Kevin Walker
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2021-05-16

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16266

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Rezension / review

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

NECSUS

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Fig. 1: Still from Table Manners: Bush Tales #1 by Zina Saro-Wiwa (three-channel digital video, 2018). Image used with permission and courtesy of the artist.

I am watching a man eating a tortoise. Shirtless, sitting at a table against a plain wall, he is eating it with his hands, and staring right back at me. This is Zina Saro-Wiwa's video artwork *Table Manners: Bush Tales #1*, part of her exploration of indigenous cosmologies, particularly in her native Nigeria. Her practice has moved from journalism to art to curating, and her work often uses seemingly mundane activities like kissing, crying, praying, and eating to

discuss larger issues. Here, the tortoise is a mythical figure believed to hold up the world, and in West African folk tales it is far from a slow, gentle, ancient creature but rather a trickster – lying, deceiving, even committing rape. Consumed by the man in the video, it becomes one with him, and in the process moves from the quotidian to the transcendental, along the way prompting reflection about consumption, power relations, and stories.

Saro-Wiwa has defined artworks as 'objects of contemplation that are charismatic enough to travel around the world',[1] and this particular work derives part of its power in multiples: the tortoise-eating performance is repeated across three screens. Stacked vertically, they allude to the philosophical (and computational) problem of infinite recursion – that tortoise holding up the world is standing on the back of another, which in turn stands on another, *ad infinitum*. It is, as they say, turtles all the way down. And that is exactly where Saro-Wiwa's work, so raw and analog, meets the digital world. For this is the age of the Covid-19 pandemic, and I am watching the work at home, on a laptop, the three screens reduced to three stacked windows in a web browser. A price tag sits beneath them: for $30,000 USD the work could be mine, free of the digital watermark over Saro-Wiwa's middle screen. Or, instead of buying, other buttons beckon me to share, save to a playlist, and search similar works by hashtag.

This is the Daata Art Fair, held in December 2020 alongside Art Basel Miami, the biggest and most prestigious art fair in the Western hemisphere,[2] forced online along with everything else by the pandemic. Art fairs are the art world's blunt financial instrument – in 2019 they accounted for 45 percent of all gallery sales, and a year later due to Covid, galleries bore the brunt of the art market's drop in sales by a third.[3] But during the same period, online sales doubled in value to a record $12.4 billion.[4] Fairs and galleries have always relied on face-to-face encounters with art, artists, and collectors, with online presence limited mostly to promoting exhibitions and events. Covid quarantines brought on a sudden rush of online viewing rooms, screenings, and virtual openings. While some were restricted to collectors and paying guests, others supported struggling artists and galleries, such as David Zwirner Gallery showing the works of smaller galleries; or widened access to works previously visible only in person, such as the Whitney Museum's free screenings of video works from its collection. Why not go further, to screen new works online, for show or sale? After all, the music and publishing industries have already made the transition to digital, albeit not always smoothly.

The trend was already underway, with the artists, as usual, leading the way by posting their work in progress or newly completed. Digital art, internet art, post-internet art, and now crypto art have emerged with the development and spread of the digital as material. As media, the digital and the internet have further made possible the digitisation and dissemination of previous forms – notably video art. Collectors have taken notice, and thorny issues around rights and preservation are being addressed in innovative ways. New venues have opened up, such as the corporate lobby with a dedicated screen, which artist Anne Spalter has identified as a new frontier for artists – creating in turn another twisting knot connecting art and commerce.[5]

The screen as site

It is difficult to imagine a work like Larry Achiampong's *The Expulsion* (2019) playing in such a venue. Shown at the Daata Art Fair, the 14-minute film shows a nameless woman cleaning nondescript office spaces, silently and repeatedly, while a narrator voices the thoughts of the underclass who build, clean, and repair the streets and spaces inhabited by the workers and consumers who tarnish them during the day. It is a reflection on Achiampong's own childhood in London's East End, based on his concept of 'sanko-time', from the Ashanti word for going back or what is left behind – expelled, but not forgotten. That such a work is now so readily available to any collector (individual or corporate) willing to pay $19,000 is not exactly revolutionary, but previously would have required an awareness and some knowledge of the artist, and a brokered sale with a dealer, which would have required visiting a gallery or art fair – an intimidating prospect to the uninitiated.

But more broadly, the availability of this work online for anyone to see signals a more significant shift in the way art is exhibited and consumed – and I use the latter term in both its capitalist and quotidian forms. Online exhibitions, including Daata's temporary gathering of works, have been rapidly accelerated by Covid restrictions, and this means not only a kind of democratised viewing but a flattening of our experience of the artworks. Outside of the gallery, displayed on a web page, such works are experienced the same way we now take in almost all moving image – usually on a small screen, mostly at home. We can now therefore carry video art from the living room to the kitchen table; we can pause, research the artist, consume the work at

our own pace and in our own way. But this also means the work competes with every other distraction in the home and on the net.

As Petra Löffler observes, media technologies are 'contextualised by modes of reception and spectatorship that always include hierarchies, institutions, and power relations'.[6] Previously, cinema activated the immobile viewer through the on-screen narrative, but in exhibitions mobility shifts to the mobile viewer, able to move around the on-screen content. This was all lost to me as I viewed the Daata fair, particularly in contrast to the last, pre-Covid exhibition I had seen, *Transformer* at 180 Strand in London – a huge former car park made into a truly immersive and surprisingly intimate space, where massive projections and controlled conditions meant you can really get close to the work – and I spent hours there. By contrast, viewing the Daata Art Fair online at home, I became, as artist Eugenio Ampudia says, more citizen than spectator: 'It turns video into a research and discussion tool, much more accessible to people.'[7] This is a welcome trade-off, and I hope the art world retains online fairs and exhibitions to run alongside co-located ones in a post-Covid world.

The art fair as site

Art fairs, like biennials, rely on face-to-face transactions – and again I mean both in a monetary sense and with artworks directly. But this relation, too, has been complicated by the mobile phone, ubiquitous at fairs as in every other area of contemporary urban life. The portability, personalisation, and connectivity of the phone extend not only to consuming artworks but also capturing and sharing them. And art fairs thrive on distraction. Not unlike a social media platform such as Instagram, each gallery in an art fair typically presents only a snapshot – a small selection of works by selected artists. In return, fairs and their host cities thrive on the sharing afforded by smartphones and social media.

Video art, by contrast, is notoriously difficult to show and sell at fairs. According to collector Haro Cumbusyan, 'You have to control the ambient light, you have to control the audio, you need space to really appreciate a video work, and most of all you need time, which is something that people at art fairs don't typically have.'[8] Take, for example, artist Jibade-Khalil Huffman, whose gallery offered up three of his works for Daata Art Fair, totalling more than two hours. I watched them all sitting on my sofa, and spending a couple

of hours inside Huffman's head in this way was profoundly disturbing – in the positive way in which good art *should* shake our sensibilities. Car accidents played backward, snippets of music videos, obscure promotional films and movie credits, all woven together with the artist's own carefully staged and beautifully filmed live-action vignettes, music spanning every genre, and his spoken poetry – all combine for an acerbic critique on race and social issues via pop culture and car culture. After watching just one of his videos, I felt like I had never watched so much television, seeing things that were at once familiar and completely new.

This kind of work, requiring time and contemplation, is seemingly not suited to an art fair. And yet, it was in fact screened at Art Basel Miami in 2020 – the fair was not entirely canceled by Covid, and Daata paired with local contemporary art museum The Bass to co-curate a screening on a massive outdoor wall. This followed Huffman's video work about club culture shown at the 2019 fair, screened on the back of a moving truck. So video works are finding their way into the big art fairs, even in the age of Covid, a trend driven in part by collectors who are buying them, and platforms such as Daata that are showing and selling them. This is a rapid acceleration of a slowly building trend: Loop Art Fair in Barcelona, devoted solely to video, has run since 2003, showing works primarily in hotel rooms; Art Rotterdam added a dedicated video art area in 2018; and private receptions at various fairs have taken place for years. This acceleration has been made possible by new modes of circulation, display, collection, and preservation that rely on media infrastructure.

From physical to digital mobility

As art fairs went (mostly) online in 2020, the art world's carbon footprint was already under fire. Collectors, curators, and artists like to boast about their itinerancy, shuttling around the world for biennials, openings, and fairs. Some hope that Covid will bring less travel in general, and that fairs will become more focused on local art scenes. For its part, Art Basel Miami has a strong emphasis on Latin American galleries and artists. For instance, a work by Adrián Balseca was included in the concurrent Daata fair. It depicts a fellow Ecuadorian artist carving a monumental self-portrait out of a non-native tree on the Galápagos Islands, raising questions about introduced species and human presence on Darwin's iconic islands.

Another work at the Daata fair tackles trees in a different way. David Claerbout's *Wildfire* (2019-20) is a mesmerising mixture of stills and video depicting trees ravaged by fire, contrasting sharply with *Boom*, a video work of his from twenty years earlier, which acted as a kind of portrait of a single tree; where the previous work used live-action video to create stillness, the new one uses stills in motion to freeze a fast-moving fire. In a concurrent exhibition at Galeria Pedro Cera in Lisbon, *Wildfire* was accompanied by Claerbout's drawings of wildfire – done in watercolour.

An online art fair like Daata's can thus bring such works together just as well as an art fair can, minus the air miles. The Daata fair was also much more focused, inviting just 10 galleries to present one artist each, in contrast to Art Basel Miami's own online fair with 255 galleries, each showing six to ten works. The Daata fair ran for two weeks—about a week longer than Art Basel Miami, with the works only available on the site during that time, though most were technically still online or available elsewhere, so I was effectively able to watch all the works repeatedly over a couple of months.

Limited editions & conditions

The fair is part of Daata, the platform started in 2015 by David Gryn, formerly the film and video curator for Art Basel and a veteran of the London art world. He was aware that galleries struggle to show video, sound, and digital art, and do not make money from showing it, and so he set up Daata as a marketplace, with seed funding from collector Anita Zabludowicz – whose eponymous London collection is one of the few galleries that does exhibit and commission media art. *Tongues Duel the Corn Whores, an Opera*, a mad *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Trulee Hall, was filmed at the Zabludowicz Collection in Summer 2020 between lockdowns, and it was included in the Daata Art Fair in December. Hall provokes and pushes against gender stereotypes and the conservative US culture she grew up in, and her deliberately low-tech and low-brow mix of 3D animation, stop-motion, and live action treats 'taste' with equal fluidity.

Daata differs from other online art sales platforms by primarily commissioning such new work from emerging artists. It launched alongside the Frieze Art Fair in 2015, and all of its inaugural artists quickly sold several editions, earning a 15 percent commission on each sale.[9] Besides commissions, what differentiates Daata in an increasingly crowded online art market is that

it offers a small number of limited editions of each work. Hall's opera, for example, is sold in an edition of five, at $15,000 each. By comparison, Sedition (a competing platform) offers editions of up to 10,000, selling for as low as $8 each.[10] (The shortest works at the Daata fair were a set of looping 3D animations about the state of artificial intelligence in games by Alex McLeod, at $3,500 each.)

Through the use of watermarks, certificates of authenticity, and blockchain technology, platforms such as Sedition create a secondary market for such editions wherein a collector can subsequently sell a purchased work on the same platform. Shortly after the Daata fair ended, a market in digital 'NFTs' (non-fungible tokens) exploded, with artists, auction houses, and online platforms suddenly generating huge incomes, especially in cryptocurrencies. The fact that all these technologies, from artistic medium to display and sales platform to currency, are all based on digital media represents a huge transformation of the art world – beyond my scope in this article.

On Daata, instead of purchasing a work for a one-off fee, it can be streamed via subscription. As in the music and publishing businesses, this shifts from ownership to access, the tradeoff being that someone else stores, backs up, and maintains a digital file for you. Daata has grown in revenue since it launched, has gained trust from galleries, and its audience grew exponentially during Covid quarantines. But Gryn realised that the time-sensitive nature of a fair would shift focus from mere viewing to more sales.[11] The first Daata fair was held alongside the Frieze and FIAC art fairs, in the window between Covid quarantines in 2020. Anyone could join the fair, and anyone can view work on the site for free. A subscription enables streaming and playlists, and purchasing a work removes the watermark.

Platform as site

As a site – both web site and site of artistic production – a platform like Daata creates useful linkages and tensions between virtual space and real-world fairs and galleries. Twenty years ago, Miwon Kwon detailed how capitalism 'circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods',[12] and a site of artistic production encompasses several interrelated spaces and economies, including the studio, gallery, art criticism and history, and the art market.

    As such, an online platform represents not only a market for buying and selling artworks, but can accommodate institutional critique. For example, the Daata fair included *Watched and Recorded* by artist Patrick Panetta, in which he records himself scrolling through a gallery's website, set to music often recorded as background sound in the gallery itself. Turned into a moving image work, this becomes an exposé of the broader system of art production and promotion, blurring the line between real and virtual space. As an ongoing work since 2010, it also shows how what is 'new,' in terms of both art and its online promotion, has changed over a decade.

    Curator Pau Waelder points out that most artworks take on multiple lives as they are reproduced in photos and videos, online and offline – most of the art we know best we have experienced through reproductions, mostly on screens.[13] Video art that is bought, sold, and streamed online raises questions about authenticity and value – but these are becoming less of an insecurity, as the increasing success of the Daata platform shows.
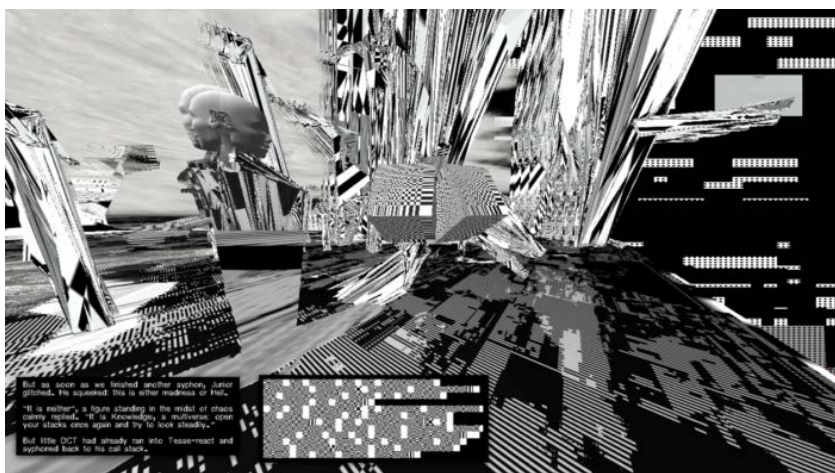

Fig. 2: Still from DCT:SYPHONING. The 1000000th (64th) interval (virtual reality application for Oculus Rift with three-channel video installation and single-channel gameplay video, 2016-17). Image used with permission and courtesy of the artist.

This is especially the case with 'born digital' artworks, such as Rosa Menkman's *DCT:SYPHONING. The 1000000th (64th) interval* (2016-17), part of the Daata Art Fair. My favourite of the fair, it is a version of Edward Abbott's 1884 story *Flatland*, told through digital graphics in Menkman's beautifully glitchy style. The work began as a commission from the Photographers Gallery in London and was first shown as a Powerpoint file with 2D graphics. From there, Menkman transferred it into a 3D virtual reality piece, but since

VR can be challenging to exhibit, it was also shown across three screens. For Daata, it came back together as a single, ultra-widescreen single channel video, in a $14,000 edition of three. A copy was sold a few years ago, according to Menkman, and what the collector received was the software, a single video file, three separate video files, and a video walkthrough of its installation.[14]

The 'born digital' generation of artists is more comfortable producing and sharing video and other digital content,[15] and in fact content production and access merge as online presence, as well as mobile encounters, increase.[16] Another Daata artist, Petra Cortright, is a good example, moving from net art to painting and back, and from being a 'YouTuber' to a highly regarded artist.[17] For a growing number of emerging artists – predominantly young and female, including Grimes and Chloe Wise (other Daata artists) – online, on-camera presence seems equally important as the work produced.

Screening the work

Before Covid, video art was beginning to be noticed by collectors. In a review of the 2019 Frieze fair, critic Hettie Judah noted, 'Screens seem rather a phenomenon this year – just the thing for the collector who loves paintings but has run out of wall space?'[18] Any collector of media art faces the same quandary: how and where to display it. Gryn told me of collectors who purchase the framed iPad a work is displayed on in an art fair. But Daata has no intention of getting into the hardware business, content to offer what curator Steven Sacks calls 'unframed software art' that collectors can keep on their phone, laptop, smart TV, or whatever. 'When we go into a cinema,' according to Gryn, 'we don't ask the projectionist about the lens.'[19] Nonetheless, there are now bespoke monitors sold solely for displaying video art – and this brings us back to the corporate lobby, where an artwork is in danger of becoming a mere screensaver. Daata started a subscription model in part because it was being approached by hotel groups and other corporate investors. But Covid quickly put an end to this, for the moment.

Several critics suggest shifting our focus from medium to format, which enables a greater specificity that facilitates historical, material, and aesthetic analysis.[20] On a platform such as Daata, all 'video art' and 'media art' becomes digital art, with the portability and flexibility that digital technology

brings, but without losing the capacity art has for constructive critique of site and institution – these concepts themselves taking on expanded forms online. This is not guaranteed however, and nor is the capacity of audiences to be open to such critiques. It is not clear that Daata has attracted new types of collectors; by aligning with art fairs, galleries, and corporate clients, the platform remains within the art-world bubble. It may instead be the new generation of young, internet-savvy artists themselves who hold more potential to reach new audiences and foster critique, and in this regard Daata's business model might serve them well by investing in their future work.

Online art fairs are unlikely to supplant their carbon-intensive, locations-specific relatives. But as with so many rifts Covid has exposed, as the pandemic recedes, fairs may not be what they once were. Daniel Buren wrote in 1968 that 'art [is] the system's distracting mask. And a system has nothing to fear as long as reality is masked, as long as its contradictions are hidden.'[21] If art fairs become more local, this could be balanced by platforms such as Daata simultaneously becoming more global, exposing us to challenging works like Zina Saro-Wiwa's metaphysical feast, and facilitating dialogues about the works, the systems of art, and those that underlie them – turtles all the way down. Artist Artie Vierkant puts it nicely: 'The art world we return to – if there is one to return to at all – will be formed in this moment. This is the time to build our own institutions.'[22]

<div align="right">Kevin Walker (Coventry University)</div>

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Notes

[1]   Udobang 2019.

[2]   Farago 2015.

[3]   Gerlis 2021.

[4]   *The Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report 2021*. https://www.artbasel.com/about/initiatives/the-art-market

[5]   LASER Talks CYLAND Saint-Petersburg (2020) *Art Data: Collecting, Preserving and Displaying Digital*. 12 Dec 2020. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC81Z5WbpM3okBeJnzg7syJA/live, accessed 20 Feb 2021.

[6]   Löffler 2012.

[7]   LOOP Talks (2020) A Screen Within A Screen Within A Screen, accessed 20 Feb 2021.

[8]   Daata Talks (2020) *Demystifying Digital Art: Collecting and Displaying at Home and Beyond* https://vimeo.com/485880783, accessed 20 Feb 2021.

[9]   Brownell Mitic 2015.

[10]   Solon 2011.

[11]   Personal interview, 11 Jan 2021.

[12]   Kwon 2002, p. 12.

[13]   Waelder (n.d.).

[14]   Personal interview, 14 Jan 2021.

[15]   Saether 2018.

[16]   Szita 2020.

[17]   Waelder 2017.

[18]   Judah 2019.

[19]   Personal interview, 11 Jan 2021.

[20]   See for example Jancovic & Volmar & Schneider 2020; Saether 2018; Joselit 2013.

[21]   Verkant 2020.

[22]   Ibid.