

Weapons and Refuse as Media: The Potency and Politics of Recycling in Contemporary Mozambican Urban Arts

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My research focuses on contemporary Mozambican urban artists that use recycled materials in the creation of their art, which illustrates the intersection between art and life. Mozambican artists involved with the Christian Aid funded program, "Transforming Arms into Tools," utilize decommissioned weapons for assemblage art pieces to engage the viewer and urge them to remember the violence and destruction in Mozambique's struggle toward liberation. Mozambican artists also utilize natural and urban refuse in the creation of their contemporary artworks, which underscores recycling as a way of life throughout the continent of Africa

These artists working in urban Mozambique today are linked in their connection to major themes related to the environment of Mozambique in particular, and Africa in general. Within a broader framework, the use of recycled materials by these contemporary artists reflects a nexus of environmental, economic and culturally related issues that creates an expanding discourse surrounding the identity and materiality of objects. These theoretical ideas frame the pre-dissertation research I completed this summer in the Mozambican capital city of Maputo, where I spent time interviewing many artists, arts

administrators, and museum officials in order to develop a greater understanding of the contemporary arts environment within Mozambique. Through these interviews, I learned of the strength, vitality, and overarching sense of community within their contemporary arts network.

I spent time visiting artists in their studios, homes and exhibition spaces where I could directly engage in discussions with them about their art processes, techniques and theoretical concerns surrounding their use of recycled materials in their artworks. There is a great diversity in the different



types of recycled materials that are used, the forms that are created, as well as in the age and background of the many artists I interviewed. The striking link between all of the artists I spoke with is their understanding and belief in the power of art.

The transformative power of art in Mozambique became widely apparent to me not only in the emotionally engaging artworks made from traded decommissioned weapons, collected urban detritus, and natural landscape elements, but also from the intense personal commitment of the artists I spoke with. Many artists expressed their need to create art as a continuation of their cultural traditions in a contemporary context by using discarded materials that they recycled into artworks. Several of the artists I spoke to carried on the power of the visual arts by teaching Mozambican orphans and youth in arts education programs that they designed, facilitated, and in most cases, financed themselves.

To create connections within the arts community on a larger scale, I also met with directors, managers and curators of organizations such as the National Museum of Mozambique, the Franco-Mozambican Cultural Center, Nucleo de Arte, MovArte, MozArte, ENAV (National School of Visual Arts) and the Christian Council. Through these discussions, I have gained a greater understanding of the transformative power of art and its impact as a force within Mozambican society and culture. Since my return to the US, I have received word that a projected weapons monument that I discussed with several of the artists and administrators while I was in Maputo is indeed underway.

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