

# The African Biennale: Envisioning 'Authentic' African Contemporaneity

by

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## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to assess the extent to which the African curated exhibition, *Dak'Art: Biennale de l'art africain contemporain*, succeeds in subverting hegemonic Western representations of African art as necessarily 'exotic' and 'Other.' My investigation of the *Dak'Art* biennale in this thesis is informed and preceded by a study of evolutionist assumptions towards African art and the continuing struggle for command over the African voice. I outline the trajectory of African art from primitive artifact to artwork, highlighting the prejudices that have kept Africans from being valued as equals and unique artists in their own right. I then look at exhibiting techniques employed to move beyond perceptions of the tribal, to subvert the exoticising tendency of the West and remedy the marginalised position of the larger African artistic community.

## OPSOMMING

Die doel van hierdie tesis is om die mate te assesseeer waartoe die Afrikaan-gekonseptualiseerde uitstalling *Dak'Art: Biennale de l'art africain contemporain* daarin slaag om hegemoniese Westerse voorstellings van Afrika-kuns as noodwendig "eksoties" en "anders" te ondermyn. My ondersoek van die *Dak'Art*-biënnale is gerig en voorafgegaan deur 'n studie van evolusionistiese aannames rakende Afrika-kuns en die voortgesette stryd om beheersing van die Afrika-stem. In die tesis word die baan van Afrika-kuns vanaf primitiewe artefak tot kunswerk uiteengesit, met klem op die vooroordele wat erkenning van Afrikane as gelykes en unieke kunstenaars in eie reg teëwerk. Hierna word uitstallingstegnieke ondersoek wat gebruik word om verder as persepsies van Afrika-stamme te beweeg ten einde die eksotiserende neiging van die Weste omver te werp en die gemarginaliseerde posisie van die groter Afrika-kunsgemeenskap te herstel.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to examine the exhibition of contemporary African art on the African continent, and in particular the African curated *Dak'Art: Biennale de l'art africain contemporain*. According to Sotiaux (2002: 158):

the Dakar Biennale has succeeded in proving to us that another approach to the world is possible. An approach that breaks away from any hegemonic tendency of one culture (and thus one civilization) over the others.

I will explore this biennale as a means through which Africa presents its cultural modernity against the weight of centuries of Western<sup>1</sup> domination. Thus, the main research question of this thesis is whether African exhibitions, as exemplified by *Dak'Art*, solve problems of hegemonic Western representation.

To date numerous writings have focused on the reception of African art in the West as part of a history of cultural imperialism. These studies trace the migration of African art objects into the West, from the sixteenth through twentieth-century, from the *Wunderkammer* to the International contemporary art exhibition. Their aim is to demonstrate the establishment of early Western definitions, misconceptions of “classical/traditional” African art and the continued influence of an oppressive colonialist ideology on the reception of contemporary African art. They are, in Elizabeth Harney’s (2007: 120) words, ‘deliberate act[s] of canon reformation.’ As such it is essential that this thesis begins with an examination of this trajectory as an intellectual framework for my continued investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> I will speak of the West when referring to Europe and North America particularly as colonial powers whose hegemony oppressed and continues to oppress Africa, its citizens and its cultural production after the abolishment of colonialism.

Included in this trajectory I will consider the participation of African artists and curators in major Western exhibitions of contemporary art whose aim it is to subvert the exoticising tendency of earlier exhibitions in an attempt to remedy the marginalised position of the larger African community. These artists are by and large diasporan and their enterprise, as I will demonstrate, can be criticised for maintaining a Eurocentric tone. For the most part scholarship on the reception of African art ends here, but efforts to free the exhibition of African art from Western instruction does not. To my knowledge, there exists no comprehensive study on the exhibition of African art that traces the above-mentioned trajectory through to the present day, and certainly no study that investigates the display of contemporary African art on the African continent. The most recent exhibitions of contemporary African art acknowledge the importance of supporting cultural infrastructure and exchange on the African continent, one example being *Dak'Art*. Thus, this thesis will address whether exhibitions on the African continent, as exemplified by *Dak'Art*, succeed in overwriting the Western hegemonic paradigm.

My approach to the exhibition of African art is informed by a postcolonial critique of Western modernist epistemology. Post-colonial theory rejects colonial beliefs in universal truths, and exposes the normative assumptions of modernist Western discourse. This thesis looks at the effect of such normative beliefs on the reception of African art, relocating interest from the African art object proper to its textual and institutional reception and interpretation by the West.

Furthermore, this thesis adopts aspects of diasporan studies and its associated theories of nationalism. Western ideology is a totalising, essentialist mythology (to borrow a term from Barthes, 1973) that does not account for the heterogeneity of the colonised body politic. In Western exhibitions of African art and those by diasporan curators, it is largely denied

that postcolonial African art is by and large a national phenomenon. These exhibitions favour an “African essence” that is conceived of as pan-African.

Besides literature on the trajectory of African art into the West this thesis relies a great deal on debates carried out on the Internet. As I have already pointed out, comprehensive scholarship on African art bridging the twenty-first-century is very limited. Thus I rely primarily on exhibition catalogues and on debates and reviews on the Internet.

In Chapter 1 I ground this thesis by providing a brief outline of the evolutionary paradigm that has arguably informed all subsequent approaches to African art. The transformation of African material culture from ethnographic curiosity to art object will be traced. I will then look at a few landmark exhibitions that demonstrate the entry of African art into the gallery space. The first exhibition I will consider is the (in)famous *“Primitivism” in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984), whose display of “primitive art” is of particular importance, since it reflected (but also largely aided in determining and fixing) current Western perceptions of “primitive” cultures. This is then followed by an exposition of *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), which is a landmark attempt to implement a post-modern exhibition strategy. Firstenberg (2003: 38) describes the combined importance of these two exhibitions as

[establishing] a canonical and essentialising discourse around African art for the late twentieth-century, a discourse based on relationships among Western modernist brands of appropriating non-Western cultural objects as emblems of the “primitive”.’

The critiques of these two seminal exhibitions engendered a series of exhibitions in response, the aim of which was to remedy the marginalisation of African arts. The remainder of this first chapter is dedicated to two of these “corrective” exhibitions, namely *Africa Explores* (1991) and *Seven Stories of African Art* (1995).

Chapter 2 is dedicated to analysing the particular efforts of diasporan intellectuals to re-educate the West on African art, and also traces concurrent polemics (some recycled from previous initiatives) surrounding the exhibition of contemporary African art. The central question posed here is: “who defines the contemporary?” Many of the criticisms against the diasporan enterprise focus on the ways in which these exhibitions might serve the continued marginalisation of Africa. I offer for discussion *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (2001) and *Africa Remix* (2005), both of which acted as new entry points for the African artist into the domain of the contemporary. Following this discussion I pose an important question: “How suitable is the biennale model and the structure of mega-exhibitions for the exhibition of African art in Africa?”

In my final chapter I investigate the *Dak'Art* biennale as an alternative biennale, an example of Africa (re)defining itself. My aim is not to discuss the *Dak'Art* biennale in any depth—I will not make reference to any of the art on display, but rather to unpack and evaluate the discursive strategies employed by this exhibition on the African and international stage. I explore whether key issues pertaining to the African postcolony, such as pan-Africanism, nationalism, a sense of the local and the global, contribute to make *Dak'Art* distinctly different from European mega exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale. In particular I pose the question whether *Dak'Art* succeeds in unsettling Western presuppositions evident in exhibitions of the twentieth-century, or whether, in fact, the mega-exhibition format perpetuates a Western model.

# CHAPTER 1

## MAPPING AFRICA: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WESTERN RECEPTION OF AFRICAN ART

*Appropriation is a distinctly modern anxiety (Collier 2006: 40).*

Since this thesis aims to evaluate whether *Dak'Art*, as an exhibition of African art on the continent, manages to solve problems of Western hegemonic representation, it is necessary for me to first give a short history the West's prejudiced evaluations of African art objects first as curiosities, then ethnographic specimens and finally as works of art. This chapter will thus provide an historical foundation for an ongoing dialogue of ideological constructs surrounding African cultural production.

### 1.1 CABINETS OF CURIOSITY

African art objects first entered Europe in the sixteenth-century. Initially appraised as curiosities by wealthy gentleman collectors—as specimens that attested to the European explorer's discovery of new lands and power of conquest—they were displayed in special curiosity cabinets known as *Wunderkammers*. In so doing African art objects were dismissed, Shelly Errington (1998: 9) explains, as exotic Other and assigned to the margins. In their chapter *Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter*, Phillips and Steiner (1999: 3) look briefly at the acquisition, representation and evaluation of non-Western objects in the West. They view '[t]he possession of an exotic object...as an imagined access to a world of difference, often constituted as an enhancement of the new owner's

knowledge, power, or wealth.’ Hence, African art objects were not only evidence of the Other’s exotic ‘reality’, they are also constituted evidence of the West’s superiority. This was symptomatic of Africa’s cultural subjection to the control of the West.

## 1.2 THE EVOLUTIONARY PARADIGM

To bolster ideas of racial supremacy the West used advances in Western science to establish hierarchical dichotomies according to which non-Western objects were labeled as “primitive”<sup>2</sup> and Western objects “civilised.” The increasing prevalence of biological and cultural developmental theories in the late nineteenth-century saw the placing of “primitive” art objects as the necessary ‘starting point from which to measure change and progress’ (Errington 1998: 5). The idea of progress in turn rested upon the notion of linear time; ‘an infinite, gradual gradation of cause and effect that leads upward and onward, ever better’ (Errington 1998: 5). These ideas support what is known as the evolutionary paradigm; an oppressive use of time in which the West is regarded as the vanguard of human cultural and intellectual development, and “survival of the fittest” rationalises Western domination over both non-Western people and nature.

Johannes Fabian (1983: xii) is particularly aware of the way in which our theories and rhetoric are informed by ‘the ideological nature of temporal concepts.’ In his seminal text *Time and Other*, he examines past and present uses of time, particularly in the way temporality was used by the West to construe the object of its study in aid of higher self-regard.

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<sup>2</sup> The word “primitive” first appeared in English language in the fifteenth-century connoting that which was held to be original or ancestral of animals and perhaps also of men. In the eighteenth-century it evolved, referring to the earliest stages of church history. In its adoption by many other fields of study, including nineteenth-century biological theory, it implies original, pure, and simple (Torgovnick 1990: 18–19).

The modern notion of the “primitive”, theories of progress, and the concept of linear<sup>3</sup> time all rested on a radically new notion of history made necessary by the age of discovery. The sacred history of the prevailing Judeo-Christian tradition could not provide an explanation for the discovery of new realities and other cultures and races, since its specificity limited history to a series of biblical events that culminated in salvation. To enable the recognition of these new realities it was necessary to secularise Time<sup>4</sup>. This was achieved through generalising and universalising<sup>5</sup> time, which resulted in its quantitative expansion. In other words, the chronology of history was extended to make it more incorporative.

Sacred history was abandoned for a second reason. Not only did it not contain enough time, but more importantly it did not contain what Fabian (1983: 13) calls the ‘*right kind of Time*’. Sacred time functioned as a register of historical events from which it could not be separated. There was ‘no way to order an essentially discontinuous and fragmentary geological and

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<sup>3</sup> Pre-modern pagan models of history are cyclic, ‘which involves rather less urgency and anxiety than the linear one, events come around again and again forever ... There can be no sense that one has missed the boat and will never have another chance’ (McEvelley 1995: 136). This model of history can be characterised as incorporative. Sacred history (as exemplified by Judeo-Christian narratives) was a linear model and was fundamentally exclusionary. Following this we see the development of another linear model, secular history. But after the secularisation and subsequent naturalisation of time, the concept of time had become evermore incorporative. What is referred to here as a modern model of time, is the re-emphasis of its exclusionary character made possible by the rehistoricisation of secular, naturalised time.

<sup>4</sup> Sacred time of the Judeo-Christian tradition was thought of as a sequence of specific events of relevance to a chosen group of people. As Fabian (1983: 2) explains, this tradition stresses the ‘specificity of Time’. Secular time is similar to sacred time in that it is also linear in nature, but in the secularisation of time there is movement away from conceptions of totality towards generality. In other words, secular time is applicable to a large number of instances.

<sup>5</sup> As an example Fabian (1983: 3–4) cites Bossuet’s *Discours sur l’histoire universelle*, which was an attempt to universalise Christian history in the seventeenth-century. Bossuet wanted to alleviate confusion caused by the multitude of historical facts, by teaching the reader to distinguish between different times with the help of universal history. Universal history was to Bossuet (1845) a device which “is to the histories of every country and every people what a general map is to particular maps.” Hence, Bossuet is an example of a premodern treatise on universal history.

paleontological record' that Fabian (1983: 13, 14) calls '*uneventful* data'. The naturalisation of time was made possible by Darwin's theory of evolution propounded in *On the Origin of Species*<sup>6</sup>.

Social evolutionists adopted Darwin's theory since it provided a scientific frame in which ideas of progressive unfolding and improvement could be placed. But it is important to note that this utilisation entailed some fundamental alteration to Darwin's theories. Where the social evolutionist is of the conviction that time brings about change, Darwin insists that '[t]he mere lapse of time by itself does nothing either for or against natural selection' (cited in Fabian 1983: 14). In order to make use of Darwin's theories time had to be, according to Fabian (1983: 13), 'rehistorized,' which would infuse it with the notion of necessary development.

Infused with the idea of necessary development, the evolutionary paradigm provided a solution to the problem of the Other; a means of accounting for all observed differences. By placing itself at the forefront of the journey of progress, as the most advanced stage of evolution and the Other at its beginnings, the West created temporal distance between the Self and Other. The Other was labeled "primitive" connoting a position lower to the Western explorer on the now hierarchical evolutionary scale<sup>7</sup>. At this stage Fabian (1983: 17–18) makes an important point, that

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<sup>6</sup> Of course it is important to point out that such theories did not wholly originate with him. There existed vague ideas of biological evolution and theories of social evolution some time before. Darwin proposed in this text that variation within species occurs randomly and that the survival or extinction of each organism is determined by that organism's ability to adapt to its environment. This came to be known as the principle of natural selection.

<sup>7</sup> Through the rehistoricisation of Darwin's naturalised time, the social evolutionist achieved the temporalisation of the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain of Being had its origin in Greek philosophy, particularly in the work of Aristotle. He proposed a hierarchically organised scheme—called the ladder of life—that arranged all living things on an ascending scale. Some forms of life were regarded as more "primitive" and others as more developed. At the bottom of this classification system were inanimate forms, above this are various stages of plants and animals, then the different ranks of humans, from slaves up to the highest forms of humanity, the kings, queens and popes, and then

[a] discourse employing such terms as “primitive”, “savage” does not think, or observe, or critically study, the “primitive”; it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought.

In other words, the Other is *constructed* as fundamentally less developed, uncivilised, and “primitive” compared to the West. It is this evolutionary paradigm that has significantly influenced the study and reception of African art. It is in view of the above that we can state that modernism is no more than ‘a myth of history designed to justify colonialism’ (McEvilley 1995: 85).

### 1.3 ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECT

Since there is no place for anomalies in a totalising system such as modernism<sup>8</sup>, attempts were made to find a place for “primitive” art in the system of modern knowledge in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. This involved the incorporation of African art objects into the emerging discipline of anthropology, due to the increased prevalence of biological developmental theories and scientific interest in “primitive” objects as artifacts. The materiality and physical presence of “primitive” art objects made them not only uniquely persuasive witnesses to the existence of realities outside the West’s experience, but together with the revision of time these objects also provide a means of constructing a *scientifically justified* story of the West’s superiority. Consequently, the anthropologist

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up through the various orders of angels and finally God himself (Johnston 1998: online). For this reason, according to Errington (1998: 12), ‘[the West] came to understand that “low” means prior and simple, and therefore inferior.’

<sup>8</sup> Modernity refers to a discursive paradigm following the Enlightenment, which set the tone for the arrogant extremes of the modernist/colonialist paradigm during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. French sociologist Lyotard uses the term *modern*

to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse...making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth (1984: xxii).

approached the “primitive” art object with scientific interest, as important sources of information about the colonised. This necessitated a move from the *Wunderkammers* to the more public space of the natural history museum.

As objects of scientific knowledge African art was incorporated into natural history displays. Information in these displays was limited to the technical, social and religious *functions* of objects, thus erasing any notion of their aesthetic value. Objects of a utilitarian nature were regarded as less advanced than those produced for aesthetic purposes, which determine cultural production in the Western tradition. This idea was supported by the Hegelian notion of progress and Kantian aesthetics.

Fabian (1983: 26) points out that:

Evolutionary sequences and their concomitant political practice of colonialism and imperialism may *look* incorporative; after all, they create a universal frame of reference able to accommodate all societies. But being based on the episteme of natural history, they are founded on distancing and separation.

As well as secularisation and naturalization, time was also thoroughly spatialised. This was based on the conceit that distance meant difference. In other words, ‘[d]ispersal in space reflects directly, which is not to say simply or in obvious ways, sequence in Time (Fabian 1983: 12)<sup>9</sup>. This allowed for

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<sup>9</sup> At the heart of the knowledge (anthropological) that is gathered about the Other lies what Fabian (1983: xi) identifies as a fundamental contradiction.

On the one hand we dogmatically insist that anthropology rests on ethnographic research involving personal, prolonged interaction with the Other. But then we pronounce upon the knowledge gained from such research a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance; spatial and temporal. The Other’s empirical presence turns into his theoretical absence, a conjuring trick which is worked with the help of an array of devices that have the common intent and function to keep the Other outside the Time of anthropology.

the existence of contemporary ancestors as well as what Fabian (1983: 31) terms '*the denial of coevalness*'<sup>10</sup>. By this he meant '*a persistent and systematic tendency to place referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropology discourse*' (original emphasis; *Ibid.*). What we see are the distancing of the subject and object of study.

Another factor that influenced the interpretation of African material culture as ethnographic objects was the dominant Kantian aesthetics of Western culture. According to Michael Podro (cited in Phillips 1999: 6) Kant influenced Western systems of art classification by propounding the view of artists as autonomous creators who are 'fettered by their physical dependency on Nature, but [is] free in their exercise of Reason. ... "The role of art ... was seen as overcoming our ordinary relations to the world"'. Those forms which are regarded to be most free, what we may call "art for art's sake" are the highest form of cultural attainment and the lowest are those that are the most utilitarian<sup>11</sup>. Coupled with the Hegelian notion of progress<sup>12</sup>, the increased freedom of the artist and therefore the increasing

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We can say then that the disciplines of art history and anthropology that write about the "primitive" as belonging to time are "allochronic" discourses as opposed to diachronic.

<sup>10</sup> Coevalness means simply belonging to the same age or generation. Therefore, in order to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse, there has to be a denial of coevalness (Fabian 1983: 31). In other words, the anthropologist has to deny any contemporaneity with the Other. This however results in an absurdity. For human communication to occur or for any comment of another culture to be possible there has to be coevalness. For communication to be possible between two parties there has to be a shared knowledge, since communication rests on understanding.

<sup>11</sup> In his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* Kant states: 'If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to the Object by means of understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination (acting perhaps in conjunction with understanding) we refer the representation to the Subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste, therefore, is not a cognitive judgement, and so not logical, but is aesthetic – which means that it is one whose determining ground *cannot be other than subjective*' (cited in Preziosi 1998: 79).

<sup>12</sup> In *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) Hegel offers an account of the many manifestations that the spirit and mind takes on at different stages in life. This account

incidence of “true art”, mark the level of civilisation that a group of people has achieved. In Preziosi’s (1998: 67) words: ‘Hegel’s theodicy ... renders the visible legible as episodes in a historical novel’.

Once anthropologists had established objects made for functional purposes as inferior compared with high art objects produced for purely aesthetic purposes, the graphic images that appeared on tools, weapons and fabrics produced by the “primitive” were imagined to serve utilitarian purposes as well. It was therefore believed that ornamentation (geometric, stylised or abstracted) was a sign of early cultural development, and naturalism which was the dominant style of Western tropes of art at the time was assumed to be the most advanced stage of cultural development (van Robbroeck 2006: np). The evolutionary anthropologists concentrated almost exclusively on ornament since it was believed that its stylisation marked the origins of art, ‘which ... [they explained] as the misapplication of naturalistic art impulse, in spite of the wide divergence of its final result from its intention’ (Goldwater 1962: 21). What Goldwater refers to here is Alfred Haddon’s<sup>13</sup> conclusion that the “primitive” lacked the artistic skill to copy from nature. This skill that the Western artist possessed, but which the “primitive” lacks was

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is a dialectical tracing of the spirits’ maturity from the most naïve sense perception to the highest and most intellectual. It happens, he says, with a kind of necessity. ‘As conscious of itself, Spirit is conscious of its own potentialities, and it possesses a drive to actualize these potentialities’ (Kenny 1998: 275). Through the actualisation of its potentialities towards maturity, it strives for the discovery of *Absolute Knowledge*, which is the end of history. It is at this point that rationality and reality satisfy one another.

<sup>13</sup> A trained biologist, Alfred Haddon, conducted experiments in the successive copying of naturalistic representations of an object. What the experiment showed was that original representation is gradually simplified and conventionalised beyond any resemblance of its former self. What this revealed in Haddon’s view was that the non-artist (he did not use artists for this experiment), which would be the same for the “primitive” artist, must have been copying from each other and not from the original image because they lacked skill to do so. He called this process “degeneration” which was unconscious and not due to choice (Goldwater 1962: 20).

believed to be innate. It was taken for granted that the geometric and stylised could not have occurred in “primitive” art out of conscious choice<sup>14</sup>.

#### 1.4 MODERNIST PRIMITIVISM AND THE RE-VALUATION OF AFRICAN ART OBJECTS

Robert Goldwater (1962: 15) in his seminal *Primitivism in Modern Art* draws attention to the fact that, by the turn of the twentieth-century, the ethnographic interest in “primitive” African art objects was supplemented by aesthetic appreciation, which meant the incorporation of African art into the discipline of art history. This re-evaluation did not however divorce judgments and evaluations made about “primitive” African art objects from its evolutionary underpinnings. Its acknowledgement was not without condition.

The appropriation of “primitive” forms by the modernist primitivists in the early part of the twentieth-century and the concurrent development of formalist theories<sup>15</sup> are considered to be major causes of this re-evaluation.

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<sup>14</sup> As has been discussed earlier the “primitive” artist was not regarded to be the autonomous free creator that the Western artist was. The artistic production of the former was strongly dictated by his environment, which was nature. For example Gottfried Semper believed that art was produced by the “primitive” out of a practical need for shelter and protection from the elements. If this sounds somewhat strange it is because he developed his theory with architecture in mind, but it was adopted by his followers and adapted to other forms of art (Goldwater 1962: 17). Not all academics interested in the origin of ornamentation were sceptical of the “primitive” artists’ autonomy. Hjalmar Stolpe thought that the stylisation or conventionalising of ornament was due primarily to ‘the technical (not the aesthetic) unsuitability as decoration of more realistic designs, and in addition to the desire of savages to repeat as often as possible representations having symbolic content’ (Goldwater 1962: 23). Hence ornament was a conscious choice made by “primitive” artists and not simply because they lacked any skill to do otherwise as was suggested by Haddon.

<sup>15</sup> Preziosi (1998: 579) defines Formalism as ‘an approach to the appreciation and analysis of artefacts privileging their formal or morphological qualities over (or with respect to) other aspects of a work’s production, reception, subject-matter, or thematic significance...’ Roger Fry—a formalist art theorist—suggested that “primitive” art could rescue Western art from its tradition of the representational and narrative. He also suggested an inversion of the evolutionist assumption that naturalism constituted a

Ambivalent to the processes of modernisation and the forces of capitalist society, the Cubists, Surrealists and German Expressionists embarked on a campaign of defiance against so-called “high art”. This revolt, Gill Perry (1993: 2) points out, took the form of a ‘positive discrimination in favour of so-called “primitive” subjects and techniques,’ in an attempt to recapture a certain kind of simplicity<sup>16</sup>. Still inspired by the popular evolutionist perception of the “primitive” ‘as a living relic of the ordinary human mind’ (Clifford 1985: 352), they were thought ‘to express their feelings freely from the intrusive overlay of learned behaviour and conscious constraints that mold the work of the Civilized (Western) artist’ (Price 1999: 32). Accordingly James Clifford (1985: 352) suggests that the modern artist went to the “primitive” artist in ‘search of “informing principles”<sup>17</sup> that transcend culture, politics and history.’ This entailed the gradual elimination of the anecdotal

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higher level of attainment than stylised art, and proposed that abstraction was indicative of higher conceptual ability. Fry notes controversially (for the time) that since

we have the habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements ... it seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it (cited in Torgovnick 1990: 89).

While his reasoning posed a challenge to the prejudices of the Western tradition that supported colonialism, it does little to uproot evolutionist assumptions. The term “savages” does not compliment his claim. African art is still “primitive”, in his view, since abstraction was not obtained through process. African art shows no development (Ibid.: 90–91).

<sup>16</sup> Artistic primitivism was not an invention of the twentieth-century. Goldwater’s (1938) notion of ‘preparation’ helps to establish an artistic root for the interest in the “primitive” in the nineteenth-century. Underlying this crucial hypothesis, according to Perry (1993: 2) is the assumption ‘that the “primitive” artefacts were invested with value at the same time as—or even *after*—similar technical innovations appeared within western art practices. The characteristics of “primitive” sources were thus seen to *conform* to, rather than simply to *inspire* the changing interests of modern artists. In other words, a “primitive” tendency was already being produced from *within* modern art, and in fact was to become a distinguishing feature of the “modern”.’

<sup>17</sup> Informing principles are otherwise known as structural universals. Structuralism, to offer a simplistic definition, is an approach in anthropology, other social sciences and literature that interprets and analyses its material in terms of presumed underlying oppositions, contrasts, and hierarchical structures. These structures are assumed to be universal.

and the narrative, and an increasing preoccupation with pure form. Stripped of its referential function, pure form (in other words abstraction) was believed to be a universal language capable of communicating across cultural and historical divides. The fact that the “primitive” looks like the modern was then interpreted as validating the latter by showing that its values were universal. Modernism can thus be thought of as the ‘Africanized period of Western art’ (McEvilley 2005: 34).

This appropriation of African forms did pose a logistical problem for the West. The Hegelian narrative of progress in its most pure form moves from the Ancient World, to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and then to the Modern World. The history of art based on this narrative did not include non-Western art. The problem with the recognition of the latter was where to place it in the scheme of art history. One major strategy according to Errington (1998: 52), was ‘to place the arts of primitive people with the magical beginnings of art proper, prior to history—that is prior to Egypt and the Ancient Near East.’ This highlights one of the major contradictions of modernist discourse. The “primitive” is not only placed (as has been discussed) at the beginning of time, but also before time.

The aesthetic appreciation of African art forms and incorporation into the discipline of art history necessitated the spatial relocation of African art to the gallery. Presenting African art objects as ethnography meant that displays included information pertaining to its technical, social, and religious functions. When African art objects enter the gallery, ‘it is common for its ... presentation to become more spatially privileged (i.e., for the clutter of competing pieces to drop away), and for almost all of the didactic information to disappear’ (Price 1989: 84).

## 1.5 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY WESTERN EXHIBITIONS OF AFRICAN ART

Following the appropriation of African forms by the Primitivists, Western exhibitions began to explore this trend. However, despite the veneration of this art, it remained classified as “primitive”.

Primitive sculptures were once banned from the museum; now they enter it. Not only because they are the sculpture of half the earth, and of much more than half the time, but also because beyond the frontier figures of Sumer and Mexico, this crucial and ageless art, so strangely relevant to our own, is the art of our next investigation: the night side of man (Malraux in Flam 2003: 431).

A trend emerged in the exhibition of these artworks that acknowledged this relationship, culminating in the 1984 show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, *“Primitivism” in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. The MoMA show was not the only exhibition of ‘primitive’ art at the time, but by far the most contentious and widely debated<sup>18</sup>. But unlike the other exhibitions of primitive art *“Primitivism”* was recognised for its exhibition of “primitive” pieces side by side with Western pieces, a relationship centering on the universalising allegory of “affinity”. The catalogue was considered a definitive source on this topic. Subsequent exhibitions of informal African art, which are often viewed critically in relation to *‘Primitivism’*, include: *L’art Naïf Africain*, 1987, Paris; *Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989, Paris; *Africa Explores*, New York 1991; *Africa Now: Jean Pigozzi Collection* (travelling exhibition) 1991; *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* 1991, Tokyo; and *Jean Pigozzi Contemporary Art Collection*, 1992, London. From this list I will investigate *Magiciens de la Terre* and *African Explores*, since the former elicited criticism for its glib post-modern

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<sup>18</sup> It was one of six exhibitions in New York that year. The new Center for African Art opened in September, with an exhibition of masterpieces from the Musée de l’Homme. *Asante: Kingdom of God* opened at the American Museum of Natural History, and the Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples opened as a permanent installation at that museum in December. *Te Maori* opened at the Rockefeller Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and an exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian art opened at the IBM Gallery in October (Clifford 1985: 351).

approach while the latter raised questions about curatorial choices, categorisation and the unquestioned Western gaze. Lastly, I will look at the *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* exhibition that aimed at exhibiting African art without superficial categories from personal perspectives.

### 1.5.1 “PRIMITIVISM” IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART: AFFINITY OF THE TRIBAL AND THE MODERN

Following the adoption of non-Western forms by the Primitivists, a trend emerged in the exhibition of modern primitivist artworks that acknowledged this relationship, culminating in the 1984 show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, *“Primitivism” in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, organised by William Rubin with Kirk Varnedoe. The aim of the show was to address what Rubin saw as a lack of up-to-date scholarship on primitivism. In his introduction to the catalogue Rubin (1984: 1) writes:

[I]llumination[s] cast upon tribal objects by anthropologists ... naturally focus on understanding tribal sculptures in the contexts in which they were created. Engaged with the history of primitivism, I have quite different aims; I want to understand the Primitive sculptures in terms of the Western context in which modern artists “discovered” them. The ethnologists’ primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects—is irrelevant to my topic.

Thus, the exhibition aimed to showcase ‘the interest of modern artists in tribal art and culture, as revealed in their thought and work’ (Ibid.)<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Steiner (1994: 106) describes this exhibition as a “*taxonomic* moment” in the history of art; a moment when African art and modern art were brought together on an “equal” footing; a moment when the status of so-called “primitive” objects was profoundly elevated and redefined.’ However, clearly the shift of African objects from artifact to art had nothing to do with an objective change in the quality of the objects themselves, but was the direct result of what several authors have characterised as a peculiar relativism. Sally Price (1989: 25) writes: ‘The “equality” accorded to non-Westerners (and their art),

Keeping in mind that this was primarily to be an exhibition of European Modernist primitivism; non-Western artworks were exhibited alongside the former. Their similarities were interpreted not as showing the influence of the so-called “primitive” on the so-called “modern”, but as showing a deep emotional sameness; an underlying spiritual affinity of all mankind. By proposing this affinity, Rubin downplayed the direct contributions “primitive” art objects made in shaping the course of modern art, which McEvilley (1995: 36) interprets as an attempt to subvert the possible view ‘that primitivism ... invalidates Modernism by showing it to be derivative and subject to external causation.’

Discrepancies<sup>20</sup> were constructed in the exhibition space by relegating the “primitive” to an ahistorical realm, before the time of the modern, thus reinforcing the notion of “contemporary ancestors”. While the exhibition was launched as the first large-scale critique of ethnocentric attitudes towards African art objects, it was criticised for, *inter alia*, displaying named and dated Modernist artworks alongside anonymous and undated African sculptures that were only labeled according to “tribal” designations. Torgovnick (1990: 121) explains: ‘The exhibit paid fetishistic attention to the dating of Western objects—sometimes down to the month and week of composition; the primitive objects [on the other hand] were labeled by centuries.’ By omitting all specific information Rubin deprives the “primitive” art object of their histories. They were labeled as ahistorical, as not

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the implication goes, is not a natural reflection of human equivalence, but rather the result of Western benevolence’. Later she goes on to add that the ‘Western observer’s discriminating eye is often treated as if it were the only means by which an ethnographic object could be elevated to the status of a work of art’ (Price 1989: 68).

<sup>20</sup> On the other hand (so as not to jeopardise his thesis of affinity—read from the apparent *shared* abstraction of form and complex conceptualisation), Rubin worked hard to suppress the difference of function and provenance between the modern and the “primitive”. For this reason he had no choice but to turn away from ethnological concerns and focus on formal aspects.

occupying the same history as the modern artwork. Furthermore, where the modern artwork was attributed to a named artist, the “primitive” art object was not. At most it was labeled according to a ‘tribal’ designation. By insisting on the anonymity of its creator, an individual “primitive” art object is not only able to function as *the* representative for its whole culture according to the so-called ‘one style one tribe’ paradigm (a phrase coined by Sidney Kasfir), but it also suggests that the identity and status of the artist was of no importance to “primitive” cultures. It was assumed that “primitive” art conveyed communal ideas, thus Rubin (1984: 36) proposed that ‘[t]ribal art expresses a collective rather than an individual sentiment.’ Though it is true that available information often did not allow the artists’ identity to be known, its anonymity (“faceless native”) was nevertheless a necessary precondition of its *authentic* “primitiveness.” It was commonly believed by collectors that once the identity of the artist was known the art object could no longer be regarded as “primitive” art.

[T]he act of ascribing identity simultaneously erases mystery. And for art to be ‘primitive’ [and therefore authentic] it must possess, or be seen to possess a certain opacity of both origin and intention (Kasfir 1999: 94).

Rubin’s exhibition can thus be read as an attempt to avoid challenges against the West’s patriarchal role, by carefully constructing apparent similarity while still retaining distance/difference. Criticisms were predominately focused on Rubin’s controversial thesis of affinity that served to demonstrate the universality of the modernist canon, through the exploitation and misrepresentation of the “primitive” art object and its creator, in addition to enforcing disparate power relations between the West and the colonised<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> The only “sameness” which James Clifford (1985: 354) will allow between the modern and the “primitive,” is that they both do not feature the pictorial illusionism or sculptural naturalism that came to dominate Western art after the Renaissance. ‘To say that they share with modernism a rejection of certain naturalist projects’ he explains ‘is not to show anything like an affinity.’ Furthermore, according to Sieglinde Lemke (2003: 409) ‘to describe this cultural relation as an “affinity between the modern and the tribal”—as

## 1.5.2 MAGICIENS DE LA TERRE

Out of the controversy of the “*Primitivism*” exhibition arose a renewed call for the presentation of African artworks in their own right and not as proof of Western hegemony. The seminal *Magiciens de la Terre* directed by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre George Pompidou, Paris 1989, led a new postmodern<sup>22</sup> phase in the exhibition of non-Western art that was consciously anti-modernist, revealing

Western culture as it [entered] the 1990s [as] somewhat inchoately seeking a new definition of history that will not involve ideas of hierarchy, or of mainstream and periphery, and a new, global sense of civilisation to replace the linear Eurocentric model that lay at the heart of Modernism’ (McEvelley 1990: 396).

Where the “*Primitivism*” show was based on a belief in universally valid quality judgments, *Magiciens* ‘hoped to be able to acknowledge that value judgments are not innate or universal but conditioned by social context, and hence that they only really fit works emerging from the same context’ (Ibid.: 399). *Magiciens* was expected to provide a sense of the global state of

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William Rubin ... did—is a misleading gloss, ... because “affinity” suggests that Western and non-Western art are parallel structures that can never be integrated.’ They can never be integrated, ‘since modern painting is modern’, it is not according to Goldwater (1962: xxi) ‘primitive in the same sense as any of the [“primitive”] arts.’ This is exactly the nature of the affinity that Rubin proposed. It communicated similarity to the extent that it would qualify the universalist project of modernism, while at the same time preventing the “primitives” from participating as equals.

<sup>22</sup> McEvelley (1995: 67) suggests that, if modernism can be described as the fetishisation of sameness, then postmodernism fetishises difference.

A post-Modern exhibition strategy begins with the realization that categories and criteria have no innate validity—only the validity that is projected upon them—and thus that their transgression can be an opening into freedom.

Most importantly the “ideal” post-Modern exhibition must allow values of quality to stand side by side without giving one of them dominance or authority over the others; and it must not strive for sameness as in the Modernist exhibition with its attempt to universalise a canon. In other words, the postmodern episteme may briefly (and at the risk of oversimplification) be described as skepticism towards typical European Grand Narratives of universality. Evelyn Nicodemus (1995: 30) describes post-modern thinking as ‘a kind of western introspection, when overweening pride in modern progress reached the self-critical, self-denigrating, self-dismantling stage.’

contemporary art with all its fragmentations and differences. Consequently, Andre Magnin, the associate curator, strategically selected for the exhibition fifty Western and fifty non-Western contemporary artworks, in other words (in the literal sense) art belonging to the present, and installed them in a loose, disorganised, and therefore potentially neutral configuration. As a result, the exhibition was dubbed by Lucy Lippard (1990: 406) as ‘an extravaganza of current “global” art.’ Additionally, in contrast or as a reaction to the “*Primitivism*” exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre* neglected to comment intensively on the array of works (in contrast to the *Primitivism* show, which was accompanied by an extensive double volume catalogue), that were left to speak for themselves.

Despite its precautions, the exhibition was criticised for its selection of artworks, which, according to McEvelley (1990: 396), displayed the ‘distressing signs of residual colonialist attitudes.’ Firstly, the exhibition was criticised for defining the selection of works according to Western standards. McEvelley (2005: 35) argues that the exhibition would have looked significantly different if African experts had selected the works, since they were bound to have had very different expectations. Furthermore, one (unspoken) selection criterion was that the non-Western artists should not have lived or have been trained in the West. In fact none of the artists featured had formal training, and many had not been considered, or had not considered themselves, artists before they were invited to participate. Accordingly, John Picton criticised the curatorial structure of *Magiciens* for harbouring a hidden agenda ‘in the selection of ... a mask carver, a coffin maker and a sign painter as representative of Africa’ (cited in McEvelley 2005: 36).

The exhibition, as evinced by its title, has been criticised for proposing ‘a romantic tilt toward the idea of the “native artist” as not only a magician but as also somehow close to the earth, as if in some precivilized state of nature’

(McEvelley 1990: 396), and therefore, primitivist. Through this exhibition the non-Western “primitive” self-taught artist was portrayed as shamanistic, instinctive and emotional. He/She now embodied that which is “original” and “authentic”; untainted by education and training. In other words, the contemporary African artist was defined as a neo-primitive. The third criticism, therefore, was that the selection of work, in its primitivist bias, did not succeed in fulfilling Martin’s promise of a global representation of visual culture.

Nevertheless, *Magiciens* was a groundbreaking and enormously influential exhibition that greatly succeeded in breaking down barriers that had obstructed African art from entering official international circuits. It was the first exhibition of contemporary art partly produced by non-Westerners to make a significant impact in Europe. The connection that *Magiciens* established between Africa and the rest of the world, explains McEvelley (2005: 36):

put the debate firmly in the public domain. While challenging modernist universality, taking an unashamedly postmodern stance and postulating a critique of European activities in and misplaced notions of exotic places and people on earth, the project at the same time set the stage for the continuation of the old-fashioned ethnographic practice of categorization and its application to contemporary artistic practice in the Third World.

### 1.5.3 AFRICA EXPLORES

In *Magiciens de la Terre* a revised definition of the “authentic” introduced the West to a new vista of contemporary African art. Yet works were deliberately selected that were produced by Africans who had not lived in the West or received Western style education at any time. By only including artworks of so-called self-taught African artists, the art of Africa was predominately

constructed as “primitive” and self-taught. In 1990, the show *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition* curated by Grace Stanislav at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, selected works of Western educated African artists, many of whom lived abroad, and whose work showed Western influence. It is these two divergent approaches that Susan Vogel attempted to balance (McEvelley 2005: 36) in *Africa Explores*. Vogel showcased self-taught artists as had been done in *Magiciens* but at the same time she included some Western educated artists; an attempted compromise between “traditional” and “modern” African art, with the result that the category of the modern was widened. Yet this did not immunise her from the criticism that she had juxtaposed (in an uncritical manner), academic and informal art to the detriment of the latter.

Vogel’s exhibition aimed to show Africa ‘digesting the West’ (Vogel 1991: 14), since it has been ‘the determining experience—though certainly not the only influence—for African art in the twentieth century’ (Vogel 1991: 14). African artists assimilating foreign elements are often described as “Westernised”—an accusation that carries implications of inauthenticity. Vogel, however, does not only believe that this kind of culture contact is unavoidable, but that ‘[a]rtists using foreign themes and techniques in their work do so not as a sign of their domination by the West, or of their repudiation of their African heritage, but in terms of their own culture’ (Vogel 1991: 27). African artists, according to Vogel, borrow Western elements inasmuch as they answer their own specific needs. What Vogel intimates is that once Western elements are incorporated into an African artwork they cease to be Western as they correspond to African visions and fantasies and not to Western culture’s reading of itself. Vogel (1991: 30) wishes her study to demonstrate ‘the ability of non-Western peoples to apprehend, digest, and appropriate parts of Western culture without losing themselves’. She goes on:

For too long we have regarded this process from a strictly Western point of view, and have been unwilling to surrender ownership of our material culture after it has been permanently borrowed by others...The widespread assumption that to be modern is to be Western insidiously denies the authenticity of contemporary African cultural expression by regarding them a priori as imitations of the West. This book and exhibition contradict that assumption by showing that African assimilations of imported objects, material, and ideas are selective and meaningful; that they are interpretations grounded in preexisting African cultural forms, and that they contribute to a continuous renovation of culture (Vogel 1991: 30).

Accordingly Vogel claims in her foreword, that:

“Africa Explores” seeks to focus on Africa, its concerns, and its art and artists in their own contexts and in their own voices. ...[W]e preferred to try and understand Africa’s experience of this century from the African perspective—from a point of view in which Western things and ideas are particles in a matrix of preexisting African styles and philosophies (Vogel 1991: 9).

In his review of the exhibition, Oguibe (1993: 16) is severely critical of Vogel’s use of “voices”, for while it claims to offer an open platform for African artists, it is yet another example of the West speaking for Africa<sup>23</sup>. Vogel (1991: 10) argues that the ‘Western contributors speak as *intimate outsiders*’ (my emphasis). ‘The invited insider’, responds Oguibe (1993: 16),

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<sup>23</sup> Selections were made for this exhibition primarily by Susan Vogel, however it is significant that they were made from pre-existing Western collections, including *Centre Internationale des Civilisations Bantu*, Libreville; *The Chase Manhattan Bank*; *Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography*, Harvard University; *Jean Pigozzi*; *Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon*; and the *Fonds National d’Art Contemporain–Ministère de la Culture*, Paris. Furthermore, the contributors to the catalogue include Walter E.A. Van Beek, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Ima Ebong, Donald John Cosentino, Thomas McEvilley and V.Y. Mudimbe.

'is only a stranger in his own discourse, swamped and drowned out. It is the "intimate outsider" who truly is in charge.' The selected title does not help her case either. It insinuates the paradigm of discovery that initially constructed Africa as exotic Other. Furthermore, Vogel makes a revelation in her foreword that her 'conclusions are drawn in the face of much that remains unknown.' Thus, writes Oguibe (Ibid.):

In this inadvertent divulgence, Vogel seals that fate of any claims to departure from the frames and prejudices of orthodox "Africanist" traditions by insinuating the same old binary of the Self and Other. ... That which it does not know is *unknown*. That which it does not present is not presented, and that which it does not speak for cannot speak.

Again setting out to counter the argument of *Magiciens de la Terre*, Vogel framed the visual material by way of a series of categories namely: traditional art, new functional art, urban art, international art, and extinct art<sup>24</sup>. These labels too glibly categorise the complex multiplicity of Africans. In accordance with a barely disguised evolutionary model which includes the co-option of western material culture by Africans, the contemporary adoption of traditional forms, and the assimilation of Western concepts and mediums (Firstenberg 2003: 38). In response to this, Oguibe (1993: 18) in a polemical tone accuses Vogel's naming exercise as 'the first duty and prerogative of the discoverer/master' and calls this categorizing impulse 'bird-watching'. Kasfir's (1993: 16) reading of this categorical organisation of the catalogue, is that it works in the same way as the style-area rubrics of

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<sup>24</sup> Vogel (1991: 10-11) describes these categories as follows. The first strain called traditional art refers to art that is village based and functional. New functional art, produced by the current generation, will in time become traditional. Urban art or popular art is often ornamental and used for commercial purposes. The artists producing this work have a basic school education. International art, on the other hand, is made by academically trained artists, who live in cities and who have the opportunity to travel. "Extinct" art is traditional art of the past often appropriated as a signifier of national unity.

canonical art: 'it de-emphasizes chronology and therefore strongly resists any possible art-historical treatment of change'.

This led to an additional problem, the problem of exclusion. Given the exhibition's all-inclusive subtitle, *20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, which promises a comprehensive survey, its partial selection is contradictory to its title. This omission underlies a major part of van Robbroeck's (1994) review of the catalogue. The most prolific art being produced at the time are curios for the tourist market, yet it is scarcely mentioned in *Africa Explores*. Curio art, by virtue of its sheer prolificity and its Western target of consumption, is not collectable, not 'authentic', and lacking, in Vogel's words, 'sincerity'. If the rationale for the inclusiveness of *Africa Explores* is a reluctance to impose Western High Art Criteria on the cultural output of Africa, then Vogel would have included for investigation what van Robbroeck (1994: 66) considers to be the predominant cultural phenomenon of Africa.

Despite these criticisms, Vogel's exhibition has been credited as being influential in the discursive reception of contemporary African art in the West.

#### 1.5.4 SEVEN STORIES ABOUT MODERN ART IN AFRICA

Since *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Africa Explores*, and the establishment of Jean Pigozzi's *Contemporary African Art Collection* (CAAC)<sup>25</sup>, objections have

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<sup>25</sup> Inspired by *Magiciens de la Terre* and curated by Andre Magnin, the collection takes seriously the idea of African art as uncontaminated by the West, that the principle has been to reject works made by artists who went to art school in the West or who have moved out of Africa and reside in Western centers such as Paris, London, or New York. In Magnin's words, the aim of the CAAC is to emphasise 'an art that prefers to ignore its possible claim as "contemporary", an art often practiced by artists without any formal schooling, many of whom have no ambition beyond satisfying a local community' (cited in McEvelley 2005: 37). This suggests that African contemporary art does not belong to the same stratum as Western contemporary art. In other words, "true" African art is not contemporary. As Picton (2002: 116) argues it, the CAAC is dedicated to "collecting and

arisen against the establishment of self-taught artists as the new paradigm of African creative authenticity. As an answer to *Africa Explores, Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*—an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1995—was deliberately planned on a relatively modest scale. Catherine Lampert (1995: 9–10)—the director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery—explains in her foreword that this exhibition ‘seeks to avoid the numbing effects of a more neutral survey, on those exhibitions where material is selected according to categories and a perspective that conforms to practice in the west.’ Each of the seven stories was presented as the personal viewpoint of different artists and historians from Africa that would be ‘directed to the serious achievements of artists, both those working as individuals and those who have contributed to movements.’ Through this selective focusing, Lampert (1995: 10) continues, ‘this familiar question of Africanity and its relation to ‘traditional’ or ‘tribal’ culture has to be reassessed.’ What the exhibition hoped to achieve (perhaps idealistically) was the gradual exhaustion of the romantic assumption of “authenticity” automatically associated with the ‘untrained’ African artist (Ibid.). A more pragmatic outcome of the exhibition, Clémentine Deliss (1995: 13) proposed, was

to experiment with the idea of the exhibition as a pooling system for a plurality of approaches to curating, that run in tandem with the specificities of the works on show and that signal different ways of making, looking at and presenting art.

Critical response to the exhibition recalls those criticisms made of *Magiciens de la Terre* and *Africa Explores*, namely that the exhibition was guilty of disseminating questionable ideas and tropes that define African artists as exotic neoprimitives. Additionally, the exhibition’s pragmatic approach postulates “personal interpretation” as a viable approach to questions of art

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publishing modern African art in such a way as to make it seem that ‘true Africa’ is perpetually unschooled, primitive, and innocent.”

and cultural history. In so doing, argues Ogbechie (1997: 10) it '[resituates] contemporary African art in a third-worldly, primitivist context where "stories" (as oral traditions) become the basis of knowledge about its tendencies and contexts of practice.' The fact that its organisers appointed African artists and critics to oversee the representation of these individual stories, promotes insider/outsider binaries in its assumption that insider narratives provide privileged knowledge.

Furthermore, the exhibition relies on the belief that the stories presented here are just that—stories, and therefore, thoroughly subjective. Ogbechie is critical of Deliss' claim that the exhibition stemmed from an initiative whose beginning was a 'series of interdisciplinary seminars and discussions around contemporary African art and criticism' (Deliss 1995: 14). As Ogbechie (1997: 10) explains: 'From a curatorial perspective, we then perceive that this exhibition was organised around a predetermined framework which was subsequently applied to her choice of "insiders" as curators who become no more than field hands executing carefully choreographed intentions.' A strategy such as this serves as a ready-made excuse for any curatorial inadequacies, since the exhibition is not intended to be a final word on the subject. These seven episodes were therefore used to excuse any criticisms deferred from previous exhibitions. Although they could not, and were not intended to, represent the continent as a whole, for Deliss (1995: 17) they 'were nevertheless emblematic of a common sensibility among other artists and movements in Africa at the time.' The ambiguity of Deliss' assertion, writes Ogbechie (1997: 12)

disguises her basic decision to assess contemporary African art in terms of the development of "specific movements," thus ensuring teleological narratives as the individual curators struggled to align their stories to fit this underlying premise.

Therefore, seven stories and seven stages, not only add up to one exhibition (7+7=1), but also one essential view of Africa, and is therefore not exempt from the essentialising for which exhibitions were criticised.

In his criticism of *Seven Stories*, Philip Ravenhill (1996: 16) calls to attention the fact that:

modern African art, like the formerly “traditional” African art, is more often seen as a product of a cultural group or movement than as the products of individual artists who engage the world intellectually, viscerally, and artistically from within and across particular cultural, and historically determined, milieus.

One problematic sentence that seriously weakens the apologia made by *Seven Stories* for modern art in Africa, reads: ‘Especially in Africa, one finds that some of the most radical art began with collective endeavours, at times identified with memberships, manifestoes and magazines’ (Lampert 1995: 11). What the exhibition seems to support is the claim that art is worthy of attention only as it is reflective of larger socio-political and cultural struggles. Consequently, Ravenhill (1996: 16) believes North Africa to have been strategically written out of the story of African art because, in the case of Morocco and Tunisia, ‘discussions ... suggested that the notion of discrete artist-led collectives was less evident in the organization and practice of artists in these countries’ (Deliss 1995: 26). Ravenhill (1996: 16) points out that to deal seriously with art is to deal seriously with the work of the individual artist.

The above account (necessarily very abbreviated) of the display of African art in the West, provides a genealogy of the logistical, taxonomic and dialogical problems that characterised the assimilation of African art into a hegemonic Western framework. In the next chapter, I investigate responses to the shortcomings and biases of these exhibitions by African artists of the diaspora in Europe and America.

## CHAPTER 2

### DIASPORAN REPRESENTATION

*At no moment in history has the truth been clearer than it is today, that movement is the human condition. Whether manifest in geophysical, demographic flux constantly exacerbated by the prevarications of political or economic forces, or in the utilization of the hitherto unimaginable possibilities of information technology and the mechanics of vitality; movement, transition, transformation, relocation, transfiguration, subjection to the enormous fluidities of location and identity, are the imperatives of existence in our age. Today, to survive is to be on a constant move, to engage in an endless shift, to recognize, and acknowledge, the underlying fluidity in the nature of things (Oguibe 2001: 50).*

The preceding chapter traced a trajectory of Western prejudice and its influence on the judgment of African art. Included in this trajectory I offered for examination several notable exhibitions which have contributed to the ever-expanding and on-going initiatives addressing the marginalisation of African art, but which nonetheless continue to pose challenges and demonstrate the West's persistent neocolonial attitude. In this chapter I will investigate further initiatives or *counter-exhibitions* within the West, whose main distinguishing factor is that they are curated by diasporan Africans as opposed to Western curators. I will argue that despite their contribution to the West's attempt to come to terms with contemporary African culture, and despite their efforts to increase Africa's visibility on the international stage,

their mediation has largely benefited a small diasporan community of artists, while African artists practicing on the continent remain deeply marginalised.

## 2.1 WHAT IS THE DIASPORA?

The term Diaspora<sup>26</sup> is used today by communities whose lineage is shaped by colonisation, the slave trade, and prejudice, which leads them to the land of the coloniser. In his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy explains this phenomenon as one that is not only vital to an understanding of slavery and the ongoing suffering of predominately black people, but is vital to an understanding of the global, nomadic, dynamic and fluid nature of modernity. He suggests that the term:

refers to a system of historical, cultural, linguistic and political interaction and communication that originated in the process of enslaving Africans. ... As it evolved, New World slavery threw together diverse groups of people in complex combinations they could not have anticipated. Their histories, languages, religious outlooks, their divergent understandings of phenomena like nature, time and space mutated and combined in a living, dynamic pattern that was not the simple product of any single one of its many sources (Gilroy 2004: np).

Gilroy understands diaspora culture as diverse and irreducible to any single national or ethnically based tradition. As such, it is defined against the relatively fixed normativity of nation-states:

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<sup>26</sup> The word diaspora derives from the early Greeks for whom the expression was linked to ideas of migration and colonisation in Asia Minor and the Mediterranean in the Archaic period between 800 and 600 B.C. In the Alexandrian Greek translation of the Septuagint (Deuteronomy 28:25), it described the displacement of Jews exiled from Palestine after the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C. as a curse: 'Thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms on earth.' Thus the formerly positive connotation of the term was lost (Peffer 2003: 23).

By drawing attention to the untidy complexity of this process and some of its unforeseen and unintended consequences, the Black Atlantic brushes our understanding of culture against the grain. It directs us not to the land, where we find that special soil in which we are told national culture takes place, but towards the sea and the maritime life that ringed and crossed the Atlantic Ocean bringing more fluid and less fixed “hybrid” cultures to life (Gilroy 2004: np).

Gilroy does not attempt to locate and ‘fix’ a tradition for African peoples located somewhere in the premodern past to act as a template of authenticity. He presents instead a long and complex history of African diasporic intellectual culture that is specifically *transnational*. This accords with Stuart Hall’s (1993: 402) definition of the diaspora experience as characterised ‘not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*.’ Diaspora identities are therefore constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference, which precludes them from anything but a superficial association with their country of origin. Nevertheless, it is a common conceit of Africans in the diaspora that they can improve the lot of compatriots in their ancestral homelands, and act ‘as the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with Twentieth century civilization’ (Peffer 2003: 24). This is perhaps partly due to the experience of not being outside or inside Africa but connected to both, an experience Gilroy calls ‘double consciousness.’ As such, diasporan curators are theoretically ideally suited to mediate between Africa and the West.

## 2.2 SILENCE, VOICE, AND THE DIASPORAN SOLUTION

Simon Njami (2005: 17) explains Western control over the articulation of Africa as the direct result of Africa’s silence:

[The] silence [of Africa] might have been an act of defence and timidity, a sign of the stupor which the world kept on producing with its speeches and machines. ... Many African artists, however, stay silent. ... African artists can be indifferent to the way the surrounding world sees them because, deep down, they pursue a different goal, think different thoughts and speak a different language. Their refusal to raise their voices amidst the throng is not a throwback to the timidity passed on from other eras, it marks their deliberate will to master their own space—the precious and unique space that is the hearth of all creation worthy of the name. This now all too long–forgotten silence is, in my view, the best way to approach African creativity. Everything starts and finishes with this silence.

Njami suggests that the West continues to speak for Africa because Africans refuse to *perform* or voice their “Africanness” on the global stage, instead focusing their energies at home in Africa. Njami therefore regards Africa’s silence and marginalisation as self-incurred. Njami’s problematic de-historisation of African silence effectively releases the West from any blame for the marginalisation of Africa. Furthermore, his interpretation suggests that African silence indicates indifference to the global economy, as if Africans somehow do not belong, or are incapable of adjusting since they essentially ‘think different thoughts.’ According to this interpretation the diasporan role of interlocutor is indispensable. Without it, Africa would remain silent and continue to experience marginalisation.

Olu Oguibe (1997: 18) provides a second more convincing interpretation of the silence of the African. He describes it as a ‘*significant* silence’ an ‘objectifying projection’.

For though this silence is not literal, it is nevertheless made real since, beyond the preferred narrative—that specified rhetoric that reiterates palatable constructs of Otherness—the native’s

utterances are not speech. They occupy the site of the guttural, the peripheries of sense, the space of the unintelligible where words are caught in a savage struggle and sounds turn into noise, into the surreal mirror-image of language. In this void of incoherence, utterance becomes silence because it is denied the privilege of audience. And, without audience there is no speech (Oguibe 1997: 18).

What Oguibe describes above is the tendency of Western critics to recognise African art and artists as occupying an insignificant and intelligible outpost, a location on the peripheries of the centre. Thus, Oguibe shifts the focus of the silence of the African artist to the terrain of the West, the inability or unwillingness of the West to be an audience. As outsiders the African voice is not privileged<sup>27</sup>. Africans face ‘a persistent shortcoming in the political will of cultural brokers and managers in the West to locate them alongside artists from other parts of the world’ (Hassan & Oguibe 2001: 8). Oguibe (1997: 18) argues that native aspirations:

are quickly displaced in a hegemonic withdrawal of audience that re-establishes the hierarchical location of the *Self* and the *Other*, of the white critical and artistic establishment over the African artist. On this stage of simulacral dialogue there is only one voice that counts. The Other can exist only as a projection, an echo, as the displaced sound of percussive fracture.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Johannes Fabian characterises this particular dilemma as the problem of “forgetting Africa”. What is peculiar about this phrase is that in pronouncing it one negates what it seems to state. But, this is the point. According to Fabian (2003: 198): ‘[R]emembering Africa and forgetting Africa—in the sense of recognizing and denying its presence—have always gone together, often such that the latter has been a condition of the former.’

<sup>28</sup> The principal problem Africans encounter in their efforts to be heard, Ogbachie (cited in Van Robbroeck 2006: np) believes, is that they are subject to the hegemony of Western discourses. This is mainly because the West controls the technologies of discourse. Consequently, those wishing to publish books on the African subject face many obstacles. This includes satisfying the needs of the Western art market for “tribal” art. Exhibitions—the subject of this essay—are equally to blame. Ogbachie explains their considerable power as the ability to ‘break down African art objects and invest them with new meanings. [To] provide the cover of “objective analysis” that allows these objects to

Despite their divergent views on African silence, Njami and Oguibe are in agreement that one must approach African creativity through this silence.

The diasporan solution is to pull African artists from the periphery and bring them to the center, to break their silence by providing space for self-articulation in the West where they experience the greatest marginalisation. This requires, according to Hassan, 'a quantum departure from the stereotypical notion of African art as...products of naïve and self-taught artists' (cited in McEvelley 2005: 40), which continues to frame the reception of contemporary African art outside the continent.

In this chapter, I focus on exhibitions of "African" art, curated by diaspora Africans, that aimed to decentre Western hegemonic power by voicing a radically different perspective of African art from the West's privileging of the naïve and the untutored. I argue that while these efforts have succeeded in raising the profile of cutting edge, avant garde diasporan and African artists whose 'ineluctable presence disturbs, disrupts and problematises the postcolonial border' (Enwezor 1999: 245), they tend to overlook, if not dismiss, the overwhelming majority of untrained, informal artists in Africa. In fact both Hassan and Oguibe, curators of *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa In and Out of Africa*, have been openly derogatory about untrained African artists in their writing. According to Hassan (1999: 218) the purpose of these exhibitions is to counter the 'western demand for difference and exoticism' which 'deliberately [bypasses] the most proven African artists in international art arenas in favour of the kitsch, crude and naïve products of the roadside painters who crowd the markets of African metropolises...'. Similarly Oguibe (1997: 24) writes:

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be redefined according Western interests, and above all, [to] ensure that the value of the objects is directly proportional to the provenance they attach to it' (Van Robbroeck 2006: np).

The perverted desire for the pornographic manifests itself most significantly ... in the continued preference in the West for that art from Africa that is easily imagined not as art as we know it, but as a sign of the occult, an inscription of the fantastic. The childlike paintings of the Beninois, Cyprien Toukoudagba would not ordinarily represent great creative talent in the West, and would not, conventionally, qualify as art beyond the sixth grade.

I suggest that this tendency of African diasporan curators to avoid informal African art is overcome by the curator Simon Njami, whose exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* navigated the boundaries of popular and 'high' art.

### 2.2.1 AUTHENTIC/EX-CENTRIC: AIMS AND STRATEGIES

Throughout the history of the Venice biennale, only two traveling exhibitions of African art have been included, both organised by Western curators, and only one African country, Egypt, has retained a national pavilion since the second Biennale. For this reason *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa In and Out of Africa*<sup>29</sup> at the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2001, co-curated by Salah Hassan<sup>30</sup> and Olu Oguibe<sup>31</sup>, is regarded as an historic event. According to Hassan

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<sup>29</sup> The accompanying publication is titled: *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*.

<sup>30</sup> Born in the Sudan, Salah Hassan received his Ph.D. in 1988 from the University of Pennsylvania, USA. He is currently Professor and Director of the Africana Studies and Research Center, and professor of African and African Diaspora art history and visual culture, Department of History of Art and Visual Culture, Cornell University. He is also founder and editor of *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* and has curated and edited several exhibitions and companion catalogues including *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa in and out of Africa, Unpacking Europe & Seven Stories about Modern African Art* ([www.asrc.cornell.edu/salah.html](http://www.asrc.cornell.edu/salah.html)).

<sup>31</sup> Olu Oguibe was born in Aba, West Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in art history from the University of London and works as an artist, international curator and art critic. His works as art historian include the co-edited anthology *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*. He currently teaches at the University of Connecticut as an associate professor of painting and African American studies, and

(2001: 8) it was ‘the first exhibition of its kind conceived and organized [by] *African curators*’ (my emphasis), but more accurately diasporan curators. The exhibition aimed to be ‘both an intervention in the patterns of narration of contemporary culture, a re-insertion of passages otherwise likely to be left out, as well as an effort to assume responsibility in telling one’s own story’ (Hassan 2001: 8). In other words, it had a dual aim, to initiate the introduction of African art into mainstream culture and to provide Africa with the opportunity to define itself.

In view of this preferred outcome the exhibition attempted to map a terrain of conceptualism in contemporary African art. The characteristics and traits of conceptualism were summarised by Oguibe and Hassan (2001: 10) as practices in art that do not include Western traditional techniques such as painting and sculpture (which had been the most prevalent African art production hitherto entering the West), but instead include performance, video art, and installation as strategies in which the rejection of the art object, the ‘dematerialisation’ of the art object, and temporal and spatial concerns could be explored. In light of these characteristics, conceptualism was clearly believed by both Oguibe and Hassan to be a truly international phenomenon, meaning that strategies of Western conceptualists—namely the pre-eminence of idea over form—were also evident in non-Western cultures. With this in mind the exhibition was curated to show African artists as inseparable from global conceptual art movements. The artists who were chosen to feature demonstrated command of the most recent international trends and currents in conceptualism. For this reason the exhibition was thought to be crucial as it acknowledged to the world African artists’ provenance in contemporary art practice. Hence the word ‘authentic’, in the title, plays on ‘cultural determinism and the demand for “authenticity”’ and ‘ex-centric’ points to ‘issues of cross-cultural and trans-national aesthetics

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associate director of the Institute for African American Studies ([www.camwood.org/biograph.html](http://www.camwood.org/biograph.html)).

and consciousness within contemporary African art practice' (Hassan & Oguibe 2001: 6).

### 2.2.2 AFRICA REMIX: AIMS AND STRATEGIES

The principle selection for the encyclopaedic touring exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* was based on the consideration of the opposing views of "traditional" and "modern" African creativity. 'It is impossible to comprehend fully what Africa is,' writes chief curator Simon Njami (2005: 13), in the catalogue's opening statement. What it is, he suggests, is 'a contradictory entity eternally branded by the seal of history...Africa is a scandal. Even its everyday speech is hybrid...Today's Africa is inevitably the illustration of cultural syncretism underlying all contemporaneity' (Ibid.: 14–15). African art, he suggests, is the result of a process of *bricolage* and therefore should not be described as one thing; as either traditional, tribal or naïve (thus satisfying Western fantasies), or as cutting-edge production of the academically (Western) trained artist and therefore connected to contemporary international culture. Clearly Njami is cautious not to essentialise African art.

The aim of *Africa Remix* was to focus on acknowledging the current work of internationally renowned and emerging African artists who are stimulated by myriad influences, and who live and pursue their occupations on the continent and around the globe. Put differently, the panoply of artworks in this exhibition was seemingly selected without condition, to show the hybridity and diversity that characterises current contemporary African art in a globalised world. Roger Malbert, director of the Hayward Gallery, insisted in his brief introduction to the exhibition at his venue, that the goal was, indeed, to provide 'eclecticism in order to confound differences' (cited in Ogbachie 2005: online). Furthermore, it was concerned with breaking down boundaries not only between Africa and the West but also on the continent itself between Anglophone and Francophone Africa and the diaspora. This

theme of opposites was evident in the choice of three broad rubrics around which the exhibition was structured. *City and Land* explored the contrasting experiences of urban and rural life; *Identity & History* focused on matters of power and authority, modernity and tradition, and collective identities; while the final theme, *Body and Soul*, addressed issues of representation, individual identity, religion, spirituality, emotion, sexuality, and the body.

## 2.3 PROBLEMS WITH DIASPORAN REPRESENTATION OF AFRICA

Despite their efforts, both *Africa Remix* and *Authentic/Ex-Centric* have been criticised for, *inter alia*, their partial display of works; the exclusion of residential Africans from the curatorial project, and consequently (and ironically) the display of African art according to Western categories and values. Hence, as examples of the diasporan enterprise, they continue the marginalisation of mainland Africa. Put briefly, their definitions of contemporary African art are not as representative of art being produced on the continent as suggested by their titles.

### 2.3.1 WHAT DOES CONTEMPORARY MEAN?

The definition of contemporary art adopted by both exhibitions is one that is generally used to mean art that displays awareness of modernism and its aftermath, and not perhaps as it should be used, in its literal sense, as all art of the moment. The focus of *Authentic/Ex-Centric* fell on cutting-edge trends, consciously omitting the art of so-called self-taught artists in an attempt to unsettle the West's presuppositions about Africa. It is significant that, of the seven artists included, all but two (who happen to be South African artists), live and work abroad. It can be argued that South African artists are more readily assimilated in international art trends since they have greater access to infrastructure and global information and training. The concern is that this focus leads to—in van Robbroeck's (2006: np) words—an 'unfortunate *overreaction*' (my emphasis) since the majority of work being

produced by resident African practitioners is overlooked. This is partly due to the fact that it is overwhelmingly university trained artists and intellectuals, and artists who have settled permanently or have spent substantial periods of time outside their own countries, who have access to conceptual trends and the international cutting-edge. This ironically constitutes a second wave of marginalisation over the African artist.

Similarly, in the case of *Africa Remix*, Roger Malbert (2005: 11) admits in his preface to the catalogue that the exhibition overwhelmingly emphasised ‘the work of urban and sophisticated artists who—like so many Africans in other spheres—are truly international, multi-lingual and versatile in their approach to contemporary society.’ In this regard, Kasfir (1999: 12–13) points out:

while Western cultural theory asserts that globalization has created a world in which vast territories, including both Europe and its post-colonies, are interconnected through the circulation of goods, money and ideas, there are still many places in rural Africa where an artist can spend a productive lifetime without connecting with a global art market ... [A]s practicing African artists, they should all lay equal claim to our attention. But art books and catalogues are written and read in New York and Los Angeles, Paris and London, not in upcountry African towns, and increasingly the focus of critical attention has come to rest on those artists, transnational yet also African, who inhabit this larger and distant art world.

In Ogbechie’s (2005: online) view, the proliferation of exhibitions focused on Western-based African artists are to the detriment of those living and working on the continent and promote work that is more palatable to the ‘lazy Western curators who are thereby saved the rigors of traveling to Darkest Africa, where, who knows, they run the risk of being eaten by cannibals in Lagos.’

### 2.3.2. HOW “AFRICAN” IS CONCEPTUAL EXPRESSION AND THE DIASPORA?

Kasfir (1999: 12–13) rightly states that the output of an African artist living in any of the big Western cities, such as London and New York, is filtered through a very different everyday reality from his/her counterpart in Lagos, for example. Similarly, Enwezor (1999: 251) speaks of the tension between here and there, the ‘seeing eye’ and the ‘remembering mind’. This double vision is not a part of the artistic experience for artists who have not migrated, and for whom the most pressing issue is marginalisation in their own home countries. An extended duration of life as an expatriate, he believes, cuts one off from the flow of cultural practice in Africa. As Ogbechie admits in an interview with van Robbroeck (2006a: np), the longer one lives abroad, the clearer you identify with your foster country and the more difficult it is to claim to speak for Africa.

It is in part due to this sense of displacement that the diaspora’s “Africanness” and their suitability as African representatives have been questioned. It can be argued that the diaspora is not fully in touch with the challenges facing artists on the continent and that therefore, any exhibition focusing on their work cannot claim to accurately represent the current African condition and artistic climate. Accordingly, *Authentic/Ex-Centric* has been interpreted as demonstrating the pitfalls that occur when one culture interprets and curates another for the consumption of foreign audiences, which suggests that the diaspora constitutes a different culture to Africa. Nevertheless, as a diasporan intellectual Ogbechie insists on the value that his experience and scholarship, and that of the diaspora at large, adds to the collective discourse on African art and culture (van Robbroeck 2006a: np), because Africa is not one thing but an accumulation of divergent realities and influences.

As discussed earlier, the diaspora, as a transnational phenomenon, embodies the characteristics of hybridity and thus rejects the notion of an essential “Africanness”. As such it has adopted a strategy to demonstrate Africa as a legitimate member of the current dynamic and fluid global culture. However, it is ironic that the hybrid richness and diversity of production that is a characteristic of African cultures is denied by the overwhelming focus on diasporan conceptual art. Furthermore, grouping this limited selection of work (in the case of *Authentic Ex-centric*) under the rubric *Contemporary Art of a Continent* is not only inaccurate (since most of the artists are no longer of the continent) but implicitly denounces all other African art production as un-African. Ironically, the art production that is characteristic of the diaspora is depicted as more African than art production on the continent. By insisting on the urban, conceptual and the technological, *Authentic/Ex-Centric* can be accused of misdescribing the continent.

The focus on conceptual art is detrimental to its cause for a second reason: conceptual expression is generally—fallaciously or not—regarded as a fundamentally Western practice, which ironically reduces African conceptual practice to the production of a ‘denativised imagination or to an inferior mimetic’ (Enwezor 1999: 245). Although it does not conform to the Western definition of what African art should be (which was the aim of the curators), it ironically invites critiques of mimicry. Oguibe (1997: 27) rejects this critique as a Western concern with “authenticity”, which he describes as:

only a demand for identity, a demand for the signs of difference, a demand for cultural distance. It is a demand for visual and formal distance without which it is impossible for contemporary Caucasian art not to reveal itself as mimic, as a culture of quotations, as a mediated translation of cultures and art tradition other than itself, as pastiche. For, having purloined its form and identity from others, it becomes relevant for Caucasian art to insist on difference

in order to obliterate any traces back to the source, to E(u)rase the mimetic trail.

It is accepted, indeed celebrated, that the shifts and changes in European art that occurred in the early decades of the previous century came about as a result of many artists' fascination with and appropriation of the arts of Africa and Oceania, and that this revolutionised Western art. The obverse—the response of African artists to European models—was, and still is, regarded as derivative and mimetic, the native being spoiled by civilisation (McEvelley 2005: 157). By employing this device of reversal, it becomes possible for contemporary Western art to invest itself with originality and a sense of its own authenticity. Ostensibly, by again reversing this appropriative process, the curators of *Authentic/Ex-Centric* aimed to unsettle all notions of centre and periphery, but it is questionable whether they succeeded in their aims.

While it is beyond doubt that the presence of the West in Africa has shaped African modernity, Pivin (2002: 8) cautions that we should not accuse the African of meaningless mimicry: '[T]he transportation, knowledge, economic and communications revolutions that fueled the West would have nonetheless reached the African continent, with or without military colonization.' Appropriations would have occurred. Hybridity is an inevitable cultural process following culture contact. The cultural exchange brought on through colonialism is an example of the ability of cultures to feed off one another. Nevertheless, the exhibition of African art faces a double problematic: It is either regarded as too assimilated or not assimilated enough.

Simon Njami attempts to overcome the diasporan tendency to exhibit African art as exclusively cutting-edge and characteristically diasporan, while also being careful not to exhibit African art as characteristically "traditional". The title *Africa Remix* suggests a project of unification between seemingly diverse

facets into a new coherent whole. Although it celebrates the visual arts, *Africa Remix* derives its title from a trend in musical production where multiple existing tracks or samples are manipulated to produce an entirely new piece of music. What made this focus possible for the curators was the apparent shared experience of colonialism. In his review of the exhibition at the *Museum Kunstpalast*, Niklas Zimmer (2004: 58) describes the title as suggesting an African melting pot, and suggests that the categories (Identity and History, Body and Soul, and City and Earth) delineate what he believes to be ‘improbable and abstract territories that seem as superimposed as colonial borders.’ The title suggests a further strategy—on the part of the African—to attract the attention and approval of the West, by using raw materials to craft something new.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, however, in highlighting African hybridity the exhibition supports African essentialism, or pan-Africanism. ‘To a European visitor such as myself’, explains Zimmer (2004: 59)

*Africa Remix* dangerously confirms rather than debunks standard misconceptions of ‘Africa’ as an unintelligible mix of multi-coloured surfaces and heavy textures that hint at fantastic constructions of reality. The show exteriorises difference to the degree that it becomes a given, and tends to be read as an amassment of unsophisticated trophies for random sampling. It involuntarily evokes associations with the *Wunderkammer*, an environment created by and for European gentry to gaze at the sensational creative output of primitive cultures.

In other words, the exhibition’s emphasis on hybridity is partially detrimental to its cause, which was to free African art from Western prescripts. The decision to address practices from the whole continent and the diaspora

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<sup>32</sup> Zimmer (2004: 59) notes that the exhibition had made use of scaffolding to exhibit some of the works, which he understood as the curators attempt at providing a visual proposition that asks viewers to regard Africa as under construction, which works well with its title.

within a single exhibition ironically negates the fact that experiences in different parts of Africa, not to mention the diaspora, are widely varying and inflected with local histories and experiences. The result is that the West is not experiencing Africa any differently than it had in the past. By organising the exhibition and catalogue into three broad themes, Marion Arnold (2005: 19) interprets *Africa Remix* as an attempt to ‘fudge the issue of African identity.’

Despite diasporan efforts to remedy the stereotypical view of Africa, some reviews of these shows suggest that they have hardly succeeded in this aim. Consider Brian Sewell’s anachronistic, explicitly neo-colonial and highly controversial review of *Africa Remix*<sup>33</sup>. His criticism is so open in its racism and cultural imperialism, unabashedly using the terms “tyranny,” “mutual slavery” and “cannibalism,” that are disturbingly reminiscent of the colonial era<sup>34</sup>. In particular, Sewell disregards any pretence at political correctness. He begins by questioning the works’ qualification as art according to contemporary European standards. Of *Africa Remix* he writes:

We are presented here with a bunch of no-hopers whose work is on view because, and only because, they are African. ‘Look, look,’ they say, ‘we can do it too.’ And so they can, but it is not worth the doing, for in following the West they mimic it in witless parody, or ape in modern material and terms what little they know of a genuine African past, or embark on tasks that can only be

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<sup>33</sup> Sewell, Brian. 2005. Out of Africa. *Evening Standard*. Available: [http://users.pandora.be/african-shop/contemporary\\_art.htm](http://users.pandora.be/african-shop/contemporary_art.htm) [online]

<sup>34</sup> Sewell’s review *Africa Remix*, is typical of a response that, according to Ogbechie, arises from a renewed confidence in the Western project of imperialism. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York (11 September 2001) have been greatly instrumental in this renewed confidence. As Ogbechie explains, it ‘finally provided the basis for a bold move to bring the rest of the world under the control of the West through the might of the USA ... [I]t is obvious that this incident provided the US with a chance to try and remake the world in its own image, by making it safe for transnational predatory capitalism. This effort has run into significant resistance in Iraq, and is increasingly unravelling but nevertheless persistent’ (van Robbroeck 2006: np)

completed with the obsessive industry of the deranged (Sewell 2005: online).

Since the art exhibited, in his view, adopts Western forms, techniques and devices 'it hardly qualifies as African.' He calls for African art to revert back to "traditional" cultural practices of precolonial artifacts. In his opinion, nothing produced by Africans then or now could satisfy the definition of art known to the Western world. It is the ancestral craft and 'fetish of ethnographic interest' that is most valued and respected by the West.

Sewell's criticism is particularly revealing of the fact that no matter how educated or instinctive and spontaneous the African artist might be, the West will continue to view him/her as inferior. McEvilley points out that this is a double-edged sword:

*if* on the one hand African artists are not educated (or Westernized) they are innovative and non-derivative, [but "primitive"]. If on the other hand they are educated—meaning in the Western tradition—their work becomes simply more examples, with a tinge of African subject matter, of the type of things Western artists made twenty to fifty years ago (McEvilley 2005: 40).

Regardless of the attention that is being paid by Western institutions to African art driven by diasporan intellectuals, it has not wholly altered the sense of inferiority with which the West views this art. What we are witnessing is not the ultimate recognition of the plurality of history, but as Hassan argues, 'a return of Western grand narratives in the guise of asserting "cultural difference", evidenced in the ideology of neo-conservatism and reactionary Western practices' (cited in McEvilley 2005: 41). Nevertheless, out of Sewell's scathing criticism we can extract a single legitimate criticism, namely that exhibitions of African art as a collective phenomenon are not only impossible, but also increasingly unacceptable and absurd. Such large-

scale exhibitions tend to portray Africa as a single entity instead of focusing on the differing constituents that comprise the continent.

## 2.4 THE GLOBAL ART WORLD: THE VENICE BIENNALE AS “WORLD EVENT”

The Venice Biennale has been identified as a platform from which to champion the African cause and as an opportunity to showcase the current state of Africa’s art and its individual cultural identities. Despite the strategic efforts of exhibitions such as *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, the Venice Biennale continues to marginalise Africa. Apart from Egypt who has had a long-standing pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Africa’s presence at this exhibition has been relatively scant, and serves as proof of its continued marginalization in the West.

Founded in 1895 and regarded as the definitive world event, the history of the biennale is closely related to that of the World Fairs. The Great Exhibition (1851) held at the Crystal Palace in London was the first in a series of World Fairs. Initially these exhibitions focused on the display of technological inventions and advancements. Later a departure from this original focus led to specific themes of cultural significance and began to address issues of mankind. Olu Oguibe defines the purpose of the trade fairs as giving:

each emerging nation an opportunity to showcase its most recent and significant and cultural products and in that way not only place its progress alongside those of other nations, but even more importantly, show the world what it has to offer in terms of marketable resources. The trade fairs brought prestige to nations, proved that they did not lag behind other nations, promoted their intellectuals, and helped them to build an international market (Oguibe 2007: online).

According to Oguiibe (2007: online): 'The Venice biennale was established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to serve this purpose: namely to parallel the trade fairs and provide each nation opportunity to showcase the latest and most significant of its visual culture.' As such it is structured around clearly demarcated national pavilions. The biennale's nationalistic outlook and structure is problematic when it comes to the exhibition of African art (as a continental phenomenon) and especially diasporan art, which as I have pointed out, is transnational.

The reliance of the Venice biennale on a Western archaic notion of art history is a key issue for Beral Madra (2005: 687), who describes it as 'a manifestation of cultural politics, an operation of ideological totalisation.' While the Biennale prides itself on the advancement of dialogue between global cultures, what we are witnessing, writes Hassan (1999: 217), 'is not the ultimate recognition of plurality of history, but a return to Western grand narratives in the guise of asserting "cultural difference".'

Africa's presence at the biennale disrupts and problematises the cultural order (which prioritises national competitiveness and the idea of national cultural entities) established by the West. It also embodies the discontinuity of normative assumptions about originary "authenticity" in the work of Africans. In order to protect the European territory from contamination and keep their neo-colonial view of African art intact, many of the big Biennales have failed altogether to invite African artists. This discomfort with the exhibition of African art is evident in the fact that Africa has only ever been invited to exhibit as a *continental* pavilion (significantly, the only continental pavilion). This reveals the West's essentialising view of Africa as a single entity and not an amassment of many varying and divergent cultures and nation-states<sup>35</sup>. The biennale model is clearly geared towards Western needs

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<sup>35</sup> Through the ideology of pan-Africanism, which I will discuss further in chapter 3, Africa supports the view of single identity. However, Africa views this singularity as complex and varying.

and cannot bring justice to African art until it truly embraces the consequences of globalisation. It is clear that the “universal” and “global”, as articulated in the Venice Biennale, is actually a singularly Western conception.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious Eurocentric nature of the Venice Biennale it is still revered as *the* entry point onto the global stage from which to champion the African cause and as an opportunity to showcase the current state of Africa’s art and its individual cultural identities. Africa’s failure to exhibit on this platform has been interpreted as a loss. Marilyn Martin’s dramatic and fatalistic misinterpretation of Africa’s lack of presence at the 2003 Venice Biennale, directed by Francesco Bonami and titled *Dreams and Conflicts: the Dictatorship of the Viewer*, is a case in point. Martin (2003: online) wrote a somewhat contentious review for *Artthrob* in which she expressed grief over the fact that South Africa had not been represented at ‘the most important biennale.’ After confronting the installation *The Presence of your Absence* by Ingrid Pesaud, which consisted of small gravestones in a circle formation with bronze plaques indicating the names of countries that were not represented, she reflected on the perceived death of South Africa’s visual arts. However, it is likely that Martin misinterpreted the work, which actually was a commentary on the marginalisation experienced by these nations, and not (as Martin suggests) that visual production not showcased ceases to be worthy or significant. It should be questioned whether Africa’s absence can be interpreted as “proof” of failure. To do so acknowledges the West as the center and the unquestioned authority on acceptable art; and thus endorses the centrality of Western consumption.

The questions most frequently asked now are whether an African pavilion is desirable at all, or whether there is even still a need for the biennale as a model? The sentiment is that ‘we should not judge the success of [African]

art by its presence or absence in the prime venues of the international arena' (Pissarra 2007: 12). By so doing, Pissarra (Ibid.) argues, we 'inadvertently perpetuate an iniquitous system where Africa (and the rest) will always be judged according to its value in the centre rather than in its own environment.' Pissarra points out that to declare Venice's centrality is to condemn Africa to the margins. Hence, Africa's centrality must be performed on the world stage by hosting Biennales locally. In the next chapter, I will explore the efficacy of this strategy.

## CHAPTER 3

### ***DAK'ART: DE L'ART AFRICAIN CONTEMPORAIN:* STRATEGIES IN AFRICAN SELF-REPRESENTATION**

*[T]he Dakar Biennale has succeeded in proving to us that another approach to the world is possible. An approach that breaks away from any hegemonic tendency of one culture (and thus one civilization) over the others (Sotiaux 2002: 158).*

It is apparent from the outline of the Western reception of African art objects in Chapter 1, and diasporan counter-discursive strategies discussed in Chapter 2, that exhibitions of African art on the world stage<sup>36</sup> are dominated by Western hegemonic discourses. However ineffective these strategies have been in subverting the sub-normative view of Africa, they have nevertheless been constructive in the continued development of an instructive reclamation of Africa's own cultural identities that had been hitherto constrained by Western control and modes of classification. This chapter considers a further counter-discursive strategy, exemplified by *Dak'Art: de l'Art Africain Contemporain*<sup>37</sup>. This African biennale attempts to claim Africa's place in modernity by fighting Western hegemony from inside the continent with an "African voice". I outline here some of the problems surrounding African

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<sup>36</sup> It is ironic that when Africans speak of the world stage, the global world, or the international it usually refers specifically to the West. The problem with global culture is that it is not global but controlled by Western powers. To enter into global culture is to find success and an audience in the West.

<sup>37</sup> While contemporary African art exhibitions proliferated in the West in the 1990s, alternative platforms were also constituted on the continent. In addition to *Dak'Art*, other biennales include the first and second Johannesburg biennales in South Africa, the Cairo Biennale in Egypt, the East African Biennale in Tanzania and the *Afrika Heritage* biennale in Nigeria.

self-representation as well as various strategies aimed at overwriting the Western hegemonic paradigm.

### 3.1 NEW AFRICAN INITIATIVES

The increased participation of African artists in major Western exhibitions has demonstrated and assisted significant changes in the Western reception of African art. However, their participation has not been wholly successful in subverting the marginalised position of the larger artistic community. As discussed in Chapter 2, the artists participating in these events tend to be diasporan. These artists are regarded by some to be too far geographically and conceptually from Africa to accurately showcase the continent, while others view this persistent focus on such artists as at the expense of African artists based in Africa, and thus ‘increasingly offensive, intellectually bankrupt, very biased and racist in its assumptions’ (Ogbechie 2008: online). Furthermore, what is demanded from these African artists, explains Oguibe (1997: 28):

is for them to produce to specification, to affect anonymity, to concede the ability to enunciate within the sites of normativity. Even more significant is the fact that, for these artists, access to criticality in contemporary discourses is regulated by this demand for subnormativity.

In view of this dilemma a number of critics and theorists have called for new initiatives to be pursued on the African continent, that shift “the centre” ‘globally so that the fortunes of most are not subjected to the whims of a few’ (Pissarra 2007: online)<sup>38</sup>. In what is now a respected and

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<sup>38</sup> Those participating in this debate include among others, Mario Pissarra, whose online forum *Africa South Art Initiative* (asai) is an example of what he envisions as part of the solution to the marginalised position of (South) African artists; Rasheed Araeen (2005); Virginie Andriamirado (2002); Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004). The consensus, as Mbembe and Nuttall write in an essay on African metropolitan modernity, is that ‘[in]

repeatedly cited letter in *Third Text*, Rasheed Araeen (2005: 414–415) speaks out against the debate concerning Africa and its cultural achievements. He writes:

there is always the same repetitive voice: the West has done this, the West has done that ... The West has ignored and continues to ignore Africa's real and great contribution to human civilization. When the West does pay attention to this contribution, it misunderstands, misrepresents, or tends to marginalize it by locating it in a moribund past. These complaints are of course justified, given the continuing power of colonial legacies. But why is the West expected to do what is not in its interest, which is against its continuing ambitions and need to perpetuate its dominance? Why should the west do what should and must be done by Africans themselves? Are Africans, then, not wasting their creative resources in what has now become a facile discourse of complaints and rhetoric against the West?

What Araeen suggests is that if Africa is to be truly respected within so-called global culture it must take the initiative, beginning in Africa. Africa can no longer rely on the West to remedy its marginalised position. Araeen (2005: 412) criticises the fact that Africans are: 'unable to think, innovate, and produce for [themselves]', which he sees as the result of a postcolonial dependency. Africans are 'in a constant struggle to catch up with whatever is happening in the West' (Ibid.). If art, defined by Frank Ugiomoh (2007: 303) as a 'value-creating social practice,' is 'subjected to critical distortions ... [it] remains unharnessed as power that positively transforms.' Hence, 'a concerted effort should be made ... on the African

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an attempt to overturn predominant readings of Africa, we need to identify sites within the continent, entry and exit points not usually dwelt upon in research and public discourse, that defamiliarise commonsense readings of Africa' (2004: 348).

continent to chart ways whereby this embodiment of knowledge that art encapsulates might become accessible through active dialogic participation' (Ugiomoh 2007: 304). To free themselves from the constraints imposed by and in the West, Africa's artists, writes Adriamirado (2003: online) must 'assert themselves as they are, with their language and their way of thinking through an artistic oeuvre that must be inscribed in the long term, far from the diktats of fashion and third-rate exoticism.'

The suggestion is not that African artists should refrain from participation in the global capitalist economy; however, the concern is that although Africa has (un)successfully entered the modern world, it has not been done on its own terms<sup>39</sup>. It has been forced into it through the global system that now 'determines and controls whatever Africa aspires to, including its art production and evaluation' (Araeen 2005: 413). In order to form a clear perspective of Africa's place in contemporary culture and to give meaning to the globalisation of contemporary art forms (free exchange of ideas), a level of self-definition and self-representation is required<sup>40</sup>, and, adds Hassan (2001: 8), 'even more so when others are

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, in his essay *The Crises of Modernity*, Ugiomoh suggests that cultural dialogue with this global economy is essential. His belief is that displacement (a condition that necessitates dialogue with the global economy) drives cultural progress. '[T]he practice of art in its true sense', writes Ugiomoh (2007: 305)

shuns self-limiting norms. This is evident in the nature of what collectives in Africa stand for, which is the constant rearticulation of culture. The making of art and the power of its appeal is a question of fermentation. This value of art may be lost to humanity if it is left to the domains of constructed difference as against the obvious differences that do exist between cultures. Difference is a reality and its ultimate advantage is to help humanity cope in its commerce with nature and culture.

Ugiomoh views dialogue as essential to the realisation of an "authentic" identity out of existing differences.

<sup>40</sup> It must be noted that Araeen does not suggest prescribed characteristics of what "authentic" African art should be, just that it should move away from digesting the West and practice free innovation and imagination.

unwilling to take that reality as a given.’ Hassan proposes that in spite of the inclusiveness engendered in the global, Africa’s membership is not certain. This must be explicitly articulated.

### 3.2 THE *DAK’ART* BIENNALE

The *Dak’Art* biennale emerged out of this need of African nations to develop their own ability to manage and command the interpretation and recordings of their cultural achievements and therefore plays a vital role in the provision of contemporary African production by Africa in Africa (Elliott 2000: 15). It takes a leading role in trying to mediate a continuing discourse about what constitutes contemporary African art and culture. My interpretation of this biennale will be presented here as oscillating, in de Duve’s (2007: 681) words, ‘between the optimistic embracing of a democratic redistribution of cultural power among established and “emergent” regions of the world, and the pessimistic recognition of a new form of cultural hegemony and re-colonisation’. Of course its objectives lie closer to the former; to help widen the artistic network and to give meaning to the globalisation of contemporary art forms, a globalisation too often limited to a centre constituted by the West.

Regardless of its aims it would seem that the importance of this Biennale has not yet been fully realised. It is important to note here that it is extremely significant that in the course of my research I found little information on the internet and in published articles on this biennale. It is shocking that the most prominent journal on African art, *African Arts*, is to date limited in its coverage with only six articles in 2006 dealing directly with *Dak’Art*<sup>41</sup>. The only other source materials available, besides those which have appeared in

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<sup>41</sup> The six articles that appear in *African Arts* in 2006 are: Robert, Polly Nooter et al. *Dak’Art 2006 Positions and Perspectives*; Hughes, Henry Meyric. *Agreements, Allusions, and Constructive Misunderstandings*; Brown, Carol. *A Global Africa at Dak’Art 7*; Diba, Viyé. *Dak’Art 2006: A View from the Inside*; Nelson, Steven. *Recalling Dak’Art*, and Van Rensburg, Storm Janse. *Art Routes: Negotiating Dak’Art*.

*NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* and a limited number of smaller reviews in other journals, are the catalogues which accompany each edition and the biennale's official website. This is hardly surprising since, as Sidney Kasfir (2008: 10) observes, 'the majority of influential critics and curators are themselves located within [the] diaspora and not operating from the African continent.' Therefore, exhibitions of contemporary African art in the West are far more likely to receive critical recognition than those on the African continent. It is, perhaps, indicative of the relative absence of a culture of art criticism in Africa that very little has been written by our own critics. This is also in part due to the lack of infrastructure in Africa, which limits the number of tertiary scholars emerging out of African universities in African art studies. Furthermore, the number of Africans visiting this biennale is limited by financial constraints.

Nevertheless, given that this is the only major biennale of African art on the continent, this lack of coverage shows what little attention is paid to the way Africans perceive themselves. In this chapter I will further explore the degree to which *Dak'Art* is effective or a failure in its attempt to put African art on the world stage from within the continent and to cultivate active dialogic participation.

### 3.2.1 THE STRUCTURE AND SELECTION

The Dakar biennale was established in 1989 at the request of intellectuals and artists of Senegal (Huchard 2002: 133). Under the guidance of the writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane and poet Amadou Lamine Sall, the first *Dak'Art* in 1990 was not an art exhibition per se but an international seminar on the theme 'Cultural areas and literary creation in Africa' and dedicated to African literature. This was partly due to the fact that it was supported and influenced by intellectuals involved in the Négritude movement (which will be discussed in due course), many of whom were writers and poets. Subsequent editions focused on contemporary African art, and thus the

biennale was officially renamed *Dak'Art* (Huchard 2002: 132). It was devised by the Senegalese government, which continues to provide the resources and the permanent structures to prepare and organise each of its exhibitions (Konaté 2006: 32). This has contributed greatly to the continued realisation of this biennale while other attempts on the African continent have fallen away due to the lack of funds and state support. The organisation of the event is the responsibility of the national legitimisation body also known as the Scientific Council, which includes Senegalese intellectuals and representatives from all art divisions (Huchard 2002: 133 & Sagna 1998: 26), who further selects the International Selection Committee and Jury responsible for the selection of works exhibited. This selection committee comprises a range of art professionals from Africa and abroad<sup>42</sup>.

Compared to the Venice Biennale and in opposition to the oppressive ideology it represents, *Dak'Art* differs strategically from this model in very significant ways. The selection of works does not result entirely from invitations being sent out by the organisers and curators and thus 'presenting a selection more closely connected to a thematic speech or to another subject' (Camara 2002: 17). The earlier editions of *Dak'Art* exhibited works selected from a pool of submissions; the only criteria being that the artists be either born on or have familial ties with the continent<sup>43</sup>. Hence, there is no overarching curatorial structure. The advantages of this

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<sup>42</sup> At *Dak'Art* 2004 this selection committee included art professionals from Ethiopia, South Africa, France, Canada, Austria, Cameroon and Senegal (Farrell 2004: 13).

<sup>43</sup> There have been exceptions to this rule, such as when curators invite guest artists from other parts of the world. For example, at the 2002 *Dak'Art* biennale the curator Bruno Cora invited three European artists to respond to the experience of life in Dakar, which he saw as an example of the global. He writes:

in addition to its historic status as a prominent theatre of human sufferings and its incomparable natural beauty, this country displays the values of a popular "ethos" and of a diffused sensitivity of Senegalese men and women, turning this country into a significant partner in our quest for reciprocated exchange relation and shared social, economic and cultural growth (2002: 103).

approach was that fairly unknown artists, the self-trained, the non-elitist and those living some distance from city centres, who would otherwise not likely be visited by a curator, had the chance to participate and thus gain interest from gallerists and curators. Remi Sagna (1998: 26), the General Secretary of the Organising Committee of *Dak'Art '98*, claimed: 'Our desire is to develop a plural critical view and not, for now, to impose the choice of an official or an artistic director.'

More recent editions, according to Konaté (2006: 32), '[accumulate] the advantages of a two-pronged approach.' Over and above the applications submitted by individuals, curators also recommend artists who are then exhibited in separate curated exhibitions. This means that established artists, who would possibly not follow the protocol of submitting an application to the selection committee, would also be included<sup>44</sup>. For the individual curated exhibitions, artists (some of which are foreign) are chosen by members of the selection committee (Sagna 1998: 26 & Grabski 2008: 111).

The advantages of this varied approach were described by Yacouba Konaté (2006: 32) on the occasion of *Dak'Art 2006*, to evoke themes as varied as 'urbanity and ecology, politics and globalisation, spirituality and identity'. Opposed to the Venice biennale, which is focused on cutting-edge and avant-garde trends, the selection at *Dak'Art* includes painting, sculpture, photography, design, installation, and video, thus emphasising variety. Konaté (ibid.) describes the styles of these works as 'abstract and figurative, popular and conceptual', and belonging to at least three generations of artists. Furthermore, *Dak'Art* attempts to foster dialogue with the past by honouring and remembering deceased artists who have made lasting impressions on the development of contemporary art in Africa. The biennale

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<sup>44</sup> To get an idea of its size, at the 2002 *Dak'Art* Biennale 64 artists were selected from 366 applications covering 5 disciplines and 6 exhibition sites (Camara 2002: 17). *Dak'Art* 2004 presented 33 artists from 16 African countries (Farrell 2004: 13).

also encourages the organisation of numerous non-official activities or “Off” exhibitions, which adds to the ‘dynamism of the artistic community’ (Camara 2002: 19). Such a varied and open approach has the potential to provide a more accurate, non-elitist, and diverse representation of contemporary African art production.

*Dak’Art* is constructed to support a pan-African ideology with the intention of rectifying the marginalisation of contemporary African artists. As a counter-discursive strategy *Dak’Art’s* use of the biennale model is questionable. The biennale model (as discussed in Chapter 2) was developed in Europe to provide nations with a platform to showcase their visual culture, and is thus fundamentally a nationalistic vehicle deeply entrenched in Eurocentric ideology. This problematises *Dak’Art’s* use of this model to challenge Western racism and present an “authentic” view of Africa free from these constraints and Western prescriptions. Nzewi (2007: online) articulates the problem as follows:

While one is quick to add that there is nothing wrong in adopting strategies that are internationalist and global, the question that arises is the efficacy of strategies in ameliorating the occlusion of the greater percentage of artistic production—informed by reality and experience—from inside the continent?

The Venice Biennale uncritically exhibits, on a competitive basis, art on national platforms. In Africa, however, such national platforms present difficulties because nationalism is a problematic construct in the postcolony. In Africa, nationalism as a liberation strategy is flawed in its very inception, since the imagery of nationalism and the institution of the nation-states are European imports. Proponents of anti-colonial nationalism can be said to simply promote modified versions of the colonial nationalisms they allegedly oppose. They thus replicate the ‘monocular and sometimes xenophobic view

of identity and [the] *coercive* view of national culture' (*my emphasis*, Ashcroft 1995: 151).

The large preceding cultural systems (in the West) correspond to the boundaries drawn by one modern nation–state<sup>45</sup>, but the same cannot be said of Africa. Whereas the nationalisms of Europe and most of the first world correspond to former, pre–existing ethnic models, the nation–states of the postcolonies are much less stable since they are recent constructs imposed by colonialism.

It is quite likely that *Dak'Art's* rejection of such a nationalistic model (as represented by the Venice Biennale) responds to this dilemma of postcolonial nationalism. It is also a practical decision since Venice's national platforms rely on extensive sponsorship from the nation states concerned, and most nations in Africa don't have the financial means to support the arts<sup>46</sup>. *Dak'Art* thus adopts pan–Africanism as a political and postcolonial strategy, since African affiliations are arguably stronger in Africa than national affiliations. This is predominately due to the collective experience of racial marginalisation and the relative isolation of the continent.

It is significant that while Venice is structured around national pavilions, Africa has been displayed at this biennale as the only continental pavilion. As a continental pan–African biennale, *Dak'Art* does not aim to exhibit Africa as a one–dimensional homogenous cultural identity as is promoted at the

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<sup>45</sup> Benedict Anderson (1983: 19) explains the ambivalent emergence of the nation as follows:

If nation–states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past ... What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self–consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being.

<sup>46</sup> *Dak'Art* is important in this sense as it represents an official commitment from the Senegalese government.

Venice biennale. Marie-José Crespin (2002: 13), president of the Scientific Council at *Dak'Art 2002*, describes the biennale as 'an incomplete panorama of two years of work by our plastic artists who wish to establish links with other artists and with the public, while affirming their independence from Western-dominated Art.' According to the general curator of *Dak'Art 2006*, Yacouba Konaté (2006: 32), the biennale:

renounces the idea of dividing works and the artists according to categories such as "international", "African" and "Diaspora", it also refuses geo-political criteria in order to reconfigure an ensemble in which the diversity of the languages and styles can provide an idea of the complexity of the notion of African-ness and all the misapprehensions linked to questions of identity.

### 3.3 PAN-AFRICANISM AS STRATEGY

The discursive construct of pan-Africanism relies greatly on the political rhetoric of Négritude. The influence of Négritude<sup>47</sup> extends back to 1930s Paris. Here a group of African intellectuals and poets, including Léopold Sédar Senghor<sup>48</sup> and Aimé Césaire<sup>49</sup>, mobilised in response to the common

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<sup>47</sup> The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was the first to give the Négritude concept an extended philosophical formulation. His essay *Orphée Noir* was an expansive reflection on the term, which had been coined by Martinican poet Aimé Césaire.

<sup>48</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor was born in 1906 in the village of Jaol, in Senegal. After completing his secondary education, he was awarded a scholarship to study in France. He first attended the *Lycée Louis-le-Grand* and later the *Sorbonne*, after which he followed a teaching career in Paris schools until the start of the Second World War. While in France, Senghor studied the works of African-American poets. His meeting with the Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire led to the development of the intellectual movement later known as Négritude that dominated critical discourses in African literature and history. Most notably, Senghor was the first president of the newly independent country of Senegal. His term lasted twenty years, retiring in 1980 after creating 'Africa's most stable and socially accommodating nation-state' ([www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5154](http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5154)).

<sup>49</sup> Aimé Césaire was born in 1913 in Basse-Point, Martinique in the French Caribbean. At the age of 18 he attended the *Lycée Louis-le-Grand* in Paris. In 1945 Césaire began his political career when he was elected mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy in the Constituent Assembly on the French Communist party. He was an avid supporter of the

experience of colonial racism and displacement. Their quest for an authentic African culture (i.e. a hidden essence, an autonomous force that can be threatened, contaminated, diluted, destroyed, suppressed or altered by circumstance) promoted 'a glorification of the African past and a nostalgia for the imaginary beauty and harmony of traditional African society' (Irele 2002: 40–41). This was not merely an attempt at encouraging African communities to take pride in their heritage, but a deliberate effort to salvage and re-habilitate what was thought to be a 'lost national ethos' (Ashcroft 1995: 166)<sup>50</sup>. In many ways it was a means of establishing a stable identity to counter the instability of displacement.

The Négritudinist study of African life and culture before colonial "contamination" by the West (or before the introduction of modernity) was considered to be revealing of the true "authentic" nature of Africa's people and cultural production. Thus, in many ways Négritude is seen as a 'backward movement' (Irele 2002: 41) towards an originary beginning from which Western culture had 'pulled the African.' Instead of the creation of a new African image, emphasis is put on the *re-habilitation* of a lost "original" culture<sup>51</sup> (Ashcroft 1995: 166). Fanon writes:

[A] national culture ... finds legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risked being swamped. Because they realize they are

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decolonisation of the French colonies of Africa. Césaire's criticism of European civilisation and colonial racism in *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955) influenced deeply Franz Fanon's revolutionary manifesto *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) ([www.kirjasto.sci.fi/cesaire.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/cesaire.htm) & [www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Cesaire.html](http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Cesaire.html)).

<sup>50</sup> This follows the belief that '[a] people or class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history' (John Berger cited in Araeen 2001: 94). In order to understand the present and construct the future, we must possess an awareness of the past.

<sup>51</sup> Africa's search for heritage reflects or mimics what James Clifford (1987: 73) described as the 'salvage paradigm' typical of Western academic anthropology: 'the desire to rescue something "authentic" out of destructive historical changes.'

in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hot-headed and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most precolonial springs of life of their people (cited in Ashcroft 1995: 153).

Since Senegal's independence the state ideology has attempted to define contemporary African cultures according to the concept of Négritude. For example, in 1966, the *Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres*, (*Dak'Art's* predecessor), looked to the past (Grabski 2008: 104 & Pivin 2002: 149). African art following contemporary trends was characterised as Western products of assimilation. It was thought, for example, that the change in African art after colonial contact demonstrated the imposition of modernity and

was an expression of the classes whose vision of Africa's future was not derived from the dynamics of Africa's own traditions but the ideas of human progress and advancement that came from the West (Araeen 2008: online).

Expression connected to the powers of colonialism was regarded as essentially anti-African; therefore, the incorporation of Western influences into African artworks was thought to diminish its African character. Accordingly, in pursuit of being contemporary (the binary opposite of traditional "authentic" African expression), African artists had to 'set aside their differences and [strive] to assimilate the dominant [Western] model' (Konaté 2002: 142). For this reason, continues Konaté (Ibid.),

[c]ontemporary could be an avatar of assimilation; a metamorphosis of this key word of the colonial period that has survived in the so-called post-colonial time. A word that portrays

practices of a time gone by, attesting to the might of the master's way.

What Konaté suggests is that contemporary trends are associated more often with the persistent influence of modernism than as a byproduct of a global economy and cultural exchange.

As has been demonstrated in chapter 1, one of the most pervasive characteristics of colonial discourse was the tendency to propose a progressive teleology of cultural development. This relentless linear trajectory of time and narrative of progress established the opinion that earlier forms were "primitive" and later forms higher and more sophisticated. In terms of Western art history, traditional forms are thus inevitably superseded by contemporary art forms. It is this tradition/modernity dialectic that has so persistently influenced the classification, collection and evaluation of African cultural production. The Négritudinist emphasis on traditional forms and techniques of art production hinders the liberation of African artists, and reciprocates the West's idea of Africa as modernity's Other. As John Picton (2002: 329) explains, the merit of tradition (i.e. the handing on of social practice) is allowing 'possibilities for change and development.' The idea of tradition, he continues, is fundamental to any understanding of visual practice in Africa, but when the term "traditional" is used to define "authentic" African expression it hints at the ideological construction of words such as "primitive" and "tribal."

Contrary to the *Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* one-dimensional understanding of Négritudanism, Senghor's unique view of Négritude, was not only aimed at the rehabilitation of "traditional" African arts, but also saw the necessity of change and dynamic cultural exchange. According to Senghor the identity of African artists must be shaped with their specific cultural context and the richness of ancestral traditions and traditional art in mind. He also felt that artists should be concomitantly open to different and

outside influences. He used the term “assimilation” to express the pragmatic way in which Western cultural values could be accommodated (Ebong 1991: 199).

Senghor writes:

There is certainly no art without the active assimilation of input from abroad, but above all there is no original spirit without the rootedness in the originary earth (cited in Ebong 1991: 200).

Senghor made it clear that the absorption of Western values need not come at the expense of traditional ones. As Mudimbe (1994: 276) explains, contemporary African art should take ‘up an interrupted tradition, not out of desire for purity, which would testify only to the imaginations of dead ancestors, but in a way that reflects the conditions of today.’ While encouraging dialogue and assimilation Senghorian Négritude recognises the importance of maintaining a sense of place.

From the outset *Dak’Art* fell under the patronage of the Senegalese government and was thus greatly influenced by the Négritudinal ideals of Senghor (Okeke 1998: 24 & Badine 1996: 11). As established above, Senghor demonstrated and transcended the essentialist resonances of Négritude. He called on Africa to repeal its identity as a complex negotiation between the “traditional” and the contemporary, the local and the global. As Konaté (2002: 143) explains on the occasion of the fifth *Dak’Art* biennale:

We are only worthy of our culture if we renew it, and we can only renew it at its very foundations if we deploy culture as a critical task; that is, an act that queries those foundations in order to re-establish them rightfully, in the light of new rights and new legitimizing authorities. Tradition is the living culture of ancient times that has been passed on to us and it is up to creators to reinvent new paradigms of the substance of our times that we shall have to transmit. They must shift the points of articulation of our

society. Identity is only ever partially relevant, for although we do belong to our society, it is our ability to make it move and to shift the points at which it tunes into the wavelength of development that make it swell and progress. “Africanity” is a performance that proclaims itself African, which goes beyond the territoriality of its place of birth and its belonging to race.

What Konaté recognises is that in order to exist in this global world a complex negotiation between the local and the global is required.

African identity at *Dak’Art* was not to be imagined as homogenous. Senghor envisioned what Mudimbe calls a “unitary universe”, in which Africans were called on to participate in the building of a civilisation whose characteristics are universal, dialogue among different cultures, the blending of cultures, and African integration (Crespin 2002: 13). It was, according to Ebong (1991: 200), ‘Senghor’s concept of assimilation [that] allowed for a global concept of Négritude as an African world view.’ Therefore, *Dak’Art* adopts a pan-Africanism as a vehicle for the dissemination of Négritude as envisioned by Senghor, uniting ‘artists from all over Africa in the framework of a new universality’ (Leenhardt 1996: 9).

### 3.3.1 THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Being directly influenced by the Négritude movement, the merit of *Dak’Art*, according to Sylvain Sankale (2002: 153), is to force us to wonder about the eternally unanswered questions: What is it to be African? Do you become African through your birth, your ancestors or your experience? In *The Idea of Africa* Mudimbe describes Africa as a trope. He writes (1994: xi): ‘[This idea] is a product of the West and was conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge.’ What Mudimbe establishes is that the West has historically controlled the idea of Africa. What has been promoted as authentic African art (by those who question Western hegemony) is

predominately that which appears to rupture Western standards. African artists, as Andriamirado (2003: online) points out 'are almost by definition in confrontation'.

As mentioned in the last chapter, earlier African initiatives (and here I mean diasporan exhibitions of contemporary African art in the West) argued for and demanded equality in response to Western racism, and wished to show that artists of Africa and African descent had no less contributed to modern and contemporary art movements than Western artists. Hence contemporary African artists were exhibited as employing cutting-edge practices. This, as I stressed earlier, meant that diasporan African artists were favoured and the majority of African artists living on the continent were not accessible and excluded from membership of the global community. Accordingly, Ogbechie (2008: online) asks of African artists living in Africa,

why don't we see exhibitions of their art that takes their particular aesthetic concerns into consideration? In a truly global world, why does it seem as if all contemporary "global" artists take their cue from New York? If indeed they take their cue from New York, why do we talk about their work as if it transcends space, place and time? It seems to me that what we have here is a supremely colonial and imperialist discourse of art masquerading as a global discourse that assumes that an artist is global only to the extent that he or she lives in the West or assumes aesthetic attitudes that comply with prevailing orthodoxy in New York, London or Paris (Ogbechie 2008: online).

Ogbechie understands global to mean the world. All expression open to dialogue should be viewed as worthy of the appellation, global. However, as I previously explained, the global is a condition controlled and regulated by Western powers. Consequently, the majority of contemporary African arts continue to fight the battle to be heard.

*Dak'Art* takes a different position. In order to engage more fully with global contemporary culture the biennale attempts to broaden its perspective by negotiating between “traditional” African and contemporary trends, an attempt to show the multifaceted nature of African art<sup>52</sup>. As Johannes Fabian and Ilana Szombati-Fabian have indicated, African art should be viewed as ‘a complex process in which society articulates and communicates its consciousness of its origins, its past and its present predicament’ (cited in Hassan 1999: 221). Accordingly, *Dak'Art* pursues a narrative that acknowledges the richness of its African history and tradition but which also brings to the fore its affiliation to contemporary global culture and trends. It was recognised that reducing identity only to a rediscovery of one’s roots was not sufficient to sustain a sense of self in the increasing global environment. This requires both a remembering of the past and a reworking of the future. ‘We are only worthy of our culture if we renew it’ writes Yacoube Konaté (2002: 143)<sup>53</sup>,

and we can only renew it at its very foundations ... Tradition is the living culture of ancient times that has been passed on to us and it is up to creators to reinvent new paradigms of the substance of our times that we shall have to transmit. They must shift the points of articulation of our society. Identity is only ever partially relevant,

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<sup>52</sup> In the *Dak'Art 2002* catalogue, Yacoube Konate recalls the response of artist Yinka Shonibare to criticisms of his work as being not African enough. The artist, it is noted, visited libraries to learn about traditional African art and subsequently reoriented his work, finally coming up with sculptures dressed in the fashions of Victorian England, cut out of African fabrics, putting ‘in perspective both the notion of an African identity, as well as the different historical registers and contradictions that it holds’ (Konate 2002: 143).

<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Ato Delaquis speaks of his aesthetic expression:

[B]eing a socially-conscious artist I try to express the environment, the whole physical and spiritual concept of my society in the flux of change, using both my knowledge of western and traditional concepts to make my imageries on a two-dimensional surface effective and significant ... Just as the present African society finds it necessary to combine indigenous and western way of life for survival, so can the African artist fuse foreign influences with his own talent for a significant art (Delaquis nd: 16).

for although we do belong to our society, it is our ability to make it move and shift the points at which it tunes into the wavelength of development that make it swell and progress. “Africanity” is a performance that proclaims itself African, which goes beyond the territoriality of its place of birth and it’s belonging to a race.

In Ery Camara’s (2002: 18) view of *Dak’Art*, ‘An historical memory, thus based on cultural values and on new and original actions, motivates a more intelligent use of culture and leads to less disrupted progress<sup>54</sup>.’ As Huchard (2002: 133) puts it, *Dak’Art* seeks ‘to re-activate the Dialogue of civilizations and [to] play an active part in building a world of peace ever more fraternal within its differences and freer in its complementarity.’ Hence, *Dak’Art* is one effort to bring about what Pissarra (2007: online) calls ‘geo-politically defined responses to globalisation<sup>55</sup>.’

*Dak’Art* endeavours to negotiate the traditional and contemporary by placing emphasis on the principle of continuity. In this case “continuity” should not be read as the teleological process whereby African artists lose their cultural rootedness due to “inevitable” assimilation and acculturation. Nor should it be read as a “natural” progression of history. For, as Nicole Guez (cited in Andriamirado 2002: online) puts it,

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<sup>54</sup> It must be noted that the term “progress” as it is used here, is problematic. It suggests (perhaps unintentionally) a continuation of an evolutionary paradigm.

<sup>55</sup> The concept ‘globalisation,’ which dates back some twenty years, is often described as a very recent phenomenon.

A lot of people get the impression that Africa is dragging its heels on the globalisation front. In reality, however, long before people recognised it for what it is—the rapid development on an international level of an economic space that revolves around the United States—a world economy had already established itself progressively. As this economy is dominated by the Western countries, the Atlantic Ocean is its main centre. From our point of view, Africa has been part of this process since the end of the fifteenth century (M’Bokolo 2003: online).

Contemporary African artists' work cannot easily be read as an ensemble. It is not part of an approach, a continuity, an evolution, something that can be described as being in the order of an "art history".

Rather, continuity describes here the process whereby African artists stay aware of their tradition but continue to utilise and adapt new technologies and ideas<sup>56</sup>. While rooted in the local they are still players in the global economy. *Dak'Art* depicts Africa not as a unitary culture or in dualistic relation to Others. *Dak'Art* purports to be a celebration of the multiple dimensions of African experiences. The aims of *Dak'Art* according to Ugiomoh (2007a: 94) is to 'provide a means of coming to terms with the knowledge of self, the opening up of knowledge within its formative boundaries, while at the same time keeping its sanctity.' Edgar Morin explains that, 'the alternative between homogenisation and diversification is simplistic' because such a choice is 'posed by a thought structure that esteems that where there is homogenisation, there is no diversification and vice versa' (cited in Andriamirado 2003: online). Still, since tradition and modernity have historically been constructed as mutually exclusive, this aim results in a pervasive ambiguity, 'an anachronistic synthesis' between perceived binary opposites (van Robbroeck 2006: np).

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<sup>56</sup> However, as I mentioned earlier, the trend has been to take tradition for granted and focus on advanced technologies and techniques. Rasheed Araeen (2003: 100) explains:

The struggle of Africa was not only against the crude and brutal forces of political domination and oppression but also for its right to define itself in its own way and within modernity. Although it would be a truism to say that modernity was an arm of colonial domination, Africa – like other colonised continents – did adopt its ideas of universal progress and emancipation, with a hope that it would help construct its liberated future in terms of advanced scientific and technological developments. This consciousness also gave rise to the emergence of art that not only defied Africa's old traditions, particularly those which in some cases had become an obstacle to its modern progress, but also challenged the West's perception of Africa and its creativity perpetually trapped in its old structures.

According to Oguibe (2001: 50), 'no one today typifies this trend in mobility and fluidity that is characteristic of our age more than the contemporary African artist.' Similarly Era Camara (2002: 17) writes of contemporary African artists:

Their creativity frees them from any harsh categorization. They do not pretend to either define or cause an isolation confining them exclusively to what is African. These are people who travel the world and who, from such experience, produce works that are not exempt from singular tracks. Denying them the liberty to choose what best suits their eloquence means not to have understood what art is all about.

He continues:

Each of them conveys a culture that transcends the nationalities and geopolitical borders imposed on them. Their works reflect experiences that are both individual and collective; they appropriate whatever serves their purpose in order to upset established standards. Their universe is not limited to the African continent, it covers the world they choose to live in or to re-create (2002: 18).

Nevertheless, while Camara views African artists as having no more bounds than any other artists, there is still a sense of *something* particular.

Thus far I have established *Dak'Art* as the only international biennale exhibiting contemporary art by African practitioners in Africa. This singular focus is a response to the marginalisation experienced by African artists in the West and relies greatly on a Senghorian ideology. Unlike the Venice biennale, which celebrates the uniqueness of nation-states, *Dak'Art* adopts pan-Africanism as its structural model. Its aim is to establish a complex, multi-faceted notion of "Africanness" that transcends the constructed physical borders and nationalities that have been imposed on Africa. In so doing *Dak'Art* provides the opportunity for Africans to engage with

contemporary culture and debates, all the while retaining a sense of and connection to the local.

### 3.4 NEW FORM OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY

It is true that the West ‘often overlooks the modernity of African artists’ work, and uses their “Africanness” as the only measure of these works’ (Araeen 2003: 102). They tend to look at African art in search of evidence of a unique social, cultural and aesthetic context. It is thought that this elusive essence of “Africanness” is not culturally transmitted, but genetically encoded, an instinct, similar to what Mudimbe (1994: xi) describes as ‘an ancient, timeless and fundamentally irrational primal force that is intrinsic and unique to the continent of Africa.’ But, Araeen continues,

[g]iven the global spread of modernity during colonization, and with modernism now being the common inheritance of artists from all over the world, it would be presumptuous to think that they should have different goals on the basis of racial or cultural difference.

This African “essence” does not prevent African artists from participation in the global economy. In fact due to the nature of colonisation Africa is familiar with the proponents of modernism, which dominates global discourse<sup>57</sup>. While Africa is rich in tradition colonial history opened the continent to external influence. Thus, assimilation has long been the inheritance of the African artist.

The displacement of many African artists has also brought them awareness of global reality. *Dak’Art*, explains Robert (2006: 54), is shaped by decisions on ‘how to define the scope of “Africa” as a constantly shifting paradigm, and how to curate a biennial of contemporary art when every aspect of the phrase

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<sup>57</sup> Alioune Badine (1996: 11), coordinator of the exhibition at *Dak’Art 96*, describes this phenomenon as the African artist ‘[knocking] at the door of the international art market seeing that they have succeeded in the quite innovative artistic process.’

is in flux.’ Africa can no longer be seen as a static, singular identity. Discourse on identity, Robert (2006: 56) continues, ‘needs to be revisited, reinstated and re-envisioned in light of the evolution of our great society in the context of global values.’ The biennale is therefore structured to support an image of Africa as a global member, but which is also in touch with local issues of the African continent.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that, by highlighting “Africanness” *Dak’Art* is problematic. With knowledge of the realities of a globalised world it still attempts to present *an* African identity. While *Dak’Art* should be congratulated for not being slavish to Western ideologies by discounting nation-states, this is problematic in that it subverts the autonomy of nation-states in Africa. While *Dak’Art* supports a view of an African culture that is receptive to the impulses of history and globalisation, it nonetheless implies the essentialist notion of innate and pan-African characteristics that remain relatively constant despite the changes that the continent undergoes in response to these historical events and the globalised world. By pan-Africanism we understand intellectual and political movements among Africans and the diaspora predicated on a homogenous “Africanness”; and ideas which have stressed or sought political independence, cultural unity or imaginary coherence<sup>58</sup> (Geiss 1974: 3), which Asante (1991: 69–70) describes as a confraternity<sup>59</sup>. Underlying assimilation and dialogue there exists an essential “Africanness” that has remained intact since pre-colonial history. The biennale provides African artists with the opportunity to

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<sup>58</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu (2000: online) describes the term “Pan Africanity” as drawing from the more precise notion of kinship and community. ‘One is a kin by virtue of bloodlines of descent even though some are distant relatives, and even though the social experiences and existential conditions of the lives of relatives may differ.’

<sup>59</sup> ‘Pan-Africanism was long confined to a sort of pan-Blackism, according to which Africa was exclusively the continent of Blacks and the solidarity to be built involved Black of Africa and their descendants in the American and European diaspora. It then took a new content and under the supervision of Kwame Nkrumah and of Nasser set itself the goal of liberating and unifying the entire African continent’ (Pivin 2002: 17).

participate in the global market, but requests that the circulation of such goods should contribute to the recognition of what is of artistic essence in society (Camara 2002: 18), to serve as representative of the 'African race.' Contemporary African art, at the *Dak'Art* biennale claims to share with "traditional" African arts a fundamental "Africanness"<sup>60</sup>.

As a pan-African biennale, Nkiru Nzegwu (2000: online) accuses *Dak'Art* of 'not sufficiently [recognising] the fundamental sociocultural and national differences in the realities of so-called relatives' and for 'misguidedly [privileging] biological/racial ties over sociological/cultural ties and national identities.' If this is the case, then it may be argued that it is precisely through ideas of pan-Africanism, which speciously defines African culture as homogenous with an identifiable cultural style, thereby obliterating their disparate and composite social realities, that African artists remain marginalised<sup>61</sup>. This is the most pervasive ambiguity to emerge at the *Dak'Art* biennale. Contemporary African art is regarded as a product of a free creative individual, while simultaneously constructing African artistic output as partaking of a collective identity that is fundamentally and essentially different. Pan-Africanism, as the construction of a single continental identity, ironically abides by the same Western conventions of identity construction that has continuously resulted in the marginalisation of Africa.

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<sup>60</sup> Stuart Hall explains this essential "Africanness" as follows:

In terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath all the other, more superficial differences, the truth, the essence of ["Africanness"] of the black experience (Hall 1993: 393).

<sup>61</sup> Elliott (2000: 15) points out that *Dak'Art* is in the developing stages of establishing what exactly constitutes modern and contemporary art. '[A]ll separate histories from across the continent', he claims, 'have still to be put together within a common framework.'

Pan-Africanism has cost the artist a central role in shaping and participating in the event. Within this struggle for independence, the role of the artist and intellectual easily become subordinate. *Dak'Art* promotes African unification to the detriment of individual national identities<sup>62</sup>. Under the cannon of pan-Africanism and its political and cultural theories the question is not about individuality, but collectivity. One of the conceits of recent postcolonial discourse is to view Africa as less a place with individual histories than a concept. This, according to Ogbechie (2008: online), is a supremely pervasive response to the marginalisation of Africa in global discourses. Similarly, Afropolitanism, notes Cotter (cited in Ogbechie 2008: online),

Is the modish tag for new work made by young African artists both in and outside Africa. What unites the artists is a shared view of Africa, less as a place with individual histories than as a concept; a cultural force, one that runs through the world the way a gulf stream runs through an ocean: part of the whole, but with its own tides and temperatures.

In a similar vein, Laurie Ann Farrell (2007: 13) states, in her 2004 review of *Dak'Art* that this exhibition perceives cultural identity in a stereotypical manner. Njami (2005: 54) explains identity in contemporary African representation as that which

does not just refer to the individual. Identity cards may well give your name, forenames and distinctive features, but they are used less to say who we are than where we come from. This type of

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<sup>62</sup> What has resulted from these efforts to re-write Art History from an African perspective is an art history that reflects the strategies and polemics of the exhibition and is significantly devoid of individual accounts, a consequence of the dwindling discipline of art history. Van Robbroeck (2007: np) views the latter as a positive development. She writes: 'In a sense, art historians have to overcome the ontological roots of their discipline before they can meaningfully rewrite [Africa's] cultural heritage. Part of this overcoming means to transcend the notion that art history deals exclusively with "Art"'. In other words, it is necessary to relinquish the obsession with art if we are to justly reinterpret historic and by implication contemporary art production.

identity refers to a sameness, an identification with a whole of which we are one of the elements – a nation.

By supporting a pan–African structure, *Dak'Art* diverts attention from the individual and the complex differences between the many diverse nations that inhabit the African continent. Consequently, the African artist finds him/herself in a marginalised position<sup>63</sup>.

The goal of pan–Africanism as resistance to Western prescription detracts from the aim to showcase contemporaneity. *Dak'Art's* focus on pan–Africanism limits the potential of the exhibition to facilitate the kind of interaction and exchange afforded by a more international show. 'The exhibitions dotted over the last decade' writes Njami (2005: 20) 'have mainly striven to define historical and thematic frameworks focusing on context more than aesthetics or sources of inspiration, political problems rather than creative processes.' This is in light of the fact that in an increasingly globalised world finding a "commonality" is ever more difficult. In Simbao's (2008: 60) words,

to hang an entire exhibition on the tender hooks of the Afri–fad is no longer groundbreaking, but is simply to go along with the flow ... The commonality can no longer satisfactorily be race, nor can it be geography. We all know that in theory the nation–state is dead ... Curators turn, then, to "Africa"—not the continent, for we are supposed to be past meta–geographic "myths of continents", but a deterritorialised "Africa".

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<sup>63</sup> This inability to recognise the African artist as singular is revealed in an interview between Thomas McEvelley and New York based Ivory Coast artist Ouattara, an encounter that predictably restricts the latter to the confines of the West's preferred narrative of Africa. '[Q]uestions [were] not intended to reveal the artist as subject, but rather to display him as object of exoticist fascination' (Oguibe 1997: 18). While the artist is invited to speak, he is coerced by McEvelley to narrate himself according to the confines defined by the West. Thus while traditional African art was attributed to the 'tribe', rather than to the individual artist, effectively erasing the latter from the narrative spaces of art history, critics like McEvelley continue this practice to anonymise African art by using novel rhetorical devices.

Fall (2002: 110) makes an important point. The African artist no longer exists as an anonymous ‘traditional, primitive authentic.’ Africa is not one country, nor is it just one continent. The idea of Africa is a highly political fiction. “The African artist” writes Fall (2002: 111), is a generic, obsolete phrase, since Africa as a cultural and artistic entity has never existed. Thus, new generations of African artists have abandoned, to a certain extent, the pan-African project in search of new ways to define themselves. Konaté (2006: 32) notes that some artists chosen to show at *Dak’Art* ‘recuse themselves of the label of African in order to insist on the conclusive authority of their intrinsic value as universal artists.’ As Oguibe (1997: 19) explains: ‘when the artist creates or the musician composes, the most influential intent is to replicate and reiterate herself as a being, to impact herself upon reality, to assert her author-ness, her authority.’ The issue, according to Njami (2005: 35), is no longer about establishing a definition of post-colonial Africa; it is about defining the role of the African as an individual on the international stage.

While Konaté (2006: 34) describes *Dak’Art* as not having

a specific vocation to oppose the lies about Africa, the truths of Africa; neither is its role to raise, against the images of an Africa that is killing itself in fratricidal wars, an eloquently contradictory curtain of images of a creative Africa which would win and which, therefore, would send the world a message worthy of On Kawara’s: “I am still alive”.

However, the fact that the biennale envisions itself as pan-African suggests otherwise. Engendered in the title of the biennale is the premise of defining a contemporary “Africanness”. In the same catalogue Roger Pierre Turine (2006: 344) expresses a conflicting view. He writes:

It’s time, more than high time, Africa got out of that—political, economic, social, cultural—jungle in which the Western world has bogged her for God knows what grievous reasons! It’s time, more

than high time, Africa asserted herself, whole and entire, conquering, inventive, innovating, fertile, proud of being what she has managed so far to be, despite the various colonisations which somehow and to some extent have stripped her of her selfhood. She has to assert herself through her own way of thinking and moving, original and full of grace, through the nobleness of her arts so rich and so secret.

By defining a collective identity we imply the construction of an authentic “Africanness”. This construction of authenticity, writes Oguibe, (1999: 25) ‘suggests history, a tradition that forms a frame of reference, a point against which adherence or departure is gauged.’ These views of an “African Spirit” can be termed strategic essentialism, in which stereotypes are re-evoked, but given a positive, constructive value. For example, Senghor strategically embraced all the alleged qualities of the African that were once derided by the West. Therefore, *Dak’Art* has established itself as a counter-myth, as diametrically opposed to the myth of Africa invented by the West, yet like all counter essentialisms, it reifies the dominant hegemonic myth of a collective identity. Furthermore, it promotes the view that the postcolonial<sup>64</sup> world (voluntarily or involuntarily) consumes rather than produces modernity. Primarily, it endorses the dominant party’s reductive caricature of the self and can be regarded as proof, in the eyes of the outsider, of innate, biologically determined difference.

Considering the above, it needs to be asked whether *Dak’Art* is able to transform and transfigure stereotypes of “Africanness” in order to

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Postcolonial’ is a complicated term subject to ongoing debate. Firstly the prefix ‘post’ problematically implies that it is an aftermath of colonialism, whether it temporal, coming after, or ideological, as in supplanting (Loomba 1998: 7). However, the inequalities of colonialism still persist in the ‘postcolonial’ era, which means that we cannot proclaim the demise of colonialism. Furthermore, ‘the term “postcolonial” does not apply to those at the bottom end of the hierarchy, who are still “at the far economic margins of the nation-state” so [there is nothing] “post” about their colonization’ (Loomba 1998: 9).

accommodate its participants' myriad inclinations and ethnicities and to present this diversity to the world? It is in pursuit of this aim that *Dak'Art* avoids a coherent curatorial voice. Pan-Africanism was partly adopted to offer the biennale a viewing structure in the absence of an over-arching intervention. In his review of *Dak'Art*, Rasheed Araeen (2003: 94) suggests that a curatorial context would better help critical engagement. As Joanna Grabski (2008: 108) points out, the majority of visitors to *Dak'Art* hail from Western centers. Therefore, the 'omission of "context" assumes a problematic universalism in the viewing experience.' The work is not viewed in its connection to global debates nor are African artists viewed as individuals with distinctive sensibilities. Grabski (2008: 110) suggests that instead of engaging with deeper issues and debates, responses to the work exhibited are confined to 'aesthetic strategy or artistic process.' *Dak'Art* continues to miss an opportunity to discuss crucial issues of the African continent and to direct the experience of African art.

My investigation of *Dak'Art* suggests that it does not succeed in exhibiting the continent's complexities, and that the exhibition is fundamentally flawed in its inability to move beyond a pan-African essentialism. In order to break with this model it would have to engage in a reciprocal exchange of ideas and merging strategies with the rest of the globe; dissolving the either/or dichotomy, and acknowledge the movement between local and global, thus obscuring any fixed definition of authenticity. Nevertheless *Dak'Art's* contribution to the international art scene is invaluable. The success of *Dak'Art*, according to Elliott (2001: 15), is providing a truly post-modern outlook that includes all its complexities as well as providing a renewed focus on the artist.

## CONCLUSION

The dialogue in which I am engaged here is directed towards a narrative of African art that reveals the limitations of appreciation, expectation, and the confines of perception within which it is constructed. My investigation of the *Dak'Art* biennale in this thesis is informed and preceded by an investigation of evolutionist assumptions towards African art and the continuing struggle for command over the African voice. I outline the trajectory of African art from primitive artifact to artwork, highlighting the prejudices that have kept Africans from being valued as equals and unique artists in their own right. I then look at exhibiting techniques employed to move beyond perceptions of the tribal, to subvert the exoticising tendency of the West and remedy the marginalised position of the larger African artistic community. Since "*Primitivism*", *Magiciens* and the like, the exhibition of African art has evolved in significant ways yet even at the international biennale the African artist remains marginalised, a product of Western thought and systems of classification.

It is obvious, to Chika Okeke-Agulu (Hassan 2008: 178), that international biennales have played a part in shifting the dominant centre. Yet, as I highlighted in chapter 2, these Western exhibitions and biennales tend to assist in the increased exposure of predominately diasporan artists who are regarded by some to be too far from Africa to accurately showcase the continent. Still, the significance of this diasporan work in sustaining the practice and discourse of contemporary African art can hardly be doubted. In response to the continued marginalisation of African artists in the West comparable initiatives have been instituted on the continent, as platforms from which to challenge and address perceived problems encountered in Western biennales where African art is exhibited. It is a means for African artists on the continent to gain exposure, for them to assert their own

position on the global art market, as well as building an audience for contemporary African art in Africa.

*Dak'Art* is unpacked in this thesis as an African biennale whose structure supports an ideology of pan-Africanism. While its strategy is to avoid mimicking the structure and form of the Venice Biennale it does maintain the homogenisation of culture and the construction of a single coherent African identity typical of Western biennales<sup>65</sup>. Recent studies foreground more complex cartographies and connections of cultures so that

[t]he very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or “organic” ethnic communities—as the grounds of cultural comparitivism—are in a profound state of redefinition (Bhabha 1994: 5).

While some biennales and major survey exhibitions of African art hold onto the notion of homogenous national cultures, others strive to move beyond the confines of identity politics towards the complex and unlimited locale of the global.

One such example is the second Johannesburg biennale, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, which in opposition to the 1<sup>st</sup> Johannesburg Biennale, sought to present an image of Africa as an established global player. Okwui Enwezor (Becker 1998: 101), the artistic director, described it as ‘antinational ... bring[ing] about a conversation in which we can ask if it is possible to make a transnational biennale ...’, one that resists being ‘ossified in one

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<sup>65</sup> A further example would be the first Johannesburg Biennale (1995). As a post-Apartheid biennale, it participated in the process of reconstruction and re-engagement of South African art with the rest of the world. Great emphasis was put on recounting its history and structuring a new coherent identity.

particular context where it could become an illustration of certain points that we see in a particular terrain' (Ibid.)<sup>66</sup>. He has written:

Within new, layered cultural formations, one is at once particular and global. Particular and global because the way we resist the sort of impinging narratives practiced daily as figurations of the African imaginary is contingent upon the unconditional ways we recognise the transcultural and transnational nature of today's Africa' (Enwezor 1997a: 11).

In Enwezor's (1997: 21) article *Reframing the black Subject: Ideology and fantasy in contemporary South African art*, he notes that South Africa is 'a "nation" seeking a new identity, a new sense of itself, new images, new geographies with which to ballast its strategic and mythological coherence and unity.' The metaphor of the rainbow nation he argues, rather than being an effective solution to cultural conflict, exposes cultural and racial divisions. In view of this ineffective nation building, Enwezor structured the second Johannesburg biennale as an international biennale of contemporary art 'sited around the axial vector of economic globalisation' (Enwezor 1997a: 9). The biennale 'was intended to act as an open network bringing together different forms of cultural activity, each open to translation by their proximity to other works, mirroring the effect that migrant cultures have on host cultures' (Ratnam 2004: 283). Thus many of the works exhibited focused on the global movement of people and communities.

Veering away from the traditional format of the biennale based on national pavilions, which inevitably reinforces constructed binaries, Enwezor decided to collaborate with six international curators, inviting them to respond to the discourse engendered in *Trade Routes*. At the centre of the biennale was the exhibition *Alternating Currents*, co-curated by Enwezor and Octavio Zaya. This exhibition was described by Bisi Silva (1998: 48) as:

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<sup>66</sup> '[I]n this era of postnationality, the international art world has become a place of origination itself, imagined into being by its curators in what Michael Brenson has termed the Curator's moment' (Becker 1999: 26).

a rambling exhibition in which no discernible trajectory is visible and any attempt at a single thematic underpinning dissipates. This does not prove to be a hindrance but actually allows one to approach the exhibition as a free for all “zone of encounters”.

The biennale sought to introduce African artists to the international art world as artists in their own right, and not as “African” artists.

However, the internationalism of the biennale met with resistance from those keen to emphasise “Africanness” (Hynes 1998: online). According to Matthew Debord (1998: 41)

Johannesburg’s commissars of received opinion decried the Biennale on several grounds: that it inadequately represented South African artists, that it favoured conceptual work over the putatively more African modes of painting and sculpture; and that it fetishized technology to such a degree that Africans, more removed from technological innovation than the inhabitants of any other continent, felt excluded as participants and viewers.

Accordingly, it was characterised as being an instance of cultural imperialism (Diawara 1998: 86), where African artists pursuing more “traditional” mediums were excluded. But, as this thesis shows, exhibiting “Africanness” and a contemporary culture engaged in tradition is equally problematic.

The biennale was not concerned with the exhibition of “Africanness” per se but the experience of hybridity and transnationalism, which according to Klopper (2006: 65) ‘has shattered the once stable, unified sense of home and self ... Repeatedly uprooted, or displaced, the relationships people once established to concrete notions of space and place have become increasingly tenuous.’

Hybridity is in itself problematic. It is logistically impossible to exhibit this hybridity. Any selection of work must make some suggestion as to who is

entitled to the appellation of global citizen. Furthermore, Coombes (1998: 491) suggests that exhibitions that foreground hybridity as a condition of 'post-coloniality' tend to portray the world's cultural products as part of "a contented global village". It suggests that there is a level playing field where none exists.

Clearly there is no easy way to formulate a viable definition for African art. As this discussion shows, in one way or another attempts have been problematic. They are beleaguered by the difficult negotiation between the local and the global. Moreover, it ironically works to further entrench racial generalisations. Perhaps the goal of exhibiting "Africanness" is too broad and we should at last abandon this goal.

In a recent curator's roundtable discussion on mega shows in the twenty-first century, published in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, a number of the participants brought to the fore the fact that 'the megashow[/biennale] format for contemporary African art exhibitions has definitely outlived its use value' (Farrell in Hassan 2008: 157). Given that the global field is dynamic and changing, continental-wide shows run the risk of perpetuating the destructive identity-based essentialisms that both artists and curators aim to overcome (Colin Richards in Hassan 2008: 160). As Marie Ramirez points out:

"Identity" is not an "essence" that can be translated into a particular set of conceptual or visual traits. It is, rather, a negotiated *construct* that results from the multiple positions of the subject vis-à-vis the social, cultural, and political conditions which contain it. How, then, can exhibitions or collections attempt to represent the social, ethnic, or political complexities of groups without reducing their subjects to essentialist stereotypes? (Hassan 2008: 155)

Ramirez points to the fact that even the most complex and constructed identities are contained identities nonetheless and viewed as such.

In the preceding chapter I noted, according to Oguibe (1999: 20), that ‘the ability and freedom to enunciate ..., that takes [the African] beyond the dominance of others, takes [the African], as it were, beyond the bounds of power.’ The argument I am making here is that the whole project of exhibiting Africa is problematic if at all achievable. As Pirote (cited in Williamson 2002: 27) writes: ‘Are we not maintaining a marginal position to continue a battle which is already partly won?’ As Africans it is not necessary to position ourselves as Other or in resistance to a historically Western aesthetic. Enunciation, Oguibe (1999: 20) suggests, is powerful enough to free us from the dominance of the West, and exhibitions according to Camara (2002: 19) are ‘articulate speeches’. If it is *Dak’Art’s* goal to do away with any preconceived ideas of what it is to be African, to be free of Western imperialism, it is important that it, and all dialogue surrounding contemporary African art, disengages from perpetual struggle against the West. Spivak comments on the difficulties that subalterns have to speak and be heard: ‘by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society’ (cited in Graves 1998: online). It is through engagement and conflict with the West that Africa affirms its sub-normative position.

Alternatively, Africa, Araeen (2003: 102) suggests, should be involved in scholarship of African art and contemporary art in general, so that Africa’s independent position within the grander scheme of modern history of art, too readily viewed as an essentially Western timeline, can be asserted. Salah Hassan suggests an alternative dialogic model, within which ‘African art forms must be seen as existing in one contemporary space and interacting with each other in a “dialogic” manner’ (Hassan 1999: 21). Taking into account this complexity, the search for an absolute definition of what it

means to be African must be set aside, since complexity and free dialogue frustrates generalisations and thus suggests the equality of all races and cultures, and their equal roles in modernity. This does not, however, mean that the work ceases to be African.

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