Re-Framing Africa

*Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*  
Edited by Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor

Richard Hylton

*Reading the Contemporary* brings together twenty-two essays and articles from numerous art magazines and journals, written between 1991–97. Divided into four sections — ‘Theory and Cultural Transaction’, ‘History’, ‘Location and Practice’ and ‘Negotiated Identities’ — the collection, as the editors explain, represents a body of critical thought that ‘challenge[s] the containment of Africa as a monolithic entity’. Dealing with art history, anthropology, primitivism, Eurocentrism, African cinema and, at its heart, contemporary visual arts practice, contributors such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Laura Mulvey, Everlyn Nicodemus and John Picton testify to the authority of this anthology. If *Reading the Contemporary* is a challenge to traditional readings of African art history, why is this significant and where might it be taking us?

From art history syllabuses to anthropology, African art has commonly been subjected to the reductive and even derisory interpretation of western academia. In fact, if I cast my mind back to the college library, innumerable studies about ‘ancient Africa’ or ‘primitive art in Africa’ commonly outnumbered contemporary material on the subject. Books on the 1940s and 1950s photography of Seydou Keita and Mama Cassett were not available. More common, however, were the traditional texts which have so dogged African art and culture. Africa, it seemed, was imagined as one coherent land mass, distinctions between Arab Africa or Sub Saharan Africa, or rural and cosmopolitan life, Black, White or Asian experience, all of which would complicate this image, were rendered invisible.

Geoffrey Parrinder’s *African Mythology* (Paul Hamlyn, London, 1967), although more than thirty years old, is typical of this mind set. Through the ‘exploration’ of the mysteriousness of African art such books habitually enacted a [patho]logical subjugation of the subject. In his introduction, Parrinder assures us that, ‘In this century appreciation of the power of much African art has been given by artists such as Jacob Epstein and Henry Moore, and our own art has been influenced by it. African art is not often photographic.’ Paradoxically, the obsession with producing a mythological Africa illustrated an amnesia vis-à-vis European domination which had demonised and destroyed the very histories and cultures now valorised in these texts. Parrinder continues: ‘There are still races of Pygmies and Bushmen surviving from ancient times. And *behind modern political doctrines* there are countless myths and stories which form part of the background to the thinking of African peoples’ (my emphasis). Ironically, it was during the 1960s, when many African countries were decolonising and Africa became the cold war battleground for Marxist and capitalist ideology, that the past became the focus of western valorisation.
The proliferation of such books that produced and fixed African art as denoting the primitive has had a long and lasting influence. The genealogy of exhibitions such as ‘Makonde Sculpture’ (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1989) and ‘Magicians de la Terre’ (Center Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989), or even ‘Africa Explores’ (The New Museum of Contemporary Art and The Center for African Art, New York, 1991) are evidence of this. In Britain at least, exhibitions like these were increasingly met with incisive critiques by the likes of Eddie Chambers and Rasheed Araeen, which troubled the relentlessly Eurocentric wisdom and authority of those who were selecting and in effect ‘producing’ dominant understandings of African and other non-Western art practices. These dissenting voices illustrated the need for tried and trusted interpretations to be questioned.

Arguably, this new energy was galvanised by the mighty ‘Africa ’95’. Held across Britain, the visual arts component of this six-month arts festival spearheaded by Clementine Deless, was the first high profile attempt at displacing an antiquated and Eurocentric vision of African art. Through a range of exhibitions such as ‘Self Evident’, ‘Samuel Fosso’ and ‘New World Imagery’ (which also addressed the African diaspora), contemporary and historical practices that had hitherto gone largely ignored—the photography of Seydou Keita and Mama Cassé, for example—received greater exposure. Significantly, more black curators and historians such as Mark Sealy and Petrine Archer Straw were crucial to the genesis of such projects. By no means unproblematic in either its corporatisation of Africa, or the curatorial agendas adopted by some of the major institutions involved, ‘Africa ’95’ nevertheless crystallised the need for academics, curators, artists and the general British public to acknowledge a different kind of Africa; one that was built upon a complexity that was both historical and contemporary. It is this decade or so of activity which Reading the Contemporary attempts to anthologise.

Manthia Diawara’s ‘Talk of the Town’ grapples with the power of Keita’s early studio portraiture from the 1940s and ’50s. Diawara suggests Keita’s photography endowed his subjects with a desired cosmopolitan aura. Produced in Bamako (the capital of Mali) these early works by Keita represented ‘the history of modernity’, the desire to be seen to be modern, in the capital of the French colony. Paradoxically, for Diawara these images of modernity already belonged to the past ‘like objects of nostalgia and stamped as the photographer’s product’. Sidney Kasfir’s essay, ‘African Art and Authenticity: A text with a shadow’, is a rich critique which interrogates traditional ways African art has been compressed and read as a flat uniform bed of knowledge. From problematising the reading of African culture in terms of a simple before and after colonisation, to the pervasive classificatory systems which have valued the anonymity of the African artist ‘as part of the arts canonical character’, Kasfir highlights how these systems of knowledge have not only prevailed but, in contemporary settings, been modified, thereby forsaking differences within cultures. Kasfir says, ‘Omniscient curatorial authority has the power to flatten out these hills and valleys, but should it? Is the public really incapable of understanding that African cultures, and the arts they produce, are not monolithic? Do we really want a “text without a shadow”?"

Such shadows are cast by the way the informative essays and articles in Reading the Contemporary highlight, to a degree, the contested ground upon which African art rests. For example, Olu Oguibe’s essay, ‘Art, Identity, Boundaries: Post Modernism and Contemporary African Art’, is an intellectual rant about the art historian Thomas McEvilley’s objectifying treatment of the Ivoirian born artist, Ouattara, which is all rather too much for Oguibe. But not, it must be said, to the extent that McEvilley himself could not be included in this anthology: he is represented by the essay ‘Fusion: Hot or Cold?’, a text originally produced in response to the exhibition of five African artists at the Venice Biennale in 1993.

Apartheid constructed through the media as a South African problem is highlighted within this volume as an affliction which infected the expanse of southern Africa — from Margo Timm’s analysis of the framing of the Namibian born printmaker John Ndevasia Muafangejo, to David Koloane’s strident assertions regarding the dilemmas facing black southern African artists. Where Timm outlines the constriction that apartheid placed on Muafangejo’s practice, Koloane interrogates the way in which black practitioners must fulfil an ethnic/mythological role, an expectation which ‘does not appear to apply to White artists’ if they want to succeed in the mainstream. Koloane states that the need for ‘identity’ to clearly manifest itself in the work of black practitioners mirrors the ‘protection’ of ‘otherness’ or separate cultures that lies at the heart of apartheid. Also written during the demise of white minority rule in South Africa, Colin Richards’ ‘About Face: Aspects of Art History and Identity in South African Visual Culture’ maps out the context of art production for artists across the racial divide in a ‘changing’ nation. I was left curious as to what these
contributors are now making of the situation.

Nowadays, taking down traditional readings of African art history by a peg or two is what we have come to expect of any serious commentary. Reading the Contemporary achieves this, which is hardly surprising given that Enwezor and Oguibe have chosen their crème de la crème of theorists. In their introduction, the editors are keen to stress that Reading the Contemporary is by no means a ‘comprehensive’ survey of African art and culture. And rightly so, we should not expect one publication to make up for the dearth of such criticism. But in considering this anthology — which by its nature invariably includes and excludes — what kind of voices might be silenced by the power of such a book?

While accommodating a Pan-African view of art practice, from north Africa to southern Africa, Reading the Contemporary also provides ample space for African artists who are ‘living and working in the Western metropolis’. Essays such as ‘Between Worlds: Postmodernism and African Artists in the Western Metropolis’ by Enwezor and ‘Meaning in Transit: Framing the Works of Boutros, Dridi, Ennadre, Gasteli and Naji’ by Octavio Zaya, illustrate this fact. Zaya states: ‘With the exception of Lamia Naji... all of the photographers mentioned above live in Paris. In itself, this piece of information wouldn’t amount to much if we were to overlook its historico-political specificity entirely.’ If we must consider, as the editors suggest, the forces of ‘globalisation and the production of a new African diaspora, already emergent since the end of World War II’, why then, for example, are Asians so invisible in this anthology? Asians have, after all, had a checkered history in Africa, their mass expulsion from Uganda being the apotheosis of that history. Where do these ‘other’ somewhat unconstituted relationships and histories with Africa belong? This omission, given how far and wide the net has been cast, is symptomatic of the larger failing of this book.

The global art circuit, to which Enwezor and Oguibe have so unreservedly subscribed to, is the model employed here to frame African art history. Consequently, practices and opinions that do not fall within their field of vision are pretty much excluded. This is not to say that those other voices would or would not deem it worthy or necessary to be placed in such a book. However, in noting the high-flying status of the editors, this publication assumes a lofty position in art criticism. And for that reason alone, the fault lines which Reading the Contemporary travels along should be highlighted.

That African art has, over the past decade, been repackaged and become a ‘player’ in the global art market is not to be ‘celebrated’ as simply a triumph over old values. The pay off, for some at least, has been to embrace the inflexible model of the global art market, where there is really only one way of doing and being. In this context, nothing really interrupts the relentless drive and collusion of the bourgeois art curator, collector and market.

Perhaps the outcome of Reading the Contemporary was a fait accompli. Its dénouement was never going to trouble or provide a counterpoint to the editors’ own (curatorial) framing of African art. What does this say about the editors’ sense of empowerment for practice and theory which exists outside of their ‘interests’? The power of Reading the Contemporary is in its critical distance to a traditional picture of African art and culture. The daylight created between old and new is significant. But this light shines so bright that it washes out of the picture the presence of other practices and opinions which have not been consumed by the gospel according to Enwezor and Oguibe.