

The stakes of art criticism in Africa

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by *Yacouba Konate*

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In Africa, one may point out a polymorph demand for art criticism. This demand is related to a real deficit of writing about art. Indeed, very few artists in Africa own a personal catalogue. Even when they have attained a certain notoriety, most of them only feature in collective catalogues where, alongside their identity photo and a short CV, one or two photos of their works are reproduced. Bouba Keita from Mali who died in 1997, Malangatana from Mozambique, Ahmadou Sow in Senegal, Lyolo from Democratic Congo – all those artists who have dedicated their life to art – deserve critical reviews and merit a monograph for instance.

Secondly, the demand for art criticism comes from the public. The deregulation of the traditional rules of aesthetics, the proliferation of conceptual art, and the fact that anything can be presented as an artwork lead the public to understand that anybody, including themselves, can pretend to be artists. But the public need to verify their doubts and incertitudes. So they look to the critics, waiting for enlightening argument.

The demand for art criticism proceeds also from the artworks themselves. The dynamism of creativity and power of imagination in Africa have cultivated several areas of high artistic intensity and produced a lot of incisive and cutting works which are both pieces of singular lives and pieces of collective history. Luis Meque's exploration of the underground life in the cities, Ishmael Wilfred's fascination for the presence of spirits in our daily modern life, the reinvention of the African sculpture by Mustapha Dime or by Tafuma Gutsa, are not just amazing and exciting for the gaze. They are also basic, suggestive and succulent foods for the aesthetic intelligence of Africans facing their actuality and finding new paths between their present past and their future present.

One may define also a structural demand for art criticism. During this last decade, a culture of biennales has flourished. From the Cairo Biennale of contemporary art in North Africa to the Johannesburg Biennale in Southern Africa, passing through the *Dak'Art* Dakar biennale in West Africa, the agenda of the visual arts in Africa is not blank. It is busy and each event develops its unique form and content.

Devoted to African artists inside and outside Africa including the African Diaspora, the Dakar biennale nourishes the aim to become pan-Africanist. The treatment of

African art is different in the two other biennales with African artists in the minority and the international dimension emphasized. In fact both of these manifestations, Johannesburg and Cairo, want to be international biennales in Africa rather than being African biennales.

The structures and processes of these different art exhibitions in Africa are themselves open to debate. For instance, while the Dakar and Johannesburg biennales work with curators who are more or less responsible for the selection of the artists, the Cairo event gives more power to institutional structures. That is to say, curators of national galleries and ministries of culture inside the countries are implicated in the selection of the artists.

The situation of cinema, dance, photography, music and drama is simpler. Each of these arts has its own festival. The *Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou*, the *Choreographical Meetings of Luanda*, the *African Photography Meetings* of Bamako and the *Market of Live Arts* of Abidjan don't seem to have a problem of identity. It could be highly instructive to put in perspective the aesthetic tendencies in these different artistic disciplines. One of the main concerns across all these various fields is: What are the logics and the aesthetics of these different exhibitions? How is African art invented and why? But these questions must be preceded by another one: How is art criticism to be conceived, formatted and executed regarding these demands?

One may distinguish at least three types of criticism: the journalistic, the academic and, between these two, the critical writing in specialized journals. The first is the most current. Impressionist in its inspiration, journalistic criticism is a kind of immediate reaction, which doesn't take the time for distancing. Engaged in the invention of the daily pages, this discourse on art avoids the jargon and the superimposition of theoretical references which construct the preciousness of the academic style. In the middle field, the criticism practiced by art magazines can combine the advantages of the two previous methods without assuming their faults. It can master its specific assets: better quality of photographic reproductions, opportunity to take the time to think and write, etc. But the problem is that there are not enough art magazines in Africa. The few that exist are not as rich as they need to be to attract the active collaboration of journalists and scholars. However, the problem of art criticism in Africa is not just a problem of publication, it is also a problem of ability or opportunity to exhibit the works of artists with which the African art critic can and must engage so that they can stimulate a real discussion and communicate the reason for showing such artworks and the need for the public themselves to try to elaborate the meanings of the artworks they like or don't like.

Since the beginning of the century, the so-called traditional African art has been aestheticised while Negro art was produced. This aestheticisation has fostered a blindness to the art in process. One has to wait until the end of the 1960s before hearing some names of modern African artists. This process can be observed in the domain of photography. What is celebrated under the name of African photography refers to the daily work of the earlier photographers in Africa, before the 1960s, and we find again the same contagious effects between aesthetics, sociology and ethnology. At the same time, the visibility of contemporary African photographers becomes problematic.

Prominence is given to neo-primitivist artists in the internationalisation of African contemporary painting and sculpture. What has been promoted as authentic African art is, most of the time, that which appears to rupture Western standards. But at the same time, the ambiguity of the norm of authenticity has generated negative criteria. The short list of the items of this exigency are (i.e. to be an 'authentic' African artist is): not to be influenced by Western art, not to have been a scholar of a school of fine arts, not to be young, not to be expert in artistic rights, not to be already known, etc. Meanwhile, an artist dealing with popular imagination or offering the spectacle of a laughing Africa, is welcome. Such a policy digs a deep gap between the external point of view presented as an international one, and the internal status of the artwork. The risk is that, as airport art has increased its empire, neo-primitivist trends encapsulate creativity and direct it.

As long as the script of African art continues to be conceived from outside, African art will appear as the 'other' of Western art. If we accept that the process of African contemporary art criticism consists, first, in gaining distance from the sociological and ethnological codes, and then second, in assuming a personal observation and imagination, we may recognize that African artistic production can no longer be seen as the other of someone else. As long as African art continues to be seen as the other of western art, it can never be itself.

Alienated from itself and from the other, how can African art avoid remaining on the borderline of the international art system? How can it prevent itself from being the external border of African culture? We must find out an alternate way, which must not prohibit the first view point but which will overcome and dialecticise it. The professionals and the amateurs of African art criticism must not just speak about African artists and exhibitions. They must also orchestrate, from their internal African points of view, their personal syntax of African material cultures. This will begin to put an end to the monolithic externally-driven discourse on Africa and start to explore the heterogeneity of African cultures in the light of their internal histories.

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