WE WELCOME

OKWUI ENWEZOR
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**SOME OF THE AUTHOR'S PUBLICATIONS**
PART I
DEFINING AND PERIODIZING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART SINCE 1980

Chapter 1
Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction

During the past two decades, there has been a surge of interest in the work of contemporary African artists. A major reason for this turn of events is partly due to the impact of contemporary art and culture. Like other artists who were once situated on the margins of mainstream art historiographic narratives, African artists have been beneficiaries of the globalization phenomenon that has included the rise of biennials and art fairs, and the unprecedented exchange of global art and visual culture. As a result, new transnational exchange patterns have emerged across the African continent.

Further ground was broken when the Senegalese figurative sculptor Ousmane Sow and the Nigerian installation artist Ron Edogwa became the first Africans to be included in the prestigious exhibition Documenta 9 (1992). Since then, African artists have participated in numerous Documenta exhibitions (Documents 10, 11, and 12), which are held in Kassel, Germany, every five years. Tracing further the trajectory of global exhibition activities and curatorial responses to African artists in multiple international exhibitions in the 1990s, we have included documents such as Crociera (1994), by Dan Cameron at the Reina Sofia, Madrid; and Two Paths: Escuela Africana (1994), by Simon Njami and Joelle Buca at Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. In addition to Venice and Documenta, African artists have regularly appeared in several other biennales: Guangzhou, Sydney, São Paulo, Istanbul, Havana, Bjørvika, Lyon, and Manifesta. Such participation underscores the increasing visibility of global African artists. Contributing to the expansion of the discursive networks of the field, such as Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, Revue Noire, ArtPeb, and Third Text have been leading critical sites devoted to new writing on issues in contemporary African art. More recently, in the last decade, several significant exhibitions, such as The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movement in Africa (2001), and Africas Remix (2004) have drawn even more complex articulations of the historical and contemporary issues related to African cultural production. These activities, along with numerous others that are not listed, have each contributed to crystallizing serious scholarly and curatorial interest in the field. With this new attention, several important shifts are immediately noticeable in the discursive circuits of curatorial and historical evaluation of contemporary African art as a field of study.

African artists are not simply more visible in the institutional circuits of museums, exhibitions, and art histories; scholars are also investing serious intellectual resources in researching and teaching the field. Emerging scholarship in this field has produced doctoral dissertations and countless graduate theses. Most notably, in a single generation, we have witnessed a broadening of the interpretative and curatorial models from amalgamated group exhibitions to monographic exhibitions that explore the trajectories of individual artists. More museums and major private collectors now include the work of contemporary African artists in their collections; key international exhibitions routinely feature the works; critics write about the artists' galleries exhibit and represent them.

What is Contemporary African Art? This project seeks to rethink one immediate point, which lies in its title: "Contemporary African Art" implies the existence of an artistic landscape of some coherence, one that has discernible durability.
and which justifies the label, as applied to the works of those artists grouped under the various thematic rubrics that inform the sections of this book. But here we pause to reflect—perhaps the philosopher V. V. Mudimbe—on "the idea of Africa" that we are working with. We readily acknowledge that, for some artists, being identified as an African artist may prove a disabling label in negotiating the boundaries of power that inform the entire global cultural complex. To a degree, the very "idea of Africa" may be superficially disabling to some artists, because Africa has often been represented more in terms of epistemological negation, to which no profit can be tabulated on the ledger of artistic and cultural capital. Add to this the fact that for millennia, and in the media, Africa has been interpreted as a marginal, limited sphere of artistic and institutional power; so it makes sense that some artists may feel uneasy with being identified as such. But only to a point, for there is also the reverse, the tendency of over-identification, to the point of essentialism built on a sense of authenticity, which some African artists are seen to be lacking either by race, region, or dwelling.

In our approach, however, Africa is not a monolithic or uniform entity. It is a field of complex artistic production, research, interpretation, and a repository of rich, varied, and diverse artistic practices reflected in this book. It also applies to the very complex models of identity and ambivalent identifications of the artists who reside both inside and outside Africa, or who move easily between both.

But to convene a discursive landscape such as contemporary African art is not to blend these disparate sensibilities, cultural situations, historical experiences, and politicized models of subjectivity and subjectivization (that is the strategic positionings as an artist adopts qua the field) into one unified frame of cultural identity. Instead, the idea of African identity we employ is not an absolute, but a malleable term. It refers to both cultural and geographic situations and to modes of subjectivization, dimensions of identification, and ethical strategies. None of these are singular. An African identity can support relationships as much to ethnic, national, and linguistic conditions, as to racial, ideological, and political strategies. An African identity can be understood as part of a broad repertoire of practical, strategic, and subjectivizations that link cultural traditions and cultural archives, that subvert geopolitical and geopolitical spaces, transnational and diasporic experiences. In this sense, there is no totalizing construct that defines the center of this project.

Against this backdrop, the term "African" employed here is capacious. It accommodates slippages, incompleteness, eclecticism, idiosyncrasies, and ambivalences. It is not to be understood in ethnocentric, national, or even continental terms alone, but as a network of positions, affiliations, strategies, and new philosophies that represent the multiplicity of cultural traditions and archives available to and exploited consistently by the artists to shape their artistic positions in a way that reflects the diffuse repertoires of artistic forms and concepts which we designate as contemporary African art. As the same time, the term "African" is also temporal, in particular in the way it encroachers or displaces emotional attachments in the present. It is about the shape of Africa in the world today. Each of these positions, on their own or in combination, defines the nature of contemporary African art in the twenty-first century. Most importantly, for our critical purposes, it is how these

formations shape the understanding of an archive of practices that reflects this multiplicity in the contemporary art of Africa. As we argue throughout this volume, the principal goal of contemporary African art since 1980 is to define a specific historical datum, one in which artistic works, conceptual strategies, and formal procedures can be coherently organized. At the same time, the goal is to reveal—through the evidence of the works represented and discussed here—the fact that the term contemporary African art has a historical basis on which our premise rests, and therefore the spurs for serious analysis and engagement by art professionals and the public alike.

To mark out a field is always to delimit a space of survey, it is to draw a line, but nevertheless a line which, we hope, does not subscribe to rigid borders, unmarked hierarchies, or anthropological certainties. But as tends to be the case in circumstances of diversity of archives, a delimited space cannot be subordinated to the logic of totalization or standardization. Rather, a delimited field, particularly one with historical complexities such as is presented in today's Africa, is not a flat field, but a series of shifting grounds composed of fragments, of composite identities, and micro narratives; in fact, it is the petit récit that forms the methods of historical discourse. Pierre Bourdieu defines this as the "field of cultural production" in which diverse actors operate. He states:

The field of cultural production is the area of common excellence of offenders between the dominant fractions of the dominant class, at the same time that it is the space where the dominant fractions of the dominant class can find products adjusted to their tastes, whether in the theatre, in painting, literature, or discussion.

Thus the main focus is the recognition of the existence of this field and its historical implications for the analysis of African art, and hence the issues we have chosen to focus on. We have chosen the last thirty years (as opposed to longer periods) as a focus for our analysis of contemporary African art studies in general. In other words, we aim both for temporal specificity (since 1980) and disciplinary clarity (contemporary African art) in order to show the fruitful links between the three decades which this overview covers. We take the approach that under the works represented here from the periods covered requires the articulation of the surrounding historical atmosphere, the conditions of production, and the cultural, political, and epistemological legacies of post-colonialism that surround almost all the works of art discussed throughout the course of the unfolding analysis. Nevertheless, our aim is not to make contextualist points, but to show how social, political, and economic events of the last thirty years—from postcolonial critiques of the state form and neo-liberalism, to responses to globalization and the severe austerity measures of recent periods; the reform movements of democratization, state failure, migration, exile, the rise of political Islam, and the struggle against apartheid—have all profoundly affected and remapped the field of contemporary African cultural and artistic production.

As we have already underscored, since the early 1960s many African artists—E. Anatui, Yinka Shonibare, Yot Tozandaa, Berni Searle, Outsider Watts, William Kentridge, Chris Oill, David Adjaye, Menzele Okoro, Moseta Ntshanga, Othul D20l2, Menesho Gaba, Tracey Rose, Marcia Rute, Maneloma Dumas, Wangechi Mutu, Shadi Ame, Julie Mehretu, Georges Adéagbo, Nomusa Haoumi, Chaka Samba, etc.—have come to global prominence and have been positioned at the forefront of critical debates of contemporary African art. Scholars have devoted serious and focused attention to the study of these artists' diverse experiences and works. In addition, a historical remaking of modernist art has reinvigorated the assessments of the work of contemporary African artists in light of modernity—and, by extension, the links to traditional African art—and broadened each of their critical horizons. More recently, with younger scholars doing art-historical, rather than ethnographic, research on contemporary artists, the study of contemporary African art has become a core area of academic inquiry in African art-history scholarship. As these studies expand the available data on practices and discourses, the field has been imbued with forms and methods of theoretical, aesthetic, and social analysis of a new history of the arts in Africa.
When Was Contemporary African Art?

While continual practice and related activities have engendered new circuits of interpretation and a reordering of the discourse of contemporary African art, until recently the field was an area of considerable debate. One such debate concerns the issue of periodization, namely, when did contemporary African art emerge? Did it emerge as a consequence of the crisis of traditional African art due to colonialism? Or is it because of the encounters with new paradigms of artistic production generated by African responses to European modernity? To pose these questions reveals some confusion if we take the most common dictionary definition of the term "contemporary" purely as an event of the present, that which belongs to or occurring in the present, distinctly apart from that which is viewed as belonging to the past, to a historical epoch. However, this does not get us to the philosophical or the cultural sense of how "contemporary African art" except as a distinguishing trope that sets apart not periods or categories of time, but artistic styles and genres. Terry Smith gives us a useful guide, stating that contemporary art is set pre-occluding what is going within its time.1 Arthur Danto, on the other hand, sees contemporary art, in its ever increasing sense of timelessness, as post-historical, as a liberation from the succession of historical periods bound to styles.2 Smith and Danto are not quite saying the same thing; the former is strictly concerned with questions of temporality, while the latter focuses on the criteria of historical periods.

But can these two interpretations help define what we mean by contemporary when used strictly in application to Africa? The answer, generally, is yes, especially if we see African art in the era of colonialism and in encounters with European modernity as, reflexively, an encounter with categories of time and a march toward a post-historical paradigm where traditional styles no longer designate the aesthetic coordinates of artistic production. At the same time, we can also see the convergence of traditional styles and contemporary paradigms as occurring at the same time, but with two distinctive features: one reflecting its connection to a historical past, the other establishing its separation from that past. In this sense, it is typical of arrangements of contemporary African art to analyze it as a field of mismatched genres, "a process of biopole upon the already existing structures and scenarios on which older, precolonial and colonial genres of African art were made."3 The sense of biopolitics would seem a privilege practiced thrown together irrespective of clear conceptual and philosophical distinctions. However, the combination of successful historical periods, formal styles, and genres yields, at least, to both Smith's contention of temporality and Danto's idea at the end of styles. If we are to usefully bridge the philosophical distinctions between Smith and Danto, we can perhaps allow that, at a minimum, contemporary African art comes both at the end of traditional arts (seemingly precolonial) and at the end of colonialism; that is to say, the condition of existence in the present is postcolonial. But is Kasfir's reference to biopolitics a claim for the postcoloniality of contemporary African art? Not quite, as we will see.

The Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Art

With the competing claims of the past and the separation of the present from it, the discursive landscape of contemporary African art has been shaped according to the struggle between two fields of knowledge that have addressed its content through different and divergent approaches. During the past forty years, much of the debate that centered on the question of art in Africa has played out in two principal arenas: in the ethnographic museum and in the museum of art.4 In the first arena, scholars and curators often made little distinction between contemporary art and works that are more appropriately craft, such as pottery-making, basket-weaving, cloth-dyeing, and toy design.5 It is important to point out here that the term "craft" does not necessarily denote an inferior practice to contemporary art. But it should be recognized that these two types of creative processes operate in distinct discursive systems and circulate in different cultural economies, namely in the market for souvenirs and utilitarian material on the one hand, and in exhibition circuits of the contemporary art gallery and systems of museums of art and ethnography on the other. We in no way infer in the circuit of the museum a superior sphere of cultural reception. Even if it is for the sake of not constructing a false hierarchy between art and craft—a distinction that has long bedeviled the reception of African art in general—the theoretical and formal distinctions often made between areas of practice and the diverse systems of distribution, exhibition, and reception in which the materials separate can sometimes be misleading and ill serves the artists themselves.

This is not to say that there have not been moments when craft-artists have brought aesthetically complex and conceptually sophisticated artisanal genres into the field of contemporary art, for example, the work of the Ghanaian coffin-maker Kane Kwei, whose elaborately sculpted fantasies plays simultaneously with Surrealist disjunction and makes reference to commodity fetishism in contemporary Akan systems of luxury decoration. Or consider another example, Esther Mahlangu's geometric abstract wall paintings according to traditional Ndebele architectural wall decoration that was transmuted both to gallery decoration and to its source. The fact that the separate works of these artists—one positioned as a craft-maker, the other repeating and extending the patterns of a decorative tradition, and yet still another conventionally an artist—have, in turn, attracted the fascination of the ethnographic museum is no doubt the result of their relatively uncritical adoption of their aesthetic quality which, on the one hand, links the work of the craftsman to the popular desires of the everyday Ghanaian and on the other to the popular taste for eclecticism that pervades the ethnographic reception of contemporary African art. With Kwei, the public for African material culture can simultaneously indulge in a bit of ethnographic surrealism and in Mahlangu and Anasatu, a mediated view of decorative arts and contemporary African art.

Until recently, the ability of the ethnographic museum to wield discursive authority over objects, practices, and meaning was overwhelming. This made it a formidable discursive site of the aesthetic field, and the primary locus of curatorial interpretation. Granted, the ethnographic museum was operating largely unchallenged in this way, but the museum of art, as such, showed little interest in the category of contemporary African art, a fact ascribed in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern in 1966. However, in recent years the discursive authority of the ethnographic museum, and the interpretative power it wielded, have been eroded by the emergence of contemporary curatorial projects functioning in the arena of the museum of art. Consequently, a remarkable curatorial attention and its focus on contemporary art has made the temporary, large-scale exhibition model in art museums the indispensible arena for the theoretical and historical framing of contemporary African art. As Sidney Littlefield Kasfir notes, "blockbuster shows have greatly influenced the mainstreaming tendency" of contemporary African art. Much of this debate, in which the ethnographic museum and the curator of anthropology have had to share epistemological space with the curator of contemporary art and the institutional frame of the museum of art—even if there is little common ground between them in terms of the vocabulary that shapes their respective projects—has occurred in the last thirty years, a period that also witnessed the increased visibility of contemporary African artists in the global scene.

Given the changing stakes in the critical ground occupied by African art and artists globally, the discursive challenge of this project bears on four reflexive points: in the first, we explore what constitutes the "contemporary" and how it is defined and theorized; second, we analyze the term "African" without making any essentialist claims about the term (we focus mainly on how artists are located within the larger context of African art studies); third, we examine the way the term has been analyzed by other scholars and explore how distinctly different it is from the way we are concerned with it; fourth, we ask what identifying the central participants in the making of the field, and how their practices help generate and shape the meaning of what is identified.
Archives of Traditions

A caveat to keep in mind: the task at hand is not to argue whether these four points exhaust the possibilities of how to frame the argument of contemporary African art. Instead, we seek to address the provenance of the ideas and the overlapping discourses, as well as the surrounding historical and analytical architecture that underpins them. Also, our critical task is narrower, and in larger measure more pointed, because it is oriented to the present, even if the period covered has traces in the past. The limit in our temporal frame is the postcolonial, a point meant to articulate the temporal and theoretical richness of our chosen decades. What is immediately clear, and not surprising, is the consistency of the formal, political, aesthetic, and cultural connections between the concerns of the artists and the questions of African contemporaneity they follow. In this sense, they are poised to seek to avoid the concepts and the questions of African art are made explicit, to theorize the shifting power structures and the construction of cultural identity. We recognize that notions of the authentic and the autochthonous have in the past provided a level of comfort for historians reluctant to perceive African artists in the present, as part of the modern and contemporary world.

To this end, we speak coherently of contemporary African art as an ongoing tradition, one that is not connected to writings about forms of art and that directly resists those boxes either by stubbornly being hybrid, ironic, or allegorical. But we do not subscribe to the staged binaries between tradition and the contemporary, nor is complicated by the subordinated condition of tradition while contemporaneous of the contemporary as the British educator William Fagg did when, in the 1940s, he lamented: “We are in the death of all that is best in Africa art...” at a time when African artists were vigorously engaging modernism.

We do not resist the term “traditional African art,” which represents a storehouse of powerful artistic achievements that continue to exert influence beyond Africa. But we see less sanguine about the claim that traditional art is the end of achievement in the African creative cycle. To us, tradition—in the best and most rigorous employment of the term—never designates a state of cultural stagnation. Nor does it promote a fixed point of historical status in an endless cycle of repetition and mimicry of the past. Rather, tradition always has a forward motion to it, and with that constant, dynamic pitch into the future, many contemporary forces of change and transformation converge: multiple, contrasting issues of rupture and discontinuity emerge; new and surprising, even contradictory ideas appear or are constantly created as forms, images, objects, narratives, and styles. Tradition, in fact, denotes the continuous flow, change, transformation, evolution, continuity, and discontinuity that enlivens and strengthens the archive of all cultures. It is in this condition of dynamism that we speak about the archives of traditions.

In Contemporary African Art since 1980, we find ourselves actively immersed and engaged in the archives of new traditions of artmaking and discourses. These archives support the term “contemporary African art.” They are part of the conceptual architecture of our ongoing discussions of thought. To think of contemporary African art as needing to be part of a timeless African tradition is to ignore the fact that multiple historical events in the African context have led to new forms of knowledge, fresh ways of conceiving symbolic and structural frameworks, and that, for centuries, African societies have adapted to constant change both through internal and external forces. To that end, for contemporary African art there are no ancient rivers to excavate in order to find continuing traditions. And no strange hybridization that leaves the artists and their work at the mercy of well-meaning, but ultimately wrong-headed, interpretations that lead to binary distinctions such as tradition and modernity, Western and African, center and periphery, vernacular and academic, urban and non-urban, indigenous and diasporic models of identification.

We take it as a given that contemporary African art—like contemporary art generally—is always in a state of creative reinvention and reimagining. And while we make use of the language of colonialism on African cultures and institutions, we also acknowledge the importance of artistic exchanges that have marked the transition from colonial to postcolonial subjectivities, which in turn occasioned the responses of African artists to the colonial event. From this standpoint, we are more penetrating interest in historical events, especially as explicated in the views held by many commentators who consistently insist that contemporary African artists lost their authenticity because of colonial disruption. Forty years ago, as ethnographers were examining the loss of authentic African traditions in Africa and elsewhere, Jacques Delange and Philip Fry were correct in pointing out that the concept of “traditional” culture often hides a negation of the primordial openness of many African communities during the pre-colonial period. If we examine the aesthetics of the visual art practiced during this period, attempts to think in terms of “closed communities” and “tribal styles” will have to be much more prudent. The fact is that we know very little about the exchanges and the creative processes that gave rise to the traditional art in Africa. While many may inquire into this background, very few are sufficiently concerned to look at contemporary works, much less to take them seriously. . . . As important as [traditional] art may be, it is high time to notice that Africa is alive and in movement. A dialectic of acceptance and refusal, of give and take, always typifies colonial and neo-colonial situations.

These are obvious points, and we do not disagree with them. When we survey literature on contemporary African art, especially those published in the 1990s and ‘70s (a notable exception in this regard is Uili Beier’s thorough assessment published in Contemporary Art in Africa), and recent ones in the 1980s and ‘90s, a schism between the analytical prudence undertaken by Delange and Fry and an ethnocentric focus appears that underpins the argument of some of the other scholars. That ethnocentric focus tends to fix an ethnocentric aura around African art. Such an aura is fundamental to the categorization of African arts, not in relation to innovative individual aesthetic systems and the influence of those systems in the development of styles, or the formal deviations from them, and the invention of new paradigms and concepts, but in terms of tribes and ethnic formations. For instance, one can read the deployment of a category such as “Art of Black Africa” as a general case of the racialization of artistic production. Though such a category may be puzzling to us since “Black Africa” extends beyond the “sub-Saharan” space, it is nevertheless explainable since it defines the narrow outlook of ethnographic writing and the cult of traditional culture.

At another level, this is a superficial boundary because it ignores the transnational situation of African artists working under contemporary conditions in which ethnic or essentialist identifications are hardly the locus of critical consideration. African artists have been working internationally since the early twentieth century. One important example of the transnational reception of artistic styles is the tradition of Soumer under-glaze painting genre, which entered Senegalese artistic archives in the nineteenth century from the Middle East; when it was brought back by Muslim pilgrims returning home from the Hajj in Mecca, it quickly became to our discussion is the participation of such artists as Alice Onabolu, Mahmoud Makhar, Ernest Mancoba, Gerard Sekoto, Ben Enwonwu, Gerard Sekoto, Isi Ndagwe, Ahmed Cheikh, and Gamba Siby in discussions of modern and contemporary art in the 1920s. More recently, William Kentridge, Marlene Dumas, Yinka Shonibare, Julie Mehretu, El Anatsui, Quattara Watts, Wanepechi Mutsu, Odili, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Patric Mizzah Turyor, Sokari Douglas Camp, Duane Sow,
Fode Camara, Kan-Si, and others, have all been operating at a global level without the strictures of ethnocentric encroachment. They have each been examining the tension between African art and contemporary forms, and have been doing so in modern and contemporary styles, in cosmopolitan, transnational, and diasporic settings, thereby bringing new insights into the debate, beyond ethnocritical discourse.

Yet, as we challenge ethnocritical and ethnocentric conceptions of African art, we do hesitate in the absolute dismissal of the value of ethnocritical research in illuminating provocative points of intellectual and aesthetic convergence—particularly in instances where artists make conscious decisions to align the classical past of African art and contemporary forms. For example, in the 1980s the late Nigerian-British photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode produced a series of works reflecting the many faces of the artiste as images staged as hermeneutic responses to the powerful artistic legacies of the African sculptural past. In such works as Songorouvi (1987), Brons Head (1987), Don Quixot (1987), and Efo Orii (1985), African masks, sculptures, and even menhirs were deployed as metamorphic structures in a strategy linking tradition not only to Africa but also to the West. Similarly, the Cameroon-born, Dutch-based artist Angèle Isouendi Essama has explored similar issues in relation to African masks in a series of photographic tableaux: at her Sokari Douglas Camp in her figurative works and Ceremonial Objects exhibit, that the West is part and parcel of the narratives and mythologies that constitute African identity. In essence, the exhibition of her works reflects a similar conceptual idea in relation to ideas of past and present, home and diaspora, culture and exile. Ous-tana Wettge’s large-scale postmodern paintings, which appropriate the texture of African mud wall paintings and transpose architectural fragmentary visualizations of African material culture, recast recent developments in African art and culture. The exhibition of the artiste’s works is a testament to the reappropriation of African cultural narratives in a modern and contemporary context.

Deskilling as a Process of Inventing Contemporary Art

The advent of European avant-garde art in the early twentieth century amounted from the connective artistic strategies of deskilling the high academic styles that were part of the dominant taste of the bourgeoisie up until the nineteenth century. The artistic salons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the battlegrounds for the artistic reinvention of the skills of the modern and contemporary artist.

In theorizing the origin of contemporary African art, there is something of critical value to be extracted from the idea that the degeneration of traditional styles as a result of the emergence of contemporary art meant the death of the great traditional arts of Africa. One could argue, therefore, that the root of contemporary African art, outside of postcolonial temporality, lies in its attempt to separate itself from the skilled competence of the traditional artist/craftsperson in a self-conscious process of "deskilling." The advent of the craftsman laying down their tools and going into a new way to put forward an analytic frame around artistic experiments, reception theories, cultural exchanges, and changes in the conditions of production, institutions, publics, and aesthetic protocols, in light of which a new insight into the motivations behind contemporary African art could be gained. None of these issues seems to bear on the interpretation of the artist’s work. What it revealed instead was not necessarily a deep love of traditional art, but a contempt for contemporary African art as a field of intellectual value. On this account, Mount had a word of two of confident generalization and condensation for African “elites” whom, he supposed, played a role in the negative deskilling of traditional art: “As a result of generations of indiscriminateness the attitude of today’s African elite comes sometimes to, rather than against, this disappearance of traditional sculpture.”

In other words, the elite had become contemporary, not by choice, but by colonial indiscriminateness. The point that African thinkers and artists understood precisely the historical desecration of the paradigmatic ruptures brought about by colonial modernity, and had been responding to them in the practice of art seemed far-detached in the...
conception of contemporary African art. "Mission-inspired art" was the category employed by Mount to describe the early institutionalisation of African artists as instructed by Christian mission schools and as a part of the architecture of colonial processes of conversion. Such a process of conversion, which is not utopian historically, is seen purely from the viewpoint of its destructive tendencies, which is to say devastating canons of traditional knowledge. But at the base of the critique of mission-inspired education is the fact that the artists were trained in European methods. Here is how he explicated the point: "The earliest Afrikanos of this group received their earliest training at missionary schools, the only education available to them on the continent, and their ideas, particularly among the older generation reflect this early Western-inspired training." This is a fair point, but can hardly be used to seriously attenuate the process of artistic exchanges developed through it. Mount's conclusion concerning the place of the African artist in Ghanaian sculpture is a clear example of the ambiguity of the interactional influence of African traditional art on the ever-changing, eclectic modern art of Europe, is not sufficient to make his complaints. He is determined to point, sculpt, and weld using each method as it is used in other nations of the world, and having his work or subjects selected from the material and realistic aspect of his way of life. The goal thing about this is that he is well aware that in art, what is important is not the kind of medium used, but what one can express with the medium. And what is the Ghanaian artist's advantage over his European counterpart is not to be found in any one medium, but in the way he can transcend the limitations of any one medium in order to achieve the greatest beauty of the sort of art expected of him by the world outside Africa.

Artthumb's polarizing viper expresses a key argument on the contemporaneity of African art in the broader context of global modernity. Here, he states more explicitly, the important dimension of deskillling, not as a renunciation of traditional style, but as the essence of artistic modernity, one precipitated on individual expression and inspiration over collective production and canonical orthodoxy. In fact, as early as 1930, the modernist Nigerian painter Awo Aliko addressed similar issues concerning the place of the African artist in the context of modernism. Ogbolu, who portrayed paintings of colonial Lagos's demimonde at the turn of the century, published a long essay titled "A Short Discussion on Art" in a catalogue of an exhibition of his paintings on the eve of his maiden voyage to study art in St. John's Wood Art School in London on May 2, 1920. Ogbolu essentially used the essay to address the techniques of easel painting, but more importantly, to remind his readers and those who would view his painting exhibition, of the role of the artist as an individual in African societies in the context of modernity. To Ogbolu, the painted image captured the essence of the quest for modernity, much more so than the created art. One can, of course, see Ogbolu, in deeming easel painting, an inferior to carved wood sculpture, had succumbed to the other false distinction between "traditional" art and modern art, namely that the latter is superior to the former. Or the reverse: it challenges the point, as stated by Fagg, that traditional art represented all that is great in African culture. Besides Ogbolu's considered attempt to place himself and his work within the debates of the historical reception of artists, the short preface to the catalogue by A. O. Delu Dorsum succinctly underlines the conflicted nature of the modern African artist as an artist making a mark on the one hand, and on the other, a social and historical agent capable of representing the modern conditions in which he is working. Dorsum writes:

There is a peculiar interest attaching to Mr. Ogbolu and his works—which would have been the same if he were a European as he is an African—the fact that he had never been to any tertiary school, the amount of success which he has attained in his efforts will on the one hand be more appreciated by everybody and on the other hand be of greater value to Africans because his genius is essentially of Africa. There is no greater medium of expression of national life and culture than Art and no one but Africans can fully express their joy and sorrow, their hopes and aspirations, and their changing needs and positions. In this respect, the greatest role falls to M. Ogbolu—the interpretation of Africa to the outside world."

Two important points are linked in Dorsum's claim for Ogbolu's paintings as allegories of the modern imagination: the first is the capacity of art as an expression of national life and character. This conception of art in the making of the nation, casts art in the public square, speaking, as it were, to their society. The second is the artist as a social interpreter and, therefore, as a translator of society's complexities to others outside the nation-space. But nowhere does Dorsum refer to the need for the artist's absolute fidelity to "petty" art, or does he suggest that the interpretation of national life be based on the continuation of canons of formal production that could be deemed ethnocentrically African. The pivotal point rested on the production of a historical consciousness in art, under the conditions of art, in which the artist was working—that is to say, the contemporary present. Thus, if the claim is that African elites had abandoned "traditional" art, then Ogbolu's art—the artist being one member of that elite—would not have fitted any scheme in which the modern expression of African artists could be taken seriously. In this way the early critics of modern and contemporary African art tended to reflect on the mechanisms of reception of Western art in modern African art as though they were values of an irreplaceable and original African art, rather than as a dialectic between cultural traditions and artistic archives.

The philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe offers an analytical path out of this binary which splits modern and contemporary African art and "traditional" art as if they are not in any way related, by suggesting that we consider African artworks as we do literary texts, that is as linguistic (narrative) phenomena as well as discursive circuits. However, critics, unlike Mount, with vested interest in "traditional" art, often fail to account for the highly self-conscious and didactic motivations behind theRetreat to the highly self-conscious and didactic motivations behind the conception of contemporary African artistic production, which is based on ideals of African art as an artistic production that is not just a reproduction of Western forms and techniques, but a re-creation of the ideals of "traditional" art according to Western tastes. Mount writes in parenthesis: Furthermore, in conversations with Artthumb, his suspicions of the motives for Western interest in traditional art were at times also evident. The African "vides" sometimes believe that Westerners, by their enthusiasm for the continuance of traditional art, are attempting to "keep Africans in their place," "hold them back," and perpetuate Western domination. Artthumb's point is not only well placed; it also illuminates the predicament of the artist both as a producer and a thinker of forms and as an interpreter of contemporary African subjectivities. Mudimbe explores this tension in artistic subjectivity through the concept of reformatory—which calls a strategy of embellishment—as one approach for dealing with the composition of contemporary African artistic production. Some motivations function with a heightened awareness of dialectical limitations, but equally discursive possibilities to "indicate broad rhythms, tendencies, and discontinuities extending from recent period of rupture that brought about new types of artistic imaginations."

Here we come to the category of "Souvenir Art," namely, art made for the tourist market, and mostly patronised by Western collectors, and "New Art," which is that form of art that seeks to call itself contemporary art. Each of these categories remains bound to an evolutionary
Idea than they are to a more reflexive reworking of aesthetic concepts. A sophisticated thinker and historian such as Susan Vogel, in her important exhibition on African Art. In the exhibition catalogue—when, incidentally, Muthoni's essay was published—Vogel reveals in more dense fashion some of the prevailing categories. However, she reinforces and offers five conceptual categories as scaffolding on which to survey twentieth-century African art. Her introductory essay, "Digesting the West," uses a sly anthropophagic turn of phrase, which also has the benefit of having a etymology. For what is digested must surely be expurgated as well.

But what does the expurgated material look like? A mound of segregated postmodern turf? Or is it perhaps, a conceptualized form of contemporary art as a tragic consequence of "digesting West?" Whether Vogel was cognizant of the paradox of her extinct art category, which places contemporary African art in the grip of an unsustained duality—between a dead past and an unsatisfactory present—she does make us aware that, far from being extinct, the old forms of art formerly connected to the rural African remain mordant reminders of their haptic, aesthetic legacy. Are the artist or are they props on which curators and scholars can maintain a critical foot on each side of a historical argument? The problem is not the bankruptcy of African artists to digest the West—after all, modern European artists hardly survived their assault on the Western art world. There were no North or South African artists. Though a rich sample of contemporary art was part of the exhibition, few or a very limited number of examples earlier than the 1890s were on display. And, with the exception of the Senegalese painter Ibra N'Diaye and the Nigerian contemporary Michael Okpogie, an entire generation of pioneering artists such as Uche Okeke and Ekahau Enekpe (Nigeria), Sokerish Buhusia (Ethiopia), Isolation El Sabah (Sudan), Duniel Feni (South Africa), Gashiri Suru (Egypt), Kofi Asehah (Ghana), Winfred Kofi (Ghana), Julian Nossa (South Africa), Walter Battiss, Cecil Skotini (South Africa), to name a few—from the 1950s and '60s, and working at the height of decolonization, were not included.

Also for an exhibition covering the art of twentieth-century Africa, no prominent artists—such as Gombele, Emenwari, Moreau, or Sekou—to who were active before the Second World War—were represented. These artists had developed styles of abstraction and figuration in painting and explored formal representations that dealt specifically with the African subject as a topic of modern and contemporary art. These absences revealed the extent to which the categories formulated to read African art of the twentieth century were dependent on anthropological rather than aesthetic paradigms. However, there were ample examples of what Donald Cooper referred to in his catalogue essay as Afrofuturism. These are objects whose artistic value lay precisely in the exaggerated appropriation of "African" aesthetic, a sort of neo-traditional Afrofuturism, and cheap imitations of the "real" things. Avevo: what Coevert calls them, a term which translates from the French as "foolish or sottishness." Bettius, on the other hand, says, "parodies that mask the extraction of a tradition. These works feed like vipers, diing off a feeding host." Or by they concretize as market-bought popular objects such as colorful aerial plastic dolls, which, when bought in pairs, could be magically transformed as cheap substitutes for carved Iboi twin figures used in the Yoruba cult of twins.

Despite its flaws, however, African Explorers and its accompanying catalogue are significant contributions to the debate on contemporary African art, providing an invaluable and rich discussion of its perceptions. On reading Vogel's account of the exhibition, the result of her work, it is clear that many of her ideas had already been developed by the artists or by other commentators, such as Bevis. This leads us back to the point at which we began, namely, how to designate and define contemporary African Art. For, categories like traditional, extinct, urban, new, internationalism, or international art are of little use in dealing with the conceptual frames of contemporary African art today.

If anything, they tend to reinforce methodological and curatorial trickily that may have made contemporary African art easy to digest, but hardly to save. In view of this fact, one stark point is important to note when we address the contemporary in the course of this book, our main reference to the entire epistemological architecture bequeathed by the decolonization movements between 1945 and 1980, a period when artists developed new critical languages to delineate spaces of production and theories of perception. The basic thesis we propose is that, rather than frame our assessment in ethnographic and ethnocentric terms, we attempt to map the field by attempting to delineate the socio-political boundaries delineated by decolonization and the geopolitical spaces mapped by diasporic and transnational movements. From there, we look at the aesthetic and conceptual preoccupations of the art of the last three decades. Most importantly, the works presented here, and the arguments for them, are put forward as part of the broader foundation of the architecture of the global reception of contemporary art.

To recapitulate the scope of our argument, we take a step back and forward at the same time. As widely used as it is today, the term "contemporary African art" remains rich in conceptual rigor and a potent discursive material in the production of art. If, in the last forty years, the debate about contemporary African art has played out in two principal arenas—in the ethnographic museum and in large temporary group exhibitions—then today the museum of art is an analytical space for the structuring of artistic discourses has been implicated in shaping our understanding of the historical significance. Recently, this question has galvanized the conceptualization of one of the most significant and ambitious artistic projects of the 1990s by a contemporary African artist: the multi-part Museum of Contemporary African Art (1997-2004, p. 212, 213) by Rotterdam-based Senegalese artist Malick Gaba. Beginning in 1997, while in residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, Gaba sketched out a system of departments—in homage to Belgian artist Marcel Broodtherrs installation series Musée de l'Art Moderne, Département des Arts (1968-1979)—of a museum that was as conceptual as it was concrete. Conceived in twelve years—fourteen to a museum shop and a restaurant; from the museum's architecture to its development and fundraising departments—Gaba's project evoked a critique not only of the museum as an institution in which cultural values are produced, but also the museum as the symbolic realm in which such value is redistributed as cultural capital. On the level of the project's formal affinity to the function of a museum, he also signified an anthropology of the contemporary African art museum's late modernist strategy of appropriation of cultural authority by creating the means both for its existence and for its institutional radicalism. Gaba's Museum
of Contemporary African Art not only offers a critique of the license of the ethnographic museum, but also constructs a discursive site for the analysis of contemporary African art.

Projects such as Gaba's taxonomy of the museum and its various departments and those of Georges Adékpolo, another Beninois artist, whose sprawling installations combine carefully chosen archival material and commissioned and store-bought "neo-traditional" African art and "popular" art (sculpture and painting alike) in dizzying data-driven accumulations comprising objects, images, books, posters, and accompanied by elaborately written notations that mimic the field work of the ethnographer are imperative vehicles for unraveling the meaning of contemporary African art. Here the ability of the ethnographic museum to wield discursive authority, and therefore the power of interpretation, has been quite significantly denied by curatorial programs overseen by the conceptual complexity of the artists' work. Preceding Adékpolo and Gaba's projects are those of the Ivoirian artist, translator, linguist, and anthropologist Frédéric Rémy Bouabré with the epic Alphabet béte (1990–1991): Commissaires du Monde (1982–1994). Antiquité africain (1982) and Le musée du vinage africain (1991–92). Each of Bouabré's projects restages the relationship between past and future as an archive of innumerable events in which images, texts, signs, aphorisms, and alphabets bring together the structure of reality and the inscriptive in radical entanglement. Each of these critical projects has opened new theoretical frames for the future thinking of contemporary African art as a ground of images, objects, narratives, and histories. In short, Gaba, Adékpolo, and Bouabré may well be the most astute theorists of the condition of contemporaneity in African art.
A DAILY LECTURE BY
MARCUS STEINWEG

52nd Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 20th August 2013
THE TRUTH OF ART
Marcus Steinweg

1. Art and philosophy share a kind of geometrization of the incommensurable.

2. The assertion of form by art gives contour to formlessness.

3. The ghostliness of the work implies that its consistency is indebted to inconsistency.

4. To make chaos precise means to tear the consistency of the work from its invisibility and dissolution, to produce a visibility lacking any self-evidence and to defend it.

5. Therefore the appearance of the work is a continual surprise because its evidence is of the order of the non-evident.

6. Art exists at the moment when this appearance tears a hole in the web of facts in order to darken the evidence of instituted realities, not through obscurantism, but through clarity, through an excessive measure of evidence which blinds understanding and the senses.

7. The moment of this blinding which demands categories or concepts which do not lie to hand is the moment of appearance in which the work's necessity comes to shine while the subject seeks its motives.

8. The artwork comprises this power to disturb through clarity, to suspend the subject's certainties, "to abolish the real".¹

9. There has never been an art which enters a coalition with reality.

10. Art is resistance against that which is, not in the name of what ought to be, but in the name of the portion of established reality that has remained nameless.

11. Of this portion one can say that it denotes the truth of a real texture.

12. In the artwork, recognized realities communicate with this resistance which denotes nothing other than its ontological fleetingness: the formlessness that resists formalization.

13. The work is the locus of this nameless hierarchy of meaning.
14. Instead of giving room to dialectical reconciliation, it is the crossing-point of that which cannot be mediated.

15. It outlines this space of conflict which can be called the place of diaphora, zone of restlessness which develops its own rigour and precision.

16. The artwork marks this crossing of form and formlessness as it asserts a form which recognizes chaos.

17. But this recognition itself cannot be chaotic.

18. This precise indebtedness belongs to the precision of the work.

19. It takes up a problematic loan from chaos and what it expresses is nothing but this debt.

20. The artwork’s autonomy is indebted to its heteronomy.

21. The recognition of heteronomy is autonomy, just as there is no sovereignty that is complete domination, but only in relation to everything which disputes and relativizes sovereign autonomy.

22. That is the sense of the assertion ex nihilo: the artwork does not appear from nothingness because it is without conditions, but because it articulates the infinitesimal distance from its factual conditions.\(^2\)

23. The suspension of its reality and the transcendence of its conditionality presupposes a relation of the work to reality as the field of objective conditions.

24. This relation can be described as affirmative destruction.

25. An artwork relates to its objective reality in a necessarily destructive way.

26. It destroys the space of its reality because it lends consistency to an inconsistency which demonstrates the arbitrariness of recognized realities.

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Forest Houses Residents Build a Monument

By Sheila Stainback

Janet Bethea says she loves hard work, and she and 14 other Forest Houses residents certainly are doing their share. They are part of an ambitious, international event to build an interactive art exhibit - Gramsci Monument - in the middle of their Bronx development.

"I think it's going to be a beautiful thing," said Ms. Bethea, a grandmother and 30-year NYCHA resident. The Gramsci Monument, named in honor of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, is a concept that sprung from the mind of Thomas Hirschhorn, a Swiss artist who built similar monuments around the world. This will be his first one in the United States.

Residents are building the exhibit, which will be in place from July through September, and will feature areas for playing and learning, as well as serve as a production site for theater and art workshops. The project is funded completely by Dia Art Foundation, including employment of the residents.

"I am excited and also very nervous because there is so much work to do," said Thomas Hirschhorn, who moved just minutes from the Monument site. Mr. Hirschhorn says his concept comes from "an understanding of art and my belief that art can transform." More than 40 Forest Houses residents were hired to perform various duties for the exhibit, including the 15 who are building the exhibit. Once completed, the exhibit will include a bridge and a series of "houses" that will include a library, theater platform, workshop area, lounge, Internet corner and the Gramsci Bar - all which will be staffed by residents. Residents also will be part of the security team to watch over the exhibit overnight. The resident builders putting the project together will regroup in September to dismantle it.

"This has energized everyone, the community really needs this," said Eric Farmer, President of the Forest Houses Resident Association. It was Farmer's enthusiasm for Hirschhorn's concept that convinced the artist to choose the Forest Houses as the site for the summer-long exhibit.

"Right now, it's just a job for them," said Mr. Farmer. "When Gramsci Monument is completed, they're going to stand back and say, 'I did that!'" Mr. Hirschhorn will detail the ongoing efforts online at www.gramsci-monument.com.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Los residentes del Residencial Forest Houses construyen un monumento

Por Sheila Stainback

Janet Bethea dice que le gusta el trabajo duro, y ella y otras 14 residentes del Residencial Forest Houses sin lugar a dudas están poniendo todo de su parte. Ellos son parte de un ambicioso proyecto internacional para construir una exhibición de arte interactiva - el Monumento Gramsci - en el centro de su residencial del Bronx.

"Ya es hermoso", aseguró la Sra. Bethea, abuela y residente de NYCHA durante 30 años. El Monumento Gramsci, llamado así en honor del filósofo italiano Antonio Gramsci, es un concepto que surgió de la mente de Thomas Hirschhorn, un artista suizo que construyó monumentos similares en otras partes del mundo. Este será el primero en Estados Unidos. Los residentes están construyendo la exposición, que tendrá lugar de julio a septiembre y contará con áreas de juego y aprendizaje, y servirá a su vez como sitio de producción para talleres de arte y arte. El proyecto está financiado en su totalidad por Dia Art Foundation, incluso la contratación de los residentes.

"Estoy muy entusiasta y también muy nervioso porque hay mucho trabajo por hacer", dijo Thomas Hirschhorn, que se mudó a pocos minutos del sitio donde se erigirá el monumento. Hirschhorn dice que su concepto deriva de "un entendimiento del arte y nuestra creencia de que el arte puede ser transformador".

Se contrató a más de 40 residentes del Residencial Forest Houses para realizar diferentes tipos de actividades para la exposición, incluso 15 que están a cargo de construir la exposición. Una vez completada, la exposición tendrá un puesto y una serie de "casas" que incluirán una biblioteca, escenario de teatro, área de talleres, vestíbulo, rincon de Internet y el Bar Gramsci, todos atendidos por residentes. Los residentes también serán parte del equipo de seguridad para vigilar la exposición las 24 horas. Los constructores residentes que están montando el proyecto se volverán a reunir en septiembre para desarmarlo.

"Esto ha sido revitalizante, la comunidad realmente lo necesita", dijo Eric Farmer, Presidente de la Asociación de Residentes del Residencial Forest Houses.

Fue el entusiasmo de Farmer por el concepto de Hirschhorn lo que convenció al artista de elegir el Residencial Forest Houses como el sitio para la exhibición de arte. "En este momento, es simplemente un trabajo para ellos", dijo el Sr. Farmer. "Pero cuando [el Monumento Gramsci] esté terminado, los visitantes podrán decir: 'Esta lo hizo yo!'

Gramsci Project(s)
by Patricia Johnson

WHAT'S GOING ON?

To form an opinion about Thomas Hirschhorn's GRAMSCI MONUMENT, you only have to hear about it. In my first significant conversation about the project, a curator friend of mine as she excitedly told me Hirschhorn would host a daily lecture by philosopher Marcus Steinweg for the residents of Forest Houses, a housing project in the Bronx. Whatever the rest of the work was about, I instantly had concerns. The value of imposing scholarship on a group that would likely have few means of interpreting it seemed limited at best. After all, wouldn't such alienating lectures do more to discourage people from self-education than encourage it?

Even after I visited, that question lingered, but the monument itself, commissioned by DNA, does a good job of bringing diverse communities together. In early May, the President of the Resident Association of Forest Houses, Erik Farmer, approved the public work and residents began construction. A staff member told me that Forest Houses was the only housing project in the city to approve it.

The temporary structure (up through September 15) is basically a taped together community center that resembles a sprawling tree house. It's situated in the courtyard and includes a library, education center, stage, (dry) bar, newspaper room, and radio station, almost all of which were in use when I visited. For art's part, the stairs, couches, and shelves were covered with brown packing tape, a Hirschhorn trademark; he has famously transformed galleries with the material for years. And of course, Hirschhorn's longstanding interest in philosophy and Gramsci show up, taking the form of plaques, quotes on banners, and his frequent collaborator, the philosopher Marcus Steinweg. Even Gramsci's personal affects from prison—a hairbrush and a pair of shoes among them—are on display.

I suspect the sense of ownership that comes with community construction has something to do with the general vibe of the monument; there wasn't a soul who didn't want to chat, whether or not I invited it. "I'm Stan the Man!" one friendly staff member told me, introducing himself as he walked by. He worked the bar, which was a particularly active site for conversation. A bunch of us spent a while talking about where we were from and how cheap the food they were serving was. (Three bucks for a plate of rice and fried fish is a good deal!)

There's probably no good way to say this, but the reason I enjoyed this conversation (and countless others) was simply because I was having it. I've lived in Brooklyn for 11 years, and it takes quite a bit to get the white people to talk to the black people. I harbor a reasonable amount of white liberal shame for this, so it was a relief to spend some time in a place where some of that racial tension was eased, even if the guilt isn't.

This would probably make Antonio Gramsci happy. The philosopher and one-time leader of the Italian Communist Community in the 1920s believed that while hegemony may be impossible to escape, we could foster counter-hegemonies. Anyone can improve his or her quality of life through self-organization and self-education. It's impossible to say if Hirschhorn achieved this, but there was at least more activity on the site than there was before.

Whether that has anything to with philosophy, though, is questionable. The library was empty, and a worker running a lawn mower nearby the lecture I attended made it difficult to hear Steinweg's already impenetrable talk about criticism. Hirschhorn has to know that these lectures, which take place outside and by nature aren't easily accessible, wouldn't be absorbed well by many in the audience.

Still, as I left the site, I turned back to get a last look at a hand-painted banner hung across a constructed overpass: "Destruction is difficult. It is as difficult as creation." (Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks). I assumed the quote spoke to hegemony and the difficulty it takes to dismantle it, but whatever the case, it seemed unlikely many people would interpret it that way. Mostly I thought of the quote as a reminder that come September 15, the monument will be dismantled, and the conversation will stop.
RESIDENT OF THE DAY

"A.P" AMERICAN PHAROAH
(T.N.G) TOP NOCH GENTLEMEN