Art and Art from Africa
The Two Sides of The Gap

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Visual art is only partly visual; the invisible part is what consecrates it within the art system: those preconditioned notions, sets of underlying discourses and a ceremonial of approaching, handling and understanding the object as art, which Bourdieu referred to as the 'habitus'.

This characterises the art production in industrialised societies, summarised as modern art. It is no less valid for how art functions and is integrated into the structure of other societies and from other epochs, where the production and use of what we call art manifests a significant and coherent system. This system might represent a completely different 'notion of art', but it has its specific codes and ceremonials. 'Art' may be a recent, and to a certain degree, western invention, but structurally integrated systems of visual production have existed and exist, whatever term we apply. It may also be assumed that visual commodities have been and are manufactured more or less alongside these systems to satisfy different needs.

ART OF A CONTINENT'S PAST

'Africa: The Art of a Continent' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, announced the ambition to make manifest a unity by representing the visual culture of the entire continent, perceived in terms of art history rather than ethnography. It disregarded national boundaries and segmented its survey, for practical reasons of presentation, into seven broad areas. The resulting mass effect could be seen as a new, even if not revolutionary, approach. One might question whether Africa any more than, say, the Americas, is suitable for this kind of summarising representation, which risks the disintegration of cultural entities. Part of this disintegration stemmed from a relativisation of notions of cultural continuity and spatiotemporality produced by the confrontation of exhibits from the Nile Valley and the Rift Valley, humanity's cradle, as well as by charcoal drawings and rock paintings by the San people in southern Africa spanning twenty-seven thousand years up to today.

Thus, the exhibition offered a temptation to forget about paradigms and systems and to perceive a history of art liquefied into an endless flow of — polymorphic
and fascinating — visual production. Given the premises of the exhibition design, the presentation by geography rather than by epochs and cultures was to some degree validated by the vast time and space covered, and by complex interrelations, about which there is still so little research. The track drawn around the continent was carried out with a rare blend of vision and respect: entering by ancient Egypt and leaving by the Maghrebian north counteracted, for instance, an ingrained primitising approach to ‘Africa’ by referring to two major systems with different connotations.

**BETWEEN TERMITES AND TOURISTS**

The track around the continent encircled what is generally regarded as the main art of the black African past, the extremely expressive sculptural production primarily consisting of ancestor figures and masks. The time-span of this category is somewhat blurred at both ends. The distant past drops out of sight by the early 19th century, as a result of the physical decay of materials (mostly wood) and the effects of climate, and probably also due to the fact that the objects were not produced to survive into eternity but to function temporarily in collective living contexts of social representation and education.

If the boundary in our time is equally blurred, it is through cultural decay as a consequence of confrontations with colonialism, missionary zeal and outside markets. Within a process of interventions and influences, it is often difficult to determine exactly when what was once an autochthonous system came to its end and when the production of its visual signifiers began to imitate itself, making copies for the collector, for the market and airport art for tourists.

The catalogue texts left boundaries floating, but ‘case studies’ threw light on
the course of events and of changing attitudes. One such case originated from Tanzania, until recently a neglected area. Tradition says that a so called ‘Presentation Figure’ was sculpted by a Nyamwezi artist by the name of Buzuzya, who came to the Kerebe people at the Lake Victoria island of Bukerebe. He carved it for the local king, Machunda. It functioned as a secret source of power, and was kept in the royal house for Machunda and his successor Rukonge from around 1870 until a German military expedition dethroned Rukonge in 1885. The Germans took the sculpture, but it subsequently fell into the hands of the missionary White Fathers who used it as propaganda against ‘paganism’, beating it with sticks and removing its sexual organs. It is now in a private collection in London and was temporarily on loan to the Royal Academy exhibition.

AN AFRICAN SYSTEM

The new overall picture of this art system — polymorphic and inventive, yet with an astonishing comparability between its subdivisions — mediated by both exhibition and by catalogue, is that of aesthetic mobility: overlappings, appropriations and exchanges along trade routes, sometimes across the continent. The transactions may have been carried out by traders or emissaries or by artists functioning in both roles, as seems to have been the case at Bukerebe, and in some regions even by migrating artists’ guilds. The stereotype of a closed, cultural immobility is finally done away with. Indirectly, this dynamic interchange at the same time bears witness to the amazing inner consistency and maturity of this art as an integrated system.

Noting that the introduction of the national state model has finally proved rather destructive in most of Africa and asking from which precolonial structures African countries could possibly draw strength, Basil Davidson in his The Search for Africa, 1994, comes to a parallel conclusion about the specific character and role of classical African art. He talks about a community consciousness and a sense of belonging — a system — which existed throughout African societies, whether tribal or kingdom. It “certainly took shape in a very wide range of forms and images”.

He perceives these objects as carriers of beliefs and intuitions that “may be said to have embodied Africa’s distinctive and original form of civilisation”, thus hinting at an alternative interrogation of a social, artistic and cultural African past, positioned as far from western primitivism and formalistic exploitation as from a nostalgic African traditionalism, digging among what Fanon called “empty shells”, with its back turned to the future.

‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’, was part of ‘africa95’, a mega-festival whose success is yet to be determined. Its modern counterpart exhibition was ‘Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa’ at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, whose ambition was to depart from those recent exhibitions which conceive contemporary African art as isolated and more or less neo-tribal. Generally, it can be said to have succeeded in marking a decisive moment in the western reception of modern African art. It was the first major exhibition to centre its attention on the modern art system in Africa and to attempt to draft its ninety year old history.

THE GAP

In order to try to specify the paradigmatic role of ‘Seven Stories’ and to understand the relations between the two exhibitions, I want first to focus on the gap between the two art systems they represent, and to deal with the treacherous idea of an unbroken continuity between them. I disagree with John Picton, writing in the
‘Art of a Continent’ catalogue, when he champions this idea, repudiating the ambition to keep apart different notions of art as ‘‘another absurdly simplistic division of west African art into the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’’. To me, this negation of a more serious analysis of the distinction characterises a general tendency today to disregard historical and art historical contexts.

There is a wide though somewhat diffuse gap between a previous African art system which perished and a new one, which was introduced, for instance, by the Nigerian portrait painter Aina Onabolu as early as the first decade of this century, to be completed later by the first modernists, but whose infrastructure and wider anchoring in the society of many African countries has yet to be formulated. Of course, the production of a range of visual commodities has gone on to satisfy different local needs. These objects and images, sometimes distinguished as ‘popular’, sometimes as ‘transitional’, are integrated into neither of the two art systems. The problems began when western market interests and cultural stereotypes intervened and promoted this in-between production as the authentic contemporary art. Exhibitions such as ‘Magiciens de la terre’ and ‘Africa Hoy’ adopted and confirmed this wilful error and turned it virtually into a pitched battle against modern African artists.

John Picton’s statement that the simple fact that ‘‘masked performers and art school trained painters inhabit the same city’’ should prove his view that a categorisation which seeks to separate the ‘traditional’ from the ‘contemporary’ has no value, manifests an unawareness of the problems connected to the blurred categories of African art. And besides, does it prove anything that Picasso, Ecole des Beaux-Arts professors and harlequins inhabited the same Paris?

SEVEN MODERN STORIES

What troubles me somewhat more is that the initiating and co-ordinating curator of ‘Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa’, Clementine Deliss, seemed to have been trained in the same kind of thinking. Her vague rendering in the Whitechapel catalogue of the background to the exhibition was remarkable, as it leaves the recent museological history, the one which was here at last to be corrected, quite diffuse. This lack of overall curatorial clarity on crucial matters made it even more difficult to understand in what specific way the exhibition was conceived to establish a paradigmatic shift — which it nonetheless does — a circumstance that weakened its impact. It was, however, in part compensated by the dedicated contributions of some of the African artists and curators who co-curated the sections of the exhibition. Five sections sketched a partial African history by concentrating on seven countries, Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa, constructing different angles of approach and different ‘stories’.

A DIALECTIC SYNTHESIS

The Nigerian section, one of the opening stories, can be said to pivot around a series of tiny drawings by Uche Okeke, the instigator of the so-called Zaria rebellion in the Fifties. The drawings are characterised by a dialectic vigour: modernity in confrontation with the drastic humour of popular tales and a linear agility partly informed by traditional body painting. They mark a turning point. Their author once wrote a programme, ‘The Natural Synthesis’ for a group of fellow students at Nigeria’s first art academy, who demanded that their own African culture be integrated into the curriculum. The text was an initiative towards a cultural independence which started as a sophisticated discourse on
“an art with the new philosophy of the new age”. It comprised an awareness of the fact that the system of the past was gone but that an inheritance remained, a focusing on living popular traditions and an analysis of the multicultural dynamics of a national Nigerian identity with a creative interplay of reciprocally adapting tribal subcultures in the wind of modernisation. It appears to have been the germ of a genuine postcolonial African discourse.

Today, the term ‘Natural Synthesis’ seems to have become the magic formula of neo-traditionalism in general. My own view is that the original multicultural thinking was derailed by the Nigerian civil war, whose wounds inflamed the dialogue between national/local identity.

NEOTRIBALISM OR UNIVERSALISM?

When the idea of a synthesis was taken up again around Uche Okeke’s teaching inNsukka, it apparently drifted towards a flight from the world and the nation to the village, a retreat to a cult of local traditions of body painting and paintings on the walls of mudhouses, uli. As the traditionally abstract idiom of these at a superficial glance is close to international non-objective art, dialectics seems to have been rendered redundant.

I may be unjust here, as an African artist with little sympathy for fundamentalist regionalism or for hiding behind traditional forms, but the widespread reference to uli among eastern Nigerian artists today, a refrain in the section’s chorus, appears to me an alibi rather than an alternative, fitting neatly into the primitivist expectations in the West.

There is a counterline of ‘universalism’, of artists for whom the world has been their constituency, to use the words of the curator of the Nigerian section, Chika Okeke. A significant figure in this respect is the painter Gani Odutokun, who died in an accident this year. His remarkable recent paintings in liquidised oils, merging informal and classical sensitivity, ought to have been more adequately represented. Another pioneer is Erhabor Emokpae, whose abstract painting

Erhabor Emokpae, The Last Supper, 1963, Oil on board.
Struggle between life and death from 1962, with its emblematic consistency, is outstanding in the section, while Chika Okeke, with his big seven-part painting Tyranny and Democracy, 1994, convincingly represented a younger generation. The Wooden Masquerade sculpture of El Anatsui, a tower, a shrouded figure, a throng of people, is a tense and complex form, a complex dialogue between the material, the power-saw and blow-torch and a painful African history. Trying to squeeze his philosophically discursive work into uli aesthetics can only sustain my suspicion that there is some kind of an ‘art political correctness’ at play here.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, who, together with Uche Okeke, was one of the Zaria rebels but originated from another region, has followed his own line, developing a specific, plastic-based graphic technique into a method of production which today allows him to blend narrative and tectonics. Unfortunately, these qualities of his ‘shrine sets’ were difficult to access by an overcrowded presentation.

IN THE VOID OF A MISSING HABITUS

In the second opening story, Sudan and Ethiopia, El Salahi’s painting The Last Sound from 1964-65 presented another kind of amalgamation, firmly rooted in European modernism and its sovereign appropriations. The painting’s surface oscillates, like Miró’s paintings from the Thirties, between that of a pictorial physicality, a sky, a universe and a sheet of a script. In the centre, a frontality is accentuated by a human face in African mask style, which is inscribed among crescents and Arabic calligraphy. It thus refers to a Sudanese polyethnicity, but in a way that may be associated less with a notion of synthesis than with notions of integration, incorporation and inclusion, words that the curator Salah Hassan used in the catalogue, implying relations of power and domination.

Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian from Ethiopia deserved more extensive coverage. Boghossian, even more embedded in a western surrealist-abstract lineage than El Salahi, was represented by some small five-finger exercises from the late Eighties. In Power, 1973, by Desta (a glimpse of an interesting universalist artist), the double sense of the notion of power, technology and domination was transformed into a dynamic pictorial-spatial structure which combined machine abstraction with organic complexity.

These three artists returned in the Sixties from an international art scene to teach in the art academies of their native countries — El Salahi in Khartoum, together with, among others, Ahmad Shibrain, and Desta and Boghossian in Addis Ababa. In an art field within a highly restricted social sphere, they had an immediate impact on emerging artistic milieus, functioning like queen bees around which the swarms clustered. But if some of the younger artists, like Sudanese Hassan Musa, revolted against the fashionable ethnocentricity of the early Khartoum artists with arguments from Fanon and Cabral, they apparently did not manage to translate this into an equally new artistic production.

This raises the question of the habitus. The kind of position-takings that for long empowered the European modernist field has not been transferable together with the rest of western instruction to African scenes, not even in countries with considerable traditions of education. In isolation, with an as yet poorly established habitus, network and social root systems, artists’ enunciations wander like lost echoes. In addition, social conflicts and political instability in these countries have inhibited continuity or prompted the artists’ exodus. It is significant that this section is curated by a diasporan curator who has had to collect most of the work from the Sudanese and Ethiopian diasporas.

The opening stories narrate two early tracks or journeys of African modernism: that for Nigeria, and that for Sudan and Ethiopia, where modern idioms were
informed by different religious cultures, Islam and Coptic Christianity. One curatorial difficulty seems to have been a conflict between representation and selection, in a gallery whose limited space called for more concentration, somewhat fewer artists, more central works.

On the other hand, a dramatisation of the display — which seems to have been an initial curatorial strategy — produced a fatal miscarriage in the Senegalese section, where the co-curator, artist El Hadji Sy, staged a reminder of performance-based Laboratoire Agit-Art activities initiated in the Seventies, largely though a rather provoking over-presentation of his own work. As is often the case with static museum reconstructions of performance art, his exhibits were reduced to inert stage props, which blocked any clear perspective on either Senegalese contemporary art in general or the paintings of his co-exhibitor, Souleymane Keita.

If this incongruity raised questions about curatorial ethics, the stories from east Africa raised questions about professional competence. The School of Fine Arts at the Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, was a pioneering institution and once one of Africa’s key art academies. To choose in an introduction to Africa’s modern art history to leave out its historical contributions and to concentrate on its decline under Idi Amin’s dictatorship, was a poorly considered decision, which amounted to giving priority to sensational imagery of war and suffering over a discriminatory and relevant art historical account.

But given that such a choice was made, there should have been some curatorial analysis of how the artists understood and negotiated their situation in relation to the murderous political oppression. It was not enough to present unstructured interviews in the catalogue, as does the co-curator Wanjiku Nyachae, where for instance an artist rather naively recounts how they worked on a medal for General Amin, referring to the “great deal of meaning” the medal embodied for the artists, for Amin and for the soldiers who received it. Likewise, a minimum of critical estimation of the level of representation was demanded. In the Kenyan story, the lack of it has lead to a confusion of ambitions among Kenyan artists to “take art to the people”, the sisi kwa sisi movement, and commercially populist intentions of a European directed gallery. The result did not belong in a seriously curated exhibition.

**AUTOPSY AND VISION**

David Koloane’s very concise and creative solution of the South African section disregarded routine and concentrated on a political reminder and an artistic vision, kept apart yet linked together. As an African during apartheid, Koloane was not allowed to visit museums and galleries without being accompanied by a white person. Yet he is an experienced curator, co-curating ‘Art from South Africa’ in Oxford five years ago. Some of the many issues in a South Africa in reconstruction that he has had to consider were actual already then, and some were illuminated by an emerging post-apartheid establishment which staged ‘Africus’, the Johannesburg Biennale. But he has cut through the knot.

He deepened, not avoided, the issue of art and politics by dedicating a room to Steve Biko with works that comment on his murder, defining political commitment in terms of responses to martyrdom and to the still valid goals of Black Consciousness, applying throughout the section the ANC’s desegregational principle of no colour distinction — a principle which will hopefully reach out to the world today as a strong antifundamentalist message.

In the Biko room, the fluorescing factuality of Paul Stopforth’s big drawing of Biko’s body laid out on a table, executed in graphite and wax and informed and
conditioned by forensic photos, can be compared to the visionary transposition of the subject into a both more abstract and a more crude cosmic drama of dismemberment in Ezrom Legae's *Chicken* series. A gaze from outside and a vision of assault from inside. If it says something about white and black art, it would be that at the time, around 1980, a white artist like Stopforth could openly risk manifesting his anger as provocation and solidarity, while Legae had to conceal his in an enigma.

In his work with the Thupelo Art Project, Koloane has been promoting, in collaboration with the late Bill Ainsley, abstract painting and experimentation with media within the community of black artists. Not long ago, this was widely considered politically incorrect, "a buying into American cultural imperialist agendas", as Ivor Powell words it in the catalogue. But from the artist's view, it was a revolt and refusal to be locked into a segregated genre, township realism, and a claiming of unrestricted freedom of expression.

With respect to this freedom, the remaining part of Koloane's section displays a dialogue between black and white artists using the language of abstract expressionism. If the landscape genre has been penetrated and coloured by the Native Trust and the Land Act, which has excluded the black majority from occupying/owning 88% of the country's 'landscapes', then this colour obviously can be reflected ironically and sadly from both sides, as in Kevin Atkinson's blazing *White African Landscape* and in Koloane's *Fertility*, a township-townscape-landscape mouldering away like a refuse dump.
Ezrom Legae, *Drawing from Chicken Series C*, 1979, Conte on paper, 35.5 x 47.5 cm.

WHO CURATES THE OTHER?

How to curate the art of another culture? How to select, how to interpret and present it as a broker to the receiving public? And how to guarantee that an exhibition generates reciprocal experience without simply functioning as a one-way import of cultural entertainment in a long tradition of colonial shows? Those are some of the crucial methodological and ethical issues of curating today in increasing intercultural and international exchange.

How, for instance, was the curatorial collaboration structured and carried through between those representing the curated side and those on the initiating-receiving side, seen as relatively so much richer in resources? Was the resultant experience brought back to the places from which it emanated? ‘Seven Stories’ represented an important step by having its sections co-curated by African artists and curators. It was originally intended also to be shown in Africa, but this plan has fallen through.

A second failure of itinerary renders even more critical the question of the division of curatorial responsibility: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (SoHo) in New York, which originally planned to take the exhibition, seems to have had second thoughts. If this means that the exhibition is looked upon as a failure, then whose failure is it? In connection with the Johannesburg Biennial there was much talk about ‘soft’ African curating. Should ‘Seven Stories’ be interpreted as yet another sign of Africa not being prepared to curate itself, it would, in my opinion, be highly unfair and set us back ten years.

I had the opportunity to observe at least part of the production process of the exhibition. It was obvious that turning over the sections to domestic co-curators in no way removed basic responsibility from the co-ordinating curator in London, anthropologist Clementine Deliss. It is the ground concept, designed, controlled and governed in the economically powerful centre, that predetermines the construction of the whole exhibition enterprise. The amount of professionalism with which it is conceived, with which the relevant art scenes are chosen, the themes or stories envisioned, the co-curators selected and the co-ordination carried out, inevitably influences the final success or failure of the whole as well as of the parts.

I have already pointed to the curatorial introduction in the catalogue and its defective description of the background and strategy of the project, indicating an insufficiently professional analysis of the art historically, critical and curatorial problems involved. This uncertainty, which contributed to the delicacy of the whole enterprise, also accounted for the two failed stories and co-curators, marked by unprofessionalism (Kenya and Uganda) and by high-handed self-promotion (Senegal).

The issue of responsibility should be part of the follow-up debate around this exhibition, which despite its shortcomings manifested a turn and a new chapter in exhibiting contemporary African art. The failures in London should not be taken as a pretext for an existing, prejudiced reluctance in the West to recognise Africa as an integral part of modern art’s world scene, on which it should now be entitled to present itself.