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# Another Gaze

By Simon Njami

A wind of change is blowing through the curation and discussion of African contemporary art. With touring shows such as Africa Remix (coming to the Haywood Gallery in February 2005) and the new Luanda Triennial (commencing 2006), the heated debates of the '80s and '90s are starting to bear fruit: African art is less and less the art world's token Other, and increasingly taken on its own terms. Simon Njami, curator of Africa Remix and co-founder and editor of *Revue Noire*, sketches the curatorial and discursive terrain

In the past 15 years, contemporary African art has found its audience – a public. It is now usual to come across African artists taking part in international biennial exhibitions or being shown in European, American and Japanese galleries. This development was confirmed by the nomination of the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor as director of the last Documenta in Kassel. African art has become a constituent part of the international contemporary art discourse. The theoretical basis has been supplied by publications such as *Revue Noire*, followed by *Atlantica*, *NKA* and *Coartnews*. They form a pool of information from which all sides draw raw material for a debate that finds its roots in the 1980s. An important role was also played by a series of group exhibitions, which contributed to the increasing recognition of African art. Yet, in the global village that has been forced upon us by the new world economic order as inevitable and necessary, the role of Africa and its artists still needs to be defined. One of the paradoxes that has accompanied the evolution of this discourse is that it has been forged, to a great extent, outside of the African continent. The rare events staged on African soil are the Bamako and the Dakar biennials, the chaotic biennial in Cairo and the ephemeral biennial of Johannesburg. Questions concerning the recognition of African art production therefore remain: what gets included, according to what criteria and what strategies?

Defining time, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote: 'At the heart of time, there is a gaze.' The statement was directed to various cultural dynamics that make us understand the world according to contrasting vantage points determined by the precise points on the planet from which we view it. Such an understanding of time is both philosophical and poetic, and far from being universal. The question this idea raises with regards to Africa resides in the definition of its contemporaneity. David Elliott took this up in his introductory article to the 2000 edition of the Dakar biennial catalogue:

Has Africa ever been a "modern" entity, other than as part of colonisation? Can we for example envisage an Africa that skips its "modern" period and lands straight in its independence? This would ipso facto make it "postmodern" and avoid a sense of delay and "third-worldliness" that attach themselves to the way the world views numerous post-colonial cultures. Excepting if the concept of the modern does not always have the same meaning and depends on the time and the place. Does modernism always have to relate to our Western concepts?

The question that is being raised here is that of the inadequacy of our references. Postmodernism and its analyses point us to a monolithic view of the world, excluding everything that does not seem to fit in to its model of accepted discourse. Let me relate the discussion that I entered some years ago, opposing the views of Alfons Hug (then curator of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt exhibitions in Berlin). Christos Johamides put on a exhibition at the Walter Gropius Bau in 1996 called *Die Epoche der Modernen* (Epochs of the Modern). Hug responded with *Der Anderen Modernen* (The Other Moderns), mounted in the same year. Hug intended to register the absence of non-European artists in the Gropius Bau show – a quite honourable intention. He tried to produce a polemic about the inclusion of non-European production into the international art world. The means to support his thesis

however do not hold water. The modernists, such as those presented by Johamides, formed a part of a very specific moment in Western art. Only a very few non-European artists could share that moment. Since the history of art has been the unique point of reference we must not forget that it refers to styles and schools resulting from the internal upheavals within the system that produces them. Africa cannot offer such a history – the schools that emerged in the 1930s and '40 were mostly established by European emigrants. We must agree with a statement that Robert Atkins offers in his handbook of Modern Art<sup>1</sup>, namely that 'modern art is taken as being restricted to Europe and North America (including Mexico), as the phenomenon of internationalisation was far from reaching today's dimensions.'

If the last 15 years prepared the ground for integration rather confusingly, what path are we now to follow in this stuttering century, and what will be the situation of the continent and its artists? Every attempt to answer this question must first return to the landmark events that influenced our understanding of African art within and outside of the continent. The simplest way to achieve this must be an overview of various exhibitions and an attempt to reintegrate them into the context from which they emerged. Every exhibition triggered off a debate and made a position felt. Looking at those years one would have thought that, in the last part of the 20th century, the Manichean temptation of radicalism could have been avoided. But truths clashed and came face to face amidst a cacophony that is blatantly oblivious to history and its lessons. Thus the field of contemporary African art gradually transformed itself into a vast, economic and theoretical battlefield, one that forced the various actors into defending sometimes restrictively narrow definitions.

The discussion was even more passionate since when it comes to African art there is a tendency to reduce it almost completely to the conditions of its making; every attempt to understand the shifting truth as an illusion of reality projects a certain definition of Africa and Africans. Art historians, gradually replacing the ethnologists in this field, have tried to reach a definition of African specificity, while placing the continent on the wider map of international art. Such deliberations necessarily throw up the complex question of the parameters of such a definition. What do we have in mind, or rather, should we have in mind, as we tackle the problem of contemporary African art? All the while, the territory appears virgin to the uninitiated, so much so that everybody claims his or her own truth. Here as elsewhere, there is only subjective truth; the gaze must reach a certain level of freedom in order to be able to express itself in new ways and send exoticisms back to the cellars they should never have left. We have finally been able to admit Art History has not been assigned any universal mission. It was this very 'discovery' that enriched the debate at the end of the last century.

The '80s were harbingers of what the '90s were to confirm: the definition of the world is no longer the exclusive prerogative of the rich countries. First theories of globalisation sprang up – not dissimilar to the theories of universalism of the 18th century. The need to initiate a discussion on contemporary art in Africa became ever more evident. Ethnographic contextualisation has gradually been replaced by decontextualisation; one misunderstanding expected to chase away the other. The flaw in the idea of a global village, as imagined by some, is its inability to avoid repeating the old instincts of appropriation. To claim that we are all alike after having stated that we were different is not, in my opinion, the right thing to do; it merely inverts the conditions it apparently seeks to transcend. How on earth is it honestly possible to sustain the illusion of one, indivisible humanity? African art should be analysed for what it is and not for what some would like it to be.

Even though Suzan Vogel's 1991 exhibition *Africa Explores the 20th Century*, at the Center for African Art in New York, opened two years after *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, it marked the swan song of the ethnological era, representing as it did the core of the praxis that was then en vogue within the ethnographic milieu. The title indicates that its aim was to show a century of African art, but according to which criteria? Suzan Vogel solved the problem by avoiding making any choices. She renounced

taking the risks that she was perhaps unable to take. The exhibition therefore portrayed Africa as a complex and overcrowded continent. Africa Explores was not so much an art exhibition as an ethnological representation of context at the expense of aesthetics. Just as colonial exhibitions had done in the past, it set out its stall, showing everything it possibly could. It was up to the audience to make its own selection. A true cabinet of curiosities. The overblown ambition of showing a whole century of art of such a vast continent could have no other result; the selection and the theme were ill defined, and the chosen items could only be assembled in the same place via the ethnological approach. It made one fact clear: what used to be classified as African Art had not yet found an adequate translation to the contemporary museum.

Vogel, like Pierre Gaudibert in his 1991 book *Art Africain Contemporain*, attempted to establish, if not a hierarchy, then at least a way of distinguishing between various African art forms. She did so using an empirical vocabulary, the limitations of which she was the first to acknowledge. However, two years previously, the discourse had taken a turn in another direction which, while not new, nonetheless caused waves that are still being felt today. Even though Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou was not solely dedicated to Africa, it brought the debate into the public arena. There were other exhibitions about Africa in the '80s, above all the ones curated by David Elliott (one on Makonde sculpture and another on South Africa), but Martin was taking things in a new direction, lifting African art out of a curatorial ghetto and decontextualising it within an exhibition of international art.

His impossible challenge was to unite magicians and people in a single space/time. By including Africa in this important international exhibition, he set out to prove the interdependence between the dark continent and the rest of world. The aim of *Magiciens*, an exhibition with a mystically beautiful title, was to show the most astounding creations of the planet. As Martin himself says: 'The general use of 'magic' has the connotation of the living and incomprehensible influence of art.'<sup>2</sup> And then, addressing non-European production:

The main question that is raised is why it is that certain objects, that have a very defined meaning within their original context, acquire an interpretation and evaluation according to the new meaning that we find in them? If we were able to comprehend the root of the misunderstanding, then we could see that the consequences are breathtaking; the object is possessed of another life to which we attach a meaning that it didn't have before. Such slippage, such deflection should elicit deeper thought instead of negative reaction.

From the early '90s, we could then discern two directions in the analysis of contemporary African productions: the 'internationalists', supported by *Revue Noire*, who rejected every form of triumphal exoticism and Africanism as embodied, for example, in the collection of the German Hans Bogadzke; and the 'authentic', the heritage of *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, most prominently represented by the collection of John Pigozzi. *Les Magiciens* gave rise to other exhibitions such as *Africa Hoy*<sup>3</sup> or *Neue Kunst aus Afrika*<sup>4</sup> and to a smaller extent *Africa Africa*<sup>5</sup>.

These shows promoted the view that art could be anything as long it came from different countries and set up a kind of a political correctness based, once again, on ideas of Otherness. Meanwhile the 'internationalists' were trying to address African art using the same criteria applied to any other art practice, no matter where it came from. In spite of these radically diverging positions, African art had both sides to thank for having become a real topic of theoretical discourse, celebrated by numerous exhibitions and an ever increasing presence of African artists at big international events. The inauguration of the Dakar Biennial, dedicated to African creativity, came at just the right time; the Senegalese capital now looks poised to take the leading role in contemporary African art curation. And yet, curators both in Africa and Europe are keenly aware of the dangers of categorisation. The

exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*<sup>6</sup> decided on a historical approach, to do with the seven points on the continent. The exhibition *Suites Africaines*<sup>7</sup> did away with the barriers between various aesthetic forms, uniting film, art, literature, music and dance under the same roof, in an attempt at an interdisciplinary approach. Two other exhibitions, *Otro Pais*<sup>8</sup> and *Die Andere Reise*<sup>9</sup>, integrated artists from the Caribbean Diaspora and Africa into a creative historical community. These exhibitions, not all mentioned here, have one thing in common: they aimed to avoid the trap of preconceived ideas and superficial representations. The results did not always meet expectations. It is to be hoped, however, that the recognition so denied to Africa and its artists will now be given to them.

The lesson we've learned from the past 15 years and that will serve as our guiding thread, is that we must look at every contemporary African artist according to his or her own inspiration, regardless of any other context. Here, the context is understood as personal experience and shifts it away from any form of territoriality. Established methodologies are perhaps no longer suitable to solve the need for such sensitivities. We should resist any form of exoticism when selecting artists, otherwise the obligatory inclusion of a couple of Africans used to prove that the market has become truly global is in danger of becoming yet another curatorial trend. It is necessary to understand that it is no longer thinkable to accept the dictatorship of the market that not only sets up the prices, but also influences fashions in art and its inspiration. We must return to the artist, talk about the artist, analyse the work with all the tools at our disposal – none should be left out. There is today a dire need for transdisciplinarity. If during the '80s discussions of contemporary African art were limited to a happy few, working almost exclusively in Europe (namely Paris and, to a lesser extent, London) and to a handful of ethnologists and anthropologists, the '90s opened the way to a more idiosyncratic set of approaches. Its origins were no longer the primary criterion for the appreciation of a non-Western art work. The gaze became sharper. Contemporary art and museum curators joined with specialists. Using their position in the global culture game, they forced the discussion to tackle the work directly without necessarily focussing on origins. There were various approaches – stemming either from a Third World philosophy or from the Manichean debate opposing the centre (the West) and the periphery – which multiplied the theories and created conflicts without which no proper and constructive discussion is viable. It is however high time to stop limiting this discussion to the forcible rapprochement between so-called international art and African art, pretending to ignore the real differences between them. Whatever the good intentions promoted by the defenders of the Global Village, the village will only be inhabitable if it accepts the Other as part of itself and if it stops casting Him as a distorted mirror image of its own aspirations.

The emerging curatorial approach, which substitutes a nuanced, individualised treatment of contemporary African art for an overwhelmingly territorial one, was/is the modest contribution of *Africa Remix*<sup>10</sup>. It is also the aim of the newest initiative on the African continent, the *Luanda Triennial in Angola*. Scheduled to take place in spring 2006, it will attempt to bring the inscription of African art in the contemporary world to another level, while also trying to define its originality. The triennial will also attempt, on the one hand, to address the context in which all big international art events are constructed and, on the other hand, to offer new routes for reflection. Those routes could enable Africans to speak for themselves and to stop being the spectators of their own history, written, as it has been from the colonial times, by others.

#### FOOTNOTES

1 Robert Atkins, *ArtSpoke: A Guide to Modern Ideas, Movements and Buzzwords, 1848-1944*, Abbeville Press, 1993

2 Jean-Hubert Martin, *Introduction du catalogue de l'exposition Les Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris, 1989

3 Atlantic Center of Modern Art, Las Palmas, Gran Canary Islands, 1991, curated by André Magnin

4 Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 1996, curated by Alfons Hug

5 Tobu Museum, Tokyo, 1998, curated by Toshio Shimizu

6 Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1995

7 Couvent des Cordeliers, Paris, 1997

8 Las Palmas, Barcelona, 1994

9 Kunst Halle, Krems 1995

10 Curated by Simon Njami: Dusseldorf, London, Paris, Tokyo, 2004-2006

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