DOCUMENT

ART, SIGNS, AND CULTURES

IBA NDIAYE AND JEAN LAUDE IN CONVERSATION WITH ROGER PILLAUDIN

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Roger Pillaudin [*introductory remark*]**:** If the artist reveals the cultural sum of his people, to what degree are relationships between different arts and civilizations the sign of a more profound cultural dialogue? Can the artist convey something more than his own desire to create?

[. . .][1]

RP: Iba Ndiaye, how can one be a Senegalese painter today?

Iba Ndiaye: I would personally redefine myself in relation to the question you've just asked, in the sense that I am a product of cultural and ethnic mixing. I have Mande ancestors, a Wolof father, a Serer mother. I was born to a Muslim father and a Catholic mother. That's a lot. And with an education at the Lycée Faidherbe that was Western, and ultimately led to attending university in Europe, I had no choice but to move within the Western circuit, and from there, to nevertheless try to hold on to this African tradition, meaning my own nature and essence.

Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA), Paris, ID no. PHD99255327. The dialogue, between critic Roger Pillaudin, painter Iba Ndiaye, and art critic and professor of art history at the Sorbonne Jean Laude, took place at the Casino de Royan, France, during the Festival des Arts et Cultures Africaines, March 26, 1977; it was broadcast on the channel France Culture, Radio France, August 2, 1977.

1 Ellipses and words in brackets mark places where parts of the interview have been omitted or supplemented for streamlining and continuity.

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That is rather difficult, but in fact I think that even if today I find myself here in dialogue with you in French, it seems to me I had to try to get to know this language that was taught to me and to be able to dialogue with you in this language, which allows me to express feelings.

Jean Laude: Very well. [. . .] To what degree can you evaluate, within yourself, a cultural background that would have been passed on to you by your grandfather, which isn't of course a biological background but a *cultural* background—culture not being defined in the way one thinks of it as, you know, a minister specialized simply in the production of objects that go in museums, but culture expressing itself through the simplest gestures of daily life.

IN: I would say that I don't evaluate my background as a function of what I should say or what I should do . . . but simply as a function of my personal pulsation [*pulsation personnelle*]. And I believe it's on the basis of this personal pulsation that the language in which I choose to express myself comes, with me not having to worry about it too much. [. . .] This pulsation will always take hold in arriving at the unique form of what I want to express through a language [*langage*] that's not native, that I rather tried to acquire through the education I received.

JL: Since the word "language" [*langage*] has come up . . . you have multiple languages [*langues*]. You have the Mande language, you have the Wolof language, you have the Serer language—which are true languages [*langues*], I remind us, not ways of speaking or dialects. These are true languages, structured as such; they are what I call vernacular languages, which is to say spoken by a set group of people, and not spoken outside of this set region. But at the same time, you have another language, which is French, that you learned in high school and that you absolutely speak like a good French student . . .

IN: [*interrupting, protesting*] Say–!

JL: Let me finish the question. Languages shape us, and they shape us not only at the level of impulse [*pulsion*] as you say, nor even of pulsation, because this makes us recall a biological conception of the individual . . . [that] is extremely dangerous to the degree that it doesn't steer us away from racism. So there is a phenomenon of awareness. Languages are things that are conscious that include unconscious elements but that one can analyze and structure. In other words, to what degree, in

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what you call your impulses or your pulsations, do you not convey very precise elements—if only in your way of speaking, if only in your diction—which are acquired elements, and are not innate?

IN: Yes but, when I was speaking about language—in any case language is very important, but right now we're talking about *painting*, and from the moment I used the word "language" [*langage*] you've been engaging me in linguistics, and I won't follow you on this theme. I was talking about language in relation to artistic expression, because it's a language. So when I was speaking of language I was saying it in my way, and I thought you would follow, given that you know I am a *painter*, and that I am not a literary man, nor a poet, nor a writer, and that you would follow me on the topic of visual language [*langage plastique*]. I'm talking about fine art being a language, with its own rules, its grammar, its syntax. This was my framework for talking about language, to say that my grammar, syntax, vocabulary, are the equivalents of form, color, lines, etc. It's precisely by acquiring this language that a painter can begin to express himself. This is how I was speaking about language.

JL: [. . .] What I had foreseen as an objection to your position is that there is what one calls "visual language" (by misuse of the term, by metaphor) . . . [and] we live in a visual world that's specific to each one of us. We see this or that thing, this or that light, this or that sign, and since our childhood, since the moment when we begin to reflect and to be conscious, we reappropriate all of these signs around us in our universe, and which are already structured by a culture. This means that society is structured like a language. From this very fact, language and writing are structured under the same conditions as painting, architecture, and sculpture, through the language of this culture. [. . .]

What I understand by [sociocultural] "environment" is not only the atmosphere in which one lives but also the totality of signs that we manipulate and that, we must admit, also manipulate us. So when, for example, on a piece of African pottery there is this or that sign, the sign is not there by accident. It is rooted in a culture where it has meaning, or more exactly multiple meanings. As it happens, I've had students who've done very focused studies on this, notably on scarification and tattooing, on everything related to body markings. And in doing this work they noticed that the same markings on the body were also found on pottery, as well as sometimes in interior decorations in houses. In other words, there are certain signs that are privileged, and that have

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different meanings according to the specific place where they are inscribed. [. . .] So these signs are active. They are even more active when one doesn't notice, and indeed I was expecting you to speak to me about subject-matter in painting. But it's precisely the problem of the subject—because look, to take another example, if defining a national [style of] painting were [only] a question of subject-matter, then Delacroix would be the greatest Moroccan painter.

IN: I didn't say anything about national painting. And the Orientalism of a past era doesn't mean that Delacroix's corpus can be Moroccan, in the same way that Van Gogh's use of Japanese prints doesn't make him Japanese. This brings me to another thing: you spoke earlier about signs in African pottery that refer to obviously a certain structuration that it would be necessary to reproduce because it signifies this or that thing. I believe [this applies] in the same way with Egyptian hieroglyphics: a contemporary Egyptian painter working in his own hand cannot proceed from hieroglyphics to attempt to remake an Egyptian style of painting. Or take Roman sculpture as it was originally conceived: a French painter of our time can't fully orient his work in his own hand to the signs, the symbols of the Renaissance or the Roman era.

JL: But obviously there is an enormous difference. You cited the example of Egyptian hieroglyphics. These Egyptian hieroglyphics are no longer understood, for the good reason that they predate contemporary Egyptian civilization. So that's one thing. The second thing is that, on the contrary, in Africa, in the villages, the people who use signs still know their meanings (thank God) and the uses for which they were made. So these signs are still lived.

Now, coming back to what I was saying earlier about Delacroix. Delacroix when he paints . . . women, when he paints scenes of Moroccan life, he refers to a Moroccan subject. But at the same time, [what is less known] is that Delacroix had previously studied not only certain Persian miniatures, from which he took a certain sense of space, but also that he had a great love of Moroccan carpets for their relationships between colors. [. . .]

The question I am asking is of an entirely different nature. It's that African painting—but also North African painting or the painting of another region of the world that had the same problem as African painting, which is to say, one must say, it was *colonized*. And colonization is not only the presence of the administrator. It's not only the presence of

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the military. It's not only the presence of an organizing political power. It's also a *culture* that is disseminated. And culture, everyone puts a big "C" on culture, regards it as sacred, and that's how it goes. But indeed, that's the question: it is to what degree traditional African cultures—and when I say "traditional" I don't mean fixed, tradition isn't something dead, which is convention, whereas tradition is something that persists—to what degree can African tradition—in what it has that is alive, vital, agile—resist the impact of dominant cultures [*cultures véhiculaires*]?

There it is. This is the question I am asking, because there's a problem: traditionally the African artist is above all a sculptor. There are of course painters, muralists. There are also jewelers. But the African artist is especially and above all a sculptor. This sculptor is a man who works in three dimensions. And there we arrive at the crux of the matter, I believe: oil painting is a Western offering. It was the West that arrived with easel painting and all that comes with it. Easel painting isn't something that was eternal in Europe. It has precise dates from the era of the pre-Renaissance, maybe even a bit earlier, but it encompasses a technique and a particular ideology. Using color on a perfectly flat surface, with brushes, oil paint, all the ingredients—the unguents [*onguents*] as Mallarmé would have said—in a set manner, determines painting, conditions it in some way, and almost Westernizes it. So this is exactly the question: How does the African, whose culture is a culture of sculptors, move from a world in three dimensions to a world in two dimensions, with technical tools that don't belong to him? And how will he use these tools to subvert them in some way and to make them say what Africa has to say?

IN: When you say that the African is above all a sculptor—i.e., that traditional African sculpture is well-known, and was the first discovery by the West, since it influenced Western artists and all that—you shouldn't forget that mural painting, too, as well as decorative painting on houses, has nevertheless had a noble status in Africa. [*Laude tries unsuccessfully to interrupt*] So when one sees—and I saw it again in the most recent issue of *African Arts*—the mural decorations of South Africa—and there was also a remarkable piece of work that appeared in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in 1956 showing the Mapongas, whose mural decorations really had the feel of Mayan frescoes, the frescoes of Mexico, with such richness in the coloring, inventiveness in forms, and the appropriation

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of space on the framing wall . . .

JL: [*interrupting*] So this is where I was able to lead you . . .

IN: Well, I know it was a trap, because you wanted to make me say that easel painting is a degenerate art addressed to a certain clientele . . .

JL: No, no, no . . . !

IN: . . . and that such is the nature of easel painting that one must find this clientele, which permits it to develop.

JL: It's worse than that.

IN: Yes [*sighs, laughs*].

JL: In reality, easel painting led to this outcome. It's that there was a sacralization, a mythification of the object. In the Middle Ages, painting wasn't on the easel but was destined for the collective—it was accessible to everyone, notably those around the church. Well, starting at the moment when the big merchants started traveling, and wanted to bring something with them it was only the portrait of their wife and their children. They got paintings that were easy to roll up and that they could take with them in their bags. So it started in a simple way, but progressively the easel painting, this little transportable painting, was put on the wall, in the interior of a specific apartment, a set space. It all developed from this . . .

IN: [*interrupting*] Easel painting doesn't start there. It already started with a kind of retablo already on the wall, with the framing . . .

JL: [*interrupting*] That's not the question. The question is that easel painting . . .

IN: [*sighs*] Yes?

JL: . . . became mythicized and sacralized from the very fact that it became an object of prestige and an object of culture. So there in the sense that . . .

[*Laude and Ndiaye talk over each other.*]

JL: . . . and with all the factors of alienation that accompany the term "merchandise," really all merchandise. It's alienated by definition. So when one believes one is using a medium that is innocent, that an easel

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painting is innocent, in reality one adopts a whole system that extends down through the most fundamental layers of the economy, and that completely transforms the culture of whoever uses it. And that's what I was trying to get at. One thing that's very important is that at the beginning of this century, painters aggressively stopped wanting their pictures to be hung on walls. They wanted their pictures to be independent from the space in which they were situated. [. . .] Braque and Picasso wished—and this is why their paintings are in small format, not because they were less rich, that they were poor at the time that they worked in small formats, but because one could take out the picture and look at the picture in that way, almost laid flat or in one's hands, one could hold it and make . . . a reading, certainly a visual reading. [. . .]

IN: Yes of course, but as a painter I take pleasure in seeing a painting on the wall because it belongs to an interior. I see it this way. And when I make a painting—and I even keep paintings for myself, because it's a creation that marks, let's say, a stage within my own progress—well, within the environment that I create for myself, in my space, the painting brings a little note that contributes to the general harmony of the objects surrounding me.

JL: Good.

IN: Good.

JL: So!

IN: First! [*misspeaks, laughs*] Two: the question of Picasso, as you were saying, and of Braque, can also be resolved in a different way because there are now people who buy paintings in order to put them in a safe in the bank, and . . .

JL: The painting becomes a commercial value . . .

IN: . . . and so that connects to this personal enjoyment of taking out a painting to hold it, whether it's in a drawer or in a bank. The principle is completely the same.

JL: No, because . . .

IN: Whereas a painting hung on the wall is a painting that's destined—as you were saying earlier and you seemed to deplore it—is a painting that belongs to everyone who comes to your house, in the same way

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that . . .

JL: No, I didn't deplore—

IN: . . . the paintings that, eventually ending up in a museum, are paintings that are dedicated to being on show for everyone.

JL: So the painting is put on stage, right? Do you agree?

IN: No it's not put on stage. It's there, it's an element of pleasure, an element to be read . . . [*Laude speaks over Ndiaye*] . . . put at the disposal of a public that goes to the museum to, indeed, take pleasure in the acquisition of this painting and to benefit from it . . .

JL: Sorry for playing Socrates but I led you exactly where I wanted to once again—in other words, to make you admit that your painting has a hedonistic function. So, don't you concede this function of giving pleasure for contemporary painting? Or do you think we need to go further with this notion of pleasure . . . ?

IN: [*interrupting*] No, one can find everything within the notion of pleasure. One finds what the painter expresses. One finds the space and time that the painter expresses. The painter occupies a position in time and in space, and the painter has the duty to imprint, or more exactly to acquaint himself with the society to which he belongs, within which he lives, to try to translate his feelings. I believe it's a position statement whenever a painter takes up his brush, whether he's translating a still life in his environment, or whether it is an artistic creation, let's say a portrait, or if it's a position statement on aspects of current events—in finding the right form so that his work doesn't become a novel or an anecdote, this I believe belongs, by all rights, to the power of the painter.

JL: But the painter has every right, as long as he remains a painter.

IN: But exactly, in being a painter, that's why I say when he finds the right form, so that even in his position statement on a given current event, the content is equivalent to what the form is containing. Do you understand?

JL: Let's try to summarize. Tell me if I am mistaken. I think that we can say at this point in the discussion that painting speaks to other things beyond itself, but it still speaks in its own terms.

IN: Mm-hm. Because obviously painting has a specific language, and it's from there that . . .

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[*Ndiaye and Laude speak loudly over each other.*]

JL: . . . a specific language, but that says something other than its language.

IN: Yes of course, it speaks another language than its language. In any case it's very extensive because there are many possible readings of a painting, and the reading also depends on the person reading the painting, so on top of what the painter thinks of his painting, the reader brings something else to it, from his or her own culture. [. . .]

JL: So we find ourselves in the presence of all painting, which is legible to different people in different ways. Do you agree?

IN: The color relations that Cézanne translated [resulted] in what I call a kind of aerial perspective, since everything is nuanced in space, in depth. Whereas by contrast I think that it is very important to underscore the influence of African art on contemporary art, which is that the Cubists introduced graphic arts.

JL: [. . .] So there, if you will, our European artists become interested in sculptural problems, not in order to make sculptures themselves, since they transposed—well, putting aside the German Expressionist painters who purely and simply copied . . .

IN: Copied, yes.

JL: . . . African sculpture. But our European artists—let's not say "French" because there was a Spaniard (Picasso), a Frenchman (Braque), etc., anyway it matters little, it's not a question of chauvinism—our European painters discovered a system of writing in African art. Because when one looks attentively at an African sculpture, one perceives that everything is in the tensions of line, tensions between volumes, there's a sculptural design—if I may be so bold, and this might seem like a paradox—there's a sculptural design in African art that is the means by which is conveyed what Matisse called *expressivity*—and not *expression*, which is not at all the same thing, *expressivity* being the effect produced on the viewer, and *expression* having to do with bringing out something from oneself to show, and this is the difference between Matisse and the German Expressionists. There is hence this question of writing—it's a metaphor, excuse me, but—of the sign, and indeed, when one sees how things unfold with the Expressionists, there is no

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use of the sign. Now this question of the sign will become more and more important and active in Western painting. [. . .]

So there is another thing, which is that we find ourselves confronted with a problem of extreme difficulty. You spoke earlier about painters who wanted to renew themselves in some way through Roman art, and in fact just after the war of forty-four, a certain number of painters became passionate about Roman art. Well, there were circumstances, we were coming out of the war and were trying to draw from this art. But it's evident that the source of Roman art, when one looks at the work of Soulages, is no longer visible. And it's for this reason that I ask the question, because the source of African art can be invisible in a contemporary African painting, but it's there nonetheless. And yet at what level? For it's not there at the level of the subject, because that would otherwise be folkloric painting, right? So it's maybe at the level of what I was saying earlier—and that the European painters had discovered—at the level of the expressivity of lines, of sculptural design, or of signs that, that, um, you have been able to see and read in. . . . I think that we are, that one is, at the heart of the subject. It's your turn to respond now.

IN: At the level of the subject, as you say, and that could be "folkloric" . . . I still think that it's the way in which a subject is interpreted that gives it the folkloric aspect, but that the main thing, I think, in a painting, is that apart from this aspect of what I would call this kind of Socialist Realism, you see, because for me folklore is Socialist Realism, you see, at a certain level, if I dare . . . yes, well, there you go. [*laughs*]

So I think that what's needed is to find a sign that comes from the subject and that corresponds to it at the level of form—something that goes beyond folklore, and that is legible not only for the people for whom one is painting, but also that goes beyond that public in order to be read by others, with the same reading and with the same sentiment and with the same emotion.

JL: So now I think we are approaching a possible conclusion, because if I look at the evolution of the oeuvre of the painter Iba Ndiaye, I notice that progressively, or at least in the most recent paintings and in the landscapes, you are oriented more and more toward the problematics of the sign, more than toward the problematics of representation.

IN: Well, let's say that at first . . . I tried to translate what I saw. So I was learning a language. I was learning a form of writing. And the

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more I drew and the more I painted, the more I escaped from the subject, and my subject became less legible because I synthesize, I try to provide the most density possible within the sign, in the composition, in the truth of its signification. And at that point, if the subject isn't legible—because it doesn't interest me anymore, in the sense that it's no longer its recognition that matters to me, but simply the meaning of what I want to express as a function of the composition I'm making—well, from that point, I think I'm working with the sign of which you speak.

JL: I think that here we have an important point on which we can maybe agree. It's that any fundamentalist position is to be rejected from the start. When one speaks of cultural identity, of collective identity, one has the idea of Africa that the painter makes or the viewer makes, and this idea is fixed. Well, from that point . . .

IN: That is conventional art.

JL: Right. And so the task, following the conversation we've just had, of the African artist who wants to remain faithful to his African origins and to speak Africa to the world—because Africa must be in the world—is a man who, far from stopping at a given moment in the history of Africa, takes this moment as his starting point.

IN: But for me my objective is not to remain African! I am African!

JL: What I mean is to *speak* Africa—that is, to *speak* the culture that is one's own. After all, when one looks, for example, when you put French paintings (let's say since Fouquet to the present day) and Italian paintings (let's say since Giotto to the present day) in a room side by side, well you notice that even though these artists express themselves in a so-called universal language, French painting can be recognized as French painting, Italian painting as Italian painting. And that is precisely the question.

IN: Right, and the painting of Picasso can be recognized as Spanish painting I believe.

JL [*agreeing*]: It can be recognized as Spanish painting. Because you put . . .

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IN: [*interrupting, laughing*] Well really now, I think . . . [*laughing*] . . . that we need to look at this closely, because I think that the painting of Picasso is precisely the painting of a *man*.

JL: Yes, but this man is Spanish!

IN: No, no, no . . .

JL: Let's not forget that Picasso was part of that generation, known as that of 1898, that laid claim to *Hispanidad*, which is to say Spanish-ness. They wanted to renew themselves through the deep sources of Spain.

IN: But I will tell you: I saw in Germany—it was designs on Greek vases at the museum of Cologne—Picasso's drawings from *Verve*. Do you know these drawings on Greek vases? So, you understand, I think that is pretty far from "Spanish art"! Because one really finds in Picasso's graphic designs an influence that's absolutely . . .

JL: Oh dear, that term—"influence"!

TRANSLATED BY JOSHUA I. COHEN

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