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AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE CURATORIAL TURN

Abstract: During the fifty year period of the second half of the 20th century the field of African Art History, as well as the forms of art studies and art exhibitions have changed considerably. This article considers the evolution of the idea of African identity in contemporary arts. I would like to examine the different forms of art representation and interviewing of African fine arts in the last three decades. In order to illustrate the dynamic changes in the European approach to African Art, it is simply enough to recall the famous remarks of Carl Einstein and Roy Sieber on that subject or William Rubin's controversial exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1984). It seems that the visibly growing practice of engaging curators of African origin in the creation of exhibitions of modern African art, particularly as a strategy to incorporate the voices of those represented, is one of the most important aspects of the "curatorial turn" of the 21st century.

Keywords: African art, curatorial turn, museum, exhibitions, contemporary art

In his most influential book entitled *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford raised the problem of cross-cultural translations, challenging the notion of ethnographic authority and asking the fundamental question: "Who has the authority to speak for a group's identity or authenticity?"¹ This question has great significance for the discussions of museum exhibitions as narratives about cultural creation from Africa and to considerations by African artists on and off the continent. Since the mid-1980s there has been a shift in the strategies museums adopt to enhance participation and to ensure that museums remain

¹ J. Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1988, p. 8.

responsive and relevant to the communities they serve. Of particular interest is the extent to which those who are the focus of an exhibition play a role in their own representation. Increasingly, museum professionals recognize the benefits of exhibition models that rethink the singular, authoritative voice of the museum and embrace the telling of complex, multi-vocal narratives resonant with the realities of lived experience.

This article considers the questions of representation and interviewing as they have been employed in the creation of exhibitions of modern African art, particularly as strategies to incorporate the voices of those represented and as they are used in ethnographic research. I examine museum exhibitions as specific contexts for the dissemination of those narratives, and I draw attention to selected museum exhibitions that can serve as useful models for presenting Africa's so-called traditional arts as well the contemporary art from the African continent.² With regard to contemporary African art, the examples cited are illustrative of an equally important commitment to ensure that the voices and perspectives of contemporary artists are incorporated into the exhibitions featuring their work. The creation of any exhibition, regardless of its subject matter, requires familiarity with a vast body of literature that is used to frame the approach a curator or a team adopts in selecting and interpreting objects and ideas. The scholarship on the arts of Africa has typically drawn upon research methodologies employed over the years in such distinct disciplines as art history, anthropology, history, folklore, philosophy, and so on. Research results have reflected the prevailing disciplinary perspectives, and their limitations, about Africa at particular points in time, and these perspectives influenced the ways in which African peoples and cultures were represented in scholarly research and in museum exhibitions. Over time, this interdisciplinary approach has resulted in the production of discursive, dynamic, and complex narratives about African creativity, which until recent decades were largely silent in the presentation and interpretation of their cultural heritage. The fundamental issue, it seems, is how various strategies of representation allow museums to bring artists, community representatives, and other individuals into their spaces in order to voice their perspectives in exhibition narratives. The inclusion of these voices is a paradigmatic shift in museum practice. It has transformed the narrative spaces of exhibitions into discursive spaces that reflect the complexities of the human experience and new engagements with the diverse publics served by the museums.

Other important questions which need to be answered are: what is "African" about the art of Africa? Why is it African art? What makes it worthy

² To see more: *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, O. Enwezor, Ch. Okeke-Agulu ed., Damiani, Bologna 2009, pp. 10-12.

of distinctive study? What distinguishes or highlights it from the rest of the work of humankind and codifies it as a canonical and specialized corpus of creative expression by the artists living in the continent and by its Diaspora? What is the African soul that the artists discover, invent, and celebrate in their works? Is it true that, as Ugandan writer Okot p'Bitek claims in his posthumous book, "In an African society, art is life. It is not a performance. It is not necessarily a profession. It is life."³

A great many volumes of books, catalogs, essays, and studies have been published on the subject of the art of Africa, devoted to African art history and art criticism, from ancient icons to recent works. In these publications, the continent is often defined within a distinctive spatial feature coinciding with a distinctive history and a distinctive expressive culture titled African art. It is usual to speak of the African mind, African literature, and African music as part of African culture.⁴

Although there have been numerous philosophical efforts to include "African art" in the fold by producing wider definitions and criteria, these tend to be paradigmatic. Such view was well expressed almost a century ago by Carl Einstein (1885-1940) in his essay entitled "Negro Sculpture": "There is probably no art that the European approaches with more suspicion than the art of Africa (...). The negro is regarded from the outset as an inferior part of humanity that must be ruthlessly developed into something better, and what he has to offer is judged in advance as wanting."⁵

It is necessary to emphasize that since Roy Sieber wrote his influential dissertation concerning art from Africa (1957),⁶ in which he examined the spiritual and religious connections between African sculptors and their work, many other dissertations have been submitted on African art. Susan Preston Blier, the present-day art historian of Africa from Harvard University, accurately summarizes the current state of research on African artistic heritage:

"Over the course of the next half century the field of African art history — as well as the forms of art studies — changed considerably. Sieber's dissertation was in essence an 'armchair' thesis, one based on the careful overview of an array of earlier literature with an aim toward singling out and highlighting a range of art forms across key areas of the continent. Following Sieber's initial

³ Okot p'Bitek, *Artist, the Ruler Essays on Art, Culture, and Values, Including Extracts from Song of Soldier and White Teeth Make People Laugh on Earth*, Heinemann Kenya, Nairobi, 1986, p. 34.

⁴ See: J. Bingham, *African Art and Culture*, Raintree, Hampshire 2004; P. Ben-Amos, "African Visual Arts from a Social Perspective", *African Studies Review* 1989, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 1-54 and *Estetyka Afryki. Antologia*, ed. M. Cymorek, Universitas Kraków 2008.

⁵ *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Ch. Harrison, P. Wood, ed., Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2003, p. 111.

⁶ Roy Sieber, *African Tribal Sculpture*, unpublished PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1957. To see more: Ch.M. Kreamer, "A Tribute to Roy Sieber", *African Arts*, vol. 36 no. 1, pp. 12-23, 91.

African art research, later scholars and researchers in this field would focus their study on specific areas of Africa, generally exploring these issues through in-depth local analysis, documenting various types of art production and meaning, addressing a range of media (from masks to architecture) and different contexts of use. Alas, for the most part the continent continued to be defined in earlier colonial terms as a variety of unique cultures (discrete ‘tribes’), each assumed to be identified with distinct artistic forms, rituals, political systems, and other idioms of socio-cultural identity.”⁷

The curatorial turn

In her significant essay entitled “Turning”, Irit Rogoff explains that a turn – such as that toward linguistics in the 1970s – occurs when an academic discipline is in urgent need of being shaken up, perhaps to the point of discomfort. Irit Rogoff carefully unpicks the etymology of “the turn,” speculating that the language of turning might function as an important model for understanding the use of pedagogy in the arts: “In a turn, we turn away from something or towards or around something and it is we who are in movement, rather than it. Something in us is activated, perhaps even actualized, as we turn.”⁸ By emphasizing our own activity and movement, Rogoff hopes to maintain the sense of urgency that informed the inception and production of pedagogical art projects, concerned that education initiatives in curating “are in danger of being cut off from their original impetus and may be hardening into a recognizable style”⁹ (a criticism that has been leveled at similar turns in artistic practice, such as “the linguistic turn” of the 1960s and more recently, “the turn to relational aesthetics” in the 1990s). As she pointed out:

“Are we talking about reading one system, a pedagogical one, across another system of display [and] exhibition ... so that they both nudge one another in ways that might loosen and open them up to other ways of being? Or are we talking about an active movement, a generative moment in which a new horizon emerges in the process, leaving the practice that was the originating point behind? In a turn, we turn ‘away’ from something or ‘towards’ or ‘around’ something, and it is ‘we’ who are in movement, rather than ‘it’ (...). Something in us is activated, perhaps even actualized, as we ‘turn’.”¹⁰

⁷ S. Blier, *African Art*, [in:] F. Abiola Irele, B. Jeyifo ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, vol. 1, p. 30.

⁸ I. Rogoff, *Turning*, [in:] *Curating and the Educational Turn*, ed. Paul O’Neil and Mick Wilson, Open Editions London 2010, p. 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

The above clarifications should be interpreted as a new aim for the Western world of art – to examine the ability of future curatorial practices to both reflect and instigate a dynamic turn in the study of African arts and to understand what kinds of intellectual and aesthetic energies might be produced in the process. It goes without saying that on-the-ground research has led to brilliant dissertations, exhibitions, and books on particular culture areas and regions that form the foundation of the discipline. Yet today's studies of traditional African arts extend beyond the ethnographic field research undertaken in rural areas through interviews, visual documentation, and participant-observation basic to inquiry. In recent years, scholars have brought much transparency to African art studies, revealing and analyzing the impact of colonial and neo-colonial encounters, the museumification of African arts, the role of the art market, and the effects of urban life and globalization on tradition-based expression. Furthermore, as the last European and American expositions on African art made vividly clear, new areas of tradition-based arts are rapidly emerging: Islamic expressive culture, transforming textile modes, architectural renewal, urban masquerades, and ephemeral arts; and new methodologies are inspired by theories of culture, performance, and the body. In the north of Africa, women artists, including Ghada Amer, Hourri Niati, and Zineb Zedira, are producing art searching for the place of women in Islamic cultures, as they triangulate the crossroads of identities that define them as Arab, African, Muslim, and female. (Fig. 1) The works of these artists become foundational materials for exploring the intersection of feminist interventions and artistic productions in North Africa, where women are still treated as second-class citizens because of their gender, are expected to cover their heads and sometimes their entire bodies, or are regarded as objects of their husbands' desire. They have learned to use art as a form of resistance and subversion, while still maintaining ample spaces of fantasy and pleasure in their playing and manipulation of materials and forms.¹¹

A number of curatorial approaches to the presentation of tradition-based arts have defined the field to date, but due to the limitations of space, I will only give a few examples among the many exhibitions focused on ethnic groups which represent one of the most important outcomes of deep scholarly research over the past fifty years, and there have been many that have familiarized the viewers with particular cultures and the brilliance of their artistic repertoires.

¹¹ To see more: M. Okediji, "Whither Art History? African Art and Language as Semiotic Text", *The Art Bulletin*, 2015, vol. 97, no 2. pp. 123-139.



1. Ghada Amer, *The Rainbow Girl*, 2012. Embroidery and gel medium on canvas

The role of Africa-themed mega-exhibitions

It could be said that thirty years on from William Rubin's controversial exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1984), the question of the role and place of non-European art has gained new relevance through the globalizing tendencies in art history. At the heart of the debate back then were the objects that Rubin had enlisted to back up his thesis of the affinity of "tribal" and modern art. Rubin's concern was to show that European artists and those non-European artists dubbed by modernism as primitive were driven by similar aesthetic premises and a similar attitude of mind.¹² It seems that further ground was broken when the Senegalese figurative sculptor Ousmane Sow and the Nigerian installation artist Mo Edoga (1952-1914) became the first Africans to be included in the prestigious exhibition *Documenta 9* (1992). Since then, African artists have participated in all subsequent *Documenta* exhibitions (*Documenta 10*, *11*, and *12*), which are held in Kassel, Germany, every five years.

The other important recurrent exhibitions include the Cairo and Alexandria Biennials in Egypt, Dak'Art Biennial in Senegal, Rencontres de Bamako, Biennale Africaine de la Photographie in Bamako, Luanda Triennial in Angola, and Joburg Art Fair in South Africa.¹³ There are also the defunct historical initiatives such as the Johannesburg Biennale and CAPE Africa Platform. These events are important in their mission to make different locations on the African continent active cultural sites in which works of African artists are displayed and debated. These events are part of interrelated initiatives, such as the *Seven Stories About Modern African Art* (1995); *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (2001); *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (2002); *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* (2003); *Looking Both Ways: the Art of Contemporary African Diaspora* (2004); *Africa Remix* (2004) and *Africa, Assume Art Position!* (2011) or *Ici l'Afrique/Here Africa* (2014).¹⁴ Such exhibitions have helped to create significant visibility for modern and contemporary African art in the international arena. They have articulated the broad contexts of

¹² W. Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction" [in:] W. Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984, vol. 1, p. 11 and J-L. Paudrat "From Africa" [in:] W. Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th ...*, pp. 75-125.

¹³ G.G. Montero "Biennialization? What biennialization? The documentation of biennials and other recurrent exhibitions", *Art Libraries Journal*, 2011, vol. 37, no 1, pp. 13-23.

¹⁴ To see the list: G.G., Montero, op. cit., p. 18-23 and *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, op. cit., p. 6.

African artistic modernity in the twentieth century, employing frameworks that insisted on exhibitions as epistemological grounds for engaging the intersection of African history and art history.¹⁵ Writing on the role of museum exhibitions in the construction of art historical narratives, Hans Belting argues that museum exhibitions in the past did not only serve as sites of display but were active agents in “narrating history in the mirror of its own history”.¹⁶ These exhibitions are a significant contribution to the blossoming of contemporary African art, circulating within the global cultural arena whose primary locations are in Western Europe and North America. These Africa-themed mega-exhibitions are commendable in their mission to make contemporary African art visible in the West. Aside from these mega-exhibitions, African art has also featured in major international exhibitions such as the *Venice Biennale* and *Documenta* organized in the West. These exhibitions enable African artists to participate in global-scale events in which their work is seen and debated alongside artists from different parts of the world. The benefit of this participation cannot be underestimated, considering the historical marginalization of African artists in major world art events, a marginalization that has rendered African artists insignificant if not appendices in the history of modern art. While it is fitting to commend their importance, it is equally appropriate to point out the disappointing fact that these Africa-themed mega-exhibitions have not circulated on the African continent, with the exception of *Africa Remix*, which only came to Johannesburg in South Africa. Adding to this disappointment is the deprivation of African audiences living and working in different parts of the African continent who cannot see, witness and engage with what Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu called in their survey of the work of contemporary African artists the “important roles [these mega-exhibitions have played] in brokering the expansion of the knowledge of the field”¹⁷ of contemporary art worldwide.

In other words, although Africa is still deprived of the opportunity to possess its own artistic and cultural productions that rather continue to enrich western institutions and consumers, during the past two decades there has been a surge of interest in the work of contemporary African artists. A major reason for this turn of events is partly due to the impact of globalization on contemporary art and culture. Like other artists who were once situated on the

¹⁵ R. Chikukwa, “Curating contemporary African art: questions of mega-exhibitions and Western influences”, *African Identities*, 2011, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 225-229.

¹⁶ H. Belting, *Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate* [in:] H. Belting, A. Buddensieg ed., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2009, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, op. cit., p. 6.

margins of mainstream artistic narratives, African artists have been beneficiaries of the globalizing phenomenon that has included the rise of biennials and art fairs, and the unprecedented surge in collecting art on a worldwide scale. Consequently Africa continues to suffer from the colonial legacy instrumental in rendering Africa a space void of modernity; Africa becomes void of artistic activities, which elevate and justify the superiority of the West as the centre of modernity of contemporary times. In this regard, Africa becomes remote from, if not superfluous to, spaces where artistic activities that define cultural globalization take place. It is disturbing that for a long time ethnography, in order to emphasize the uniqueness of non-occidental cultures applied a different rule of attribution to art from such cultures, effectively denying the identities of the artists even where these were known. The figure of the individual genius, that element which more than any other defines enlightenment and modernity, was reserved for Europe, while the rest of humanity were identified with the collective, anonymous production pattern that inscribes primitivism. Until recently, works of classical African art were dutifully attributed to the "tribe" rather than to an individual artist, the latter thus effectively erased from the narrative spaces of art history. In contemporary discourses critics like to represent the continuation of this practice whereby novel strategies are employed to anonymize the work of the artist, thus deleting the authority of the latter, or constructing the artist away from the normativities of contemporary practice.

From Ulli Beier's (1922-2011)¹⁸ work on contemporary African art, to Andre Magnin's¹⁹ - present curator and dealer's - presentation of the ne-native African artist, there is a split between the author and the work which effectively depletes individual credit to the artist. While Beier focused on the details of biographical difference, others dwell on the peculiarity of the work, often situated in a simulacral ambience of esotericism and fractious submodernity. In each case the gaze is deflected unto Utopia, unto the significance of the Other. We are directed to the references to animal sacrifice and voodoo by the Ivorian artist Ouattara Watts (b. 1957) or the background of Mustapha Dime (1952-1998), the Senegalese sculptor who won first prize at Africa's own *Dakar Biennale* in 1992, rather than to their contributions to, and discursive place in, contemporary sculpture and installation art. Readers and art viewers are confronted with the Nigerian artist Twins Seven Seven's (1944-2011) identity as a spirit child and village chief, rather than with his work as a graphic artist (Fig. 2). And rather than find Congolese Cheri Samba (b. 1956)

¹⁸ Ulli Beier - German writer and scholar, who had a pioneering role in developing research on traditional culture and visual art in Nigeria.

¹⁹ O. Coutau, "André Magnin in Conversation", *New African*, October 2013, pp. 97-98.



2. Twins Seven Seven, *Sea Ghosts 3*, 1968. Ink on plywood

articulated within the discourses of contemporary satire, he is presented to us as symptomatic of the kitsch and camp aesthetics which characterizes the disintegration of African contemporaneity. And in each case these misrepresentations are made possible by first crossing out the subject's ability to self-articulate, to not only enunciate but also expatiate, to exercise their authority.

The African public and contemporary art

The Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) noted long ago that this is indeed the state at which the West has arrived [to Africa], at that juncture where it no longer has to erase or ignore others consciously, but as a matter of fact.²⁰ In the African continent, as in other developing parts of the world, the equitable distribution of public resources is a priority. The case for public support of the arts is thus difficult to make because it has been shown and borne out by many studies that arts audiences tend to represent the better educated, more prosperous minority of society, not the very poor, illiterate or inadequately educated population of African-origin.

Back in 1994, Okwui Enwezor, Nigerian curator and art critic, sadly wrote of the then debates engendered by the continuous canonical hegemony of Eurocentric discourses: "One of the problematic aspects of visiting museums, art galleries, and other sites of cultural valuation, in Europe and the United States, is the pervasive absence in these highly policed environments, of art by

²⁰ O. Oguiibe, *African Curators and Contemporary Art Notes and responses to the Sao Paulo Letter*, http://www.camwood.org/African_Curators_and_Contemporary_Art.html (29.07.2015).

contemporary African artists. Not only are the works of these artists (many of whom have been working for the past half century) conspicuously absent from the museum and gallery environment, they've also been accorded little attention or significance in academic art historical practices, university curricula, the print media, or other organs of such reportage.”²¹

During the last two decades, this situation has been changing. Many contemporary, worldwide, art museums have acquired numerous works by contemporary artists from the African continent that are already well established on the international art scene. These works are displayed alongside other works of contemporary art in galleries devoted to such work. The starting point is for the Africans themselves to take a greater interest in the art produced around them. For many, African art is still wrongly synonymous with “tribal” [meaning traditional] art, to which not much value is attached. The influence that traditional art had in shaping the work of Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque has been widely acclaimed; yet the same cannot be said of other African art.²² Contemporary abstract African art is a natural progression in the evolution of the local artists. However, if we exclude the oligarchs, established collectors, and a small emerging market of informed and affluent art enthusiasts in West Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa – where the contemporary art revolution is flourishing; the outlook elsewhere across the continent is less clear.

It looks as if the naive tourists and ill-informed locals actively encouraged the trade in badly crafted, mass-produced, wooden and metal masks or sculptures. The effect is to overlook the genuine African craftsmanship and artistic expression, which exists beyond the convenience of the shopping mall galleries and gift shops, all of which purport to sell “African art” to gullible, but enthusiastic, consumers. Part of the problem lies in the nature of abstract contemporary art itself. For those used to the more traditional African art of the type described above, contemporary art can be difficult to digest. This challenge is greater in Africa than it is elsewhere, as the market for abstract art has yet to fully mature outside of the esoteric world in which most of its enthusiasts dwell. Other important issues are access, cost and education. Art exhibitions, such as 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair at Somerset House in the late 2014, the Dakar Biennale and Art Dubai art fair – which was curated

²¹ O. Enwezor, “Redrawing the boundaries: Towards a new African art discourse”, *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 1994, vol. 1, Fall/Winter, p. 3.

²² A. Pawłowska, „Picasso i Afryka” in: *Artystyczne tradycje pozaeuropejskich kultur. Studia*, ed., B. Łakomska, Polskie Stowarzyszenie Sztuki Orientu Toruń 2009, pp. 163-173; Idem, „Wpływ zainteresowania kulturą afrykańską świata zachodniego na estetykę sztuki współczesnej” [in:] *Sztuka Afryki w kolekcjach i badaniach polskich*, ed. S. Szafranski, M. Kądziała, et al, Wydawnictwo Narodowe w Szczecinie, Szczecin 2014, pp. 59-70.

last year by one of Africa's leading art connoisseurs and curator Bisi Silva, the founder of the Centre of Contemporary Art Lagos (CCA)²³ – may champion rising artists, but the disposable income of many ordinary Africans will not stretch to allow them to attend these regional, let alone international events. Only very few average Africans will have an opportunity to experience Angola's triumph in winning the *Golden Lion* for the best pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2012 or have the pleasure of seeing the work of Nigerian sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp in the permanent exhibition at the *Smithsonian Institute* in Washington, or at the British Museum.²⁴ The internet helpfully opens a window to the continent's art, allowing art enthusiasts to access pieces which may never make their way to local museums or galleries. However, without the guidance, editing and commentary that often accompanies these pieces when they are in the formal setting of a gallery or museum, it is difficult for African amateurs to educate themselves.

Another problem which should be emphasized is the lack of curators of African origin and museum managers as well as cultural practitioners. Although there are a number of African art historians now residing in the West including those from Nigeria (like Roland Abiodun, Babatunde Lawal, Moyosore Benjamin Okediji, Olu Oguibe), the number of curators involved in some of the most active areas of artistic creation in Africa to address the current state of curatorial practice in this region are insufficient. The exceptions in this respect are: Meskerem Assegued (Zoma Contemporary Art Center, Ethiopia); Raphael Chikukwa (National Gallery of Zimbabwe); Marilyn Douala Bell (*Doual'art*, Cameroon); N'Goné Fall (independent curator, Senegal); Abdellah Karroum (L'appartement 22, Morocco); Riason Naidoo (South African National Gallery, RSA) and Bisi Silva (CCA Lagos, Nigeria).²⁵

International market for modern and contemporary African art

As one of the leading scholars in contemporary African art – Sidney Littlefield Kasfir – notes, “Blockbuster shows have greatly influenced the mainstreaming tendency.”²⁶ Much of this trend has occurred in the last thirty years, a period that also witnessed the increased visibility of contemporary African artists on the global scene. In consequence, in recent years, Africa's profile as an

²³ *Centre for Contemporary Art*, Lagos, <http://www.ccalagos.org/who-we-are> (30.07.2015).

²⁴ M.Ch. Kapotwe, *Whose Art Is It Anyway?*, “New African,” 2015, April, no. 549, p. 81.

²⁵ *Curating in Africa symposium*, Tate, London, October 2010, <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/curating-africa-symposium> (12.04.2015).

²⁶ S.L. Kasfir, “Museums and Contemporary African Art: Some Questions for Curators”. *African Arts* 2002, vol. 35, no 4, p. 15.

art market has risen considerably. With increasing support from international curators, young African artists have experienced higher profiles in the global market, including involvement in the art events mentioned above. Major interest within the African continent is focused on South Africa, especially Johannesburg, as well as the major cities in Nigeria and North Africa. For example, according to Deloitte and Art Tactic's Art & Finance Report 2014,²⁷ international and domestic sales of African modern and contemporary art have been fuelled by the rapid growth in the millionaires population in Nigeria and a growing interest in the rich history of the visual arts. The Nigerians are becoming Africa's most influential art collectors and the market is coming to rival its more established counterpart in South Africa, although experts point out that it is not just about money – Nigeria has a history of holding contemporary art exhibitions, and of collecting art. The Nigerian auction house, Art House Contemporary, registered a 25% increase in auction sales between 2008 and 2012, while 2013 was a record-breaking year, with 1.7 million US dollars in overall auction sales – an increase of over 20% compared to 2012.²⁸

According to many African art dealers, online auctions can democratize the art market and open it to a different sort of buyer. For example the major auction house Christie's reportedly generated 20.8 million US dollars in its online sales of all art in 2013 from 49 online only sales.²⁹ The eminent auction house Sotheby's has also gone online, launching a partnership with the online marketplace eBay in 2014.

Georgia Spray of The Sotheby's Auction Room claims: "We have found that [online auctions] are particularly suited to the African art market. The price points are still fairly accessible, starting at just £500 up to £30,000. It also attracts a younger demographic of buyers who may be collecting art for the first time and who couldn't transact with traditional auction houses, as they are intimidating to attend and their threshold for works is very expensive."³⁰

African art expert Ed Cross, who is curating the sale, says that the profile of the buyers has changed to encompass young members of the African Diaspora, alongside experienced collectors from the Middle East, Asia, Europe and North America. "I would say that the momentum for what is a new category as far as the art market is concerned, has continued to build – what we are

²⁷ *Art and Finance Report 2013*, http://www.deloittelux-library.com/artandfinance/2013/lu_en_wp_artandfinancereport_15032013.pdf (27.07.2015).

²⁸ A. Dalby, "Culture. African art breaks out online", *African Business* 2015, vol. 49, no 417, p. 86.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

seeing overall is the early days of long-term sustainable growth.”³¹ The traditional British auction house Bonhams was one of the pioneers in developing the market for contemporary African art. It remains the only traditional British auction house with a dedicated African department and an annual sale of African art. According to Bonhams’ director of contemporary African Art – Giles Peppiatt – Africa Now sale in May 2014 raised a record 3.2 million British pounds – an increase of 47% in comparison to May 2013. “It’s still emerging. It’s growing and continuing.”³²

Importantly, Bonhams holds a sale of South African art in London and features work by three top names from this country – Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886-1957), Irma Stern (1894-1966), and Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993)³³ and in the opinion of Peppiatt, valuations of African artists have “exploded” over the past seven years. Among the record prices Bonhams has achieved for individual works are over one million pounds for South African Irma Stern’s *Zanzibar Woman* in 2012 and 370 thousand pounds for Nigerian Ben Enwonu’s sculptures.

Cross, like Peppiatt, sees the market growth coming from within Africa, and says that this bodes well for the long-term health of the market. A number of artists, like Ablade Glover and Ben Enwonwu, have seen significant rises in prices, but the African market is not going to be a bubble-price growth; it is likely to be more gradual and consequently sustainable. As claimed by Cross: “The real growth will come when sufficient numbers of collectors from African countries decide that they want to own their national or continental heritage – and we are seeing that already with the Angolan mega-collector Sindike Dokolo and his personal ‘crusade’ to re-acquire African tribal art from non-African collections. There will be many others thinking and acting along these lines.”³⁴

Conclusion

During the past two decades, there has been a surge of interest in the work of contemporary African artists. This turn of events is partly due to the impact of globalization on contemporary art and culture. Like other artists who were once situated on the margins of mainstream artistic narratives, African artists have been beneficiaries of the globalizing phenomenon that has included the rise of biennials and art fairs, and the unprecedented surge in collecting art on

³¹ E. Cross, *African Contemporary & Modern Art - The African Art Auction. 18th October 2013 - 7:00 pm*, <http://theauctionroom.com/auctions/9> (30.07.2015).

³² Ch. Beugge, *African art: a good investment?*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/investing/10842809/African-art-a-good-investment.html> (30.07.2015).

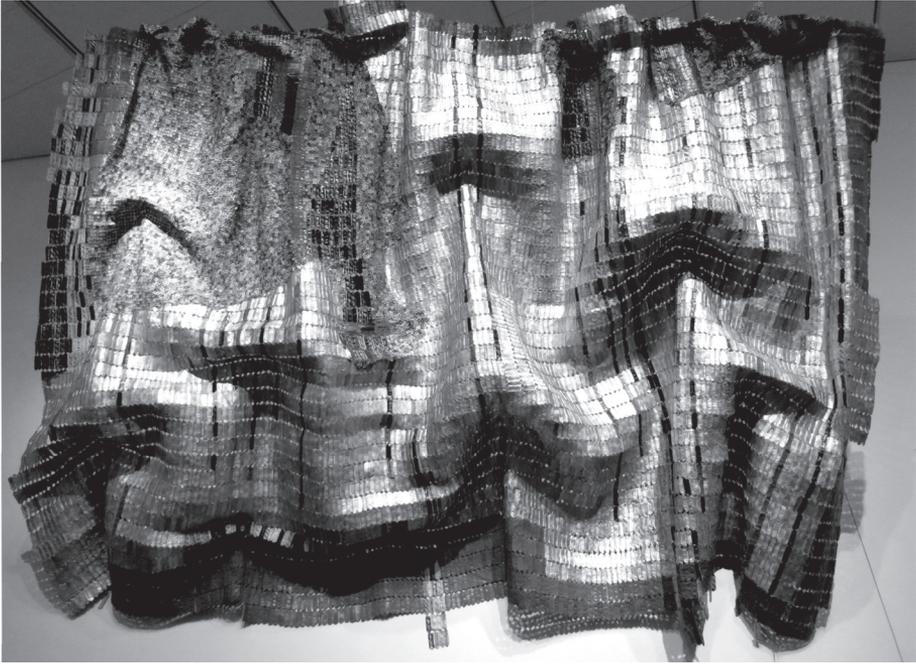
³³ To see more on South African art: A. Pawłowska, *Sztuka i kultura Afryki Południowej...*, op. cit.

³⁴ A. Dalby, op. cit, pp. 86-87.

a worldwide scale. To be clear, the apparent largesse of the international artistic contexts that have so readily embraced African artists and others could be attributed less to a change of heart about the artistic competence of the marginal regions, and more to a strategic repositioning and adaptation to global winds of change that blew down ideological walls throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Furthermore in the past 20 years Western art viewers have seen many African artists and curators taking part in international platforms like Documenta in Kassel, the Venice Biennale, the Gwanju Biennale, Arco Madrid, Berlin Art Forum, Art Basel Miami, and many others. Today a number of African art curators/artists on and outside the continent are showing in high-profile international art institutions like the Centre Pompidou (France), the Guggenheim Museum (USA), the Hayward Gallery (UK), the Manchester Art Gallery (UK), MoMA (USA), the Mori Art Museum (Japan), the Museum Kunst Palast (Germany), the Victoria and Albert Museum (UK), Modern Tate Britain (UK) and many others. Some of the artists who have shown in the above venues include Berry Bickle (Zimbabwe/Mozambique), Bili Bidjoka (Cameroon/ France), Cheri Samba (Congo), Dilomprizulike (Nigeria), Samuel Fosso (Togo), Yinka Shonibare (Nigeria/UK), El Anatsui (Ghana/Nigeria), William Kentridge (South Africa), Wangechi Mutu (USA/Kenya) and Romuald Hazoume (Benin) to mention but a few (Fig. 3 & 4). All of them have come to global prominence and have been positioned at the forefront of critical debates on contemporary art. Scholars have devoted serious and focused attention to the study of these artists' diverse experiences and works. In addition, a historical rereading of modern African art has reinvigorated the assessments of the work of contemporary African artists in light of modernity - and, by extension, the links to traditional African art - and broadened each of their critical horizons. But these huge names on the international stage remain unfamiliar to many Africans. Some may have heard of them but would still be hard-pressed to name these artists' famous works. As far as I am concerned, the most important statement in the ongoing dialogue about the representation of contemporary African art today, are the words of Olu Oguibe's when he said: "Africans must narrate themselves and must not be mere stagehands in a ventriloquist show."³⁵

³⁵ O. Oguibe, "Review: Africa explores: 20th century African art", *African Arts*, 1993, vol. 26, no.1, p. 22.



3. El Anatsui, *Rain Has No Father?*, 2008. Flattened bottle tops



4. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, 2010. The 1:30 scale replica of Lord Admiral Nelson's flagship, HMS Victory, includes sails with ethnic textile textures. Fibreglass, steel, brass, resin, UV ink on printed cotton textile, linen rigging, acrylic and wood

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AFRYKAŃSKA SZTUKA WSPÓŁCZESNA A ZWROT KURATORSKI (streszczenie)

W II połowie XX wieku podejście do historii sztuki afrykańskiej jako dziedziny naukowej jak też formy studiów artystycznych oraz wystaw teje sztuki znacznie się zmieniły. Celem artykułu jest zobrazowanie ewolucji idei tożsamości współczesnej sztuki afrykańskiej poprzez prezentację sposobów ekspozycji tej sztuki w ciągu ostatnich trzech dekad. Aby pojąć dynamikę zmian w europejskim podejściu do sztuki afrykańskiej, wystarczy przypomnieć słynne uwag Carla Einsteina i Roya Siebera z I połowy XX w. na ten temat lub kontrowersyjną wystawę Williama Rubina w Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Nowym Jorku (1984), pt. *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*. Wydaje się, że obecnie proces przemian w postrzeganiu i prezentowaniu współczesnej sztuki afrykańskiej pogłębia się. Jednocześnie rośnie udział kuratorów pochodzenia afrykańskiego, co pozwala na stworzenie nowej strategii kuratorskiej – prawdziwego „zwrotu kuratorskiego” z początku XXI w., który pozwala odzyskać głos uprzednio jedynie reprezentowanym Afrykanom.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka afrykańska, zwrot kuratorski, muzeum, wystawy, sztuka współczesna.