

From the Editor

Chika Okeke-Agulu

This issue of *Nka* presents “Contemporary African Art and the Museum,” the third in a series of four conversations on issues in contemporary African art by leading voices in the field. The first panel, in issue 22/23 (2008), brought together well-known curators to examine the large-scale art exhibition as a platform for bringing the work of African artists to global attention. The second, in issue 26 (2010), convened established and emerging scholars to discuss the relationship between contemporary African art and art-history scholarship, and the fourth will examine the work of independent art centers in Africa. These timely and critical conversations fulfill the mandate of our journal, which was established primarily to help articulate the problems and challenges of the nascent discipline. Global interest in the conversations has been unprecedented, thanks in part to the fact that they have been relayed in near-real time through our blogs. What these roundtables suggest is that as the discursive horizons of the field expand, and as shifts and transformations in the sphere of artistic production, critical scholarship, and the marketplace continue, it is necessary, and this journal hopes, to find new ways of keeping abreast with the dynamics of contemporary African art.

Let me share a few thoughts on this latest roundtable. I was primarily interested in the politics of contemporary African art and the art museum. From the outset I hoped that the forum would provide the opportunity to examine as never before the role of museums in bringing the work of African artists to the consciousness of the contemporary world. The panel was chosen on the basis of the contributions each participant has made to the field as a curator in an important museum with sustained engagement with modern and contemporary African art and artists. Given that the invited participants, all established scholars, served as senior officials in the museums or galleries with which they were affiliated, I was somewhat concerned that

their institutional affiliation might discourage serious discussions about how museums do their work. As the reader will see, my anxiety was, thankfully, unfounded.

Our topics included the role of the curator of contemporary African art in the museum, accessioning and (re)presentation of African artists in the permanent collection, the place of contemporary African art in relation to “traditional” African art and Western contemporary art, and the age-old questions about presenting contemporary African art in art and/or ethnology museums. I was fascinated by our discussion of the curator’s engagement with persistent notions about authenticity and/or national or ethnic purity in the context of contemporary art. What is clear is that Africa is not one place or culture but many and remains a “contested terrain,” and there is no better place to test and debate the meanings and limits of ideas of Africa than in the context of the art museum. Museums, as Karen E. Milbourne of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art aptly noted, do and should always confront the question of how to “create exhibitions or make acquisitions that challenge the range of assumptions about where and when Africa is.”

One point of interest that results from this discussion is how institutional curators keep apprised of contemporary African artists’ work. Biennales and other high-profile group shows often serve as “filters” through which museum curators learn about new work. And although such exposure has its merits, it also limits knowledge of African contemporary artists, since the blockbuster shows inevitably occlude work that is outside their curatorial horizon. To be sure, curators who are not affiliated with museums have been vital to African artists’ access to museums. They also provide alternative venues and catalyze changes within museums with which they collaborate. But although independent curating has made great contributions toward opening museums’ doors to African artists, it cannot be a substitute for the power of museums as arbiters of art and cultural knowledge.

Another matter that must be kept in view — and that all three roundtables have considered in one form or another — concerns Africa’s place relative to the power dynamics in the globalized art

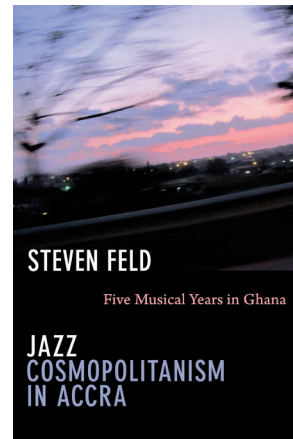
world. While I agree with the sentiment behind Yukiya Kawaguchi's call for alternative sites to the Western-dominated art industry, the prospects are sobering. As US and European economies shrink, and as their ability to support international art and cultural programs decreases, new global players motivated by their own national imperatives, such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC), are likely to see their roles in the world differently. As developing economies, moreover, the BRIC countries will likely focus on developing their own still modest national contemporary art and cultural infrastructure and resources. This means that African state and corporate/private institutions must be pressed to take greater responsibility for creating an environment in which contemporary art will thrive. Establishing art museums and collections is the way to start. The current excessive reliance on foreign museums and funding agencies to support advanced African art and artists is unsustainable because it goes against any desire Africans may have for "local" agency in matters of art scholarship, commerce, and cultural politics.

This brings me to my final point: the apparently low level of serious, sophisticated, critical engagement with contemporary art by critics and historians resident in Africa. What is to be done about this? Or is my assessment wrong, as "home-based" colleagues have told me on countless occasions? *Nka* remains committed to contemporary African art inside and outside the African continent, but over the years it has received very few articles and reviews from scholars resident in Africa. So I hereby openly encourage critics, art historians, and scholars resident in Africa to bring to the attention of our journal exciting, ambitious, and sophisticated work in their corner of the African world — art that might otherwise escape our attention. And the way to do this is to submit for our consideration equally good texts and portfolios dealing with this work. How many out there will take up this challenge?

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