Africa: Art and Hunger
A Critique of the Myth of Authenticity

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I

The distortions in the study of the market in African art and Africa's own commercial art have their roots in the historical specificities of the relations between western and African cultures. Christopher B. Steiner has already offered some keys to the complexity of the processes involved:

...academics have frequently isolated an object of study without taking into account external influences. Each method of investigation is inevitably artificial from the moment that African art is discussed as having existed for some time in absolute cultural isolation, so the study of the African art market poses many of the same problems as would the study of an African secret society.¹


The relations between Europe and Africa are projected nowadays through two basic spheres of influence: the cultural and the socioeconomic. From the cultural point of view there is a reciprocal relation which has to look both at the way in which western clientele affect the conduct of the local African market as well as the way in which contemporary African art is implicated in the international market. From the moment the European avant-gardes 'discovered' African art through the museums, that cultural production was 'contemporaneous'. It was a contemporaneity that was not recognised by an ethnographic approach, which situated it in a spatiotemporal past with respect to modernity. Characterised as 'the primitive', this art did not fit into the space of the modern since it served only as source material for the vanguard artists, many of whom practised a kind of 'collectionism' which was not simply ethnographic but pursued aesthetic values. It was a question of a collectionism which sought value, not only in an acquisitive act of compensation, but in the possibility of the consumption of an alternative aesthetic universe to that of the ephemeral structure of canons, succeeded and superimposed, in the modernist frenzy. No matter how respectful this attitude of the European artists would try to be, it was unfailingly parasitic, and condemned African art to passivity.
Behind this parasitism there was no strategy, but rather an unconscious impulse towards appropriation and expansion, conditioned by the imperialist psychology of modern Europe and the echoes of its condition as colonialist metropolises, an impulse which persisted well into the beginning of the 20th century. However, the attitude of the developed countries towards Africa almost at the end of this century is markedly distinct. The kind of relations in which one places the distribution and consumption of contemporary African art possess no spontaneity. It is a question of a system of strictly managed political and economical relations. It is not only the tourists or a few amateurs who determine the entry of African art into the West, or the manner by which this art comes to be redefined in real terms. It’s a question now of the major art museums, important events and powerful institutions of the international market looking for new values to exploit, not only through financial transactions but also through the trade in symbolic power.

Too often this attitude is blatantly cynical, as the words of Jean Pigozzi in the catalogue to the exhibition ‘Africa Hoy’ demonstrate: ‘... collecting contemporary African art can become a passion and demands much time, but it’s much cheaper than collecting Van Gogh...’ To which Ery Camara responded indignantly:

These agents of a new fashion which turn eclecticism into the exotic menu of the market think they are Christopher Columbus. (…) Beginning with the collection of art of the past, their market has made and produced profitable curiosities to please the demands of eccentricity. This same situation threatens art of the present [which] means less a body of informed aesthetic values than financial and ideological profit.

Ery Camara’s evaluation is applicable as much to African art as to western art. In this sense African art has achieved a certain status of ‘equality’: it is as exposed to the mercantile manipulations as any other international artistic product. But to arrive at that status, African art has had to achieve recognition of its ‘contemporaneity’, which was conditioned by its assimilation of western aesthetic criteria. It was only through this assimilation that a sector of Africa’s aesthetic production was freed from adjectives such as ‘ritual art’, or ‘popular art’ or ‘craft’, and came to be called simply ‘art’.

One of the artists selected for the exhibition ‘Africa Hoy’ was Jean Baptiste Ngetchopa from the Cameroons. After training as a sculptor in wood, he specialised in the production of ritual masks and themes which evoked the tribe and its myths. But from 1989 he abandoned traditional themes and began to make a series of banknotes. At first he made a $100 bill, and then dedicated a series to the African bank. ‘There are wealthy people who guard their money in a strong box’, said Ngetchopa, ‘that money sleeps and becomes devalued. I propose to these rich people that they hand over to me a part of this money and in exchange I’ll sculpt them a note in wood with which they can live and put on display. Moreover, this wooden banknote will acquire considerable value.’ The African artist (who of course was in ‘Africa Hoy’ showing his banknotes not his masks) responds with an attitude whose cynicism is equal to the irony of Jean Pigozzi.

II

Marshall W. Mount mentions in his book, African Art: The Years since 1920, the words of an anonymous sculptor of souvenir art: ‘We discovered what they [the westerners] liked. We made what they liked when we were hungry.’ There is not much difference between what is revealed in that phrase and what is exhibited in Ngetchopa’s statement. In a certain sense Ngetchopa’s work would also come
under Mount’s definition of souvenir art: an art created to sell to ‘westerners eager to possess a piece of ‘genuine’ African art but who are ignorant of or underestimate traditional art’.6 What may be a trick or even a self-defensive strategy by the autochthonic culture in the face of the harmful ignorance of the coloniser is also appreciated in both examples. Ngetchopa’s work is not received as souvenir art in Europe or the US precisely because it seems much more like what the West anticipates as postmodernism. Ngetchopa would be a representative of ‘genuine’ African postmodernism were it not that contemporary African art doesn’t accept such a qualification nor follows in any way the most recognisable manipulations of concepts. In the end, Ngetchopa’s work seems to be directed towards a public who responds in a kitsch way with regard to the phenomenon of art. However, no one would distinguish it from kitsch. Simulation, seriality and commercial interest seem here in ‘good taste’.

The vulgar side of the western gaze at African art is revealed in that persistence in making an ethical or ideological judgement of its commercial production from a romantic perspective, which sublimates the ‘uselessness’ of the artistic object, the genius and originality of the author.

This is a decontextualised discourse in Africa, where what is called ‘art’ has always been a functional activity, intrinsically bound to collective, practical needs, and regulated by the imperatives of demand. In Africa, aesthetics has been, rather than an individualistic value derived from a psychological displacement, the recognition of an order in which the individual is connected with the community. Colonialism discovered and tried to impose on African art another scale of aesthetic values across the criteria of art; the African responded with assimilation, but also with the simulacrum. Both attitudes are logical, looking after the survival of the culture as well as the man.

The definition given by Friedlander and other theorists of kitsch, which Donald J. Cosentino tried to apply to African art,7 appears incomplete if one does not also add that it’s a matter of a commercial activity inserted wholly in a system of economic survival. So we can see African kitsch also as a splitting in the face of the imposition of western cultural patronage, but appreciating that splitting as a means of subsistence.

Jean-Baptiste Ngetchopa, carved wood.
One already knows that that splitting has historical roots in what Marshall Mount has described as "mission inspired art", and that it has been linked to the processes of indoctrination and religious propaganda from the 15th century until the "extrêmes maquettes" of Bodys Isek Kingelez of the present — another artist-'defector' from traditional practices who has assumed a type of artisanal sculpture, eclectic in so many senses that the western critic can do no more than resort to a comparison with postmodernism. 8

The examples of 'Afrokitsch' put forward by Donald J. Cosentino include political kitsch as a new field to which has been transferred procedures and certain codes initially experimented with in the religious domain. Cosentino observes at the level of representation a set of visual systems constructed on the basis of a political symbology which seeks to 'rescue' or reutilise the codes of traditional culture. It would be interesting to see this subject also connected to the models of politics and present African economy, from the influence of the ideology of pan-Africanism to the contradictory situation generated by the attempts to apply neoliberal programmes of structural adjustment.

III

For Africa the decade of the Sixties meant the moment of independence for the majority of the colonies and the establishment of multiple nation-states. It was the beginning of a period of modernity for Africa, marked by pan-Africanist tendencies which took off from an ideal of transregional integration that at the same time would respect the frontiers of the new countries, organised along the same lines that the metropolises had set up. In this way the nation in turn was organised according to the structures inherited from the metropolis (social organisation, language, finance) and any attempt at nationalism resulted in considerable contradiction. Those conditions also made apparent the contradictions of an integrationist ideology whose new idea of Africa still contained a western construction, through substituting an already old fashioned and unsustainable image of a mass of fragmented colonies. Nevertheless pan-Africanism was a serious attempt at strengthening a continent then emerging from colonialism in a dispersed and debilitated state.

Another point to consider is the series of distortions suffered by the practice of that ideology starting from variants like 'negritude' and 'authenticity'. The position of Leopold Sedar Senghor in the development of the poetics of negritude is well known. Senghor used different media to promote and apply his vision of negritude to his cultural politics, and as support and argument for the economic and social objectives of the programme of his government (1960-1980). On the cultural plane he conceded that, on the one hand, one had to rescue ancestral African traditions — in a romantic project of cultural nationalism — and on the other hand, artists (and, of course, also the economy) had to open themselves to foreign influences which he called "‘assimilation’, and which expressed the way in which western cultural values could be accommodated. In this way, the generation of artists of the School of Dakar, through their proximity to the President and his doctrine, acquired the name "‘painters of negritude’" (Ima Ebong).

If, on the one hand, the stimulus and impulse which was thereby given to the development of contemporary Senegalese art was positive, 9 on the other, the ‘search for identity’ in many cases became forced and exotic: the themes and even the compositional structures of the artists of the School of Dakar — more an academy — demonstrated the ideological domination of negritude as the ‘national aesthetic’ and as a support of the establishment. The privileges enjoyed

8 See the exhibition catalogue Africa Hoy, op cit.
9 As well as the School of Dakar, the Workshop of Decorative Arts of Thies was created, and the PanAfrican Festival of Art was realised in 1966.
by the artists had to end up in a grateful and complacent support of the state apparatus.

On the aesthetic plane, pan-Africanism, linked with the new perspective of the international market, contributed to the proliferation of that "pseudospecific" art referred to by Vil Mirimanov as a type of work in which a "premeditated authenticity displaced the real". On the politico-economic plane, there was generated what Ysuf Bangura and Peter Gibbon call a "diffuse nationalism" whose persistence the authors argue is one of the causes of the low popularity of the Programmes of Structured Adjustment (PSAs) in Africa.

The PSAs meant a new situation for African modernity. The patterns of this modernity had been set up in the 60s according to western models. Now, the situation coincides historically with a period of postmodernity characterised by the end of the Cold War, the disappearance of the European socialist bloc and an increase in neoliberalism. From there on, the application of the PSAs are being accompanied by an ideology of 'democratisation'. Bangura and Gibbon suggest, in the study already cited, that the governing institutions in the application of these programmes (the IMF and World Bank) have gone through various positions in relation to the African question, from a technicist position of political neutrality, which was confident in the free dismantling of market forces, to direct participation in financial support to authoritarian governments of a reformist orientation, to terminating help at the end of the 80s in the rebirth of democratic regimes committed to the PSAs. "The specialists", Bangura and Gibbon tell us, "began to think that the crisis in Africa demanded a solution in good government, political responsibility, the empire of law and popular participation in government..."

As we can see, these 'solutions' to the economic question do not take account of the cultural aspect. A technocratic posture prevails in the sense that society is not seen as a totality, and hence the uncertainty arising from the incongruence between the nationality of the projects and the frustrating anarchy of their application.

...social creativity only could be liberated and the democratic ideal only become a cultural praxis if those intellectual assumptions which, since independence, served to support authoritarianism are left behind.

What seems to be needed is an organic project for the insertion of Africa into the universal without forcing a priori adaptations to models imposed from outside. From this perspective one observes the trap of a boom in African art in the present circumstances. The use of African art by the international market does not mean the recognition of its equality for reasons we have already outlined; on the other hand, to emphasise difference (be it from an external discriminatory position or from a politics of identity generated internally) also does not mean a true vindication of its autochthonous values. "The vindication — often magical — of a specific cultural identity ends up in the construction of a closed and disciplinary history", and (we might add) created conditions for the manipulation of collective sentiments, leading to chauvinism and racism and a twisted expression of the 'authentic'. We have already seen how the markets include western criterion for African art in their search for authenticity. On occasion it seems that it is a trap for Africans into which the West has fallen, and from which it tries to save itself by evaluating African art without attending to its socioeconomic conditions, and by evaluating its economics and politics without attending to its conditions in terms of cultural patronage.

With respect to this point, Achille Mbembe speaks of the necessity of destroying
such myths as the 'nation', whose function was that of exacerbating 'tribalism', aggravating the centrist reflections of the state and creating the conditions for an unproductive violence'. The saga of that exacerbated Africanism leads to a position of extreme panic in the face of the new world order and the substitution of the European socialist bloc by the search for continental integration. Disturbing questions appear, like those thrown up — but not answered — by Ali A. Mazrui:

Will the white world be closing ranks both in the one and in the other Europe? (...) Is a global retrivalisation in the process of forming? (...) Is the 20th century preparing to hand over a new legacy of global Apartheid to the 21st century?

IV

As we have seen, we have tried to highlight the historical and economic conditions in which the market of contemporary African art is situated and, above all, the ideological positions stemming from a long relationship between Africa and the metropolitan countries. These are the circumstances which have underlined a particular perspective of western thought towards the art of Africa and its commercialisation. Firstly, it was the undervaluation of a cultural production which was considered 'primitive' and at the margins of civilisation. Later came the scientific interest in the 'savage', which restricted African art to the space of the ethnographic museum. From that, a vision of the authentic became linked to ritual art. Paradoxically, that authenticity does not correspond to the aesthetic-artistic paradigms of the West.

The African is considered authentic only insofar as he or she satisfies predetermined western fantasies, contained in fetishistic concepts like originality, purity or authorship. The first concepts are applied to the search for 'pure' traditional art; the author is in the habit of looking for contemporary work, generated by a modern thought, closer to the western notion of art. There would be works that depart from the schema of 'savage thought' which was linked, in an arbitrary manner, to a material, premodern reality and the intellectual sphere of the African. It is not by chance that in the well known encyclopaedia Art and Man, African art appears immediately after the chapter dedicated to art of the mad and mentally ill and the prehistoric. Perhaps the search for the savage incorporated an interest in the forms of traditional African art because the European vanguards were also looking for an excuse to confront bourgeois rationality.

All these formulas are far removed from the reality of an art that is eminently functional. They take refuge in the tradition of cultural objects made to satisfy immediate collective needs through their insertion into ritual and mythical systems; but that same quality is not perceived (or if it is, it is only to pass judgement on it) in contemporary art of a commercial nature. An art realised through the function of survival, plunged into the ritual plays of the market and ambiguously overlaid by standards generated by western expectations.