images: a still image, a moving image, and a still moving image (a still image which is in motion). So this is also organized according to certain structures and schemas. We're still on the track of certain tropes and recurring images, but the aim is not so much to schematize but to create a kind of liquidity. So the method we're adopting has more to do with superimpositions and dissolves and what we call camouflage. A camouflage is when a body disappears into a landscape, and there is the relation between a body and a landscape, a figure and a space. We're trying to create a continuum between body and space rather than making the body isolate itself in relation to a space. So I would say this is about continuities and continuums. The mural is about schematics, schemas, and structures. They are both forms of visual study, but they each demand different kinds of analysis.

AS: When our editor came – we've been working with him for 18 years; his name is Simon – and I showed him all the material and I said, "I want to activate this dialogue between the moving image and the cutout. How do we get to the cutout, the still?" And I said, "This is going to be difficult." He said, "No, this is exactly what's going to be fun. It's the challenge of making a film from a mural." Some moving image artists might take stills from their films, and that's something we've never wanted to do. It's more exciting for us to go into the

image production as was defined by the mural and just give it another space. In fact, we could have gone on and on and on with this. We could have made it two hours or three hours. But yes, it's this relation between motion and the cutout.

NC: You talked earlier about Panafrica and the concept of borderlessness. How does *Mascon* tie in to the idea of Panafrica?

KE: The idea of Pan-Africanism is often dismissed as a dream or a fantasy, but actually Pan-Africanism has to do with the theory and the practice of liberation: the liberation of specific countries from colonial rule and the unification of those countries in the interest of a borderless continent. So first you liberate the nation and then you dissolve the borders of that nation in the interests of a borderless continent in which the questions of currency and the questions of militarization are not siloed or sequestered within the borders of a nation – they're spread out. What that requires is a certain expansion of a political imagination because you are moving beyond the question of national liberation to the question of continental liberation. And the liberation of the continent would require the transformation of the world because it would be changing the balance of power. That's why Lumumba had to be murdered by the Belgians, and the CIA, and the Americans, and the British: because the Congo, Ghana, Mali, and Guinea were forming a nucleus of what would become a United States of Africa, which had implications for the economics and politics of the continent and therefore of the planet. Panafrica was a serious threat to the imperial system of the 1950s and 1960s as it existed then.

So if Pan-Africanism entails an expansion of a political horizon, it also entails an expansion of a kind of aesthetic imagination of what is possible, what is thinkable. And it's a kind of imagination of scale in which you move from the imagination of the nation, to the imagination of the continent, to the imagination of the planet. That's what's at stake in the question of Pan-Africanism. Our argument is that we can see this at work in the artistic production of the 1950s and 1960s. Cinema becomes a place and a space where you can see the expansion of a political horizon. You can see that cultural imagination being played out, you can see it at work. And so that's part of why we turn to these films by these filmmakers. And that's also why we approach them in the ways we do. We're not making a documentary on the life and work of these filmmakers. We are trying to take their existing historical images and give them what we call a kind of unbounded, temporary orbit, so that they start to travel, and they start to migrate, and they travel out of their date. So an image from the '60s is a '60s image, but it isn't circumscribed by its date in 1964. On the contrary, it's on the move. And so we are opening up an intertemporal dimension, a dimension between times and a dimension between scales.

That is another way of characterizing what the mural and the video have in common. They are both attempting to put this question of the intertemporal and the question of the interscalar on the map. These days, we don't even use

the term “essay film” so much anymore. We think of our work in terms of “interscalar vehicles,” which are vehicles in which a research question and a medium travel between scales and open up an imagination of a movement between scales, and the kinds of claims you can make as you change your scale of analysis and your scale of inquiry. That’s probably a good way of thinking about both of these works. They are both interscalar vehicles.

NC: What was the inspiration for the title *Mascon: A Massive Concentration of Black Experiential Energy?*

AS: Kodwo can talk a little bit more about the genesis of the title. I was just going to say that *Mascon* sounds like a sort of strange weapon, some kind of rocket launcher or some such evil technology. But in fact, with our work, it’s the reverse of an evil weapon.

KE: So Stephen Henderson, a great African American literary theorist in the early ’70s, he’s surveying the grand sweep of experimental African American poetics, and he’s charting tendencies, and he’s looking at that moment in time when poetry is taking the measure of free jazz. He is trying to evoke the kinds of experiments that Coltrane and Ayler, Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor have been working with. What would a poetry *be* that is trying to evoke the kinds of extended improvisations of John Coltrane? And in understanding that he comes up with this formulation, which he borrows from NASA, of this notion of a “massive concentration,” but he applies that terminology to what he calls “black experiential energy.” He’s trying to capture certain words, certain ideas, certain notions, which are loaded down with the energy of lived experience in America at that moment. And that seemed a very compelling formulation, not least because it kind of enacts what it’s analyzing.

“Mascon” is already a compression of “massive concentration.” So even at the level of the first encounter, it’s already doing that work. So the question is, If we adopt that term and then adapt it for the present, what becomes thinkable when we add that notion of a “massive concentration of black experiential energy” to the questions of the interscalar and the intertemporal that animate a lot of the work that we’ve been doing over the last past few years? And so it’s a question we are posing rather than the question we’re answering. To bring *Mascon* into relation with those other themes invites a kind of density, a kind of theoretical density, and a kind of aesthetic thickness that we want from our work.

This transcript has been slightly edited for length and clarity.