in a great variety of colors and shapes during the mid-twentieth century. Discovering that the Saunders peony is seedless and depends on human manipulation to reproduce, Sime found himself thinking of computer engineering (Sime 2019). He used reclaimed computer parts and bundles of electrical wires along with sheet brass to fashion the twisted roots of the peony and a red-dyed composite of cement and recycled newspaper to create the flower. The large sculpture is interactive, allowing visitors to walk around the flower and through an arch representing its roots.

Programming around the exhibition took place all fall. Among the highlights was the return of Elias Sime to the Wellin Museum in September. He participated in a panel discussion of his work along with Meskerem Assegued and Tracy Adler, and led a gallery tour and discussion of the exhibition interpreted by Assegued. On October 2, a lecture by Dr. Karen E. Milbourne, senior curator of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC, focused on her essay in the catalog of the Tightrope: Elias Sime exhibition and discussed her continuing scholarship in contemporary African art.

The first monograph concerning Sime’s work, Elias Sime: Tightrope, is authored by Tracy Adler with contributions by Karen Milbourne; Meskerem Assegued, curator and codirector of the Zoma Museum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, curator of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City (Munich: Presetel Verlag in association with the Wellin Museum, March 2020. 192 pp., 205 color ill. $60/€65, hardcover).

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References

exhibition review

IncarNations: African Art as Philosophy curated by Kendell Geers and Sindika Dokolo
BOZAR, Brussels
June 28–October 6, 2019
reviewed by Aude Tournaye
Since its inception in 1929, the Centre for Fine Arts of Brussels, or BOZAR, has woven Africa into its cultural patchwork. Just one year after its opening, in the midst of colonialism in full bloom, the Palace organized the large-scale exhibition Art Nègre: Arts anciens de l’Afrique noire (Lavachery 1930). It was one of the very first times that African sculpture was allowed entry into a bastion of “high art.” The ethnographic samples, carefully displayed throughout the Art Deco halls, were the colonial treasures of some of the most renowned collectors, such as Félix Fénéon, Léonce and Pierre Guerre, Charles Ratton, and Paul Guillaume. Now, almost ninety years later, the Palace’s rooms are home to another vision: that of Africans staring back and cannibalizing what once tried to curb them. For the occasion, BOZAR has set the stage for yet another illustrious collector: Sindika Dokolo, a Congolese businessman dabbling in international affairs, politics, and the arts.

For the exhibition IncarNations: African Art as Philosophy, Dokolo invited artist Kendell Geers to delve into his African art collection consisting of over 3000 pieces, resulting in a selection of more than 150 historical and contemporary works shattering the European myth of African art as mainly ethnographic. IncarNations aimed to detach African art from its peripheral label and to redefine it as an incarnation of a living philosophy that absorbed, cannibalized, and appropriated various influences. Remarkable pieces such as Congolese Tabwa and Songye figures, Chokwe and Pende masks intertwined with striking work by modern and contemporary artists such as Peter Clarke, Sue Williamson, Omar Ba, Kehinde Wiley, Nick Cave, Otobong Nkanga, Léonard Pongo, and many others.

The African works were no longer displayed simply as ethnographic specimen, but became actors in a multifaceted experience. Spoek Mathambo’s “She’s Lost Control”—his KwaZulu-Natal cover of the Joy Division classic—blared through the exhibition halls, while the throbbing beat of Die Antwoord’s “I Fink U Freeky” made the exhibition pulsate with energy. The artworks were removed from their display cabinets and pedestals and exhibited on transparent, metal frames throughout the exhibition spaces (Fig. 1). When viewed from above, the frames—reminiscent of a collector’s storage space—mapped out an old plan of Kinshasa. At the same time, they created a scenographic interplay in which the works became visible from all sides. The bare, blank walls were in their turn supplanted by fiery red wallpaper, printed with symbols inspired by the adinkra of the West African Ashanti tradition. From that web of symbols the word “BELIEVE” appeared, coercing us to think about the complexity and paradoxes of language, power, and truth.

THE NEW RULES OF PLAY

_IncarNations_ aimed to turn BOZAR on its head. This became abundantly clear with an inverted map of Africa displayed, like a coat of arms, at the entrance of the exhibition (Fig. 2). From the outset, the emblem announced the rules of the exhibition: the balance has been tilted, the compass points have been reversed, the positions of power have been exchanged. The nkisi magical figures now stared back, reflecting the gaze that had previously hushed and exorcised them. Their murky mirrors, which hide hollows with magical, spiritually charged substances, reflected not only ourselves and the world around us, but other worlds as well.

Throughout the exhibition spaces such mirrors multiplied, where they occupied the archetypal location of works of art on the walls. As such, they reflected the very location where the _Art Nègre_ exhibition took place some ninety years earlier. It was this constant interaction between architecture, artworks, visitors, and institution that forced us to redefine the African art exhibited here. While Western art history has all too often reduced African objects to footnotes of the European avant-garde, this exhibition attempted to show how the works in their turn were inspired by other ideas and cultures.

Each shard of glass or mirror in the exhibition became a trace of centuries-long exchanges of ideas, raw materials, and belief systems. For instance, long before artists such as Picasso and Braque absorbed so-called primitivism into their art, the opposite was already happening: Congolese crucifixes crafted in both ivory and wood were imbued with iconographic and symbolic elements from Christianity, documenting the convergence of two distinctive worldviews. After being introduced to central Africa by the Portuguese in the late 1400s, elements of Christian icons resonated profoundly with the local spiritual canon and were assimilated into different spiritual objects (LaGamma 2015: 109).

ANTROPOFAGIA

A key guideline in this exhibition was the symbolic absorption and devouring of the culture of the colonizer. The Brazilian poet and writer Oswald de Andrade developed a metaphor for this as early as 1928: cannibalism. In his _Manifesto Antropófago_ he expressed that “Only cannibalism unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The unique law of the world. The masked expression of each individualism and each collective movement.” Andrade’s illustrious antropofagia was a Brazilian reaction against any manifestation of the colonizing import of what he referred to as “canned consciousness,” which as a movement gained a worldwide following, including on the African continent. Following Andrade’s manifesto, the works in _IncarNations_ “cannibalized” all concepts of primitivism, exoticism, and alienation, like ravenous bodies capable of unfolding and expanding in order to effortlessly consume the Other.

One such piece was the modernist work _Untitled (4)_ (1958) by Ernest Mancoba, the little-known painter who left his native South Africa in 1938 to settle in Paris, where he later became a founding member of the European...
The CoBrA movement. In this small oil painting, abstract strips of paint and color splotches blend into a sketchy, characterless figure, vaguely reminiscent of an African sculpture. The work does not allow for a simple cultural interpretation. In fact, Mancoba embraced a modernist creed imbued with African spirituality and forged a utopian synthesis between the indigenous African and modernist European formal aesthetics. With Mancoba, Africa no longer sits at the shores of the mainstream of art history, but at the heart of that history.

In the work of the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, cubism and surrealism merge with the Négritude and voodoo philosophy. In Untitled (Yoruba Pantheon) (1946), Lam reveals the modern mutations of his Yoruba origins, which he examined after the discovery of Picasso’s African masks and cubist origins. His drawing reveals a clear affinity with the neo-African culture in the Americas, where myths and rituals from West Africa overlap with the obscurity of Spanish Catholicism. In Lam’s Cuba, African slaves introduced the Yoruba culture and cannibalized the iconography of the colonizing religion, Catholicism, which merged into Santería (Richard Hernandez 1997). Lam’s Untitled (Yoruba Pantheon) depicts its orishas—saints from the Santería and Yoruba religions—and recalls the ideographic, ritual ground sketches from the broader African diaspora, such as the vèvè in Haitian Vodun and pontos riscados in Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, whose symbolic markings not only represent, but also evoke different gods.

Other, more recent works also continued to play on the notions of cultural identity. Yinka Shonibare’s How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (2006) comprises two Victorian figures adorned in brightly colored waxprint, each pointing a duelling pistol at the other’s absent head (Fig. 3). Like his previous works, this one resists an easy cultural or ethnic reading. The waxprints—anchored in the public imagination as a sign of African culture—only gained a foothold on the continent through a series of European colonial deals. Goods that had been a failure in Indonesia would turn out to be a commercial success in Africa (Kroese 1976). Shonibare uses these assumptions as his tools only to undermine them. The Victorian archetype of the dandy—a fashion-conscious, image-obsessed man who uses the performance of social norms to sap the pretence of the social sphere—has been given a central role here. Ambiguously, How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once exposes the irony of the idea of cultural authenticity.

Using trademark strategies such as masquerade and performance, the works in IncarNations challenged the very concept of identity. Ana Mendieta’s series of subversive self-portraits Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) (1972) distorts the notions of beauty while questioning gender constructions (Fig. 4). In the self-portrait Sibusiso, Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy (2015), Zanele Muholi stares ahead from under a wooden stool, which, like the Congolese Pende giwoyo mask right next to it, is placed like a crown on Muholi’s head (Fig. 5–6). By means of symbolic poses, props, and situations, Muholi’s self-portraits reveal African identity as nuanced and incongruous. Shrouded in kaolin, cowrie shells, and raffia, Muholi experiments with different characters and archetypes. As masks, Muholi carries different historical, cultural and political layers.

**FROM PRIMITIVE TO HIGH ART**

The exhibition, however, did not address the ways in which African art not only cannibalizes but was also cannibalized. Before becoming part of Dokolo’s imposing collection, the majority of the historical works circulated in the Western art market, where they were adapted to its ideals and standards. In their original context, many of them were crafted not only in wood, for example, but also included various plant, animal, and mineral substances, some of which were eventually removed in order to be fitted into the West’s modernist visual aesthetic. Throughout their peripatetic existence, these objects lost not only their garnishments but also their context. By the time they had become “art,” the figurines looked more like sculptures than ritual objects demanding action. They became contemplative objects that needed a frame, a pedestal, or a stage as a boundary between the art object and the rest of the world, where art is separated from daily life, social context, and mundane use. Their frame no longer includes “real” life, but a mere representation of reality. Dokolo and Geers claimed to set out to re-IncarNate this life and spirit that has been erased from these works. The exhibition’s press kit and visitor’s guide announced their mission thus: “IncarNations: African Art as Philosophy crosses the African continent, travelling along former slave, trade and migration routes in search of the essence of African art. … Classic African statues are our guide in every room.” Exhibited alongside contemporary works, often staged as mere set pieces or footnotes to the contemporary musings of Dokolo and Geers, the historical works in question were called to heel in the defense of the alleged “essence of African art.” Little attempt was made to recover an emic sense of the historical works on view. This viewpoint—that of the tribal participant—was omitted in favor of the etic one, thus monopolizing the historical works in a game of their particular expertise, the tracing of spiritual and stylistic relationships and chronologies. But when etic pretends to be emic, or emic to be etic, their account becomes dubious, troubled, and at times even misleading.

**PHANTOME LIMBS**

In the meantime, the search for lost African treasures continued in the margins of the exhibition. In one gallery of the exhibition space, the walls were littered with identity labels of objects that were plundered from the Dundo Museum collection in the northeast of Angola during the civil war (Fig. 7). The labels, evoking ads for missing persons, map
the artifacts that were looted in Angola during the ravaging of war or likely disappeared during their transfer from Dundo to Luanda upon independence, after which they melted away into the illicit international art market. Their images emanated an unrelenting, noisy silence, like the persistent pain of a phantom limb—asymmetries that begged to be settled. Neglected by the evolving canons of European art history and subsequently gone missing, these historical works represented epistemic amputees, samples of past decompositions. Scattered across international collections, uprooted and hushed in ethnographic displays, they form a reservoir of aesthetic energy that has been held in paralysis—antennas of Angola’s history to which the country is no longer able to connect.

With the help of his wealth—accumulated through different business ventures such as the Angolan diamond trade—and research team—in particular Didier Claes, one of Brussel’s main African art dealers—Dokolo set out to locate and, if needed, buy the missing artifacts for Angola’s Dundo Museum. Since its initiation, the project has been able to repatriate thirteen objects destined for the Dundo Regional Museum.

**The Myth of the Sahara**

The exhibition, however, revealed yet another itchy phantom limb. Within the selection of some 150 works, not a single North African piece is included. Such an exclusion of art from the north of the Sahara is not a novelty on the African art scene. North African culture, for example, has a very long Arabic history and a large part of the West African population is Muslim. The Imazighen (Berbers and Tuaregs) maintained their African culture from prehistoric times and populated Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco as well as the Sahara, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Somalia, Djibouti, Chad, Eritrea, the Comoros, Tanzania, and Mauritania belong geographically to sub-Saharan Africa, but are also areas where Arabic is spoken as a result of the historical exchanges within the continent.

How can it then be explained that *IncarNations* hardly bore witness to this rich exchange with North Africa? Perhaps because too many parties still benefit from a reduced image of Africa that limits itself to sub-Saharan Africa? After all, this reduction serves the idea of a unique “Africa” in need, left behind in a temporal and geographical vacuum, an idea that is fed by a multitude of willing scientists, aid organizations, and collectors. Only a special or doomed Africa can justify their pity, which distinguishes them from their charity project. And North Africa, which is at the source of an important part of Western (art) history, hardly fits in with that image.

For art collectors, (sub-Saharan) Africa became hip and bankable, the more so now that there is a social revival in the art world. After
all, within the game of African art, in which the rules are still governed by the art market, the idea of an isolated sub-Saharan Africa has high value. And with one of the most important African collectors and businessmen behind the exhibition, the stakes were high.

And that is precisely where the Achilles heel of IncarNations can be uncovered: Can an exhibition be socially critical if it is ordered by a collector—a customer? Can a state institution simply upgrade his collection and ideas, even if that collection has persistent gaps in its widely proclaimed philosophy? Or should we consider IncarNations to have been a Trojan horse that guided complex and subversive works into institutional strongholds, in order to hollow them out from the inside out?

A series of talks, lectures, performances, and conversations accompanied the exhibition. There is also a catalogue, in English, available through the BOZAR Bookshop; Sindika Dokolo and Kendell Geers (eds.), IncarNations: African Art as Philosophy (Brussels: BOZAR BOOKS & Silvana Editoriale, 2018. 128 pp., €15.00).

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book review

Afrique-Asie: Arts, espaces, pratiques edited by Dominique Malaquais and Nicole Khouri
Mont Saint-Aignan, France: Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2016, 318 pp., 74 color ill., notes. €27.00, soft cover reviewed by Kim Dramer

Afrique-Asie: Arts, espaces, pratiques is the second volume in the series “Art dans la mondialisation,” an initiative of sociologist Myriam-Odile Blin. Under the editorship of Dominique Malaquais and Nicole Khouri, senior researcher and associate researcher respectively at Institut des Mondes Africains (CNRS), the volume brings together scholars writing in French and English. It is divided into two intentionally permeable parts. The first, “Flux et reflux” (“Ebb and Flow”), presents essays describing centuries-old cultural exchanges between Africa and Asia: movements of people, things, ideas and practices linking the two continents over the long term. The second, “Trajectoires,” consists of essays that highlight the forward path of changing Africa-Asia relations in light of shifting global configurations and increasingly fractured landscapes of power on the world stage. These two parts are made up of articles that explore what the editors, referencing Arjun Appadurai, call “scapes”—fluid spaces of interaction connecting the physical world, the spirit realm, and the imagination. Such scapes, Malaquais and Khouri argue, are rarely well served by established fields of study. They require more flexible and open-ended approaches to knowledge production. With this in mind, the editors eschew disciplinary boundaries, geographical categories, and chronological order, thereby opening up novel ways of addressing events, objects and concepts.

The wealth of topics that are covered and the cross-disciplinary models that are called upon in Afrique-Asie make for an original compendium. Literary criticism rubs shoulders with urbanism, tourism studies, art history, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology. The result is a thought-provoking addition to an area of research—Africa-Asia relations—otherwise dominated by the fields of political science and economics.

EBB AND FLOW

“Flux et reflux” opens with a discussion of new perspectives on global space. Lindsay Bremner’s “Filter/Filter” considers continental geographies from the perspective of the sea. This approach reveals overlooked vantage points from which to view a shifting world order over the long term (in a historical perspective spanning several centuries) and looking forward. Bremner presents the Indian Ocean as a vast, ever-in-flux region that functions as both a filter and a funnel for people, ideas, and goods transiting between Africa and Asia. Two notions structure her analysis: that of the Slow Ocean (a porous space cyclically tied to the monsoon cycle) and that of the Fast Ocean (a space operating through power relations). Untethered from land, these “decentered” vantage points, she argues, allow us to set aside predetermined judgements based on teleological readings of space and place.

Concerned as well with acts of decentering, Katherine Isobel Baxter’s essay “La nouvelle fiction noire d’Asie de l’Est” focuses on African characters operating on the margins of Asian society. Avoiding traditional, Eurocentric analytical categories allows the author to highlight ambiguous or little-known aspects of Africa-Asia intercultural exchange. She calls on figures and notions that are rarely used in Western literary criticism. Thus, Eshu (the Yoruba trickster) is brought into play to explore novelist Biyi Bandele’s writing on his experiences fighting the Japanese in Burma during World War II, on the fringes of the Pacific Theater of War. The Chinese term guî (gu)—“ghost” or “spirit,” also a derogatory term for foreigners—is deployed as a means for exploring Ken Kamokhe’s works on the lives of Africans living on the fringes of contemporary Chinese society.

Margins and decentering are a focus too in Mary Nooter Roberts’ and Allen F. Roberts’ “Scapes of the Indian Ocean World.” In this study of intersections between geographical and spiritual space, the authors show that culture is not by any means limited to territory, but moves, rather, in the limen of “edges and in-betweens” (p. 63). Reminding us that, and showing us how, “spirits are always restless, always recombinant and always on the move” (p. 55), they consider ways in which images of the Indian saint Shirdi Sai Baba, celebrated by Hindu and Muslim devotees alike, cross boundaries of land and water, physicality and the imagination, Africa and Asia, giving rise to an Indian Ocean world of never ending flux. Taking up the idea of Indian images as agents of the spirit world in “Imaginaire de l’Inde” dans le vodun d’Afrique de Louest,” Dana Rush shows how chromolithographs depicting Indian deities function as passports