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The Twenty-First Century and the Mega Shows: A Curators' Roundtable

Chika Okeke-Agulu, Salah M. Hassan

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THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY AND THE

MEGA

A CURATORS' ROUNDTABLE

MEANING

WRITING + GRAPHIC

SYSTEMS

AFRICAN

Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art. May 9, 2007–August 26, 2007. Photo: Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Installation image.

SHOWS

Moderated by **Chika Okeke-Agulu**
with an introduction by **Salah M. Hassan**

[H]istoriography, including art historiography, is only possible if a few events are selected from the chaos and peddled. Historiography pretends to go by the worth of events, as contemporaries supposedly saw it, but uses its own evaluation.

Walter Grasskamp (1996) ¹

The general state of curatorial practices and research in contemporary and modern African art has improved a great deal in the last two decades, and a number of well-researched books, dissertations, exhibitions and catalogues have been produced. Contemporary African artists have started to enjoy some recognition, albeit on a smaller scale than that accorded to their Western counterparts. Several exhibitions and a few texts produced during the last decade have effectively captured aspects of the complexity of the contemporary African art scene through interdisciplinary and visual culture approaches.² These include exhibitions and companion texts such as *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, *The Short Century*, *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, *Looking Both Ways*, *A Fiction of Authenticity*, *Snap Judgments*, and *Africa Remix*. With varying degrees of success, these exhibitions have provided critical frameworks for interrogating the contemporary—specifically African modernism and post-

modernism—by engaging diverse media including art, photography, architecture, music, theater, fabric, fashion, film, posters, and literature. Unlike earlier exhibitions or texts on African modern art, these exhibitions have transcended traditional boundaries in the visual arts by incorporating popular culture, situating the visual in relation to the discursive and overcoming the typical institutional separation of art, architecture, film and video, and new media. Above all, it is important to mention that these exhibitions challenged old representations of Africa in art history. By breaking down the artificial boundaries between northern and sub-Saharan Africa, and between the so-called “Arab Africa” and “Black Africa,” they critiqued many of the essentializing tendencies that have plagued the field since its inception.

As I have recently argued elsewhere:

Today, the overall picture in Africa points toward a serious intellectual decline when compared with the optimism of the independence and decolonization movements and the rise in the 1960s and 1970s of a generation of modernists in literature and arts, such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Wole Soyinka, who combined artistic and literary production with serious critical writings. With few exceptions, the current burgeoning of artistic and literary production ... has not been matched with critical, discursive writings that can help elucidate their complexity.³

An example of such exceptions, besides articles in journals such as *Nka*, *Art South Africa*, and *Third Text*, is the companion catalogue of Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, which highlighted the range of individual artistic responses to the economic, social and cultural spheres of African nations, and provided new insight into the complex and multiple voices of younger African artists.

Perhaps what we now need is an innovative framework that can facilitate a critical unpacking of contemporary African art practice and the curatorial politics of its representation. This can

only be accomplished through systematic research and interrogation of the theoretical imperatives that inform contemporary African artistic practices, and the curatorial politics that shape their representation in exhibitions and global art forums. This is the main goal of the roundtable, which is brilliantly moderated by our colleague and co-editor Chika Okeke-Agulu. By inviting major scholars, curators, and practitioners in the field of contemporary African art, the roundtable is also intended to gesture toward a critical meditation on curatorial practices of the last two decades and to provide a space for reflectivity and theoretical engagement and dialogue on the meaning and implication of mega exhibitions in relation to contemporary African art practices.

We might as well ask, why focus on exhibitions and curatorial practices of the last two decades and not on other means of representation of contemporary African art, or not on the artists and their art works? If anything, as the above quotation by Walter Grasskamp clearly illuminates, exhibitions remain to be helpful in aiding scholars in producing a coherent historical narrative.⁴ They are, whether we like it or not, the building blocks of art history and are therefore crucial in “mediating the art object and in moving it from the private to the public domain.”⁵ Most important, reflecting on mega exhibitions and curatorial practices in African art will most likely help us highlight the various issues of cultural hegemony *vis-à-vis* non-western art production, and to clarify the dynamics between the international art market and the politics of globalization.

The past few decades have also witnessed a noticeable shift in the scholarship and exhibition of contemporary African art in the West, and especially of the modernist and postmodernist experience in African art. This shift, however, is taking place within the context of a larger shift in curatorial practices in the West. It is characterized by the proliferation of exhibitions focusing on contemporary non-western art. These exhibitions are constructed around particular notions of group identity and then projected and translated into certain conceptual and visual traits. In most cases, these notions are largely “reductive.” Marie-Ramirez points out that:

"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? ⁶

This shift, of course, is due largely to the new politics of multiculturalism in Europe and North America, and to the increasing diversity of their ethnic composition. But whatever the reasons, there is a definite shift in the art world, and it is one that deserves our attention as the discussion in the roundtable has clearly evidenced.

To begin with, this shift, as Marie-Ramirez once remarked, gives the illusion of expanding "the borders of the contemporary art world, reorganizing cultural frontiers, and charting out new identities for previously marginalized groups."⁷ It allows organizers and curators to claim credit for tearing down established hierarchies and for democratizing the space for cultural action. Indeed, it gives every appearance of celebrating diversity and multiculturalism, but for all the hype, this shift is taking place against a background that is rife with contradictions and paradox.

Most interesting, these exhibitions take place in the western world that is becoming increasingly xenophobic and bent on closing its borders to African and other non-western immigrants. The curb on immigration, the recent Draconian laws in post-September 11 USA and Europe, and the racist attacks on African immigrants and refugees in Europe are but a few examples of the growing xenophobia. However, most relevant to the purpose of this roundtable is the role of the curator, which has undergone a profound transformation in the contemporary art world. No longer a discreet arbiter of public taste, as Marie-Ramirez has eloquently argued, the curator has become a cultural broker of global magnitude, a central player on the world stage of culture and identity politics.

It is curators, more than art dealers or critics, who establish the value and meaning of artworks. As intermediaries between artists, institutions, and professional structures, curators have tremendous power over the fate of an artist's career and status in the art world.⁸

Given this complex state of affairs, therefore, it is questionable whether the recent trends in curatorial practices have truly expanded and democratized the world of contemporary art.

In conclusion, what I have tried to argue above is to outline the rationale and timeliness for organizing such a roundtable and to sustain such a dialogue on contemporary African art practice and its politics of representation globally. To this end, the moderator and the participants have been most eloquent in articulating many of the issues at hand and in addressing the questions raised by the moderator.

Salah M. Hassan, Ithaca, NY, May 19, 2008

Notes

¹ See Walter Grasskamp, "For Example Documenta, or How Art History is Produced?" in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 68.

² Prior to that, since the mid-eighties we have seen a steady rise in the number of exhibitions on African art, and, more specifically, on contemporary African art. Consequently we have witnessed the proliferation of exhibition catalogues and critical articles both validating and contesting the various discourses projected by these exhibitions. Examples are numerous. They are mostly what is referred to as "mega" shows and art festivals dedicated to contemporary African art: Africa Explores, Africa Hoy or Africa Now, Africa: Towards the Year 2000, Africa 95, Africa: The Art of a Continent, to name only a few.

³ See Salah M. Hassan, "Flow: Diaspora and Afro-Cosmopolitanism," in *Flow* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, forthcoming June 2008).

⁴ For more discussion on the importance of exhibitions to the making of art history see Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, "Preface" in *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (The Hague: The Prince Claus Fund Library & Forum for African Arts, 2001), pp. 6-8

⁵ See Walter Grasskamp, p. 68.

⁶ See Marie Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*



Inscribing meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art. May 9, 2007–August 26, 2007. Photo: Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Installation image.

Chika Okeke-Agulu: This platform I think presents us with the opportunity to consider the challenges ahead for the field of contemporary African art. Looking back at the last century there was no doubt that a lot of gains were made, in terms of exhibiting the work of African artists in the international arena; a trend that began more or less with Jean-Hubert Martin's *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 and Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores* (1991), followed by a succession of megashows in the 1990s, and continuing in the early years of this century with Okwui Enwezor's *Short Century* (2001) and Simon Njami's *Africa Remix*, currently touring in Johannesburg. Granted that big all-Africa shows have played important roles in bringing to African artists to international arena, do they still have relevance, or has the field reached a point where such shows should be deemphasized in favor of smaller, more rigorously focused thematic or one-person shows? Also, and here one may

speak in general or specific terms, what are the critical implications of the curatorial arguments and choices such shows entail on ways of knowing, and of constructing or fashioning contemporary African art?

Gilane Tawadros: Perhaps one way to approach your question is by clarifying our intentions when we curate the work of African artists. Speaking personally, I have always understood it as a double-edged process. First of all, it is about the presentation of an artist's work and the provision of a critical, artistic, and intellectual context for that work, respecting the integrity of the artist's own intentions and artistic trajectory. At the same time (and this, in my view, should not be a secondary or second-order intent) is the configuring and reconfiguring of the art-historical canon. This latter aspect requires us at moments to intersect and converge with art's existing historiography and at

other moments to move away from and chart new narratives, to retrace past histories, and also imagine new possibilities at one and the same time.

Elizabeth Harney: Thanks for starting with such a loaded set of questions. First, I think ideally we should be beyond the point where the all-Africa surveys should be necessary, but in reality I believe that a continued two-prong approach, with large and smaller-format shows, needs to be followed, taking into account the audiences with which we deal and discourses with which we wish to engage. We still need the big shows to reach those who situate arts of African artists in ethnographic spaces and times. The continued presence of “artifacts” in most of the major museums of the West that represent “precolonial” practices and that are both physically and conceptually separated from exhibits and discourses on contemporary arts demands a continued, concerted response. Contemporary curatorial projects go a long way toward engaging with these long-standing ways of seeing and interpreting the works of African artists. Situating African artistic practices in the here and now with presentations that alert museum publics to the sheer diversity and breadth of contemporary work across the continent and its Diaspora is critical.

Certainly the continental-wide shows run the risk of perpetuating the pernicious identity-based essentialisms that both artists and curators wish to overcome. Following the lead of artists is critical here, as Gilane has already suggested. I, for one, am more interested in curating solo exhibitions and thematically focused shows than Africa-wide shows, as there are so many artists whose works may speak poignantly to these broader issues without being imprisoned by them. There should be no reason why these smaller shows cannot highlight a wide range of aesthetic conversations, which may or may not have to do with Africa. I do think that it is difficult to speak of the essentializing fictions of Africa-wide shows without also contemplating the temporal parameters curators use to frame them and the works shown under their umbrella. There remains a very large, important, and barely known “archive” of modern materials, practices, and artists on the continent

and in its diaspora that megashows like *The Short Century* can only begin to suggest. It is imperative that curators continue to tell more pointed stories of modernism in and of Africa so that one can consider the relationship of contemporary artists’ works to local and international frames of reference and simultaneously engage with longstanding modernist canons.

Ery Camara: Unfortunately I didn’t have the possibilities to see the last shows but I’ve read both catalogs and followed recent biennial exhibitions that can be considered a survey of contemporary African art. To start with a challenge for that field, I wonder what kind of audience these exhibitions are targeting? Most of them are unknown in many countries in the continent. Few educational institutions can be mentioned as taking care of that patrimony and its integration and dissemination through more serious means. I agree that exhibitions of this kind brought more visibility to our contemporary artists, documentation for scholars and opportunities to Western students and amateurs to have an alternative vision of art history and so many issues related to the manipulation of identity, etc. . . . It is hard to be satisfied by an exhibition, but let us acknowledge their values as keys for several debates and revisions that maybe wouldn’t take place but, once again, what are our aims in doing these kind of exhibitions? Being a contribution to a larger and complex discourse, I think many contradictions observed in some of these shows project unclearness, seems to be addressed to the Western mainstream as a proof of whatever curators propose. I wish we could focus the different publics attending these exhibitions and the promotional infrastructure around these projects. Is it only a problem for the African diaspora? How are they connected to the many lacks we could mention from our cultural policies, our trainee programs in art school? I hope we could in our discussions transcend the doing and discuss why and for who those exhibitions are made and what kind of use can be made from them.

Laurie Ann Farrell: The megashow format for contemporary African art exhibitions has definitely outlived its use value. While these earlier exhibi-

tions may have served an introductory purpose, they now seem to reveal more about the organizing curators and institutional agendas than they do about the actual participating artists. Group exhibitions of well-known, overexposed artists (commonly referred to as the usual suspects), gloss over in-depth explorations of individual artworks and issues through the inclusion of too many artists. Having said this, these exhibitions will likely continue and it is up to artists to decide whether to participate in the large-format group exhibition, or not. Individual artists need to weigh the pros and cons of each exhibition opportunity against their own personal ambitions or career goals.

I echo previous panelists' suggestions that consideration be given first and foremost to the artists' intentions. Continuing to provide meaningful solo and focused thematic exhibitions for emerging, mid-career, and established artists is a proactive way forward. We can also support artists by commissioning new work and publishing catalogs for these solo and smaller exhibitions. Additionally, we can develop and implement progressive new strategies for exhibiting contemporary African art that move beyond geographic and nationalistic models.

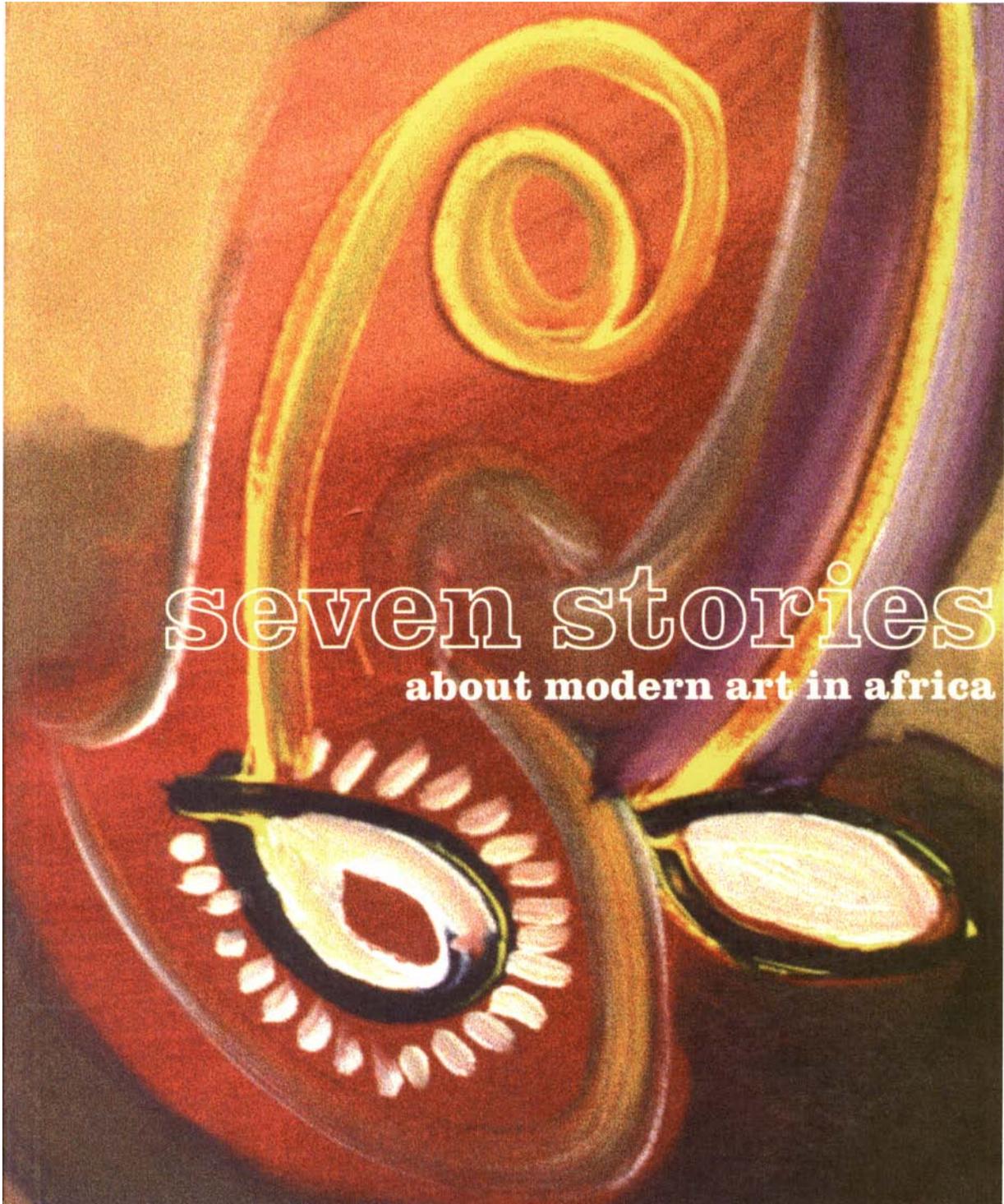
Colin Richards: It struck me forcibly in *Africa Remix* that these large shows raise expectations of representivity just by the sheer number of artists included. A smaller show, conceptually (curatorially) tighter, with more works per artists, is exclusive (and of course risky, but curators should be up to that), and allows real questions of value and so on to surface quickly. I sometimes think "inclusive" shows indicate a curatorial failure of nerve. Related to this is the inevitable "cramping" of certain works because of the sheer scale of the show. In the case of *Africa Remix* here, Tracey Rose's work was horribly positioned, and Wangechi Mutu was frankly a travesty. Others, like Bili Bidjocka were much better. Clearly we all have to grapple with the constrictions and contingencies of space, especially in shows that travel. So some shortfalls are to be expected. In this case, however, I think the compromises were avoidable and simply too great. There were also too many tepid

South African artists on show, which made me wonder. Not sure what happened here. But perhaps these are local issues.

While it may be true, as Laurie says, that these shows highlight the curator and institutional agendas, and without minimizing the critical centrality of individual artists, I do worry about the somewhat fetishistic appeal to "the artist" in many responses from curators. In practice this can wear a bit thin. In my interaction with artist colleagues as an artist every day, they are as variable as any other collection of individuals bound by a common activity. And those who have been "curated" have much to say about their work being respected etc. Oddly, artists are often spoken for by those who claim that right, and I am not sure about this. Artists are critical obviously to the creative project in all its extension, from studio to public space. In *Africa Remix* a strong claim was made for the individual artist, a claim not sustained in the show in my view, and also not in the catalog in any distinctive way. So it is complex. I am not suggesting, by the way, that Laurie is doing any of this, but what she says has me thinking (if on the spot). I will doubtless say some stupid things in the course of all this.

I agree, but to a degree, on the need for shows to reflect artists' intentions. Artist's intentions, like "context," are variable, change, are uneven, contradictory, pat, too smooth by half, and suffer all the predations of rendering in language our desires, wishes, dreams. Sometimes they are plain silly, off the wall, but in uninteresting ways. There are interesting and important ways of being silly of course, but my point is perhaps there is nothing especially sacred about artists' "intentions." Whatever else we seemed to have placed in questions, "intentions," like "authenticity" and so on are all included. Not to be ignored, but simply to be critically engaged.

As curators, we indeed have to be more complex (visibly) in our engagement with institutions. These "sites" are all interconnected, but it often seems to me the institutional factors or forces are suppressed in many shows, or displaced by so-called larger questions of "framing"—be they nationalistic, geopolitical, or, indeed, the "individual artist" approach. The institution is a site in the



Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, exhibition catalogue.
London: Whitechapel, 1995.

site-specific sense, not simply a venue.

By the same token, but on another point, I think curators are often not particularly straightforward about their own active and energetic agency in the art world. They (we) sometimes seem like honest but passive brokers for the individual artists. This is deception, for like us all we are people with ambitions, agendas, affiliations, and so on. I am overstating the case here, no doubt, but the passive or even active honest broker figure speaking on behalf of the (largely silent) artist seems to me a figure of justifiable suspicion. Curators are not paper-thin, transparent mediators of the real work. They constitute and create and direct and . . . have their careers. No? This is something that did occur to me when I read Gilane's interesting observations on what curators do.

In any case, I think Chika's last question is perhaps paramount. Entangled here is the problem of "African" art in a "global" context. This is still complicated (however dated), but I am convinced like many of my colleagues that the key issue is to avoid continental introspection on the one hand (a kind of zero-sum-game parochialism) and simple assimilation to so-called "global" trends in the other. The interface between within and without is surely the zone that deserves our energy and fleshing out of our arguments, our creativity, our questions. This may sound simplistic, and I am deeply irritated by the dead rhetoric of in-betweenness and interstitiality, but the critical vitality in art-making as in curating surely lies in relating to what is strange. In fact making strange itself is a crucial, critical process. Estrangement is a double-edged sword, and it seems to me critical for any creative activity here and now.

Chika: A number of questions emerge from the discussion, but let me take up just two. First is the place of the curator in the making of art-historical scholarship. Colin had mentioned, quite rightly, that curators are not necessarily neutral mediators for artists and their work, but instead are like other producers and traders of knowledge motivated by personal visions, careerist imperatives, ambitions, and such. Indeed in the field of art, especially contemporary art, curators are arguably the most powerful shapers of art's discursive hori-

zons, with their exhibitions (which can make or break artists' careers, influence values of artwork and their movement into museums) and catalogs (that have increasingly become referenced texts competing for scholarly attention with the autonomous monograph). In other words, the choices curators make can have far-reaching effects on the direction of contemporary art, at both the discursive level and in art's participation in the wider socioeconomic and ideological national and international contexts. What difference does it make to acknowledge this significant "power" of the curator in knowledge production? Does it matter that in the field of modern and contemporary African art, catalogs seem to outnumber autonomous monographic studies? In short, is this a problem for the field?

Second is the question of the audience. Ery speaks of the problem inherent in the fact that many of the large exhibitions address a Western audience, and this is obvious from the fact that none of the important megashows (with the exception of *Africa Remix*) were produced on the continent, nor did any travel there. As such reviews and follow-up scholarship around these exhibitions have been more or less restricted to the first-world discursive circuits. Although the Internet makes it a bit easier to access exhibitions and debates around them from anywhere in the world (including, at least theoretically, Africa), and therefore complicate the question of audience, the physical absence of these exhibitions from the continent and the attendant absence of local critical discourse can be the basis for argument against the relevance of the apparently influential megashows *inside* the continent. In other words, does it matter that an overwhelming amount of knowledge production in the field of contemporary African art takes place in the first world? Equally important, it seems to me that these questions invariably bring up the question of money. Let me put it this way: if African institutions cannot afford to produce these exhibitions, does it matter if African-based scholars are not part of the debate elicited by these shows? Does it matter that Africa-based (critical) viewing publics are marginal to what has become the effective discursive horizon of contemporary African art?

Elizabeth: I have several thoughts on this next set of questions, and I take up the second question about audience and space first because I think by unpacking it we might be better able to understand the centrality of the curator's role in the production of a canon and discursive space for contemporary African arts within the broader art world and academy. I agree that the mega exhibitions are geared toward audiences, collectors, and critics in the West or first world (for lack of better terms) although the fact that they are in Africa or not doesn't always yield the kinds of shifts in economic or discursive power, let alone audience, that one would hope for. Just think of the broad appeal of the Dakar and Cairo Biennales and Bamako Photography Festival with the art-world glitterati. Gerardo Mosquera warned us many years ago now about creating an exotic marketplace of "others" for New York curators to "shop for" and "discover" the new within the Havana Biennale.

I would argue though that while one of the reasons for the spatial positioning of megashows in the West is money, another reason is simply that this conversation about Africa, representation and discourse, and aesthetic universalisms and particularisms has been such a longtime preoccupation of the Western art-historical establishment and diasporic communities. The Western art world, with all its hubris of centrality, is where the fight has continually been played out. Indeed it has been argued that the fascination with exhibiting in this manner is inherent to Western understandings of the self.

This fight over representation seems largely to have ignored local conditions on the continent. I am not suggesting that curators have not been or should not be concerned with the infrastructural realities, patronage systems, and audiences on the continent, only that the mechanisms of the Western art world have clearly not been concerned with these issues.

The so-called "curator's moment" has certainly been encouraged by a Western art world that is looking for an interlocutor who will vet the work of previously "unknown" artists for the market. How much does the curator in this sense differ from the modernist critic (from Baudelaire to Greenberg) who determined measures of value

and authenticity for an insular Western art world? The spatial positioning of the curator or critic affects the amount of resources available and the audiences addressed; what is most concerning is the suspect manner in which art-world institutions look to an authentic voice to speak "for" Africa.

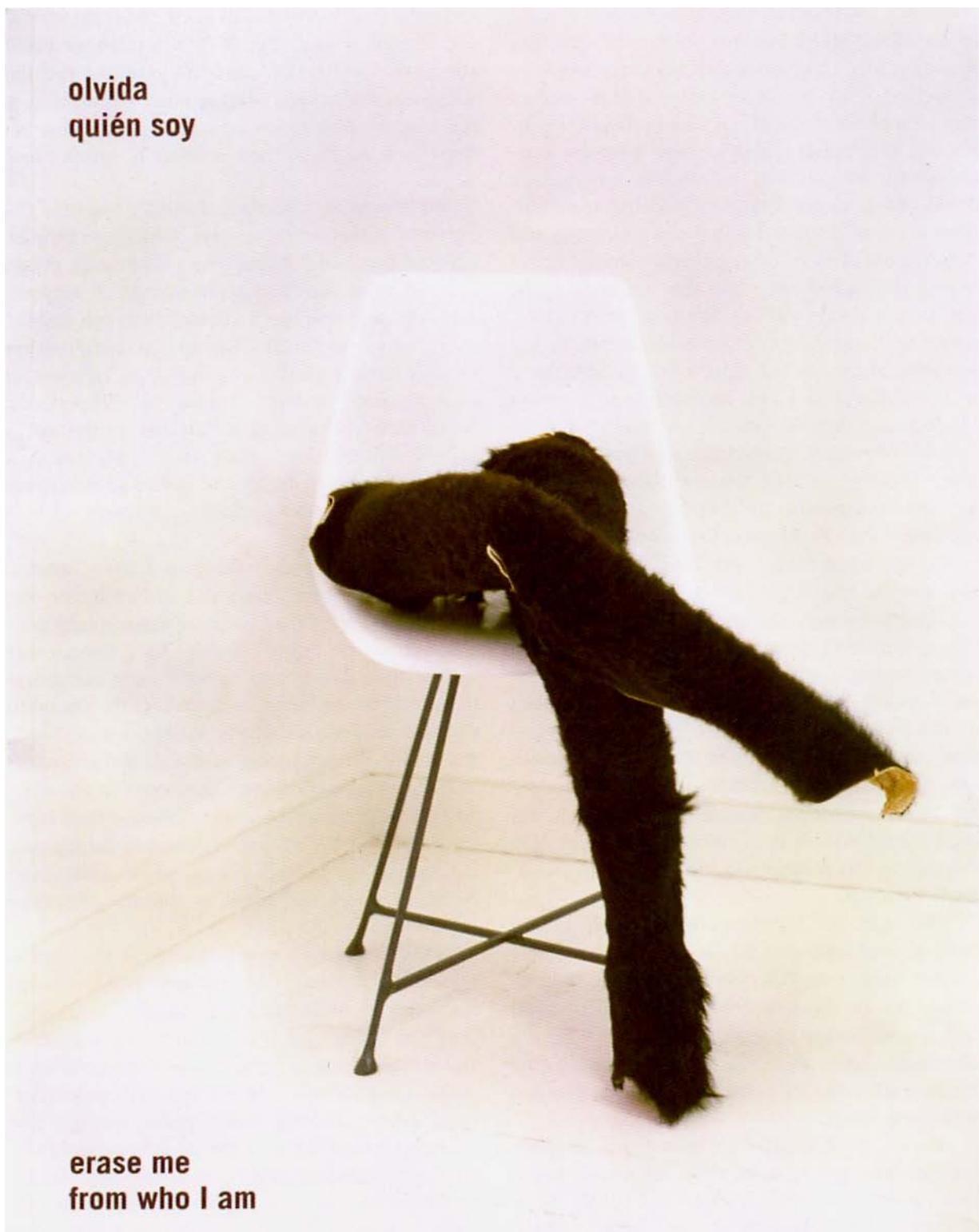
We should be concerned about the extent of the curators' powers today; powers which can only be checked through collaborative efforts with artists and other scholars and transparency of purpose. The scholarly writing of curators is much needed in a situation in which art-historical narratives are so slow to address the cosmopolitan richness of contemporary artistic expressions. One needs, however, to continue to be sensitive to the workings of canonization, which advance an elite class of carefully chosen artists and ignore an enormous set of visual practices upon the continent.

Laurie: Is there such a thing as a truly "neutral mediator"? It seems that much of our recent dialogue has hovered over issues of agency, subjectivity, and power. Some curators have consciously shifted their practice to operate more collaboratively and the resultant shows reflect the strengths of these cooperative efforts. What do we make of the recent phenomenon of influential collectors as curators and the power they exert in the market? Do we think artists more objective than curators? Alas, in the end, everyone has an agenda. Ultimately, we are still talking about individuals taking a position—albeit a solitary or group stance.

Exhibitions will never transcend the limitations of subjectivity. Can we accept this limitation and enjoy them for what they do offer?

There are a number of vibrant artist collectives and groups doing important work across Africa. If we ask ourselves if it matters that African intellectuals are not shaping contemporary projects and associated scholarship in the West, we should also ask ourselves why many Western curators who are creating these projects are so out of touch with what type of work and practices are taking place on the ground in Africa. Going to Biennales with a troupe of other curators (seemingly as tourists) hardly constitutes meaningful research. Does it

**olvida
quién soy**



**erase me
from who I am**

olvida quién soy/erase me from who I am, exhibition catalogue.
Gran Canaria: CAAM, 2006.

matter how long someone conducts research if they are able to establish contacts and relationships that lead to future inquiries? Does a curator or organizer need to be an organic intellectual to put together a thoughtful or groundbreaking exhibition? If so, how do we qualify the requirements? Who sets these parameters? This again seems to lead back to questions of subjectivity.

What about scholars who have dedicated their lives to studying historical or indigenous cultural practices and now turn their attention to contemporary art? My experience has been that some of these scholars want to create an ethnography for all contemporary artists to interpret their works through an anthropological lens. If the contemporary work resembles something they encountered in their fieldwork and is familiar, then somehow it becomes more relatable. I acknowledge that years of dedicated research into a culture may shed deep insight into some signs and symbols employed by contemporary artists. However, the issue is that some curators in this camp are actively working against commissioning new works and offering new opportunities to emerging artists. How do we deal with this type of curatorial practice? Or do we even need to address this?

Okwui Enwezor: I want to be specific, and will avoid generalizations and vagueness. As such I will address Chika's questions from my own curatorial and institutional experience. In this way, I can organize what I say in more self-reflexive fashion so as to sketch both the differences and convergences in modes of working and thinking that others may share or not share. It would also be helpful if the participants can speak concretely to their own experience, how they have addressed some of these admittedly thorny issues in work they have made. On that note, I long ago ceased being worried about being an African curator or a Nigerian or diasporic or American curator—take your pick as I am represented in one form or other by these affiliations—that I do not find it useful in the least to worry, as Betsy does, about overcoming the burden of identity. There is the soft point of identity, and there is the hard, then the fuzzy. Artists and intellectuals alike make worlds out of

these modes of self and collective fashioning. So from the point of view of the essentializing conundrum, one may or may not face, let me err, at least provisionally, on the side of my postcolonial identity as a point of departure, and from there we may complicate the picture a bit more in order to understand what is fundamentally at stake when any of us venture out to make Africa the subject of our various curatorial or intellectual endeavors.

I believe strongly in the idea of constructing a field of study, an area of inquiry that constitutes in the Foucauldian sense an archaeological ground, a space capable of yielding insight into the various situations of art and artists, and the fate of ideas and objects produced in societies in transition such as those in Africa where many artists we work with live and practice. Then there are the others who have developed a taste for exile, those we give the title diasporic, but whose Western Union remittances still reach their targets back in the mother country, where entire families depend on them. When we pose the question of essentialism, how do we pause to observe how the intellectual and cultural infrastructures of African societies are being dismantled, displaced, and dispersed across the world? It is a frightening prospect to think about renewal of the aesthetic and critical conditions of contemporary African art without addressing these issues.

These questions as they are arrayed before us offered the first prompt, the provocation, if you will, for constituting an organ—*Nka*—where the results developed from within the field of contemporary African art can be moderately accessible. The metaphor of archaeology I am employing invariably affects how we analyze the conditions of production within which African artists toil. Understanding the forces that shape a given field and the artists' struggles with it and place within it is important in making informed decisions and choices about what objects and images to include in an exhibition or which artists to exclude or invite. I am a strong believer in curatorial research. There is no exhibition I have made on the work of African artists that has not involved extensive trips to the continent. While it is impossible to be exhaustive, frequent research trips give one better tools of analysis and for articulating the differ-

ences between practices and between geopolitical and economic spaces—take for example North Africa or the Maghreb and South Africa as good instances. What may sometimes seem a tendentious tendency to be all-inclusive—and certainly, there are exhibitions that do not discriminate enough between weak and strong works—nevertheless, experience has taught me that many things do intervene: from artists not living up to what they promise to lack of curatorial will and responsibility. Any number of these issues can set some of a curator's best intentions astray. I certainly can tell stories about the *Short Century*, *In/Sight*, the African section of *Century City* and *Global Conceptualism*, and *Snap Judgments*.

Each of these exhibitions have been as different as the subjects they addressed or engaged. The dialectic, was always, however, Africa and its various conditions of cultural production and individual aesthetic and cultural visions. And they showed artists in such concentrated forms. Take the *Short Century* for instance; we were able to present large-scale installations of Antonio Ole, Kendell Geers, William Kentridge, Kay Hassan, Oladele Bamgboye, Bodys Isek Kingelez, plus large suites of David Goldblatt's photographs (more than forty images), an entire room of Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. Mind you, this is a very large exhibition with many artists and other artifacts. Sometimes, I tend to think, it would be a long time before any institution will invest in such wide-ranging examinations of postcolonial African practice. For me the *Short Century* is a paradigm, because it accords with my interest in enacting Africa from an archaeological and archival point of view. So to set a context, the archival and archaeological is the historical and intellectual basis from which I work curatorially. This is certainly the way I have imagined the current trilogy on Africa I am working on: the first being *Snap Judgments*, then *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, and *The Invention of Africa: 1839–1939*, which is on the first one hundred years of the history of photography.

I note the above in order to begin the careful work of distinguishing individual curatorial projects, what motivates their production, and what ultimately recommends them as good or not so

good. I clearly believe in the mastery of one's language, because it can provide tools for examining the flaws within it. I would never accept having my work expediently lumped together with any other exhibition simply because the subject is Africa. We must develop a critical scope for sorting exhibitions from one another, otherwise we will find ourselves lapsing back to the same homogenizing tendencies to set Africa in aspic. Exhibitions, to my thinking, have a language, and sometimes may bear the stamp of their authors (I want to insist on this nomenclature for what it yields on behalf of understanding and analyzing the language and discourse of a given exhibition). This language helps define and designate the curator's logic, his command of his subject, and how equipped he or she is, to fashion distinctive work while respecting existing references. So try as one might wish to assume the position of a balanced, objective curatorial motive, curators are authors of their projects, and for better or worse, the exhibition is their text. And the first place to check out the text, is not the catalog or brochure but the exhibition proper. Colin does a magnificent job of reading *Africa Remix* from the evidence of what it "looked" like in Johannesburg. But I am not convinced that he captures all the nuances of Simon Njami's curatorial approach.

While certainly my work is often not restricted to contemporary African art, over the last fifteen years, contemporary African art has been a consistent field of inquiry for me. My position as a curator and writer emanates from that commitment. Whether writing solicited or unsolicited essays on the work of the artists, commissioning new work from them, inviting them to shows, or collecting their work for institutions, this is what I do and I am quite happy to defend it. While working in this field has produced its share of frustrations and sometimes disappointments, it has been worth it from my standpoint to devote serious and sustained intellectual, institutional, and organizational resources to examining the textured and complex views of art that have been made by artists who by choice and otherwise claim either this identity or affinity with the continent. In a global sphere in which the instruments of cultural legitimation increasingly are being dispersed and

the totalizing construct of a center is becoming an anachronism, and as more focus moves in the direction of Asia, African artists, curators, and intellectuals cannot risk the kind of complacency that tells them that their identity is a weakness.

I am certainly not advocating an identity-based model for anyone, but to treat the complexity of the contemporary African imaginary as something to be so easily dismissed, or a field that cannot survive sustained intellectual reflection and curatorial interrogation through different exhibition devices and methodologies is to me a mistake. To trade inclusivity for exclusivity, as Chika's question suggests, is a rather reductive way of looking at this complexity. Why should there not be many options, from the monographic to the subject-driven group show, to the mega exhibition? The large-scale exhibition is a genre, with a grammar and language all its own. Not every curator is particularly good at curating them. All these models should be part and parcel of the evolving narratives of contemporary African art. I certainly do not agree with Laurie that so-called megashows (and very few of these shows, including *Africa Remix*, truly qualify to be called that name) have outlived their usefulness. In addition, if we look at the numbers we find that there have not been that many so-called megashows of contemporary African art. We must be circumspect about dismissing an exhibition model that has served, especially, emerging and developing artists. The group exhibitions—both large and small—are oftentimes where these artists make their international debut. While the monographic study is essential in building a better understanding of the individual oeuvre and how its legacy and effects are diffused through the work of younger generations, or the countervailing disciplinary and methodological disobedience other artists subject it to, we must not treat it as a virtue in its own right. It is something to work toward in order to diversify the options available to artists. If we look at the field today one gains a measure of satisfaction that much of what we see on the ground today was built in the '90s. There are far more many artists with galleries, solo museum exhibitions, showcases in art fairs, biennials, and hanging in permanent collection galleries in museums than there

were a decade ago. While this might not be enough, it is moving in the right direction. I am a great fan of the model Clive is developing at Johannesburg Art Gallery. It's all additive.

These debates, to my mind, offer a healthy environment on which one can work confidently, creatively, and theoretically on what makes contemporary African art a viable option, among many other options in the study of art of the present. In this sense, Gilane makes a very important point about the current configuration of art history and the production of new narratives. I for one teach from one such new narrative, which is Betsy's profound study of negritude and how it shaped, dominated, and ultimately mobilized the critical practice of a generation of artists in a thorough postcolonial model in Senegal. Negritude's productivity in parsing the essentialist question, which like the "other" question is not as transparent to the commodifying lens of curatorial field research, showed us in Betsy's book a veritable theater of refusal, a ground of intellectual insurgency about contemporary African artistic conditions that cannot be universalized for the sake of expediency. Concrete cultural and historical circumstances and philosophies mark those moments of intense, active, engaged production of a field.

Therefore, it bears repeating that the global sphere at this historical juncture may have slipped into the condition of permanent transition. And so like everything else that is dynamic and changing, contemporary African art is part of this condition. I therefore agree with Colin on the need to avoid continental introspection. Yet, he goes on to warn against assimilating everything into the global. This seems to me an attempt to have it both ways. But I am sympathetic to the conundrum the questions Colin is raising provoke, particularly if we view it from Ery's opening remark about the audience for contemporary African art exhibitions, given the fact that they are almost always displayed in places generally outside the continent, and may therefore become susceptible to the misreading of the manifold gestures of the artists.

Questions of the power of the curator, their agendas, and careerist jockeying in the West have

been made, but has anyone asked how many African curators are actually permanently employed by institutions or have the kind of consistent access to institutions to produce exhibitions of their own choosing with artists to whom they are committed? Even more, how often are African artists employed to teach as tenured faculty in Western art academies, colleges, and universities? These are spaces where the security of employment can allow for more reflexive, long-term modes of working and thinking about the complexities of the field of contemporary art, whether African or not. But if we leave the West aside, a big worry rarely broached is the pitiable state of art academies in Africa today. To have artists operating under such huge deficits is numbing and something that I have been thinking about for quite some time, especially how to invent another model of curatorial practice that can begin working with new situations on the ground.

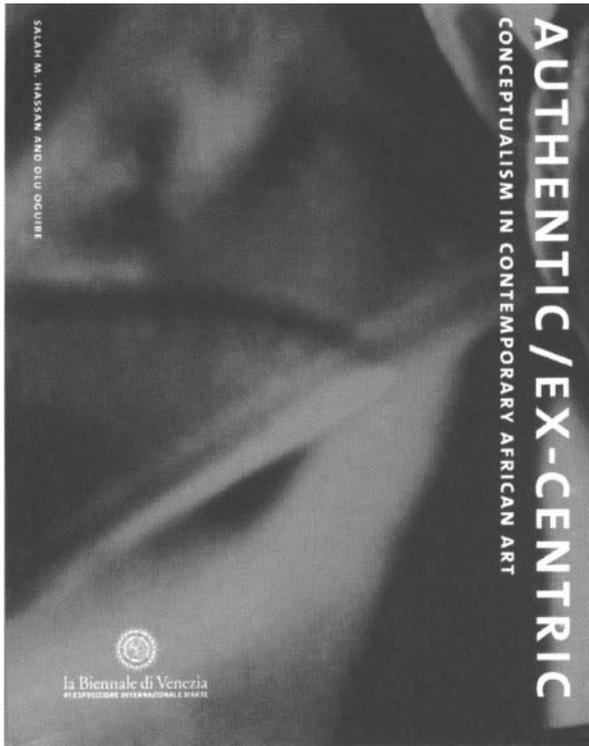
This is where I return to the earlier point I made about my postcolonial identity in relation to my curatorial and art-historical practice. I see my postcolonial positioning as more than an affective condition in relation to identity or ethnicity, but a fundamental philosophical and historical ground on which to formulate a meaningful curatorial position, and therefore to help frame the larger agenda of a critical interest that may be useful in the global art world. But I speak of postcolonial here as both a matter of historical entanglements and estrangements, as the sharing of legacies across histories of domination and subordination, oftentimes with brutal dehistoricizing consequences that blot out artists, objects, and ideas out of history. At the risk of offending Colin, contemporary African art and artists still work in interstitial modes, in make-do, *tokunboesque*, bricolage kind of way. When working with some artists one is aware of the poverty of the language, the gaps that exist in how certain formal languages are assimilated even though the complexity of imagination is there for all to see. Sure creative misunderstandings and mistranslations produce new—not hybrid—objects and ideas, but the cost of that kind of struggle on the psyche is tough. Artists often work with tools that may not always effectively serve their complex aesthetic and intellectu-

al needs.

Across the gap of the deep-seated ambivalence expressed in some of the responses, I will agree, that more rigorous work remains to be done.

Colin: I noticed that the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London includes among its December talks one titled “The Artist-Curator: Curators as Artists and Artists as Curators.” This has come up in various ways in the curating of African art, and I wonder whether it is not worth exploring a little more. Partly there are situational issues relating to the presentation of what happens in Africa and to Africans in contemporary art in this relation, and this will be of direct interest to us all. There are other arguably more intrinsic dynamics to the curator/artist figure and activity—whether it is a good thing, what is negative about it and so on, which would apply to any exhibition. At root though, I think there is a changing notion of what curator means in contemporary art, and in the ’90s especially Africans (mainly of the diaspora?) And African artists made a great contribution to this change. There is an interesting history here, is my suspicion. It would be part of Chika’s first question relating to “the place of the curator in the making of art-historical scholarship,” with the addition that here the focus is on display and studio production in the making of such scholarship. It also speaks to the various forms of scholarship that seem to have arisen over the past two decades, when the number of catalogs has not been met by a similar production in monographs, or even general continental histories (this last difficult anyway).

Presumably we are building audiences within Africa, and this is a crucial activity. We are also building networks, critical discourse, and the like, all of which are important. Perhaps here those of us who live on the continent have stronger views about the imperative of all this development, however dire the infrastructural and developmental problems we face. I recall when David Elliott did his Art from South Africa show, he made a commitment to have at least part of that show brought to a major venue here (I mean South Africa). I have no doubt that this contributed to the debate around that show, even in its most radical and uncomfortable dimensions. We wanted a postex-



Authentic/Ex-Centric, exhibition catalogue.
(The Hague: Forum for the African Arts and
Prince Claus Fund Library, 2001).

Contemporary
African Art and
Shifting Landscapes
Edited by
Gilane Jawadros and
Sarah Campbell



Fault Lines, exhibition catalogue.
(London: inIVA and Prince Claus Fund Library, 2003).

hibition text to come out of this experience, so we could have a record. This proved impossible.

The other major exhibition in which this happened was in the (re)mixed bag of *Africa Remix*, and again there was some very interesting critical discussion that would contribute to this very debate we are engaged with here in these pages. Again, had a document been produced of both reception and writing from elsewhere, combined with what happened here (in the most productive moments), we would have produced something quite remarkable. The postexhibition forms of publication are not done for any shows anywhere as far as I know—but would it not be worth building this form into the budgeting for such exhibitions? I must also say that *Africa Remix*, while in Johannesburg, was seen by Africans from numerous other parts of Africa, and this interaction was also valuable. I would not think this historical imperative should become a political duty as such; partly because we need some flexibility for quite material reasons, and we need to respect the critical independence such as we all enjoy when we engage such matters as critics, or even if we choose to engage them. And we are all part of that critical audience, are we not? I am expressing myself badly here, but hopefully the drift is clear. I am also aware of tensions that exist between South Africa and rest of Africa, which seem at base to relate to the power of the economy, and all that might be consequent on that.

International Exhibitions and Representation

Chika: Although she didn't put it in same words, Betsy's comment alludes to the matter of representing work produced by artists on the continent in international (precisely in Western and emerging Asian) galleries, museums, and biennials. Quite clearly this points to a problem faced by curators who must confront the aspect of curation that has to do with "quality control," in other words an awareness that Museum X will balk at a proposal with work considered qualitatively inferior to what is normally seen in such museum. Which raises the question, how does the curator deal with the problem: seek out only such work that meets this supposedly "international stan-

dard," and face the possible charge of becoming an agent of globalization, while ignoring those characteristic of the local trends? In Nigeria, there has been some debate in the past couple years arising from the feeling on the part of artists there that curators of international exhibitions ignore their work because it refuses to comply to the curators' ideas about what constitutes ambitious contemporary work. Although one often reads in these positions a strain of dunderheaded nationalism, it nevertheless reflects a general criticism of curators and exhibitions of contemporary African art.

It seems to me, however, that in dealing with the question of representation, the work of the curator must first and foremost be seen as an argument, as position taking, which implies a conscious decision to ignore—in the context of a show, by not including—aspects of a subject irrelevant to the argument/position, rather than as an anthropological enterprise meant to show the way things generally are, how artists live and work in a particular place; in other words, that it is impossible to talk about representation (of African art and artists through contemporary art exhibitions or other similar narrative procedures such as published studies) as a neutral, nonpolitical, or non-ideological gesture or process. Much of the criticism of representationality often comes from the assumption that curators of the big African shows set out do just that, to *present* a totalizing picture of contemporary art in Africa; whereas it seems to me that the most successful shows, regardless of their size, try at their best to show important examples of work that fits the subject or theme of the exhibition. As an independent curator, it is not my job to represent or account for the range of practices in Nigeria or Africa, without subjecting such practices to the same critical standards immanent in the discourse of contemporary art. It does not make sense to use my shows to highlight the impoverished state of our art institutions, or comment, for instance, on the resistance of many Nigerian artists to new practices and forms, by including such work in my shows. Not including them is in itself taking a position, an argument.

Colin: The problem of quality is a vexing one, and in truth exhibitions—especially in institutions

with public mandates—are products of struggles over “quality” rather than benign showcases of “quality.” It places, though, a special burden on a curator when there is a conflation of normativity in qualification and the energies of some particular, situated set of conditions of creation. Often “locality” bears the burden of this particularity, against the normativity of the international or global.

This said, I have also been acutely aware that intense cultural parochialism is the reason for creative and intellectual poverty, within Africa and beyond. Artists will say that their work does not fit the bill (so to speak). This kind of parochialism is itself an “inside” mirror image of an imposed and often ill-understood “outside.” If contemporary African art is intrinsically critically open and relational, then creative parochialism is less about the local than the simply impoverished. When it is more robust, pointed, resisting, critical, engaged most curators worth their salt would presumably recognize this, framing and organizing things accordingly. And make suitably modest claims for what they are doing. I am not speaking here of some simpleminded notion of the exotic (although I think strangeness has an unappreciated place in too much of what we do) or of a particular kind of appropriation that too easily becomes assimilation.

“Representivity” in the sense used in the discussion has risked becoming a very passive form of false consensus—like the megashow, that part of our history is over for the moment. It seems artists, curators, writers are alike in that they offer perspectives, not totalities; and the perspective stands or falls on its strength (quality again). They do take positions, advocate and so on, albeit in complex ways about complex things. Public-mandate institutions have other pressures presumably, but we have choices how we interact with these (reflection on the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial and its fate would be very useful in this regard).

It is worrying that the institutional reception of work around “quality” remains a stumbling block. Not because we do not agree that quality is crucial, but that consensus about quality is hard to achieve, especially if it diverges from some kind of canon or norm. Often, weak work fits a curatorial

bill, sometimes instrumentally, and so gets included. We all know the pressures of representation are always already there. Here the categories of an imposed art history often do not help, where classifications are used to deal simplistically with the much more complex and conflicted problem of value. Curators seem to me to have a special responsibility in taking up these issues with some assertiveness; hence the need for deep and intimate experience of the work, the artists, the operating histories, the conditions of production.

When Laurie asks if there is a neutral mediator, one wonders if this is a serious question (although it underpins Chika’s first question). At best I would think there are agents with interests that can turn a number of ways, and not always congruently or consistently. It is best that these be visible—but as data rather than as an alibi of some sort—and part of the production and critical reception of the work. Each exhibition seems to be about advocacy of some order; about breaking ground and occupying terrain—in discourse, in the studio, in the institution. I would wholeheartedly support Chika when he says “the work of the curator must first and foremost be seen as an argument, as position-taking... rather than as an anthropological enterprise, meant to show the way things generally are, how artists live and work in a particular place etc...” That everyone has an agenda is no bad thing; if they say so, all the better. It should become part of the discourse of the exhibition. Indeed, who would trust anyone who, open-palmed, says “Trust me, I have no agenda”? One favorite “but” is that the curator serves the interests of the individual artists who are silent, unrepresented, and disgruntled. This artist as victim pose seems to me demeaning to all. Of course mutual respect is important; of course recognition of mutual value equally so... and so on.

My feeling is also that curatorial approaches have more to offer the conventions (or challenges to) art history than the correlate of the individual/collective emphasis. The first would lead to biography and even hagiography as a basis for writing history, while the latter would probably lead to another rather fast-frozen social history of art. Curatorial approaches often thematize the larger project, within which other “themes” arise.

While being avowedly contemporary, these inevitably lead to important questions of history or histories, as well as essentially open questions about relations between different parts of the world. If structured in quite a careful way, we would reach a combination of a kind of present history of ideas and recognition of the material conditions that make our creativity possible, while also setting limits. Crucially, it is important to develop a language of the art object or the event (whatever media) which itself involves specificity, materiality, intellection, even "spirituality," the combination of which should force us to recognize the irreducibility of at least part of what we create in our response to our worlds, internal and external. It goes without saying that in all this that the curator becomes a key agent in the construction and writing of art history.

I also wonder whether a postexhibition catalog would not be something built into such projects. Catalogs are an important resource and space of intellectual and creative movement, but often they contain older works, and rarely installation shots and discussion as to what actually happened in the curating in particular settings. A post-exhibition publication could also record responses to the exhibition in consolidated form, and so ensure that material otherwise lost or obscure would find its way into crucial archives. There is something about the essentially conservative culture of the major institutions that needs challenging here, and this seems a case in point.

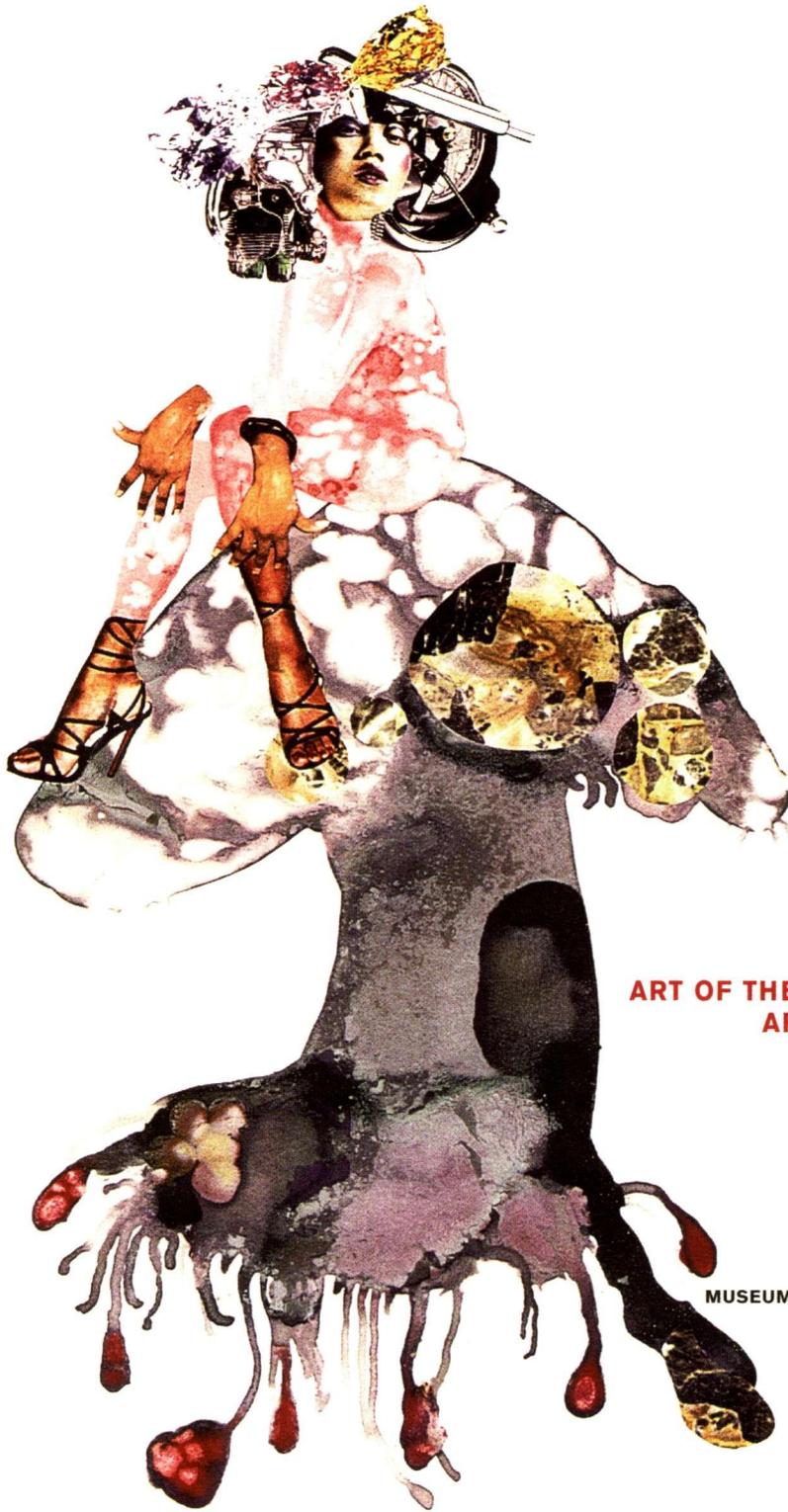
Laurie seems to see a way of articulating an alternative in terms of "cooperative" efforts. While I would endorse this as an option (rather than an orthodoxy), I don't believe it addresses the problems she originally worried about. It is also very easy to idealize collectives, and to imagine them more pure and complex than is often the case. But what is of greater and more worrying critical moment is when they are brought into being because of a failure of critical nerve on the question of value, and the diffusion of responsibility that happens in collectives when no one quite grasps the nettle of value. And, of course, even single-curator shows are clearly the products of collective action. Here presumably direction, orientation, and so on may well be associated with a sin-

gle person, but the collective project is critical. It would be useful to look at different models here. My guess here is we need to become more specific and historical, and actually examine some of these forms of collectivity in relation to value, canonization, to the production of an audience, as artistic advocates, and so on.

I see Betsy also seems to think that "collaborative efforts with artists and other scholars" may set conditions on the "power" of the individual curator. I think this is important, but not without some questions (some of which are pointed to above). Betsy's other point about "transparency" is, I think, in any event an intrinsic part of the critical process with which we engage exhibitions and our colleagues. Some curators are apparently more transparent than others, but I am not always sure this is a good thing. What is, is that we challenge each other critically, and that critical processes become part of the reception of such exhibitions. Access to information here is primary, and transparency serves this access in important ways. What I am trying to say, I guess, is that transparency is a bit like "artistic intention": complex, contradictory, and a "text" not easily taken at face value. Transparency can so easily become an evasive and defensive reaction to the potential of criticism.

Perhaps I should say that for me contest is always intellectually and creatively more interesting and fertile than consensus and correctness. Hardly a novel thought. Contradiction and subjectivity (to think of Laurie's comment) are not obstacles to what we do, but are the very grounds upon which we mount (discursively) our exhibitions, volatile as they may be. The limitations of subjectivity are no more than other limitations, including the opposition subjective/object, and not something I would want to transcend. On the contrary. This may be making virtue of vice, but so be it. Subjectivity relates to transparency and advocacy.

My sense about the literal location of the curator in social life is variable. When institutional structures are weak, organic intellectuals play a critical role. When institutions are strong, organic intellectuals play an even more critical role. We need, ultimately, to challenge the paralyzing



Looking Both Ways

ART OF THE CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN DIASPORA

Laurie Ann Farrell

MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART New York
SNOECK Gent

Looking Both Ways, exhibition catalogue.
(New York: Museum for African Art, 2003).

orthodoxies of those in our and other institutions whose practices and administration of culture seem suspect. We certainly need to smash (or at least reverse) the anthropological lens of which Laurie speaks, and to which Chika refers.

In creating an audience—and here I would imagine we are speaking not of a Western audience, but principally an audience located in cosmopolitan conurbations around the world. The exclusions built in to this spatializing process can be part of constituting an audience for and of contemporaneity in art. Contemporaneity (for all that has been written) remains a critical term for any such discussion such as this. My own usage tends to locate it since 1989 (the reasons are not hard to find), although I think it is continuous with and older but still ongoing process of our encounter with “modernity.” And by the last I crudely mean the implications of radically increasing urbanization, industrialization, social mobility, and the like and the consequent routines of crisis that afflict the twenty-first century. Putting things this way, though, however pragmatically useful, tends to reduce complex, intimate individual imagination and creation simply to so many responses to the conditions of existence, and this seems exactly what art (almost uniquely) is *not* about, or not entirely. But perhaps this is another question. Still, the notion of contemporaneity does prefigure or give some shape to what kind of audience we might seek to produce and address.

Whatever the case, I still do not think it is useful to draw fundamental principles and stable distinctions between Western audiences and others. This too is a place of real social contestation and dogged, excited misunderstanding, and as curators, artists, and writers, one in which we are all presumably involved. My sense is there is also a question of value here. Clearly we are not in the market for popular culture as such (which leads to antagonisms for the remit of especially public institutions, funders and so on), or, this is an aspect of what we do that is a source of creative conflict. Celebrity still seems to be the best pitch we have for the popular or populist (this is not high-grade stuff). But I have doubts that what we produce in our studios, other spaces, the streets, and where what we produce ends up—galleries, museums,

and events—will ever garner large, excited audiences. But we need to make every effort to constitute audiences for what we do, remembering too that our colleagues and fellow travelers are also an important part of that audience.

Of course the fact that institutions are embodiments of colonial and imposed authority gives us pause to consider such things very carefully, but even when this history is complexly mediated for now, many questions of populism and public accountability remain entangled. If we take the question of value seriously at least here, then to collapse art directly into heritage or popular culture (I am not saying there is not an ever-present dialectic that might be very productive here) must be important, in one way or another. My own view is for a robust, historically conscious autonomy for art (but this is an argument for elsewhere). At one level, this goes to the heart of what art is and is not in the contemporary world (although I think this is, in some ways, a sterile question). My sense is that whatever it is, it cannot respect localisms and national boundaries too much. Of course these things could and perhaps should not be wished away, even if we could. They certainly offer some of the resources of resistance to simple assimilation of art to homogenizing global trends: the “global” market. But the space—symbolic and literal—of what we do lies somewhere adjacent or at cross-purposes to these forces, hinged and unhinged to convention, faux populism.

To return to Chika’s earlier provocative question at the end of his articulation of the two questions; Yes, it does matter whether or not viewing/critical audiences inside the continent are marginal to discussions about contemporary art, but this is not a given, or a reflex to what some might see as an impertinent question. We do need to work out how it matters—that I would think it should not be taken for granted that it does or does not matter. This needs to be thought though, though my instinct tells me that if there is not a local context of encounters, experience, response, the overall picture becomes seriously disfigured and to some degree illegitimate.

But what we also need to avoid is a case of special pleading for contemporary African art, in favor of a robust discussion that works with and

challenges the contradictions in institutional reception and culture. There is a worrying tension, for example, at work in *Africa Remix*, where the opposition individual: collective (“African”) seems to thread through the discourse and the actual exhibition. The privileging of the former is I think less problematic in principle (though it is), than in actual practice. But I cannot do justice to the specifics here.

What I do remember vividly about *Africa Remix* were two things that bear on audience. The one was the opening, which was attended by a far larger and more diverse audience than probably had ever been seen at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Not all were drawn by the art, of course, but it was extraordinary to realize the deep hunger many have to see an “African” show here, perhaps especially given that it circulated in parts of Europe—broadly speaking. There was much energy generated, too—the second thing. Many energetic (and some frankly disappointing) discussions, formal and informal, resulted from the exhibition. This began fostering—at least within a wider intellectual/cultural community—a sense of engagement, which has to count for something. In a sense the show seemed to meet the need in some (or the expectation) of providing a “positive” history of African art, and an appreciation of the distinctiveness of art in the production of “local” and continental histories. It also threw some questions into stark relief, questions intellectuals here have been engaging but in different arenas of activity. In a sense, however a mixed bag the show inevitably was, *Africa Remix* offered a window and mirror on ourselves in “Africa” (specifically Johannesburg, of course) and “Africa” out there, as well as a fulcrum or interface for debates about the colonial legacy, contemporary globality, and so on. Sometimes these debates were more about entrenched prejudices than open, searching experiences, but that is part of an important cultural process here at least. In the end, what struck me is that there may be a large hidden audience for contemporary African art here and elsewhere, and than our efforts—when involved in institutions abroad—include the primary recognition of this and its consequences for the show being proposed. I recall David Elliott, to his eternal credit, acknowl-

edging the need for *Art from South Africa* (1990) being shown here. The show provoked much discussion, negative and positive, but ultimately it generated energy for practice and discourse to move. Of course we are not dependent on these initiatives, and there is a great deal of conflictual energy in the country to move things forever. But in this case more is always better. And material from abroad seems extra-contentious and provocative, which is not to be underestimated, as it ruffles feathers often in quite a unique way.

Finally, it strikes me that there is an odd replication or echo of some fundamental questions at the concrete, micro-level of actual artworks, the curated shows as experienced in space, the relation of a given show to others in the country, between institutions, the country and the continent, the continent to the rest. What happens in situ, on the ground (to use a definitely overused metaphor), seems surprisingly accurately reflected throughout the system and its discourses, even at a high level of abstraction. Just the fact that the West, and the Not-West, and their complex mergings and entanglements, is everyday reality here (conflicted to be sure) ensures that we grapple continuously with such questions at every level.

I would like to make a point about audiences for contemporary African art exhibitions. This is obvious but worth keeping within our picture. As I indicated, *Africa Remix* (which as a show was a very mixed bag, as I said previously) attracted a very large number of people to the opening. Contemporary South Africa comprises South Africans (often the so-called cultural intelligentsia) who went into exile. In some important ways their experience dovetails with part of the experience of the African diaspora. This seems to be a largely untapped convergence in the visual arts, and I wonder if *Africa Remix* offered an occasion to play this convergence out.

Secondly, there are many non-South African Africans living and working in Johannesburg. This is a “new” constituency, and again, I wonder how much of this constituency was activated by the exhibition? How many came? Even if not many, we should not underestimate the power of this group within the context of the larger continent.

Thirdly, the opening up of post-Apartheid

South Africa and the expansion of the middle classes (even though we can never underestimate the vast majority of the poor) has meant many more people have traveled out of the country into the continent and beyond. This, too, is a potential audience that may have been attracted to *Africa Remix*, or would potentially be.

Finally, there are the so-called settler Africans, of which I am part (part English, part Afrikaans, from two generations on the English side to several—or more—generations on the Afrikaans). For some of my generation, a reflection on critical relations between “Africa” with the “West,” and some musings that move generationally far back into a nineteenth-century Europe about which we really know little about and probably care less. Europe is—for me at least—not a mythical homeland or point of origin. More likely it figures mostly as the now fortress-like source of ongoing post-colonial insult and assertive (but hard to believe) self-anxiety? I don’t know. The opening of the recent Picasso show here in Johannesburg indicated just how arrogant those of lost empires can be. The upshot of this experience, for all its differences (in power, etc.) is a sometimes-divided consciousness that may respond to similar senses of division in just about any part of the world, whatever their causes.

Some or all of these were probably expressed in *Africa Remix* in a very rough but still accessible way, and this too may have been part of the attraction/repulsion of the show, and future shows like it. Whatever the response, these potential audiences and the history of our present speak to the importance of such exhibitions for this part of the world. And I don’t necessarily mean mega-exhibitions. The idea of collaboration mooted by other contributors is appealing here. If we could construct exhibitions that went up here and then traveled, this would be ideal. As yet collaborations have not yet yielded much of a showing here, and we are compelled to the mediation of catalogs for experience, a poor compensation.

It would require research to find out exactly who attended the opening of *Africa Remix*, and what portion of that extraordinary crowd were non-art but interested people from in and around Johannesburg. As I indicated in my last response, I

do not think this is about popular culture and a mass audience, be it black or white. But in terms of normalization I would expect the demographics of such events to map roughly onto the demographics of the country at large. I think this happened more at the opening of this show than any other event I have attended in Johannesburg (Perhaps the Dumile show comes close). But I may be wrong. Clive Kellner is on this roundtable, so perhaps he can enlighten us as director of the gallery.

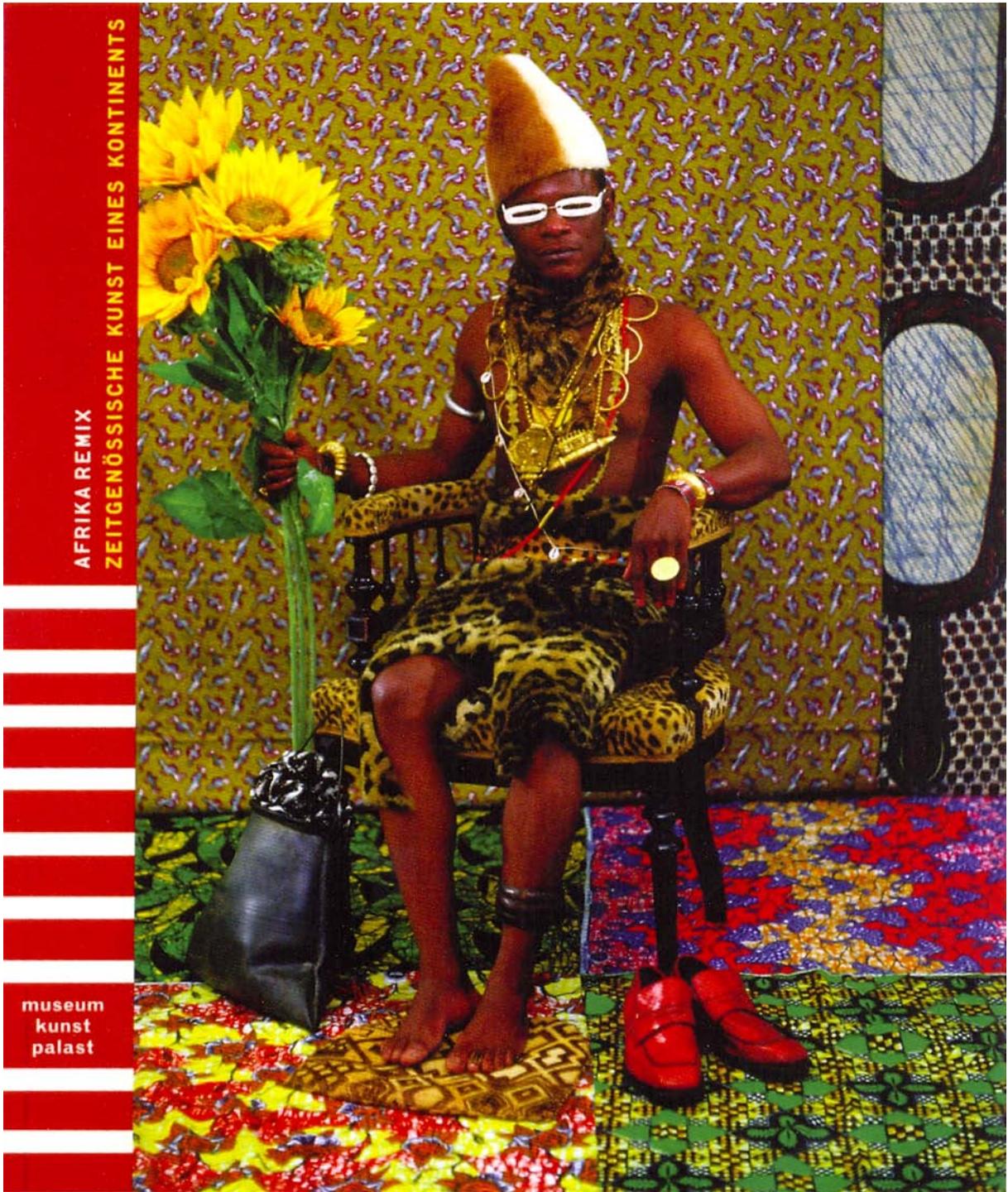
Clive Kellner: The main impetus for bring *Africa Remix* to Johannesburg was the fact that to date, none of the major exhibitions, or lesser for that matter, on African art ever traveled to the African continent—here I am thinking of *Africa Explores*, *Africa 95*, *The Short Century*, *Snap Judgments*, et al. While I recognize the value and significance of presenting monographic exhibitions—we are currently exhibiting a solo show of Meshac Gaba and in the past three years presented retrospectives of William Kentridge, David Goldblatt, and Dumile Feni and are now working on a Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble retrospective for the end of 2008—*Africa Remix* was an unprecedented success with the highest opening figures in the history of the Johannesburg Art Gallery—since 1915. *Remix* received 28,000 visitors over the three-month duration of the exhibition, compared with 24,000 for the Kentridge retrospective in 2005. It’s not that *Africa Remix* is a seamless exhibition; rather, the opportunity to experience the work of eighty-five artists from the continent and diaspora representing twenty-five countries was fairly symbolic. The validity of presenting megashows is really about the kind of gravitas the exhibition generates—in terms of the audience and the media, but also for the sponsors. What *Remix* and all of the previously mentioned exhibitions does foreground in terms of curating, is that these exhibitions are always curated by European/American curators or curators from the diaspora, which in itself is problematic in that it furthers the notion of the West as the site in which the framing of contemporary African art continues to take place. Is the diaspora the new West? Of all the people participating in this e-mail roundtable, only two

reside in the continent and both are male, white, and from South Africa. The challenge then is for curators to be active from and on the continent, for exhibitions to be curated on and from the continent, and for catalogs, journals, and the discourses to be developed from the continent. This would also apply to the creation of new museums and institutions, galleries, art magazines, and collectors on the continent. Until this is addressed, the sporadic dipping in and out of Africa will continue not only by Western curators but now ever-increasingly by curators of the diaspora as they tap into Western resources and funding and develop networks in the West, namely institutions and museums that can host shows. The flip side is that with exhibitions such as *Africa Remix* and *Snap Judgments*, Africa is looking sexy again and as problematic as this is in terms of the gaze, does at least offer a window for contemporary African art. The problem is Africa is too diverse, too complex, and does not exist out of one notion of historical development, but is continuously represented as such by cultural arbitrators trading with this “idea of Africa.” Rather, what is needed is some serious scholarly work around modernity in specific contexts, epochs, movements, etc. from and around which the positioning of contemporary practice can be located.

Another moment for defining the practice of the continent’s artists needs to be realized, one not predicated on the idea of geography or language—francophone, North, East Africa, etc. These are overthrows from colonialism, there is sense that another generation is rising while older, more established artists are beginning to have some international success, the real challenge is for these artists to be recognized in their own countries. Artists like Amal Kenawy in Cairo, Goddy Leye in Cameroon, Jimmy Ongongo in Nairobi are symptomatic of a new generation working from the continent, producing cutting-edge work while trying to realize and effect some sort of change in their own locations, impacting local audiences. I was in Bamako for the photo Biennale last week and had a sense of more networking and trading going on among artists, curators, and intellectuals on the continent. There was still the usual international crowd flown in for the week and little

impact on the local community, but some new initiatives are taking place: Bisi Silva from Lagos is opening a small contemporary center in Lagos in December while a new art center has opened in Benin, where a Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibition took place a few months ago; they have shown Romuald Hazoumé and the next project is an outdoor exhibition of Malick Sidibe.

Chika: Clive’s response brings up a crucial question of place and geography in the discourse of contemporary African art. He speaks of the current situation in which Africans residing outside the continent dominate the field, especially when contemporary African art is projected on the international scene. In one of my blog entries last month at chikaokeke-agulu.blogspot.com, I had expressed my appreciation for the fact that *Africa Remix*, because it traveled to an African location, achieved something no other major international exhibition of contemporary African art had been able to do. But that in itself points to the lack of institutional and financial resources to take on such *big shows* (except for some institutions like JAG, in Johannesburg or SANG, Cape Town, and possibly a few locations in Cairo). Quite clearly, the overwhelming presence of Africans located outside the continent is in itself a result of the continent’s fraught socioeconomic and political realities. The significance of work by Africans residing outside the continent in sustaining the practice and discourse of African art can hardly be doubted, yet the inability of national governments to create an enabling environment where institutions of art can grow, where platforms for public debate are encouraged, but more importantly where economic viability of citizens and state can allow for the kind of socioeconomic stability that in turn sustains ambitious art practices, institutions, and infrastructures, remains a gnawing reality. For this reason, few well-established artists, such as El Anatsui in Nigeria, and several from the younger generation including those Clive mentioned, who reside in the continent, have for the most part figured out ways of being part of the international art world—with viable gallery representation in Europe and the United States—so they don’t have to *really* depend on local support for their work.



AFRIKA REMIX
ZEITGENÖSSISCHE KUNST EINES KONTINENTS

museum
kunst
palast

Afrika Remix, exhibition catalogue.
(Düsseldorf: Museum Kunst Palast, 2004).

On the other hand, there are unique local, self-sustaining art ecologies across the continent that are equally important in the sense that they represent other aspects of the artistic practices, intellectual economies, and visual cultures of these places. As it is, in full awareness of the ineluctable reality of globalization, in its ugliness and beauty, the new privately run initiatives in Benin, Cairo, Morocco, Nairobi, Lagos, and elsewhere will be important in bridging local and international discursive sites. Such private contemporary art centers, if run by people who are willing and able to participate in the discourse of contemporary art in a non-parochial way, will quite likely increase intranational and intercontinental discursive traffic through real and virtual exhibitions, workshops, and debates. Abdellah Karoum's *L'Appartement 22* in Rabat has shown, with its impressive programs, the possibilities of such projects particularly in tapping the intellectual resources of Africans residing outside the continent in fostering more lively local practices and debates. Given the difficult realities of Africa's art worlds therefore, it might be more rewarding to embark on significant projects that are not necessarily the huge, big-bucks shows like *Africa Remix*. But the readiness of local private and public institutions to engage and collaborate with artists, critics, and curators resident within *and* without the continent in meaningful, creative, and productive ways, will, I suppose, obviate Clive's charged rhetorical question: "Is the diaspora the new West?"

Colin: I take all Clive's points about *Africa Remix*, although I think he overplays and simplifies the question of European/American curators or curators from the diaspora as furthering the notion of the West as the site in which the framing of contemporary African art takes place. There is a truth in this for me, but it tends to see some quite fundamental issues of criticality and creativity in an overinstrumental way. Perhaps I indulge in this idealism because I work in a university... but I'm not sure. Too solid a notion of emplacement—a kind of rigidity in linking place and space—can be counterproductive critically and creatively, and I would not be inclined to overemphasize the kind of oppositionality that leads to the idea that the

diaspora is the new West. I know the arguments about parachute curating, but am beginning to wonder if this can be a productive idea if handled with intellectual rigor and care.

These are all quite nuanced arguments about quite fundamental things in the end, but my sense is that if one takes engagement, relation, willful openness, worldliness, and strangeness seriously as key experiences in contemporary art, we begin to think of what we do slightly differently... a different cultural politics becomes possible. All this seems to me to be more about degree, actual practice, rather than some essential principles. Otherwise this debate begins to feel paralyzed. None of this suggests that we should endorse the material critical developments he speaks of in the later part of his contribution. The question of generational change and networking is vital, and a profound lived experience for me. Exposure—long or short—to each other within and beyond the continent seems to me crucial in a way little else seems to promise. The forms this can take are varied, and I think Clive is speaking about a very important set of issues here. My sense is that there are (yes) European and recently Asian institutions that for whatever reason are located throughout the continent or at least sub-Saharan Africa. Setting aside the politics of these institutions (can we?) they can offer means and mechanisms to facilitate interaction, exchange, local support, and so on. The political deficits would in my view be a risk worth taking to achieve greater intimacy across the continent, and beyond. One can be cynical about such things, but I have had some of my most exciting and productive interactions in this way, sometimes in spite of national indifference, priorities of a different kind, and the mandates of these institutions. Also, as I read it, some of the initiatives noted by Chika indicate ways of working even outside infrastructural securities we seem to think we need to carry on our business.

A final point: What seems to work is individual, personal contact. People drive projects. Institutions drown themselves in red tape, but we find individuals within them who are open to much more and canny about getting resources for some very unorthodox work. Of course there are exclusions and partisanship, which may distort

what happens because of personal relationships (we all know of some, and are part of some), but if there is enough happening the effects of any distortions lessen.

Chika: Already there are so many questions raised by Okwui, Colin, and Clive and I hope that we will ponder them a bit. But I want to ask us to consider one more issue: the challenge of Africa-based biennials. To begin with, the role international biennials have played in shifting the center-periphery argument, particularly in terms of where one could encounter some of the most ambitious contemporary work, is all too obvious. Biennials also—and this is much more questionable, as Ulf Wuggenig recently argued—have contributed to the decentralization of contemporary art practices, their institutional networks, and major players. In this regard, the Dakar biennial, especially in the last few editions, has been very important in providing not only a significant opportunity for African artists to be seen by the tribe of curators, collectors, critics, and scholars who frequent the biennial circuits but also in bringing international artists who otherwise would never be seen inside the continent to Dakar. The hosting of international biennials begins, I think, with the wish on the part of the organizers to become important players in the vastly globalized contemporary art scene and the success of the shows depend not only on the extent of local support but also on the scope and quality of international visitors as well as the response to the exhibitions by the art critical media. In this regard, the Johannesburg Biennale seemed poised to become a major player with its two biennials. (The Cairo and Alexandria biennials, on the other hand, have arguably not been as important) However, one of the issues that came to light during the controversy around this year's 52nd Venice Biennale was the paucity of international platforms, not just biennials, for African artists, which puts so much pressure on curators to represent, to go for number, which can get quite messy curatorially. So, is it in the interest of contemporary African art and artists to have more serious biennials within the continent, or should—as the debates around Johannesburg indicated—the already meager

financial resources be channeled into building more, and supporting or improving existing, permanent institutional infrastructure?

Elizabeth: This question of the central role of the curator in making art-historical scholarship brings up the fissures and tensions that many of us feel working between the demands of academia and the terrain of curating. As we all know, these “domains” of intellectual work are not separate but rather dialogical in nature and yet one can argue that there are tools that are more suited to one than the other as differing audiences and professional demands are addressed.

I would like to contextualize some of my earlier responses, taking Okwui's lead on relating our thoughts to specific experiences. My comments below stem not simply from an academic perspective but directly from my experiences as first curator of contemporary arts at the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian; a post that has been left unfilled since my departure five years ago due not only to dire fiscal issues affecting all of the Smithsonian (with an operating budget swallowed up by the war in Iraq) but perhaps more profoundly to what I see as a lack of clarity about its broader mandate as an institution that struggles to define its relevance in a globalizing art world.

We have discussed issues of representivity; how does curatorial work avoid the expectations by numerous publics to present an essentialized Africa? How does one invoke the complicated landscape of local/global exchanges within an exhibition project? What does the public expect from both mega-exhibitions and more focused efforts? And which public are we talking about? The questions surrounding representivity extend also to the figure of the curator: is she/he a representative somehow of the stories she/he chooses to tell and do institutions seek such interlocutors and in the process “essentialize” their otherwise subtle, hybridized stances?

This role of intellectual/curator as interlocutor or bricoleur in shaping the discourse surrounding contemporary African arts (and by extension the processes of canonization) seems of central concern to all of us. As shaper of a canon, a cura-



Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora. May 2–December 7, 2003. Photo: Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Installation image.

tor/intellectual engages with the longstanding art-historical concerns about artistic intention, tackles the thorny and often evasive processes of assigning value (cultural, aesthetic, monetary, political, spiritual); and advances diverse methodologies from worn-out anthropological approaches to more sophisticated readings of local art histories and the texture of individual oeuvres derived from Foucauldian and Derridian approaches to archaeological and archival work. These approaches produce texts, in the broadest sense. They are authored by the curators and “read” by multiple and varying audiences, both as events or as spectacles and as archaeological records in their own right, in various forms of post- or extra-exhibition art writing.

My previous comments about representivity stemmed from the frustrations that arose as I tried to advance exhibition projects based on the works of artists whose oeuvres remained relatively “unknown” in Western institutions. These institutions are often looking for a quick fix of “Otherness” that will still resonate with the contemporary tastes of the art world in terms of chosen media, artistic approach, or visual vocabulary. The players within them might be eager to pursue “globalizing” projects, but this desire is often predicated on extremely unnuanced understandings of Africa and its diaspora. There is little desire or indeed awareness that the artistic careers of the individuals involved are informed by layered understandings of artistry, identity, and histories that are themselves born at the interstitialities of the local and the global. This ignorance on the part of powerful art-world actors and institutions is all the more exacerbated when the projects emanate from a culturally and geographically defined institution such as the National Museum of African Art.

Issues of representivity and exhibiting also should be put into the context of collecting. This discourse around the contemporary is not just about itinerant shows. Collecting for large institutions or private individuals shifts the more traditional discourses surrounding African material cultures, which for the most part remain ensconced in earlier ethnographic models within encyclopedic institutions, and it also challenges

the universalist stances of modern and contemporary museums. Surely our work as curators also needs to consider the shifts taking place in the traditional museum world as institutions seek to “update” or contemporize their visions of a continent’s history. They are seeking in some senses to continue a “totalizing picture” of the continent not simply by the exhibition but through acquisition of contemporary works.

My previous comments about the need for transparency and collaboration in curatorial work were not made without an understanding of the problems of fetishization that come with singling out the artist’s intention or that seize upon collaborative work as a panacea for a more profound and insidious politics of power. Nor should they be read as an abdication of the responsibility or “authorship” that comes with curating or a lack of critical nerve. I agree with Chika that curatorial work need not engage in an “anthropological enterprise meant to show the way things generally are.”

Rather, these comments should be read against the backdrop of the compromised, anachronistic mission of the conservative institution in which I found myself curating. Charged with collecting contemporary materials of an entire continent in a geographically specific institution with roots in the multicultural wars of 1980s America, I did have to address sensitively my place within this charged, politicized narrative. Identity did matter; as much as I would support the notion of a hybridized, fluctuating, and performative nature of identity, its essentializing framework oversaw every decision within the institution.

I realize that all museum curators face challenges in dealing with boards and competition for funding from both inside and outside the institution. However, in the National Museum it was accentuated by an institutional unwillingness or inability at some level to acknowledge a textured, capacious vision of Africa (beyond geography) or to embrace the contemporary practices it claimed to support (in an organized way much earlier than other museums) but had little trust in its ability to evaluate. (I must emphasize that there were individuals working within the institution with clear and sophisticated approaches to Africa and the question of the contemporary, but they

were given little power). Moreover, within the broader division of Smithsonian art museums, the realm of the contemporary was seen to be the concern and mandate of the Hirshhorn Museum. Artists whose works were shown within the National Museum of African Art often felt “ghettoized” within its walls and questioned why the Hirshhorn’s collecting and exhibitory practices rarely included works made by artists with connections to Africa.

As both Chika and Okwui have eloquently argued, it is possible, even desirable, to engage in an archaeological or archival exercise when researching for a specific project that might avoid the kind of sporadic “dipping into the continent” to which Clive Kellner alerts us. This committed work can produce focused “texts” in the form of exhibitions that need not uncritically represent an entire scene but rather represent a specific intellectual argument. However, there remains, I believe, an unspoken agreement about what constitutes “aesthetic quality” in the creation of these exhibitions. Given the history within the art world in which quality, aesthetic value/judgment have for so long been seated within the realm of universalism defined by Europe and America, how have these measures shifted (is this a result of the culture wars of the 1980s, the subaltern and postcolonial efforts of the 1990s)? I would like to consider how curators of contemporary African arts, or indeed those that are concerned with effects of the global within their work, think about the parameters of value and taste. How are these measures connected to artistic media, to practices, to site specificity, to biography or identity, to histories of modernism, to local assessments of worth and collecting networks, to the mechanisms of art writing, to the political engagements of the historic avant-garde or the newfound activism of many contemporary practitioners?

Despite our best intentions to the contrary, we would be fooling ourselves to think that our directed, discrete projects were not being read as representations or markers of a broader canon of contemporary African art. I agree that it is essential to acknowledge the place of geography within the developing discourses surrounding contemporary arts of Africa. In my experiences, geographi-

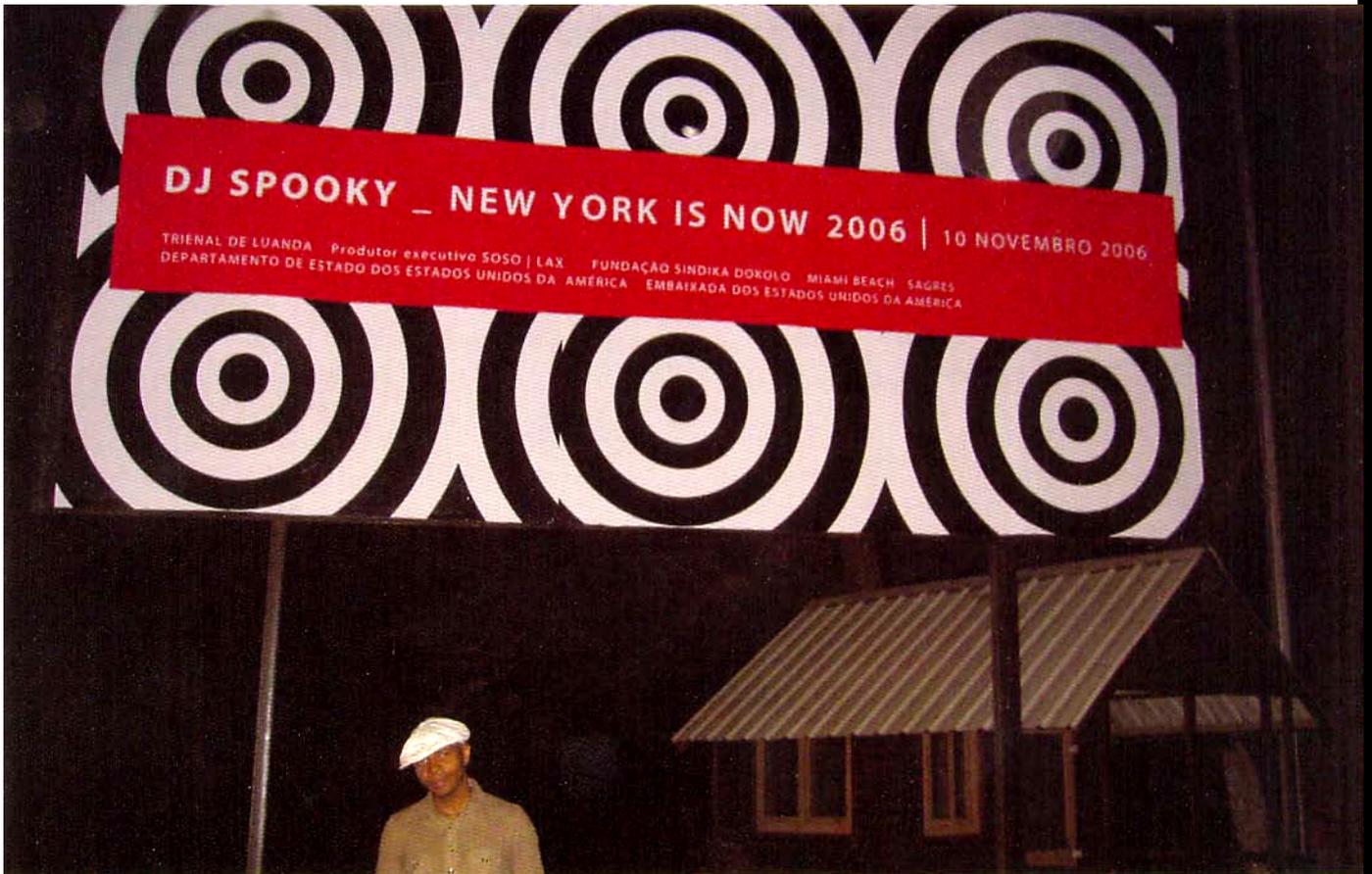
cal parameters were limiting but at times a useful framework for considering the local. Suggesting that the diaspora might be considered the new West, however, provides us with little way forward in discerning the generous nature of artistic exchange and creativity or the epistemological challenges to writing about aesthetics in a globalizing world. As we would all agree, these larger labels say little about the way humans live and place themselves in multiple terrains. They are amorphous, easily manipulated, expanded, collapsed, or dismissed.

I have always liked Kobena Mercer’s suggestion that we consider the “space of exhibition” as an important locus for constituting not simply reflecting identities, aesthetic values, and intellectual work. I concur that the space of exhibition must be seen as so much more than a site of spectacle but a specific, well-crafted “text,” authored by an individual and open to multiple readings. It is only at a site such as this that we can begin to hope to problematize the demanding and enriching interfaces of the local and the global, of the archival and the contemporary.

Gilane: Okwui is right to draw our attention to how few mega African exhibitions there have been in actuality and their impact (in contrast with their number) is impressive. Surely, we have only begun to dip our curatorial toes in the water and there remains such a great deal of work yet to be done by individuals and institutions, by those based on the African continent and outside it. There should be more mega exhibitions, more group shows, more solo exhibitions and retrospectives, more artist-curated shows, more new writing and scholarship, more debates and discussions. The critical issue for me is that we create platforms in different geographical locations for a plurality of different forms and scales of exhibitions with a range of different perspectives, contexts, and viewpoints. As Elizabeth says, we should not omit the historical in favor of the contemporary, the local in favor of the international, but rather should embrace the dialectical relationship between the past and present, the local and global. (Perhaps this is the way to have our cake and eat it?) Neither should we privilege one form of



Textures: Word and Symbol in Contemporary African Art. February 11–September 4, 2005. Photo: Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Installation image.



DJ Spooky, concert and film premier, New York, NY., 2006.

knowledge production over another. As Colin points out documentation and the Internet play a vital role, as do talks, debates, magazines, and fora such as these. It is precisely through such a multiplicity of forms and contents that we shall come closer to achieving a richer, more nuanced, and complex articulation of African art with the space for challenges and contradictions as well as opportunities for new art-historical narratives and models of production.

Without wishing to fetishize the artists' intention or suggest that the curator is an objective mediator, I think it is important to clarify one or two points on the question of subjectivity and agency. To be honest, I still find it difficult to describe myself as a curator. The term, in its current usage, is still a relatively new attribution and one that has become too easily associated with the figure of the circus impresario who convenes artists at his or her whim and to the service of his or her thematic construction. Over the twelve or so years during which I ran the London-based arts organization INIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts), and wrote articles, published books, organized exhibitions, convened seminars and talks, and commissioned artworks, publications, and educational projects, I considered all of these activities as part of a broader and continuous political project, dedicated to creating spaces for articulating experiences, ideas, and artworks that were marginalized from the mainstream art world. In this sense, the audience that I felt myself addressing primarily was a Western audience since the primary objective was to diversify the mainstream, to introduce ideas, perspectives, and histories that did not register in hardly any way a decade and a half ago on the cultural landscape of the Western world. What I had not anticipated was that the project of INIVA would provoke an extraordinary virtual community of artists, curators, and intellectuals from across the globe who felt excluded from the mainstream discourses of the Western art world, five million of them engaged remotely with INIVA across cyberspace every year.

The desire and drive to be involved in such a project emerged from my own personal experience and subjectivity. In this sense, my Egyptian-

ness, my status as a political exile from my home country and migrant to Western Europe is less a fixed frame for seeing the world, but, as Edward Said once described it, like a set of bifocal spectacles that forced me to see the world from two perspectives at one and the same time. This is the prism through which my intellectual and curatorial work is necessarily refracted. Of course, it is personal and subjective, but like the work of any artist or writer who aspires to operate in the public domain, this intellectual and curatorial work is of little public value unless it can communicate something beyond its specific origin and context and resonate meaningfully with a wider audience and context. To return then to Ery's very important question at the beginning of our discussion: Why and for whom are we making exhibitions and what kind of use can be made of them? Let me answer with one specific example: *Faultlines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* (at the 50th Venice Biennale) was an exhibition that attempted to tussle with the disappointment of postcolonial utopias and the impact that this has had both in Africa and in the African diaspora from post-Nasser Egypt to the post-Civil Rights United States. It seemed to me that there were a number of artists whose work was exploring this terrain and that without understanding and confronting this question, it is hard for us to begin to construct new visions for the future. In this instance, the exhibition was inevitably aimed at Western audiences, but the book, which we tried to distribute as widely as possible and that contained newly commissioned writings by writers from across the continent, was aimed at a much wider audience.

The question of infrastructure and resources has continually underpinned our discussions mainly in terms of the lack of physical institutions (art schools, academies, galleries, and museums) and lack of access to resources (financial and logistical). Okwui makes an important point about the role of exhibitions and curatorial work in constructing a field of study or area of inquiry, and Elizabeth, Laurie, Okwui, and Colin all make reference to the importance of research and intellectuals' work as a critical part of the curatorial process. I would like to add something about the

importance of building infrastructure in two parallel zones simultaneously: First of all, I think it is vital that scholars, artists, curators, and critics in Africa and outside are both engaged in building an *intellectual* infrastructure and resources in the form of publications, writers, teachers, academic debates and at the same time building on, extending, and expanding the *physical* infrastructure—the “local, self-sustaining art ecologies across the continent”—to which Chika crucially refers. My point is that the two are mutually dependent and need to be constructed at one and the same time if a truly dynamic, critical, and sustainable art economy is to flourish and prosper. It is here, perhaps, in the simultaneous development of this dual infrastructure, both intellectual and physical, where new models of collaboration and exchange can be developed between those of us based in Africa and outside Africa to create distinctive lines of intellectual and cultural enquiry and exchange that crisscross the continent and the globe, and maybe even transform it.

Laurie: As I sit down to reflect on the issues raised by the panel, I return from my office in Atlanta having just opened Yinka Shonibare, MBE’s new solo exhibition *Odile and Odette* at the ACA Gallery of Savannah College of Art and Design. Having worked with Yinka previously in the group-exhibition context of *Looking Both Ways*, it was refreshing to be able to present a more focused presentation of his multimedia practice—particularly in the context of an art college.

Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora was the first major exhibition that I mounted at the Museum for African Art. In the process, I learned a great deal, made my fair share of mistakes (including an overpacked installation in the Museum for African Art’s former gallery in Long Island City) but these experiences and relationships have stood me in good stead. In the course of my eight years at the museum, I focused my efforts on establishing support for modern and contemporary art, even though the emphasis at the museum was on the more traditional and ethnographic aspects of African art. I was encouraged to see the Museum for African Art advertise and fill my post as curator of modern

and contemporary art, as this position did not exist when I started at the museum in 1999. I hope that the museum will continue to expand their exhibition program to include more progressive engagements with contemporary art. The forthcoming Ibrahim El Salahi exhibition curated by Salah Hassan (which originated at INIVA under Gilane’s leadership), to be mounted in the Museum’s new building on Fifth Avenue, is an event to look forward to.

Since leaving the Museum for African Art a year ago to work as the Executive Director of Exhibitions at the SCAD, I’ve had the opportunity to collect work for SCAD and host solo exhibitions with a range of artists, including, Nicholas Hlobo, David Adjaye, Wangechi Mutu, Yinka Shonibare, MBE and have projects in development with Kader Attia, Kiluanji Kia Henda, and Deborah Poynton, to name but a few. I’ve taken my passion for contemporary African art with me and have appreciated being able to work with these artists in my new context. I no longer feel the pressure of working within a geographic-driven institution, but rather have more freedom to invite artists based solely on the merit of their work, interest in education, or to continue supporting the careers of artists with whom I have worked previously.

Through these solo shows and smaller projects (and similar focused projects at the Museum for African Art), the work of the artists has been seen in a reflective and critical context that is not possible in the blur of the mega-exhibition model. The main issue that I have with large-scale mega exhibitions is that they seem to promote the art-fair phenomenon of spotting rather than looking. Furthermore, with the invariable inclusion of too many artists, the installation of work is often compromised. And in the tour of the exhibition, often a number of the artists get dropped due to space limitations—which in turn compromises the integrity of the exhibition. In smaller or more focused exhibitions, the inclusion of numerous works by an artist provides a broad sample of work, obviating the tendency for generic or essentialized readings. The framework of solo, or more focused, exhibitions encourages us to look at the art and make a refreshing return to evaluations of

IN SCR**👁**IBING
MEANING
WRITING + GRAPHIC
SYSTEMS
IN
AFRICAN
aRT

Sublevel 2
◀ This way to
Workshop
This way to ▶
Administrative Offices
Theodore Roosevelt Archives
James M. Robison Library



Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art. May 9, 2007–August 26, 2007.
Photo: Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

content, aesthetics, and production rather than the demographic of its maker. In the face of limited resources and minimal support from the South African Department of Art and Culture, Clive Kellner should be lauded for mounting an impressive series of solo shows at JAG featuring the work of William Kentridge, Berni Searle, Meschac Gaba, Johannes Phokela, and David Goldblatt, among others.

A field in which I believe we can all advance the debate is through exchanges with artists and museums in Africa. It might sound like an obvious statement, but there are surprisingly few such links to Africa in many of the institutions in the United States that focus on Africa. I believe it would also be productive for institutions such as the Fowler Museum, the Museum for African Art in New York, and the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian to support more artist residencies and exhibition exchanges with venues in Africa. In my years at the Museum for African Art, numerous institutions in Africa approached the museum about receiving traveling exhibitions, and the issues with sending, or receiving these exhibitions, always fell apart due to a lack of funding and resources. The relative absence of museums and galleries in Africa of a standard to host traveling exhibitions (aside from South Africa) obviously also undermined these efforts, and brings to mind Chika's questions about the need for more biennials versus the channeling of limited resources into building and improving institutional infrastructure. I don't think these two options need to be mutually exclusive. Take, for example, the work being done by Fernando Alvim with the Trienal de Luanda. The Inaugural Trienal was organized primarily for the people of Angola—partly because it is difficult to get a visa to travel to Angola, but primarily due to Alvim's interest in bringing art and culture back to the people in Luanda. Additionally, Alvim raised funds to preserve abandoned buildings and mounted exhibitions across the city for three years leading up to the Trienal. Funds raised by the Trienal are slated to help fund the realization of a permanent museum and foundation for contemporary art in Luanda (scheduled to open in 2010). This new institution will house a major collection

of contemporary African art, provide education programs, and add a contemporary site to the already broad range of cultural institutions in Luanda.

As a student, I was inspired by the intellectual investigations of groundbreaking exhibitions such as *ART/artifact* (1988), *Face of the Gods* (1993) and *Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art* (1994). The questions, concepts, and issues raised by these early projects fueled my interest in contributing new scholarship to the growing field of African art. While in graduate school, resources and materials on contemporary African art in U.S. institutions of higher learning were incredibly limited. Journals such as *Revue Noire*, *Nka*, and online sources such as *ArtThrob* helped fill the void. While the number of available resources has grown, there is still much work that can be done to enhance engagements with contemporary African art, both in and out of Africa. John Picton once said to me “the messier and more complicated the story, the closer you probably are to the truth.” Implementation of numerous exhibition models, research methods, and enhanced reciprocal exchanges between institutions and artists will hopefully (as I've stated elsewhere) “mark a step toward a vision not of a dichotomous divide between Africa and the West but of entirely new cultural spaces of multiplicity—spaces already familiar to the creative practices of the artists.”

Chika: I wish we could go on with this immensely rich conversation, but we must adjourn for another day. Many issues remain, some raised here but not fully explored at this time, for which reason I most certainly will convene the roundtable again. Hopefully then, our absent colleagues, Andre Magnin and Jean-Hubert Martin will be able join us!

Biographies of Roundtable Participants:

Chika Okeke-Agulu is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art & Archaeology, and Center for African American Studies, Princeton University, and editor of *Nka*. He co-organized several exhibitions, including the Nigerian Pavilion at the First Johannesburg Biennale, 1995; *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (1995), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (2001), and co-curated and wrote catalogue essays for the Fifth Gwangju Biennale.

Ery Camara is a museologist and curator at the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, Mexico City. He is also an artist. He was in the selection committee of the Dak'Art (2002) and served as President of the International Jury of the 49th Venice Biennale (2001).

Okwui Enwezor is Dean of Academic Affairs and Senior Vice President at San Francisco Art Institute. Enwezor was Artistic Director of *Documenta 11*, and the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. He curated numerous exhibitions including *The Short Century; Century City; Mirror's Edge; In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940-Present*; and *Global Conceptualism*. Enwezor contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues, anthologies, and journals. He is founder and editor of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*.

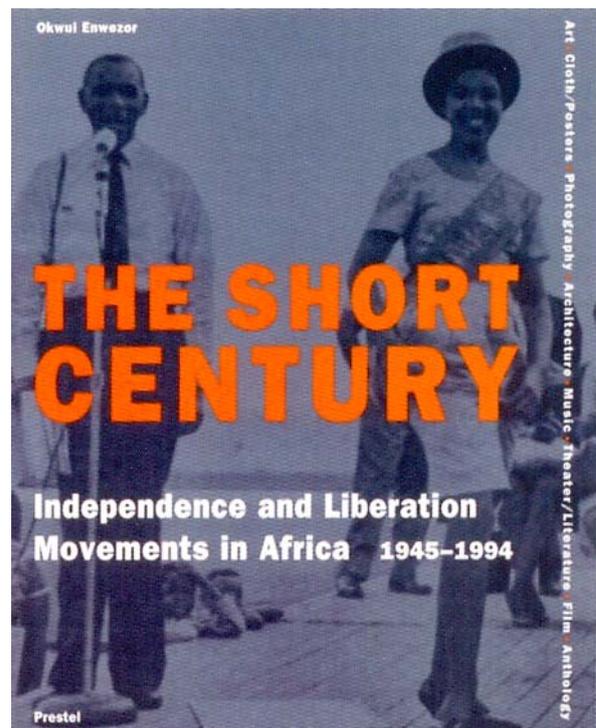
Laurie Ann Farrell is Executive Director of Exhibitions, Savannah College of Art and Design. She served as a curator at the Museum for African Art, New York, where she organized *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* (2004) and *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (2003).

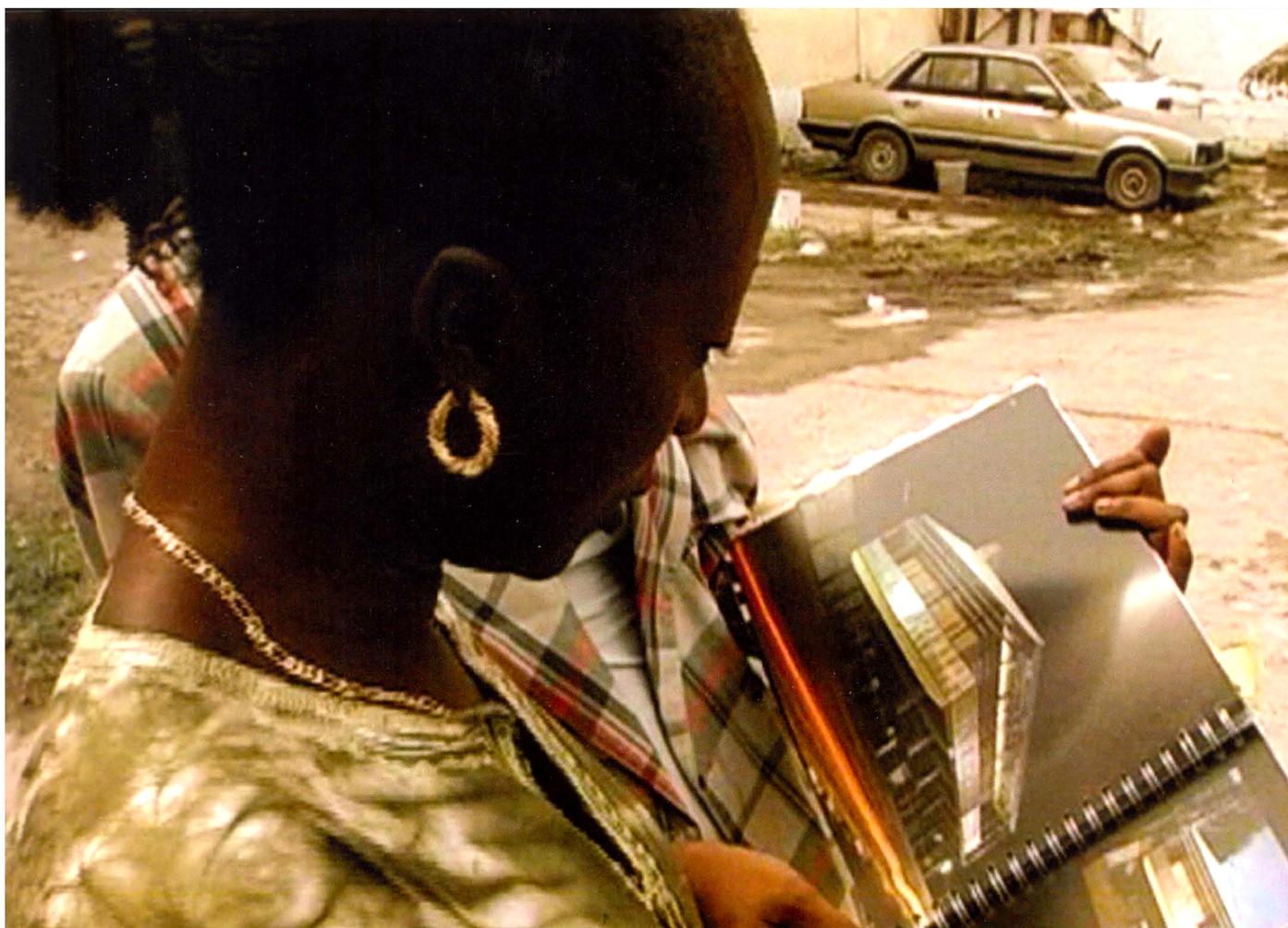
Elizabeth Harney is Associate Professor of contemporary African art at the University of Toronto. She was formerly the curator of contemporary African art at the National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, where she organized *Ethiopian Passages: Contemporary Art from the Diaspora* (2003) and co-organized *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* in collaboration with the Fowler Museum, UCLA (2007).

Clive Kellner is Director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and formerly the Director of the Johannesburg Art Museum. He curated *Emotional Geographies: Re-imagining the Past in Post-Apartheid Narrative* at the Foto Biennale Rotterdam (2000).

Colin Richards is Professor of art theory and studio practice at the Wits School of Arts, University of Witwatersrand. He is also an artist. He organized *Taking Liberties: The Body Politic* at the Africus Johannesburg Biennale (1995) and *Graft* at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997).

Gilane Tawadros is a writer and curator. She was the founding director of Institute for International Visual Arts (InIVA), London. She organized several international exhibitions including *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art* at the New Art Gallery, Walsall (2004), and *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, the African Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale (2003).





MAISON TROPICALE

Un film de / a film by
Manthia Diawara

La Première Africaine de *Maison Tropicale* (2008) aura lieu à la **Biennale des Arts de Dakar**, au **Musée Théodore Monod d'Art Africain (IFAN)**, du **9 Mai - 9 Juin 2008**, avec des présentations journalières.

The African Premiere of *Maison Tropicale* (2008) takes place with daily screenings at the **Biennale des Arts de Dakar** in the **Théodore Monod African Art Museum (IFAN)**, between **9th of May and 9th of June 2008**.

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