in an increasingly globalized world. These questions are not new. With the development of postcolonial theory, exhibitions concerning diasporic identities and the boundaries of African art have become, for lack of a better word, popular. One need only think of “Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic” (Tate Modern, 2010), which traced the impact of black culture on modernism and the diversity of contemporary diasporic artists, or the 2016 Armory Show that spotlighted global artistic production from African and African diasporic artists as a part of its “African Perspectives” focus. “The Ease of Fiction” echoes many of the ideas and methods established by postcolonial scholars and previous exhibitions.

Yet Wimberly manages to distinguish “The Ease of Fiction” as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue through the framework of fiction. The recognition of history and accepted truths as fiction is a starting point to understanding many of the works in the show, but it can also be conceived of as a strategy for navigating an increasingly globalized world. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie gave a TED talk in 2009 describing the concept of a single story: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Adichie’s words reinforce the idea that to fully understand narratives and storytelling, we must acknowledge their flaws. In a political climate that prizes single stories and polemics, understanding the ease of fiction is critical to developing a more nuanced conception of the world and its many histories.

After its showing in Raleigh, the exhibition moved on to the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, California.

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Notes

exhibition review

Focus: African Perspectives
The Armory, New York
March 3–6, 2016
reviewed by Yesomi Umolu

There has been a not-so-quiet awakening in the art world of late as it comes to recognize practices from Africa and the Diaspora. This can be attributed to a number of factors, not least the string of innovative artistic voices coming out of the continent married with the tireless work of prominent curators and scholars including Okwui Enwezor, Koyo Kouoh, Bisi Silva, Ugokwuku-Smooth C. Nzewi, and Elvira Dyangani Ose, among others.

Concurrently, over the last decade a slew of contemporary art spaces have been established across the continent. These largely independent institutions provide indispensable platforms and resources for artists who prefer to cultivate their practices in the metropolitan areas of Lagos, Accra, Luanda, and Kampala over other global centers. Major institutions in the West, from the Tate Modern to the Brooklyn Museum, in a tardy push for greater representation in their collecting and curatorial endeavors have dedicated solo shows to key figures including Ibrahim El Salahi and Mescha Gaba, as well as broken new ground with large-scale exhibitions such as “Disguise: Masks of Global Africa” that explore the influences of aesthetic traditions on contemporary production. On the commercial side, historical and contemporary artists alike now command record figures for their work. And the recent and overwhelmingly successful addition of the 154 African Art Fair in London and New York exposed an untapped interest in African art among international collectors and museum donors.

With so much activity and what some might call art world hype, this spring it fell to New York’s Armory show to launch its own foray into Africa. Recruiting respected curators Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba of the nascent online publishing platform Contemporary And, “Focus: African Perspectives” was a refreshing and buzzworthy addition to the fair. Grosse and Mutumba’s curation was marked by the strong presence of emerging voices as well as a balanced representation of artists and galleries working both within and outside the continent.

Of particular note were Francois-Xavier Gabre’s sublime photographs of West Africa’s industrial architecture at Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan; Francisco Vidal’s eye-catching interactive installation Utopia Machine at London’s Tiwani Contemporary (Fig. 1); and Kapwani Kiwanga’s research-oriented moving image and sculptural works at a joint booth by Galerie Jerome Poggi, Paris and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin (Fig. 2). As this year’s commissioned artist, Kiwanga’s work received particular attention and certainly it was strongly featured in the booth. However, her single-channel video The Secretary’s Suite got short shrift with its placement at the entrance of Pier 92. The art fair context is of course not the ideal setting for viewing an in-depth moving-image work exploring the histories and practices of gift-giving, but given the prominence of Kiwanga’s contribution, the placement of the work was highly disappointing.

Other special projects, including those by Emeka Ogboh, Athi Patra Ruga, and Mame-Diarra Niang, also suffered from lack of impact due to their thin dispersal across the fair. Rather unfortunately, one of the most conspicuous contributions garnered undue attention due to an apparent controversy over censorship. Ed Young’s monochromatic banner emblazoned with “ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN” (Fig. 3) and “NOT ME IT’S YOU” graced one of the entrances to Pier 94 and his “YOUR MOM” balloons—unleashed into the fair after said controversy—achieved the visual shock-and-awe that is so often effective among the cacophony of offerings at art fairs. The cynical tone of Young’s works is intentional, but for this viewer at least it proved unproductive in its attempts to call attention to the exoticization and commoditization of African art in the art world writ large. Perhaps a banger with the statement “Tell me something I don’t know and with a little more subtly, please” would have been more appropriate in this context.

Elsewhere, Karo Akpokiere’s Alternate Art Fair (Fig. 4)—a participatory live drawing activity located centrally at the customary champagne lounge—was far more successful at exposing the internal dynamics of the fair system through soliciting contributions and reflections from fairgoers. While the Focus section at the Armory has tended to ghettoize a group of artists by virtue of geography, it was particularly striking this year that other artists from Africa and the diaspora were well represented across the main fair. Zanele Muholi’s striking self-portraits in black and white at Yancey Richardson Gallery commanded multiple takes and a strongly curated selection of works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby,
Wengechi Mutu, and Chris Ofili at Victoria Miro celebrated the artists’ accomplishments with figuration. The presence of works by these artists and others in the main fair raised questions about the limits of the term “African art” and the politics of inclusion or exclusion from it. It also frankly pointed to the redundancy of a geographically defined focus section—an issue that was addressed recently with the announcement that the Armory would no longer apply this model to future fairs.

Regardless, “Focus: African Perspectives” exposed the liberty with which the term “African art” is being use in the art world today and the slippery nature of this category. It was certainly Grosse’s and Mutumbe’s intention to usurp a single definition of “African art” by affirming its contemporaneity, complexity, and hybridity. But to return to the question of marketplaces for such works: When does expressing an affiliation with this term define the saleability a work and when does it prove problematic to its recognition within the mainstream art world? When does “African art” define a heritage and a set of questions, practices, and contexts that are located on the continent of Africa and when does it become a catchall term for production by artists of African descent? “Focus: African Perspectives” and the subsequent second iteration of the 1:54 Contemporary African art fair in New York, which was marked by the participation of African American artists (and others in the diaspora) as much as those living and working on the continent, have surfaced these questions and revealed the incongruence of our definitions. If it is the case that “African art” has truly arrived, then the pressing task must be to find ways to make this wave of interest serve both local and global sites of production and scholarship. Grosse and Mutumbe’s platform at the Armory show was an important step in defining the visibility of so-called African art on the international stage, and only time will tell how this contributes to local scenes where the work continues to be done regardless of the current surge of interest.

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