Mashup Iwalewahaus
A conversation with Otieno Gomba and Kevo Stero
Curated by Sam Hopkins
Transcribed by Lucie Ameloot

Otieno Gomba and Kevo Stero are from the artists collective, Maasai Mbili, based in Nairobi, Kenya. Self-taught artists coming from a background of sign-painting and street art, the collective works in various media and registers, from painting, to installation, from art classes for children in their neighbourhood to exhibitions in international venues. Mashup the Archive is a project of the Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth which is dedicated to activating and making visible the extensive archive of African art collected over the last thirty years. Working with a guest curator, young African artists-in-residence and a series of mini-festivals, the intention is to explore accessible ways for new audiences to experience this rich cultural heritage. The project is coordinated by Nadine Siegert, Deputy Director of the Iwalewahaus and Sam Hopkins, a guest curator and visual artist from Kenya. This text is based on a conversation in March 2014, approximately six months after the residency.

Sam Hopkins: So, tell me about Bayreuth. Is it strange to you that there is such a substantial archive of African art in provincial Germany?

Kevo Stero: Well, it makes sense because of the African Studies department at the University of Bayreuth. But, what we saw in the archive, it was noma. \(^1\) It shows our past and that we have come a long way. The guy who had to climb up the tree with the rope? It was impressive! And of course there was this connection because they are Africans, like us.

Otieno Gomba: And you remember, there was even that one guy who looked like Solo? \(^2\) But let's say this: these guys are from central Africa — that's the first connection, Africa. But then also, it's about a generation, about things in the past. I mean, what we saw in these films are things which I just did not expect. I had not even heard about. On the one hand, these guys are our neighbours but, on the other hand, you never knew about their life and lifestyle at that time. Although, most of the film material in the archive was from

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\(^1\) Very cool.

\(^2\) Former member of Maasai Mbili.
West Africa, and a little bit from Tanzania, I was really thinking if this was the same thing that my grandparents or great-grandparents were doing.

**KS:** Now if you look at the Malawi Twist. Me, I didn't know that there was a Malawi Twist. If you look at the Kenyan Twist, it's just the same! There is a strong connection.

**SH:** See, when I went to Bayreuth for the first time and I saw all this artwork from Africa — much more than I could see in Nairobi — I just thought, ‘This is crazy.’ In a way, the whole project attempts to understand this paradox, this strange situation that you go to Germany to find out about your neighbours. For example, do you know Richard Onyango? The Iwalewahaus has a new collection with I think six or seven of his paintings. He is a really good painter. He is Kenyan, and I have never seen a Richard Onyango painting in Kenya.

**KS:** There are no collections in Kenya where you can actually go and see Kenyan art. The museum is a dinosaur. And here at Maasai Mbili, once the work is sold to a collector either local or abroad, it is gone. Seeing it again is difficult. There is no archive here.

**SH:** Gomba, why did you decide to work with masks?  

**OG:** That was another issue for me, as actually just before I left for Germany I had done a mask, although at the moment I am not really sure of the significance of this. Anyway when I arrived there I saw all of these masks, and each mask represented a tribe, or a ritual, or had some story in it. The European archive of African art has a lot of masks in it. When the Europeans first came to Africa what they saw as Art was the mask, and that is what they took out of here. But for me, masks are something whose meanings are inherited and which go from generation to generation. Right now, it is Avatar, maybe that is the mask of today. In a future time it will be another mask altogether, although actually it will be the same mask with a different significance and a different ritual.

**SH:** And Kevo, why did you decide to paint over the frames in the ethnographic film?  

**KS:** Like for myself, me I like to recycle everything. I wanted to take pictures of the films, paint over them and make them into a new film to tell a new story. The films are films, but they are also artefacts. They are very old, but I imagined showing them to children.

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3 Otieno Gomba developed a psychedelic installation based on Western African masks from the archive which were then photocopied, painted and layered on polystyrene, together with a video of himself, dancing in the archive wearing a Senufo mask.

4 Kevo Stero worked with a film of a Do mask dance, shot by Dr. Himmelheber in the Ivory Coast in 1968, painting over a series of frames to create an animation which was then layered over the original film.
That's the thing about the archive, there is all this material there, but nobody actually goes there. I thought if we give it a popular feeling then people might come and see it.

**SH:** And did you like feel free? Did you think you could do everything you wanted? Or did you think that there were expectations that you had to do something?

**OG:** Okay eventually we were expected to do something, but I think the thing is, what is more conducive to me making work? From all this material, what do I take in? So what I take in is also what I try to put out there. So the first few days, it was like 'what am I going to do with all of this?' Because you've been presented with an entire archive and there is a lot of material there. There is music and there are masks and there even guns! So you're really thinking, where and how do I fit in to all of this. And, at the end of the day you know that you are supposed to do something, and that's like.. the dilemma. What am I going to pick first, what really fascinates me the most about the whole archive? And first you have to get acquainted with, and knowledgable about, all these artefacts. OK, like me for there was a street art thing; it was the first time I've really seen works by people like Cheri Samba, which I've only really seen in books and stuff. And they were painting on plywood, just like us.

**SH:** Was it like was it a big difference to see it like in reality? Do you think people would be interested in seeing the archive in Kenya?

**KS:** Yeah there was this connection, same painting on plywood, same style, same everything, you know, same words pesa, pombe, siasa, wanawake (money, booze, politics and women). The four pillars of the artist.. I think it would be very interesting to show it here. But I don’t know, it depends on where you show it. Because here (Kibera) if you show it here, I think people would be very interested. But I don’t know, sometimes the way things are shown here, the focus is on something specific. So if you showed it at the Goethe, it's good, but only certain people would go and see it.

**OG:** It's the way that it is presented. It's like what we tried to do with “yesterdaytoday”, if we just brought the masks from the archive, then it would not really make any sense. But if you incorporate it in another way, say the way Kevo did with the painted video sequence, then it becomes really.. it makes people more interested in it. Maybe it would be an idea to show both the work that we made, and the originals that the work was based on, so people get an idea where it is coming from.
Installation shot of the exhibition 'Yesterdaytoday' by Otieno Gomba and Kevo Stero as part of the first Mashup the Archive festival curated by Sam Hopkins. October 2013. (Photo: Sam Hopkins)
Installation shot of Kevo Stero's installation (Untitled) in the exhibition 'Yesterdaytoday', part of the first Mashup the Archive festival curated by Sam Hopkins. October 2013. (Source: Sam Hopkins)
SH: How about the video of you dancing in the archive? It is really one of my favourite works, but it was kind of a little bit of a joke in the beginning. What do you think about the work?

OG: For me it’s like you have a mask and you know what it was used for. It was used for a certain ritual. So when you put on the mask it’s like you’re going back through the years. And you try to think 'so the character was usually a jovial guy dancing and making moves'. So that’s what came to me; having a connection with the past and transporting it today. As if somebody from the past can see it, like a connection with the spirits. As if we are seeing the spirits and saying sawa budda (nice one mate) 'we are with you'.

SH: Did you ever have the feeling like any of the pieces had a spirit?

OG: Yeah some were like untouched, like 'don’t touch me, don’t touch me', 'don’t come here'. Even at night you could feel it, going down the stairs. Or maybe we’re watching too many movies.. going down the stairs was spooky! But you know most of the things in that archive aren’t just artefacts, they have some purpose; medical, spiritual, what, what, what… they’re not like masai paintings. When you looked at these things in the archive they had a purpose. So maybe putting on the gloves was not about the cleanliness, it was to protect you from the spirits. But you know man, that archive had something. Seriously, there are spirits there. I don't know how the new Iwalewahaus looks like, but maybe they fit in there too.

SH: Do you sometimes wonder where your things end up? Where the pieces are going?

KS: Sometimes you just don't know where they are going. I mean some collectors we know, like one guy, he says he has 700 paintings here and 3000 in his 'dream house', but that we shouldn't tell anyone. Don't show anyone. He took me around, I've seen them all. I don't know if it is an archive because nobody goes there... Sometimes you have cases where a collector comes and they have seen a piece of yours in Sweden, Switzerland or wherever and you have no idea how it got there.

SH: It’s funny to think that there little pieces of you all over the world. It would be nice to have a map. But anyway, how could the whole Bayreuth experience have been better?

OG: Just talking about the archive, you really need some time. To go through it, you really need some time. And there is also this question of where these objects belong. If some of them, like the old artefacts that we were working with, were collected in colonial times, and maybe these objects should be taken back, particularly if it is needed in the place where it came from. Many of these objects had special purposes, and were needed in special rituals. But, on the other hand, it would also be good to preserve some of these things. Many of these things. So, if it is appropriate to store them there, to archive them there, yes it is better. Because then I can see an object, which is maybe 1000 years old, which maybe I would not otherwise have come into contact with. I mean, you can
always copy these objects, but then they lose some kind of value.

**SH:** Although it's funny, because some of the artworks that you made were bought by the Iwalewahaus and will be included in the archive. And maybe, in 50 years time, more artists will come and mashup your mashup. An endless cycle of mashup.

Film still from the video work (Untitled) by Otieno Gomba in the exhibition 'Yesterdaytoday', part of the first Mashup the Archive festival curated by Sam Hopkins. October 2013. (Source: Sam Hopkins)
Film still from the video work (Untitled) by Otieno Gomba in the exhibition 'Yesterdaytoday', part of the first Mashup the Archive festival curated by Sam Hopkins. October 2013. (Source: Sam Hopkins)
Exhibition/part at the Glashaus, Bayreuth during the first Mashup the Archive festival curated by Sam Hopkins. October 2013.
(Source: Lukas Richthammer)