Africa, Art Criticism and the Big Commentary

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Where art production is integrated into a highly advanced information society, the work and its textual mediation more or less become part of one and the same productive process. In parts of the world where information circulation is poor, on the other hand, visual production is left to function by other, more precarious conditions. To transfer discourses and notions from the one situation to the other easily becomes misleading. That is partly why the theme set for a conference in November of 1996 in London, 'Art Criticism and Africa', seemed to be too narrowly defined.¹

In most sub-Saharan African countries — and for that part also in the West — critically and theoretically informed writing on contemporary African art is generally still to be developed. In Africa, as elsewhere where modern art has become the expression of cultural contemporaneity but where the cultural infrastructure remains insufficiently structured and where the circulation of information is scanty, the question of a professional art criticism in a western sense is so far reduced to a detail of a much bigger problem: the need for a broad basis of domestically-produced, published and circulated texts on visual art.

As a basically intellectual system, modern art has been framed by its symbiosis with writings on art. The different levels of textualisation account for a crucial part of the diverging conditions and the unequal status to be found in the contemporary art world as the circulation of written information on art represents both a knitting element and a power.

This essay has been occasioned by the conference mentioned above. But we do not intend to review or comment upon it. We will instead try to sketch, with western examples, how the modern textualisation of art and visual culture was constructed. And within that course of events, we will recapitulate the genesis of western art criticism. This is in order to give a background against which, in our opinion, a discussion about critical writing on art in Africa could be

¹ The conference was organised by the Courtauld Institute in London and papers from it have been published in Art Criticism and Africa, Essays on Art Criticism in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Egypt, Saffron Books and Eastern Art Report in conjunction with AICA, British Section, London, 1997.
structured. Well aware of the faulty documentation that exists of contemporary African art scenes, in our approach to the African situation we abstain from a historical account, which necessarily would become watered down by abstractions and generalisations. We will instead try to approach some basic problems while resorting to jump cuts and commenting upon some works dealing with contemporary art in or from Africa.

THE BIG COMMENTARY

A persistent question arises in connection with the conference. How to explain that, with the convening of a number of Africans involved in art and writing on art from various African countries as well as the diaspora, the issue of the basic lack of infrastructure was not really addressed? Is it an issue one prefers to avoid? Do there exist psychological complexes among Africans when faced with the heartbreaking lead in producing and handling texts held, not unexpectedly, by cultures with long traditions of writing and publishing? Is there, to make it more incisive, a prick in the African self-esteem produced by the fact that it was mainly European pens that interpreted precolonial African visual production and reinstated it as a significant chapter of what is called 'world art', and is this perceived as a sophisticated kind of domination? If so, we want to argue that it can be seen from another perspective.

This process of consecration through writings, of 'listing' images, objects and monuments as belonging to the categories of 'art' and 'cultural heritage' and as being worthy of preservation and of cultural consummation, has nothing specifically to do with relations between Europe and Africa or between text-based cultures and oral cultures. It has occurred throughout the history of recent centuries. And not least in Europe itself.

Interviewed in a programme on the television channel Arte, the French artist Arman, talking about his collection of classical African sculptures, boasted about western collectors rescuing valuable art objects from being destroyed by neglect or by intertribal conflicts in Africa.2 His patronising air revealed an ignorance not least about his own part of the world. It has been estimated that 99% of what is called the western material cultural heritage, from classical antiquity to the early Renaissance, has been lost due to destruction through negligence, wars, religious intolerance, simply greed, or recycling, for instance, marbles lost to lime-furnaces or bronze sculptures to weapons production.

Visual cultures have always lived under the threat of disposal in climates of changing values and taste. Most of what has survived had, sooner or later, to be rescued through textual safety nets, through the writings and other activities of cultural élites reclaiming them as regalia of cultural heritage and refinement, a social process touched upon by Pierre Bourdieu in his book La Distinction.3

This issue was taken up in an article in Die Zeit which focused, as one example, on the cathedral in Aachen.4 Its Byzantine cupola mosaic, which had survived centuries, was inconsiderately removed in 1709 and replaced by a stucco ceiling in the late Baroque style. In 1881, when Baroque was regarded with loathing, this ceiling was also dumped, only to be deeply missed some years later when art historians like Gurlitt, Riegl and Wölflin, through their scholarly writings, rehabilitated the Baroque.

Perhaps even more ironically, Arman’s insinuation that intentional war destruction of art works was something specific to Africa rebounds on its
French source. The classical example in this context is the ruthless ravaging by French Napoleonic troops of German churches in the conquered Rhineland, whose mediaeval altarpieces were looked upon as despicable fetishes of an antiquated social order. A deep resentment on the German side triggered, after the fall of Napoleon, an extensive cultural restoration. Instrumental to it were the inventions of art societies and museums as well as of a structure for the protection of monuments. A mediaeval art historiography was established. Thus a leap was produced in the history of written safety-netting, for which we choose to appropriate the term the Big Commentary.2

A SUPER MACHINERY AND A STATE OF SHORTAGE

This netting has since been directed towards visual products of non-western cultures such as the African and the Oceanic. Around the Eurocentric 'art supermachinery' that it represents, objects and images from further geographical, historical and prehistoric areas have been drawn into the textual network, the extension of which has been part of the completion of the current western/global notion of art. It is easy to point to the overtones of a Eurocentric and imperialistic hegemony in the process. A number of annexed and misrepresented art histories will have to be reclaimed and rewritten from more complex perspectives. Two things should nevertheless be noted. This implies that these cultures establish their own Big Commentary; and the global listing may nevertheless have preserved some of their riches.

The examples we have given above may evoke a picture of the Big Commentary as being retrospect and centrifugal, while the opposite is the case. The writing has overwhelmingly concentrated on western European contemporary art and has been interlaced with modernism as a working up of its proceedings, productions, programmes and prospects. It is when we compare the situation in Africa with this prodigious circulation of texts on art in the West that the former's state of shortage stands out as fatal. The function and impact of western circulation is perhaps best summed up by Pierre Bourdieu's term the habitus, the general knowledge about art and about how to deal with art integrated in society through education and through social processes of power and class identity.3 Habitus stands for a know-how which keeps the field of modern art going, and it is mainly produced by the Big Commentary.

In his field theory, Bourdieu points to the fact that every move and every position-taking within the art field comprise a consciousness of the field's previous history. This highlights the crucial role played, for instance, by art historical surveys as maps and log-books. The lack of such basic historical structuring is perhaps the weakest point of the African shortage, leaving artists and art fields in Africa with few navigational instruments of their own. Let us make the experiment of comparing the number of art histories on 20th century modern art in Europe with those on modern African art. In counting those produced by native authors, we shall not include for instance American or Japanese contributions on western modernism, nor the rather few western attempts to write the history of contemporary African art — which are generally not very satisfactory, with the possible exception of the early survey by Marshall W. Mount.4 While we would most probably count hundreds of European works, in sub-Saharan Africa we are left with one single historical survey, 20th Century Art of Africa by Koju Fosu, a 200-page volume which was published in Zaria, Nigeria, in 1986, where the Ghanaian art historian was then

5 Ibid, p 46: "Der Grosse Kommentar, der mit dem 18. Jahrhundert einsetzte und den man inzwischen Diskurs nennt" – "The Big Commentary, which appeared in the 18th century and which later on has been called discourse".


teaching.

What gives it weight is the assessment Koju Fosu makes of the shift from the old to the new paradigm of art in Africa, applying the research made by Ola Oloidi on the Nigerian pioneer artist Aina Onabolu, who, defying colonial prejudices, appropriated academic realism and a European notion of fine arts. Also his narrative of the first period of independence and of the role of modern pioneer artists in designing symbols for an African self-esteem is an important contribution.

If Fosu's work is impaired by a certain lack of theoretical structuring, this might be connected to the fact that he doesn't clearly distinguish between 'expressions' and 'notions' of art. While the European Cubists appropriated structural expressions from African sculptures, renewing modernism but not changing it as a system (the paintings continued to hang on the same gallery walls), artists like Onabolu who took up the European paradigm together with academic realism performed a principal shift in how to use and how to think art.

This slight confusion of terms makes Fosu forget the shift of paradigm he is noting and construct an African perspective by defining the new expressions of 20th century art on the continent as "derived from a tradition ... consisting of engravings and paintings ... on cave walls". To us, it appears as a somewhat too-sweeping geo-chauvinism. More serious is the fact that the use of the notion of derivation — as opposed to the notion of appropriation — seems to have hindered him from analysing the double process of sequestration which takes place from the moment when modern African artists leave academic realism to participate in modern art's exchange: that is, the western sequestration of African traditions and the domestic appropriation of western modernism's transformation of them. It is a double process which most probably contains one of the main keys to 20th century African art history. It has at the same time produced problems and handicaps and remains to be penetrated.

The restricted flow of information among parts of Africa seems also to have obstructed the analysis of social and political contexts and general historical patterns. The author resorts to merely listing artists, schools and workshops as soon as he moves away from his home ground, Nigeria and Ghana. And finally, it may be added that a practical obstacle to building a base for a more informed art historical writing on modern African art is the inaccessibility of the material, an inaccessibility of which Koju Fosu's book in itself is an example. We could not even find it in Nigeria.

**ART CRITICISM IN RETROSPECT**

Art criticism as we understand it today has as its genesis a specific line within the western Big Commentary. It was first established in the 18th century with the philosophical 'Salons', the commentaries on the Paris Salon, that Diderot regularly published in Grimm's *Correspondence littéraire* (1759-81). These were soon surrounded by copy-cats, and thereby initiated art criticism as a category of writing. It was part and product of the market-related public space of bourgeois society. With the technical modernisation of printing and a fast-expanding press, the number of French art critics jumped from 300 to 450 in the earlier decades of the 19th century.

Even before the big battle of modern art, critics became involved in aesthetic conflicts, advocating opposite schools, for instance in the case Romanticism
versus Classicism. Acting as a representative and a protagonist of Romanticism, Baudelaire took its logic beyond the limits of the time and can be said to have initiated modern art criticism. Still, the bulk of art critics voiced for a long time the views of the institutions and/or the taste of the public rather than supported struggling artists.

Pierre Bourdieu defines the modernism that arose in Paris in the mid-19th century as a process towards art's autonomy. He speaks of the field of restricted production in the sense that a growing number of artists refused to serve the dominating bourgeois class and the big market. They abstained from immediate success in order to concentrate on artistic problems and renewal, whilst most critics acted during this period as watch-dogs for the establishment and furiously attacked the dissidents. Bourdieu's theory makes one side of the role of the art critic visible, that of the conceiver. He stresses that art as value is not a creation of the artist alone but is produced by the field and by its different agents: for instance, the art dealer who invests his good name when launching an artist and the critic who argues or contests the value of an art work. The critic himself acts as a player in the field. "All critics declare not only their judgement of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it."15

The impartial role of an aesthetic judge — if that ever existed — is thus problematised by the partial role of the conceiver, the protagonist, the defender (defender at least of certain subjectively vindicated values). But this is only one aspect of art criticism. As the artist is more or less bound to her/his position-taking, the critic is bound to the logic of her/his judgements and to the critical consequence of her/his discourse, as nobody can write criticism in all ways the winds blow and still be taken seriously. At the same time, this critical self-coherence is to be combined with the spirit of reconsideration and with a ruthless urge to investigate, characteristics a true critic has in common with a scientist.

Art criticism thus produces its own authority, while functioning on several levels, some of which date from Diderot: as a party of an art dialogue, as an inquiry into social and political contexts mediated by analyses of art works, as a referee checking the rules of the game in the field of visual production, whereby a chief rule is the autonomy of the artist — and of the critic. With the increasing merging of the agent roles in the field and the crossover among the activities of critics, curators and artists, this critical heritage has become productive in wider contexts.

We are at the end of the modern era, wrote the president of AICA, Kim Levin, where the modernist creed of ideological absolutes, technological perfectibility and utopian faith in an utopian future has ceased to be believable. The standard history of 20th century art, she continued, has been grossly biased and enormously incomplete not least in terms of ethnicity, gender and geography. Today, postcolonial, post-totalitarian and postmodern art intersect at unexpected angles. We all witness aspects of the same global process, but our specific problems and solutions tend to be local.16

And where does this leave us where writing on African art and art criticism in Africa are concerned? Nobody believes seriously today that development, as moving on from an underdeveloped stage, may simply mean catching up with more advanced patterns while imitating and restating them. Every local situation has its own dynamic within which, sooner or later, its solutions will be worked out. Taking into account the double fact that the genesis of modern African art is as closely linked to Europe as its future paths seem to be linked

15 Ibid, p 36.
to globalism, this process can hardly be characterised by parochialism and ethnic essentialism, even if there have been signs, but will build on analyses of international as well as of African structures. Things are changing with new generations of well-educated Africans coming into the political and cultural fields.

What is at hand is, among other things, a clearing up of deformations, misunderstandings and myths within the thinking on art in Africa, connected not least to a colonial inheritance and to relations between Africa and the West. The way of putting things hinted at by Kim Levin, and a more open and self-searching approach, could have provided the AICA conference in London with a platform for discussions about the future of an African art criticism, about its prerequisites and prospects.

THE SOURCE OF BITTERNESS

To accept fully that the artist’s role is that of an intellectual is one of the main turnstiles to be negotiated in the realm of modern African art today. Among things that need clarification is therefore the domestic evaluation of the game played by some European expatriates dealing with and writing on contemporary African art — people like Romain-Desfossés, Pierre Lods (at the Poto-Poto school), Ulli Beier (at the Oshogbo workshop) and Frank McEwen (Shona), and their propagation of the biased notion of an ‘innocent’ African art and of amateurish products from their workshops.

Beier, with his double role, has been a specifically hard nut to crack. Coming from Présence Africaine avant-garde fringes and with a lot of connections, he undoubtedly was able to do a great deal for young artists in independent Nigeria, for instance, the ‘Zaria Rebels’. But at the end of the day, his commercial interest in the Oshogbo workshop production and his heavy publicity for it contributed to displacing the same rebellious artists from the market and silencing them at a crucial moment in history.17

An extremely split view on this issue seems still to reign in Nigeria. Typical is the objective diploria manifested in the writings of the critic Olu Oguibe, who at the conference hailed Beier as a ground-breaking pioneer of art criticism in Nigeria, “as significant as Greenberg”; yet who, only a few years ago, was extremely critical of the Oshogbo chapter, “for which we must always persecute Beier”, noting “a lack of appropriate critical tools but also a narrow determinism”.18 It seems to us to be high time to conclude that the world’s view on contemporary African art of the fifties and sixties was distorted and remains distorted by these educational, knocked-together constructions based on a “salvage paradigm” and on “the notion of ‘noble savages’”, to use terms more or less in accord with Oguibe.19

These distortions are not bygone history. In the eighties and nineties they became extended through the primitivising market trends produced by the exhibition ‘Magiciens de la terre’. And today, on the cover of the recently published volume Contemporary Art of Africa by André Magnin, we find a decorative painting in bright placard colours by one of Pierre Lods’ Poto-Poto adepts.20 The roughly 200 colour plates inside the volume parade Oshogbo, Poto-Poto, Shona, sign-painters, as well as old acquaintances from ‘Magiciens’, where Magnin served as a co-curator, and a new mix characteristic of the Jean Pigozzi collection of neoprimitivism, where he now serves as director. With few exceptions, the works reproduced in the book emanate from the Pigozzi

17 We build on an interview with professor Uche Okeke in Nigeria in 1995.
19 Ibid, p 110.
20 André Magnin and Jacques Souillou, Contemporary Art of Africa, Thames and Hudson, 1996.
collection.

Part-way through his text, Magnin raises an astonishing rhetorical question: "What is the source of the bitterness aroused by what many view as the deliberate decision by the West to prolong the marginalisation of contemporary African art by putting a sort of premium on a 'Postmodern primitivism' and a form of historic 'naïveté'?" The only possible answer we can think of is that the source is the activity which he himself today predominantly stages.

The selection and the text in Contemporary Art of Africa have only superficially to do with critical assessment or discourse, reflecting rather the choice made by or for a collector. Magnin has constructed something which pretends to represent the contemporary art of Africa. Referring to a collaboration with Jacques Soulilou in a perfectly circular argument, he shows his cards by noting that the construction has been produced "through the choice that makes the artists the object of the authors of this very book, necessarily placing them within a certain logic of the art field known as contemporary".

André Magnin was invited to the AICA conference but did not turn up. It might be added that his book shows flagrant ignorance about the history of modern African art. He simplistically relates the introduction of a European visual production merely to the import of canvas and paper, dating this advent to around 1930, when a colonial civil servant in the Belgian Congo put paper in the hands of a popular house painter, Lubaki. It is today available knowledge that, several decades before, the painter Onabolu had ordered from London his canvas, drawing-paper, colours and crayons.

21 Ibid, p 10.
22 The selection principle of the Pigozzi collection, preferably non-trained artists, is increasingly contested. Aware of this, Magnin is covering himself with a handful of trained artists taken more or less as hostages.
23 Ibid, p 16.
24 Ibid, p 8, note 5.
25 Ola Oloidi has, for instance, provided the information that already by 1901, Onabolu had contacted a London art shop that, for over four decades, was to become his main supplier of such art materials as sketch and instrumental books, brushes, papers, canvases, pastel, oil and poster colours, as well as various technical and historical art books.
27 Ibid, p 55.

ECLECTICISM MISINTERPRETED

Uzo Egonu - An African Artist in the West is a book on a modern African painter whose work challenges the impoverished western myth of the native African artist. It thus represents an argumentative counter to Magnin's primitising volume. Written by a Nigerian art critic in the diaspora, Olu Oguibe, it is a rare critical monograph on a contemporary artist. Like the Koju Fosu publication, it stands out against a desert of shortage. Scholarly informed, Uzo Egonu nonetheless reflects certain attitudes concerning African-western art relations which still need to be addressed.

In 1945, aged thirteen, Uzo Egonu came from Nigeria to England to take up art studies, remaining there until his death in 1996. This meant, as we understand it, a conscious choice not to return home but to position himself within the western field of art and in relation to international modernism. He is claimed as a forerunner of modern Nigerian art and an important figure in the history of postwar British art. He was not a political activist, but followed attentively the fate of his native country and of Africa, whose progress and setbacks, as Oguibe relates, had deep repercussions on his thinking as an artist.

While Egonu's main confrontation with classical modernism took place in the fifties — he lived for a year in Paris and toured parts of Europe, studying both European and African art in the museums — it was not until the early sixties, that is, in the period of Africa's political independence, that he transgressed the academic instructions of his years in British art schools and, in a self-conscious way, connected his visual production to a more modernist line.

Olu Oguibe quotes an interview from 1966 where the artist talks about "the influence African masks had on modern art, especially on Cubism", suggesting that he felt free to claim his African right to a co-authorship of
modernism, a thought cherished by Négritude. A fascinating field of study opens up in which elements of sensitivity and consciousness interact on aesthetic as well as political levels, connected to the question of identity, producing a personal discourse which goes beyond western dogma not by referring to some exotic Africanism but by exploring its own complex interconnections.

Oguibe can be said to have set a landmark by not just narrating an artist’s life but by trying to represent a practice developing in a transferred perspective, thus contributing to the debates "on the role, position and aesthetic concerns of an African artist in the contemporary world", to quote the blurb of the monograph.

But it is a remarkable fact that the author shrinks back exactly where Egonu gives a clear hint about his main connecting-point within modernism, namely, to the vital crossing of European, African and other non-western discourses represented by Synthetic Cubism. The stage of Cubism around 1915, where the experience of collage as procedure definitely had deconstructed the Renaissance model of representing space and volume, proved to be a rich source of new pictorial ideas and intercultural crossovers. It finally liberated colour from locality, it set free line as an element of expression and it opened up a richness of ornamental patterns. During the sixties and seventies, Egonu experimented with all these possibilities, in somewhat diverse directions, until in the early eighties he crystallised a personal form built on a Synthetic Cubism close to that of Juan Gris.
Olu Oguibe does not acknowledge this obvious connection, mentioning Cubism only in the quotation from the interview. If he is aware of the influence of the Spanish painter, he seems to have preferred to explain it away, as when he writes: "By approaching modernism as only one of several heritages and locating it in his space, Egonu had already stifled whatever elements of eclecticism may be found in his work." His silence on the role of Cubism suggests an African oversensitivity vis-à-vis European influences, at least when they can be seen as specific and not just general. It can also be understood against the backdrop of an obsession with constructing a domestic African genesis of modern global art phenomena.

Part of this obsession may be traced to a provincial trend within current Nigerian art to claim traditional Uli body- and wall-painting, an Igbo women’s folk art, as a main point of reference for the passage to abstract art. This folkloric justification is not an isolated phenomenon. We find parallel thinking behind the current South African valorisation of the Ndebele chapter as a national black proto-modernity and in many discourses around aboriginal art in Australia. Common to these cases of an alleged ethnic shortcut to modernism is that they build less on critical/historical analysis than on wishful thinking and marketing ideology.

Oguibe points to Uli paintings back in Nigeria as being Egonu’s most important source of instruction, devoting nearly a third of his chapter, ‘The Egonu Aesthetics’, to popular Igbo murals. When he comes to the analysis of paintings from around 1980 such as A Cup of Coffee in Solitude and A Poetess, where Egonu’s drawing of inspiration from Cubism is most evident, he refers to the "masterful manipulation of positive and negative spaces [which] belongs to the classical tradition of Igbo mural design". His insistence on the Uli origin

Uzo Egonu, *A Cup of Coffee in Solitude*, 1981, screenprint, 64 x 88 cm

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29 Oguibe, *Uzu Egonu*, op cit, p 55

30 The focus on Igbo Uli art became common among Igbo artists after the Civil war in Nigeria, centered around the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, and encouraged mainly by Uche Okeke, Ola Oloidi and Obiora Udchukwu. It has had a great deal of attention in the West, for instance, with the exhibition ‘Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria’ in 1989 at Ulle Beier’s Iwalewa Haus in Bayreuth, Germany, where Olu Oguibe contributed to the catalogue. The trend was also reflected in the Nigerian section of the exhibition ‘Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa’ at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1995.

31 Oguibe, *Uzu Egonu*, op cit, pp 64–76.

of Egonu's formal elements appears no less perplexing in relation to a series of screen-prints called 'Four Seasons', a series which rather could be characterised as Japanese paraphrases.

Egonu was an artist as proud of his international positioning of himself as he was proud of his African origin. His art was conceived within the space between that origin and experience lived in an European setting. To read a dominant influence from a local African source into his cosmopolitan and composite art seems to produce a misleading imbalance. It stands out against the absence of any reference in the book to statements by the artist himself relative to Uli, except for a not very conclusive quotation about murals remembered from his childhood.\textsuperscript{34}

It belongs to the conditions of art criticism and critical writing on art that new perspectives open up only when things are penetrated with an uncompromisingly critical approach, never shying from facts which preconceived views might want to avoid, and never reading into the matter what wishful thinking wants to see there. Over-sensitivity, self-assertion and wishful thinking in dealing with intercultural relations seem to be the Scylla and Charybdis from which African art criticism has to steer free in order to find its course in the 21st century, not to mention the rock of what Colin Richards has called 'solidarity criticism'.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p 150.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, p 78.
A SOUTH AFRICAN ANGLE OF INCIDENCE

The weight of the country's inner political history complicates South Africa's staking a national identity beyond colour. The post-apartheid art situation is stamped by the drastic inequality of the white and the black art scene, the latter, where it exists, being out of step to a degree that cannot be conjured away by liberal discourses or by simply leaving out the colour label. The situation is further complicated by a specific legacy of isolation.

The white art establishment has considered itself an offshoot of western art. A provincial one, it was for a long time cut off from the outer world by the cultural boycott and sealed by reactionary cultural politics. But it dominated and dominates institutions and market. It now makes haste to reconnect ties to the world and to catch up with globalisation, concentrating much of its activities and policies on an international level.

During apartheid, the black art vanguard was structurally kept out of this provincial art scene, a double isolation. The building up of a black art community has to start from the bottom, with activities and policies predominantly located on a local level. Post-apartheid art politics thus end up repeating an old pattern of segregation. Against this backdrop, it is difficult to predict what role South Africa will be able to play in the context of contemporary African art and in the development of an African art criticism.

In the fifties and sixties, the South African artist Cecil Skotnes played a central part in promoting a black modern art by turning a cultural recreation centre at Polly Street in Johannesburg into a black art centre with educational activities. Though it was not an art school in a formal sense and in no way comparable to the art academies reserved for the white minority, it provided a basis for a professional black art and produced a number of important modern sculptors, among them Sidney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae.

Sidney Kumalo, *Two Bulls*, 1975, bronze, De Beers Centenary Art Gallery, Fort Hare
A chapter in a recently published monograph on Skotnes, *Teaching and learning, Skotnes at Polly Street* by Elizabeth Rankin, throws light upon the topic.\textsuperscript{35} It is interesting to note that when Skotnes first tried to introduce sculpture among the students who gathered at the centre, it was not unanimously well-received. The reason seems to have been that they related sculpture and especially carving to craft, which was almost the only form of art offered in the black classes of Bantu Education. Painting, on the contrary, was conceived as being part of modern urban culture.

Seen from a wider African perspective, it is likewise thought-provoking that when Skotnes wanted to avoid letting western ideas and aesthetics interfere with a presumed original African sensitivity, and therefore tried to encourage the students to draw on an African heritage represented by craft and traditional visual production, he met with little response. His approach was in fact not totally different from the patronising views of the heads of the workshops in Central and West Africa where an alleged African innocence was cultivated and manipulated. But here the context was different and Skotnes was quick to learn.

He soon found out that with the disappearance of South Africa's material culture and the industrialisation and urbanisation of the black population, the urban black artists with whom he worked had virtually no knowledge of the traditional culture of the continent. For them, art was connected with the present, not with the past. This gives rise to various speculations: one is that the compulsive preoccupation with traditional forms and with the idea of a
domestic artistic continuity in art scenes in West Africa might partly be due to an incomplete industrialisation and a lack of modernisation in these societies compared to South Africa; another concerns the right of possession of modernity and the freedom to appropriate. When Sidney Kumalo, at the zenith of his career, connected directly to models of classical West African sculpture, it was an act of a modernist’s appropriation comparable to that of his white colleagues rather than of ‘seeking roots’.

Elizabeth Rankin tries to assess the role played by Skotnes in a balanced way, avoiding simplifications. She builds on interviews with the artist and people involved, letting many contradictions remain unresolved. The Polly Street chapter in the history of South African art and of white/black relations has been the object of highly divergent judgements. White art historians have often tended to write about it in terms of expectations and have made much of its achievements. Black writers have offered different perspectives. The artist and curator David Koloane, for instance, has maintained that Polly Street reflected apartheid values by offering a training for black artists different from that provided by white institutions.

The sharp contradiction between these two views was also reflected at the art criticism conference in London. It will probably remain as part of a duality which represents the context within which art criticism and writing on art in South Africa will have to balance itself. The injustice and the brutal conditions experienced by black artists make everything which could look like glossing over unacceptable. And the ongoing inequality in the art scene cannot but keep a black hypersensitivity alive. Add to this, from time to time, an unsuspecting spirit of white self-centredness. The actual monograph, Cecil Skotnes, edited by Frieda Harmsen, provides a pronounced example, Rankin’s chapter being the exemplary exception.

Designed as a tribute to the septuagenarian artist, lavishly illustrated with his own works but with no visual reference to his contributions in the black context or to his collaborations with black artists — that is, to what makes him specifically significant from today’s perspective — Frieda Harmsen’s book seems to repeat the classic optical trick of apartheid, to make South Africa look white and to make its black majority invisible. There is still no monograph on Sidney Kumalo.

South Africa is today governed on the basis of a non-racial constitution, and this is in itself a victory for humanity. But this does not necessarily mean that the old dishonesty and tokenism have evaporated. What Steve Biko wrote twenty-seven years ago on the games of white liberals, might prove to be applicable to the split art field of today. One might have wished the Johannesburg Biennale, to take one example, to use some of its allocated resources to organise retrospective exhibitions of the most prominent pioneers of black African modernism and to combine them with extensive and well-illustrated monographs in order to repair some of the most glaring instances of neglect. This would mean laying the foundation for one road to an African art criticism.