

# Textures of Time – Abstraction, Afronauts, and the Archive in the Artwork of Daniel Kojo Schrade

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My wing is ready for flight,  
I would like to turn back.  
If I stayed timeless time,  
I would have little luck.

GERSHOM SCHOLEM, GREETING FROM ANGELUS



Figure 1: Daniel Kojo Schrade, *afonaut-05L1* (2005).



The work of Afro-German painter Daniel Kojo Schrade represents an important intervention in recent debates on Afrofuturism and contemporary art. In this essay, I aim to unfold Schrade's aesthetics in relation to the abstract-modernist tradition and the Black diaspora, exploring questions of temporality and the use of semantic references, scriptural codes, and figurative elements in his art. I will reconstruct how Afrofuturist tropes in his work, such as the figure of the lone Black space traveller, emerged in response to his on-going engagement with and negotiation of abstraction in modern art history vis-à-vis his own position and experience as a Black diasporic artist with connections to Germany, Ghana, and the US. It is not only on the level of symbolic meaning or cultural influence that his work resonates with arguments about the cultural politics of the Black diaspora. A distinct diaspora aesthetics is also manifested on the level of form, artistic process, and his unique treatment of the materiality of paint and canvas, resulting in a distorted temporality, the synopated times and time-lags characteristic of the Black Atlantic and the Afrofuturist project, the dissolution of borders – between layers of color, but also those between expressive codes and genres –, and fleeting expressions of what one might call an archival impulse. Although the notion of diaspora aesthetics, like Afrofuturism, is open, multifaceted and anything but statically defined among its theorists and practitioners (Nelson 2006), it might be Jewish-American painter R. B. Kitaj, having spent most of his life in self-elected exile, who comes close to something like a definition. In his *First Diasporist Manifesto*, Kitaj writes:

“Diasporist art is contradictory at its heart, being both internationalist and particularist. It can be inconsistent, which is a major blasphemy against the logic of much art education, because life in Diaspora is often inconsistent and tense; schismatic contradiction animates each day. To be consistent can mean the painter is settled and at home.” (1989: 36-37)

It is perhaps this very inconsistency and oscillation which diasporic artists, such as Schrade, have mobilized against the centralized space, the teleological conception of time, and the hierarchical organization of meaning that lies behind the Western colonial project and its racialized epistemology. I will argue that in Schrade's largely abstract oeuvre, the *afro*naut at some point emerges precisely as such a figure of unsettling possibility.

## ABSTRACTION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In a seminal essay, the American art historian W. J. T. Mitchell asked with playful irony: If pictures were people, what kind of people would they be? Would they have a color – or a gender? If pictures were people, what would they *want*? In

Mitchell's eyes, pictures want one thing above all: to be recognized as “complex individuals” which, like people, have “multiple subject positions and identities” (1996: 82). Mitchell's post-humanist reversal of the relationship between viewer and picture not only points to some of the difficulties involved in speaking and writing about pictures; more importantly, it also reminds us that every act of painting and writing takes place in a political arena of representation and recognition and that paintings, at least temporarily as an heuristic exercise, might also be acknowledged as others (or aliens). Abstract painting, in particular since the triumph of abstract expressionism during the Cold War, aided by the cultural policies of the US State Department, in its radical striving for form, its refusal of superficial reference, and its self-reflexive approach towards color and canvas as elements of pure media-specific expression, has since the 1970s been suspiciously viewed by progressive art historians as an expression of a hermetic high modernism. In its supposed neutrality and universalism, which excludes large parts of the world, abstract painting is seen to be permeated by Western ideologies of modernization, bound to US geopolitical interests, and branded the domain of dead white men. It is only in recent years that this view has been questioned by postcolonial critics, who point out the mono-cultural bias of this well-meant critique, emphasizing the global character of aesthetic modernity and the forgotten contributions of non-Western or Black diasporic artists to the history of abstraction in the 20th century. At the same time, it is important to point out that unlike the primitivism of the 1920s, which “had been a one-sided affair that involved unilateral appropriation rather than mutual borrowing, abstract expressionism arose at a moment when cross-cultural interaction became a two-way conversation for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Mercer 2006: 8-9).

Although theorists of abstract expressionism like Clement Greenberg rejected any positive reference to the outside of the painterly codes of the canvas, calling for a purity of abstraction, which only referred to the developmental laws of the painterly material, more recent studies have pointed out that such a purity (including its racial and sexual undertones) never existed, especially when the canon is expanded to include non-white, non-male or non-heterosexual artists, emphasizing that the very critique of aesthetic mimesis formulated by Greenberg and others has to be read against the grain because it is linked to a Jewish intellectual tradition that includes the profoundly historical experience of diaspora, exile, racial trauma, and genocide (Greenberg 1986; Kaplan 1999; Godfrey 2007). Looking at the American configurations of the global and dialogical dimensions of abstract expressionism described by Kobena Mercer, Ann Gibson in her landmark study *The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting 1945-1975* stresses that abstraction was one attractive option, among others, to Black American painters because it allowed artists to escape the racialization of recognizably African or African American images, while still enabling them to search for a universal “ancestral imagery” (1991: 37) of forms.





Figure 2: Daniel Kojo Schrade, *Synapse VIII* (1999).

For marginalized artists the question of abstraction arose not only in relation to the development of the aesthetic material during modernism, but also in relation to the racialized regimes of the gaze in modernity. Abstraction promised liberation from the burden of signification, a “freedom from being read” (Morrison 2006: 138) that encompassed both the painting subject and the painted object. Since the modern racialization of the Black body is also indebted to a Cartesian or logocentric-binary conception of space and the subject, abstract painting’s promise of freedom should not only be defined in negative terms as refusal or unreadability. What appealed to marginalized artists was rather that formal experimentation with aesthetic form enabled the exploration of new forms of subjectivity and being-in-the-world. On the abstract African American painter Norman Lewis, Jeffrey C. Stewart writes:

“Abstract expressionism was a radical salvation for Lewis, despite its social limitations. It was a break with the familiar terrain of Eurocentric art, from the Italian Renaissance to cubism. Abandoning the social, and especially the figurative, abstract expressionism created a rupture in traditional Western ways of thinking and acting ... [The] Western subject [...] was overturned by abstract expressionism, which promoted a radical, desubjectivizing vision of the world. Abstract expressionism thus had the possibility of effecting a revolution not only in aesthetics, but also in the Western perception of subject-based exploitation of the natural

world as the agenda of humanity [...] building a new way of being an artist outside the mimetic strategies of representation and aesthetic colonialism that had defined an African-raided European modernism.” (2015: 171)

Nevertheless, the discourse on minoritarian aesthetic formations is still dominated by sociological approaches and institutional critique, which tend to make the autonomy of aesthetic objects invisible. Only rarely are the works of diasporic artists ennobled with the “dignity of objecthood,” as Mercer (2005: 53) has persuasively argued.

## TEXTURES AND TECTONICS

Schrade was born in 1967 into an artistic family: his mother is a painter, and both his stepfather and brother work as gallerists. For several years, the family lived in a castle his parents had renovated and turned into a studio and gallery space. His bohemian South-German family environment included painters affiliated with the Munich artists’ group SPUR, which for a short time formed the German section of the Situationist International (SI), or left-wing intellectuals with connections to Klaus Croissant, the Stuttgart-based lawyer of the Red Army Faction (RAF).

In the late 1980s, Schrade studied fine arts in Munich and Cuenca, Spain, where he met painter Antonio Saura and came under the spell of abstraction. Among his early influences are American abstract expressionists such as Robert Motherwell, and artists associated with the *art informel*, a distinctly European branch of abstract expressionism that emerged in the 1950s, as represented by artists such as Asger Jorn, Antonio Tàpies or Serge Poliakoff. In the 1990s, Schrade immersed himself in Munich’s bohemian scene and continued his studies at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, where he also began to teach. Since 2008, he has been teaching painting as an Associate Professor of Art at Hampshire College. Reflecting on his time in Munich and the problems Black artists face in Germany, Schrade later recalled in an interview: “It was signaled to me that I could belong to the art scene – as long as I didn’t play up the color of my skin,” adding that the general reaction to the word *Africa* was something akin to panic (Fischer 2009).

Schrade’s engagement with the formal questions informing abstract expressionism and *art informel* permeates his entire oeuvre. This is already evident in some of his works from the late 1990s such as *Untitled* or *Synapse VIII*, which share certain qualities with works by *informel* artist Poliakoff (for example *Composition Abstraite*, 1960, or *Composition gris et rouge*, 1964), above all a virtuosity and luminosity of color, amplified by their concentration on a limited spectrum of color. In the case of Poliakoff this is gray and orange, in *Untitled* or *Synapse VIII* (1999) black



and brown, or a bluish gray/black, with an additional white hue in both of Schrade's paintings. Although gestural elements are not particularly present in all of these examples, there is a shimmer that permeates the surface of fields of color, which result from the translucency of the underlying ground and the irregularities of the brushwork. Both artists work with a wobbly geography where the borders of the planes of color are pitted against each other like continental plates, searching for space, interacting with each other and occasionally engendering balanced spatial illusions. These tectonics point to the importance of layering, which in the case of Schrade resonates with his practice of painting with dry pigments that disallow the blending of colors on the canvas. Unlike Poliakoff, Schrade breaks up binary contrasts of color and form through smaller white color strips with gray grains that connect the upper and lower frame in *Untitled*, and the right and left frame in *Synapse VIII*. Syncopating the vocabulary of forms, such strips mediate between the laminary structures and intensify their chromaticity. From a postcolonial perspective, one might read Schrade's geographical take on color fields quite literally. In our world "where borders gain a paradoxical centrality", writes James Clifford (1997: 7), "margins, edges and lines of communications emerge as complex maps and histories" (ibid: 7).

Whereas Poliakoff divides his canvases in the tradition of Russian icon painting into quadrants (implying the shape of a cross), Schrade's compositions are more decentered, privileging vertical relations of thirds and quarters that can also be found in the segmentation of Motherwell's canvases – an influence that Schrade returns to time and again in conversations, along with Jean-Michel Basquiat, Asger Jorn or Julie Mehretu. Unlike Poliakoff, Motherwell took a skeptical stance towards notions of pure abstraction and medium specificity and rather stressed the symbolic-historic and language-like side of non-figurative painting. This worldliness and openness towards historical reference is expressed through a polyvalent symbolism, scriptural-tachist elements and the titling of the paintings, which provide a semantic frame of interpretation. This is most evident in Motherwell's series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, which he worked on from the late 1940s to his death in 1991. The key motif in this abstract, mainly black and white series is the alternation of vertical stripes and ovals. Through their size, flatness, and monochromaticity, they dominate the pictorial foreground like a blotch (and resemble, according to Motherwell, the cut-off testicles that are presented to the audience at the end of bull fights in Spain). A similar problematization of the foreground (and the illusion of spatial depth) can be found in those paintings that challenge the painterly element through graphic components: in *Dublin 1916, with Black and Tan* (1964) it is a golden arrow on blue ground, resembling a matchstick man, house or tree – a recurrent motif in his early oeuvre, similar to Schrade's later use of the afonaut figure in an otherwise abstract context.

A similar play with the introduction of elements that break-up foreground-background structures occurs in several paintings by Schrade created during different stages of the series *Stop Look Listen*. In one of the upright format paintings of the series, which he started in 2003, the lower third of the composition is dominated by white planes resembling overlapping, arctic patches of ice, which seem to drift on a striated white-grey sea of color from the lower border of the canvas to the middle of the picture. In the upper third of the painting one can recognize black triangular figures that shine through screaming red streaks that are running down the canvas like trails of blood, delimiting the spatial illusion in the lower third like mountains on a horizontal line. Cut off by the upper margin there are two fragments of block letters. They become readable or semantically meaningful in relation to the rest of the series: O and K – the last two letters of the word "Look". Over this already quite complex structure Schrade applies another layer: three huge sand colored ovals with pointed bottoms. The ovals at the left and right margin are cut off; their grainy-scraped, opaque surface structure contrasts with the vertical streaks of color. Unlike the black ovals in Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, Schrade's ovals are not an integrated "part" of the picture or its composition – in Schrade's painting, instead of being *in* the picture, they seem to rest *on* the painting like leaf gold and leap into the eye with almost haptic force. One is tempted to explain this difference, using the words of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, as the difference between the *detail* and the *pan*. Whereas in the case of the detail the singularity of the appearance and the totality of the picture are mediated in a stable manner without troubling supplements, the pan engenders a disruptive effect that resembles the *punctum* described by Roland Barthes in his meditation on photography. Didi-Huberman describes the pan as a hysterical "symptom of paint within the picture" (2005: 261), arguing that paint should be understood as a "material cause" (ibid: 266), as a "sovereign accident" (ibid:256) that violates and tyrannizes representation, because it "insists" (ibid: 266) in the picture. While the detail can be extracted from the picture and tends towards stability and closure, the pan remains "semiotically labile and open" (ibid: 269). Unlike the punctum, the pan is not focused towards a point in the picture, but privileges the foreground and "frontal expansion" (ibid: 264). The pan does not simply demand a different perspective of contemplation; it delineates "another state of painting within the representative system of the picture." It marks the "expansive force" of the local in the global. Such moments of the "intrusion of the paint", according to Didi-Huberman, are "*partial intensities* in which the customary relation between the local and the global is upset: the local can no longer 'isolate itself' from the global, as in the case of the detail; on the contrary, it invests it, infects it" (ibid: 256).





## RELICS AND PALIMPSESTS

Like Motherwell and Basquiat, Schrade likes to work with series and with the variation of motifs. Schrade uses the titles of paintings to forge political-historical references to afro-diasporic modes of consciousness, practices, and symbols. These references form what art historian Robert Farris Thompson has called the “flash of the

spirit,” designating the visual and philosophical “streams of creativity and imagination” (1983: xiii) that run like a subterranean continuum through the Black Atlantic. Schrade integrates scriptural elements into his abstract compositions which open the painting up to a world of reference and a visual symbolism that increasingly does not shy away from singular figurative elements. Occasionally, this figurative dimension affects the foregrounded pictorial elements and augments their materiality with a symbolic dimension, resulting in an un-arrestable “oscillation between the material of painting and the painted” (Lüthy 2004: 94). In some of the frontally expanding fields of paint in series such as *By Any Means*, *Du Bois* or *Stop Look Listen* one can decipher allusions to the stylized form of the Ghanaian percussion instrument Gong-Gong (an iron double bell) or Anansi, the trickster spider. In paintings such as *Afronaut* (1999) *Synapse VI* (1999) or *DuBois IV* (1999) we find the abstract silhouette of a cephalopod that was derived from the play of Schrade’s then three-year old son who loved to stick a Gong-Gong into his toddler cap and walk around as if it was a horned helmet. This, too, might be one of the modalities through which the local in Schrade’s afro-diasporic abstract expressionism insists in the global.

The title *Stop Look Listen* of Schrade’s series already turns modernism’s call to pause and confront the materiality of the painted object with one’s own eyes into an aesthetic program. Schrade’s works on canvas or paper in an exhibition space literally set the viewer in motion and require spatial interaction. Their dimensions range from over-sized canvases to tiny miniatures; on closer examination, their apparently flat surfaces turn out to be a complex assemblage of paint layers, charcoal lines, scriptural fragments (like sequences of letters), and added mineral elements, such as sand or marble dust, which call into question the two-dimensional “flatness” (Greenberg 1986) of the panel painting, subjecting the gaze of the viewer to an oscillatory movement between the macroscopic and the microscopic. While the command to ‘stop’ and to ‘look’ refers to the spatial dimensions of the aesthetic experience or the objecthood and materiality of the canvas, ‘listen’ bears a temporal and dialogical signature conjuring up musical and linguistic perception.

The temporal dimension results both from the de- and re-territorializing movement described above, the controlled interplay of form-setting and form-dissolving elements and their effect on the viewer, and from Schrade’s mode of production. His pictures are created in stages over weeks and months, separated by breaks, in which he applies layer upon layer of paint, demarcates, reapplies, modifies, scrapes away, or re-contextualizes, adding figurative or scriptural elements. Schrade paints with his canvases spread out on the floor – a technique, as he points out, that has a strong performative dimension. The result of this multi-layered painting style is perhaps best described as a palimpsest; in a manner similar to collage or montage, even if they are gradually effaced, traces of earlier stages are still present or *aufgehoben*, even if they do not insist or persist on the surface, but now exist as an



archive of multiple underground inscriptions which dialogue with each other underneath the paint, forming a latent text reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad",<sup>1</sup> "The pictorial structures that arise in this way are three-dimensional," writes Thomas Huber (2000: n. p). "The composition of the paintings emerges from the depth and is indebted to both tectonics and architecture; forms are created by the layering of planes next to and on top of each other" (ibid: n.p.).

Schrade's afro-diasporic aesthetics of inscription, erasure, remembrance, and superimposition stages and dramatizes the performance of an individual and collective, postcolonial archive which extends both into the past and future. Before and beyond any meaningful pictorial or symbolic content, this artistic mode of production parallels the self-positioning and becoming of afro-diasporic subjectivity in the manner of an existential phenomenology and counter-historiographic or chronopolitical practice. On the one hand, Schrade's work on the surfaces of his paintings resembles the work of the African archeologist from the future imagined by Kodwo Eshun (2003), who searches for hidden, forgotten, and repressed fragments and past connections across the Black Atlantic in our present. On the other hand, the work on these memories that are stored in different layers of paint and oscillate between presence and absence requires construction and improvisation, which can only unfold in an open temporal horizon, because they demand a different future that must be more than the prolongation of a racialized present. As much as the search for specific aesthetic constellations of the material preserves memories of the performative process of painting, the process itself is marked by a futurity, which, after the painting is finished, ventures into the space and the work of the spectator. In an interview, Schrade stated: "There is a quite practical connection between the painting and the layers of time. I work with countless layers of paint. Every layer is a memory, every layer is continued or affects the next one, and the end result is a cre-

<sup>1</sup> Schrade's artistic method, based on a linear temporality of sequential steps that is finally negated through the simultaneity of traces present in the finished painting, recalls Freud's notion of the unconscious as a palimpsest with multiple layers of inscription and different forms of temporality first developed in his 1925 essay "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" (Freud 2008). Contemplating a new children's toy, a wax tablet with a loose sheet of cellophane on top, Freud realized that old notes or drawings made on the surface of the pad remained readable in the underlying wax even when the surface marks were erased. For Freud, the mystic writing pad provides a metaphor for the functioning of the unconscious and the processing of sensory perception. While for Freud repression guarantees the stability of conscious self, it seems that in Schrade's chronopolitical aesthetics of layering it is precisely these traces, related to his engagement with a repressed or lost history, that are key to the survival of the Black subject in an alien environment.

ation permeated by different layers of time which in their layering as a sum total can acquire a larger meaning" (Gunkel 2014).

These moments of perceived time are reinforced by the use of typographic elements (often emphasizing elements from the picture's title, as in a close-up) which, unlike the simultaneity of viewing a picture, require a sequential reading and refer to the indeterminability of the production of meaning – an aspect of Schrade's oeuvre which is also reflected in his serial mode of production. Like the remixes of electronic music producers, it examines motifs in their multiple potentialities. Even the ambivalent status of writing itself – as a medium of an un-arrestable Derridian *différance*, as well as an expression of Western cultural superiority – is further twisted and complicated by Schrade's subtle mode of production. He takes his brush and individually copies typographic letters that belong to the world of mechanical reproducibility and the printed word, thus calling into question the boundaries of symbolic and painterly codes. Like a floating postcolonial relic, writing in Schrade's works often appears in the spaces between foreground and background, or in the transition between different color areas, creating a third space of interpretation and memory.

At the same time, Schrade's abstract compositions are opened up towards reference through the act of writing. Like Asger Jorn, Schrade reminds us that all painting – and writing – develops processually from what has been painted or written before and must be understood as the expression of a *dialogic imagination*, which, according to Mercer's (1994) influential argument, represents an essential feature of Black and diasporic aesthetics across the Black Atlantic. Schrade's use of text particles can thus be read as an echo of tri-continental traditions of applied art (Latin American and West African signs or hand-painted Indian cinema posters, for example) which he integrates as found objects in the manner of *arte povera* – in *Afronauts 08CD01* (2008) he incorporates a printed sack of wheat from Ghana (the home country of Schrade's father) into the canvas. These text particles are further direct reflections of politico-cultural, private and pop-mythological frames of reference: *Stop Look Listen* uses signs which can be found in Ghana at railway crossings, and which themselves are British imports that have been appropriated and often put to new uses.

Other text fragments, together with the pictures' titles to which they refer, allude to Malcolm X, speculations about the African ancestry of Ludwig van Beethoven, or W. E. B. Du Bois, whose notion of double consciousness resonates even on a more formal level with Schrade's use of multiple sign systems in his paintings.





Figure 4: Daniel Kojo Schrade, *Gap Junction II* (2006).

It is not simply through the symbolic content of these references, but through the interleaving of different semiotic codes (reminiscent of advertising or other forms of so-called low art) that Schrade positions himself in the tradition of political painting since the late 1960s, for example in a Black nationalist context the painters of Chicago's AfriCOBRA collective, who like Schrade, insisted on representing the

Black experience but rejected the social realism of other activists, oscillating between abstraction and figuration.<sup>2</sup>

The utilization of writing particles might be understood as a communicative strategy to activate the audience, which is forced to develop a new, simultaneous *and* sequential literacy, and face the painting as a reader and observer. Reading becomes a new form of seeing – and vice versa (Beckwith 2011: 44). Such fragments of writing, especially when working with iconic or slogan-like significations embedded in the picture and titles (“by any means necessary”) indicate that there is an addressee or reader outside of the hermetic world of the painting. In this way, Schrade's works imply a call-and-response structure characteristic of afro-diasporic performances, confronting the spectator, as conceptual artist Adrian Piper phrased it, with the “spatio-temporal matrices in which they're created” (1996: 241).

## DIASPORA AND THE SCENE OF WRITING

Writing, as Schrade practices it, is situated between the word and the letter: sometimes the fragments of letters can be completed to become meaningful words, in other paintings their purely graphic character dominates. Occasionally, the letters appear as painted block capitals, but they might also have a handwritten character and transpire like a sketched outline through planes of paint. All this activates the cognitive participation of the spectator, because the gesture of sloganeering triumphs over semantic reference and the gaps have to be filled “with the eyes and the lips” (Barthes 1985: 157) in the space beyond the canvas. *Dis poem is to be continued in your mind*, as Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka once put it in an influential poem, which formulated a powerful, syncretic-afro-diasporic poetics of incompleteness and postcolonial re-appropriation. In the rejection of plain readability and closure (augmented by a gestural surplus), writing does not function so much as a quote, but as the quotation of a quote or as a quotation gesture. Unlike the *graphisms* of Cy Twombly, Schrade's diasporic traces of writing are not only decipherable but, like the scribblings of Basquiat, remain interpretable (despite their

2 Because of their connections to Black nationalist agit-prop and vernacular forms of expression, the Chicago based collective AfriCOBRA for a long time was relegated to the rear-guard of art history. Founded in 1969, they postulated an Afrocentric aesthetics that aimed to create “awesome imagery” (Donaldson 2012: 85) of African Americans by putting a figural and literal “shine” (Jones Hogu 2012: 94) on the subjects depicted. Such an intense interest in luminosity and the materiality of color is also characteristic of Schrade's work. For recent reassessments of AfriCOBRA, see Henderson 2012 and Ellsworth 2009.



brokenness) through historical reference (Barthes 1985: 160). This resonates with a hybrid refusal of pure abstraction permeating not only Schrade's oeuvre, but also characteristic of the aesthetic of Black and other non-canonized abstract expressionists since World War II. Historically as well, writing and reading as a diasporic *black secret technology* (to quote the title of A Guy Called Gerald's seminal 1995 Afrofuturist Jungle album) was too precious a good to vaporize semantic reference entirely in a radical gesture of transgression (Gates 1986). Schrade's practice of including fragmented words problematizes the act of reading and writing in a way similar to Basquiat's strategy of crossing out words. The emphasis on the isolated letter, of course, is also reminiscent of graffiti and the "Gothic Futurism" or "Ikonoklast Panzerism" of early HipHop MC and sprayer Rammellzee, who understood his work as a rebellion against the "tyranny" of the alphabet: "In a war against symbols which have been wrongly titled, only the letter can fight" (Tate 1992: 145). At the same time, letters as a trace of the performative act of writing that is subjected to temporality undermine the very "metaphysics of presence" linked to notions of abstract painting as a narcissistic, masculinist "mirror of the painter" (Krauss 1994: 70) which postcolonial and queer-feminist art history has challenged.

This openness towards the referential in Schrade's work is evident not only in playful titling or drawn or painted word fragments, but also through the figurative references embedded in such scriptural gestures. One of the most important references is linked to the omnipresent parasol or umbrella motif, which often develops out of the graphic lines Schrade applies to the interstices between foreground and background. Paul Klee is said to have described the graphic line as a "footpath and travel guide through the imaginary country of the picture" (Geier 1993: 4) and this geographic metaphor seems to be fitting here as well. If Schrade's paint layers evoke associations of continents and landscapes, then the line as a trace of manual activity points to movement, migration, and diasporic connections. Semiotically and gesturally, these lines have an extremely complex function in Schrade's work. As markers of ambivalence and in-between-ness, they can either turn into writing or into shapes and symbols. Culturally, the parasol is also a complex image: 19<sup>th</sup> century racist and colonial caricatures often showed Africans or African Americans with parasols as a failed and ridiculous imitation of Western civilization and its white epidermic ideal. At the same time, parasols are an important prop in New Orleans Second Line parades and conjure the subversive aspects of mimicry and the carnivalesque in the afro-diasporic tradition. In Schrade's cosmology, the parasol directly refers to visionary Jamaican dub reggae producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry. In the 1970s, as an alternative to the Black nationalist and religious traditions of Rastafarianism, the remix pioneer Lee Perry began to integrate science fiction, space, and alien metaphors into his private cosmology and to stylize himself as an extra-terrestrial afronaut by means of a range of eccentric (or: ex-centric) costumes,

aliases and mad props (CDs used as magic amulets, pressing irons, umbrella hats, amongst others) to remind us that "not all aliens come from outer space" (Corbett 1994: 7). The musical trickster Lee 'Scratch' Perry resorted to extra-terrestrial tropes in order to lend expression to diasporic experiences of alienation and abduction, but also as a means to open up a creative space of possibility resulting from the non-standardized, surreal-psychedelic usage of often antiquated studio technology in his Black Ark studio.<sup>3</sup> As a modernist border crosser and as a radically anti-essentialist figure, the afronaut represents not only lost *roots*, but above all the de-centred *routes* taken across the Black Atlantic by Black people and Black forms of cultural knowledge over the past 400 years.

In an essay for the Afrofuturism exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, curator Zoé Whitley notes: "Afrofuturism is primarily representational. [...] Often, the human figure serves as a compass for the viewer in otherwise foreign surroundings – from flamboyant gold lame against the skin to dystopian topography extending to the horizon." (2013: 22) As notable exceptions to this observation, she mentions Ellen Gallagher, Kira Lynn Harris and Sanford Biggers – and one might also add Schrade to this lineage, which not only reaches back further to Norman Lewis in the post-World War II era (Stewart 2015) but which also calls into question precisely the art historical hypostasis of the figuration/abstraction dichotomy on which Whitley's argument is based.

Around the year 2000, Schrade began a series entitled *Afronaut*, and here one can register not only an increased presence of referential and figurative elements but also the final appearance of the human figure previously only hinted at in Schrade's paintings. The series *by any means* for example refers to the famous photo of Malcom X published in *Ebony* magazine in September 1964 which shows Malcom X with a M1 machine gun raising a curtain to peer through a window. *By any means I* (2002) and *by any means II* (2003) are vertical, abstract compositions, in which red and yellow color planes in a sea of black evoke associations of the window frame, the window, and the curtain. Malcom X, however, is not visible. In striking contrast to this missing subject or figure, the afronaut in Schrade's work appears in a variety of figurative incarnations – from the monochrome UFO to the Black male torso, sometimes painted in the detailed Afrocentric psychedelic style of

3 In an interview with David Toop, Perry described his Black Ark Studio (whose name, of course, resonates directly with Paul Gilroy's notion of the ship as *chronotopos* of the Black Atlantic) in Afrofuturist terms: "It was like a space craft. You could hear space in the tracks. Something there was like a holy vibration and a godly sensation. Modern studios, they have a different set-up. They set up a business and a money-making concern. I set up like an ark... You have to be the Ark to save the animals and nature and music" (Toop 1995: 114). On Perry's Afrofuturism, see also Nagl (1998: 71-72).



AfriCOBRA or Chris Ofili. Most frequently, though, the afonaut figure appears as the dashed-off charcoal silhouette of an astronaut's helmet or an umbrella (parasol), emerging from Schrade's vibrant color compositions, layered surfaces and wobbly borders.



Figure 5: Daniel Kojo Schrade, *Brother Beethoven 06L8* (2006).

The characterization of the afonaut through these two props goes back to the cover photo of Kula Shaker's 1999 album *Peasants, Pips and Astronauts*. Schrade in a 2004 catalogue included this album cover as supplementary material. In its floating movement, we might interpret the afonaut as an heir to and variation of the strange, Gong-Gong-inspired cephalopod that populated several of his late 1990s paintings such as *DuBois IV* (1999). As the agent of a radically different hermeneutics and chronopolitics, Schrade's afonaut is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's equally extra-terrestrial angel of history (and also, in the transition between graphic and painterly codes, line and surface, of Paul Klee's water color *Angelus Novus* (1920), which inspired Benjamin's "Theses On The Philosophy of History"). Like Sun Ra and other Afrofuturist figures, Benjamin's angel is a post-eschatological figure. He is propelled backwards by the storm of progress from a paradise lost into a future which he cannot see, looking at the course of history "which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin 1968: 257), appearing as one single catastrophe. It is already "after the end of the world," as Sun Ra stated on

the soundtrack of John Coney's *Space is the Place* (1974).<sup>4</sup> Although Sun Ra and the Afrofuturist afonaut are travelling this apocalyptic timeline in a different direction, from the future back to the past, like Benjamin's angel, they are disarticulating a messianic promise from the linear philosophy of history. It is maybe quite fitting in this regard that Schrade's afonaut seems to have sidestepped this timeline entirely, moving laterally *across* the canvas. In his (or her) sketchy and fleeting appearance, the afonaut might also be read as a relatively direct reference to Basquiat's repeated use of symbols of Black self-empowerment like the omnipresent royal crown he quickly tagged in graffiti style, which Schrade also references in the late 1990s in works such as *zero gap II* or early paintings from his *Brother Beethoven* cycle.

Ranging from utterly abstract compositions to paintings that use the human figure precisely as what Whitley had dubbed a "compass for the viewer in otherwise foreign surroundings" (2013: 22) the series' title playfully, and with compelling poetic license, riffs on the alleged North African ancestry of German composer Ludwig van Beethoven, an Afrocentric theory first popularized by Jamaican-American journalist J.A. Rodgers in the 1940s. In the isolated context of growing up Black in Germany, the power of the Black Beethoven image can hardly be underestimated. Although Rodgers' theory has been refuted (Rinchart 2013; de Lerma 1990), Schrade uses the title and the pop cultural associations it evokes as a poetic symbol that defamiliarizes white washed notions of European history, hints at repressed transnational filiations across the Black Atlantic, and provides a cipher of Afro-German excellence, while connecting the classical German musical heritage with African American 1960s and 70s soul culture.<sup>5</sup> These genealogies also resonate with the artist's biography. Schrade is an accomplished classical cello player but has also fronted a blues band and jammed with Free Jazz legend Wadada Leo Smith. *Brother Beethoven 06L8* (2006) engenders such a notion of history in the subjunctive mood by answering the expectations set up by the painting's title with an image of the afonaut, represented here through the hastily-drawn umbrella and a

4 For a compelling treatment of Afrofuturism's messianic and apocalyptic streams, see also van Veen 2016.

5 Since Beethoven's family was from Flanders, which for a long time was under Spanish rule, writers like Rodgers assumed a Moorish origin to account for contemporary descriptions of Beethoven's dark appearance. The persistence of the popular discourse on "Black Beethoven" is perhaps best read against the whitewashing of classical music history, which has relegated the contributions of Black composers and performers such as Joseph Boulogne Chevalier de Saint-George (1745-1799), George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower (1778-1860), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1875-1912), William Grant Still (1895-1978), Ulysses Kay (1917-1995), or George Walker (born 1922) to mere footnotes.



spaceship that emerges from a huge, light-blue blotch of paint by way of a few defining charcoal lines. While setting into play of a set of spatial and semiotic ambivalences through his layered and tactile brushwork and graphic usage of written fragments, *Brother Beethoven 06L8* (2006) is one of the paintings from this period of the artist's work that comes closest to a realistic representation of the human form. Behind the mothership, that seems to aggressively block the viewer's gaze like a protective shield, two bald and bare-chested Black male torsos rise up in an austere, restrained pose: the project of symbolically re-constructing the Black body is only possible in the shadow of extra-terrestrial technology.

In recent years, Schrade has expanded on these themes and stylistic preoccupations, occasionally substituting the afonaut with other alien proxies and exploring ways to integrate figurative and painterly reproduced photographic elements, often relating to the human body, to an even greater degree in his paintings, straddling the borders between abstraction and an Africanized take on pop art. In works such as *Afonauts-Anglophone*, *Afonauts-Francophone* and *Afonauts-Lusophone* (2010), he plays with advertisements for the French cheese brand La Vache Qui Rit popular in Francophone West Africa and appropriates other Western commodities such as the Michelin man made of tires or the retro-futurist image of the deep sea diver as variations on the space traveller, suggesting an enigmatic extra-terrestrial or submarine space of free-floating movement. In *Brother Beethoven 08C04* (2010) we finally encounter Lee 'Scratch' Perry directly, wearing his famous umbrella hat and holding up an electric iron like a warrior's shield, while the *Brother Lafargue* series (2015) points to the Black ancestry of Karl Marx's son-in-law and author of the anarchist classic *Le Droit à la Paresse* (1880). Some of these works are concerned with issues of site-specificity and the project of decolonizing the imperial archive: 'La Vache Qui Rit' was printed on the back of the cardboard which Senegalese painter Aboubacar Diané had used as a canvas and which Schrade had found in the collection of the Iwalewa House gallery at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. The Michelin man references the work of the late Nigerian painter and Afrobeat musician Prince Twins Seven-Seven, a representative of the Oshogbo school, who Peter Wollen once aptly dubbed an "idiosyncratic-art star from a hybrid matrix of traditional culture, urban vernacular culture and upmarket tourist art" (1993: 203).<sup>6</sup> By connecting his own artistic practice to these African artists and the democratizing tendencies of vernacular practices, Schrade not only points to the crisis of modernism in the post-independence period, but also enriches our understanding of the multiple modernities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creating an awareness, as Mercer put it in an essay on non-Western pop art, "of the contradic-

tory dynamics of popular culture when viewed in a global perspective" (2007: 7). Schrade's skillful, but technologically obsolete practice of manually reproducing photographs in otherwise abstract compositions extends his interest in non-Western sign-writers, playfully riffing on notions of verisimilitude that were highly valued by low income groups who could not afford photomechanical or electronic forms of reproduction.

Pointing to a wealth of transnational allusions, such faded inscriptions, fleeting figures, signs and overlapping temporalities and materialities in Schrade's works create a diasporic archive which not only conjures up the past but also holds itself radically open to the future. Through the orchestrated interplay of formal construction, improvisation and chance, Schrade's aesthetic can be understood as the Afro-German expression of a Black *vernacular modernism* in which "formal mastery" and the "deformation of mastery" (Baker 1987: xvi) go hand in hand, rewriting art history from a cosmopolitan perspective and testifying to the generative powers of Afrofuturism in a yet to be decolonized art world.

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6 On Prince Twins Seven-Seven and the pioneering role of German Jewish anthropologist Ulli Beier in the creation of the Oshogbo school, see also Glassie 2010.



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Henriette Gunkel, kara lynch (eds.)

# We Travel the Space Ways

Black Imagination, Fragments,  
and Diffractions

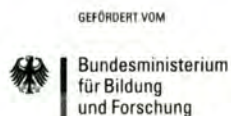


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A new take on Afrofuturism, this book gathers together a range of contemporary voices who, carrying legacies of 500 years of contact between Africa, Europe, and the Americas, reach towards the stars and unknown planets, galaxies, and ways of being. Writing from queer and feminist perspectives and circumnavigating continents, they recalibrate definitions of Afrofuturism.

The editors and contributors of this exciting volume thus reflect upon the re-emergence of Black visions of political and cultural futures, proposing practices, identities, and collectivities.

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