

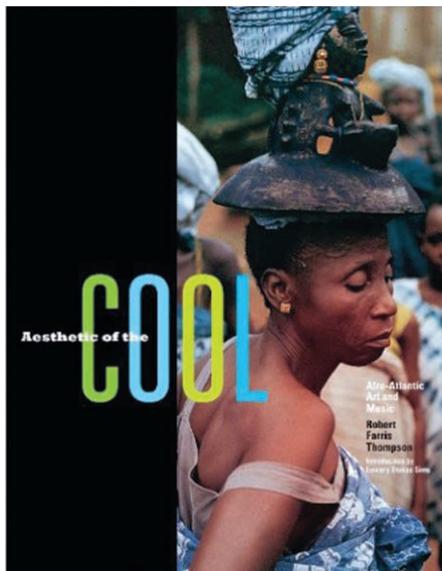
it, on the “personal” side of the gallery. Here we see gathered the private possessions of Alonge himself: his favorite book, *Character Building*, the musical instrument he played for three decades at his Baptist church, his Kodak Brownie camera, and various commemorative objects, including a plastic measuring cup, embossed with a photographic self-portrait of Alonge following his passing. Suddenly, I got the point: in a society that has been for centuries geared towards visually resplendent rites mediating between the living and dead, Alonge’s mastery of photographic representation has helped enable his transition to venerable ancestral status. Photography in Benin on the one hand has been a technology of royal power, helping to enable the remarkable continuity of this vibrant tradition-based polity within the modern Nigerian nation-state. Simultaneously, photography has been instrumental to cycles of social and spiritual reproduction for all Benin persons, moving them through cycles of life towards productive ancestorhood. This dichotomy is elegantly dramatized, and ultimately bridged, by this sophisticated, thought-provoking exhibition.

MARK AUSLANDER is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Museum Studies at Central Washington University, where he directs the Museum of Culture and Environment. He writes on ritual, political cosmology, and popular aesthetics in Africa and Afro-Atlantic communities, and is the author of *The Accidental Slaveowner: Revisiting a Myth of Race and Finding an American Family* (University of Georgia Press, 2011). auslanderm@cwu.edu

References cited

- Blackmun, Barbara Winston. 1997. “Continuity and Change: The Ivories of Ovonramwen and Eweka II.” *African Arts* 30 (3):68–79, 94–96.
- Kaplan, Flora S. 1990. “Some Use of Photographs in Recovering Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria.” *Visual Anthropology* 3:317–41.
- _____. 1991a. “Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recording Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin.” *History in Africa* 18:205–37.
- _____. 1991b. “Benin Art Revisited: Photographs and Museum Collections.” *Visual Anthropology* 4:117–45.
- Freyer, Bryna. 1989. *Royal Benin Art*. Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- Gore, Charles. 2007. *Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City*. London; Edinburgh University Press.
- Ben-Amos Girshick, Paula. 2007. “The Symbolism of Ancestral Altars in Benin.” In *Benin Kings and Rituals: Royal Arts from Nigeria*, ed. Barbara Plankensteiner, pp. 161–70. Ghent, Belgium: Snoerk Publishers.
- Nevadomsky, Joseph. 1983–84. “Kingship Succession Rituals in Benin. Part I: Becoming a Crown Prince.” *African Arts* 17 (1):47–54, 87; “Part II: The Big Things.” *African Arts* 17 (2):41–47, 90–91; “Part III: The Coronation of an Oba.” *African Arts* 17 (3):48–57, 91–92.

book review



Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music by Robert Farris Thompson
Pittsburgh: Periscope Publishing, 2011. 179 pages, 119 color illustrations, 43 b/w illustrations, bibliography of author’s writings. \$40.00, cloth

reviewed by Tobias Wofford

His students refer to him as “Master T.” The honorific references Robert Farris Thompson’s enduring presence at Yale University as Master of Timothy Dwight College, but it also reflects his preeminence in the field of African and African Diaspora art history for the last half-century. Thompson’s 2011 book, *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music*, provides a glimpse of his contribution to the field through a collection of short writings from throughout his important career. While the book takes the form of disparate case studies, it puts forth the thesis that there is a complicated, yet cohesive, aesthetic that connects Africa and its westward diasporas into a unique cultural sphere: the Afro-Atlantic. Through many specific analyses, Thompson’s vivid, vibrant prose describes the ways in which African social and visual philosophies are maintained and transmitted around the world through visual art, music, and everyday practice. While Thompson may be best known for large-scale projects such as the exhibitions “Black Gods and Kings” (1971) and “African Art in Motion” (1974) as well as discipline-defining monographs such as his widely disseminated and well-loved *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philoso-*

phy (1983), such texts often overshadow the important ways in which Thompson’s theoretical framings and cultural analyses have been formulated and refracted through the form of the short essay: a fact that *Aesthetic of the Cool* makes strikingly clear. In all, the book demonstrates the far-reaching ambition in Thompson’s career-long project of describing the unifying characteristics of Afro-Atlantic art and culture.

Thompson defines the “aesthetic of the cool” that he identifies throughout African and African diasporic culture as a “deeply and complexly motivated, consciously artistic, interweaving of elements serious and pleasurable, of responsibility and play” (p. 16). The book seems to embody this aspect of the cool with its large format and extensive illustrations that give the volume the feel of a high-production exhibition catalog rather than a collection of essays. Mixing elements both serious and pleasurable, the visual appeal and pleasing prose of the book are balanced by the theoretical rigor found in the included essays and interviews.

In all, the volume contains twenty-three essays and two interviews with Thompson, presented roughly in chronological order according to their original dates of publication. They range from his early 1966 essay on African and African Diaspora music in “Aesthetic of the Cool” to the more recent 2005 “Kongo Louisiana/Kongo New Orleans.” The book also includes a previously unpublished essay on the art of famed contemporary artist David Hammons. The texts’ original publishing venues vary from popular magazines such as *Rolling Stone* to scholarly journals like *African Arts*. This reflects yet another way in which the volume (like Thompson’s scholarship) collapses genres, but also makes accessible a number of essays that are normally difficult to find. For example, the sampling of rare writings includes “The Afro-Cuban Departure of Mongo Santamaria” reprinted from the liner notes of the 1960s LPs *Más Sabroso* and *¡Arriba! La Pachanga*. In addition, Lowery Stokes Sims introduces the volume and it concludes with a bibliography of Thompson’s writings.

The essays gathered here cover a broad scope of topics including music, dance, and visual art and the context of their production range from arts in daily life, including Haitian buses called tap-tap and break-dancing in the Bronx, to art made by some of the most well-known contemporary artists. This array of subject matter underscores Thompson’s abilities as a cultural theorist as he deftly, and at times poetically, tests his conception of the Afro-Atlantic, convincingly demonstrating the durability and versatility of propositions such as the aesthetic of the cool.

The collapsing of genres, space, and time is

central to Thompson's strategies in representing the workings of the Afro-Atlantic. This strategy is reflected in his early essay "An Aesthetic of the Cool," which explores the aesthetic as found in African and diaspora music that seems to move from West Africa to the barrios of Afro-Cuban New York in the space of a downbeat. "Aesthetic of the Cool II" from 1974, expands upon the previous version by applying this technique to visual art. Using transoceanic pairs such as Dahomey and Haiti, Thompson demonstrates enduring diasporic connections in a way that anticipates later, better known texts such as *Flash of the Spirit*. In describing the concept of the cool, Thompson moves smoothly from music to language to visual form, and the inclusion of an elaborate chart mapping the term "cool" in different African languages alerts readers to the central role of language in Thompson's study. His analysis seems to employ tactics of the jazz he describes: polyphonic to the core, making leaps from one register to another, relying on verbal and formal affinities where historical record is sparse. Perhaps this is the best way to analyze diaspora culture, which often resists easy assimilation or academic classification, but those with an empirical mind may be lost if they wish to look for clean narratives or a steady analysis of historical record. In *Aesthetic of the Cool*, the reader must give way to Thompson's seductive phrasing and dig the groove.

The chronological organization of *Aesthetic of the Cool* highlights another key facet of this collection: each essay is inextricably rooted in its time. As much as the book posits and supports the concept of an Afro-Atlantic as a cohesive aesthetic world, through it, one can also trace Thompson's contribution to the evolving discourse of African Diaspora art. In particular, the book situates Thompson in the global story of multiculturalism in later twentieth century art. The essays in *Aesthetic of the Cool* were part of the increasing recognition of the importance of black art and culture by a broad American (and international) viewership. In his essay "Activating Heaven," Thompson makes a prophetic claim about Jean Michel Basquiat: "With his meteoric rise ... it seems to me the vanguard of Western art and Afro-Atlantic visual happening are now becoming one. This has enormous implications" (p. 38). Originally published in 1985, this statement forecasts the profound impact of multiculturalism's rise in contemporary art canons. The text goes on to celebrate a generation of art stars including Basquiat, Hammons, Betye Saar, Renée Stout, José Bedia, and Keith Haring. In doing so, the book also underscores Thompson's importance as a cultural critic working in dialogue with the art of his time. Considering the fact that most African American artists of the 1980s and 1990s read his writings, one senses the interwoven nature

of their production and Thompson's interpretation. Whether intentional or not, the text highlights a feedback loop that collapses often implicit lines between art history and art production, between observer and participant.

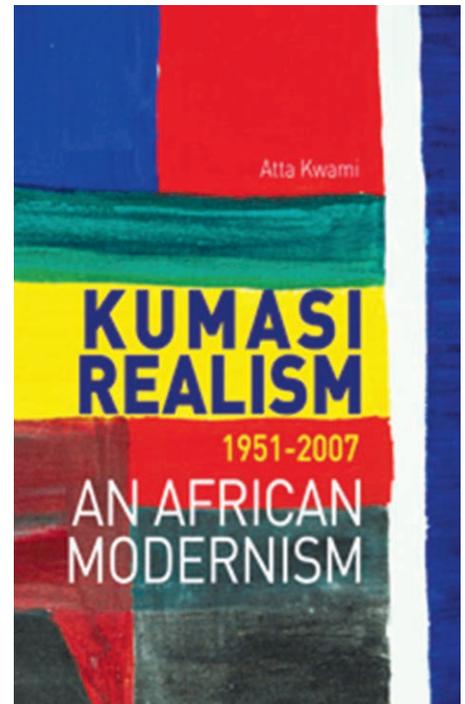
Thompson is a master of language and one can be swept away by his turn of phrase. It is no wonder that many of the included writings found their original home in popular venues such as *Rolling Stone*. Yet, some scholars may be frustrated by a lack of footnotes and other forms of exterior substantiation if they have the desire to find the roots of his arguments. Some chapters, such as "An Aesthetic of the Cool II" and "Keith Haring and Dance," are fairly well documented, but others, such as the poetically written chapter on David Hammons, have no footnotes at all.

Illustrations reflect another limitation. While the book includes hundreds of images, many clearly did not accompany the original essays. On one hand, this demonstrates the strength of Thompson's arguments by highlighting their continuing relevance—revealing the way in which other, often more recent, expressions are still illuminated by his ideas. But, on the other hand, there were moments where I wished to see the original work being referenced. For example, in "From the First to the Final Thunder: African American Quilts," Thompson gives an intriguing description of a quilt by Odessa Doby who "shades the count" in her compositions, but the account lacked the corresponding image. Since his arguments are so often based in visual analysis, one is left with a definite sense of incompleteness.

Overall, this book is a great resource for a broad audience. It is an enjoyable, image-rich volume that serves as an accessible guide to anyone interested in art of Africa's Atlantic diasporas. Further, scholars who have already read most of these texts can gain new perspective by exploring these essays together. Thompson has readily earned his status as "Master T." Through its survey of writings that reflect his unique style and perspective, *Aesthetic of the Cool* demonstrates why this is so.

TOBIAS WOFFORD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Santa Clara University. His current research explores the meeting of globalization and identity in the art of the African Diaspora. twofford@scu.edu

book review



Kumasi Realism 1951–2007: An African Modernism

by Atta Kwami

London: C. Hurst, 2013. 500 pp., 188 color ill., 17 b/w ill., 4 appendices, bibliography, notes, list of illustrations. £30.00, cloth

reviewed by Kristen Windmuller-Luna

Artist, curator, and art historian Atta Kwami defines "Kumasi Realism" as a kind of representational painting inspired by a plurality of sources. Distinctly local, it is drawn equally from Ghanaian and European art histories, mass-produced advertising and photography, as well as from Ghanaian history, culture, and current events. In *Kumasi Realism 1951–2007: An African Modernism*, Kwami argues that in Kumasi, Ghana, both college-educated artists and those trained in the city's hundred-plus sign shops draw from this shared visual vocabulary. Exploding the categorical divisions between academically trained and "street" painters often present in the West—launched nearly three decades ago by the exhibitions "Magiciens de la Terre" and "Africa Explores"—Kwami argues for the simultaneous contemporaneity of both groups of painters by claiming each as practitioners of Kumasi Realism.

Declaring that "in Kumasi painting is unavoidable," Kwami claims his book to be the first to systematically document the medium