dialogue

THE OLD AND THE NEW: “THERE IS A BIG LINK”

Gitti Salami

Scholarly engagement with Africa’s burgeoning contemporary art scenes is exciting and desirable. This is particularly true where art historians are able to penetrate artworks’ deeper levels of meaning based on thorough knowledge of local contexts, understanding of the specifics of various regional modernities, and comprehension of the intricacies of local and national discourses about art. In-depth study of indigenous artistic practices, their historic manifestations, and their contribution to and participation in respective modernities is equally engaging and prudent.

I do not think that it matters whether a scholar begins investigation with a contemporary African artist’s œuvre or with a time-honored community-based practice; if the scholarship is meticulous and eschews the notion that the dominant Eurocentric discourse on art is the only one that matters, it will invariably conclude that “tradition” and modernity in Africa constitute each other and that contemporary African art (whether rooted in indigenous practice or in academic training) extends and is expressive of this inextricably intertwined relationship. As Egè Enang, a recent graduate of the University of Yvo’s Department of Fine and Industrial Art and a sculptor in Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria, explains: “No artist grows beyond his soul whose intellectual and expressive legacies will long inspire. Salut Luc!”

What seems thrilling to me at this point in time is an investigation into the jarring contradictions inherent in (post)colonial African societies and Africans’ mastery of the paradoxes that resulted from diametrically opposed indigenous and European-imposed value systems. The international artworld seems dumbfounded by the “antinomies of art and culture” that typify the contemporary moment (see Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee’s intriguing compilation of essays by that title), but in Africa these are old hat. Instead, the strategies people have devised to live comfortably with absurdity appear to be paving the way for an expanded consciousness destined to leave the horizons of Enlightenment philosophy’s insistence on “rationality,” and therefore modernity as we know it, in the dust.

My work among Yakurr in Nigeria, many of whom use their indigenous festival practices to vie for international recognition of their culture, which they deem superior to Eurocentric propositions for a globalizing world, would indicate it is the study of those aesthetic paradigms embedded in African art alien to European thought that will eventually bring the project of modernity to its conclusion. If Africanist art historians lay to rest the notion that indigenous practices recorded during the twentieth century are precolonal, which they are not, and recognize them for what they are, various cultures’ way of filtering new ideas and experiences through their own institutions, they will understand that the study of indigenous African art is anything but exhausted and that isolating academic-based contemporary art because it has a greater shot at appealing to international audiences is counterproductive.

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Notes

1. Egè Enang, interview with author, Ugep, Nigeria, August 8, 2011.

ON DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES

Monica Blackmun Visonà

Hoping for a few good leads on the art scene in Algeria, I recently leaped through Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu’s Contemporary African Art since 1980 (2009). I had somehow forgotten that the labels attached to its gorgeous illustrations contain no information about the artists other than their names. When I discovered that I was actually following the lead of American law enforcement, “profiling” artists by their names alone, I turned to the introductory essays. But again I was frustrated; the essays deliberately frame the reader’s interest around a specific artists known as CoBrA (Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam), and under his pseudonym Luc Zangrie, he produced CoBrA’s only major movie, Persephone, in 1951. De Heusch’s notable documentaries concerned Congolese and Rwandan cultures, and his politically provocative works included Une république de vivre (Rwanda, 1894–1994) in 1996 and Quand j’étais belge of 1999, latter about the ongoing riving of Belgium by Walloon and Flemish factions.

Here, then, was—and is—a most vibrant soul whose intellectual and expressive legacies will long inspire. Salut Luc!

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Donkor, and Victor Ekpuk interact in wonderful ways across a page, even if their statements do not coincide. At some point, I began to see this project through the eyes of my American students; they simply love the book.

I then recalled the astonishment of a young art student when I pounced upon his copy of the November 2008 issue of Juxtapoz. Surely he must have wondered why the transgressive and transnational African art featured in this arts magazine, and the profiles of photogenic young artists such as Wangeci Mutu and Youssef Nabil, would interest a middle-aged art historian in bifocals? I realized that French artists might have acquired Minotaure, with its articles on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, as a marker of their own sophistication in the 1930s, just as possession of this issue of Juxtapoz conferred a cosmopolitan status upon an American student in the twenty-first century.

And almost a century ago, artists must have looked through Carl Einstein's Negerplastik of 1915 in much the same way that my students flip through Contemporary African Art since 1980, entranced by the images alone. In free-standing illustrations that are unencumbered by iconographic analysis, artists can find ideas that correspond to their own interests, be they formal or conceptual. My art history classes, on the other hand, require students to imagine the original work in its intended cultural, social, and political context, constraining the creative associations evoked by its image. In the classroom, do I thus squelch both visual pleasures and transcultural resonance? Perhaps the growing conflict in our field is not between studying African history and art history, but between artistic and academic interests. My art history classes, on the other hand, require students to imagine the original work in its intended cultural, social, and political context, constraining the creative associations evoked by its image. In the classroom, do I thus squelch both visual pleasures and transcultural resonance? Perhaps the growing conflict in our field is not between studying African history and art history, but between artistic and academic interests.

“This History of Africa to 1850,” I have become acquainted with the amazing responses I receive from my students with regard to the material I teach. It became very soon clear to me that this survey class is by far the most important of all African history classes I have taught, because it changes the perceptions students have about the African continent, its people, and its history. Most often students heard little about African history in high school and know about the continent through the stereotypes that the contemporary media convey: chaos, crises, hunger, military dictatorships, genocides, wars, and underdevelopment and, on the less negative side, African wildlife, safaris, and drum music. Thus, the effects of teaching a class about Africa’s thousands of years of rich cultural history are tremendous, and students feel not only enlightened about so many things they never expected to have existed in Africa, but also very grateful to be informed about its history, peoples, and arts. They are astonished by the fact that the continent was (and is) home to powerful women political leaders well respected in their communities, by the roles of complex religions in legitimizing political power, or by the existence of highly developed societies that were once connected through trade networks extending across the continent into the Indian and Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Such information underscores to them that the continent was an important part of world historical processes long before the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.

Students’ interests stand in stark contrast to the position that precolonical African history has within the field of African history. This dilemma calls for an epistemological shift to not only question the marginalization of an important part of the field of African history, but also the privileging of the word “colonial” in the periodization of African studies. Richard Reid (2011) noted the marginalization of precolonical history from the mainstream Africanist scholarship in recent decades. He attributed the marginalization to exaggerated focus and significance given to the history of the twentieth century.

Despite the increased scholarship on pre-nineteenth century history—and in such related fields as African Diaspora Studies and in the supporting discipline of archaeology—precolonical African history still receives neither the same attention nor funding as post-nineteenth century history. This was also underscored in a recent discussion scholars held in PRECOLONIALAFRICA@listserv.it.northwestern.edu, a listerv which is dedicated to the study and teaching of precolonical African history. One reason for this, I would argue, is the curious lack of awareness of the scholarship about the field by historians of Africa themselves, as well as the limited number of its practitioners, but also the lack of diverse teaching materials for these time periods. For instance, at the recent roundtable entitled “The Audacity of Gender: Power, Sex, and Social Roles in Africanist Research on Early Africa” convened by Christine Saidi, Rhonda Gonzales, Cynomme Fourshey, Carolyn Vieira Martinez, and myself at the African Studies Association in Philadelphia in November 2012, some members of the audience felt that the stories of precolonal Africa were not as easy to grasp, because they often were not conveyed through written texts.

It is here that African art historians can help in making these stories more accessible, not only to students but to a wider audience, and can likewise incorporate the new and exciting research that is coming out of archaeological excavations, such as the Nok sites in Central Nigeria. One of the reasons that contemporary issues have gained so much presence in the fields of both African history and art history is, as Sidney Kasfir has rightly pointed out, the desire of Africanists to continuously demonstrate that Africa is not backward and underdeveloped. But one of the strongest impressions I took home from my fieldwork in Nigeria was the rootedness of Nigerian peoples in the past. The past informed many of their actions in the present as well as their relations to the phenomena of the modern nation state. My research on the Ndakogboy ancestral masqueraders of the Nupe people, which contributed to the exhibition “Central Nigeria Unmasked,” revealed the strong connections that the Nupe peoples have to their past traditions, which they invoke during annual festivals and which are part of the life of the present. This ongoing conversation between the past and the present, as it is lived by contemporary Africans, offers abundant returns for scholarship in African art history and African history, for the classroom and the public. The spread of knowledge about Africa’s rich and complex past and present, its peoples and cultures, seems to me one of the most powerful and convincing ways to confront the stereotypes that prevail about the continent.

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CURATING AFRICAN HISTORY
Kevin D. Dumouchelle
In her recent Dialogue essay, Sidney Kasfir asks whether a series of changes within the study of African art reflect a crisis, or a generational shift. I argue for the latter. Indeed, they reflect developments predicted nearly twenty-

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Minotaure. 1933. no. 2 (June).

REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICA IN THE CLASSROOM
Constance Weise
Ever since I started teaching the survey course

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