

## Magdalene Odundo: *Untitled # 10*

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The first striking thing about Magdalene Odundo's *Untitled #10* (1995) is its serenity and silence (fig. 1). This stunning ceramic vessel, with its modest, even prosaic title was acquired by the Newark Museum, New Jersey in 1996.<sup>1</sup> It is a signature work in oxidised terracotta—hand-coiled by the artist and highly burnished. It has a sculptural rather than functional form.

On the third of May 1996, curator of African arts Anne M. Spencer wrote a memorandum to Mary Sue Sweeney Price, the longstanding Director of the Newark Museum. This document, held in the archives of the Newark Museum, forms part of the necessary bureaucracy surrounding Magdalene Odundo's pot. It records Spencer's justification for its purchase. It is a measured curatorial plea intended for the judicial court of an acquisition committee. It is normal museum business: scholarship underpinning a transaction. Rhetoric for a cheque. At one level it is the platform for investment; on another it is a consideration of legacy. After all, here is an object that will potentially enter the public realm in perpetuity.

In some ways, this may have been an easy decision for the museum's acquisitions committee to make. Odundo's work was, by this time, already revered in America. The Fowler Museum at UCLA was amongst the first American museums to acquire a vessel by Odundo (*Untitled*, 1984)<sup>2</sup> A similar pot to *Untitled # 10* had been acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 1996, another by the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, and yet another by The Art Institute of Chicago. These later pots, with their family resemblance, from the same firing, sit in a pantheon of museum holdings in the United States.

Unusually, the case for the acquisition of *Untitled # 10* was made jointly. Spencer's argument came from her position in the Department of African Arts. Her colleague Ulysses Dietz wrote in support too, as Curator of the Newark Museum's Decorative Arts Department.<sup>3</sup> His case focused on a cross-cultural narrative. *Untitled # 10* would cement the interests of the Decorative Arts and the African Arts Departments, and give the pot a home in, and across, both. Odundo's vessel would add weight to the Newark Museum's collection because of its status as "a piece of contemporary British ceramics."<sup>4</sup> It would have the same cultural profundity as major works by the studio potter Bernard Leach, who donated key pieces to the museum in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> But *Untitled # 10* would also, as Dietz remarked, be "the first piece of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Purchase 1996 Louis Bamberger Bequest Fund, accession number 96.29. In the Newark Museum exhibition *Great Pots*: it is described as *Vessel with black surface*. See Ed., Ulysses Grant Dietz, *Great Pots: contemporary ceramics from function to fantasy* (2002) The Newark Museum, Guild Publishing, Madison, Wisconsin, p. 171. See also <http://www.newarkmuseum.org/StudioPotter.html>

<sup>2</sup> See Ed., Anthony Slayter-Ralph, (2004), *Magdalene Odundo*, Lund Humphries, Aldershot and Burlington, VT for the catalogue of Odundo's work. *Untitled* of 1984 is catalogue number 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ulysses Grant Dietz currently holds the position of Chief Curator, Newark Museum. Anne Spencer was Curator of the Africa, the Pacific and the Americas Department. Mary Sue Sweeney Price retired after 20 years as Director of the Newark Museum in 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum in the Newark Museum accession file for *Untitled # 10*. Ulysses Dietz to Mary Sue Sweeney Price, May 3 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Leach, Low conical bowl, 1959 (60.483); Leaping Salmon vase, 1957 (91.82)

studio pottery by a Euro-African.”<sup>6</sup> Dietz went on to clarify this reason so as not to “pigeon-hole” Odundo’s, “aesthetic and technical influences [which] range as far and wide as ancient Greece and Maria Martinez in the American Southwest.”<sup>7</sup>

Dietz cradles Odundo’s *Untitled #10* (1995) between great civilisations and their artefacts. He places it both in Africa and in England and beyond. It is a studio pot in the tradition of Leach as well as a pot that has grown out of Africa. It belongs not to one department in the Newark Museum but to the whole institution. And this tension of ownership is replicated in other museums: in the British Museum, Odundo’s work is held in the Africa Department. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a major piece is cared for by the department of Modern and Contemporary Art. *Untitled #10* (1995) is like all of Odundo’s ceramic work, a pot of the world: classical, indigenous, African, English, European—in a word, universal.

*Untitled # 10* is also a pot that contains its differences. Odundo says a good deal about the general impulses and sources of her practice, but she says very little about any individual pot. Her public lectures and commentaries dig into the same themes of cross-cultural reference noted by Dietz and her response to historical artefacts, human behavior and the cultural and social contexts of objects. She wants her pots to be both ordinary and exceptional. They may take their genesis from the memory of an African market place or the deep and rarely seen objects of a specialist museum. Underlying all of this is a feeling that an artefact can have a symbolic and reverential character: a site of solemnity and gravity. She quotes art historian Laure Meyer who has argued that “the overwhelming majority of African Arts spring from religious rites,” adding that:

All human beings make art and objects to satisfy the need to deal with inevitable passages in life that [characterise] our condition, that which is lived and extinguished at death. In all of us there is a human need to mark these with ritual and ceremony while alive, and to appease these with those souls of the departed.<sup>8</sup>

This is deep work for a single pot, and might be sententious or polemical in hands that were less sure (or more immodest) than Odundo’s. On the other hand, potter and author Edmund de Waal has noted that, “it is from the traditional clay pot that these pristine, self-consciously modern and urban vessels are derived.”<sup>9</sup> As such, Odundo is also doing what female African potters have been doing for centuries: investing working wares with cultural meaning.

One of the reasons for the profundity of *Untitled # 10* lies, I think, in its serene, silent poise. Odundo learned the value of repetition and simplification of form through potters such as Hans Coper’s, whose monumental ceramic vessels from the 1960s were an influence, and under the guidance of several African potters. The scholar of craft and design Tanya Harrod records that Odundo was encouraged to visit Africa—specifically the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja, Nigeria—by another important

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Magdalene Odundo, ‘Object, Art and Material Culture’, in *Literature, the visual arts and globalization in Africa and its diaspora* (2014) Trenton, Africa World Press, p. 96

<sup>9</sup> Edmund de Waal, *The Pot Book* (2011), Phaidon Press Limited, London and New York, p. 205



mentor, the potter Michael Cardew, so that she might “take another look at African culture...It was a turning point. She was to become a great potter, perhaps, aside from Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and Ladi Kwali, the greatest to be inspired by Michael.”<sup>10</sup> Odundo spent three months in Abuja in 1974 “learning about clay, pots and the firing of kilns from very, very humble yet extremely accomplished potters.”<sup>11</sup>

Under the tutelage of African potters Ladi Kwali (figs. 2, 3 and 4), Lami Toto, and Asibe Ido at the Pottery Training Centre, Odundo explains that she learned

how to hand-build vessels using the Gwari traditions. The three women came from different villages and taught very differently. Their approach to making varied slightly and all three had their individual decoration motifs. This way of teaching suited my temperament. I was fully engaged and used my time to learn from each potter. My experience at Abuja was transforming.<sup>12</sup>

A year later in 1975 Odundo visited the Kenyan pottery villages in Busia and in particular Bunyala as part of her research for her dissertation at the West Surrey College of Art & Design. In xxx she uncovered a personal lineage of practice in Africa when she was informed that her maternal grandmother had been an accomplished potter in the village.

Perhaps the starting-point for every one of Odundo’s pots is in an African village. *Untitled # 10’s* (1995) Gwari lineage may be seen most evidently in its softly-swollen body, associated with the water pots made by Kwali, Toto and Ido. What is missing is the incised decoration, the quickly scored outlines of African insects, fish, birds or crocodiles. The conventional neck and rim is missing, too. Instead, Odundo’s *Untitled #10* (1995) is painstakingly burnished: her hand has caressed the pot to leave no trace.

There is nothing to disturb the smooth, perfected finish of this pot save the abstract and self-determining, smoky, cloudy effect of its firing.<sup>13</sup> The lightest touch appears on the rim, and faintly across the body: like the first glimpse of a night sky. But when you look deeply at the vessel, its globular body and swooning, swooping neck are alive with an atmospheric, oil-slick-like surface. The serene stillness now seems like a cloud formation or a rock pool surface, a moment away from the change brought by a breath of wind or wave.

*Untitled # 10* (1995) may have started its life in a Gwari village. But it is also a pot made by a mature artist, in a form that first appeared (and referred to as “angled”) as early as 1984.<sup>14</sup> Variants on the theme appeared in Odundo’s oeuvre in the 1980s and 1990s and indeed up to the present day. This form with the swelling body and the

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<sup>10</sup> Tanya Harrod, *The Last Sane Man: Michael Cardew* (2012), New Haven and London, Yale University Press, p. 378-9

<sup>11</sup> Magdalene Odundo, text panel for the exhibition *Ladi Kwali*, Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, 5 January to 2 May 2015. Odundo also names these potters as influences: Peter Gboko; Bawa Ushafa; Abie Karo; Kainde Ushafa.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> The Newark Museum accession file for *Untitled # 10* notes that Odundo had given the vessel “three reduction firings after the initial oxidation sintering which gives it that iridescent metallic finish.”

<sup>14</sup> Bill Ismay gift, York Museums Trust, *Untitled*, illustrated in Ed. Anthony Slayter-Ralph, *Magdalene Odundo* (2004) Lund Humphries, Aldershot and Burlington VT catalogue number 23

widely everted rim has held her attention for nearly thirty years. As curator Marla C. Berns has commented on the evolution of Odundo's vessel type— "the oblique openings of their mouths have grown larger and their upper lips have been gradually teased upward and backward into the graceful, sweeping curves" of a vessel like *Untitled # 10*.<sup>15</sup>

So *Untitled # 10* is a work with a back story and a future. It owes, like so much of Odundo's work, to a career of thinking. It is also borne out of intensive looking at refined things and everyday goings on: objects in museums and the weft of life in Africa. As the designer and teacher Gert Staal notes, "behind it all remains the power of the African ceramic tradition—life in an open society with no separation between the practical and the sacred, where language and body language can convey a wealth of meanings."<sup>16</sup> It owes to formal and informal thinking. Many works by Odundo begin to take shape in the store rooms or galleries of the museum. Sometimes a whole programme will take place there.

Odundo has remarked that she has

used museums as a starting point for acquiring knowledge through which one would seek enlightenment. This knowledge has enabled me to reclaim in mind and spirit that heritage lost to Africa even only in perception and not in reality. Through knowing one's heritage it is possible to establish a strong identity which enables and empowers the mind and the self.<sup>17</sup>

Odundo made this comment in connection with the exhibition *Acknowledged Sources* held at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth in 2001. This was an exhibition where a small group of artists were invited to intervene with the museum's historic collection of "paintings, prints, ornaments, bric-a-brac, and other objects of Art and Vertu" dating from 1908. This was a maelstrom of a collection with works acquired by the museum's founders, the Russell-Coteses, from all corners of the world on their extravagant travels. Its attraction to Odundo was precisely because of this indiscriminate, colonialist acquisition of objects. In addition, Odundo found the town of Bournemouth, still retained "a colonial atmosphere much like that of Mombasa in colonial years with tourists and sailors everywhere."<sup>18</sup> This was disquieting to her, and Odundo "found it very difficult to express how burdensome colonialism was and has been for many of us who come from Africa and former colonies." She felt her response needed to "reclaim in mind and spirit that heritage lost to Africa" and she did so by establishing "a platform on which to *play and display* a small personal history."<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> For this project Odundo took on the interlocking roles

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<sup>15</sup> Maria C. Berns (1995) *Ceramic Gestures: new vessels by Magdalene Odundo*, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, p. 13

<sup>16</sup> Gert Staal, 'Silent Dancers' in *Magdalene Odundo* (1994), 's-Hertogenbosch, p. 15

<sup>17</sup> Magdalene Odundo 'Acknowledged Sources' unpublished essay for the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Simon Olding, 'A Victorian Salon: an introduction', *A Victorian Salon* (1999), Lund Humphries: London, p. 7



of maker, curator, collaborator and commentator; she became a placer of objects as well as an agitator with objects. She achieved this by juxtaposing her own work in display cases otherwise full of the Russell-Cotes bric-a-brac and by ceremonially draping a Victorian painting with African fabric. And most dramatically of all, she made a dinner service for the mordant dining room with a transfer printed image in magenta of herself with her brothers taken in New Delhi in the 1970s?. Nothing like this dinner service had been seen before or since the Russell-Cotes exhibition. It was a work of subterfuge, expiation and contest. It was a piece with its autobiography made explicit. It was disquieting. Her contribution to the exhibition *Acknowledged Sources*, was, in its own way, as English as it was African in a manner not unlike the cross-cultural currents of *Untitled # 10*.

But contemplated alone *Untitled # 10* is neither ironic nor interventionist. It is serene. The extreme edge of the open neck, to my mind, suggests sound as well as silence.<sup>21</sup> This extravagant neck might allow sound to escape so this is a pot that might sing. It might also draw sound in so this is a pot that might listen. Odundo has remarked how she is interested in “the body and its embellished glory,” further imbuing *Untitled #10* with sentient potential.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps, then, the neck of this pot, with its suggestion of a vertebra, and its intense, acute accent, is a description of African hair, specifically “the dramatic hairstyles worn in the past by Mangbetu women in the Congo region of Africa,” as Dietz has argued.<sup>23</sup> Indeed Odundo once juxtaposed a colonial poster showing such a hairstyle against pots similar to her own.<sup>24</sup> *Untitled # 10* can thus also be read as both African and female. She has established, as curator Augustus Caseley-Hayford says, ‘a trans-global, trans-temporal visual system of her own: modern, yet simultaneously old, African yet resolutely European.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Magdalene Odundo, ‘Objects, Art and Material Culture’, p. 95

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ulysses G. Dietz, catalogue reference for *Untitled # 10* in *Unbounded: New Art for a New Century* (2009) Newark Museum, Newark, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Objects, Art and Material Culture’ p. 105

<sup>25</sup> Augustus Caseley-Hayford, ‘Magdalene Odundo: breath and dust’ in *Resonance and Inspiration: new works by Magdalene Odundo* (2006) Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville, p. 14