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Nine Contradictions in the New Golden Age of African Art

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**NINE CONTRADICTIONS  
IN THE NEW GOLDEN AGE  
OF AFRICAN ART**

**A**frican art today is in the midst of a brilliant renaissance, heralded in exhibitions such as "The Short Century," which recently closed at P.S. 1 in New York. That show, curated by Okwui Enwezor, adjunct curator of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago (and artistic director of Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, 2002), addresses art and politics in Africa from 1945 to 1994 (see review, p. 76). It has received extraordinary attention in the media and has brought contemporary African art to the notice of the non-Africanist museum and gallery goer while at the same time sparking lively discussion among Africanist art scholars. In short, the exhibition has generated more than the usual buzz. The proliferation of numerous other shows on contemporary African art have added to the excitement. "Africa, whatever it is," notes Holland Cotter in his provocative review of "The Short Century," "is everywhere. It's far more than just a continent. It's a global diaspora, an international culture and a metaphor with fantastical associations..." (*New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2002).

Like many aspects of globalization, this great new artistic era in many respects encompasses striking contradictions, complications, and paradoxes. Nine stand out. In one way or another they address the question, "How is Africa defined in this Golden Age of contemporary African art?" The nine issues raised here point to the fact that overly simplified and stereotyped views of Africa still prevail.

1. *Identity.* While born in Africa, most of the artists celebrated as part of the new artistic wave have spent their adult lives in Europe or the United States. Although their "ethnic" and "racial" profiles vary, many state quite explicitly that they want to be known not as African or, say, Nigerian artists but as artists. Period. (A similar issue was largely resolved long ago with respect to the category of women artists.) Some assert that by insisting on an African label, scholars, curators, art dealers, and art collectors reify a sense of second-tier importance, of segregation. Paradoxically, the popularity of many artists has been predicated on the ways that a certain "Africanness" is being read into their work; a subtext of the exotic and the different continues to shadow the Western response. Whatever label is chosen for these artists has an effect not only in academia but also in the marketplace.

2. *Locality.* Because these works address largely modern or postmodern artistic and intellectual concerns, they often have little saliency in the local areas where the creators' families still reside. Some pieces, in their hypersexuality, politicization, or choice of materials, are even seen to be anathema to key

*Continued on page 4*

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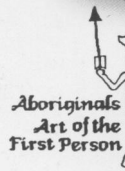


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local values and social concerns. This does not mean that the burden of a particular type of representation should be shouldered by artists wherever they live, but rather that here too there are sometimes striking disconnects that have an impact on markets, exhibition venues, and responses in Africa itself.

3. *Artistic Models.* Western art critics often ostracize African works that incorporate visual abstraction, assemblage, jarring juxtapositions, salvage materials, and recycling, saying they are derivative of Euro-American modernist movements. Yet these approaches are firmly rooted in Africa's art historical past; they were appropriated and reframed from the African aesthetic wellspring by artists in the West. Those artists in Africa who stick too closely to the earlier sources of this tradition (for example, shrine makers, woodcarvers, and dress designers) have been largely ignored in the new contemporary arena, though as living artists they are necessarily also "contemporary." African studio-trained artists in turn sometimes bridle that "unschooled" rural sign makers or history painters reaching across to modernist genres get prime exhibition spaces and lengthy texts, edging the "professionals" to the periphery.

4. *The Market.* Although promoted by some Western entrepreneurs as exotic "outsider artists" whose visionary or spiritual sources come exclusively from within (like magic),

most of the contemporary artists on view arrived at these new forms through modern art schools, local experiences with commercial advertising, or other important interactions with the West. In addition, many of these artists' oeuvres are held and tightly controlled by their Euro-American promoters and dealers—in Paris, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. Venue, price, mode of representation, and frequently content are herein brokered. To some degree there is a colonial legacy in this situation, with French- and English-speaking entrepreneurs espousing competing artistic agendas. While in some ways they are no different from patrons of art in other areas historically, today, when art passes far more as commodity, the disequilibrium between the artist's power and that of the dealer or patron carries concerns. As with music, present and future royalties are a vital question. To see this solely as an issue of the colonial legacy, however, is simplistic, for a highly talented group of African curators and critics in the West also currently exercise sizable control of aesthetic agendas and the discourses which shape the material they advocate.

5. *Exhibitions.* The new globalized, heavily publicized arena of biennials has brought contemporary African art to the foreground in blockbuster shows such as the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale. They are curated largely by outsiders (though they might be African), with international funding and other support, sometimes leaving few possibilities for local artistic engagement. Indeed, artists living in these areas on occasion have been excluded, particularly if their work lies outside the parameters of the sometimes rigid postmodern visual rubrics being promoted. In other contexts, national boundaries still retain a heavy pull, with the exhibited artists being largely local or regional. In short, a lot of contemporary art just doesn't get shown, or doesn't get shown together.

6. *Gender.* Nearly all the newly acclaimed artists are men. Some of their most provocative works involve the appropriation of image making historically identified with African women—examinations of fashion, shrine constructions, performative takes on ritual acts, and painting (once largely a woman's art). Historically, women were not only among the principal subjects (which is no longer true in the contemporary arena), but in many contexts they were also the primary patrons and users. But while women have become invisible, certain themes such as homosexuality, rarely addressed overtly in the earlier forms, are now viable subjects. The question of how and by whom contemporary art is being delimited is salient with respect to a number of issues, since African women historically have been central figures not only in artistic production but also in the economic well-being of their communities.

7. *Banishing the past.* The Golden Age of contemporary African art has in some ways further marginalized earlier or ongoing historical African art forms. These works are sometimes now shunned if they haven't already been swept out of sight and out of mind. The reasoning varies. "Traditional" African arts are

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DOGON 49cm/19.5"

Photo: Ferry Herrebrugh



**KATHY VANDERPAS**  
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 a f r i c a n a r t

alternatively: a) too African (i.e., "exotic"); b) not where they should be displayed (in Western museums rather than in "traditional" African shrines); c) despite a century of rebuttal, stuck with a "primitive" patina that threatens to contaminate contemporary artists and artworks nearby; d) too ritually charged, thus inappropriate (sacrilegious) if viewed by the uninitiated of the West; e) too complex in their signification to be viably examined and exhibited outside their native lands.

8. *Political ideology and global engagement.* Key discussions of contemporary art are sometimes being framed around theories of power difference (among these, the enduring problems of colonialism and, more recently, globalization). Yet in some ways the post-1950 Cold War between East and West had a more direct impact on this generation's Golden Age artists. Indeed, it can be argued that the heated Soviet-Western fight for the minds and resources of Africa wreaked more havoc there than it did elsewhere around the globe, as both political spheres promoted heavy-arms build-ups as a principal form of foreign aid (a "gift" that continues to plague the continent), while at the same time supporting hugely corrupt dictatorships if they could be counted on as allies. While in this case, too, power difference is important, in some respects (U.N. votes, for example) Africa during this era was accorded the role of a vital player. Having grown up in a time of highly charged (and restraining) political ideologies, many of these

artists today seem all too happy to be freed from the burdens that these and other ideologies impose.

9. *Promotion of culture.* The present artistic renaissance is framed against a backdrop that includes not only health and political woes that are pandemic in key parts of the continent, but also an increasingly dilapidated and inadequate infrastructure, manifested in everything from telephones to schools. While in the West it is for the most part accepted that the study of art and culture is critical to the development and understanding of civilization more generally, Western-based international funding agencies are now pressing Africa to cut funds to local universities in those subject areas, with technical schools and programs replacing broad learning in art and the humanities. Many artists (and intellectuals) have left to train in Europe. Their success here has brought little back to Africa.

It is important to note that many of the world's great art movements came into being during this kind of deep-rooted crisis. The examples are numerous: the Nubian conquest of the northern Nile as an element of change in Akhenaten's Egypt; the implications of the pilgrimage (and related violent crusade) movement in Medieval Europe on the development of architecture and other arts; the fall of Constantinople as a key component in the rise of the Italian Renaissance; the expansion of Islam as a catalyst for the emergence of striking architectural monu-

ments at Djenne and elsewhere; the importance of the Portuguese to the great era of Benin artistic florescence; French and Belgian colonial wars in Africa as a factor in Picasso's artistic revolution; the rise and fall of Hitler and the emergence of the New York School.

All the above were precipitated by cultural encounters, clashes, and contradictions, with their sociopsychological and internationalizing features. The present era of contemporary African art must also be viewed from this vantage point. It is therefore vital to acknowledge these contradictions even when (especially when) the artists and curators who are the intellectual roots of this artistic era—and those who are in positions to frame and promote it—have often sought to counter many of these same concerns.

In short, the way that Africa is being defined within the new Golden Age of contemporary African art conveys many of the same colonial legacies that framed discourses on Africa in earlier eras. Among these are a very narrowly circumscribed and largely monolithic sense of identity, the ongoing feature of geographical isolation, the privileging of Western genres, a promotion of art framed centrally by the market, traditions of exhibition exclusion, gender-based art and status differences, a dehistoricization of Africa, Western models of political ideology, and a view of Africa in which technology (the hand) is seen necessarily to be privileged over innovation (the mind). □

Suzanne Preston Blier