

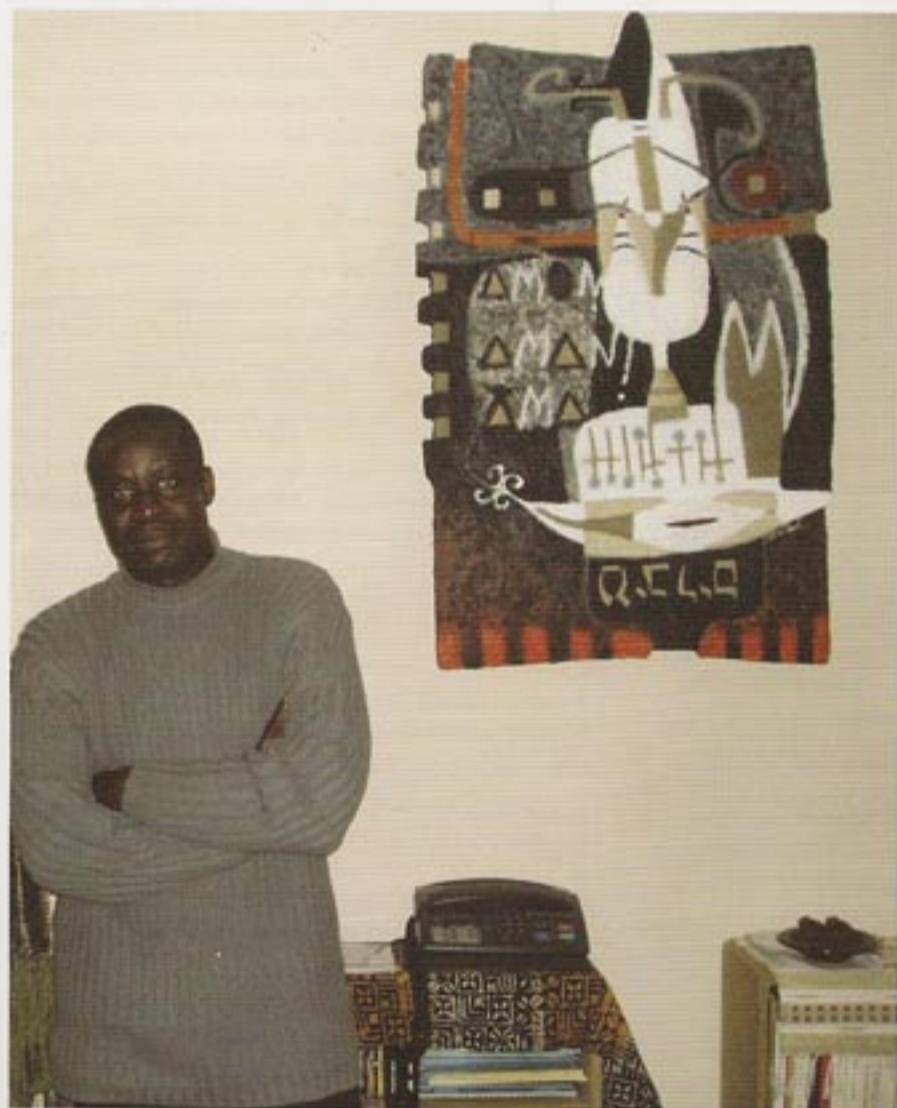
artist interview

# Ernest Dükü

## Writing Identities

Mary Nooter Roberts

translated from the French by Gassia Armenian



Ernest Dükü standing next to his work *Seex Anta*  
*Coda l'Histoire (Seex Anta: A Coda to History; 2002)*,  
Paris, 2004.

PHOTO: MARY N. ROBERTS

**E**rnest Dükü is an artist of Ivoirian descent who has lived in Paris since 1977.<sup>1</sup> His engaging multimedia creations incorporate writing and inscription deployed in creative ways across the surfaces of large constructions of thickly layered matter, built from a variety of media in the form of abstracted figures and/or anthropomorphic topographies. To me, as a scholar with a special interest in the history of writing in Africa and its incorporation into works of art both traditional and contemporary, Dükü's works were compelling because his choice of languages, letters, and signs was so eclectic and unconventional, yet clearly studied and deliberate.

Ernest Dükü's home and studio display myriad examples of such "object-texts" in progress.<sup>2</sup> His interests have moved from the most intimate understanding of his own Ivoirian legacy and a passion for Akan goldweights, *Bête* writing, and traditional mural and textile traditions to some of the most ancient writing systems of the world, such as Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Hebrew scripts. Ernest Dükü is one of many artists who have engaged in dialogue with the rich systems of graphic inscription and writing of Africa, but his results are highly individual. Furthermore, his training in architecture may explain the volume and dimensionality that situates his works somewhere between the media of painting and sculpture.

In this interview, Dükü was asked about the nature and history of his passion for traditional writing systems, the techniques he uses to create his oeuvres, and how he regards himself in light of current dialogues around the terms "contemporary," "African," and "artist." His articulate responses have been brought together in this essay, in which he explains the multi-referential aspects of his work and the deeply nuanced way in which he self-identifies, particularly as an artist of African

Ernest Dükü

*Code Ongh, Ankh, Ong, la parole du ventre* (Ongh, Ankh, Ong Code, Words of Belly; 2002)

Mixed media; 150cm x 90cm x 5cm (59" x 35½" x 2")

PHOTO: © ERNEST DÜKÜ



descent living in Paris and attracted by myriad cultural traditions and inspirations. Through his words and images one can further assert the power of writing in African artistic production, both as an end and as a means.<sup>3</sup> For, as he states, he writes his identity through inscriptions that he calls "sign-words," which he invests with power: Through the creative process, he awakens them to possibility by making them "operational" through careful juxtaposition and deployment and rendering them "thick" with signification and hidden suggestion. Inscribing the bodies of his works, the sign-words write his biography and a larger cultural history of intersecting systems of mysticism and meaning.

—Mary Nooter Roberts

*MNR: Can you talk about the place of writing and inscription in your work, and how your interest in writing systems developed?*

ED: My work requires several levels of interpretation; its syncretism makes it multilayered. One must attempt to reveal and read these layers. One level is writing—in other words, questions about

the concept of writing. How does Africa write? On another level, there are questions about an aesthetic approach to painting.

At first, I was interested, in general, in the symbolic aspect of writing in traditional African art. As a source of inspiration, writing engages me through its symbolism. The symbols that I use are inspired by the ideograms, graphic systems, and signs that one finds, partly, in the expression of the artistic practices of sculpture, mural decoration, and weaving.

*MNR: Are there particular writing systems that you are especially intrigued by?*

ED: I am particularly interested in the study of Akan [Ashanti, Baule] gold weights of West Africa with their ideographic designs. I study their aesthetic form as well as their spiritual universe. Familiarity allows me to decode and decipher their meaning: This Akan universe with its signs and symbols has nourished me; this environment has been my subject of creation, reflection, and technique. From there, I have turned to other graphic and writing systems—the Dogon and *nsibidi* writings, the Tassili



paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Amharic writing of Ethiopia, all have caught my attention.

This approach is definitely the sign of syncretism in my work. It seems to me that even today, the use of symbols in Africa retains its relevance in daily life—one example is the wearing of woven cloth. I attempt to decipher points of convergence by mixing different signs that issue from various horizons. I ponder this process, which aids my desire to attract the gaze of the spectator. I would like to transcend the boundaries of the Akan universe to encounter and observe the traditions of Ethiopia, the Caribbean, Islam, and Judaism, which attract me as much as those of my own culture.

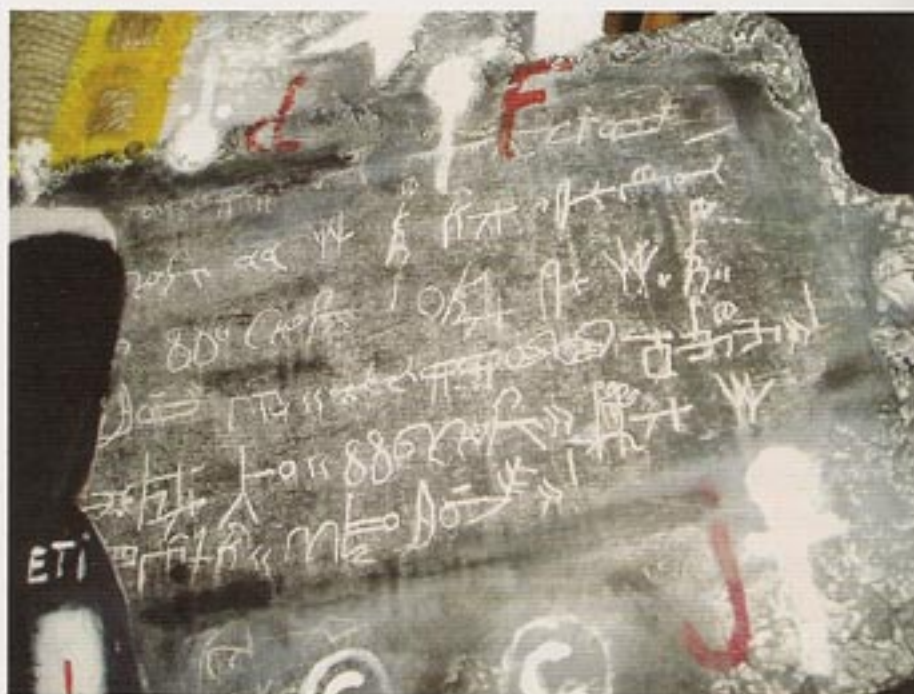
*MNR: How do you define the interrelationship of image and text in your work?*

*ED:* Through the inspiration of these signs and writings, I detach myself from the object and transmit its spirit. To translate with these glyphs—which become “sign-words,” the art of the visible and the invisible—an operational force of the symbol is released, which becomes the force of the image. For me, writing in some of the paintings becomes a type of reading. For example, in a painting like *Seex Anta Coda l’Histoire* I write the name of Egypt in Hebrew, MISRAÏM, upside-down by inverting the writing. This form of expression proceeds from what I call the “non-said.” Inverting the name of Egypt signifies the other history of this country. In this case, writing functions as a symbol, the image-force with its hidden meaning, its second layer of reading. By the same token, I use modern symbols in my paintings. Traffic signals are some of them. For example, the symbol for “wrong way” on the mouth of a figure means forbidden speech. The idea of threshold—a link between the past, the present, and the future—occurs throughout my work. Of course, there are also cultural preoccupations and issues of identity.

Ernest Dükü  
*Kurumaat Bouabré, soleil o soleil* (Kurumaat Bouabré, sun oh sun; 2004)  
 Mixed media; 92cm x 46cm x 5cm (36¼" x 18" x 2")  
 PHOTO: © ERNEST DÜKÜ

Detail of *Kurumaat Bouabré* in artist's studio. Paris, 2004.

PHOTO: MARY N. ROBERTS



MNR: How did your training and art school education affect your interest in writing?

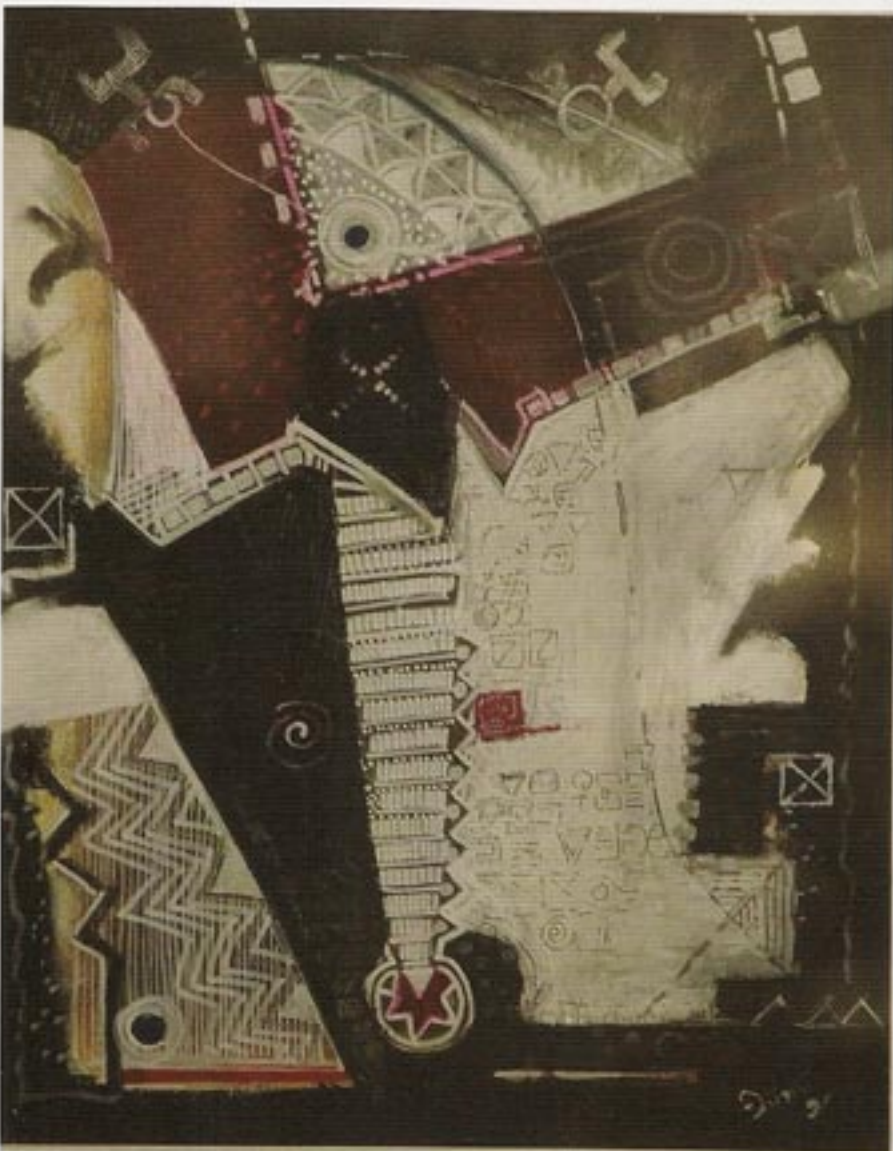
ED: In the beginning, my studies at the School of Fine Arts of Abidjan allowed me to foresee the use of graphic signs in my creations. This approach has manifested itself in the use of signs and ideograms simply as design elements in the framework of interior architecture, the results being purely graphic and decorative. I have a certain satisfaction with the results. It is probably my training as an architect that leads me towards mass and matter. In my short training period in plastic arts at the Fine Arts school of Abidjan, I found the medium of the two-dimensional canvas to be very flat, lacking in dimensionality.

The gliding from architecture towards painting happened later. It was motivated by my desire to emphasize the pertinence of the question of convergences between different graphic signs and pictograms, as well as by work on patinas in traditional architecture, or how to move from traditional decorative murals to painting. My form of expression does not use a canvas; rather, I use a method that I call "sculptured painting."

Following the example of my mixture of writings and symbols,

Ernest Dükü  
*Napata Blues* (1996)  
Painting on paper; 37cm x 46cm (14½" x 18")  
PHOTO: © ERNEST DÜKÜ

Ernest Dükü  
*Question d'écriture (A Question of Writing)*; 1999)  
Mixed media; 20cm x 20cm (8" x 8")  
PHOTO: © ERNEST DÜKÜ



I use in my painting a weaving technique with ropes and threads. I use the rope like a cable that releases the general idea, which is articulated around what I call "from the word of the river to the word of the thread." The "word of the river" is gathered in part in ancient Egypt and also in the Valley of the Niger to translate this idea of the universe, the form of thought created by these civilizations. The "word of the thread" translates more the expression of signs and symbols that are found in the weaving of kente and other African textiles.

By proceeding in this manner, I interrogate, I question, and I practice another form of syncretism. Weaving allows me to get closer to the method of weavers, whose work, linked to the symbolism of the creative word, also deploys time and space. Then, to continue my pictorial work, I mix various media to sculpt forms upon which acrylic paint will be applied—a mixed technique, at first glance. The work is halfway between painting and sculpture. I use the form of *nzassa* ['patchwork' in Baule, Akan]. Like the writings, my painting is made of a mixture of materials, for example, cardboard, thread, many types of paint (pastels, acrylics, various pigments, wax, coffee, etc.).

The colors that I use are mostly white, red, and black. The white refers to the kaolin used in traditional rituals. There is also the idea of seeing this white color turn yellow with time, just like the old parchments. The black marks the end of a being, but also the capacity for regeneration. The red symbolizes life, knowledge. We see here that I am winking at [paying homage to] the African spiritual universe that weaves between the lines of my plastic work.

There are also questions of identity, similar to the work of Gauguin: "Who are we? Where are we going? Where do we come from?" Or even closer to us, through the work of Jean Michel Basquiat: "*El gran espectáculo* (history of black people)." My thoughts are based, in part, on the outlook of these two art-

Ernest Dükü  
Seex Anta Coda l'Histoire (Seex Anta: A Coda to History; 2002)  
Mixed media; 115cm x 75cm x 5cm (45¼" x 29½" x 2")  
PHOTO: © ERNEST DÜKÜ



ists, the first on the quest for a certain "primitivism," and the second, with his nods to rock paintings and voodoo spirituality.

*MNR: How do you self-identify in terms of the words "contemporary," "African," and "artist," and especially as an artist from Côte d'Ivoire living in Paris for over three decades?*

ED: From the point of view of my "pictorial writing," at first glance, one might think that I am attached to traditional values. In reality, I lean on these values to make them operational [efficacious]. They allow me to find my uniqueness. I consider myself an artist, and as an artist I dwell amidst creative activities as a response to real preoccupations. This defines my position of contemporary artist, because I translate with the ideas of the current times. This position of contemporary artist allows me to see the events of my time. I believe that the questions I ask result

in the creation of a painting that translates the contemporary expression of my work. Therefore, I discard the idea that a contemporary artist is attached to a certain form of art, or at least, to certain tendencies of artistic expressions.

Since I am of Côte d'Ivoirian origin, living in Paris, the source of my inspiration is centered in Africa. Does this make me solely an African artist? Yes, in the sense that one can say the same thing about a Chinese or an American painter. I would say yes, if the purpose of this identification is to designate an artist whose creative outlook is rooted in Africa. On the other hand, I would say no if this "African artist" tag corresponds to a codified definition tinted with exoticism.

I position myself in the role of the artist, of the one who nurtures the emotions, who interrogates the world, his environment, through the singularity of history. In the numerous examples of "contemporary African art" with diverse forms of expression,

the themes that I tackle seem to be a reading in history. In addition, I have a global geographic vision of things: relationship and identity questions. My artistic thoughts are motivated by general questions revolving around the spirituality of Africa, in particular, and the world, in general.

On another level, the act of creating pictures is articulated around issues of artistic exchange, the relationship of one to the other, the dialogue between the West and Africa, as has happened with sculpture. The African sculpture of the Dan, Baule, and Yoruba fascinated the Cubists and even the Dadaists, and other movements in modern Western art. Also, I question myself on what I call the illumination of the inside. When does Western art influence African creation? Since this meeting point, there has developed a new and an essential level of convergence.

This is in part a source of my plastic expression, which oscillates between painting and sculpture. It is also my response to the recurring question of "contemporary African art." Living in Paris allows me to debate "contemporary African art," the problems generated by its unique expression as well as the impact that this question might have on its creators and, in particular, their creations. One of the problems linked to this situation is that of an artist who is recognized in Africa, but not in the West, as though "international art" means only "international, as seen by the West." Does the African art of today have to pass through the West to gain recognition?

For my part, I have a certain influence in my plastic endeavors. It is the relevance of "historical values" released from an artistic work. Then there is the issue of how others view it. Is African art actually a creation from nowhere, or is it the expression of a multisecular creation with its moments of breakage? Does recognizing African art also require recognizing the history that comes with it? Living in Paris, in this sense, influences my thoughts on the position of the artist.

How is the work of art articulated—what questions animate it, what are the problems of social critique? Artists carry the values of the societies that have shaped them. I believe that, frequently, "contemporary" tends to be viewed as dealing only with what happens in the present. Frequently, in the field of artistic creation, the term "contemporary" tends to be associated with a Western vision. People forget the role of memory, without which art in general and contemporary art in particular would not exist.

My work, my outlook, is the expression of an art that attempts to scrutinize this reflection on memory, contributing to a dialogue between generations. It is at the same time a symbolic expression of the moment when culture and ancestral knowledge link together to create "conceptual art," an opening to the world.

Has Paris influenced my artistic practice? Yes, to the point where it releases a multicultural spirit, just like it is released from a city like Abidjan. It allows me to get answers to questions of identity through the interpretation of events, of my outlook towards history; it is an opening towards the Other and artistic currents. This opening results in multiple forms of African artistic expression. There is the outlook of African artists of the diaspora, and there is the outlook of artists practicing on the continent. This creates a situation of exchanges. The aesthetic currents initiated by the creative circles of Côte d'Ivoire, because my work is partially articulated on memory, question me. Possi-

bly, I am obliged to glance at this artistic scene.

It must be also noted that the spirit of work of an Ivoirian sculptor, Christian Lattier, nourishes my glance because he has questioned the modernity of artistic traditions through his work. The artist Bruly Bouabré, with his inventive method of "Bété" writing, has engaged me even more in the spirit accompanying his thematic approach. On an artistic level, I am interested by what I call the operative force of Ivoirian artistic movements, such as Vohu-Vohu. This movement, started at the Fine Arts School of Abidjan, was prompted by my desire to break away from the academic instructions of art.

As a child, I was highly influenced by the signs in my environment, and I was conscious of their artistic wealth. Today, I attempt to participate in the diffusion of this ancestral knowledge, to confront it with other forms of expression, and to create new ones. I practice this by creating an art of confluences and by scrutinizing the points of convergence. Just as in African thought, where parallel universes correspond to reality, my paintings that refuse framing explore space, look for new horizons and other worlds.

Dialogue of matters, cultures, and sideways glances—my speech with the symbolic elements inscribed on the canvas—questions or attempts to express the convergences of our divergences: My tradition has opened up to other cultures. The universe calls me; the cosmos questions me.

*ERNEST DÜKÜ was born on November 7, 1958, in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire. He was trained in both architecture and fine arts, with degrees from the Ecole d'Architecture la Défense and Université de Paris I, Panthéon Sorbonne, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, and the Ecole National des Beaux Arts. He has been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions from 1995 to the present. Among the venues for his solo exhibitions have been Espace Arts Lebaudy, Galerie Agbe et Gbalicam, and Galerie Philippe Lawson in Paris; Espace Daniel Sorano in Vincennes; and Galerie Lumières d'Afrique in Brussels. Recent group exhibitions include "Modernity in African Art of Today" at the PANAF Festival of Algiers (2009); "African Artists Celebrating the Ethiopian Millennium" at the Belvedere in Baltimore (2007); and the "International Fair of Last Arts" at the Musée des Arts Derniers, Paris (2004), among many others. He is featured in publications that include Ernest Dükü: Feitiço, Galerie Lumières d'Afrique; Nouveau regard sur l'art contemporain africain, Collection Olivier Sultan; Les Afriques: 36 artistes contemporains, Edition: Autrement; as well as in Revue Noire's Anthologie de l'art Africain du XXème siècle.*

#### Notes

1 I wish to thank the French Consulate of Los Angeles and the French Cultural Services for hosting me during a late 2004 week of visits to museums, galleries, and artists' studios in Paris. The trip was the catalyst for several subsequent projects that I curated for the Fowler Museum at UCLA, including an exhibition of the work of Samta Benyahia titled "An Architecture of the Veil" (2007), and the inclusion of Yto Barrada in the exhibition "Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa" (2009). I would also like to thank Gassia Armenian for doing the initial translation of the interview from French.

2 I adapt the term "object-texts" from W.J.T. Mitchell's invention of the phrase "image-text," which he employs to discuss the interstices and overlap between image and text, and the degree to which one can become the other in certain artistic circumstances. In the case of Dükü's work, the explicit three-dimensionality of the inscribed works makes the term "object-text" more appropriate, but with the same meanings embedded within the hyphen (see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

3 For more about writing systems and African art, see Christine Kreamer, Mary Nooter Roberts, Elizabeth Harney and Allyson Purpura, *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Washington DC: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art; Milan: 5 Continents, 2007).