The Sliding Scale of Past and Present
by Till Förster

Sidney Kasfir’s analysis rightly addresses, I believe, a growing research gap in African art studies. It has indeed become difficult to persuade students to conduct fieldwork for a year or more in a remote place to study “traditional” or, as some might prefer, “local” arts of Africa—the shrines and rites that, Kasfir suggests, could also be framed as “installations” and “happenings.” I don’t believe, however, that replacing an older vocabulary by a newer, more fashionable one will solve the problem—though it appears to be an irony of history that contemporary art practices, to some extent inspired by African art, now may help to render that very art more attractive to Western students. Framing the art of others in a postcolonial vocabulary may change as much as the renaming of European museums in the past two decades. It is easy to understand that young PhD students and researchers do not want to be associated with institutions and ideas that were rooted in colonialism. The move away from the older canon of African art studies is, to some degree, an emancipation from its colonial legacy. So far so good.

More problematic than the shift away from the old ethnographic museums and research agendas towards the contemporary is what it entails. Very few PhD students and researchers still engage in a systematic documentation of the arts of others (while collecting has almost entirely turned into a secret profession of art dealers and their networks). Students today tend to look more at art that is already mediated by the institutions of the art world: museums and galleries, curators and critics. There is nothing wrong with such a focus, but art is also produced and performed for other audiences and often finds no echo in the art world. If anthropology has contributed to the study of African art, it is probably through its focus on art that is not made for a distant art world but for people that can and do experience art directly and without intermediaries. Working on such issues necessitates thick, long-term participation, often in places where one is cut off from cell phone networks, the Internet, and other means of communication that would allow the researcher to participate in two worlds.

What we senior scholars sometimes tend to forget is to tell our students that “the contemporary” and its fluidity, instability, and heterogeneity can be as much a discursive figure of thought than the older, bounded notion of society. African artists do not work in a vacuum and very seldom can afford to ignore the existing visual culture of their lifeworld. Any analysis of the formation of style and genre needs to address the question of how and to what degree that expressive visual culture iterates into the present. I cannot think of a thorough analysis of art in a contemporary context, be it rural or urban, that leaves its background, the historic modes of artistic expression, in the dark. Looking at the contemporary as a separate realm is as one-sided as looking at “the traditional” arts only. If even the remotest village is engaged with the global, then the city is also incorporating the local. I believe we need to make our students more aware of the fact that the local and the global are but markers on a sort of sliding scale that calls for an open research question: how do older arts iterate into the present?

Till Förster is Chair of the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Basel, Switzerland. till.foerster@unibas.ch

On Political Terms
by Dominique Malaquais

“Is it possible to convey [the] excitement of working on the past to a cohort of students interested primarily in the here and now?” asks Sidney Kasfir. To do so, I would argue, is not only possible, but essential: essential on political grounds.

In a recent interview, I was asked why my work centers on African art. My focus, I responded, is less on African art per se—a category that strikes me as too restrictive and too general at the same time—than on art that questions unequal power relationships. In particular, I am interested in work that considers how inequality on a global scale is perpetuated by political and economic states of affairs that find their roots in the emergence of capitalism as a world system. I am moved by creative practices that engage with the structural violence of this system. Some of the most sustained and the most thoughtful reflections on the nature and the mechanisms of such violence, as well as on the means deployed to counter it, it seems to me, have come from creators hailing from parts of the world that were subjected to colonialism. Africa is one such place. From artists whose experimental videos are projected at cutting-edge venues in London, Lagos, and Dubai to carvers in rural Tanzania who develop masks that riff on the distended eyes and hollow cheeks of Halloweenwear mass-produced in China, the African continent is home today to visual and performative cultures that converse in profoundly affecting ways with the dystopias of our late capitalist present.

In a world increasingly bereft of hope, engagement with such cultures sustains me. But what of the terms of this engagement? Are they a matter of the present—let us say of the post-colony—alone? The answer is a resounding no. Unequivocally, the cultures I reference have a history, and an extraordinarily rich one at that. With this, too, engagement is necessary.

While the foregoing may seem self-evident, too often it falls by the wayside. The best courses on contemporary art analyze the stances of (some) creators toward globalization and its off-spring—exploitation, racism, movement curtailed for the many, even as the few make ever greater haste. Little, however, is made of a complex and variegated history of expressive culture that addresses related issues a century and more earlier. The result is a peculiar disconnect that one encounters with far less frequency in studies of contemporary art from Europe, North America, or Asia. The will to express in visual form critical reflection about injustice and its root causes as these relate to the capitalist project is perceived as a recent phenomenon—a byproduct, as it were, of Africa’s exposure to the global (that is, the Euro-American) art market. In the process, a great deal is lost.

Front and center at Queensborough Community College’s masterful “Shangaa” exhibition is a figurative group collected in Eastern Tanzania ca. 1902. It depicts a chain gang: three men shackled at the neck, led by an askari. The sculpture, writes curator Gary van Wyk (2013:47), “powerfully conveys the faceless prisoners, equally inferior and irrelevant in relation to the askari, who acts as overseer.” This carving, the exhibition shows, belongs to a matrix of related objects and practices which, like it, speak truth to power—the power of exploitation in its rawest form. The shackled prisoners of Sammy Baloji’s Mémoire series come immediately to mind, underscoring the need to think across wholly artificial divides of “before” and “after,” “traditional” and “modern,” “authentic” and “tourist” production: to think politically, that is.

Our students have come of age attending Occupy rallies and reading Stéphane Hessel. For many, Noam Chomsky is a household name. Most lack the dedication to social causes of their grandparents’ generation, but the seeds are there. Let us think politically with them. Therein we may find a powerful means to convey the excitement that Sidney Kasfir describes so well: the excitement of engaging with the past.

Dominique Malaquais is Senior Researcher at Centre d’Études des Mondes Africains, CNRS/Université Paris I and Vice President of ACASA. She is co-director of SPARCK (Space for Pan-African Research, Creation and Knowledge) and teaches at Sciences Po Institute of Political Sciences, Paris. dmalauquis@gmail.com

References cited