

BIOGRAPHY



Photo: Still from 'Nama' by Nikunja (2008)

Nikunja born in Basel, Switzerland, lives and works in France, Mauritius, internationally. From 1975 to 1979, he studied painting and video art at the Basel Art Academy (Kunstgewerbeschule Basel). Initially, Nikunja started working within the development of subjective painting. His artwork was already exhibited as part of the '50 Young Swiss Painters' show at Seedamm Kulturzentrum, Zürich in 1980 and at Kunsthalle Basel in 1981. Later, Nikunja developed further towards radical painting. Nikunja perceived his work as "incarnations of existential forces" and used unusual materials like butter, cooked plants, various ashes, and carbon. These works were shown in smaller galleries and alternative art spaces in Basel, Zürich, and as a larger show, at the Kulturhaus Palazzo Liestal Kulturzentrum (1982). This show was accompanied by a first large-scale installation, which covered the whole building of the Cultural Centre with hundreds of corn plants and car lamps, lit up at night.

His early work in Basel was inspired by Vedanta and Integral Yoga philosophies, Arte Povera and German artist Joseph Beuys' enlarged comprehension of art (Der erweiterte Kunstbegriff), but also by informal painters as Agnes Martin, Mark Rothko, and Mark Tobey.

In 1983, Nikunja realised 'Heart Stream' commissioned by the City of Basel. This 150 meter long art installation on the river Rhine in the Centre of the City of Basel was composed out of earth, copper and tree trunks, drawing into the streaming waters of the powerful river. At night, underwater lamps would mysteriously light up the artwork. The work was sponsored by the City Council as a parallel event to the international art fair Art'83, Basel. The same year, he realised a large installation in front of the Art'83, Basel entrance, titled 'Heart Flames', flag-

like paintings on large fabrics with earth, fluid copper and pigments. Some of the works were realised by a savage painting action with 23 unbound 4 year old kids, directed by Nikunja, a reflection to the 'Junge Wilde' ("fair-fashion") gallery exhibitions in the Art Fair.

After travels and further individual exhibitions in, amongst others, Basel, Lugano, Berlin, Zürich, and Saint-Gall, Nikunja received the Swiss Art Prize (a national grant for young artists) and a grant for ART-EST, a 9-month residency in Poland in 1991 and 1992. This resulted in painting exhibitions at the National Gallery in Gdansk (1992), Warsaw (1992) and at the International Cultural Centre in Krakow (1993). In 1994, he held an exhibition at the European Parliament in Strasbourg under the patronage of Catherine Lalumière, then General Secretary.

From 1993 till 1998, Nikunja worked in Cologne, Germany and was represented by Gallery Inge Baecker. In 1994, he showed his 'Cologne Bridge Project', a large-scale painting work on the pillars of the monumental iron Cologne Railway Bridge at Art Cologne.

In 1995, Nikunja realised the 'Czech Flag' project, a first public and interactive installation and performance work on the Republic Square (Náměstí Republiky) in the centre of Prague. During several days, mask like intimate "portrait" paintings were realised through and on the Czech Flag (420 high x 700 cm wide).

Nikunja worked with the over 100 volunteering participants. The participant would take place on a comfortable armchair. Nikunja would cover his/her face with the flag and transport the energy he would perceive from the person into an informal mask-like painting. The work destroyed the "absolute" form of the original design of the national symbol through the intuitive, subjective forms.

The work underlines the relation of the "intimate" (act of painting/space between two persons) towards "the public" (act of arrest/space in public), an aspect that accompanied several later works.

The project caused great public attention with TV reports accompanying the project (Czech TV Nova). Nikunja and his helpers were initially arrested, but the flag was returned after their release. In 1997 it was exhibited at the UN in Geneva as part of the 'Oneness-World Vision Reality' project.

In 1996, the 'Japanese Flag' project (following the same concept) was realised in Kyoto, Japan with the support of the Goethe Institute and the Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art. The same year, Nikunja had a 3-month artist in residency in Harare, Zimbabwe, which was supported by the Swiss Embassy. He showed his work at the National Gallery Bulawayo Zimbabwe and at Liza's Gallery in Harare.

Born out of the 'Czech Flag' project and principles, Nikunja created 'Oneness-World Vision-Reality' in 1997. This was supported by the City Council of Geneva and realised under the patronage of Vladimir Petrovsky, former Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva. Nikunja used a multitude of national flags, which related to large-scale paintings of conflicting nations, for instance Israel versus Palestine, United States versus China, India versus Pakistan, and Japan versus China.

Nikunja created the “subjective portraits” with the participation of over 300 volunteering participants during a 2-month open studio work in public space at Maison des Arts du Grütli in multicultural Geneva. UN Director-General Petrovsky opened the large exhibition at the UN’s Palais des Nations in the presence of over 100 ambassadors and 300 citizens from Geneva. Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited the exhibition twice. In 1998, a large part of these works were exhibited in the Grand Foyer of the UNESCO in Paris in honour of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights celebration and conference.

From 1997 to 2002, Nikunja pursued his research on interdisciplinary and interdependence in art and the creative process in Geneva. Nikunja created a large-scale interdisciplinary performance ‘The Sky Over my House’ at the University of Geneva. The work was realised with the support of renowned alter mondialist and UN Human Rights President Jean Ziegler’s sociological department. 800 spectators attended the unique evening long performance piece. It was created for a stage of 75 by 15 meters and involved choreography, live music and live painting on art objects, created by Nikunja from industrial waste. ‘The Sky Over my House’ was realised just a few weeks after 9/11 and questioned the importance of the creation of the “image” in regards to the dangers of protestant puritanism in the capital of Calvinism. The Rector’s Office of the University declared the performance with 14 naked dancers “pornographic”. They forbade the further exhibition of the artworks from the performance, planned to show in the following month. The scandal provoked many discussions and approved the main purpose of the project.

Nikunja stated that: “Universal values can only be lived individually and subjectively. The project themes of justice, love, transcendence, humility, mother and child, time, birth and death, and grace, cannot be determined by neither politics nor religions. Their determination through external force on the individual will always be and stay an act of violence.”

In 2002, following a project-based selection, Nikunja received a grant by the State of Geneva for a directors course (movie and documentary film) at Oxford University (United Kingdom).

From 1997 onwards, Nikunja created related videos, artistic documents of the painting performances with dancers, models and himself. In this period he also started his collaboration with French choreographer Nadjani Bulin of Reunion Islands. Unlike Yves Klein’s work, Nikunja’s use of body involvement into painting is based on a detailed “spiritual conditioning to the artistic content” of the “model-performer”, similar to a movie-actor preparing for a specific role by his director. Important formal factors of the process were “the touch” (Nikunja paints with his bare hands since 1981) and the texture of the skin on the surface of the painting, a form of “sublimation of matter”, which is not possible by the “industrial touch” of the brush.

From 2003 to 2006, Nikunja lived and worked in Rotterdam. First he received an 18-month artist in residency at Kunst&Complex. This was followed by a permanent studio by the City of Rotterdam.

Besides the continuous painting work with models, like ‘Bettstatt’ (2004), Nikunja created a new body of large painting works and works on papers with crude oil and sheep blood, titled ‘Bagdad Sunset’ (2003 - 2005). They were shown as part of the exhibition at the Alliance Française, Rotterdam in 2005 and are now part of a Swiss art collection.

The most important exhibitions of interactive installations and paintings were the shows of ‘Fellini Now!’ and ‘Reconstruction of the Tower of Babel’ in 2005 at TENT and ‘Salvation’ at Alliance Française Rotterdam. The interdisciplinary performance ‘Testament of the Wind’ (inspired by the book of the same title by Reunion Island poet Christian Jalma) was performed at Muiderpoort Theatre in Amsterdam in the same year.

Since 2006, Nikunja lives and works on French overseas Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean. His move was inspired in 1998 by an earlier 3-month artist in residency at L’Oasis Le Port on Reunion Island.

This residency was a preparation for the exhibition at UNESCO in Paris. In 2000, Nikunja realised the first video-performance work, titled ‘Vision:Video’, a solo-video performance on the active volcano of Reunion Island. It was made in collaboration with British director Dave Tucker. In the same year, Tucker realised Nikunja’s video performance ‘Transforming Buddha’ for a prime-time broadcast on Swiss French TV TSR.

In 2006, Nikunja created ‘Art:Re:Public’. This was the first collaboration with Musée Léon Dierx in Saint-Denis, Reunion Island under direction of Laurence Madeline (now curator at Musée d’Orsay in Paris). The interactive installation related to the museum’s 157 artworks of the famous Ambroise Vollard modern art collection. Nikunja questioned the patrimonial value of the collection and “the past as experience, being always in the present” by the overall multilayered concept of the installation and performance work. With the aid of 157 individual volunteering participants he created new paintings, related to all of the works in the collection. He made a connection with contemporary art and its patrimonial value through the performative involvement of Reunion artist Alain Noel, who was installed motionless on a bed sheet covered bench, clothed in a pyjama. Alain Noel’s hands stretched to the ceiling, in front of his two paintings of the museum’s collection.

This was followed in 2007 by the interdisciplinary performance 'Eagle flight I', which was also shown at Musée Léon Dierx. 'Eagle Flight I' was based on a solo video performance of the same title by Nikunja in 2002 and a collaboration with choreographer Nadjani Bulin. Nikunja also collaborated with the musicians Yann Costa and Sami Pageaux-Waro for the live concert. For the sound creation, Nikunja played the Indian dilruba live.

Nikunja was invited to show 'Eagle Flight II' at the Festival International de Danse Saint-Denis in 2007. The performance was realised in collaboration with South African Elite Model Venantia Otto (Face of Africa 2006) and before mentioned choreographer Nadjani Bulin. The live music was composed and played by Geneva based electronic musician Alain Perret (computer sampling) and Nikunja (dilruba).

In 2007, the experimental short movie 'Comments on Life and Death' (52', HD, DV) was screened at the South African Durban International Film Festival 2007 and at the Cannes International Film Festival, programme du Pavillon Les Cinémas du Monde. The movie was based on an interdisciplinary performance in the Le Théâtre sous les Arbres, Le Port with French actor Théo Triffard, amongst others. The performance and movie questions "the moment of death" in relation to the death of Brazilian artist and designer Mael da Costa, who died in 1994 on Reunion Island of Aids. Mael da Costa had influenced many artists on the island and all performers on the set related to him. The role and process of "video", (as film and as "I see") and "video" as "putting to death the subject of video" (Boris Groys) and "putting to death time", was the main aspect of the movie.

In 2008, Nikunja created and directed 'Nama' (84', HD, DV), a performance based artistic movie, also starring Venantia Otto. The experimental feature film premiered at the Wild Cinema Windhoek International Film Festival in Namibia in the same year. After several other selections and screenings, 'Nama' was awarded 3 times at the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival in 2009 (Best Actress, Best Director, Best Experimental Feature Movie). President of the Jury was Abel Ferrara. A DVD was released in 2010.

The evening long interdisciplinary performance 'Transposed Heads' was performed in 2009 at the Hangar D2 in Le Port. The work questioned cultural identity processes through a network of real time video projections, video performance, real time performance, painting, live music, karate and contemporary dance.

From 2009 till 2012, Nikunja lived and worked mainly in Mauritius. He developed painting performance work with Mauritian actress, performer and writer Mannee (Seeta Jeeanah). Major works of body were 'Queen of Saba' (2010) and 'Vajrayogini' (2011), exhibited at the French Institute in 2011, at Salle d'Art Contemporain Beaudemoulin, Reunion Island (2013) and at Is'Art Gallery, Antananarivo, Madagascar (2014).

Between 2009 and 2012 Nikunja wrote two feature movies: 'Chiamaka' (development supported by the Cultural Ministry, Mauritius, BB Production), and the currently in development 'The Primeval Code' (Alefa Production).

In 2011, the French Institute on Mauritius presented a large exhibition of paintings, objects and partly interactive installations, including the video installation 'Fellini Now!' and 'The Reconstruction of the Tower of Babel'. Furthermore, 'Measure of Man' was shown through a loop video installation projected on milk.

Since 2012 Nikunja works and lives on Reunion Island. 'The Reconstruction of the Tower of Babel' was exhibited at the L'Artothèque de Saint-Denis and at the Débarcadère in the public space in Saint-Paul, Reunion Island during 2013, involving over 1.000 participants.

In 2013, under the title of 'Whispers of the Ancient Sun', Nikunja created a large exhibition of paintings, installations, video and movie-works at the Salle d'Art Contemporain Beaudemoulin, in the City of Tampon, Reunion Island. A part of this exhibition was shown at Is'Art Gallery in Antananarivo, Madagascar in 2014.

Since 2012, Nikunja has done research for the development of his transmedia art installation and movie XANADU, which in 2015 has been selected for the 56th Biennale of Contemporary Art of Venice, Collateral Events, by chief curator Okwui Enwezor for 'ALL THE WORLD'S FUTURES'. The interactive art installation XANADU:THE BASTARD'S DREAM has been exhibited at Istituto Santa Maria della Pieta.

XANADU: THE CONTEMPORARY DREAM TEMPLE is still in further development. A further focus of Nikunja's current research lies on his conception of INTERACTIVE MATTER, which emerged from the Biennale Installation: the matter which lies in between subjects and objects as gravity to be composed.

The conception of INTERACTIVE MATTER really constitutes a central aspect of Nikunja's work since the mid-90ties and the CZECH FLAG project in Prague in 1995.

This expanded conception not only of art beyond "social sculpture" and "interactive art", but also of human and natural sciences, in 2017 was elaborated in academic papers published by Commonwealth University of Doha, Qatar and the University of Goeteborg, Sweden at the IS4SI Intelligence Science Summit.

To explore subtle processes of evolutive intelligence and *Interactive Matter* between the evolutive conscious, language and even interspecies communication, in 2019 Nikunja founded the sound research experiment UNCOPPEN SAW with Mauritian performance artist Mannee (vocals), long-time music/sound collaborator Alain Perret (electronics, keyboards; Geneva) and Mathieu Sylvestre (noise, guitar, electronics; Berlin, Tours-France), with first concerts in Berlin, Zurich and Basel and the recording of the album 'MOÏKA' at the Relief Studios in Fribourg (CH), currently being remixed and to be published during 2020. Four titles with Mathieu Sylvestre have been published on bandcamp.com in 2019. (<https://uncoppensaw.bandcamp.com/>)

Nikunja's work has been supported by major art funding institutions from Switzerland, Poland, Germany, and France. He has received various grants and artist in residencies in Switzerland, France, Poland, and the Netherlands. His work has been exhibited at galleries, museums and art institutions throughout Europe, Asia and Africa. Nikunja's art works are part of private and public collections in Switzerland, Germany, Poland, United States, Zimbabwe, France, the Netherlands, Mauritius, and Japan.

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