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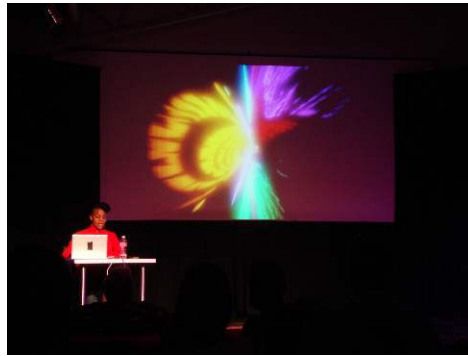
Gavin Steingo

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, many European authors invested considerable effort to illustrate that Africans are incapable of genius and civilization. Unable to fathom that an African society might have constructed what we today know as Great Zimbabwe, German geographer Karl Mauch (1837-1875) and British archaeologist James Theodore Bent (1852-1897) developed fanciful historical narratives. Mauch¹ could only attribute the archaeological ruins of Great Zimbabwe to a mysterious lost white civilization (sometimes suggesting that it may be the site of the biblical Ophir), while Bent insisted that a “northern race coming from Arabia” must have been responsible for the impressive stone structures². In a later generation, French anthropologist and priest Henri Breuil (1877-1961)—who worked closely with the South African apartheid government—attributed the paintings he encountered in southern Africa to a “red-haired people (with Semitic profiles)”³. And on encountering a series of impressive bronze sculptures in West Africa, German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) famously jumped to the conclusion that he had stumbled upon the mythical city of Atlantis⁴.
- 2 An even more extravagant set of speculative attributions can be found in a certain reception of researchers Henri Lhote (1903-1991) and Marcel Griaule (1898-1956). Lhote’s tongue-in-cheek nickname for a rock painting in Algeria—he said that it reminded him of a Martian (Fr. Martien)⁵—was taken deadly seriously by a small subset of readers⁶. Today, literally hundreds of websites list Lhote as a pioneer of so-called “paleocontact theory” (also known as “ancient astronaut theory”), that is, the idea that extraterrestrials have long intervened in human affairs. Griaule’s work (often with Germaine Dieterlen) has been subject to a similarly fanciful reception history, most notably due to Robert Temple’s bestselling book, *The Sirius Mystery*, which interpreted an observation by Griaule to mean that the Dogon of West Africa acquired knowledge of a distant star from aliens some several centuries ago⁷.
- 3 In the second half of the twentieth century, anthropologists and archeologists have unanimously dismissed the aforementioned ethnocentric fantasies. Their arguments have proceeded in two ways. First, scholars have illustrated systematically and through various scientific procedures that “local” and “advanced” African civilizations have long existed. Second, by virtue of a kind of Occam’s razor, they have argued against the need for speculation. If the simplest explanation is that Africans developed advanced civilizations and artistic practices, then there is no need to resort to more complex theories. Only a deep-seated ethnocentrism would propel someone to search out alternative explanations—this, at least, is how the story usually goes.
- 4 But there is also another way to respond to the long history of Eurocentric alibis found in the work of Mauch, Bent, Breuil, Frobenius, and many others. Rather than reject the extravagant hypotheses put forth by European writers and insist upon the existence of “local” African civilizations, artist Kapwani Kiwanga seizes upon and then radicalizes the wilder and more speculative claims⁸. Presenting herself as a “galactic anthropologist from the year 2278,” Kiwanga presents an imaginative and indeed



rigorous study of “Earth-Star complexes,” a term coined by the artist for systems of exchange between humans and extraterrestrials. Kiwanga presents her work in the form of an academic paper (the type that one would witness at an academic conference in 2016): she reads a paper and elucidates her arguments with PowerPoint images and short audio and video excerpts.

- 5 This article focuses on part three (*The Deep Space Scrolls*) of Kiwanga's Afrogalactica Series. My primary aim will be to elaborate the theoretical and political stakes of Kiwanga's work, with an emphasis on her speculations about African history. This elaboration will require a closer analysis of the relevant anthropological literature (such as the authors mentioned earlier), as well as the recent renaissance of speculative philosophy (e.g., Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman)⁹, and—more proximately—the experimental tradition of Afro-futurism. I will ultimately argue that Kiwanga avoids the “easy path”—namely, the affirmation of an unreconstructed humanism—and instead embarks on a much more ambivalent and treacherous voyage towards the alien and the unknown. In order to make this argument, it will be necessary to first analyze various aspects of *The Deep Space Scrolls*: the text that Kiwanga reads, the many allusions and references to anthropology and to history, but also Kiwanga's performance style, her sartorial choices, and her mode of address.

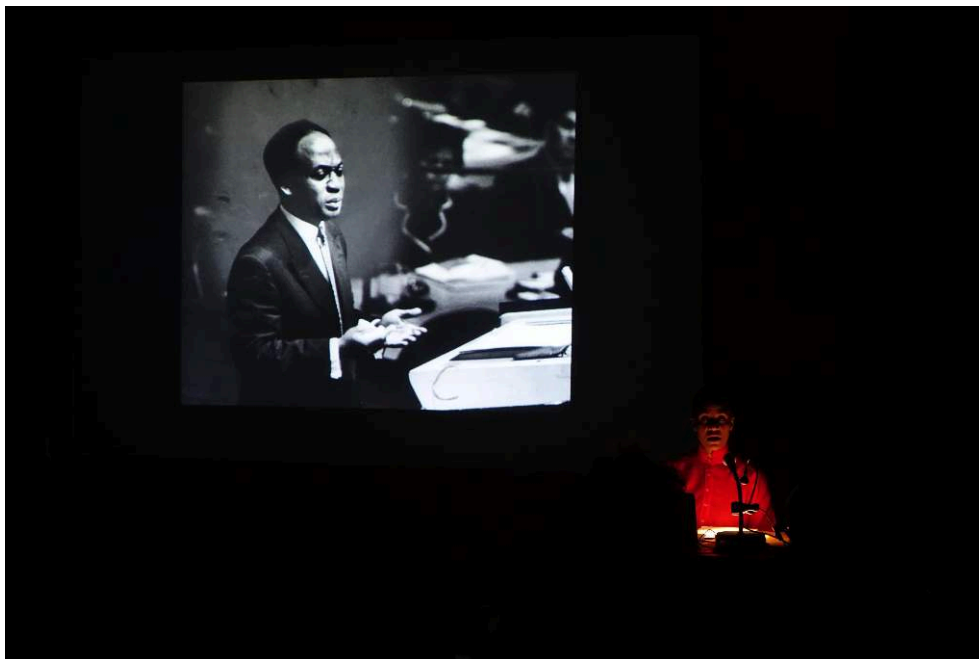
Kapwani Kiwanga and *The Deep Space Scrolls*

- 6 Kapwani Kiwanga (b. 1978) is quickly becoming recognized as one of the most interesting and important artists of her generation¹⁰. Having studied anthropology and comparative religion at McGill University (Montreal, Canada), Kiwanga explores the multiple tensions and alliances between art and the social sciences. She does this in two main ways. First, through her working process—all of her performances and exhibitions are based on months or years of rigorous archival research. And second, through her performance style, which blurs the boundary between academic presentation (conveying objective knowledge to an audience) and aesthetic practice (oriented towards the sensorium and affect). Kiwanga's heterogeneous oeuvre takes the form of installations, videos, and performances.
- 7 *The Deep Space Scrolls* is typical of Kiwanga's recent work, in which the artist presents herself almost as a scholar or academic¹¹. It is part of a larger project called the Afrogalactica Series, which consists of “three performed-conferences consisting of a live reading accompanied by projected images, video, and sound extracts”¹². In addition to the other two parts in the series—*A Brief History of the Future* (Part 1) and *The Black Star Chronicles* (Part 2)—*The Deep Space Scrolls* also bears an affinity to Kiwanga's other work from the past five or so years, for example her impressive *Sun Ra Repatriation Project*.
- 8 At the time of writing, Kiwanga has presented *The Deep Space Scrolls* three times: at *Giving Contours to Shadows* (an “exhibition and research project” in Berlin, 2014)¹³, at the *Foundation Ricard* (Paris, 2015), and at the *African Futures Festival* (Johannesburg 2015). I first encountered Kiwanga's work at the Johannesburg event, which was part of a larger series of “interdisciplinary festivals”¹⁴. Sponsored by the Goethe Institute, festivals were held simultaneously in Johannesburg (South Africa), Lagos (Nigeria), and Nairobi (Kenya) in October, 2015¹⁵. According to the organizers, the festivals sought answers to the following urgent questions: “What might various African futures look

like? How do artists and scholars imagine this future? What forms and narratives of science fictions have African artists developed? Who generates knowledge about Africa? And, what are the different languages we use to speak about Africa's political, technological and cultural tomorrow?"¹⁶ In addition to Kiwanga, the organizers invited a number of impressive artists and scholars to tackle these questions, including science fiction writers Nnedi Okorafor and Lauren Beukes, filmmakers Jean-Pierre Bekolo and Miguel Llansó, the musician Spoek Mathambo, and the political theorist Achille Mbembe.

- 9 October 30, 2015 (Johannesburg, South Africa): It is the third day of the African Futures Festival when Kapwani Kiwanga steps up to the podium. Her presence is strong, controlled; her style is futuristic, slick, suave—certainly elegant, but not normatively “feminine”. Her hair is sculpted into a rising pompadour (à la Janelle Monae) and she wears a monochrome high-neck shirt. Completely deadpan and without a hint of irony, she speaks: “Good evening. My name is Kapwani Kiwanga. I’m a galactic anthropologist from the year 2278. I specialize in ancestral earth civilizations. I am pleased to be with you today to share some of my findings on my current research on forgotten Earth-Star complexes in terrestrial memory.” A social scientist from the future?
- 10 Kiwanga’s opening gambit is as perplexing as it is alluring: the genre of her talk will doubtless be difficult to define, to anticipate. We are not at an anthropology conference, but we are also not in an art gallery—not quite academic paper, but not quite performance art either. The context makes any interpretation of Kiwanga’s piece (is it a “piece”? and if so, what kind?) all the more hazardous.

Fig. 1



Kapwani Kiwanga presenting *A Brief History of the future*, 2017. Luzia Groß, Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2017.

- 11 “In the past”, Kiwanga continues in her presentation of *The Deep Space Scrolls*, “intercultural exchange was common between planet Earth and various star systems. These intercultural organisations practiced interstellar travel, as well as cultural,

scientific, and technological exchange. This is what we refer to as an Earth-Star complex"¹⁷. In the year 2278, apparently, such complexes are no longer active, but their remnants are "easily accessible in deep space." On earth in 2015, Kiwanga goes on to tell her Johannesburg audience, the residue of formerly robust Earth-Star complexes are in fact evident if one is willing to look beyond hegemonic historical narratives. By revisiting the histories of Great Zimbabwe and the Dogon people, Kiwanga turns to mythology, ritual, and even conspiracy theory in order to amplify the almost (but not quite) forgotten systems of cultural exchange between humans and extra-terrestrials.

- 12 Like stars themselves, Earth-Star complexes have traceable histories. Kiwanga explains that at some point during a star's lifecycle it begins to "seek out companion societies"¹⁸. Once a stellar civilization has located an appropriate terrestrial partner, "the civilisations begin long term cultural exchange". This exchange is made possible through "star gates", or portholes that "enable bilateral earth-star traffic". I will examine an example later in this article that clearly illustrates the influence of an earth society on a stellar one.
- 13 Kiwanga's galactic anthropological research focuses on what happens to Earth-Star complexes at the moment of collapse or destruction—particularly when a star advances to the stage of supernova and explodes¹⁹. In the event of a supernova, a stellar civilisation is forced to choose between several possibilities. It may:
 1. migrate to earth,
 2. establish a new community elsewhere in space, or
 3. accept the end of its lifecycle and perish with the astral calamity.At the same junction the earth society must decide if it:
 1. accepts or refuses the absorption of stellar fugitives into its society; or
 2. opts for memory erasure regarding its period of earth-star exchange, and summarily abandons its social and architectural constructions.
- 14 Kiwanga focuses on those civilizations falling under the latter category, namely those opting for memory erasure. But she is "particularly interested in those cultures which, although having opted for memory erasure, display the persistence of a coded memory" (my emphasis). *The Deep Space Scrolls* meticulously documents cases where memory erasure leaves a coded trace.
- 15 Let us look closely at some examples. In her analysis of Great Zimbabwe, Kiwanga asks not only who built the remarkable stone structures near Lake Mutirikwe, but why. She also evaluates various explanations for the desertion of Great Zimbabwe around 1450 A.D. Kiwanga begins by considering "terrestrial descriptions," all the way from Mauch through to Bent—two figures I have already mentioned. As she notes, Bent was invited to southern Africa by Cecil John Rhodes, the famous colonialist after whom Rhodesia was named (until 1980, when the country gained independence and was renamed Zimbabwe). She also mentions Richard Hall, who at the beginning of the twentieth century "conducted excavations which removed artefacts and damaged the ruins whilst looking for evidence of non-African builders of the site".
- 16 By the 1950s, archaeologists had reached a consensus regarding the African origins of Great Zimbabwe. And yet, Kiwanga notes, even into the 1970s "the official discourse of Rhodesia was that the structure was built by those from outside the continent"²⁰. Kiwanga observes that the modern state of Zimbabwe has—since independence in 1980—"instrumentalised Great Zimbabwe's past to support their vision of the country's

present and desired future". Indeed, there is scarcely a professional archaeologist alive today who would deny Great Zimbabwe's local vintage.

- 17 And yet, Kiwanga emphasizes in *The Deep Space Scrolls* that the entire story just narrated—from Mauch and Bent to the modern nation—is only the terrestrial version. The galactic narrative is somewhat sketchy, but a few pieces of the story are known to future galactic anthropologists such as Kiwanga—and even to some contemporary archaeologists such as the South African Richard Peter Wade. Kiwanga notes that according to Wade a certain canonical tower at Great Zimbabwe was in fact “an astronomical marker used to designate the position of a brilliant supernova that appeared in the southern skies around 1200” A.D..²¹ Indeed, the supernova “Vela Junior” has been known since 1998, and Wade has calculated that this exploding star would likely have appeared directly above Great Zimbabwe in the mid-thirteenth century.
- 18 In *The Deep Space Scrolls*, Kiwanga does not say much more than this. Hence, while it may be possible to speculate on deeper associations between the earth-based population of Great Zimbabwe and a civilization at Vela Junior, *The Deep Space Scrolls* affirms only that Zimbabweans were looking to the skies and making careful observations.
- 19 A far more elaborate analysis of the Vela-Zimbabwe complex can be found in a text by Kiwanga titled “Comprehensive Methodology in Ancestral Earth-Star Complexes: Lessons from Vela-Zimbabwe”²². The article begins by challenging an axiom of twenty-third century galactic anthropology, namely that hierarchical social structures in the Milky Way were first established in the Vela star region (which lies more than 500 light years away from earth). Based on new evidence, Kiwanga argues that contrary to the dominant view, a hierarchical social structure developed in Zimbabwe first and was later adopted by Vela society:
- 20 The Vela civilisation, which took its name from the above-mentioned stellar mass, has received a large amount of scholarly attention because of its stratified social structure. However, the civilization of Great Zimbabwe, the other half of Vela's earth-star complex, has often been neglected in such analyses. Such omissions have done a disservice to our understandings of this early age and have entrenched a methodological bias that disregards earth civilizations in the fields of archaeology²³.
- 21 Kiwanga focuses on the period directly before the Vela-Zimbabwe complex was destroyed by supernova. Two aspects are worth emphasizing. First, the Vela-based religious clergy made an unprecedented attempt to avert “advancement toward a supernova state”²⁴. When this attempt failed, the general populace began to question religious authority and in response a number of repressive measures were taken to maintain order. This had the ultimate effect of “galvaniz[ing] class stratification”²⁵. But the calcification of a vertical social structure was also due to another, perhaps more important, factor: during this period of increasing social stratification, “exchange between the complex's stellar (Vela) and terrestrial (Great Zimbabwe) units increased considerably” (ibid.). In addition to long standing intercultural exchange between the two civilizations, the Vela leadership at this time organized special “emissary visits to their earthly confederates”²⁶. Kiwanga notes that Vela concepts of class and social rank were thus based largely on the Zimbabwean model. And she concludes that “studies of ancient Vela civilisation cannot fully be appreciated if the terrestrial component of its earth-star complex is not adequately considered”²⁷.

- 22 Kiwanga thus turns the late twentieth-century scientific account of Great Zimbabwe on its head. Rather than simply affirming that Great Zimbabwe was in fact created by the local African population without any outside assistance, she asserts a long history of “intercultural” exchange across the Zimbabwe-Vela complex. In the narrative that Kiwanga unearths, the importance of Great Zimbabwe extends far beyond world history.
- 23 The Deep Space Scrolls carefully examines a second example: Dogon country, West Africa. Kiwanga elaborates on the Dogon-Sirius complex:
- 24 According to Dogon tradition, the star Sirius has a companion star. The interesting fact is that this companion star remains invisible to the human eye in your present day and was first observed on January 31, 1862, with a telescope by American astronomer Alvan Graham Clark. The Dogon knowledge of this imperceptible companion star, which your scientists call Sirius B, long preceded the first telescopic observation. For many it was inconceivable that the Dogon, having no advanced astronomical tools of observation, could have knowledge of Sirius’ companion star. The Dogon Astronomical knowledge became widely known as the “Sirius Mystery.”
- 25 As is well known, Robert Temple “solved” this mystery with the hypothesis that the Dogon received knowledge of Sirius B from advanced extra-terrestrial beings. Today, of course, this hypothesis is typically derided as a mere conspiracy theory. But Kiwanga, following Temple’s lead, points to “Dogon oral traditions” that refer to “a race of people from Sirius called the Nommos [who] visited Earth thousands of years ago.” She adds: “The Nommos were amphibious beings that resembled mermen and mermaids. Such figures also appear in Babylonian, and Sumerian myth”.
- 26 Temple’s book, and indeed his entire theory, was provoked by a single line from an essay by anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen²⁸: “La question n’a pas été tranchée, ni même posée, de savoir comment des hommes ne disposant d’aucun instrument connaissent les mouvements et certaines caractéristiques d’astres pratiquement invisibles”. We have already seen how Temple provides an answer to this question. But what should we make of Temple’s interpretation of the Nommos, those beings described by Griaule and Dieterlen²⁹ as “the first living and moving creatures created by Amma [i.e., the supreme god and creator of the universe],” “those ‘ancestors of man’, to whom Amma entrusted a part of the management of the universe...”. Put simply, Temple’s interpretation that the Nommos are actual aliens is not taken seriously in professional scientific circles. For example, in his examination of the reception of Griaule’s work, Walter van Beek states baldly: “The weirdest connection is with the extraterrestrial addicts of ‘cosmonautology,’ who have found especially in the Sirius tales and the account of the ark some of their ‘definite proofs’ of alien visits to this plane”³⁰.
- 27 But it is not only Temple’s interpretation of the Nommos that has been seriously challenged. Indeed, Griaule’s (and Dieterlen’s) own claims about Dogon culture have come under increasing scrutiny in the past several decades. Griaule has been roundly criticized on almost every ground imaginable: political, theoretical, epistemological, and methodological. Although he has often been praised for documenting a highly sophisticated and coherent cosmology—and, importantly, one that was completely unknown to Westerners prior to his publications—many have since grown suspicious of just how coherent and totally unique that cosmology is, especially when compared to other cultures in the region, and especially when considering the differences in

Griaule's and Dieterlen's own accounts³¹. While generalizations are impossible, it is probably fair to say that today Griaule's work is valued more for its historical import than for any actual insights about Dogon culture that it claims to provide. Reflecting on Griaule's and Dieterlen's work in 2004, van Beek ends on a sober yet mildly hopeful note. In the mid-1940s and 1950s, he says, Griaule and Dieterlen "thought we were dreaming"—these words were uttered by Dieterlen herself to van Beek when he visited her in Paris. Van Beek comments: "It was truly a beautiful dream, and although theirs was an enchanting one full of rich nostalgia, the reality of everyday life, in this case the Dogon way of life, is fascinating and rich enough to make waking up a very rewarding experience"³².

- 28 The above remark by van Beek marks the end of a long history of a particular kind of Dogon interpretation. He insists—quite responsibly—that in the twenty-first century we would do well to jettison anthropological fictions that trade in enchantment and nostalgia, and suggests instead a restrained focus on "the reality of everyday life." As compensation, he offers the somewhat bland idea that life itself is "fascinating and rich".
- 29 From the perspective of social science van Beek is completely justified. But in *The Deep Space Scrolls* Kapwani Kiwanga flips the contemporary social science account. She suggests that Robert Temple's outlandish and fanciful arguments may in fact one day be vindicated—by a "galactic anthropologist" in the late twenty-third century, for example. Rather than dismiss speculative account, Kiwanga pushes them to their limits.

From Undecidability to Afro-futurism

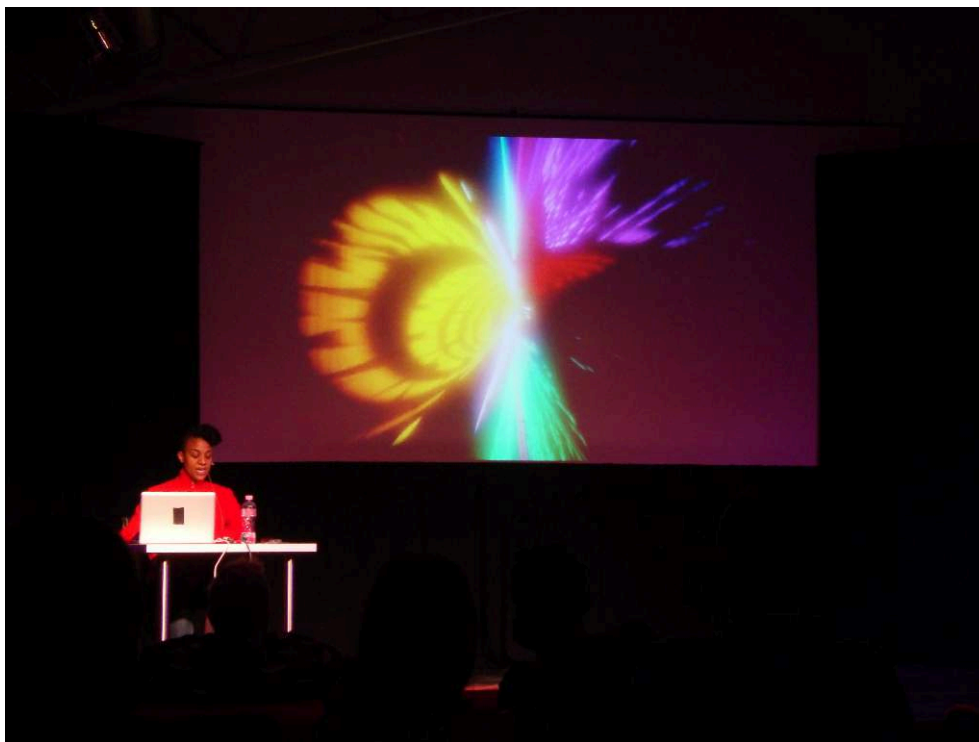
- 30 One particularly striking aspect of Kiwanga's work is that she delivers "bizarre" content in a very matter-of-fact tone. The effect is somewhat uncanny. Kiwanga hardly moves at all during her performances, embodying a resolutely scholarly persona. Her contemporary "conference-like" aesthetic is belied only by her impeccable futuristic style—from her hairstyle to her slightly shimmering monochrome shirt.
- 31 Kiwanga's totally deadpan and utterly unironic tone also comes through clearly in her written work. For example, in a text published in the 2014 issue of the journal *Manifesta*, Kiwanga's institutional affiliation is listed as "School of Galactic Anthropology, Ancestral Earth Studies, Afrogalactica Institute." In that paper, she provides citations for both real articles (including the one from *New Scientist* mentioned above) and fictional texts from journals such as *Interstellar Archeology* and *the Journal of Galactic Anthropological Archaeology*. And along similar lines, Kiwanga references a fictional text by one Okul Equiano³³, a chronicler who visited Vela prior to the supernova explosion. "This document was long thought to be a hoax in academic circles," she writes, "as no material evidence of such symbolism was found in earlier Vela periods. However, recent findings from x-ray archaeological surveys beg one to reconsider Equiano's account as a legitimate archive; it is even, perhaps, one of the last records of this bygone civilisation during its Accretion Age"³⁴.
- 32 How then might we interpret Kiwanga's performative mode? In what follows, I provide several possibilities, beginning with a recent text about Kiwanga by the art historian Fanny Curtat. While there is much of interest in Curtat's work, my interpretation of Kiwanga will ultimately push in a different (although not incommensurable) direction.

- 33 Curtat suggests that Kiwanga's general performance style goes beyond "iconoclastic mockery or ironic critique"³⁵. Writing about one of Kiwanga's pieces that explores a kind of "sacred water" used by Africans against German colonialists in the early twentieth century, Curtat asks whether Kiwanga believes that this water was really sacred. Could it be, Curtat asks, that Kiwanga truly believes in the power of her object? After all, Kiwanga certainly acts as though she believes. As I have observed throughout this paper (in relation to *The Deep Space Scrolls*), Kiwanga presents her work with complete conviction and without even the slightest smirk or twinkle of the eye.
- 34 The piece that Curtat examines is called *Maji Maji*. This piece, which was exhibited in Paris in 2014, explores the material traces (and absences) of the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905-1907—one of the largest anti-colonial uprisings of the early twentieth-century. To provide some background³⁶: during the so-called "scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Germany established and expanded its colonial rule in Southwest and East Africa through systematic violence, including genocide. In German East Africa, colonial administrators variously expropriated land, levied high taxes, and created a brutal system of forced labor. During a period of heightened rebellion against colonial policies, a local man named Kinjikitile Ngwale was recognized as a particularly powerful spirit medium. He concocted a war medicine that, the insurgents believed, would turn German bullets into water. The war medicine was made from, and indeed referred to simply as, *maji*—that is, "water" in the Swahili language³⁷. This is why the events of 1905-1907 are known today as the Maji Maji Rebellion. In the historical context of the Rebellion, *maji* refers less to water as a "pure" substance and more to the sacred and protective water given to the anti-colonial insurgents. It was this sacred water that was meant to liquefy colonial bullets.
- 35 "Mystical" responses to colonial violence were by no means uncommon in the early-twentieth century. Such responses—along with their many layers of interpretation and misinterpretation—have been documented throughout Africa and other parts of the formerly colonized world³⁸. But Curtat's question about whether Kiwanga believes in the sacred power of Kinjikitile's watery medicine is complicated by a very specific and important historical fact: although "a spirit medium, named Kinjikitile [sic], initiated this rebellion by persuading the combatants that sacred water, called *maji*, would project them by transforming the German bullets into water," this strategy actually tragically failed³⁹. The German's bullets did not turn into water, and it is estimated that 75,000 Africans were killed during the insurrection⁴⁰.
- 36 What would it mean to believe in this *maji*, considering that it failed to fulfill its designated task? Curtat answers the question by suggesting that even though the sacred water failed to protect, it nonetheless harbored a "power to rouse a people to insurrection" (38)⁴¹. She therefore proposes understanding the simultaneous power and powerlessness of the object through Jacques Rancière's notion of the "undecidable," that is, in Curtat's paraphrasing, "the idea that the critical force of the work resides in a practice of thresholds in which art is both one thing and its contrary"⁴². *Maji* is an undecidable object because it both works and does not work at the same time. Likewise, Kiwanga's relationship to *maji* is undecidable because—according to Curtat—she both believes in the power of *maji* and yet literally perhaps does not. This duplicity of belief is, according to Curtat, also evident in the manner by which Kiwanga's work vacillates between art and ethnology: "*Maji Maji* is situated somewhere between the representational codes of ethnology and those of art... Kiwanga seems to be creating a

kind of undecidable between artistic and ethnological gestures: artistic subjectivity tinting ethnology's scientific objectivity"⁴³.

- 37 While a similar vacillation between "art" and "ethnology" is evident in *The Deep Space Scrolls*, it seems to me that the questions of belief and knowledge are configured somewhat differently. Reflecting on her own performance style, Kiwanga⁴⁴ writes:
- 38 If the structure of the performance is faithful to the formal reserve of the academic conference the tone is true to the playful realms of science fiction... The conference is an apparatus of authoritative knowledge production. By appropriating the conference to an Afro-futurist end, I am at once "queering" this institutional device and proposing alternative visions of collective pasts, speculative futures, and the under-considered elements of the present.

Fig. 2



Kapwani Kiwanga presenting *The Deep Space Scrolls* at African Futures Festival, October 30, 2015. Photo: Gavin Steingo.

- 39 While the notion of undecidability may of course be pertinent here, I want rather to focus on Kiwanga's dual characterization of futurity as simultaneously speculative and Afrocentric. Her invocation of "alternative visions", "speculative futures", and "under-considered elements," does not so much suggest a belief that Earth-Star complexes are simultaneously true and untrue; rather, her emphasis on the alternative, the marginal, and the speculative asks that we consider the possibility that Earth-Star complexes might be true. Or, stated slightly differently, Kiwanga asks what it would mean if Earth-Star complexes did actually exist.
- 40 Her use of the term "afrofuturist" is key. And indeed, Kiwanga's work bears a definite, if ambiguous, relationship to the lineage of Afro-futurism—a term defined in Mark Dery's seminal text as "African American voices" with "other stories to tell about

culture, technology and things to come”⁴⁵. Afro-futurism is usually employed as an umbrella term for “science-fiction” responses to the condition of alienation through transatlantic slavery⁴⁶. Its most important practitioners—such as Sun Ra, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany—provide alternative, Afrocentric perspectives on large issues such as futurity, humanity, and even reality itself.

- 41 As Kiwanga comments in a document about her practice, she employs Afro-futurism to “explore (and explode) social assumptions through speculative narratives”⁴⁷. It is necessary to point out, however, that Kiwanga does not consider herself an Afro-futurist artist, nor does she consider her work *sensu stricto* “Afro-futurist.” Although she is fascinated with Afro-futurism as “an ‘object’ of study,” she is hesitant to identify too closely with the term, in part because it is so “slipperily defined”⁴⁸. One might say that Kiwanga’s relationship with Afro-futurism is similar to her relationship with anthropology and speculative philosophy: she employs elements from each in a flexible fashion and as part of her artistic project.
- 42 Having noted Kiwanga’s complex position vis-à-vis Afro-futurism, I contend that the *The Deep Space Scrolls* can meaningfully be interpreted in relation to Afro-futurist practices—at least if one takes “Afro-futurism” to mean simply an Afrocentric perspective on the future. And while there are many things one could say about such a relation, for the purposes of this special issue of *Images Re-vues* I will focus on the figure of the alien and the extra-terrestrial.
- 43 From Sun Ra’s “intergalactic research” to Jimi Hendrix’s “Astro Man” and George Clinton’s alter ego “Starchild,” musicians and artists in the African diaspora long explored issues of extra-terrestrials and outer space. This preoccupation with the non-human or inhuman is due in large part to the condition of forced diaspora due to transatlantic slavery, or as Dery puts it, to “the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees”⁴⁹. By affirming the extra-terrestrial and the galactic, Afro-futurists also produce a critique of the human. As Kodwo Eshun observes, Afro-futurism “adopts a cruel, despotic, amoral attitude towards the human species... It alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future”⁵⁰.
- 44 Taking a cue from Afro-futurist artists and thinkers, Kiwanga registers a dissatisfaction with humanism, a dissatisfaction extending to any anthropological project that would seek to affirm African civilizations by loudly proclaiming, “We are all human.” Why? Quite possibly because the liberal humanist position, what Roland Barthes famously called “la grande famille des hommes”⁵¹, is paradoxically and violently founded upon barring the black subject from humanity *de natura*. If this is true, then only two options are possible: 1) to fight for the recognition of black subjects into the domain of the human, or 2) to recognize that the human “would lose all coherence were it to jettison the violence and libidinal investments of anti-Blackness against which it is able to define its constituent elements”⁵². Accepting the latter position opens a whole host of possibilities, not least among which is a speculative historiography that tracks human-extraterrestrial relations.
- 45 But I also want to suggest that Kiwanga goes further than most Afro-futurism, at least as it is typically understood. In order to explain why and how this is the case, it will be necessary to take a brief detour into Afrofuturist discourse; this detour, I hope, will help to sharpen the main thesis of the current article.

- 46 Many argue that Afro-futurism derives its affective and political force by allegorizing conditions of slavery through the metaphor of the alien. The allegorical nature of Afro-futurism is articulated, for example, in the pithy title of Alondra Nelson's 2001 article, "Aliens Who Are Of Course Ourselves". In Nelson's reading of artist Laylay Ali's representations of an alien community called the Greenheads, the key point of the images is that they "reflect contradictions of the human condition"⁵³. "Alienness" is on this view a metaphor for "human connection and detachment"⁵⁴, or as Nelson notes, the alienness we project onto each other—and particularly the alien foreignness of black subjects in an inhospitable world.
- 47 Ken McLeod makes a similar argument in an extended discussion of "alien and futuristic imagery in popular culture"⁵⁵. He argues that the important Afro-futurist musician George Clinton "assumed the alter ego of an alien named Starchild who was sent down from the mothership to bring Funk to earthlings. Starchild was an allegorical representation of freedom and positive energy—an attempt to represent an empowering and socially activist image of African-American society during the 1970s"⁵⁶.
- 48 As suggested by the above examples, Afro-futurist theorization often trades on constitutive paradoxes to the effect of: "ruminating on alien life is really about human life"; "explorations of technology are really about human capabilities"; "visions of the future are really about the present". These paradoxes can be formalized as "X is actually about non-X." (Or perhaps a more pertinent formalization would be: "non-X is really about X"—since in each case "X" is really what matters).
- 49 Even Kodwo Eshun, who has long taken a strong anti-humanist position⁵⁷, advocates the allegorical position in a text published five years after his magnum opus. "The conventions of science fiction," he writes, "marginalized within literature yet central to modern thought, can function as allegories for the systemic experience of post-slavery black subjects in the twentieth century"⁵⁸. Here again, science fiction scenarios ("non-X") are really about the here and now ("X"). For Samuel R. Delany, similarly—at least in Eshun's reading of him—Afro-futurism is less concerned with the future than with providing "a significant distortion of the present"⁵⁹. Writing about the future, in this rendering, is really a matter of distorting the here and now.
- 50 What one witnesses in much Afro-futurist interpretation, then, is a kind of "crypto-humanism"—a humanism rerouted through metaphors of the alien and the cyborg. Rather than becoming something other than human, "aliens" and "cyborgs" are understood as metaphors for those humans who are denied humanity, for those humans who are not valued as such. In almost every case, what first appears to be the creation of something completely other (extraterrestrials, androids) turns out to be what is most familiar. There is seemingly no thought beyond what is already known—every thought of the outside is "in fact" about us. In the crypto-humanist rendering, the aliens are of course ourselves.
- 51 Without diminishing the potency of this mode of interpretation⁶⁰, it seems to me that Kiwanga's work offers us the possibility of thinking about Afro-futurism outside the rubric of allegory. It offers us a window into what Afro-futurism might look like if we think about it in terms of a speculative exploration of the unknown—an exploration of the unknown qua unknown, rather than as a metaphor for the Same. Kiwanga's work is

speculative rather than allegorical. In her own words, she proposes “alternative visions of collective pasts [and] speculative futures.”

Concluding Remarks on Speculative Art Practice

- 52 Kapwani Kiwanga's work is an important and radical speculative intervention into history, culture, and cosmopolitics. Rather than simply acknowledging that Africans—like all people—have historically been capable of “civilization” and “knowledge,” Kiwanga challenges the very meaning of these terms. In her creative and quasi-social scientific work, she speculates on the historical existence of “Earth-Star complexes,” she speculates on historical possibilities that jettison both the ethnocentrism of earlier anthropology and the coercive humanism of more recent scholarship.
- 53 In doing so, Kiwanga joins a long history of cosmic speculation both in Africa and the West. Such cosmic speculation, it seems to me, harbors the potential to greatly contribute to the project of decolonizing knowledge. As a final gesture, then, I briefly consider the extra-terrestrial as a limit or boundary of Western knowledge.
- 54 In 1755, a young Immanuel Kant daringly suggested: “I am of the opinion that it is just not necessary to assert that all planets must be inhabited, even though it would be nonsense to deny this in regard to all or even only most of them”⁶¹. As Peter Szendy remarks, the question “Why not?” forms the basis of Kant's early thinking, for example, “Why would there not be forms of intelligent or reasonable life (life endowed with reason) elsewhere than on Earth?”⁶². But despite Kant's urging in his early text, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, that “It is permissible, it is proper to amuse oneself with such ideas”⁶³, the “critical” Kant of the first Critique would bar all such speculation⁶⁴. Hence, Kant defined the critical project as follows: “Such a thing would not be a doctrine, but must be called only a critique of pure reason, and its utility in regard to speculation [in *Ansehung der Spekulation*] would really be only negative, serving not for the amplification but only for the purification of our reason, and for keeping it free of errors, by which a great deal is already won”⁶⁵. Kant endeavored to establish, as is well known, the limits (*Schranken*) or boundaries (*Grenzen*) of knowledge. What he hoped precisely to guard against is the temptation for thinking to stretch “its wings in vain when seeking to rise above the world of sense through the mere might of speculation”⁶⁶. It is not an exaggeration to say that for two centuries after Kant, Western philosophers lost any sense of “the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers”⁶⁷.
- 55 Kapwani Kiwanga offers a robust challenge to the cloistering of thought. In her *Afrogalactica Series*, she refuses to accept the “purification of our reason” as an ultimate goal. One might say that she refuses to wake up, as Sun Ra once put it, from the “dream that the black man dreamed long ago”⁶⁸. This dream is a cosmic dream: not of a world where Mankind is responsible for all the fruits of civilization, but a world of undulating vibrations, of occult forces and scarcely fathomed beings. Walking amidst the strangely beautiful forest landscape of his dream-planet, Sun Ra comments:
- 56 The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like planet earth. Planet earth is the sound of guns, anger, frustration. There was no one to talk to up on planet earth who could understand. We set up a colony for black people here. See what they can do on a planet all their own, without any white people there. They could drink in

the beauty of this planet. It would affect their vibrations—for the better, of course. Another place in the universe, up under different stars⁶⁹.

- 57 Like Sun Ra, Kapwani Kiwanga refuses to wake up to the nightmare of contemporary racial violence. She refuses, as per Kant's mandate, to clip her speculative wings. Instead, she marshals a vast set of resources—European ethnology, Afro-futurism, and even conspiracy theory—as an exit strategy. Hers is an “affirmative speculation” that multiplies rather than forecloses uncertainty⁷⁰. *The Deep Space Scrolls* is a message sent from the future: “It is my conjecture that by embracing what has been sequestered to the periphery a more complete vision of your past can be obtained”⁷¹.
- 58 Despite the centrality of speculation to her work, Kiwanga cannot be easily lumped in with those engaged in “speculative aesthetics”⁷². Why? For one thing, Kiwanga's interest in race and colonialism separates her immediately from most other speculative artists. This interest also points her in the direction of archives that are largely neglected by her speculative peers. For Kiwanga, “speculation” is not a lost art that was suddenly revived in the twenty-first century. It is, rather, a perennial cultural resource at the very heart of Afrocentric and Afro-futurist creativity. Her work is guided by a long history of speculative artists and theorists, going back at least to Sun Ra and Octavia Butler (not to mention a motley crew of fringe scientists and conspiracy theorists).
- 59 A second distinction between Kiwanga and her peers concerns the nature of the speculative object. Most artists and theorists enticed by “speculative aesthetics” limit their view to known objects—usually banal objects like chairs⁷³ or garbage⁷⁴, and occasionally massive objects of staggering scope⁷⁵. In every case, the object is clearly within view. The generalized sense of anxiety stems from the fact that the object is known only as a correlate of human perception and not as it is independently, as an autonomous thing. Kiwanga's work, by contrast, deals with entities whose existence has been neither established nor completely ruled out. Earth-Star complexes are not typical objects, but neither are they quasi-objects⁷⁶ or even hyper-objects⁷⁷.
- 60 What role might Earth-Star complexes or extra-terrestrials play in our histories, considering that these “objects” seem to hover between existence and non-existence? And where do such objects lie in relation to the paradigmatic axes human/non-human, phenomenon/noumenon, real/imaginary, etc.? Such questions are seldom asked by contemporary “speculative” artists. To locate something like a speculative art “movement” along the lines of Kiwanga's work, one would have to look beyond artists generally categorized in terms of speculative aesthetics; one would have to look in unexpected places. It seems to me that Kiwanga's practice is closer to an artist like Simone Rueß, whose work compels reflection on the condition of intrauterine “life”⁷⁸, or to Bill Dietz' experimentation with unforeseeable sonic-libidinal forms⁷⁹. For Rueß and Dietz, as for Kiwanga, what compels artistic creation is the very haziness of the object—not as a thing-in-itself, but as a thing-at-all. Which is not to say that these artists are anti-realist. I would argue, in fact, that Kiwanga, Rueß, and Dietz affirm a central pillar of speculative aesthetics, one that speculatavists themselves often forget: Kiwanga, Rueß, and Dietz do not assume in advance that they know what their object of study is. They do not assume to know how it exists or even, for that matter, that it necessarily does exist. For Kiwanga, at least, speculation is the exact opposite of agnosticism: if the agonistic believes that we cannot know whether certain

“metaphysical” entities do exist, Kiwanga affirms that we can know that any such entities might exist⁸⁰.

- 61 These general considerations regarding speculative art should not detract from Kiwanga's singular contribution, which stages an explosive encounter between epistemology (different forms of knowledge) and histories of colonial domination (with a focus on Africa). Kiwanga's work is a rigorous experimentation with the boundaries of power, knowledge, and reality. She probes the limits of knowledge by returning to that ever-elusive figure: the alien, that possible being which is not ourselves. The importance of her work, finally, cannot be discerned by asking whether Kiwanga herself “believes what she says.” Nor can it be evaluated in terms of her self-stylization—the way she establishes a congruence between the content of her texts and the “form” of her performances. Instead, Kiwanga's significance will be judged by future generations, by the extent to which concepts such as “culture”, “society”, and “humanity” continue to be sustained through Eurocentrism. Or the extent to which “we” as Kiwanga's audience allow her alien speculations to shake, and perhaps to destroy, these most cherished and most violent realities.

NOTES

1. Karl MAUCH, *Journals of Carl Mauch; his travels in the Transvaal and Rhodesia, 1869-1872*, transcribed from the original by Mrs. E. Bernhard, and translated by F. O. Bernhard, edited by E. E. Burke, Salisbury, National Archives of Rhodesia, 1969.
2. James Theodore BENT, *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland: Being a Record of Excavation and Exploration in 1891, Second edition*, London, Longmans, Green, and Co, 1893, p. vi.
3. As quoted in Alan Houghton BRODICK, *Father of Prehistory: The Abbé Henri Breuil: His Life and Times*, New York, H. Wolff, 1963, p. 252. As Brodick comments: “The face [of the so-called ‘White Lady’] is very delicately painted and is, Breuil considered, of ‘Mediterranean’ type; in any case it is not Negro or ‘African’” (*ibid* p. 253). The White Lady, Breuil surmised, must have been painted by “a ship's company of foreigners” who “added to their company Negro servants” (*ibid* p. 254).
4. See [No author], “German Discovers Atlantis in Africa.”, *New York Times*, January 30 1911. Frobenius has an ambiguous, even vexed, position in the history of African and African diasporic thought. For example, in contrast to the severe criticism he has received from certain quarters, the French translation of his *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* (1933) became an important touchstone for the Négritude movement. Senghor went so far as to say: “For no one did more than Frobenius to reveal Africa to the world and the Africans to themselves... We knew by heart Chapter II of the first book of the *History*, entitled ‘What Does Africa Mean to Us?’, a chapter adorned with lapidary phrases such as this: ‘The idea of the “barbarous Negro” is a European invention, which in turn dominated Europe until the beginning of this century’” (see Leopold Sedar Senghor, “The Lessons of Leo Frobenius.”, preface to *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art, and Culture: An Anthology*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2007, p. vii).
5. Henri LHOÏE, *A la découverte des fresques du Tassili*, Grenoble, Arthaud, 1958.
6. As Le Quellec (see Jean-Loïc LE QUELLEC, “Chamanes et Martiens: même combat! Les lectures chamaniques des arts rupestres du Sahara.” In *Chamanismes et arts préhistoriques: Vision critique*,

ed. Michel Lorblanchet, Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, Paul G. Bahn et al, Paris, Editions Errance, 2006, p. 235) writes: “Ce surnom de « Martiens », n’était bien évidemment qu’une plaisanterie comme les archéologues ont accoutumé d’en faire sur des sites où les occasions de rire ne sont pas si fréquentes... Quant à la dénomination de « Martiens » elle-même, aucun spécialiste de l’art rupestre ne l’a jamais prise à la lettre... Hélas, nombreuses furent les victimes de cette fantaisie et, encore maintenant, les peintures rupestres du Sahara sont régulièrement convoquées à l’appui de fumeuses théories développées par les « archéomanes »—surnom donné à ceux qui cherchent dans le passé le plus lointain des traces d’éléments de Science-Fiction.” One early example can be found in an article by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier in the magazine *Planète* in 1960. Pauwels and Bergier suggest that the painting at Tassili was of a real alien. For more on the paleocontact interpretation of the Tassili paintings, see Le Quellec’s illuminating *Des Martiens au Sahara* (Jean-Loïc LE QUELLEC, *Des Martiens au Sahara*, Paris, Actes Sud, 2009).

7. Robert TEMPLE, *The Sirius Mystery: New Scientific Evidence of Alien Contact 5,000 Years Ago*, Rochester, Destiny Books, 1998, p. 43-68 [Orig. pub. 1976]. I return to Temple’s interpretation of Griaule and Dieterlen at length later in this article. Other popular texts promulgating alien influence on earlier civilizations include Von Däniken (see Erich Von DÄNIKEN, *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit*, München, Econ-Verlag, 1968 [Translated into English as *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* and published in 1969.]) and Kolosimo (see Peter KOLOSIMO, *Not of This World*, trans. A.D. Hills, New Hyde Park, NY, UniversityBooks, 1971).

8. A brief biography of the artist is included in the following section.

9. Levi BRYANT, Nick SRNICEK, and Graham HARMAN (Eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne, re:press, 2011.

10. Kiwanga was born in Hamilton, Canada. She lives and works in Paris. Kiwanga’s work has been exhibited at the Centre Georges Pompidou (France), the Glasgow Center of Contemporary Art (UK), the Museum of Modern art in Dublin (Ireland), the Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de Almeria (Spain), Salt Beyoglu in Istanbul (Turkey), the South London Gallery (UK), Jeu de Paume (France), the Kassel Documentary Film Festival (Germany), the Kaleidoscope Arena (Italy), and at Paris Photo (France). Kiwanga was The Armory Show’s commissioned artist in 2016. Twice nominated for BAFTA, her films have been shown in several international festivals. Upcoming solo exhibitions include the Power Plant (Toronto, Canada), Logan Art Centre (Chicago, USA), and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Torino, Italy).

11. I explain this in more detail below. The title of the piece (*The Deep Space Scrolls*) is likely a reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls, a series of biblical manuscripts discovered in the mid-twentieth century. Because of their age (ca. 400BCE-300BCE) and because of their differences from other historical manuscripts upon which contemporary bibles are based, the Dead Sea Scrolls urged a serious re-evaluation of several key tenets of biblical interpretation. Kiwanga suggests that the Deep Space Scrolls urge a serious re-evaluation of human history.

12. Kapwani KIWANGA, “Afrogalactica.”, Documentation of the series, shared privately with the author, 2015. Kiwanga describes the series as follows: “The performance creates a space in which fiction and historical facts converge. Eclectic archives are drawn from specialist and popular sources. The fictional elements of the performance centre on *The United States of Africa Space Agency*, a fabricated pan-African organisation established in the year 2058.”

13. For more on the exhibition and research project, see the official website at: <http://www.givingcontours.net>

14. This characterization can be found on the website of the African Futures Festival: <http://africanfutures.tumblr.com>

15. “The “most interesting outcomes of artistic positions and discourse elements” were presented in Berlin in 2016. See <http://africanfutures.tumblr.com/about>

16. See the official website at: <<http://africanfutures.tumblr.com/about>> Clearly, much could be made of the fact that the festivals were sponsored by a German foundation. For better or worse, I have decided to elide such institutional questions in this paper.

17. Unless stated otherwise, all further quotes are from *The Deep Space Scrolls* (Kapwani KIWANGA, "Afrogalactica 3: The Deep Space Scrolls.", text from the performance, shared privately with the author. 2278 [2014]).

18. I take it that a "stellar civilization" (the "star" side of an "Earth-Star complex") is not actually a civilization on a star, but rather a civilization on a terrestrial planet associated with a star other than the sun. (A terrestrial planet is one composed of rocks and metals, rather than of gas, as is the case with stars.) For example, the civilization associated with the Vela star constellation described below would likely be located on one of the planets associated with that constellation. No less than seven stars in the Vela constellation have planets associated with them.

19. Although there are in fact two kinds of supernovas, Kiwanga is interested primarily in those that take place at the end of a star's lifecycle. The other type of supernova "happens in binary star systems. Binary stars are two stars that orbit the same point. One of the stars, a carbon-oxygen white dwarf, steals matter from its companion star. Eventually, the white dwarf accumulates too much matter. Having too much matter causes the star to explode, resulting in a supernova." See: <http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-a-supernova.html>

20. It is worth mentioning that a large commemorative statue of Cecil John Rhodes was toppled only last year (2015) in Cape Town, South Africa. Clearly, history and memory continue to be crucial sites of struggle on the African continent.

21. In another text (see the full discussion below), Kiwanga writes that "one must consider this structure not as an astronomical instrument, as Wade has suggested, but as a politically motivated construction" (Kapwani Kiwanga, "Comprehensive Methodology in Ancestral Earth-Star Complexes: Lessons from Vela-Zimbabwe." *Manifesta Journal* 17, 2014, p. 58). She adds in a footnote: "For information on Wade's suggestions, please refer to: Stuart CLARK and Damian CARRINGTON. 'Eclipse Brings Claim of Medieval African Observatory,' *New Scientist*, December 4, 2002." The text cited by Kiwanga was in fact published in the magazine *New Scientist* in 2002, and is available online at: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn3137-eclipse-brings-claim-of-medieval-african-observatory/>. Richard Peter Wade is an actual archaeologist based at Nkwe Ridge Observatory in South Africa. For his claims about Vela, see for example, Richard Peter Wade, "Southern African Cosmogonics and Geomythology of the Great Zimbabwe Cultural Complex since the Mediaeval Trade Network Era." PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2015 and Richard Peter WADE, Patrick G. ERIKSSON, Hannes C.J. de W RAUTENBACH, and G.A. DUNCAN, 2014, "Southern African Cosmogonic Geomythology ("following a star") of the Zion Christian Church.", *transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 69(2), p. 1-9, 2014.

22. This text was published in the magazine *Manifesta* in 2014. See Kapwani KIWANGA *op. cit.*

23. *Ibid.* p. 56.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.* p. 58.

28. Marcel GRIAULE and Germaine DIETERLEN, "Un système soudanais de Sirius.", *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 20, 1950, p. 274.

29. *Ibid.* *The Pale Fox*, English translation of *Le Renard Pâle* by Stephen C. Infantino, Chino Valley, AZ, Continuum Foundation, 1986, p. 39.

30. Walter E. A Van BEEK, "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule." *Cultural Anthropology* 32(2), 1991, p. 141.

31. See Marcel GRIAULE, *Dieu d'eau*, Paris, Éditions du Chêne, 1948 and Marcel GRIAULE and Germaine DIETERLEN, *Le Renard Pâle*, Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1965. For critical perspectives (of differing levels of severity), see Mary DOUGLAS, "Dogon Culture: Profane and Arcane." *Africa* 38, 1968, p. 16-24, James CLIFFORD, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule's Initiation." in *Observers Observed*, edited by George Stocking, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, p. 121-156, and Walter E.A Van BEEK, "Dogon Restudied..." *op. cit.* and *Ibid.*, "Haunting Griaule: Experiences from the Restudy of the Dogon.", *History in Africa* 31, 2004, p. 43-68.
32. Walter E.A Van BEEK, *op. cit.* p. 65-66.
33. The name Okul Equiano is perhaps a dual allusion to: 1) a star in the constellation of Capricorn known as Okul, and 2) the famous freed slave, writer, and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano.
34. Kapwani KIWANGA, "Comprehensive Methodology...", *op. cit.* p. 57.
35. Fanny CURTAT, "The 'Undecidable' Fetish at Work: Benoit Pye and Kapwani Kiwanga.", trans. Bernard SCHÜTZE, *Espace* 113, p. 37.
36. The seminal historical texts are by Iliffe (e.g., John ILIFFE, "The Organization of the Maji Maji Rebellion." *Journal of African History* 8(3), 1967, p. 495-512.) and Gwassa (e.g., G.C.K GWASSA, "Kinjikitile and the Ideology of Maji Maji." in *The Historical Study of African Religion*, edited by Terence O. RANGER and Isaria N. KIMAMBO, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972, p. 202-217.). Sunseri (Thaddeus Sunseri, "Statist Narratives and Maji Maji Ellipses.", *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33(3), 2000, p. 567-584.) has more recently criticized this wave of Maji Maji scholarship for its statist biases.
37. The ambiguous etymology of the word *maji* speaks to Swahili's own hybrid history. Indeed, scholars have argued almost in equal measure for *maji*'s etymological origin in Arabic and in the so-called "Niger-Congo" language family of Africa. As Ranne (see Katriina RANNE, "Heavenly Drops: The Image of Water in Traditional Islamic Swahili Poetry." *Swahili Forum* 17, 2010, p. 76) notes in an article titled "Heavenly Drops: The Image of Water in Traditional Islamic Swahili Poetry," Krumm (see Bernhard KRUMM, *Words of Oriental Origin in Swahili*, London, Sheldon Press, 1940, p. 2) long ago observed that "in old Swahili poetry half of the words are of foreign (mostly Arabic) origin. The word for water (*maji*), too, is from Arabic *mā*." On the other hand, von Sperling (see Eduardo Von SPERLING, "Etimologia aquatic." *Revista Brasileira de Recursos Hídricos* 10(2), 2005, p. 74) makes a strong case for *maji*'s association with words in more geographically proximate languages, for example *amanzi* (in the Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele languages of southern Africa), *amazi* (in the Rundi of Central and East Africa), and *amazzi* (in Luganda, East Africa).
38. See e.g., J.B. PEIRES, *The Dead Will Rise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989; James C Scott, 1990, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990. I would like to thank the editors for reminding me of this important point.
39. Fanny CURTAT, "The 'Undecidable' Fetish...", *op. cit.* p. 38.
40. A second complication is that Kiwanga does not present the object of (sacred) *maji* itself but only its trace: she displays photographs of amulets connected with the rebellion by projecting them onto the walls of the exhibition space. See *Ibid.* p. 38.
41. Such is also the thesis, essentially, of Iliffe's seminal text on the rebellion: Maji Maji, he says, "originated in peasant grievances" and was then "*sanctified and extended by prophetic religion*" (my emphasis). (In his view, interestingly, the crisis of the rebellion is attributable not only to German repression but also to "loyalties to kin and tribe.") See ILIFFE, *op. cit.* p. 495.
42. Curtat cites Rancière (Jacques RANCIÈRE, *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Paris, Galilée, 2004, p 65-84.
43. Fanny CURTAT, *op. cit.* p. 42.
44. Kapwani KIWANGA, "Afrogalactica...", *op. cit.*

45. Mark DERY, ed., "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1994, p. 182. Nelson uses Dery's definition in her introduction to an important collection of essays on the same subject (see Alondra NELSON, "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text* 20 (2), 2002, p. 9). She continues, referring to a description from the Afro-Futurism listserv that she manages: "The term was chosen as the best umbrella for the concerns of 'the list'—as it has come to be known by its members—'sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora'" (*ibid.*). For a treatment of Afro-futurism on the African continent, see Gavin STEINGO, "African Afro-futurism: Allegories and Speculations." *Current Musicology*, Forthcoming, n.d.
46. Mark DERY, *op. cit.*
47. Kapwani KIWANGA, "Afrogalactica...", *op. cit.*
48. Correspondence with the author, June 27, 2016. In an earlier draft of this paper I too hastily characterized Kiwanga as an "Afro-futurist artist." I shared the draft with Kiwanga and she expressed to me that she does not identify as an Afro-futurist *per se* for the reasons outlined.
49. Mark DERY, *op. cit.* p. 180.
50. Kodwo ESHUN, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, London, Quartet, 1998, p. 00[-005], 00[-006]-00[-007].
51. Roland BARTHES, *Mythologies*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957, p. 161.
52. Frank B. III Wilderson, Samira Spatzek, and Paula von Gleich, "'The Inside-Outside of Civil Society': An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III.," *Black Studies Papers* 2(1), 2016, p. 7.
53. Alondra NELSON, "Aliens Who Are Of Course Ourselves." *Art Journal* 60(3), 2001, p. 99, my emphasis.
54. *Ibid.* p. 100-101.
55. Ken MCLEOD, "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music.," *Popular Music* 22(3), 2003, p. 337.
56. *Ibid.* p. 343; my emphasis
57. See Kodwo ESHUN, *op. cit.*
58. *Ibid.*, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3(2), 2003, p. 299, my emphasis.
59. Delany, as quote in *Ibid.*, p. 290
60. Gilroy (see Paul GILROY, "Fanon and the Value of the Human.," *Johannesburg Salon* 4, 2011, p. 11-18) argues for a non-naïve, "reparative humanism."
61. Immanuel KANT, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, Trans. Olaf Reinhardt, in *Natural Science*, ed. Eric Watkins, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 295 [Orig. pub. 1755].
62. Peter SZENDY, *Kant in the Land of the Extraterrestrial: Cosmopolitical Philosophictions*, trans. Will Bishop, New York, Fordham, 2013, p. 45 [Orig. pub. 2011].
63. Immanuel KANT, *Universal Natural History*, *op. cit.* p. 307.
64. An alternative reading would more carefully consider Szendy's suggestion that the "philosophiction of the *Theory of the Heavens*... survives in attenuated form in Kant's later writings" (Peter Szendy, *op. cit.* p. 53-4). Indeed, one may even interpret certain passages from a text like *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* as an affirmation and reinforcement of the Kant's earlier alien philosophiction—rather than its attenuation. See, for example, Kant (*Ibid.*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 225 [Orig. pub. 1798]) and Szendy's analysis on pp. 46-49.
65. Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 149 [Orig. pub. 1781].
66. *Ibid.* p. 563.

67. Quentin MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier. London, Continuum, 2006, p. 7, original emphasis.
68. In *Space is the Place* (1974, dir. John Coney).
69. In *Space is the Place*.
70. Uncertain commons, *Speculate This!* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.
71. Kapwani KIWANGA, "Afrogalactica 3: The Deep Space Scrolls.", *op. cit.*
72. See N. Katherine HAYLES, "Speculative Aesthetics and Object-Oriented-Inquiry (OOI)." *Speculations* 5, 2014, p. 158-179; Robin Mackay, James Trafford, and Luke Pendrell (eds.), *Speculative Aesthetics*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2014; see also "A Questionnaire on Materialisms.", October 155, 2016, p. 3-110.)
73. I am thinking here of Travis Jeppeson's show, *16 Sculptures*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2014.
74. Jane BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke, 2010.
75. Timothy MORTON, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
76. Bruno LATOUR, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Paris, La Découverte, 1991.
77. Timothy MORTON, *op. cit.*
78. See Gavin STEINGO, "Drawing as a More-Than-One." *Schloss-Post*. October 21, 2016, <https://schloss-post.com/drawing-as-a-more-than-one/>
79. "The founding assumption of the works I have since 2008 referred to as 'TUTORIAL DIVERSIONS' is that the prospect of enunciating an unknown, indeterminate 'you' is not bound to any particular, privileged agglomeration of material *nor* any singular mode of attention, and is instead a relational potential to be perpetually reopened in the face of all manner of calcification" (Bill DIETZ, *Tutorial Diversions*, Stuttgart, Edition Solitude, 2015, p. 14).
80. I borrow this analysis loosely from Meillassoux (*op. cit.*), whose "speculative materialism" is far more mysterious than is typically presumed.

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the work of Paris-based artist Kapwani Kiwanga (b. Canada, 1978), whose work is marked by an innovative combination of techniques from visual art, performance, and social science. I focus on Kiwanga's performance piece, *The Deep Space Scrolls*, which engages concepts of the human and the extraterrestrial through a speculative approach to African history. I argue that in rethinking histories of African exploitation and oppression Kiwanga avoids the easy path—namely, the affirmation of an unreconstructed humanism—and instead turns towards the alien and the unknown. While paying close attention to the details of Kiwanga's performance style, I suggest that her work can only be adequately grasped by considering multiple distinct theoretical discourses, including Afrofuturism, Speculative Realism, and Afro-pessimism.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Kapwani Kiwanga, Afrofuturism, extraterrestrial, alien, speculation