In Vogue, or
The Flavour of the Month
The New Way to Wear Black

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Jungle Fever: international socialite 'Johnny' Pigozzi collects houses, celebrities, kitsch — and now, characteristic enthusiasm, African art.

Andrew Graham-Dixon

'The New Way to Wear Black', a major theme of Vogue, October 1992: but any resemblance to an article, 'Jungle Fever', a collector, 'Johnny' Pigozzi, or an exhibition, Out of Africa at the Saatchi Gallery, is entirely coincidental. At any rate, to some it might have seemed that Susan Vogel could breathe a sigh of relief: 'Johnny' Pigozzi was now the person we should all love to hate.

1

Jean-Christophe Pigozzi is said to have the largest collection of contemporary African art in the world. Says he:

I am fascinated by people who have no training... What I find interesting about these African artists is that they are very intelligent but they have no training and the results are, well, remarkable — a kind of pure self-expression.

Perhaps we can allow him the latter-day mythologising; but whether or not his collection is the largest — and it may well be 'just what does it represent if artists who have been 'trained' are excluded in virtue of that training? Now, from one point of view anyone, Pigozzi included, is free to collect as s/he chooses, all other things being equal. A collector can follow his/her own particular interests where a curator must in some sense represent a more collective view of things. Some years ago, Josef Herman, for example, put together a collection of African 'miniatures'; and from his point of view, the fact that such a category does exist, beyond the fact that many African sculptures are little, does not matter. He can collect things on the basis of small size if he wants to. Peter Adler, more recently,
has been collecting Southern Ghanaian flags: many of them were on exhibition at the South Bank Centre in November and December, 1992; and, as before, if he wants to collect textiles he can. Jean-Christophe Pigozzi, however, is no mere collector. He claims to be “an ambassador for Africa”3 and that puts matters of his taste in African art in a very different light. He has, it seems, appropriated to himself an authority as representative and mediator. As Andrew Graham-Dixon writes:

3 Ibid, p 212.


II

I was appointed to the staff of the Department of Antiquities of the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1961, and took up appointment as curator of the Lagos Museum in June of that year. My qualifications for the post were a not-very-good degree in anthropology, and five months working as a part-time assistant to William Fagg, the authority on African art at the British Museum. Whether I was qualified for this work, I leave others to judge. Personally, I was grateful for what was my first full-time professional appointment, and it was within the first year of Independence, a time of extraordinary hope, expectation and exuberance.

The purpose of the Lagos Museum was the preservation, documentation and display of the art traditions of Nigeria, not the new forms of practice that had emerged in the developments of the present century, but the archaeological and the ‘ethnographical’. With such rapid development and a small professional staff — eight senior officers in all — this concentration was perhaps inevitable; and in addition to the changes in local dealers with little conscience about ripping off their own cultural heritage for the profits to be made thereby. Of course, living in Lagos one could hardly be unaware of all the new developments in art, just as one soon met Ulli Beier whose critical writing was so important in the Nigerian art world of the time. Ulli was living, still with Suzanne Wenger, in Oshogbo, and their house was always open and hospitable. Oshogbo was one of those places one had to visit in any case on account of the great forest grove beside the river dedicated to Oshun. The river was, indeed, her veritable icon and the grove was empty of any artifact and adornment except for a small temple built according to the traditions of Yoruba architecture. This too was without ornament other than the black, white and red stripes painted along the pillars supporting the veranda roof. Now, I had a degree in anthropology, I had worked at the British Museum, I had read a book or two on the subject, and I thought that this little temple was a rather fine example of ‘traditional’ architecture, not spectacular but worth attending to; but it was in a condition of disrepair: pillars had collapsed and termites were eating the roofing timbers. I wanted to help, so I asked Suzanne Wenger if she knew people who could repair and restore it, and how much it would cost. The answer was that it could be done for £25. I then obtained permission from my head of department, Bernard Fagg, younger brother of William, to advance £25 to Suzanne, and the work commenced. Some weeks later, I heard that the job was done and I went to see.

I called to the house first and found Ulli who said I must go see what they had done: it was absolutely wonderful. We went together; but when I saw it my
first thought was "I hope Bernard Fagg never sees this". I made rather more approving noises to Ulli, whose friendship I valued and whose knowledge and experience of Yoruba culture was infinitely greater than mine. For the building had been repaired, but the previously aniconic temple and grove was now a riot of figurative sculpture and ornament. The pillars of the temple were now all figurated in a manner completely 'untraditional'. The grove itself had sprouted cement sculptures at the bases of the important trees, and beside the river. The walls around the grove were covered in relief imagery.

Apparently, the work had been almost completed when one of the plasterers moulded a face in the cement used to protect the earthen pillars of the temple, and either Ulli or Suzanne had suggested they do some more. Sculpture and figurative embellishment were as new to these plasterers as they were to anyone else; but having effected this transformation of the grove and its little temple they went on to create sculptural embellishments in cement elsewhere in the town. Although many people find the Oshogbo developments problematic — and whatever our assessment we should not forget that there are several Nigerian artists who owe their living in art to Oshogbo — this episode is worth noting for precisely the reason that in my ethnographical wisdom I had made the classic mistake of reckoning without the people to whom, in some sense, the place belonged.

III

The second anecdote is about a conversation in 1989, twenty-eight years later. I was attending a conference on African art in Washington DC, and during a break for lunch, I suggested to a group of Africanist curators that they should collect works of the kind to which we gave the not very satisfactory label: contemporary African art (contemporary with what?) Their response was: how do we know if it's any good?

It is all very well to laugh, but the question does require some answer. If a curator is to steer a path between buying nothing — a sign of meanness? — and buying everything — a sign of madness? — a choice has to be made, and judgement exercised. Yet the response of that group of curators seemed to betray an astonishing lack of self confidence, especially in view of the privileged role of the curator in shaping public taste (all the more so given the European art-historical placing of Africa in relation to Primitivism/Modernism; and where would Picasso have been without Kahnweiler?) More importantly, it displayed not only an unwillingness to trust one's own judgement in the matter of art, but also an unwillingness to open one's eyes and ears to local taste, and to the discourse of artists and critics themselves. I had learnt some kind of lesson in the grove of Oshun, and now I found myself with others still making essentially that same classic mistake of reckoning without the people to whom the visual arts of Africa belong.

IV

Among the most obvious things about post-colonial Africa is that there are a lot of artists producing a lot of art. Moreover, the volume, detail and complexity of the locally available data makes it possible to place discourse about art in Africa in some sense in the same dimension as discourse about art in Europe. I do realise, of course, that a simple quantitative assessment does not get us very far, and
that the fact that one might begin to write an African art history in a manner something like a European art history may or may not be a good thing; and of course I am not ignoring the possibilities of distinctive African models of art-historical practice. In any case, it becomes ever more difficult to consider Africa as a single entity. In each country artists find themselves with distinctive agendas. Senegal, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa — especially South Africa — each has very different art histories.

These things are disconcerting for an Africanist art studies establishment, dominated by a tradition of thinking, seeing and writing in terms of the functionalist generalities of a pre-Independence anthropology, which has moved on over the past thirty years, or with a functionalist perspective, which is essentially about the inter-relatedness of things; but a slipshod functionalism remains a conceptual ghost still to be fully exorcised from the literature of African art. As I have argued elsewhere\(^5\) — and the argument is now in any case commonplace — the anthropology of the colonial period promoted a way of writing about Africa characterised as the Ethnographical Present. This, in effect, denies both history and contemporary reality while encouraging the invention of a ‘traditional’ Africa that privileges certain social, ritual and visual practices at the expense of others.

It appears people in Africa can never win, for if they remain attached to the traditions of the past, they are innocent and exotic, and if they move into the present, they are merely foolish. Nor is the problem here with the notion of tradition, from the Latin *tradidere*, to hand on/hand over, for the handing on of practices and expectations is an inevitable and necessary part of social life. On the other hand, a local sense of what is ‘traditional’ can serve to legitimate the maintenance of practices on the basis of past performance, and to deny history other than as a sequence of repetitions of essentially the same practices, whatever their temporal status might in fact be.

V

In recent years, there have been several publications that discuss the developments in art in Africa in the twentieth century, often as accompaniments to exhibitions.\(^6\) Each claims to represent Africa in ways that, for example, *Chéri Samba* (ICA, 1991), or *Art From South Africa* (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1990), or *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, 1989) — and each of these was a first-rate exhibition — would not.

Grayburn, in addition, represents the rest of his so-called ‘Fourth World’, by which he means minority populations dominated by more powerful cultural orders. When his book first came out, it seemed an interesting text. He wanted us to understand the various developments in terms of two variables or functional co-ordinates; and whether the patrons were internal or external to the minority. Bearing in mind the possibilities of forms and styles that were a synthesis of internal and external, this allowed for a six-part categorisation. He admitted that the categorisation could not be accurate, and that some forms might belong in more than one. Grayburn’s categories now really have their uses only in a teaching environment, as something to argue against. In any case, an essential fault with this form of analysis is that any kind of internal/external paradigm is simply unworkable: just where, for example, do we place the institutional and private collectors of art in Nigeria?

Admittedly, there was a time, around 1960, when the greater part of available

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patronage was expatriate. Some artists preferred to keep their paintings themselves rather than sell them to expatriate collectors, with the probability that they would leave the country; but this is no longer the case. With the construction of the Independence Building at the western end of the Lagos racecourse, and its use of work by Nigerian artists, a revolution in patronage was instituted, the fruits of which can be seen all over Lagos and throughout Nigeria. There are several public and private collections, and there are Nigerian professional art brokers. Perhaps this patronage is still not enough; perhaps it never will be enough; but both state and individual patronage are evident for all to see. Sometimes, though, one’s seeing can be misconstrued, as, for example, Casentino’s reference to “Yoruboid Pharoesh” which are, in fact, relief sculptures on the Lagos Independence building by Felix Idubor, a non-Yoruba sculptor.

The more serious objection, however, is that the artist in such an arrangement seems only to exist as a function of co-ordinates that produce categories, yet cannot take account of the fact of the artist as an agent acting not just within but equally upon his/her social environment. This is what I call the Jack-in-the-Box theory of the artist, thrust in but ready to jump out and dance only when the art historian springs the catch.

In contrast, Kojo Fosu gives us a brief but, in principle, encyclopaedic account of artists across the continent from one country to another beginning, indeed, with the earliest pioneers, notably Aina Onabolu (1882-1963). It is not a definitive account, but that is not a point of criticism not least because no account will ever be definitive; but it does matter that he begins with people rather than a priori boxes.

Grace Stanislaus, who was responsible for the Harlem Contemporary African Artists exhibition and text, while deliberately more selective in choosing to exhibit a mere half-dozen artists, nevertheless included work from several countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, with essays by Wole Soyinka, Dele Jegede and herself, her catalogue seems to me to be the most instructive introductory text to this particular matter in Africanist art-historical study.

A comparison of approaches might be in order, even if what I have to say next may seem unfair; and I realise that neither one, two nor three swallows make a summer, and that between Grayburn and Stanislaus some fifteen years had elapsed; but the contrast between Grayburn (and, as we shall see, Vogel, both European-American) on the one hand, and both Fosu (Ghanaian) and Stanislaus (African-American) on the other, could hardly be more striking. For whereas Grayburn tells about categories, within which he constitutes the artists, Fosu and Stanislaus tell us about the artists. Make of that what you will.

VI

As to Magiciens de la terre, enough ink has been spilled across the pages of Third Text on that subject. Maybe there is more to be written, but not by me. I wish only to take up one small point: As we all know, the selection was bizarre, with artists such as Francesco Clemente, Anselm Kiefer and Richard Long juxtaposed with Sossou Amidou, Kane Kwei and Chéri Samba. These are, of course, all interesting artists, the Europeans no less than the Africans, and at least in this apparently post-modern juxtaposition the selectors might seem to have begun with the artist; except that as we all equally know, there was a categorising operating in the selection of, for example, a mask carver, a coffin maker and a
sign painter as representative of Africa. In effect, there was a wholesale writing-off of the achievements of artists in every country in Africa. Whether the selectors were naive or high-handed, the effect is astonishing in serving to legitimate only one small part of contemporary visual culture in Africa. *Africa Today* and *Out of Africa*, of course, continued this particular line of curatorial authority, again taking the self-taught artist as the paradigm of creative authenticity; and as these exhibitions derive from Pigozzi’s wish to buy up all the African material in *Magiciens de la terre* and hiring the relevant curator, André Magnin, to collect for him when this could not be possible, this comes as no surprise. In the catalogue of *Out of Africa* André Magnin writes:

I have deliberately chosen artists I think are among the most original and representative of contemporary sub-Saharan creators.

9 André Magnin, *op cit.*

We remember, of course, that Magnin is responsible for informing Jean-Christophe Pigozzi’s taste for ‘people who have no training’.

One might be tempted to ask who really cares what André Magnin thinks, except that, for some people, his thoughts might serve to animate a (one-sided) legitimacy. Infinitely more important are the matters of patronage, evaluation and criticism, and their relationship to the production of artworks. Of course, some artists are working for a largely expatriate patronage (including André Magnin’s), and that needs to be exposed for what it is, for better or for worse, and I am certainly not denying the right to earn a living by art; but there is a patronage, an evaluation and a criticism within the countries of Africa that is not

predetermined by an expatriate presence. I have written at length elsewhere about this exhibition and its catalogue, but further criticisms are relevant here. Susan Vogel writes:

*Africa Explores* seeks to focus on Africa... Western perceptions of Africa... are entirely secondary here... My working procedure began with looking at hundreds of paintings, sculptures, photographs, and objects of all kinds, and with reading or listening to as many African artists and critics as possible... Five loosely defined strains emerged that run through this century. Though the strains themselves are clearly distinguishable and describable, they converge and overlap at times, and individual artists occasionally move from one to another. The ‘strains’ themselves are: Traditional, New Functional, Urban, International, ‘Extinct’ [sic]. I have argued elsewhere that their definition reveals a conceptualisation of Africa based upon the following paradigms: Africa/Europe, craft/art, functional/aesthetic, traditional/contemporary, rural/urban. I do not intend to repeat the discussion here beyond insisting that as a structure of ideas with which to comprehend 20th century and after-Independence Africa, this is empirically and intellectually untenable. Nevertheless, by manipulating rural/urban contrasts in regard to form and patronage, this paradigm serves to enable the invention of a set of Grayburn-like categories (‘strains’); but whereas Grayburn has six — ‘plus extinction’ — Susan Vogel has four — plus ‘extinct’. Vogel continues:

This book is organised according to these strains, which should be considered conceptual tools rather than sequential or developmental phases, for they provide not a history of 20th century African art but an interpretation of it. Nor are they rigid or exclusive, since it is clear that some artists and some works can pass from one strain to another, and rarely is a trait limited to only one category.

First, this discussion is reminiscent of a hundred and one others, across the pages of books, catalogues (whether academic-museum or sale-room) and accession registers, where debates over ‘tribal’ attribution take place: does the piece belong to this tribe or another; this feature is shared by that tribe and others; here is an object that crosses boundaries or ‘open frontiers’. Here too, there are ready-made categories into which things — and people — have to be fitted. It seems to me that in this respect, at least, there is a marked analogy between the categorical forms and procedures of both Nelson Grayburn and Susan Vogel, on the one hand, and the tribal classifications that characterise the proto-history of African art studies.

Second, it must be insisted upon that the problems are not with categories as such. Categories are an indelible part of human life, without which there is no art, no language, and no society. The relationships between categories of people and categories of things, between aesthetic and social categories, are nothing if not complex, and we do inherit knowledge and practice that presuppose categories and their inter-relationship. The problem here is essentially with the specific categories these commentators have employed.

Third, therefore, the very fact that Susan Vogel describes her ‘strains’ as an interpretation of history suggests that, far from being categories that emerged within the processes of social life, they are a means that she has developed in her attempt to understand what is happening in Africa. Susan Vogel later describes *Africa Explores* as a “working proposal... that invites elaboration and improvement”. In other words, they have merely provisional status (as indeed
any explanatory theory can only have). The question, then, is: whose categories are they? And the answer is, of course, Susan Vogel's, just as the interpretation of history that Africa Explores gives us is also hers.

Fourth, we are warned at the outset that things and people can jump from one 'strain' to another; but does this not suggest that their usefulness as categories is to be questioned? Perhaps there are other categories and 'strains' that might be more stable. The essential problem here, I would suggest, is that neither the categories themselves, not the paradigm contrasts that underpin them, have their origins in the lives of the people whose things are the subject matter of Africa Explores. In that case, no matter how provisional one might insist they are, their maintenance is nevertheless a cart-before-the-horse fiction. Moreover, Susan Vogel's insistence on reiterating these categories throughout the book is one of its most irritating features. Indeed, had she simply omitted the introduction, and deleted all reference to her 'strains', she could have released her discussion from the straightjacket they impose.

Fifth, an interpretation of history on the basis of 'strains' that are, in effect, granted pan-African status, suggests, at least by implication, that across Africa art produced within each category, and artists working — or boxed — within each category will manifest some essential similarity. The best one can say about that is that it is not proven, much as it sounds like a version of the 'unanimism' rejected by Paulin Houtondji, Kwame Appiah, and others.

Of course there are distinct functional complexes in the sense that the mask carver, the fancy coffin maker, the sign painter, and the 'Fine Art' painter are each working within particular traditions and institutions of practice, but we lack the detailed studies of such practices that might enable a comparative discussion on any basis other than the most superficial. In any case, as already noted above, different countries have different art histories, which might suggest that before we compare glass painters in Senegal with sign painters in Zaire (both considered together in the 'Urban' category) we might consider Senegalese glass painters in relation to the 'Ecole de Dakar'. Moreover, we have little to go on by way of studies of local patronage, criticism, and evaluation.

It is perhaps for this reason that Susan Vogel is able to write on page 16 of Africa Explores: "Visual links between current and past African art are surprisingly hard to find." As I have remarked elsewhere, it all depends where you are. In South Africa, for example, local tradition had been hijacked by apartheid, and this fact alone renders that tradition unavailable to artists in the culture of resistance. In Nigeria, on the other hand, artists are very conscious of their inheritance from the past. In any case, the links do not have to be visual; if Bruce Onobrakpeya, for example, illustrates a folk tale about a tortoise and a hare, he is certainly creating continuity between past and present. The fact that in the past the folk tale may not have received visual form does not represent lack of continuity, but suggests that the visual is not the only medium of that continuity.

VIII

Nevertheless, and whatever criticisms one might have, (and this essay concentrates on just one element of Africa Explores), a service was provided to an African art world that participates in the dominant art world of Europe and European America, within which Africa is placed as a footnote via Primitivism that paradoxically underpins European. For anyone, whether African or not, who has lived in Africa, Africa Explores provides a mixture of the familiar and the
unfamiliar. Some interesting things were left out: South Africa, North Africa, Ethiopia, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Oshogbo..., and one wonders about the prominence given to Chéri Samba and similar work, perhaps as the acceptable face of contemporary African art. This theme is pursued in *Africa Today* and *Out of Africa*; whereas, for all its faults *Africa Explores* did attempt to give a wider view, rather than merely pander to a jaded European and European American taste for the New Exotic, the quirky and the bizarre.

Moreover, Vogel suggests that in the contesting of colonial rule, one available strategy was for local people to connive at the invention of a ‘traditional’ Africa, as a means of asserting an identity not to be overruled by colonialism. Pursuing this and other ideas, rather than imposing a set of ready-made categories, would have made for a better book. I dream, of course, of discovering an Africanist version of Lucy Lippard’s *Mixed Blessings*, New York, 1990, and her discussion
of naming, telling, mixing and so forth: "each chapter is defined by a gerund because the gerund is the grammatical form of process," and certainly not categories within which artists are constituted. There are all manner of particular, indigenous, functional networks of patronage, production, and evaluation, and artists do address common themes across these networks and institutions; but we shall never see any of this as long as we constitute artists within ready-made curatorial boxes.

IX

The last time I was in Nigeria was April-May 1990, and I spent time in Ibadan and in Lagos, among other places. After an absence of eight years I was struck by many things to do with art, not least that there was a lot of it about. In Lagos I was able to visit the national collection of contemporary art housed at the National Theatre.

Also in Lagos, Jankara market was full of the most astonishingly varied hand-woven textiles, combining all manner of textures and colours. In Ibadan, mural and sign painting was everywhere in evidence. I was surprised to find the kind of art popularised by Ulli Beier in the 1960s as urban/popular/naive/commercial was still in evidence. However, in contrast to the stereotypes about this kind of art (self-taught, and so forth) it was evident that sign-painting was produced within several traditions of practice. For instance, close to the entrance to the campus of Ibadan University, there was the workshop of Sola Olusola, who once did an apprenticeship in the Mokonla area of Ibadan. He now had his own apprentice, but although there was not so much work, it filled his stomach. Panels surrounded the workshop displayed his skill and gave evidence of his abilities as an artist.

Olusola's work gives equal evidence of the kind of selectivity, even within Susan Vogel's 'Urban' category, a selectivity that promotes the work of some artists at the expense of others. As with other forms of categorisation, selectivity may not be wrong in itself: it depends upon who is making the selection, of course, and the circumstances thereof. If that selectivity is based upon local criteria of value, it is only proper that these are made known, and a detailed study of public art in a city like Ibadan would be extraordinarily valuable. It would also be one kind of step along the way of proceeding to a position in which it was no longer possible for anyone to gain an audience for generalities of the kind that introduce and underpin *Africa Explores*, or the exoticism reinvented by André Magnin for Jean-Christophe Pigozzi.