

Import-export: History of the history of contemporary African art By Iolanda Pensa

Contemporary African art means everything and nothing.

A style, a recognisable identity among a group of intellectuals, the cultural production of one or several territories, an issue expressed by artists in their work, an ideology, the exclusion of an entire continent from the context of contemporary art. The *definition* - and consequently the contents - of *contemporary African art* changes and has changed according to its use and users.

Looking at the exhibitions (without taking into consideration the artists' monographs and those focused on specific countries), we can note that these events have applied different methodologies to present contemporary African art. For example, Jean-Hubert Martin in *Magiciens de la Terre* inside an international African show included artists selected freely by his team of researchers (among whom there was André Magnin); Susan Vogel in *Africa Explores* presented an heterogeneous collection of works categorised into typologies; Clémentine Deliss in *Seven Stories* interpreted contemporary African art as the history of several histories and worked with a team of specialised curators; Okwui Enwezor in *The Short Century* observed the political implications of cultural productions on the continent from a colonial and post-colonial perspective; the Dakar Biennial shows every two years in Senegal a selection of artists with the nationality of an African country.

The very *concept* of contemporary African art is tightly related to the history of its promotion. Exhibitions, publications, magazines and institutions have been launched to change the perception of Africa; to make its richness, liveliness and contemporariness both perceived and visible; to allow its protagonists to be integrated in the global market.

Differently from what happens in shows and publications focused generically on contemporary art, most projects on *contemporary African art* are nourished by justifications. In most cases, in catalogues, articles and press releases we'll find an explication about why it is necessary to promote African art, why it's indispensable to change the perception of Africa and why it's time to sustain intercultural dialogue. More than explicit (and simple) cultural objectives, it appears that exhibitions and publications on contemporary African art more likely have objectives related to co-operation, development and integration (or have to sell themselves this way). This situation seems to be confirmed by a growing number of curators and cultural operators who refuse to justify their interest for Africa to avoid this rhetoric of *good-natured sympathy* (for example, Dídac P. Lagarriga, *Chimurenga: who no know go no; An interview with Ntone Edjabe*, 2004).

Through this process of promotion, Africa turned from a territory into an identity. A heterogeneous and mutable one, each time defined differently according to the promoters who consciously or unconsciously got involved in this wide marketing project.

The last exhibition in order of time that turned on the debate is *Africa Remix*, one of widest and most ambitious containers of African artists the *West* has ever hosted. During the three days conference in Paris, the curator Simon Njami expressed his desire to close the curtain on contemporary African art and move on. From his side the show - open also to North African artists and artists from the Diaspora - provided the appropriate epilogue to an outdated approach. Outdated or not, the exhibitions gave its own *remixed* definition of contemporary African art, further encouraged a representation of international art which was already largely under discussion far before 2004 and without any doubt produced an excellent *marketing* project, not only of contemporary African art, but also of its curators.

Contemporary African art - promoted as such - is in fact fundamentally a *brand*, constructed and finalized to the import-export of a continent and its Diaspora.

The idea that contemporary African art has to be promoted and has to acquire a wider international visibility is central in the guide lines of grant-makers (such as AFAA-Afrique en Créations, Africalia, Prince Claus Fund, Ford Foundation), which require from financed activities to be development and sustainable projects. Those international foundations and semi-government institutions are focused on Africa or on the *South* and often don't have links with analogous national agencies

devoted to the cultural sector. Events on *contemporary African art* are (or have been) also financed by African governments often associated or related to pan-African ideologies; lately the South African role has become central, with new wide projects, such as Trans Cape and the Africa Centre, projected towards the continent. The African specificity is also recognisable among the organisations, curators, art critics and cultural operators that deal with *contemporary African art* and that have mainly competencies in their *geographic field* with limited contacts in the international one (in the *richer* sense of the word). In the *West*, the process of promotion of contemporary African art has produced a specific African field, rather than an inclusion of African artists inside the wide international art world. The few artists who have succeeded in avoiding this logic are those who have presented their works mainly in exhibitions and publications that were not specifically African (Gilane Tawadros, Conference at Africa Remix, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 15/06/2005), even though - in different ways - in those projects they did represent an "African presence".

The history of *contemporary African art* is not only marked by the definition of its content, but also by the definition of its containers. To trace this *other* history, a reasonable system is to identify its footprints.

Focusing on documentation, we may observe the exhibitions, publications, magazines and institutions, which enriched the definition of contemporary African art, and the methodology they applied. The great advantage is that we move from a historical approach to a historiographic one. Instead of defining what contemporary African art is, we define *who defined contemporary African art*: instead of nourishing a discourse on identity we focus on material evidence. It is obviously a reductive and faulty approach, but it has the advantage of producing and giving visibility to more composite and quantitative documentation rather than trying to define what contemporary African art actually *is*.

The issue of material evidences is essential. Studies and documentation on contemporary African art - in its wide sense - are still limited and marginally available. The primary identifiable sources are still the researches produced by "Revue Noire", by independent art critics and curators, by anthropologists and by the African institutions which disseminate them directly, even though few are really visible outside their countries, such as the biennials, the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, the South African galleries and the online magazine "Artthrob". Exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (with further researches made by André Magnin for the Pigozzi Collection), *Africa Explores*, *Seven Stories*, *The Short Century*, the Dakar and Bamako Biennials are the real source - marginally integrated - of many new projects. The critical debate is fairly developed, too. Approximate and mistaken data are spread out without real control and argumentation from the research community and from the cultural operators. A certain attitude is also responsible for underestimating rigorous studies: since most people believe they *discover* Africa and since they give for granted that in Africa there is little and that the *West* knows next to nothing about it in any way, they simply don't check. A quite emblematic case is *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, a side-event of the Venice Biennial 2001, which proposed itself as a sort of "first African participation at the Venice Biennial". Even though some information was included inside the catalogue, the curators most evidently didn't feel the need to produce a real inquiry on the African presence at the biennial (some participations are mentioned - such as the Egyptian and South African ones and the shows at the 45th and 48th edition - but there is no indication of the exhibition of 1922 or of the presentations of Tunisia, Liberia, Congo, Nigeria and Zimbabwe).

Until a growing and diversified documentation becomes widely available, we will be permanently trapped in the necessity of producing *background information*. We will repeat and multiply promotional projects which, instead of moving on and experimenting new tools and modalities of rewriting history and representing its complexity, will constantly perceive the need to disseminate and didactically teach - mainly to the so-called *West* - that history and those histories which are still considered *excluded* and marginal.

If catalogues are incomplete, reviews rare and research still limited, what we can do is ask. Witnesses can enrich the sources and, thanks to the Internet, it is now actually possible to produce contents through community-based processes.

If we can not agree on Charlemagne's coronation, we will certainly not trace a shared history (of the history) of contemporary African art. But this is a positive result.

During the conference at the Dakar Biennial 2006, Yacouba Konaté, attacked the role of anthropologists in interpreting the contemporary arts of Africa and invited Africans to gain a major role in the critical inquiry. In his presentation, the artistic director of Dak'Art 2006 gave voice to a tendency that is always relevant in the debate on African art (and strongly perceived of late), which opposes *Africans* to *Westerns*. More oriented towards origins, training, nationality, skin colour and residency of the authors rather than contents, this approach has been largely supported by the Afro-American and South African perspectives, in which social classifications - independently from changes in the legislation - are particularly present in critical studies. This attention to individuals becomes more ambiguous when the discourse is projected on the Internet. A project such as Wikipedia produces unsigned entries, in which contributions from different authors can mix indistinctly. The proper distinction appears between active and passive users, in other words, between people who can or can't directly upload contents online. In the specific field of culture, it is not appropriate to argue that the digital divide is geographical, but possibly generational. In any case it is never irremediable.

Today we need to *multiply visions* - as Rasheed Araeen would say - and not necessarily to reach a conclusion. Everyone - whatever origin, residency and training - has the inviolable right to have his/her own perspective on the world and to give his/her own interpretation. And online there is all the space and the freedom to do so.

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