THE GRAMSCI MONUMENT-NEWSPAPER

Editors:
LAKESHA BRYANT
and
SAQUAN SCOTT

"A periodical, like a newspaper, a book, or any other medium of didactic expression that is aimed at a certain level of the reading or listening public, cannot satisfy everyone equally; not everyone will find it useful to the same degree. The important thing is that it serve as a stimulus for everyone; after all, no publication can replace the thinking mind."
Antonio Gramsci
(Prison Notebook 8)

N°52

www.gramsci-monument.com

August 21st, 2013 - Forest Houses, Bronx, NY

The Gramsci Monument-Newspaper is part of the "Gramsci Monument", an artwork by Thomas Hirschhorn, produced by Dia Art Foundation in co-operation with Erik Farmer and the Residents of Forest Houses

WE WELCOME

OKWUI ENWEZOR

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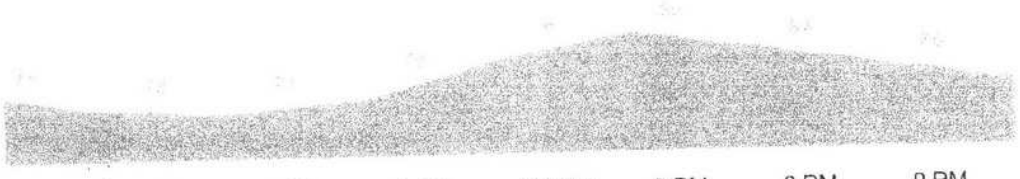
Bronx, NY 10456
Wednesday
Clear

91 °F | °C

Precipitation: 10%
Humidity: 48%
Wind: 11 mph

Temperature	Precipitation	Wind



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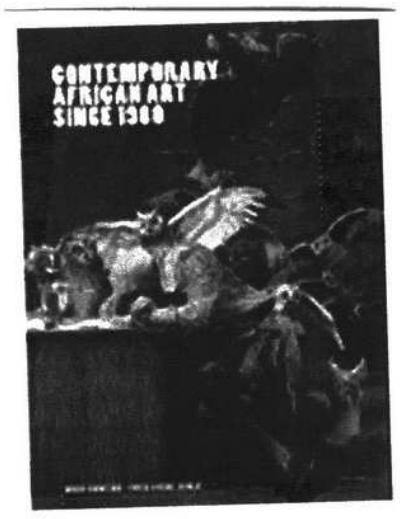
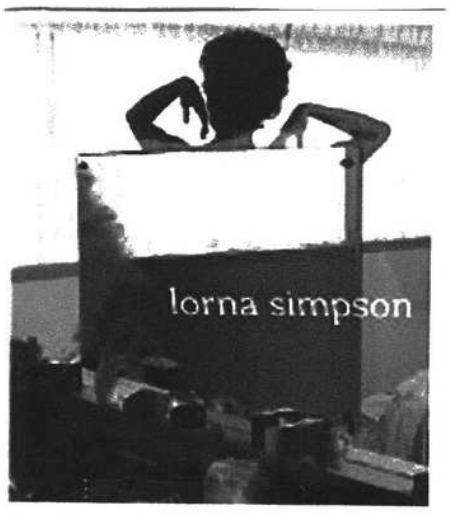
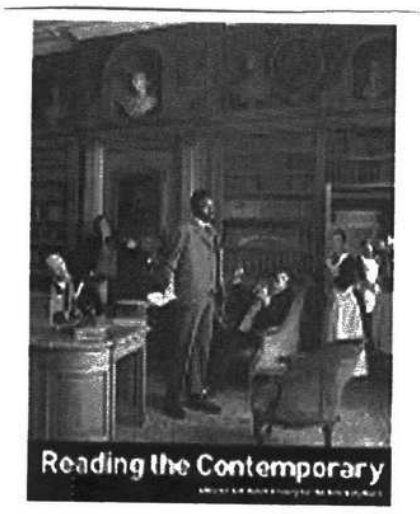
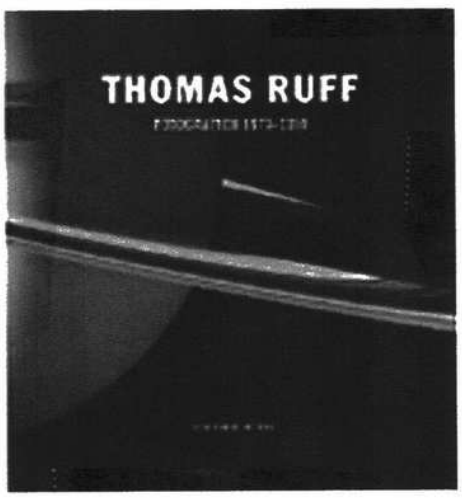
Okwui Enwezor is a curator, art critic, writer, and director of Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, Kirk Varnedoe Visiting Professor at New York University, and adjunct curator at the International Center of Photography, New York. Enwezor served as the artistic director of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (South Africa, 1997), *documenta 11* (Kassel, Germany (2002), 2da Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla (Spain, 2007), 7th Gwangju Biennale (South Korea, 2008) and *La Triennale: Intense Proximity* (Paris, France, 2012). His many exhibitions include *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, 2001), *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (International Center of Photography, New York, 2006), *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (International Center of Photography, New York, 2008) and *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* (International Center of Photography, New York, 2013). In 2006, Enwezor received the Frank Jewett Mather Award for art criticism from the College Art Association.

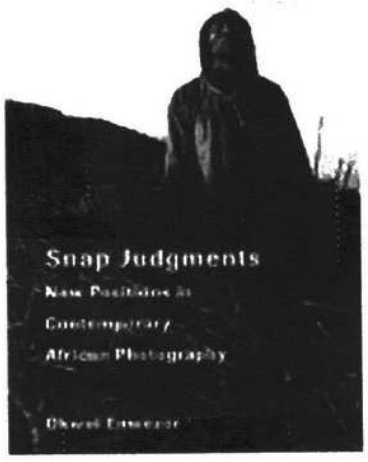
SOME OF THE AUTHOR'S PUBLICATIONS

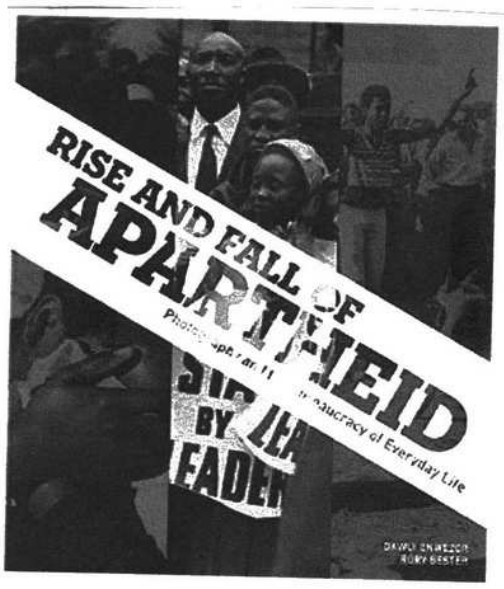












PART I

DEFINING AND PERIODIZING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART SINCE 1980

Chapter 1
Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction

During the past two decades, there has been a surge of interest in the work of contemporary African artists. A major reason for this turn of events is partly due to the impact of globalization on contemporary art and culture. Like other artists who were once situated on the margins of mainstream artistic narratives, African artists have been beneficiaries of the globalizing phenomenon that has included the rise of biennials and art fairs, and the unprecedented surge in collecting art on a worldwide scale. To be clear, the apparent largess of the international artistic contexts that have so readily embraced African artists and others could be attributed less to a change of heart about the artistic competence of marginal regions, and more to a strategic repositioning and adaptation to global winds of change that blew down ideological walls throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Every indication we have of the current situation of global contemporary art reconfirms the important impact of geopolitical reorganization of the global order, especially in the financial markets and the digital networks of information, technology, images, and ideas. The unmaking of a bipolar system of power further contributed to the establishment of a series of dialectical and historical reconfigurations that remapped the cultural, political, and economic circuits which would have a profound effect on globalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. During this period, several major international exhibitions, in which the work of contemporary African artists was featured, have been pivotal in framing these artists' global visibility. Of these, the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, organized at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, by Jean-Hubert Martin in 1989, is rightfully cited as one paradigmatic moment that helped break the border of marginality of African artists by presenting their work alongside the work of their international peers.

Since 1989, among the most important venues for the showcasing of contemporary African art are several comprehensive exhibition initiatives developed in the early and mid 1990s in several African cities. These include the Dak'Art: Dakar Biennial, Dakar (1992); Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine Biennial, Bamako (1994); Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg (1995); in addition to older venues such as the Cairo and Alexandria biennials and scores of workshops across the African continent.

When Grace Stanislaus of the Studio Museum in Harlem organized *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Traditions* in 1990 at the Venice Biennale (a process that was then reprised in 1993 at the same venue, with a slightly amended nomenclature, *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale* by Susan Vogel of the Museum for African Art, New York) the exhibition of African artists in Venice marked a further erosion of boundaries in the reception of contemporary African art in the international curatorial field. The trend for the curatorial rewiring of contemporary African art on a global scale began to take root during the 1990s, with several significant exhibitions and multimedia works, including *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (1991), by Susan Vogel and Walter E. van Beek at the Center for African Art, New York, and the New Museum, New York; *Africa Hoy* (1991), by André Magnin at Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno; *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (1995–96), directed by Clementine Deliss and curated by Chika Okeke-Agulu, Salah Hassan, David Koloane, Wanjiku Nyachae, and El Hadji Sy at Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Konsthalle, Malmo; *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* (1995), by Yukiya Kawaguchi at the Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, and *In / Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (1996), by Octavio Zaya, Okwui Enwezor, Danielle Tilkin, and Clare Bell at the Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Further ground was broken when the Senegalese figurative sculptor Ousmane Sow and the Nigerian installation artist Mo Edoga became the first Africans to be included in the prestigious exhibition *Documenta 9* (1992). Since then, African artists have participated in all subsequent *Documenta* exhibitions (*Documenta 10*, *11*, and *12*), which are held in Kassel, Germany, every five years. Tracing further the trajectory of global exhibition activities and curatorial responses to African artists in multiple international exhibitions in the 1990s, we note such shows as *Crocido y Crudo* (1994), by Dan Cameron at the Reina Sofia, Madrid; and *Otro Païs: Escalas Africanas* (1994), by Simon Njami and Joëlle Busca at Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. In addition to Venice and Documenta, African artists have regularly appeared in several other biennales: Gwangju, Sydney, São Paulo, Istanbul, Havana, Ljubljana, Lyon, and Manifesta. Such participation underscores the inescapable globality of African artists. Contributing to the expansion of the discursive networks of the field, journals and magazines such as *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *Revue Noire*, *ArtThrob*, and *Third Text* have been leading critical sites devoted to new writing on issues in contemporary African art. More recently, in the last decade, several significant exhibitions, such as *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movement in Africa* (2001), and *Africa Remix* (2004) have drawn even more complex articulations of the historical and contemporary issues related to African cultural production.

These activities, along with numerous others that are not listed, have each contributed to crystallizing serious scholarly and curatorial interest in the field. With this new attention, several important shifts are immediately noticeable in the discursive circuits of curatorial and historical evaluation of contemporary African art as a field of study. African artists are not only more visible in the institutional circuits of museums, exhibitions, and art history; scholars are also investing serious intellectual resources in researching and teaching the field. Emerging scholarship in this field has produced doctoral dissertations and countless graduate theses. Most notably, in a single generation, we have witnessed a broadening of the interpretive and curatorial models from amalgamated group exhibitions to monographic exhibitions that explore the oeuvres of individual artists. More museums and major private collectors now include the work of contemporary African artists in their collections; key international exhibitions routinely feature the works; critics write about the artists; galleries exhibit and represent them. Sotheby's and Bonhams auction houses have staged several successful sales exclusively focused on contemporary African art. In Africa itself, a market is emerging: the Johannesburg Art Fair was recently established; a new auction house, ArtHouse, specializing in modern and contemporary Nigerian art, was established in Lagos. All of these activities have expanded the networks of mediation and reception of the diversely complex field of practices and production. And with each of these endeavors there is no doubt that the methodological tools of critical appraisal have benefited from the growing awareness of the work of individual artists or regions. This calls for a fresh perspective and a need for new analytical lens toward the study of contemporary African art. This is the basic premise of *Contemporary African Art since 1980*: to organize a critical analysis of the ideas, concepts, objectives, and practices which have shaped the field we now survey.

What is Contemporary African Art?

This project seeks to reaffirm one immediate point, which lies in its title: "contemporary African art" implies the existence of an artistic landscape of some coherence, one that has discernible durability,

EXCERPT FROM CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART SINCE 1980 BY OKWUI ENWEZOR AND CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU

and which justifies the label, as applied to the works of those artists grouped under the various thematic rubrics that inform the sections of this book. But here we pause to reflect—pace the philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe—on "the idea of Africa" that we are working with. We readily acknowledge that, for some artists, being identified as an African artist may prove a disabling label in negotiating the boundaries of power that inform the entire global cultural complex. To a degree, the very "idea of Africa" may be superficially disabling to some artists, because Africa has often been represented more in terms of epistemological negation, to which no profit can be tabulated on the ledger of artistic and cultural capital. Add to this the fact that for millennia, and in the media, Africa had been interpreted as a marginal, limited sphere of artistic and institutional power; so it makes sense that some artists may feel uneasy with being identified as such. But only to a point, for there is also the reverse, the tendency of over-identification, to the point of an essentialism built on a sense of authenticity, which some African artists are seen to be lacking either by race, region, or dwelling.

In our approach, however, Africa is a multiplicity of cultural spaces, shaped by social forces and political and economic conditions that do not privilege one way of conceptualizing an African identity. And in this framework, contemporary African art includes a tissue of fascinating and productive contradictions which enliven debates on what it affirms and what it contests. More concretely, contemporary African art denotes a field of complex artistic production, research, interpretation, and a repository of rich intellectual discovery at the intersection of the shifting models of cultural, political, social, and epistemological analyses in which Africa is meaningfully interpellated. Here the connection to Africa not only informs the understanding of the diverse types of artistic practices reflected in this book, it also applies to the very complex models of identity and ambivalent identifications of the artists who reside both inside and outside Africa; or who move easily between both.

But to convene a discursive landscape such as contemporary African art is not to blend these disparate sensibilities, cultural situations, historical experiences, and politicized models of subjectivity and subjectivization (that is the strategic positioning an artist adopts qua the field) into one unified frame of cultural identity. Instead, the idea of African identity we employ is not an absolute, but a malleable term. It refers to both cultural and geographic situations, and to modes of subjectivization, dimensions of identification, and ethical strategies. None of these are singular. An African identity can suggest relationships as much to ethnic, national, and linguistic conditions, as to ethical, ideological, and political strategies. An African identity can be understood as part of a broad repertoire of practices, strategies, and subjectivities that link cultural traditions and cultural archives, that subtend geocultural and geopolitical spaces, transnational and diasporic experiences. In this sense, there is no totalizing construct that defines the center of this project.

Against this backdrop, the term "African" employed here is capacious. It accommodates slippages, incompleteness, eccentricities, idiosyncracies, and ambivalences. It is not to be understood in ethnocentric, national, regional, or even continental terms alone, but as a network of positions, affiliations, strategies, and philosophies that represent the multiplicity of cultural traditions and archives available to and exploited consistently by the artists to shape their artistic positions in a way that reflects the diffuse repertoire of artistic forms and concepts which we designate as contemporary African art. At the same time, the term "African" is also temporal, in particular in the way it engenders or disavows emotional attachments in the present. It is about the shape of Africa in the world today. Each of these positions, on their own or in combination, defines the state of contemporary African art in the twenty-first century. More importantly, for our critical purposes, it is how these formulations shape the understanding of an archive of practices that reflects this multiplicity in the contemporary art of Africa. As we argue throughout the book, the principal goal of *Contemporary African Art since 1980* is to delimit a specific historical datum, one in which artistic works, conceptual strategies, and formal procedures can be coherently organized. At the same time, the goal is to reveal—through the evidence of the works represented and discussed here—the fact that the term contemporary African art has a historical basis on which our premise rests, and therefore the spur for serious analysis and engagement by art professionals and the public alike.

To mark out a field is always to delimit a space of survey. It is to draw a line, but nevertheless a line which, we hope, does not subscribe to rigid borders, outmoded hierarchies, or anthropological certainties. But as tends to be the case in circumstances of diversity of archives, a delimited space cannot be subordinated to the logic of totalization or standardization. Rather, a delimited field, particularly one with historical complexities such as is presented in today's Africa, is not a flat field, but a series of shifting grounds composed of fragments, of composite identities, and micro narratives; in fact, it is the *petit récit* that forms the methods of historical discourse. Pierre Bourdieu defines this as the "field of cultural production" in which diverse actors operate. He states:

> The field of cultural production is the area *par excellence* of clashes between the dominant fractions of the dominant class, who fight there sometimes in person but more often through producers oriented towards defending their "ideas" and satisfying their "tastes", and the dominated fractions who are totally involved in this struggle. This conflict brings about the integration in a single field of the various socially specialized sub-fields, particular markets which are completely separate in social and even geographical space, in which the different fractions of the dominant class can find products adjusted to their tastes, whether in the theatre, in painting, fashion, or decoration.[1]

Thus the main focus is the recognition of the existence of this field and its historical implications for the analysis of African art in general. Though we have chosen to limit this overview to a specific time period—the last three decades—we do so both in response to the large corpus of artistic work covered (more than 150 artists), and also in recognition of the diversity of the critical stakes within the art-historical development of African art studies in general. In other words, we aim both for temporal specificity (since 1980) and disciplinary clarity (contemporary African art) in order to show the fruitful links between the three decades which this overview covers. We take the approach that to understand the works represented here from the periods covered requires the articulation of the surrounding historical atmosphere, the conditions of production, and the cultural, political, and epistemological legacies of postcolonialism that surmount almost all the works of art discussed throughout the course of the unfolding analysis. Nevertheless, our aim is not to make contextualist points, but to show how social, political, and economic events of the last thirty years—from postcolonial critiques of the state form and neo-liberalism, to responses to globalization and the severe austerity measures of recent periods, the reform movements of democratization, state failure, migration, exile, the rise of political Islam, and the struggle against apartheid—have all profoundly affected and reshaped the field of contemporary African cultural and artistic production.

As we have already underlined, since the early 1980s many African artists—El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, Yto Barrada, Berni Searle, Ouattara Watts, William Kentridge, Chris Ofili, David Adjaye, Nnenna Okore, Moataz Nasr, Odili Donald Odita, Meschac Gaba, Tracey Rose, Marcia Kure, Marlene Dumas, Wangechi Mutu, Ghada Amer, Julie Mehretu, Georges Adéagbo, Romuald Hazoumé, Chéri Samba, etc.—have come to global prominence and have been positioned at the forefront of critical debates of contemporary art. Scholars have devoted serious and focused attention to the study of these artists' diverse experiences and works. In addition, a historical rereading of modern African art[2] has reinvigorated the assessments of the work of contemporary African artists in light of modernity—and, by extension, the links to traditional African art—and broadened each of their critical horizons.[3] More recently, with younger scholars doing art-historical, rather than ethnographic, research on contemporary artists, the study of contemporary African art has become a core area of academic inquiry in African art-history scholarship. As these studies expand the available data on practices and discourses, the field has been imbued with forms and methods of theoretical, aesthetic, and social analysis of a new history of the arts in Africa.

When Was Contemporary African Art?

While curatorial practice and related activities have engendered new circuits of interpretation and a reordering of the discourse of contemporary African art, until recently the field was an area of considerable debate. One such debate concerns the issue of periodization, namely, when did contemporary African art emerge? Did it emerge as a consequence of the crisis of traditional African art due to colonialism? Or is it because of the encounter with new paradigms of artistic production generated by African responses to European modernity? To pose these questions reveals some confusion if we take the most common dictionary definition of the term "contemporary" purely as an event of the present, that which belongs to or occurring in the present, distinctly apart from that which is viewed as belonging to the past, to a historical epoch. However, this does not get us to the place at which we can utter the phrase "contemporary African art" except as a distinguishing trope that separates not periods or categories of time,[4] but artistic styles and genres. Terry Smith gives us a useful guide, stating that contemporary art is art preoccupied with being within its time.[5] Arthur Danto, on the other hand, sees contemporary art, in its ever increasing sense of timelessness, as post-historical, as a liberation from the succession of historical periods bound to styles.[6] Smith and Danto are not quite saying the same thing; the former is strictly concerned with questions of temporality, while the latter focuses on the caesura of historical periods.

But can these two interpretations help define what we mean by contemporary when used strictly in analysis applied to Africa? The answer, generally, is yes, especially if we see African art in the era of colonialism and in encounters with European modernity as, reflexively, an encounter with categories of time and a march toward a post-historical paradigm where traditional styles no longer designate the aesthetic coordinates of artistic production. At the same time, we can also see the convergence of traditional styles and contemporary paradigms as occurring at the same time, but with two distinctive thrusts: one reflecting its connection to a historical past, the other establishing its separation from that past. In this sense, it is typical of assessments of contemporary African art to analyze it as a field of mismatched genres, "a process of *bricolage* upon the already existing structures and scenarios on which older, precolonial and colonial genres of African art were made."[7] The sense of *bricolage* would seem to privilege practices thrown together irrespective of clear conceptual and philosophical distinctions. However, the combination of successive historical periods, formal styles, and genres yield, at least, to both Smith's contention of temporality and Danto's idea of the end of styles. If we are to usefully bridge the philosophical distinctions between Smith and Danto, we can perhaps allow that, at a minimum, contemporary African art comes both at the end of traditional arts (seemingly precolonial) and at the end of colonialism; that is to say, that its condition of existence in the present is postcolonial. But is Kasfir's reference to *bricolage* a claim for the postcoloniality of contemporary African art? Not quite, as we will see.

The Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Art

With the competing claims of the past and the separation of the present from it, the discursive landscape of contemporary African art has been shaped according to the struggle between two fields of knowledge that have addressed its content through different and divergent approaches. During the past forty years, much of the debate that centered on the question of art in Africa has played out in two principal arenas: in the ethnographic museum and in the museum of art.[8] In the first arena, scholars and curators often made little distinction between contemporary art and works that are more appropriately craft, such as pottery-making, basket-weaving, cloth-dyeing, and toy design.[9] It is important to point out here that the term "craft" does not necessarily denote an inferior practice to contemporary art. But it should be recognized that these two types of creative processes operate in distinct discursive systems and circulate in different cultural economies, namely in the market for souvenirs and utilitarian material on the one hand, and in exhibition circuits of the contemporary art gallery and systems of museums of art and ethnography on the other. We in no way infer in the circuit of the museum a superior sphere of cultural reception. Even if it is for the sake of not constructing a false hierarchy between art and craft—a distinction that has long bedeviled the reception of African art in general—the theoretical and formal distinctions often made between areas of practice and the diverse systems of distribution, exhibition, and reception in which the materials operate can sometimes be misleading and ill serves the artists themselves.

This is not to say that there have not been moments when craft-artists have brought aesthetically complex and conceptually sophisticated artistic genres into the field of contemporary African art. Take, for example, the work of the Ghanaian coffin-maker Kane Kwei, whose elaborately sculpted fantasies plays simultaneously with Surrealist disjunction and makes references to commodity fetishism in contemporary Akan systems of funerary decoration. Or the way an artist like El Anatsui deftly exploits handicraft to arresting conceptual ends. Or consider another example, Esther Mahlangu's geometric abstract wall paintings according to traditional Ndebele architectural wall decoration that was transmuted both to gallery spaces and to BMW cars. The fact that the separate works of these artists—one positioned as a craft-maker, the other repeating and extending the patterns of a decorative tradition, and yet still another conventionally an artist—have, in turn, attracted the fascination of the ethnographic museum is no doubt based not merely on their contemporary aesthetic merit alone, but also on their seeming transparent ethnographic quality which, on the one hand, links the work of the craftsman to the popular desires of the everyday Ghanaian and on the other to the popular taste for exoticization that pervades the ethnographic reception of contemporary African art. With Kwei, the public for African material culture can simultaneously indulge in a bit of ethnographic surrealism and in Mahlangu and Anatsui, a mediated view of decorative arts and contemporary African art.

Until recently, the ability of the ethnographic museum to wield discursive authority over objects, practices, and meaning was overwhelming. This made it a formidable discursive site of the artistic field, and the primary locus of curatorial interpretation. Granted, the ethnographic museum was operating largely unchallenged in this way, because the museum of art, as such, showed little interest in the category of contemporary African art, a fact adumbrated in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern* in 1984. However, in recent years the discursive authority of the ethnographic museum, and the interpretive power it wielded, have been eroded by the emergence of contemporary curatorial projects functioning in the arena of the museum of art. Consequently, a remarkable curatorial attention and its focus on contemporary art has made the temporary, large-scale exhibition model in art museums the indisputable arena for the theoretical and historical framing of contemporary African art. As Sidney Littlefield Kasfir notes, "blockbuster shows have greatly influenced the mainstreaming tendency"[10] of contemporary African art. Much of this debate, in which the ethnographic museum and the curator of anthropology have had to share epistemological space with the curator of contemporary art and the institutional frame of the museum of art—even if there is little common ground between them in terms of the vocabulary that shapes their respective projects[11]—has occurred in the last thirty years, a period that also witnessed the increased visibility of contemporary African artists in the global scene.

Given the changing stakes in the critical ground occupied by African art and artists globally, the discursive challenge of this project bears on four reflexive points: in the first, we explore what constitutes the "contemporary" and how it is defined and theorized; second, we analyze the term "African art" without making appellations of ethnic origin essential to the term (we focus mainly on how artists are located within the larger context of African art studies); third, we examine the way the term has been analyzed by other scholars and explore how distinctly different it is from the art we are concerned with; and fourth, we focus on identifying the central participants in the making of the field, and how their practices help generate and shape the meaning of what is identified.

Archives of Traditions

A caveat to keep in mind: the task at hand is not to argue whether these four points exhaust the possibilities of how to frame the argument of contemporary African art. Instead, we seek to address the provenance of the ideas and the overlapping discourses, as well as the surrounding historical and analytical architecture that subtend them. Also, our critical task is narrower, and in large measure more pointed, because it is oriented to the present, even if the period covered has traces in the past. The limit in our temporal frame is the *postcolonial*, a point meant to articulate the temporal and theoretical richness of our chosen decades. What is immediately clear, and not surprising, is the consistency of the formal, political, aesthetic, and cultural connections between the concerns of the artists and the questions of African contemporaneity that follow them. In this way, there is no need to seek to revivify expired authenticities, nor to mourn the death of autochthonous traditions. If there is any immediate dispute undertaken here, it is querying the notions of authenticity and autochthonism as the means by which we can nominate a contemporary work of art as African. We recognize that notions of the authentic and the autochthonous have in the past provided a level of comfort for historians reluctant to perceive African artists in the present, as part of the modern and contemporary world.[12] To therefore speak concretely of contemporary African art disturbs a series of analytical assumptions about the state of African art today—one being the static nature of African cultures, which supports the idea of a timeless African tradition.

We purposely make clear that our inquiry is made in the tension between contemporary artistic archives and the way they are imagined in the deep wells of cultural traditions. But we deviate from the lubricious tendency of forever linking them in historical causality. It is quite obvious that the reading which constantly illuminates either the presence or absence of tradition in modern and contemporary African art is a historical problem, one that is more connected to writings about forms of art and that directly resists those boxes either by stubbornly being hybrid, ironic, or allegorical. But we do not subscribe to the staged binaries between tradition and the contemporary, nor intoxicated by the stunted fetishization of tradition while contemptuous of the contemporary as the British educator William Fagg did when, in the 1940s, he lamented: "We are in at the death of all that is best in African art..."[13] at a time when African artists were vigorously engaging modernism.

We do not resist the term "traditional African art," which represents a storehouse of powerful artistic achievements that continue to exert influence beyond Africa. But we are less sanguine about the claim that traditional art is the end of achievement in the African creative cycle. To us, tradition—in the best and most rigorous employment of the term—never designates a state of cultural stagnation. Nor does it promote a fixed point of historical stasis in an endless cycle of repetition and mimicry of the past. Rather, tradition always has a forward motion to it, and with that constant, dynamic pitch into the future, many competing forces of change and transformation converge; multiple contending issues of rupture and discontinuity emerge; new and surprising, even contradictory ideas appear or are constantly created as forms, images, objects, narratives, and styles. Tradition, in fact, denotes the continuous flow, change, transformation, evolution, continuity, and discontinuity that enlivens and strengthens the archive of all cultures. It is in this condition of dynamism that we speak about the archives of traditions.

In *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, we find ourselves actively immersed and engaged in the archives of new traditions of artmaking and discourses. These archives support the term "contemporary African art." They are part of its normative architecture, of its ongoing traditions of thought. To think of contemporary African art as needing to be part of a timeless African tradition is to ignore the fact that multiple historical events in the African context have led to new forms of knowledge, fresh ways of conceiving symbolic and structural frames, and that, for centuries, African societies have adapted to constant change both through internal and external forces. To that end, for contemporary African art there are no ancient riverbeds to excavate in order to find continuing traditions. And no strange hybridization that leaves the artists and their work at the mercy of well-meaning, but ultimately wrong-headed, interpretations that lead to binary distinctions such as tradition and modernity, Western and African, center and periphery, vernacular and academic, urban and non-urban, indigenous and diasporic models of identification.

We take it as a given that contemporary African art—like contemporary art generally—is always in a state of creative reinvention and reimagination. And while we make note of the ravages of colonialism on African cultures and institutions, we also acknowledge the importance of artistic exchanges that have marked the transition from colonial to postcolonial subjectivities, which in turn occasioned the responses of African artists to the colonial event. From this standpoint, we take a more penetrating interest in historical events, especially as explicated in the views held by many commentators who constantly insinuate that contemporary African artists lost their authenticity because of colonial disruption. Forty years ago, as ethnographers were bemoaning the loss of authentic African traditions in the work of contemporary African artists, Jacqueline Delange and Philip Fry were correct in pointing out that:

> The concept of "traditional" culture often hides a negation of the primordial openness of many African communities during the pre-colonial period. If we admit the existence of widespread exchange during this period, attempts to think in terms of "closed communities" and "tribal styles" will have to be much more prudent. The fact is that we know very little about the exchanges and the creative processes that gave rise to the traditional arts in Africa. While many may inquire into this background, very few are sufficiently concerned to look at contemporary works, much less to take them seriously. . . . As important as this [traditional art] may be, it is high time to notice that Africa is alive and in movement. A dialectic of acceptance and refusal, of give and take, always typifies colonial and neo-colonial situations.[14]

These are obvious points, and we do not disagree with them. When we survey literature on contemporary African art, especially those published in the 1960s and '70s (a notable exception in this regard is Ulli Beier's thorough assessment published in *Contemporary Art in Africa*), and recent ones in the 1980s and '90s, a schism between the analytical prudence undertaken by Delange and Fry and an ethnographic focus appears that underpins the argument of some of the other scholarship. That ethnographic focus tends to fix an ethnocentric aura around African art. Such an aura is fundamental to the categorization of African arts, not in relation to inventive individual aesthetic systems and the influence of those systems in the development of styles, or the formal deviations from them, and the invention of new paradigms and concepts, but in terms of tribes and ethnic formations. For instance, one can read the deployment of a category such as "Art of Black Africa" as a general case of the racialization of artistic production. Though such a category may be puzzling to us since "black Africa" extends beyond the "sub-Saharan" areas, it is nevertheless explainable since it defines the narrow outlook of ethnographic writing and the cult of traditional culture.

At another level, this is a superficial boundary because it ignores the transnational situation of African artists working under contemporary conditions in which ethnic or essentialist identifications are hardly the locus of critical consideration. African artists have been working internationally since the early twentieth century. One important example of the transnational reception of artistic styles is the tradition of *Souwer* under-glass painting genre, which entered Senegalese artistic archives in the nineteenth century from the Middle East when it was brought back by Muslim pilgrims returning home from the Hajj in Mecca. Equally germane to our discussion is the participation of such artists as Aina Onabolu, Mahmoud Mukhtar, Ernest Mancoba, Gerard Sekoto, Ben Enwonwu, Gerard Sekoto, Iba Ndiaye, Ahmed Cherkaoui, and Gazbia Sirry in discourses of modern and contemporary art internationally since the 1920s. More recently, William Kentridge, Marlene Dumas, Yinka Shonibare, Julie Mehretu, El Anatsui, Ouattara Watts, Wangechi Mutu, Odili, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Pascal Marthine Tayou, Sokari Douglas Camp,Ousmane Sow,

Fode Camara, Kan-Si, and others, have all been operating at a global level without the strictures of ethnocentric encirclement. They have each been examining the tension between African art and contemporary forms, and have been doing so in modern and contemporary styles, in cosmopolitan, transnational, and diasporic settings, thereby bringing new insight into the debate, beyond ethnographic discourse.

Yet, as we challenge ethnographic and ethnocentric conceptions of African art, we do hesitate in the absolute dismissal of the value of ethnographic research in illuminating provocative points of intellectual and aesthetic convergence—particularly in instances where artists make conscious decisions to align the classical past of African art and contemporary forms. For example, in the 1980s the late Nigerian-British photographic artist, Rotimi Fani-Kayode produced a series of works reflecting the tension between the contemporary and the classical in images staged as hermeneutic responses to the powerful artistic legacies of the African sculptural past. In such works as *Sonponnoi* (1987), *Bronze Head* (1987), *Dan Mask* (1987), and *Ebo Orisa* (1985), African masks, sculptures, objects, and ceremonies were deployed as metonymic structures in a strategy linking tradition not only to Africa but also to the West. Similarly, the Cameroon-born, Dutch-based artist Angèle Etoundi Essamba has explored similar issues in relation to African masks in a series of photographic tableaux; as has Sokari Douglas Camp in her figurative welded metal sculptures that reanimate the cultural rituals of Niger-Delta riverine areas of Nigeria; and as Yinka Shonibare works with the unmasking of the seeming authenticity of African textile and the illumination of its colonial origin. Oladele Bamgboye's double video projection, *Homeward-Bound* (1995) articulates similar conceptual ideas in relation to ideas of past and present, home and diaspora, culture and exile. Ouattara Watts's large-scale postmodern paintings, which appropriate the texture of African mud wall paintings and transpose architectural fragments evoking the classic frames of Dogon building façades, remind us of the generative plentitude of the archive of traditions. Ousmane Sow's powerful figurative sculptures, at the level of dramatic tableaux, reveal a sensibility towards the venerative and the iconic in the depiction of traditional figures. Obiora Udechukwu's paintings deftly reanimate the sensitive lines of the *Uli* painting tradition of southeastern Nigeria, in much the same way that Odili Donald Odita's zigzagging geometric abstraction recalls the traditional Ndebele wall paintings of Mahlangu, as do the references to Fante flags that suffuse Atta Kwami's geometric paintings, the calligraphic mark in the paintings of Rachid Koraichi and Ibrahim El Salahi, or Romauld Hazoumé's assemblages of masks constructed of discarded plastic vessels, which cite carved African masks. All of these artists stage their works in the crossing between reflexivity and appropriation, citation and recuperation. Their works deploy, through images and objects, situations of the contemporary conception of African art as a vehicle beyond ethnographic fantasy.

Despite lively exchanges in the work of the aforementioned artists, in which contemporary conceptual strategies are employed to stage a relationship to tradition, the ethnocentric view of the floundering artist unmoored from the past, due to a supposedly weakened link to traditional art, remained for some time in several respects. This view had a discursive pattern, and generated peculiar types of argumentation that tended to ignore the contemporaneity of the artists. At the risk of belaboring the issue, we wish to examine in some depth one example of an ethnographically focused critical reflection which we believe to be an overly alarmist view of the dying traditions of Africa. In his book *African Art: The Years Since 1920*, Marshall Mount foregrounds paternalistic grumbling, laced with bracing sarcasm, to focus on the idea of a disappearing African past, while minimizing the complex artistic experiments being developed by contemporary African artists. He states:

> Today the religious and social traditions of Africa are in a state of flux. In many places they have already almost completely disintegrated. As a result, it is now exceedingly difficult to find artists who work expertly in the styles of their ancestors. Often the last skilled craftsman, if still alive, is too old to work, or his successors are so *inept* that their works are *crude and worthless parodies of traditional sculpture* [Our emphasis].[15]

This slightly updated eulogy from Fagg's, it should be noted, was written in 1973, several decades after the significant emergence of contemporary African artists on the world stage,[16] and two decades after decolonization. In fact, it would be hard to find any serious critic writing on the work of contemporary European artists in the mid 1970s having recourse to invoke the disintegration of Western culture as having a negative impact on Western avant-garde art, or about European artists no longer working in the styles of their "ancestors." We understand the recourse to ancestors, because it provides us with a primordial handle on the pastness of African culture. However, framing the art of contemporary African artists around the dialectic of a wholesome past and a degenerating present, as Mount does, is a common trope, without irony and full of self-assurance. To trace the path of the degeneration of skill and traditional styles, Mount sets up a hoary argument which, to be fair, he did not originate. His scheme begins with what is called "survivals of traditional styles," which offers some sort of elegy. In this elegy, swipes are taken against foes of traditional art. Artists who are unable to fulfill their supposed ancestral calling lead the list and are severely brought to book. Chief Inneh, a Edo sculptor working in the court of the Oba of Beninois, is excoriated in typical style: "Chief Inneh's work in the round is seen in his portrait of the deceased Oba Eweka II. It is one of the few recent works executed in the traditional bronze... The casting is cruder than the ancient works and the filling of surfaces and details is considerably more inept,"[17] Mount concludes. But if artists like Inneh have failed in animating their ancestral obliga tions due to the degeneration of artistic skills, he was not entirely at fault, because he had been abetted by the "elite Africans" who have similarly abandoned the traditional ways of their ancestors, and no longer appreciated traditional sculpture.

Deskilling as a Process of Inventing Contemporary Art

The advent of European avant-garde art in the early twentieth century accrued from the conscious artistic strategies of deskilling the high academic styles that were part of the dominant taste of the bourgeoisie up until the nineteenth century. The artistic salons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the battlegrounds for the artistic reinvention of the skills of the modern and contemporary artist. In theorizing the origin of contemporary African art, there is something of critical value to be extracted from the idea that the degeneration of traditional styles as a result of the emergence of contemporary art meant the death of the great traditional arts of Africa. One could argue therefore, that the root of contemporary African art, outside of postcolonial temporality, lies in its attempt to separate itself from the skilled competence of the traditional artist/craftsman in a self-conscious process of "deskilling."[18] The advent of the craftsmen laying down their tools all over Africa may, in fact, have historical parallels to the breakdown of institutions of patronage and authority that traditional art once enjoyed and served. This, indeed, is one part of the historicist argument of scholars like Mount. Such arguments, however, are developed not as a way to put forward an analytic frame around artistic experimentations, reception theories, cultural exchanges, and changes in the conditions of production, institutions, publics, and aesthetic protocols, in light of which a new insight into the motivations behind contemporary African art could be gained. None of these issues seems to bear on the interpretation of the artists' work. What it revealed instead, was not necessarily a deep love of traditional art, but a contempt for contemporary African art as a field of intellectual value. On this account, Mount had a word or two of confident generalization and condescension for African "elites" whom, he supposed, played a role in the negative deskilling of traditional art: "As a result of generations of indoctrinations the attitude of today's African 'elite' sometimes contributes to, rather than arrests, this disappearance of traditional sculpture."[19]

In other words, the elite had become contemporary, but not by choice, but by colonial indoctrination. The point that African thinkers and artists understood precisely the complex historical problems and the paradigmatic ruptures brought about by colonial modernity, and had been responding to them in the practice of art seemed far-fetched in the

conception of contemporary African art. "Mission-inspired art" was the category employed by Mount to describe the early institutionalization-cum-indoctrination of African artists as promoted by Christian mission schools and as a part of the architecture of colonial processes of conversion. Such a process of conversion, which is not untypical historically, is seen purely from the viewpoint of its destructive tendencies, which to be sure devastated canons of traditional knowledge. But at the base of the critique of mission-inspired education is the fact that the artists were trained in European methods. Here is how he explicates the point: "The earliest of Africans of this group received their earliest training at mission schools, the only education available on most of the continent, and their ideas, particularly among the older generation reflect this early Western-inspired training."[20] This is a fair point, but can hardly be used to seriously attenuate the process of artistic exchanges developed through it. Mount's encounter with the Ghanaian sculptor Kofi Antubam is revealing and complicates the argument, especially upon reading the writings of Antubam on the relationship between traditional and contemporary African art. Mount quotes one passage by Antubam extensively to make his point that educated Africans are the chief culprits in the disappearance of "traditional" art. Here is Antubam's statement as quoted by Mount:

> It will therefore be illogical for the Ghanaian in the twentieth century to be expected to go and produce the grave and ethnological museum art pieces of his ancestors. The argument that he should continue to do so because of the unfortunate influence of African traditional art on the meaningless abstractionists' modern art of Europe, is not sufficient to make him complacent. He is determined to paint, sculpt, and write using such methods as are used in older nations of the world, and basing his work on subjects selected from the meaningful and realistic aspect of his way of life. The glad thing about him is that he is well aware that in art, what is important is not the kind of medium used, but what one expressed with the medium. And what the Ghanaian expresses in art today needs not necessarily continue to be featured by disproportions and distortions which undoubtedly are the greatest quality of the sort of art expected of him by the world outside Africa.[21]

Antubam's polemical vigor expresses a key argument on the contemporaneity of African art in the broader context of global modernity. Here, he states more explicitly, the important dimension of deskilling, not as a renunciation of traditional style, but as the essence of artistic modernity, one predicated on individual expression and inspiration over collective production and canonical orthodoxy.

In fact, as early as 1920, the modernist Nigerian painter Aina Onabolu addressed similar issues concerning the place of the African artist in the context of modernism. Onabolu, who painted portraits of colonial Lagos's demimonde at the turn of the century, published a long essay titled "A Short Discourse on Art"[22] in a catalogue of an exhibition of his paintings on the eve of his maiden voyage to study art in St. Johns Wood Art School in London on May 2, 1920. Onabolu essentially used the essay to address the techniques of easel painting, but more importantly, to remind his readers and those who would view his painting exhibition, of the role of the artist as an individual in African societies in the context of modernity. To Onabolu, the painted image captured the essence of the quest for modernity, much more than so-called traditional art could. One can, of course, see that Onabolu, in deeming easel painting as superior to carved wood sculpture, had succumbed to the other false distinction between "traditional" art and modern art, namely that the latter is superior to the former. Or the reverse: it challenges the point, as stated by Fagg, that traditional art represented all that is great in African culture. Besides Onabolu's considered attempt to place himself and his work, within the debates of the historical reception of artists, the short preface to the catalogue by A. O. Delo Dosumu succinctly underlines the conflicted nature of the modern African artist as an autonomous producer on the one hand, and on the other as a social and historical agent capable of representing the modern conditions in which he is working. Dosumu writes:

> There is a peculiar interest attaching to Mr. Onabolu and his works—which would have been the same if he were a European as he is an African—the fact that he had never received any training in Art. The amount of success which has attended his efforts will on the one hand be more appreciated by everybody and on the other hand be of greater value to Africans because his genius is essentially of Africa. There is no greater medium of expression of national life and character than Art and no one but Africans can fully express her joy and sorrow, her hopes and aspirations, and her changing moods and passions. In this respect a great role awaits Mr. Onabolu—the interpretation of Africa to the outside world.[23]

Two important points are linked in Dosumu's claim for Onabolu's paintings as allegories of the modern imagination: the first is the capacity of art as an expression of national life and character. This conception of art in the making of the nation casts artists in the role of tribunes, speaking, as it were, to their society. The second is the artist as a social interpreter and, therefore, as a translator of a society's complexities to others outside the national space. But nowhere does Dosumu refer to the need for the artist's absolute fidelity to "traditional" arts, or does he suggest that the interpretation of national life be based on the continuation of canons of formal production that could be deemed ethnocentrically African. The pivotal point rested on the production of a historical consciousness in art, under the conditions of the time in which the artist was working—that is to say, the contemporary present. Thus, if the claim is that African elites had abandoned "traditional" art, then Onabolu's art—the artist being one member of that elite—would not have fitted any scheme in which the modern expression of African artists could be taken seriously. In this way the early critics of modern and contemporary African art tended to reflect on the mechanisms of reception of Western art in modern African art as though they were halves of an irreconcilable association, rather than as a dialectic between cultural traditions and artistic archives.

The philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe offers an analytical path out of the binary which splits modern and contemporary African art and "traditional" art as if they are alien to each other, by suggesting "that we consider African artworks as we do literary texts, that is as linguistic (narrative) phenomena as well as discursive circuits."[24] However, critics like Mount, with vested interest in "traditional" art, often fail to account for African artworks as part of a larger discursive circuit that includes both traditional and contemporary, except in an unfortunate devolutionary scheme. For instance, though he encounters this dialectic, he is unsure how to respond to the critique of a contemporary artist like Antubam who wants nothing to do with re-creating the ideals of "traditional" art according to Western tastes. Mount writes in puzzlement:

Furthermore, in conversations with Antubam, his suspicions of the motives for Western interest in traditional art were at times also evident. The African "elite" sometimes believe that Westerners, by their enthusiasm for the continuance of traditional art, are attempting to "keep Africans in their place," "hold them back," and perpetuate Western domination.[25]

Antubam's point is not only well placed; it also illuminates the predicament of the artist both as a producer and a thinker of forms and as an interpreter of contemporary African subjectivities. Mudimbe explores this tension in artistic subjectivity through the concept *reprendre*—which he calls a strategy of enunciation—as one approach for dealing with the composition of contemporary African artistic oeuvres. *Reprendre* relates to how African artists reflect conceptions of contemporary African art in the way they take up "an interrupted tradition, [but] not out of desire for purity;" it also suggests a more reflexive approach in terms of how the work of art is situated in "a social context transformed by colonialism and by later currents, influences, and fashions from abroad;" and, finally, it "implies a pause, a meditation, a query on the meaning of the two preceding exercises."[26] Mudimbe, in fact, alerts us to the highly self-conscious and dialectical motivations behind contemporary African artistic production. Such motivations function with a heightened awareness of dialectical limitations, but equally of discursive possibilities "to indicate broad rhythms, tendencies, and discontinuities extending from recent period of rupture that brought about new types of artistic imaginations."[27]

Here we come to the category of "Souvenir Art," namely, art made for the tourist market, and mostly patronized by Western collectors, and "New Art," which is that form of art that dares to call itself contemporary art. Each of these categories remains bound to an evolutionary

idea than they are to a more reflexive reworking of aesthetic concepts. A sophisticated thinker and historian such as Susan Vogel, in her important exhibition *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, did little to depart from the narrative of dislocated traditions. In the exhibition catalogue—in which, incidentally, Mudimbe's essay was published—Vogel recasts in more astute fashion some of the prevailing categories. However, she reinforces and offers five conceptual categories as scaffolds on which to survey twentieth-century African art. Her introductory essay, "Digesting the West," uses a sly anthropophagic turn of phrase, which also has the benefit of having a scatological connotation, for what is digested must surely be expurgated as well.

But what does the expurgated material look like? A mound of regurgitated postmodern turd? Or is it perhaps, a creolized form of contemporary art that hybridizes traditional, mission-inspired, souvenir, new, and modern arts with an outcome that is simultaneously postcolonial and postmodern? The theoretical sophistication of Vogel's interpretations notwithstanding, the categories of her frames are not satisfactory enough in addressing the complexities of the art. Hence the result of the African encounter with the West is revealed by these categories in such a way that may lead some to false binaries. As in Mount's work, "Traditional Art" appears in a devolutionary process which then moves on to "New Functional Art," "Urban Art," "International Art," and then through a swerve off the path we end with "Extinct Art."

There is something odd about the idea of digesting the West, especially if it leads us from the glory of "traditional art" to the tragedy of "extinct art." Whether Vogel was cognizant of the paradox of her extinct art category, which places contemporary African art in the grip of an unsustainable duality—between a dead past and an unsatisfactory present—she does make us aware that, far from being extinct, the old forms of art formerly connected to precolonial Africa remain mordant reminders of their heuristic legacy.[28] But are these reminders useful to the artist or are they props on which curators and scholars can maintain a critical foot on each side of a historical argument? The problem is not the incapacity of African artists to digest the West—after all, modern European artists hardly suffered conceptual constipation in their own ingestion of African art—or to relate to the African past. Might the issue be the inability of curators and historians to conceptualize and digest contemporary African art without the mediating lens of "traditional" art as a tragic consequence of deskilling?

On reflecting the conceptual and aesthetic journeys undertaken by African artists, the methodological rules governing the interpretation and reception of contemporary art has shifted. While *Africa Explores* was an exhibition of twentieth-century African art, it was nevertheless based on outmoded categories and cultural boundary-making, seeking to circumscribe the diversity of the contemporary African artistic field. Again, the field of analysis was constructed with an ethnographically predetermined border that fits the area of sub-Saharan Africa. There were no North or South African artists. Though a rich sample of contemporary art was part of the exhibition, few or a very limited number of examples earlier than the 1980s were on display. And, with the exception of the Senegalese painter Iba Ndiaye and the Mozambican Malangatana Ngwenya, an entire generation of pioneering artists—Uche Okeke and Erhabor Emokpae (Nigeria), Skunder Boghossian (Ethiopia), Ibrahim El Salahi (Sudan), Dumile Feni (South Africa), Gazbia Sirry (Egypt), Kofi Antubam (Ghana), Vincent Kofi (Ghana), Julian Motau (South Africa), Walter Battiss, Cecil Skotnes (South Africa), to name a few—from the 1950s and '60s, and working at the height of decolonization, were not included.

Also, for an exhibition covering the art of twentieth-century Africa, no prominent artists—such as Onabolu, Enwonwu, Mancoba, or Sekoto, who were active before the Second World War—were represented. These artists had developed styles of abstraction and figuration in painting and explored formal representations that dealt specifically with the African subject as a topic of modern and contemporary art. These absences revealed the extent to which the categories formulated to read African art of the twentieth century were dependent on anthropological rather than aesthetic paradigms. However, there were ample examples of what Donald Cosentino referred to in his catalogue essay as *Afrokitsch*.[29] These are objects whose artistic value lay precisely in the exaggerated appropriation of an "African" aesthetic, a sort of neo-traditional African art, cheap imitations of the "real" thing: *bêtise* is what Cosentino calls them, a term which translates from the French as "folly or sottishness."[30] *Bêtises*, he says, are "parodies that mark the extinction of a tradition. These works feed like viruses, dining off a fading host."[31] Or they reincarnate as market-bought popular objects such as colorful serial plastic dolls, which, when bought in pairs, could be magically transformed as cheap substitutes for carved *Ibeji* twin figures used in the Yoruba cult of twins.

Despite its flaws, however, *Africa Explores* and its accompanying catalogue are significant contributions to the debate on contemporary African art, providing an invaluable and rich discussion of its perceptions. On reading Vogel's account of the international dimension of the art featured in the exhibition, it was clear that many of her ideas had already been developed by the artists or by other commentators, such as Beier. This leads us back to the point at which we began, namely, how to designate and define contemporary African art. For us, categories like traditional, extinct, urban, new functionalist, or international art are of little use in dealing with the conceptual frames of contemporary African art today.

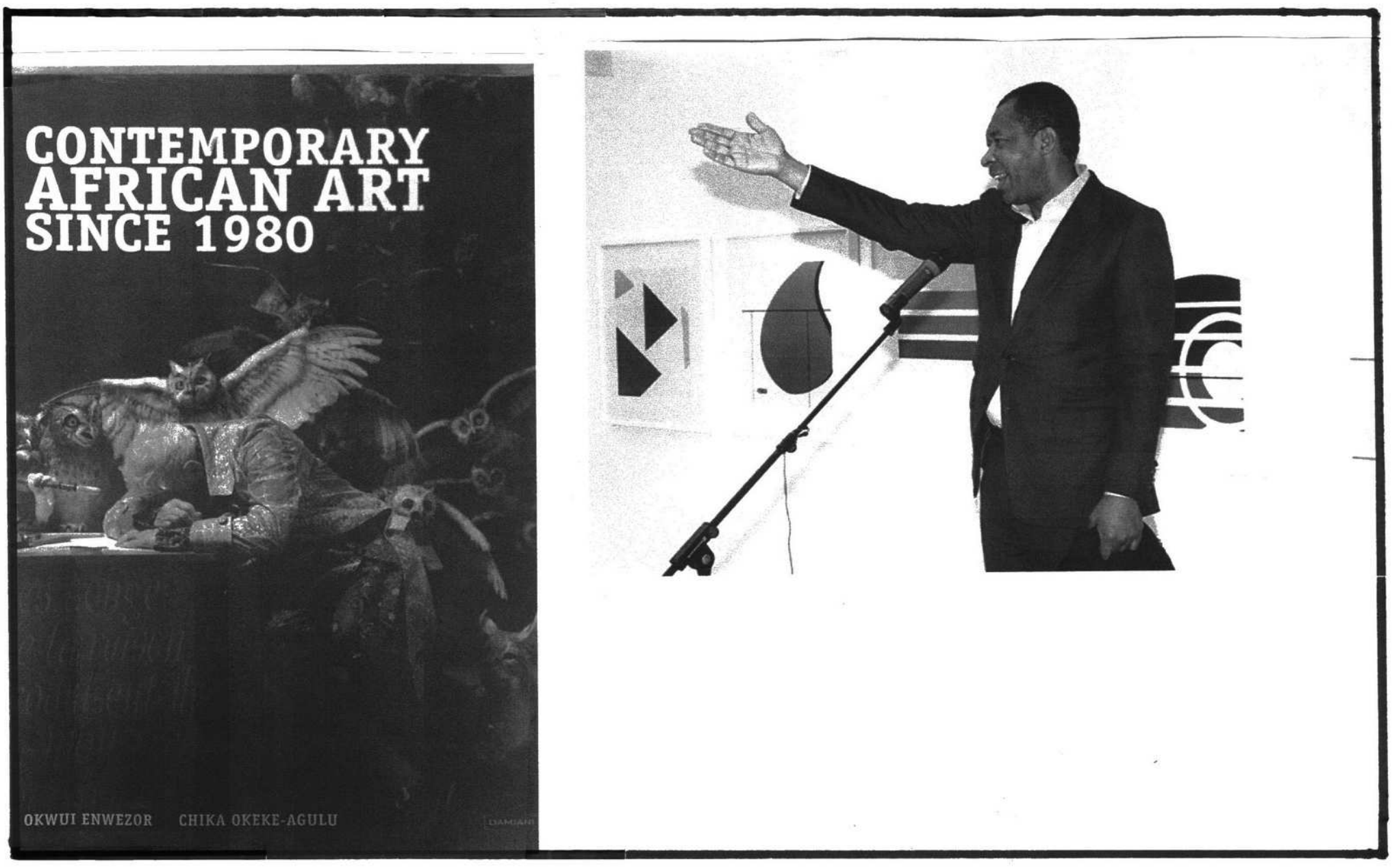
If anything, they tend to reinforce methodological and curatorial balkanization that may have made contemporary African art easy to digest, but hardly able to savor. In view of this fact, one stark point is important to note: when we address the contemporary in the course of this book, our main reference is determined by the entire epistemological architecture bequeathed by the decolonization movements between 1945 and 1980, a period when artists developed new critical languages to delineate spaces of production and theories of perception. The basic thesis we propose is that, rather than frame our assessment in ethnographic and ethnocentric terms, we attempt to map the field by attending to both the socio-political boundaries delineated by decolonization and the geopolitical spaces mapped by diasporic and transnational movements. From there, we look at the thematic and conceptual preoccupations of the art of the last three decades. Most importantly, the works presented here, and the arguments for them, are put forward as part of the broader foundation of the architecture of the global reception of contemporary art.

To recapitulate the core of our argument, we take a step back and forward at the same time. As widely used as it is today, the term "contemporary African art" remains rich in conceptual rigor and a potent discursive material in the production of art. If, in the last forty years, the debate about contemporary African art has played out in two principal arenas—in the ethnographic museum and in large temporary group exhibitions—then today the museum of art as an analytical space for the structuring of artistic discourses has been implicated in shaping our understanding of its historical significance. Recently, this question has galvanized the conceptualization of one the most significant and ambitious artistic projects of the 1990s by a contemporary African artist: the multi-part *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997–2004, p. 212, 213) by Rotterdam-based Beninois artist Meschac Gaba. Beginning in 1997, while in residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, Gaba sketched out a system of departments—in homage to Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers' installation series *Musée de l'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968–1971)[32]—of a museum that was as conceptual as it was concrete. Conceived in twelve parts—from a library to a museum shop and a restaurant; from the museum's architecture to its development and fundraising departments—Gaba's project evinced a critique not only of the museum as an institution in which cultural value is produced, but also the museum as the symbolic realm in which such value is redistributed as cultural capital. On the level of the project's formal affinity to the function of a museum, he also signaled an archaeology of the contemporary African art museum's late modernist strategy of appropriation of cultural authority by creating the means both for its existence and for its institutional radicalism. Gaba's *Museum*

of Contemporary African Art not only offers a critique of the license of the ethnographic museum, but also constructs a discursive site for the analysis of contemporary African art.

Projects such as Gaba's taxonomy of the museum and its various departments and those of Georges Adéagbo, another Beninois artist, whose sprawling installations combine carefully chosen archival material and commissioned and store-bought "neo-traditional" African art and "popular" art (sculpture and painting alike) in dizzying data-driven accumulations comprising objects, images, books, posters, and accompanied by elaborately written notations that mimic the field work of the ethnographer are interpretive vehicles for unraveling the meaning of contemporary African art. Here the ability of the ethnographic museum to wield discursive authority, and therefore the power of interpretation, has been quite significantly dented by curatorial programs overseen by the conceptual complexity of the artists' work. Preceding Adéagbo and Gaba's projects are those of the Ivorian artist, translator, linguist, and anthropologist Frédéric Bruly Bouabré with the epic *Alphabet bété* (1990–1991); *Connaissance du Monde* (1982–1994), *Antique art africain* (1982) and *Le musée du visage africain* (1991-92). Each of Bouabré's projects restages the relationship between past and future as an archive of incommensurable events in which images, texts, signs, aphorisms, and alphabets bring together the structure of orality and the inscriptive in radical entanglement. Each of these critical projects has opened new theoretical frames for the future thinking of contemporary African art as a ground of images, objects, narratives, and histories. In short, Gaba, Adéagbo, and Bouabré may well be the most astute theorizers of the condition of contemporaneity in African art.

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 102.
2. Most recent publications and doctoral dissertations have been focused on the work of post-war African modernists and modernism. See Elizabeth Ann Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004); Sylvester O. Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2008); Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Nigerian Art in the Independence Decade, 1957–1967." (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 2004); Olu Oguibe, *Uzo Egonu: An African Artist in the West* (London: Kala Press, 1997).
3. See Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, World of Art series (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).
4. For in-depth discussion on the idea of categories of time, or multi-temporality, in distinguishing historical periods, see Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2009).
5. Ibid.
6. See Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3–19.
7. See Kasfir *Contemporary African Art*, 9.
8. In the 1960s, when exhibitions of contemporary African art began to be circulated in Europe and the U.S., there was a decided tension between the work by ethnographic museums and non-ethnographic museums. Since the 1990s, the pendulum swung in the direction of art museums, therefore bringing the work of contemporary African artists to the broader attention of the art-viewing public. However, the recent development of le musée du Quai Branly in Paris may open up this debate once more.
9. See the catalogues by Evelyn S. Brown, *Africa's Contemporary Art and Artists: A Review of Creative Activities in Painting, Sculpture, Ceramics and Crafts of More than 300 Artists Working in the Modern Industrialized Society of Some of the Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1966) and by Maude Wahlman, *Contemporary African Art* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1974).
10. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "Museums and Contemporary African Art: Some Questions for Curators," *African Arts* 35, no 4 (Winter 2002): 9.
11. There are notable exceptions, such as the work of Susan Vogel at the Museum of African Art in New York in the 1990s, and Mary Nooter Roberts at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.
12. This point has been made by noted scholars over the years, though many of them are not without problems. See Ulli Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968); Frank Willett, *African Art: An Introduction* (London: Thames and Hudson, and New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 239–264; and Jean Kennedy, *New Currents, Ancient Rivers: Contemporary African Artists in Generation of Change* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).
13. Quoted in Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa*, 3.
14. Jacqueline Delange and Philip Fry, "Introduction," in *Contemporary African Art: The Catalogue of an Exhibition of Contemporary African Art held at the Camden Arts Centre, London* (London and New York: Studio International, 1969, and Africana Publishing Corporation, 1968), 5–6. This introduction was written for a small catalogue that accompanied the first major international exhibition survey of contemporary African art in Europe organized at the Camden Art Centre in 1969. The striking thing about this exhibition was its dialectical approach, covering many genres—including painting, sculpture, printmaking, and drawing. The exhibition included ninety-two artists from across the continent, from East, West, North, and Southern Africa.
15. Marshall Ward Mount, *African Art: The Years Since 1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 3.
16. By the beginning of the 1940s the Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu was exhibiting in London and the South African artist Ernest Mancoba participated in the inaugural exhibition of the avant-garde European artist group COBRA in Copenhagen.
17. Mount, *African Art*, 12.
18. For a theoretical explication of the concept of deskilling, see Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 531.
19. Mount, *African Art*, 5.
20. Ibid., 5.
21. Kofi Antubam, quoted in Mount, *African Art*, 5.
22. Aina Onabolu, "A Short Discourse on Art," in *Aina Onabolu: Exhibition Catalogue* (self-published in Lagos, Nigeria: April 27, 1920), unpaginated.
23. A. O. Delo Dosumu, "Preface" in Onabol "A Short Discourse."
24. V. Y. Mudimbe, "Reprendre: Enunciations and Strategies in Contemporary African Arts," in Susan M. Vogel, ed., *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New York: Center for African Art, and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991), 277. See also V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 154-208
25. Mount, *African Art*, 5.
26. Mudimbe, "Reprendre," 276.
27. Ibid.
28. See Vogel, *Africa Explores*, 230–239.
29. Donald J. Cosentino, "Afrokitsch," in Vogel, *Africa Explores*, 240–255.
30. Cosentino, *Afrokitsch*, 240.
31. Cosentino, *Afrokitsch*, 241.
32. See two works from Broodthaers' series in *The Museum as Muse*, an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1999; accessible online at: http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/muse/artist_pages/broodthaers_musee.html.



A DAILY LECTURE BY

MARCUS STEINWEG

52nd Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 20th August 2013
THE TRUTH OF ART
Marcus Steinweg

1. **Art and philosophy share a kind of geometrization of the incommensurable.**

2. **The assertion of form by art gives contour to formlessness.**

3. **The ghostliness of the work implies that its consistency is indebted to inconsistency.**

4. **To make chaos precise means to tear the consistency of the work from its invisibility and dissolution, to produce a visibility lacking any self-evidence and to defend it.**

5. **Therefore the appearance of the work is a continual surprise because its evidence is of the order of the non-evident.**

6. **Art exists at the moment when this appearance tears a hole in the web of facts in order to darken the evidence of instituted realities, not through obscurantism, but through clarity, through an excessive measure of evidence which blinds understanding and the senses.**

7. **The moment of this blinding which demands categories or concepts which do not lie to hand is the moment of appearance in which the work's necessity comes to shine while the subject seeks its motives.**

8. **The artwork comprises this power to disturb through clarity, to suspend the subject's certainties, "to abolish the real".**[1]

9. **There has never been an art which enters a coalition with reality.**

10. **Art is resistance against that which is, not in the name of what ought to be, but in the name of the portion of established reality that has remained nameless.**

11. **Of this portion one can say that it denotes the truth of a real texture.**

12. **In the artwork, recognized realities communicate with this resistance which denotes nothing other than its ontological fleetingness: the formlessness that resists formalization.**

14. Instead of giving room to dialectical reconciliation, it is the crossing-point of that which cannot be mediated.

15. It outlines this space of conflict which can be called the place of diaphora, zone of restlessness which develops its own rigour and precision.

16. The artwork marks this crossing of form and formlessness as it asserts a form which recognizes chaos.

17. But this recognition itself cannot be chaotic.

18. This precise indebtedness belongs to the precision of the work.

19. It takes up a problematic loan from chaos and what it expresses is nothing but this debt.

20. The artwork's autonomy is indebted to its heteronomy.

21. The recognition of heteronomy is autonomy, just as there is no sovereignty that is complete domination, but only in relation to everything which disputes and relativizes sovereign autonomy.

22. That is the sense of the *assertion ex nihilo*: the artwork does not appear from nothingness because it is without conditions, but because it articulates the infinitesimal distance from its factual conditions.[2]

23. The suspension of its reality and the transcendence of its conditionality presupposes a relation of the work to reality as the field of objective conditions.

24. This relation can be described as affirmative destruction.

25. An artwork relates to its objective reality in a necessarily destructive way.

26. It destroys the space of its reality because it lends consistency to an inconsistency which demonstrates the arbitrariness of recognized realities.

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[1] Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted", in: SubStance, Vol. 24, No. 3, Issue 78 (1995), pp. 3-28 (5).

[2] This distance makes of artistic creation an *act* in the Lacanian sense, a neither legitimate nor illegitimate, abysmal deed without reason and without justification. The act as a *creatio ex nihilo* essentially includes that it remains related to the "abyss in reality", the hole in being, i.e. to nothingness. Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Die Ethik der Psychoanalyse, Das Seminar Buch VII*, Weinheim / Berlin 1996, p. 143. Cited: Lacan, *Die Objektbeziehung, Das Seminar Buch IV*, Vienna 2003, p. 23. The "hole of being" is Sartre's formula for "nothingness". Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, London 2006, p. 103. On the relationship Sartre / Lacan cf. Andreas Cremonini, *Die Durchquerung*

Forest Houses Residents Build a Monument

By Sheila Stainback

Janet Bethea says she loves hard work, and she and 14 other Forest Houses residents certainly are doing their share. They are part of an ambitious, international event to build an interactive art exhibit – Gramsci Monument – in the middle of their Bronx development.

"I think it's going to be a beautiful thing," said Ms. Bethea, a grandmother and 30-year NYCHA resident. The Gramsci Monument, named in honor of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, is a concept that sprung from the mind of Thomas Hirschhorn, a Swiss artist who built similar monuments around the world. This will be his first one in the United States. Residents are building the exhibit, which will be in place from July through September, and will feature areas for playing and learning, as well as serve as a production site for theater and art workshops. The project is funded completely by Dia Art Foundation, including employment of the residents.

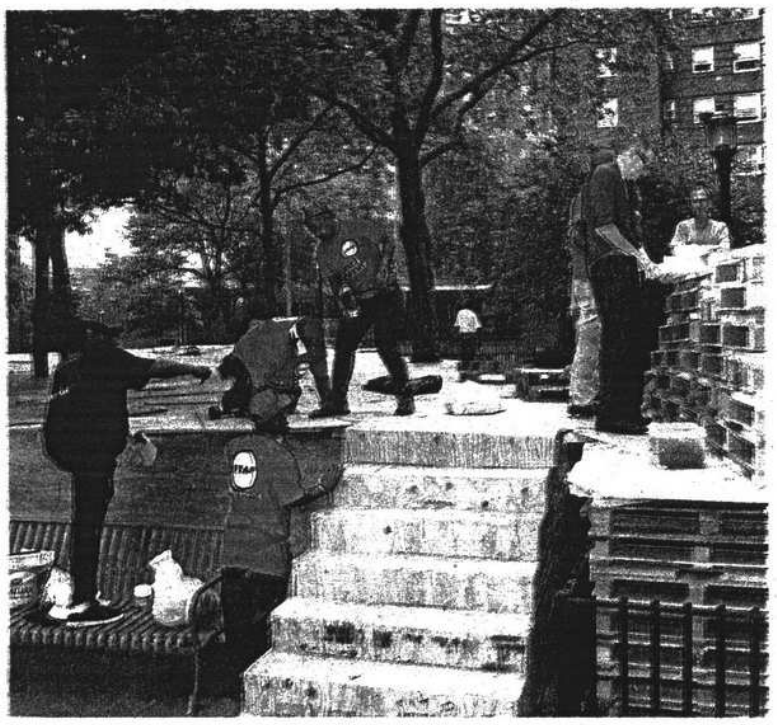
"I am excited and also very nervous because there is so much work to do," said Thomas Hirschhorn, who moved just minutes from the Monument site. Mr. Hirschhorn says his concept comes from "an understanding of art and my belief that art can transform."

More than 40 Forest Houses residents were hired to perform various duties for the exhibit, including the 15 who are building the exhibit. Once completed, the exhibit will include a bridge and a series of "houses" that will include a library, theater platform, workshop area, lounge, Internet corner and the Gramsci Bar – all which will be staffed by residents. Residents also will be part of the security team to watch over the exhibit overnight. The resident builders putting the project together will regroup in September to dismantle it.

"This has energized everyone, the community really needs this," said Eric Farmer, President of the Forest Houses Resident Association. It was Farmer's enthusiasm for Hirschhorn's concept that convinced the artist to choose the Forest Houses as the site for the summer-long exhibit.

"Right now, it's just a job for them," said Mr. Farmer. "When [Gramsci Monument] is completed, they're going to stand back and say, 'I did that!'"

Mr. Hirschhorn will detail the ongoing efforts online at **www.gramsci-monument.com**.



Forest Houses residents join Thomas Hirschhorn (in blue shirt) to build the Gramsci Monument, which will be in place all summer and feature areas for playing and learning, as well as serve as a production site for theater and art workshops.

WHAT'S

GOING ON?

FEED BACK

Los residentes del Residencial Forest Houses construyen un monumento

Por Sheila Stainback

Janet Bethea dice que le gusta el trabajo duro, y ella y otros 14 residentes del Residencial Forest Houses sin lugar a dudas están poniendo todo de su parte. Ellos son parte de un ambicioso proyecto internacional para construir una exhibición de arte interactiva —el Monumento Gramsci— en el centro de su residencial del Bronx.

"Va a ser hermoso", aseveró la Sra. Bethea, abuela y residente de NYCHA durante 30 años. El Monumento Gramsci, llamado así en honor del filósofo italiano Antonio Gramsci, es un concepto que surgió de la mente de Thomas Hirschhorn, un artista suizo que construyó monumentos similares en otras partes del mundo. Este será el primero en Estados Unidos. Los residentes están construyendo la exhibición, que tendrá lugar de julio a septiembre y contará con áreas de juego y aprendizaje, y servirá a su vez como sitio de producción para talleres de teatro y arte. El proyecto está financiado en su totalidad por Dia Art Foundation, incluso la contratación de los residentes.

"Estoy muy entusiasmado y también muy nervioso porque hay mucho trabajo por hacer", dijo Thomas Hirschhorn, que se mudó a pocos minutos del sitio donde se erigirá el monumento. Hirschhorn dice que su concepto deriva de "un entendimiento del arte y mi creencia de que el arte puede ser transformador".

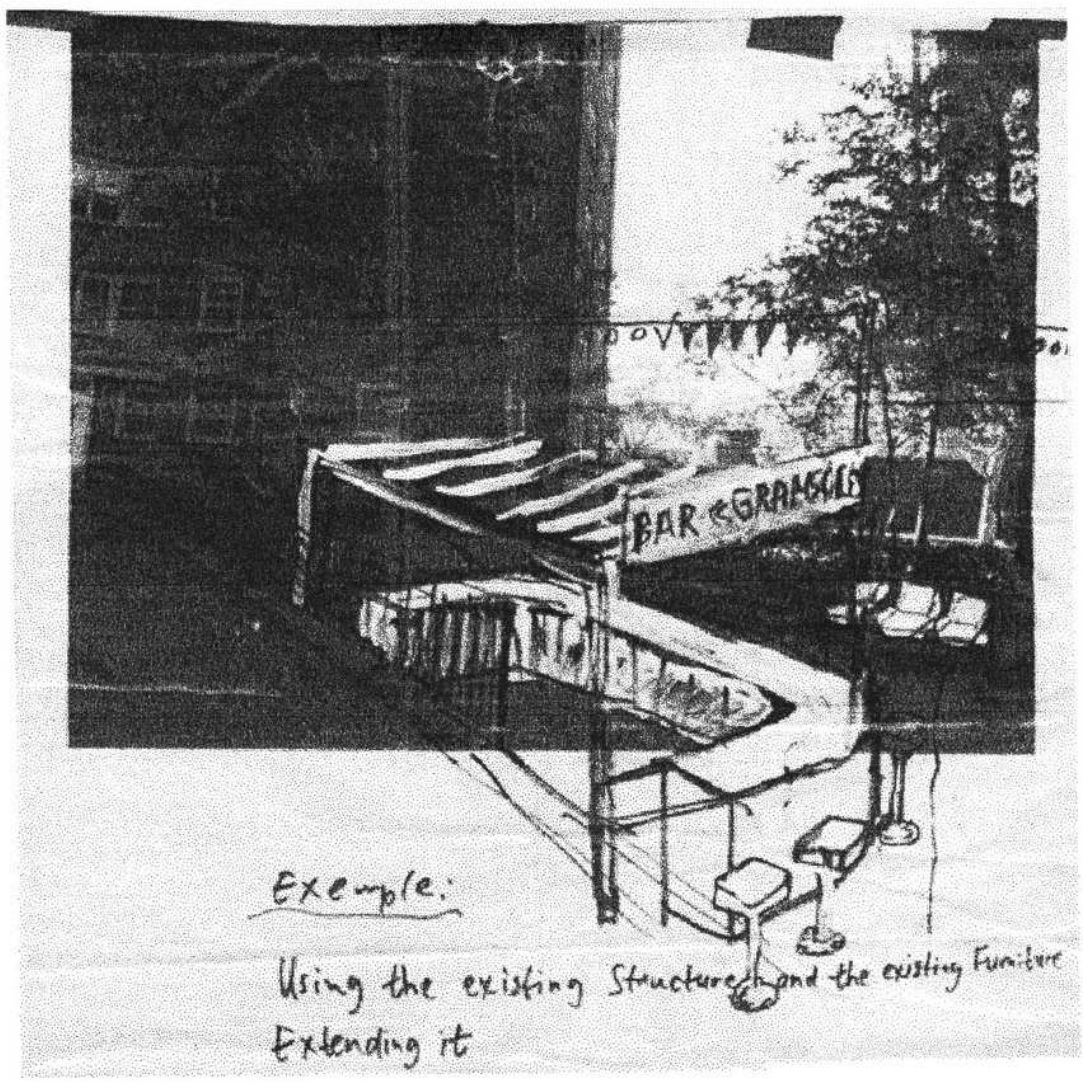
Se contrató a más de 40 residentes del Residencial Forest Houses para realizar diferentes tipos de actividades para la exhibición, incluso 15 que están a cargo de construir la exhibición. Una vez completada, la exhibición tendrá un puente y una serie de "casas" que incluirán una biblioteca, escenario de teatro, área de talleres, vestíbulo, rincón de Internet y el Bar Gramsci , todos atendidos por residentes. Los residentes también serán parte del equipo de seguridad para vigilar la exhibición las 24 horas. Los constructores residentes que están montando el proyecto se volverán a reunir en septiembre para desarmarlo.

"Esto ha sido revitalizante, la comunidad realmente lo necesitaba", dijo Eric Farmer, Presidente de la Asociación de Residentes del Residencial Forest Houses. Fue el entusiasmo de Farmer por el concepto de Hirschhorn lo que convenció al artista de elegir el Residencial Forest Houses como el sitio para la exhibición de verano.

"En este momento, es simplemente un trabajo para ellos", dijo el Sr. Farmer. "Pero cuando [el Monumento Gramsci] esté terminado lo contemplarán y podrán decir, '¡Esto lo hice yo!'"

El Sr. Hirschhorn brindará información detallada sobre las obras en curso en línea en **www.gramsci-monument.com**.

Los residentes del Residencial Forest Houses colaboran con Thomas Hirschhorn (con camisa azul) para construir el monumento Gramsci, que estará abierto al público todo el verano y contará con áreas de juego y aprendizaje, y servirá a su vez como sitio de producción para talleres de teatro y arte.



Gramsci Project(s)

by Paddy Johnson

WHAT'S GOING ON?

FEED BACK

To form an opinion about Thomas Hirschhorn's GRAMSCI MONUMENT, you only have to hear about it. In my first significant conversation about the project, a curator friend lit up as she excitedly told me Hirschhorn would host a daily lecture by philosopher Marcus Steinweg for the residents of Forest Houses, a housing project in the Bronx. Whatever the rest of the work was about, I instantly had concerns. The value of imposing scholarship on a group that would likely have few means of interpreting it seemed limited at best. After all, wouldn't such alienating lectures do more to discourage people from self-education than encourage it?

Even after I visited, that question lingered, but the monument itself, commissioned by DIA, does a good job of bringing diverse communities together. In early May, the President of the Resident Association of Forest Houses, Erik Farmer, approved the public work and residents began construction. A staff member told me that Forest Houses was the only housing project in the city to approve it.

The temporary structure (up through September 15) is basically a taped together community center that resembles a sprawling tree house. It's situated in the courtyard and includes a library, education center, stage, (dry) bar, newspaper room, and radio station, almost all of which were in use when I visited. For art's part, the stairs, couches, and shelves were covered with brown packing tape, a Hirschhorn trademark; he has famously transformed galleries with the material for years. And of course, Hirschhorn's longstanding interest in philosophy and Gramsci show up, taking the form of plaques, quotes on banners, and his frequent collaborator, the philsopher Marcus Steinweg. Even Gramsci's personal affects from prison—a hairbrush and a pair of shoes among them—are given vitrines.

I suspect the sense of ownership that comes with community construction has something to do with the general vibe of the monument; there wasn't a soul who didn't want to chat, whether or not I invited it. "I'm Stan the Man!" one friendly staff member told me, introducing himself as I walked by. He worked the bar, which was a particularly active site for conversation. A bunch of us spent a while talking about where we were from and how cheap the food they were serving was. (Three bucks for a plate of rice and fried fish is a good deal!)

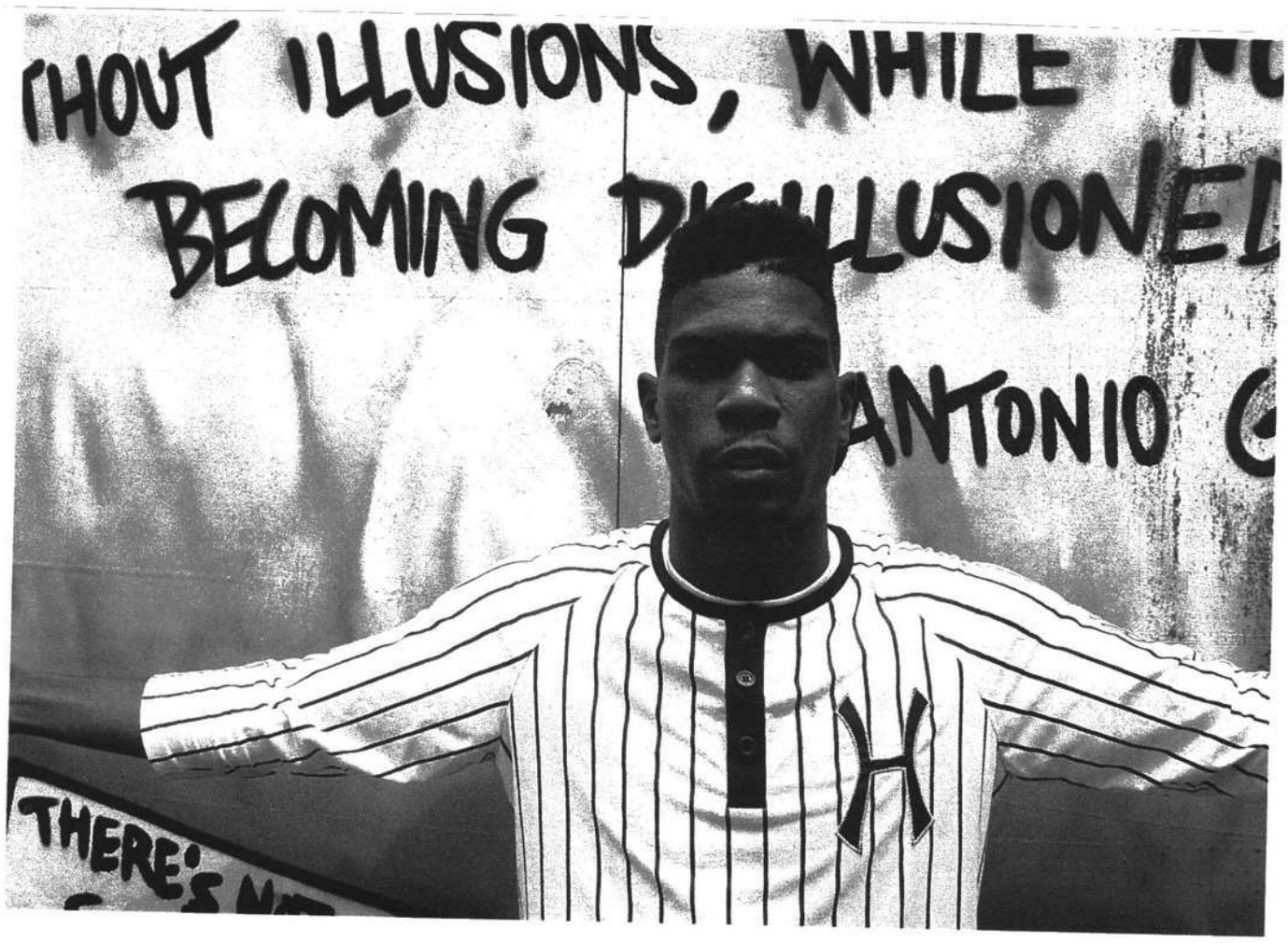
There's probably no good way to say this, but the reason I enjoyed this conversation (and countless others) was simply because I was having it. I've lived across from Lafayette Gardens in Brooklyn for 11 years, and it takes quite a bit to get the white people to talk to the black people. I harbor a reasonable amount of white liberal shame for this, so it was a relief to spend some time in a place where some of that racial tension was eased, even if the guilt isn't.

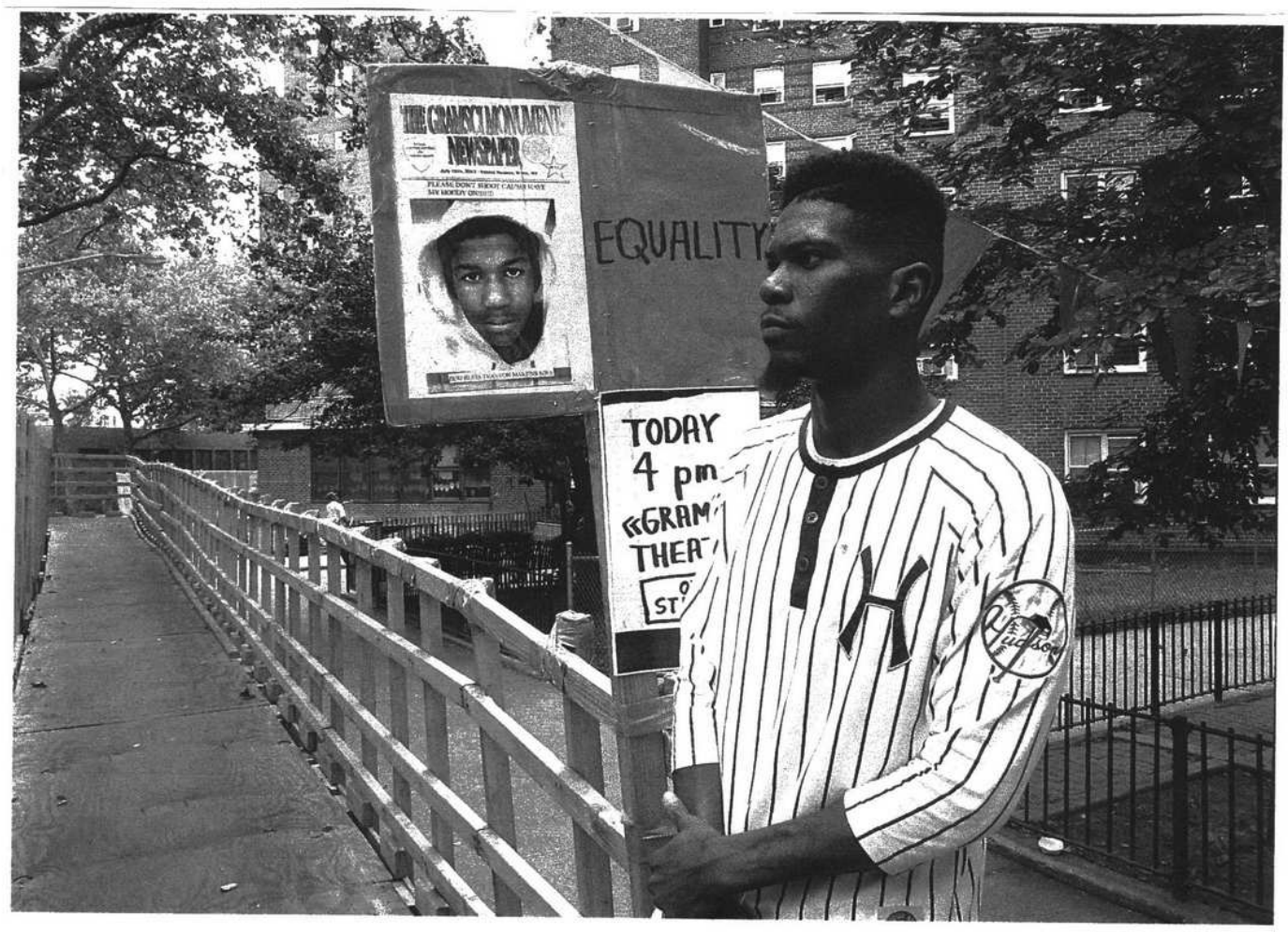
This would probably make Antonio Gramsci happy. The philosopher and onetime leader of the Italian Communist Community in the 1920s believed that while hegemony may be impossible to escape, we could foster counter-hegemonies. Anyone can improve his or her quality of life through self-organization and self-education. It's impossible to say if Hirschhorn achieved this, but there was at least more activity on the site than there was before.

Whether that has anything to with philosophy, though, is questionable. The library was empty, and a worker running a lawn mower nearby the lecture I attended made it difficult to hear Steinweg's already impenetrable talk about criticism. Hirschhorn has to know that these lectures, which take place outside and by nature aren't easily accessible, wouldn't be absorbed well by many in the audience.

Still, as I left the site, I turned back to get a last look at a hand-painted banner hung across a constructed overpass: "Destruction is difficult. It is as difficult as creation." (Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks). I assumed the quote spoke to hegemony and the difficulty it takes to dismantle it, but whatever the case, it seemed unlikely many people would interpret it that way. Mostly I thought of the quote as a reminder that come September 15, the monument will be dismantled, and the conversation will stop.

RESIDENT OF THE DAY





"A.P" AMERICAN PHAROAH

(T.N.G) TOP NOCH GENTLEMEN