

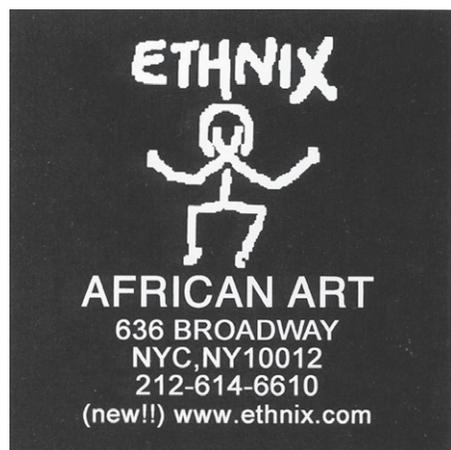
cussion around objects and performances with clear religious importance. His assertion that we can see the continuity of belief and expression over several hundreds of years is convincing because of the objects he chooses. However, in applying his methods to other Kongo and Kongo-diaspora objects, we must also take into account the possibility of cultural modification and change. While these new tools for reading objects may be extremely useful, scholars must also consider that artists may have created objects that have complicated meanings and express more than just cosmological worldviews.

Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign is well timed within the relative explosion of Kongo and Kongo-diaspora related scholarship. It is certainly an exciting time to be studying Kongo culture, with Cécile Fromont's *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), and Susan Cooksey et al.'s *Kongo across the Waters* publication and exhibition (University of Florida Press, 2013), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2015 exhibition *Kongo: Power and Majesty*. Each of these projects contributes to expanding the complexity of how we understand Kongo culture. Martínez-Ruiz's argument expands our understating of Kongo and Kongo-diaspora visual culture. Emphasizing the importance of fully reading an object's cultural context ensures that these objects will continue to play an important role in the emerging dialogues.

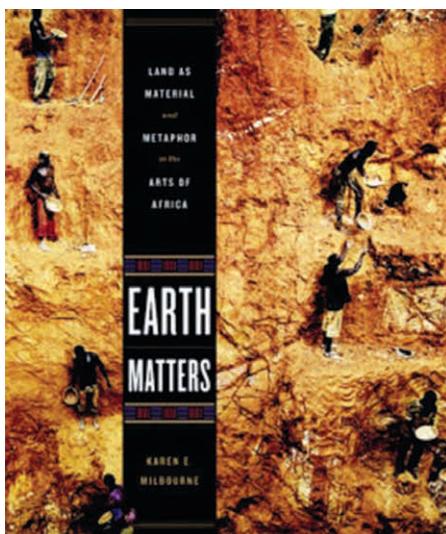
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book review



Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa

by Karen E. Milbourne, with Allan DeSouza, Clive van den Berg, Wangechi Muti, and George Osodi
New York: Monacelli Press and Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art and Smithsonian Institution Press, 2013. 320 pp., 257 ill., selected bibliography, index. \$50.00, cloth.

reviewed by Pamela Z. McClusky

Readers hit the ground running across Washington, DC, with the curator/author in the opening pages of *Earth Matters*. As she jogs through a dense city to a dirt trail, her footsteps lead the reader into a vast network of encounters with art and artists who are all compelled to look at the earth beneath us. There is no mistaking the enormous commitment that the curator and the National Museum of African Art made to harness the resources of the Smithsonian and expand the ways that museums are encouraging audiences of the twenty-first century to look at a complex subject with global ramifications.

Earth Matters completes a triad of thematic exhibitions and publications developed by the National Museum, which featured *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* in 2007 and *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts* in 2012. Each of these endeavors have showcased the capacity of the museum

to identify broad themes that emerge from the collections, continue on in current artistic practices, and are pursued with rigorous thinking to deliver a compendium of complex ideas and images. While this galvanizing of the Smithsonian resources is impressive, it also responds to Mary Nooter Roberts's challenge issued in the Spring 2012 issue of this journal: "innovation depends upon well-defined relevance, both within local communities in which art forms have been used and for those who study and interpret them."

Breaking from the previous pattern of reliance on a multitude of authors, Karen Milbourne is the leading writer for the entire volume. She conceives of the six themes that organize the text for the exhibition and her prose provides the sweeping oversight that keeps the thematic framework consistent throughout. As she introduces each theme, she raises issues that traverse the globe and place African artists firmly in the middle of contemporary concerns. This requires a deft fluidity of associations, which are delivered in a rapid pace of cross-referencing that seems to carry a sense of the urgent need to recognize how crucial environmental issues are. From the first chapter to the final, the historic references slowly fade into the background as the degree of contemporary focus shifts and the sense of activism becomes more apparent.

Feet lead the way in Chapter 1 with "The Material Earth," as the running curator is followed by an artist, Berni Searle, walking barefoot across sand, salt, and stone. They set the stage for the sensory perception of the landscape as a place where human skin meets the earth's skin. Milbourne winds her way through many citations by authors like William Logan Bryant's comments about clay, mud, and soil in his book *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* (1995); then follows with the actual materials of the earth and how they are reflected in art made in contrasting places by different artists. For mud, it is the architectural sculptures of Aboudramane and the mud coiffures of the Karamajong. For plants and the living earth, there is a look at Yoruba Orisha Oko practices and then a view of Andrew Putter's series called *Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis* (2008)—photographs that imitate Dutch flower painting of the seventeenth century but substitute the flora and fauna of South Africa's Table Mountain. Along the way, earth's material baseline elements are called out and reviewed through artistic investigations: sand, water, chalk, salt, and ashes.

By Chapter 2, "The Power of the Earth," the tempo of this dynamic mix of references from older traditional arts with the contemporary becomes fully established. How perceptions of the Earth are expressed by Bamana or Punu objects are treated in summary statements that would not be new to informed scholars, but

are given enough explanation to keep a general reader clued in. Discussions of major historic sculptures are balanced with recent artists who revive concepts, like Thabiso Phokompe, who said, “I want to reach there—the *minkisi* state of mind” (p. 66). At times, the seesaw of past and present threatens to become a dizzying succession of quotations, but they are balanced by more thorough analysis of the work of artists like Ledelle Moe, whose 9-foot boulder sculpture is described in exacting detail. The chapter concludes on a note of intense creative force as Wangechi Mutu writes her own synopsis of her history and how she chooses work with the associations that come with blood, saliva, milk, tears, sweat, and urine. Suddenly, the artist’s words ignite a more personal awareness of what the chapter was getting at.

For “Imagining the Underground,” Chapter 3, Melbourne opens with a quotation from Yi-Fu Tuan, who describes “the quest to understand the tension between surface and what lies behind, beneath or beyond it as a ubiquitous dimension of human experience” (p. 117). From this premise, she identifies numerous African visions of underground domains. Animals who are able to provoke these visions are cited—snakes, dogs, mudfish—and are followed by ways that human figures are situated as guardians or oathtakers. Such allegorical roles for humans interacting with the underground disappear in the second half of the chapter as the shift to an era when industrial mining changed relationships forever after. Now humans literally go underground, giving rise to photographs and images of mines and mining in Gabon, South Africa, and Ghana. For this chapter, Clive van den Berg contributes an essay entitled “Breaking Surface” that recounts his personal interest in seeing excavations of the narratives that are missing from battlefields and archives of his home in Zambia.

At this point in the publication, references tilt more toward contemporary art. Chapter 4, “Strategies of the Surface,” considers landscapes in photographs and paintings from a wide range of individual artists. Allan DeSouza writes an artist’s statement about his unique dual identification as a fictional researcher who is one of his alter egos, and channels them both as they wander purposefully together. Throughout this chapter, the landscapes are images ready to be decoded with the assistance of the artist whose words are often quoted in the text. This reliance on a first person directness comes up against a counterpoint of broad cultural identification with a section that looks at landscapes according to Mbuti artists of the Ituri forests, the representational systems of Luba, masks of Baule and memorial posts of Mjikenda.

Chapter 5, “Art as Environmental Action,” follows contemporary artists who step into the conflicts about the misuse of earth’s resources.

Melbourne organizes this by introducing an issue and the artist/artists who deliver haunting images of it. Asbestos is recorded as a blue wasteland in South Africa by David Goldblatt, *The Hell of Copper EWaste* (2008) is seen in Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo’s photographs of Ghana. Extraction and consumption are viewed through paintings by Jerry Buhari and the sculptures of El Anatsui. Aesthetic solutions are offered through the recognition of a Zambian collective that replants trees and the recycling by Younes Rahmoun of Morocco. Vivid illustrations of how we are destroying planet Earth and melting glaciers are brought up on canvases and videos by Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh and Georgia Papageorge. George Osodi’s statement about “matter, eco-ethics and composite space” (p. 235) offers a forceful conclusion.

Chapter 6, “Earth Works,” begins with a brief history lesson about artists who worked directly with the earth in the US and Britain since 1968. Such precedents for monumental works that reformed the landscape are considered, but the different African orientations to landscape lead into a description of the Mbari houses of Owerri Igbo peoples of eastern Nigeria as an alternate sacred art form. The chapter ends with a case-by-case description of artists working in outdoor installations. Photographs of their work offer tempting documents of earth art realized in grand proportions. Several are the final projects that appeared near the museum, including *Land Reform* (2013) by Strijdom van der Merwe, *Hunger* (2013) by Ghada Amer, *Ala* (2013) by El Anatsui, and two project proposals from Rachid Koriachi and Willem Boshoff. It is rare for a book to be able to document an exhibition process that builds to a crescendo of projects dispersed throughout the nation’s capital, and to so many Smithsonian institutions.

Earth Matters presents hundreds of illustrations of art and the environment by over 100 artists from 24 African nations, all placed in a provocative matrix that mixes observation with agitation. This sensibility moves on from this publication into a format that museums and audiences are becoming increasingly reliant upon: the Internet. *Earth Matters’* web site (which is still accessible from the National Museum of African Art’s past exhibition website, <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/earthmatters/>) spreads this inquiry into a forum for collaborative investigation. A blog opens the door for short essays by “guest voices” often composed by Smithsonian experts from many disciplines, and a news feed from a multitude of sources acts as a uniquely focused search engine. Most of the other written elements of the exhibition—family and program guides, artist’s biographies, performance art videos, twitter interviews, lesson plans for teachers, and artists quotes—are made available to international readers for no cost. This manner

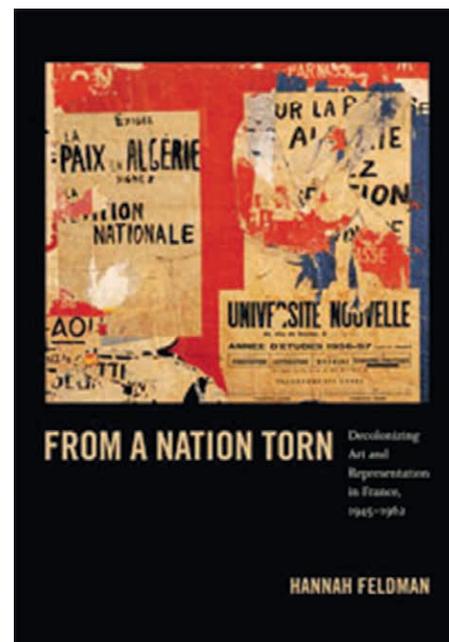
of publishing takes advantage of the immediacy and flexibility of the web, which is a sign of future choices being considered by museums.

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book review



From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962

by Hannah Feldman
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 336 pp., 21 color, 63 b/w illus. \$99.95 cloth; \$27.95 paper

reviewed by Michelle Huntingford Craig

Scholars interested in visual culture generally and modernism, colonial resistance, and subaltern art production in particular will benefit greatly from a close reading of *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962*. As scholars take note of the stakes masterfully outlined by Hannah Feldman and bring them out of France and into former colonies, including Algeria, hopefully the nuance and theoretical rigor applied in this book will also find application in future