

## From the Editor

Photography and its allied forms of lens-based image making, such as film and video, have become, as Elizabeth Janus eloquently suggested, “key to some of the most radical artistic advances, partly because it forced artists to ask profound questions about the roots of representation and partly because it changed the way we think about and look at the world around us.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, any serious discussion of photography—and by extension film and video—within the African context must take into consideration both the history of this medium and the particular aesthetics it has come to represent. It must also take into consideration the revolutionary transformations photography has undergone as a genre, especially during the last forty years. Though photography today assumes an important role in contemporary art practice, this has not always been the case. Through much of its history, the status of photography within the history of art has often been precarious, if not inconspicuous. Yet, as the conventions and aesthetics of painting and other forms of what art history defines as “high art” changed, so did ideas concerning photography. Photography has been highly influential in the most revolutionary transformation in the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the transition from pictorialism to idea-based image making. With the dissolution of boundaries between the different media, the photographic medium has come to define our understanding of artistic expression. We now know very well that the disruptive techniques of the Dadaists, the strategies of Pop artists, and Walter Benjamin’s critique of originality in art helped pave the road to the conceptualism which has dominated contemporary art practices since the 1960s. With the rise of postmodernism, photography—still or moving—has provided artists with profound possibilities for experimenting and the greatest means of appropriating reality and critiquing traditional artistic conventions and practices. Taking into consideration factors of race and gender, and the impact of feminist discourses of the last three decades, photography, as part of the print tradition, has always been and will continue to be a richer and more diverse tradition that encompasses what Ruth Weisberg called, “the personal, intimate gesture and the popular, the commercial, and the political.”<sup>2</sup>

The question one may ask is: How do African and African diaspora artists fair in these developments? What happens when they turn the camera on their own culture, or when they shift the focus to cultures other

than their own? Some of these questions might not have been asked if the medium of photography was originally African. Yet two considerations come to mind in answering these questions. One is that the complexity and diversity of the African and the African diasporic experiences defy any monolithic assumptions concerning African or African diasporic identities, cultures, and art practice. The history of photographic practices in Africa and its diaspora are no exception. Second, the connection between the development of modern media and the advent of European colonialism in Africa is undisputed. Appropriation of Africa’s visual world through the invention of the camera went hand in hand with the appropriation of Africa’s wealth. This was the past that confronted African photographers in the wake of colonialism, as they faced the challenge of transcending the images created by decades of colonial rule. And they met this challenge head-on. Since then, African and African Diaspora artists have responded to these challenges by creating a new visual language for the representation of modern African and African diasporic experiences.

We learned from landmark exhibitions and publications such as *Revue Noire’s African Photography*, Okwui’s *Enwezor’s In/Sight* and *The Short Century*, Manthia Diawara’s *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* and *Black American Cinema*, and Viola Shafik’s *Popular Egyptian Cinema; Gender, Class and Nation* and *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, that the history of photography and film in Africa or its Diaspora is not monolithic.<sup>3</sup> In places such as Egypt, Tunisia, and South Africa, the camera was put to use in the late nineteenth century, a few years after its invention in Europe and North America, while it took another half a century for the camera to attain similar currency in other parts of Africa. Today, it can be confidently stated that African and African diasporic artists and filmmakers have appropriated the medium and shaped it into their own image. African artists and photographers have been in the forefront of modernism and postmodernism, actively shaping the direction of art practices during the greater part of this century. “Studioists” such as Mama Casset and Seydou Keita are only a few of the many photographers whose pioneering work and methodical documentation offers a visual representation of the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era in African societies and its implication for modernity. Most recently, Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* highlighted a shift away from the commercial studio portraiture that was predominant in Africa

during previous decades, revealing, as he argues, “a new and surprising emphasis on conceptual art, documentary, and fashion photography.” The exhibition and its well-illustrated catalogue shifted our view to the complexities of daily life across a vast continent of over fifty nations, and in the process revealed that there are many African artists whose work deserves wider recognition. The question remaining, as put by Enwezor and Octavio Zaya in their introduction to the 1996 catalogue of *In/Sight*, the landmark exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, is, “How do we address questions of representation, self-imaging, and artistic freedom when these initiatives are counteracted by stronger economic imperatives, and when the contingencies of social and epistemological control are made to bend the influence of power and control?”<sup>4</sup>

These developments and theoretical considerations sum up the conceptual framework and the impetus behind the emphasis in this issue of *Nka* on photography, film, and video. If anything, the essays in this issue alert to the fact that in the contemporary field, African and African Diaspora artists have long been in the vanguard of international art practice, taking up critical positions in the emerging discourses on global cultural production. Okwui Enwezor’s dialogue with Paris-based Moroccan artist Touhame Enadre offers clues to the history, aesthetics, and technical process that have come to define Enadre’s oeuvre, and to the making of his black-and-white photographs of post-September 11th New York City. Petrine Archer-Straw’s essay is a meditation on contemporary critical theory and its limitation in accounting for exoticism, black subjectivity, and the representation of blackness in the context of the tenuous relationship between black and white people. Carla Williams revisits similar issues in her penetrating essay on the career of the legendary Maudelle Bass Weston (1908–1989), the African American artist, model, and dancer known professionally as Maudelle, and the ways in which her performances as a model reveal the expressive strategy that influenced the development of black women’s representation in the mid-twentieth century. Cheryl Finley and Anitra Nettleton respectively offer close readings of a single photographic-based work and a series of works by two women artists. Finley provides an astute analysis of the Black British artist Joy Gregory’s *Cinderella Tours Europe (1997–2001)*, in which she photographed buildings, monuments, and cities associated with the construction of a popular image of Europe and of classic sites of memory on any tourist’s photographic itinerary. Nettleton, on the other hand, deconstructs the

“archaeology of the imaginary,” and analyzes the media and iconography of Deborah Bell’s *Unearthed*, an exhibition held in Johannesburg in 2001.

Shifting to film, Manthia Diawara’s article offers interesting clues to the direction the aesthetics and politics of representation in African cinema are taking in post-colonial Africa. Mbye Cham pays a well-deserved homage to the late Senegalese filmmaker, Djibril Diop-Mambéty, whose career yielded avant-garde classics such as *Touki Bouki (1972)*, and *Hyenas (1992)* a *tour de force* of symbolic storytelling that reveals his obsession with the quest for an African style of cinema. Amy Ongiri provides a critical reconsideration of Third Cinema and its aesthetic in relation to the cinema of Charles Burnett, the African American filmmaker whose classic film *Killer of Sheep* has been given a new life with the enthusiastic critical reception of its re-release this year. Calling for a reconsideration of West African videofilms, Akin Adesokan’s essay challenges African elites, including academics, to rethink their assumptions about the Nigerian videofilm industry and its aesthetic appeal. Carla Williams shifts our focus to the genre of video and digital art in her critical review of Hank Willis Thomas’s *Winter in America*, a humorous but sad meditation on black-on-black violence in urban America. Focusing solely on the genre of painting, Derek Conrad Murray offers an in-depth critique of race and masculinity as major tropes of representation in the larger than life hyperrealist portraits of African American men and hip hop icons that dominate the recent oeuvre of the African American painter Kehinde Wiley. Finally, Michael D. Harris draws our attention to McArthur Freeman’s paintings which appropriate animation and cartoons to create provocative visual statements, and to explore myths, stereotypes, and fantasies of blackness.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Janus (ed.), *Veronica’s Revenge: Contemporary Perspectives on Photography* (Zurich, New York: Scalo, 1998) p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Weisberg, “Critical Theory and the Print: New Criteria for Print Qualities in an Expanded Field,” *Contemporary Impressions: The Journal of the American Print Alliance*, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 10–12.

<sup>3</sup> This is just sampling of publications among many others that could be mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> See Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, “Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption,” in *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996) p. 22.