

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART SINCE 1980



OKEWILL ENWEZOR · CHUKA OKEKE · AGHAJU

Preface

Contemporary African art is flourishing. Shifts in the production, distribution, institutions, and publics of contemporary art have contributed to its expansion into the networks of global artistic practice. As a consequence, it is now playing a significant role in revising the outmoded models of discursive control, whereby a limited number of centers enjoyed disproportionate power in determining and shaping the contours of advanced artistic debates. Today the mechanisms and the geography of contemporary art are global. This marks a radically new condition for the reception of art. The development of contemporary African art over this period has been part of this transformation, and in some measure has contributed to shaping the complex artistic landscape to which it belongs. This has engendered new debates about its critical disposition within the broader global landscape and the role of African artists in the expanded artistic networks of transnational production. Like its audiences, the critical discourses of contemporary African art have also been part of recent attempts to recast the theoretical and historical arguments pertaining to contemporary art in general. From exhibitions to publications, museum collections to university art departments, curatorial methodologies to academic research, attention has been focused on the work of contemporary African artists, thereby enlarging their transnational and global links. These moments of reassessment and vigorous engagement have been crucial to the historical understanding of the canons of art in the twenty-first century.

It is now commonplace to find the work of African artists featured in the evolving discussions of contemporary art worldwide, especially in the context of globalization. In addition, several significant exhibitions such as *Africa Remix*¹ (Museum Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*² (Museum Villa Stuck, Munich), *Africa Hoy* (Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderna, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1991), *Seven Stories About Modern African Art* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1995), *Looking Both Ways: Art of Contemporary African Diaspora* (Museum of African Art, New York, 2004), *Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* (Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, 2003), *Flow* (Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2008)—have played important roles in brokering the expansion of the knowledge of the field. One downside to this proliferation of interest, however, is that almost all of these exhibitions have occurred primarily in Europe and the United States. Nonetheless, contemporary art events in Africa—such as Dak'Art Biennial, Cairo Biennial, Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine Biennial, Johannesburg Biennial, CICIBA: Bantu Biennial, Luanda Triennial, and Cape Africa—have become important zones of convergence for artistic production and sites of critical debates on the status of contemporary African art.

More recently, the efforts of a new generation of curators and artists—such as Bisi Silva in Lagos, Bassam El Baroni and Mona Marzouk in Alexandria, Maha Maamoun in Cairo, Abdellah Karroum in Rabat, Meskrem Assegued in Addis Ababa, Koyo Kouoh in Dakar, Fernando Alvim in Luanda, Yto Barrada in Tangier, Gabi Ngcobo in Cape Town and many others across the continent—have yielded new independent artistic structures, thereby producing another layer of public dissemination and mechanisms for the development of curatorial practice and artistic production. What has evolved from these new efforts are spaces such as the Center for Contemporary Art, Lagos; Zoma Contemporary Art Center, Addis Ababa; Town House Gallery and Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo; Appartement 22, Rabat; CAPE Africa, Cape Town; Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum, Alexandria; Cinémathèque de Tanger, Tangiers; and Guguletive in Cape Town. In

the context of the art market, the launch of the Johannesburg Art Fair and an emergent network of galleries, together with auction houses focusing on the work of African artists, signal a growing confidence in the development of contemporary art in Africa.

Significantly, the last few years have also witnessed a shift from comprehensive group exhibitions to an increasing recognition of African artists' individual accomplishments by way of large monographic surveys mounted in major museums around the world. These include surveys of the work of South African artist William Kentridge at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. A mid-career retrospective of Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, MBE, has toured internationally, from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, to the Brooklyn Museum, New York; American-Nigerian painter Kehinde Wiley's *The World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar* was recently presented at The Studio Museum in Harlem. A major retrospective of the sculptures of Ghanaian artist El Anatsui is planned to open at Museum for African Art, New York, and the National Museum for African Art, Washington, D.C.; while a mid-career survey of the Nigerian-British painter Chris Ofili will open at Tate Britain, London; and Beninois artist Meschac Gaba at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel. Contemporary African artists have been featured regularly in major international biennials in Venice, Istanbul, Havana, Gwangju, Sydney, São Paulo, but also at Documenta and in art fairs, among many such venues.

This expansion of the visibility of contemporary African art across every segment of global artistic networks presents the occasion for critical reflection that goes beyond the celebration of the successes of these artists. Rather, such an occasion leads us to explore the mechanisms of the diverse forms of mediation and diffusion of the work of contemporary African artists. *Contemporary African Art since 1980* therefore seeks to address not only the boundaries of the art in question, but also the socio-cultural-political-historical issues that surround the development of the field. However, we must caution the reader that this is by no means designed as a standard art-historical account. Instead, we propose a series of arguments grounded around complex issues of periodization, definition, identification, and thematization that have emerged in the course of the period covered in the book.

We pursue a line of inquiry that seeks to map out certain phases of the discourse. This analysis is shaped by the postcolonial turn of the 1960s, but extends beyond it to encompass the decade of crisis of the 1980s, the mass migration of the '90s, and the globalization of the present era. The book is divided into three sections with seven chapters. Part one comprises three chapters and deals broadly with definitions, periodizations, networks, politics, institutions, and frames of reference of contemporary African art. In part two of the book, four chapters focus on the exploration of strategies, theories, and themes in contemporary Africa art. These chapters address such issues as the function of political critique; the role of the archive, documentary, and mnemonic systems in the structures of artistic practice; the confluence of abstraction and figuration as motors for a new subjectivity in aesthetic concepts; and, finally, artists' responses to biopolitical paradigms as related to ideas about the body, gender, and sexuality. In the third part of the book we provide an extensive compilation that organizes pertinent information relevant to contemporary African art, such as events, movements, and institutions; and a detailed bibliography that, we hope, will help readers to construct their own research into this expanding and expansive field. A note about the works and images:

while the seven chapters are divided according to a thematic plan, the sequence of images is organized chronologically, although subdivided into three blocks covering each decade in the past thirty years.

When we first set out to work on this book, we never realized how difficult it would be to track down many of the images and artists, but we were equally amazed and gratified by the depth and richness of what became increasingly obvious: namely the important creative force of African artists, many of whom have labored in obscurity and outside the spotlight, but have nevertheless continued to produce important work. The evidence of their imagination is all too apparent across the pages of this book.

A book of this nature would not be possible without the kindness, support, friendship, and collegiality of many people who, from the onset of this project, have helped and accommodated us beyond what we thought possible. There is not enough room to extend our gratitude to everyone who has been instrumental to the finalization of the book, so we apologize in advance if we have omitted any names. First we want to thank the publisher of Damiani Editore, Andrea Albertini, for inviting us to write this book and for granting us complete autonomy in shaping its content. During the years of this book's planning—between teaching, curating, writing, and domestic obligations—Andrea was a model of patience and understanding. Without his forbearance and encouragement, the book might not have seen the bright light of the sun. We also thank the entire team at Damiani, especially our editorial liaison Enrico Costanza and his predecessor Marcella Manni, Eleonora

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Finally, we want to dedicate this book to three of the most demanding critics and delightful enthusiasts of what we do every day, our three beautiful children: Arinzechukwu and Ngozichukwu Okeke-Agulu and Uchenna Soraya Enwezor.

— Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu

1. *Africa Remix* was organized by Cameroonian-Swiss curator Simon Njami. The exhibition, which first opened in Museum Kunstpalast in Dusseldorf, Germany, in 2004, subsequently toured to venues

in Paris, London, Tokyo, Stockholm, and Johannesburg.

2. *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* was organized by

the authors along with Mark Nash, Lauri Firstenberg, and Rory Bester. A more encompassing show than *Africa Remix*, it addressed a broader historical frame and was more an exhibition of modern and

contemporary art as it was a survey of cultural history. It toured to various institutions, beginning 2001 in Munich, and proceeded to Berlin, Chicago, and New York.

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 Atlântico 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, Malmö; *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* (1995), by Yukio 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 Laure 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 País: Escalas Africanas* (1994), by Simon Njami and Joëlle Busca at Centro Atlântico 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,

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, idiosyncrasies, 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, Ouatara Watts, William Kentridge, Chris Ofili, David Adjaye, Nnenna Okore, Moataz Nasr, Odili Donald Odita, Meschac Gaba, Tracey Rose, Marcia Kure, Marlène 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 art² 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 play 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 arrest 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 projects¹¹—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, Zolelethu 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 Essomba 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 Bamgbose'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 plenitude 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 Romuald 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 inmoored 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 jumbling, 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 Eweca 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 obligations 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 Lil 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. Ogbemie, *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 deskillling, 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 Onabolu "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.

Chapter 2

Frames of Reference: Between Postcolonial Utopia and Postcolonial Realism

In the preceding chapter, we emphasized the historical debates surrounding contemporary African art and artists' critical responses to those debates. We also took up the question of the relationship of contemporary to traditional African art, and how the dialogue with past African traditions could be understood as inhibiting reflections on the complexity of the artistic production that evolved out of the dialectical encounter with Western modernism, especially as it occurred in the twentieth century.

In this chapter, we take up the concept of contemporary African art in its response to cultural and political agendas, shaped not by an encounter with a traditional past, but with the postcolonial present under the conditions of the crisis of subject and the crisis of subjectivity. To the extent that the post-colony can be distinguished from ex-colonies, the postcolonial situation today can be analyzed by uniting the historical experiences of the colonized and colonizer in the new global dissolution of absolute centers and peripheries. For contemporary African art, this dissolution of the boundaries between former empires and former colonies has been an important animating factor, creating vectors that not only lay bare the complexity of geography but also expose the fault lines of nationality and the yet-to-be-fully-redeemed promise of global affiliation.¹

The postcolonial situation of the independence period, whereby multiple voices and narratives emerged to define new African subjectivities brought about by decolonization, represented a fundamental departure—both theoretically and historically—from the apparatus of institutionalized art history within which earlier writings on contemporary African art were elaborated. Postcolonialism provides a horizon of theoretical contemplation, because it illuminates some of the liveliest disputes about the state of contemporary African societies. It describes a dynamic landscape in which the questioning of power, canons, sovereignty, agency, nationality, subjectivity, and ideology organized the critical core of postcolonial Africa. Like the term "contemporary," the postcolonial is a traveling, polysemic term encompassing diverse historical experiences, traditions, and archives. In Africa, the period before 1980 represents a moment in which the attempt at cohesion engendered by decolonization produced many new schools of thought on how to be free, African, and modern—and with that, the desire to construct, as it were, forms of national culture.

This period, spanning the postwar decades through the 1960s and before the onset of austerity measures at the end of the 1970s, represented a time of great experimentation with the idea of national culture, nation state, citizenship, civil society, social models, and political institutions.² We tend to think of this era as the moment when attributes linked to postcolonial utopia were most visible, when the arts were flourishing, and when artists and writers were inaugurating new ideas and narratives. In the wake of independence, new claims to Africanness and authenticity were built through the search for a usable past. Contemporary artists, like earlier modernist precursors, articulated the postcolonial situation through manifestos, exhibitions, and criticism. Sometimes they reorganized the curriculum of art studies by emphasizing the decolonization of aesthetic knowledge.

Uche Okeke, who—as an art student at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) in the late 1950s, and as a founding member of a radical student group, Art Society³—articulated one of the earliest points of decolonized aesthetic in the manifesto *Natural Synthesis*,⁴ sought not the outright erasure of Western esthetic but an accommodation to it, by making research into local forms a crucial part of art education. In the early 1970s, when he was

appointed the head of the art department at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, he finally had the opportunity to institutionalize his progressive ideas of a postcolonial aesthetic into a powerful artistic movement called *Uli*, a movement that blossomed in the 1980s as one of the most imitated artistic forms in Nigeria. *Uli* is a mural- and body-painting tradition mostly practiced by Igbo women in Southeastern Nigeria. Typical *Uli* patterns deploy abstract, ideographic painting styles, applied directly on adobe walls of shrines, houses, and bodies as decoration. This "traditional" form of abstraction evoked for Okeke and many other artists a ready-made aesthetic reference that expanded and enriched the canon of abstract forms that could more easily be read as modernist in the Western sense, one which they had developed in their academic training in art schools. Soon, however, their work evolved from its flat, two-dimensional horizontality to three-dimensional sculpture and low-relief wood carving. The experiment with *Uli* influenced the development of other "traditional" painting references in Nigeria, such *Onaism*, a style related to Yoruba mural painting. These experiments in formal artistic processes showed the degree to which postcolonial aesthetic reconsiderations were steeped in research conceived in the realm of direct experience of classical formal styles and their subsequent transformation into experimental artistic forms.

In the 1980s a group of artists (including Obiora Udechukwu and El Anatsui, two influential professors in the art school at Nsukka) organized AKA Circle of Artists, which promoted this sensibility in annual exhibitions. Similar groups and corresponding critical writing devoted to these activities were developed elsewhere. In 1964, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa, and Mohamed Melehi introduced a systematic restructuring of the curriculum of Ecole des Beaux Arts in Casablanca in favor of artistic research into Islamic calligraphy and Berber arts and crafts. The so-called Crystallist movement in Sudan developed its own view of modernism as a confluence of Western modernist aesthetic and pan-Arabic secular thought. In Senegal, l'Ecole de Dakar was developed along the lines of Negritude.⁵ It became not only the leading art school, but in blending cultural ideology and state patronage it also took on the role of an aesthetic vehicle, ushering in its own orthodoxy of artistic practice that would later be challenged by members of Laboratoire Agit-Art.⁶

Cultural, political, economic, social, artistic, and literary theories and perspectives on national culture produced lively debates and counter discourses. In a memorable response to the theory of Negritude which, since the early 1930s—first in Europe and later in Africa and the Caribbean—had constructed a formidable discourse on the uses of an African past, the young Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka rejected what he thought was an essentialist predisposition towards race in an infamous quip at the 1962 African Writers Conference: "the tiger does not boast about his tigritude." To which Senghor disarmingly replied that "the tiger does not talk."⁷ Each of these discourses was staged at the intersection of cultural traditions and archives, and each was replete with a utopian sensibility directed at realizing Africa-centered solutions to African issues. For younger thinkers, however, emphasis on a racial past was an impediment to the theorization of the contemporary, because the early years of independence and decolonization had produced a set of conditions for critique, and for the conceptualization of new African subjectivities and systems of representation.

In delineating the situation of the early independence years as manifesting a utopian moment, we do not mean to suggest that artists and cultural producers of that period were necessarily too idealistic or naïve. Instead, we recognize the extent to which cultural production was in convergence with pressing tasks, such as projects of social and

political identification, and with the policies and ideologies of nation-building and modernization. Naturally, modes of subjectivization in literature and art which argued, for instance (as was the case in the Kampala conference in 1962), for an African aesthetic in the genres of visual art, theater, and the novel—by such artists as Okot p'Bitek, Uche Okeke, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o—were based on calls for the constitution of contemporary African literary and artistic forms from specific national cultural archives. Ngugi, then a young novelist who was politicized by the bitter struggle against the British during the Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) uprising in Kenya between 1951 and 1959, participated in abolishing the English department at the University of Nairobi in 1966. Experimental theater included Duro Ladipo's "Yoruba Operas," the establishment of the Mbari Artists and Writers Club, Ibadan, and the Chemchemi Creative Art Center, Nairobi, among a host of other activities in the 1960s.

If it was clear that the utopian processes of the '60s had run their course by the end of that decade, the '70s and '80s manifested increasing skepticism toward the manipulation of the sentiments and symbols of decolonization. The dire situation in which African societies found themselves was beginning to unveil a new sense of realism, not only in the subjects, but also in the images and forms emerging in works of art, revealing situations generated by the austerity measures that had transformed the postcolonial economy into a state of profound crisis. But this situation did not sprout overnight. As early as 1965, even as decolonization imbued Africans with a sense of optimism, trenchant critical observers—especially artists, writers, and filmmakers—were foregrounding the disenchantment with the utopian illusions of the postcolony. In the novels of African writers, for example, an incipient skepticism toward the direction in which independent African countries were headed produced sober works like Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1965), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), Yambo Ouologuem's, *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968), and Wole Soyinka's memoir, *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972). In cinema, Ousmane Sembene's film *Xala* (1975) and Djibril Mambety Diop's seminal counter-cultural film *Touki Bouki* (1973) offered images that stood in contrast to the ostentatious power of the ruling class. These critiques of the power and corruption of African elites presented early moments of an emerging realism in representation, in the films of Youssef Chahine, in the political theater of Athol Fugard, in the music of Fela Anikulakpo Kuti, and in the paintings of Obiora Udechukwu.

Structural Adjustment, Austerity, and the Politics of Aid and Dependency

Before discussing the effects of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)⁸ policies on African institutional and artistic networks, it is necessary to lay down a few signposts in the transformation of contemporary African art over the past five decades. We have already noted the phase of decolonization in the 1960s with experiments in new African identities and the critique of colonialism. By the late 1970s, many independent African countries were approaching their third decade of sovereignty. However, as the saying goes, the bloom was off the rose, as the fast pace of modernization and nation-building schemes were beginning to slow with declining economic growth, stalled political reforms, and erosion of governance. The initial stage of stagnation was making its first visible appearance among the network of institutions. This was soon followed in the 1980s by the neoliberal economic policies of Structural Adjustment Programs that further weakened structures of economic and cultural activity. The 1990s, marked by the end of the Cold War between Eastern and Western powers, was a decade of large-scale migration among artists, intellectuals, and writers. Finally, the rise of globalization and the appearance of new transnational and diasporic African spaces outside the continent ushered in the new millennium.

The narrative we have set forth follows these trajectories by focusing on artistic experimentations of the new postcolonial realism of the 1980s, and shifts in increments to the globalization and transnationalism of contemporary African art in recent years. By the mid 1980s, many Af-

ican economies saddled with enormous foreign debt were running negative growth rates. These swelling deficits further increased indebtedness, which, in turn, led to an even greater dependency on foreign aid. These structural changes metastasized into a full-blown crisis furthered by the debacle of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) instituted across the continent by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1983. In this era of austerity and SAPs, contemporary African artists were faced with great institutional instability, the erosion of cultural networks, lack of access to markets, political repression, and censorship. Economic collapse coupled with weakened social regimes created a fluid historical context and instability within artistic communities.

The SAPs play an important role in the rationale for beginning this survey in 1980. Beyond our own individual experiences growing up in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s and witnessing first-hand both the euphoria of the oil boom of the 1970s and the deflation and collapse of the Nigerian economy—which brought General Buhari to power, and General Babangida after him, and the murderous Abacha regime after that—1980 revealed a forceful realism in visual art. In the economic realm, and for survival itself, Africans were evolving a strategy of make-do, putting-together, building a network of *Tokunbo* markets for second-hand goods imported from the West, because it was clear to many that Africa had entered an era of protracted and painful stagnation. In a single decade, across every socio-economic index, Africa was faltering. Per capita output fell precipitously, life-expectancy averages declined as well, and infant mortality rose. These staggering occurrences and the statistics that accompany them delimit a distinct caesura that reveals a line between two competing visions of the African situation after independence. This period was a watershed moment that colored the circumstances in which art and intellectual production occurred, and tested the allegiances of artists and intellectuals in the maintenance of a robust African public and civic sphere.

As Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman described it, this collapse was not just the crisis of the state, but also the crisis of the subject; and of subjectivity itself.⁹ Writing in the 1990s on the state of events in the wake of SAPs—a situation which gave great impetus to the traumatic deracination of social well-being—Mbembe and Roitman elucidated a process of collapse that was, as they put it, defined by the acute economic depression, the chain of upheavals and tribulations, instabilities, fluctuations and ruptures of all sorts (wars, genocide, large-scale movements of populations, sudden devaluations of currencies, natural catastrophes, brutal collapse of prices, breaches in provisioning, diverse forms of exaction, coercion, and constraint) that make up the fundamental experiences of African societies over the last several years.¹⁰

With limited resources, many countries became susceptible to violent changes of government and civil conflict. This gave rise to a sense of precariousness, instability, and impoverishment. It is an understatement to refer to SAPs as merely disastrous. They were catastrophic and traumatic.

SAPs were world-changing on many levels. Within a decade of its introduction, and as the acronym SAP ironically suggests, entire national economies were hollowed out, their life drained from them. SAPs further contributed to the stagnation of African economies, exacerbating already fragile situations. Their widespread adoption, seemingly overnight, negated many of the advances made by postcolonial national states after independence. In *Planet of Slums*, urban theorist Mike Davis echoes Mbembe and Roitman's point, writing:

Urban Africa and Latin America were the hardest hit by the artificial depression engineered by the IMF and the White House—indeed, in many countries the economic impact of SAPs during the 1980s, in tandem with protracted drought, rising oil prices, soaring interest rates, and falling commodity prices was more severe and long lasting than the great depression.¹¹

SAPs also made governance from above untenable and agitation from below endemic. The illegitimacy of the rule of "big men"—autocrats and plutocrats—who choked cultural and political expression, forced artists to devote more attention to fashioning serious critiques of the depredations and abuses of power that were happening internally. The target

was the corrupt postcolonial state apparatus and its neoliberal Western-backed sponsors. Works by artists such as Obiora Udechukwu's *Tycoon and Stevedores* (1980) and *Exile Train* (1980), Tayo Adenaike's *Faces in the Streets* (1982), Ibrahim El Salahi's *The Inevitable* (1984), Iba Ndiaye's *Le vautour* (1985), Rachid Koraichi's *A Nation in Exile* (1981), and Cheri Samba's *La Bourgeoisie* (1981) all reflected the explicit critique of deformed African political rule. Along the same route, out of the severe political repressions in apartheid South Africa, artists challenged the state's attempt to silence its critics. Paul Stopforth's graphite drawings, such as *The Interrogation Room, I-V* (1983), and *Elegy (For Steve Biko)* (1981), Jane Alexander's sculpture *Butcher Boys* (1985–86), Penny Siopis's *Patience on a Monument* (1987), among many artistic works, explored new avenues of social and political critique.

It is against this backdrop that *Contemporary African Art since 1980* was formulated. Most accounts of the contemporary art of Africa have virtually nothing to say about this period and how it produced a different perception of the critical urgency that suffused artistic practice or their relation to other artistic traditions around the world. Throughout the 1980s, corollary developments in the field of contemporary art, analogous to the situation in Africa, were also taking place in China, South Korea, Chile, the Soviet Union, and throughout Eastern Europe. However, these links are rarely made in the explication of contemporary African art. Or even how African artists view the work of their peers or rework inherited artistic protocols within the field of historical transition. As the great transformations of twentieth-century modernity swept away large social structures on which the cultural values of many African societies had depended, it was clear that the arts of Africa were equally pulled into the contingent historical transformations that were remaking the aesthetic paradigms of the arts on a global scale.

The stories of change and transition, utopia and realism, colonialism and postcolonialism, neocolonialism and neoliberalism, migration and globalization, which we have laid out in preceding pages, constitute elements of a micro-narrative of contemporary cultural production in Africa. However, this book is not simply a narrative history of contemporary African art. Rather it is a retrospective and prospectus of works and ideas of contemporary art produced in a period of fervent enunciation of the precarious state of African societies and it examines how the artists whose work is featured in this volume wrestled with the changing states of culture and society. We want to avoid sweeping generalizations about contemporary African art, while at the same time recounting the many diverse occasions and events—like those already outlined—in which these artists produced their works.

At this juncture it is important to reiterate how the arts interpolated the changes that realigned the political, cultural, social, and economic orders, as well as the organizational structures and institutions of African societies, during the era of colonial modernity (between 1885 and 1945), and postcolonial modernity (between 1945 and the present). By now it is fairly well established that contemporary African art has always been enmeshed in structures of colonial mediation—the museum, the academy, the art market—and reflected in its disciplines—anthropology, ethnography, art history—that attempt to theorize and historicize contemporary African art also engages with vestiges of resistance to those structures. To the extent that our understanding of Africa today is mediated by the discourses and conditions of colonial modernity, it needs underlining that postcolonialism as given us a radically different view of Africa. The question we ask here is how the resistance to the structures of colonial mediation addresses the situation of African art and its artists.

Art Without Artists?

E. H. Gombrich famously began his seminal book *The Story of Art*, which was first published in 1950, with the statement: "There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists."¹² The striking idea behind these two sentences, and their startling brevity, was to make a simple point: that there can be no art without artists. Gombrich's statement reflects a key aporia when applied to the early Western museological and

art-historical conception of precolonial African art as an art without individual authors, but rather one composed by a mass of authors, known as the tribe, to whom authorship is ascribed. In this way, precolonial African art under the lens of colonial interpretation was the carrier of a collective unconscious, as the intercessor between tribe and ancestors. The diminution of authorship gave us the category of tribal art, for it was hardly perceived as art in the sense meant by Gombrich. Curiously, Gombrich never mentioned the name of a single artist who worked in Africa among "the wealth of names, periods, and styles"¹³ to which his magnum opus was devoted. To be sure, Carl Einstein in his book on African sculpture, *Negerplastik* (1915), was prescient in theoretically framing the conceptual and formal significance of African art and wrote a serious consideration of African sculptures as art rather than as ethnographic objects. However, he too ascribed no author to any of the sculptures he wrote about. In 1935, Alfred H. Barr and James Johnson Sweeney organized the landmark exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, making it one of the earliest known exhibitions of African art in a modern art museum, and the fourth in the United States after an earlier exhibition in 1923 at the Brooklyn Museum, and two others in 1926 and 1928 at the Newark Museum. Again, the evidence shows no African artists mentioned by name in attributing any of the works. There is no record to show that Einstein or his contemporaries were ever discursively interested in African artists as such. Nor is there any evidence of interest in modern African artists who were working at that time either in Europe or in the various European colonies.

What was always noted in these accounts, however, was the insuperable power of African art, albeit a power without authors. While the centrality of African art was pivotal to the conceptual transformation of European avant-garde art in early twentieth century, living African artists of the period—be they modern easel painters like Onabolu, or sculptors such as Bamgboye of Odo-Owa working in seemingly pre-colonial African styles—were never considered as part of the evolving debates on the nature of modern art or as contemporaries of their European peers. The work of artists like Bamgboye could only feature in the discourse of the structural relationship to modernism, rather than in its deeper discursive affinities. Only objects of African art were accorded historical visibility, even though a great number of the works commonly referred to as tribal were, in reality, contemporaneous to the work of modern Western artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, given the dates of a great number of so-called "tribal" art—many were made in the same decades in which modernist art was made—their nameless creators were undoubtedly contemporaries of modern avant-garde artists.

As Terry Smith persuasively argues in what he calls "conditions of contemporaneity,"¹⁴ if we think of something as contemporary in relation to its time, and not in terms of its belonging to an approved period style, then the focus on African objects as tribal, and the elimination of the African artist in the consideration of what makes an object a work of art, produced a clear historicist fallacy about the conditions of African artistic production in the narrative of colonial modernity. And if we follow Gombrich's reasoning, then there can be no African art if we eliminate the category of African artist from the equation by the very fact that it was produced as part of a tribal community rather than as part of the work of accomplished individual artists. This certainly would add great fillip to the entire apparatus of ethnographic practice. To be fair, a mass of authors, understood as one collective whole, does not in itself mean the complete absence of individual artists. It means simply that the normal tradition of authorial attribution in art, the intrinsic value of the signature, was discarded. But is the signature essential for any art to exist?

This is an old argument. However, the absence of artistic authorship accorded to African objects, as was the case in the 1984 exhibition "*Primitivism*" in 20th Century Art¹⁵ at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, created an important debate in the months following its opening.¹⁶ In that exhibition, African art objects existed completely outside of historical time, while Western avant-garde artists sat framed in the light-washed circle of the historical present. Because African art was considered as being located not in the present but in the past, there were

no contemporary African artists from the same era covered by the exhibition. In other words, there were no African contemporaries of Western modern artists; that is to say, the two groups did not occupy the same historical time.¹⁷

The absence of artists as authors of new ideas and conceptions of African art bears on our immediate reflection on the postcolonial turn in African art. And this postcolonial turn reflects another idea of postcolonial realism, in the sense of the self-reflexive explorations by African artists on contemporary conditions. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the question of the place of the African artist in the map of modernity represented an important preoccupation with an agenda for reform in the perception of modern African subjectivity. A major aspect of that agenda centered on issues of identity and authenticity in the conception of an African aesthetic. The Festival of World Negro Art and Culture, the Negritude-themed mega-festival organized in Dakar in 1966 under the patronage of its chief theorist, the then-President of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor (a Catholic in a predominantly Muslim country), was indeed a culmination of the cultural affirmation of black African identity and its authenticities. In the United States, the Black Power movement under postcolonial liberationist ethos made the African-American singer James Brown's "I'm black and I'm proud" an anthem of the 1960s.

These issues go beyond formal questions of art and into the conceptualization of African artistic subjectivity. However, they are productive to the theorization of the horizon of contemporary African art, first in relation to colonial modernity, then to more recent art. One historical problem of modern African art is the way it can be said to inhabit two types of inauthenticity: first, on account of its deviation from traditional African art; and second, in its failure to be modern in relation to Western modern art. This presents a temporal and historical gap. Yet it is a surprisingly fortuitous quandary, as it enables us to analyze, with greater precision, the constitution of the contemporary. Let us explain: in trying to determine how modern African art fits into the map of modernity, what we discovered was that, because it valorized the idea of art qua the artist and veered off the path of a traditional art that was located in a past canon of recognizable tribal styles, ethnographic thought accused it of existing out of the historical time of precolonial Africa in which the tribe was supposedly central over the idea of individual agency. Furthermore, in connection to Western modernist art, modern art historians saw modern African art as belated, derivative, mimetic, and therefore not on time.

Contemporary African art shares none of the anxieties of modern African art for several reasons: first, within categories of time, it is neither belated nor does it exist out of time; second, because it is post-historical, it did not emerge out of a succession of historical styles; third, because it is critical of colonial valorization of an authentic past, it is postcolonial; and fourth, in relation to its postcoloniality, it seeks, according to Hans Belting's thesis, to be post-ethnic.¹⁸ The existing out of time, and not being on time, as paradoxical as it is, does have a striking benefit, because it clears the ground for new possibilities of experimentation and the shaping of an artistic language. In fact, both temporal disjunctions provide a prolegomenon, of sorts, for what modern African art, in its ambiguous situation, anticipated: namely the emergence of the contemporary. Neither being out of time nor belated, contemporary African art strategically inhabits a third epistemological space by being in time. Being neither a part of the past (historical in relation to precolonial African art) or on time, i.e., fashionable according the reigning credo of modernist art which follows the trajectory of a succession of styles (such as Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, etc.), contemporary African art, like all contemporary art, is fundamentally of its time. It inhabits the present and does not follow the sequence of periods and styles common to the narrative of modern art history. By not being on time, it is far less riddled with the anxiety of timeliness and fashionableness.

Rather than imitate a succession of period styles, contemporary artists generally develop their practice by constituting strategies, working with whatever is at hand, across all artistic media. To be contemporary

also requires a self-awareness of the possibilities and the fault lines that define the present. It means having the conceptual capacity to deploy a response to the present through self-reflexive reanimations of methods of creative inquiry. This self-awareness and self-reflexivity in the midst of change and social transformation—in the clamor of the polyglossia of postcolonial fields of practice—constitute the main platform of what can be defined as contemporary. Hence, within the aesthetic structures and formal methods of contemporary African art, artistic concepts and their discourses are deployed in a panoply of ways. Here local and nonlocal, international and global, academic and neotraditional strategies intermingle, creating the aesthetic glue that binds new artistic languages to contemporary perceptions of art.

With this in mind, the view that contemporary African art is anathema to "traditional" art (at least in seeking to invent the individual artist and to avoid a tribal style) is strikingly based on poor critical logic. In the same way that European artists were responding to complex structural and conceptual issues in the sculptures of African artists in early the twentieth century, African artists were also encountering European academic styles with distinctly different representational logic. In fact, a two-way street of influence was happening during this period, in which Onabolu responded to Western academic painting paralleled Picasso's response to African masks. These responses at the beginning of the twentieth century represent a vital contemporary moment in which the work of African artists (even if their signatures remained ambiguous) received a profound artistic consideration from artists of a different tradition and, at the same time, inspired African artists to seriously reflect on the traditions of Western art. Rather than follow a path leading to the loss of authenticity, African artists' responses to modernism underscored their artistic adventurousness. They were engaged in dialogue with the values of other traditions through well-considered choice.

Contemporary African artists have consistently been involved in shaking the epistemological roots of "traditional art," while employing tradition as an archival resource. This is what Uche Okeke did in relation to *Uli* painting in Nigeria, El Anatsui with regard to *nsibidi* and *adinkra* traditions in Nigeria, Ibrahim El Salahi in response to Islamic calligraphy in Sudan, and Zehirun Yetmegeta and Wosene Kosrof in relation to the liturgical scrolls of Ethiopian religious texts. For example, in modernist European art-historical discourse, what one might call the shaking of epistemological roots was conceived as an avant-garde response to changing tradition, which in turn describes the modernist revolt against high academic art, namely the principle of deskillings. Following this process, the neo-avant-garde instituted an idea that articulates the postwar emergence of contemporary art along with postmodernism's declassification of modernist universalism and grand narratives. Contemporary African art is an art of dialectical absorption and structural integration of discourses and formal systems. In our view, this makes the historical basis of its paradigms open to diverse experiences of tradition and modernity.

Modernist and contemporary African art cannot, however, be construed as coterminous with European avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art, for the simple reason that their different historical trajectories are radically marked by separate, discursive paths. If anything, modern and contemporary African art are each involved in the further deconstitution of Western art-historical authority, rather than being, according to avant-garde and neo-avant-garde principles, attempts at revolt against African traditions.

Congolese artist Chéri Samba's response to the European modernist canon are great examples of this reflection. In his painting triptych, *Quel avenir pour notre art?* (1997), he questions the destiny or future of contemporary African art by an allegorical rereading of the relationship of the African artist to modernism. The mediating object here is a series of African masks set out on a table between Samba and the European modernist master Pablo Picasso. In this painting, Samba stages himself in the first panel of the canvas with Picasso as the modernist genius who sits in the foreground of the painting, before a drafting table, contemplating two African masks, a log of wood, and a clay vessel displayed slightly behind him. The masks are arranged on a table, upon which Samba

is seated, wearing a white suit. Here Picasso is represented as both a modern antecedent, and as a bridge between Samba and "traditional" African art. However, Samba's position is ambivalent. Of course, Picasso serves as a metonymy for the African artist's relationship to modernism and a reflection of his place in the hierarchy of artistic competence and genius. In the second panel of the painting, the ambiguity of the relationship is further explored, with Picasso no longer an antecedent, but a contemporary. Here, the two artists are now depicted on equal footing, walking side by side down a zigzagging path, clutching beneath their arms white canvases that reveal the partial features of African-mask like heads, reminiscent of one of the faces in Picasso's generative painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). What is even more significant about this image is the positioning of the artist and Picasso at the crossroads of two cultural traditions and aesthetic archives. Behind the two artists is what appears to be the verdant greens of an African village (the site of traditional African art) and before them lies an open gate leading into the museum of modern art (the site of artistic modernity.) Samba and Picasso are both represented on the threshold of the museum; they are crossing the road separating the village and the museum's entrance, seemingly exiting the old and walking into the new. After this pair of associations with Picasso in the preceding two panels, the third panel shows Samba, out on his own, mingled in a crowd of Africans, Asians, and Europeans in front of the plaza in Beaubourg, at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Undoubtedly, we know that this scene represents that moment of gathering of international artists for the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, an exhibition in which Samba and several African artists gained their first European visibility, in what now appears both prosaic and normal. Whether this scenario announces finally, the long-delayed arrival of the African artist in the scene of historical spotlight is debatable. In fact, Samba leaves no doubt about his ambivalence, through the other language, text, in which his paintings signify. In the beginning of the

triptych, he posed the question: "oui, mais... ce musée d'art moderne, n'est-il pas raciste?" and in the last panel, a speech bubble emanating from inside the Centre Pompidou, declares: "Bravo l'occidental! Bravo le cubisme! Notre musée est tien."

This triptych and the carefully inscribed texts are telling examples of the complexity of the position of a contemporary African artist in relation to so-called traditional African art and modern art. Instead of seeking a complete rupture with "traditional" African art, Samba responds by positioning himself in simultaneous dialogue with pre-colonial tradition, colonial modernity, and the ambivalence of postcolonial modernity on grand narratives of art and cultural traditions. *Quel avenir pour notre art?* could be called a reflexive painting, in that it so richly demonstrates the idea behind Mudimbe's notion of *reprendre*. Here, Samba stages what one might call a *petit récit* in the discourse of modern and contemporary art, in which *Quel avenir pour notre art?* becomes a postmodern painting. Similarly, Beninois artist Romaine Hazoumé's assemblage sculptures deploy ironic reworkings of the notion that authentic African art consisted solely of masks and ritual sculptures. Hazoumé transforms discarded plastic jerry cans (emblems of the period of SAPs when scarcity and the shortage of resources required creative readaptation of materials) into collages fashioned in the image of masks. Contemporary African artists like Samba and Hazoumé thus proffer a discourse pointing to the forms of hybridization common to most projects of contemporary art. In this engaged inquiry, the artist's bifurcated relationship to African and modern identity is questioned. This discourse also reflects a critique of the binary line often drawn in African politics between tribe and nation; which is given a further twist in situations where secular ideology seeks to subsume all other identities. Each of these many discourses (between colonial and postcolonial modernity, between postcolonial utopia and realism, between transnationalism and globalism) was incorporated in the ever-proliferating strategies and discourses of contemporary African art.

1. See Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," in *In Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 207–234.

2. See Frantz Fanon's classic essay, "On National Culture," in Enwezor, *Postcolonial Constellation*, 385–393.

3. Uche Okeke, *Art in Development: A Nigerian Perspective*, ed. LeClair Grier Lambert (Nimo, Nigeria: Documentation Centre, Asele Institute; Minneapolis, Minn.: African American Cultural Center, 1982). 1.

4. See Uche Okeke's short essay, "Natural Synthesis," in Okeke, *Art in Development*, 2. For a full discussion of the aesthetic and historical implications of "Natural Synthesis" and the evolution of the Art Society group in the development of postcolonial contemporary art in Nigeria, see Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Nigerian Art in the Independence Decade, 1957–1967" (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 2004).

5. For an extensive discussion of the fierce debates surrounding such postcolonial recontextualization of African aesthetic thoughts developed around l'Ecole de Dakar, see Elizabeth Ann Harney, *In Senegal's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

6. See Ima Ebong, "Negritude: Between Mask and Flag: Senegalese Cultural Ideology and the Ecole de Dakar," in Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New York: Center for African Art, 1991), 198–209.

7. Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 24. Soyinka has been quoted variously on what he said exactly at the Kampala Conference in 1962 concerning Negritude. In 1965, at another conference in England, he offered a clarification of his statement: "I said: 'A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces.' In other words: a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: 'I am a tiger. When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of the duiker you know

that some tigritude has been emanated there.' See Janheinz Jahn, *A History of Neo-African Literature*, trans. Oliver Coburn and Ursula Lehrburger (London: Faber, 1968), 265–266.

8. According to neoliberal macroeconomic policies, SAPs prescribed the removal of the state as an important actor in the production and circulation of goods and capital. Once this occurred, radical shortages across all spheres of production occurred, not the least of which was in the networks of knowledge of which artistic production was a part. By demanding that African countries who receive financial assistance from multilateral institutions such as IMF and World Bank adopt policies such as the devaluation of currencies against the dollar; lifting of import and export restrictions; removal of price controls on basic commodities; suppression of state subsidies for public institutions; adoption of policies of export-led growth; privatization of state assets such as large public utilities, railroads, and liberalization of financial markets; and the introduction of free market systems, infrastructures that were already teetering collapsed. Over the last decade, social scientists and economists have been analyzing the effects of SAPs and the impact on African human and social capital: See Giles Mohan, Ed Brown, Bob Milward, and Alfred B. Zack-Williams, *Structural Adjustment: Theory, Practice and Impacts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) and Thandika Mkandawire and Charles C. Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1999). See also the "Structural Adjustment Programs" entry in the "Compilation" section of this book.

9. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," in *Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, et.al. (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 99–126.

10. Mbembe and Roitman, "Figures of the Subject," 99. For a recent critique of SAPs, see Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and

Giroux, 2009).

11. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 155.

12. Ernest Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1950; rev. and exp., 17th ed., 2006), 21.

13. See preface to the first edition in Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 2006, 7.

14. See Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2009).

15. See William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, eds., "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

16. In the months following the *Primitivism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, there followed extensive reviews and discussions of the exhibition in the major art magazines. It was, needless to say, an important turning point in the reflections between the values espoused by the principal museum of modern art and the ethnographic liberties it could henceforth take in relation to art from the non-Western canon. MoMA's curatorial position was strenuously challenged by prominent scholars, leading to a debate between the exhibition curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe and the critic Thomas McEvilley, whose criticism of the exhibition in a scathing review in *Artforum* magazine inspired heated counter-responses. In addition, there were other serious reflections on the aesthetic principles on which *Primitivism* the exhibition and the term were deployed in relation to non-Western, so-called tribal art. For reviews of the exhibition, see James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73, no. 4 (April 1985): 164–177; and Yves-Alain Bois, "L'Espresso Sauvage," *Art in America* 73, no. 4 (April 1985): 178–189. See also Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (November 1984): 54–61. For responses, see William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, Thomas McEvilley, "Letters: On Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: Primitivism" in 20th Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art in

1984," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (February 1985): 42–51; and William Rubin and Thomas McEvilley, "Letters: On Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: Part II," *Artforum* 23, no. 6 (May 1985): 63–71. Five years later, a similar debate accompanied the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (1989) at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, when it also, undoubtedly inspired by *Primitivism*, and hoping to offer a curatorial corrective to the perceptions and reception of non-Western art, foregrounded artists, rather than "tribal" objects. Yet, in alliance with modernist distinctions between the European and the non-European, the curators of *Magiciens* chose to highlight supposedly self-taught African artists rather than so-called academically trained—read Westernized—artists who were perceived to have retained, and therefore reflected a more wholesome, uncorrupted idea of their otherness. See "Our Bauhaus, Others' Mudhouse," *Third Text* 6, Special Issue, 1990, dedicated specifically to the issues addressed above.

17. Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), remains a classic study of a phenomenon he calls the denial of coevalness in ethnographic writing.

18. Hans Belting's thesis concerns two different trajectories in the self-conception of contemporary artists: in the first, he claimed that with the advent of postmodernism, contemporary Western artists wanted to be posthistorical to avoid having their work framed only according to Western classical tradition; on the other hand, non-Western artists in the midst of ethnographic valorization of identity wished to become post-ethnic. So on one level, the burden of the Western artist was one about time, and on another, the non-Western artist was concerned with the idea of the self, that is the author. Belting's statement was presented in his lecture "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age," part of a conference, *Global Art and the Museum*, held at Vatican City, 13–15 December 2006, celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Vatican Museums.

Chapter 3

Networks of Practice: Globalization, Geopolitics, Geopoetics

Between Art and Life: Spectacle of the Everyday

The central focus of this chapter is the role of globalization in the emergence of networks and discursive circuits that became central to the development and visibility of contemporary African artists in the last decade of the twentieth century. Before we explore some of the reasons for this emergence, however, it is important to underline the fact that, until very recently, contemporary African artists lacked visibility in the international arenas of artistic reception and within the regimes of historical discourses of artistic modernity. A general account of contemporary art during the early 1990s reveals a shift to more heterodox methodologies of historical engagement, in which the substantive theoretical models of postcolonial thought and references were embraced by critics, historians, and curators as tools of analysis not only of aesthetic but also of ethical engagements by a host of artists positioned in different circumstances and circumscribed within specific ideological and social situations across the world. This, in turn, reflected the declining power of the Greenbergian accounts of artistic modernity, the claims of notions such as artistic autonomy, along with the waning influence of contemporary offshoots of these forms of historical orthodoxies. If the Greenbergian criticisms of art were based on the ideology of aesthetic decontamination, in the purification of art and voiding it of content or any reference to the real—which was seen to collude with capitalist consumerism and therefore kitsch—a reverse, but determined contestation of the meaning and interpretation of artistic contemporaneity sought to contaminate art, to render it as impure, hybrid, and deeply entangled with the “spectacle of the everyday.”¹

According to the modernist interpretation of artistic innovation, the patently figurative and realistic paintings by such artists as the Congolese Moké and Chéri Samba would have been anathema to the critical asceticism often adopted by historians in Greenberg's mold. And, like the questioning of such critical orthodoxies and the powers of their exclusionist commentaries, the idea of the nation-state as the authoritative arbiter of the proper and legal was as well placed under critical scrutiny. In addition, the erosion of cultural frontiers, the upsurge in the idea of border crossing as a strategy in cultural production, the emergence of postcolonialism and multiculturalism as theoretical paradigms in artistic practice, and the rise of the global network of exhibition systems—museums, biennials, art fairs, art schools, galleries, artist residencies—pointed toward the heterogeneity of contemporary artistic practices. Each of these shifts in the constitution of the global artistic sphere also witnessed the emergence of a new generation of international curators hailing from outside Western Europe and North America. The appearance of curators from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East also paralleled the creation of new exhibition sites, such as Istanbul, Johannesburg, Gwangju, Shanghai, Dakar, Manifesta, Site Santa Fe, Berlin, Sharjah, Liverpool, Bamako, Melbourne, and Asia-Pacific, in biennials and triennials that stand in direct competition with the dominant institutions of the Western establishment as arbiters of curatorial knowledge.

The rise in prominence of biennials as new circuits of exhibition opportunities for transnational artists should also be understood from the perspective of the historical transitions which made the creation of some of the biennials possible. For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 coincided with major historical transformations and geopolitical realignments. The Johannesburg (1995), Gwangju (1995), and Manifesta (1996) biennials were founded as direct responses to historical shifts in South Africa, South Korea, and Europe, respectively, at the end of traumatic political eras in the 1990s. From the fall of the Berlin Wall

in 1989 to the end of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, to the defeat of dictatorship in South Korea in 1987, the artistic networks of the biennial era experienced the unleashing of diverse critical practices from localities once routinely excluded from international exhibitions before 1990. The reorientation of curatorial selection to include wider spheres of practice would become a boon to the transformation of contemporary African art, from the ethnographically dominated view of its exhibitions to a reformed perspective centered on the work of African artists as individuals. In chapter one, we discussed this shift in relation to the tension between the ethnographic museum and the museum of art. In chapter two we concluded with the move from authorlessness to authorship as part of the shift from colonial criticism to postcolonial reflexivity.

While this tension gave great fillip to contemporary African artists in the expansion of opportunities into museums of art and global exhibition circuits, however, it did not mean the disappearance of curatorial exclusions of these artists from major exhibitions. Instead, that tension often highlighted the dichotomy between artists from wealthy countries and those from less resource-capable regions. In this equation, other issues—such as race, ethnicity, gender, identity, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism—were as important in the discourses in which artists were presented as were any ideas about aesthetics. As a direct result of the dismantling of the ideological border between East and West, and as new technologies eroded tightly controlled gates on the national frontiers of information, the control of curatorial authority which had earlier concentrated power in the museums and institutions of Western democracies was, in turn, called into question. The inclusion of an artist's work in museums of art or in biennials did not so much reorient the dynamic of power, control, and authority, as much as it illuminated the paradoxes of the global artistic realm. Yet, a direct consequence of structural and institutional imbalances between artists from the so-called First, Second, and Third Worlds, did provide greater impetus to the possibility of the redistribution of artistic visibility in new off-center locations. These issues, among others, form the focus of how we will try to situate contemporary African art in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first.

Disorientation and Regimes of Redistribution

By now it is possible to add that one of the main features of the networks of contemporary art today—in fact, a fundamental characteristic of all types of art which are considered contemporary, regardless of where the artist is based—is their simultaneous existence within the global sphere. By this we do not mean that all art is global in the same sense or is presented to various audiences in the same way, especially in relation to mediating circuits and scripted platforms such as museums, recurring temporary exhibitions, publicity, and the art market; but that contemporary art is global in some fashion, in that it is no longer strictly isolated in regional styles or along unbreachable lines between the mainstream and the margins, center and periphery. The global condition of contemporary art in which contemporary African art is deeply imbricated could be understood along the formulation that the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière calls “distribution of the sensible.” He enunciates this idea in this way:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared

and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determine the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation, and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.²

In these lines, Rancière lays out a concise critical objective that, we want to argue, both delimits and enlarges the locus of contemporary African art. It shows us precisely the absence of contradiction between the idea that previously sought to delimit “traditional African arts” as antagonistic to contemporary African arts, of the two aesthetic structures as separate spheres of artistic engagement. Or of those forms of critique—qua the decontaminated view of art—that once sought to mitigate the force and originality of contemporary African art by labeling it underdeveloped or mimetic of traditions of Western modernism, thus perpetuating an exclusionist, stereotypical understanding of the artists’ complex artistic experiments and innovations.

The attempt to even formulate a space, such as one called contemporary African art, in which conditions, strategies, networks, and institutions are delimited, is part of Rancière’s larger discussion as the politics of aesthetic. These politics, to our thinking, are inseparable from the attempt to forge a platform, to delineate a theoretical and empirical horizon of *something in common* among African artists on the one hand, and between those artists and their peers globally. The spaces and networks of activities in which African artists work today are part of the evolving aesthetic politics of the contemporary, namely, how given practices, originating from diverse spaces, structured by different aesthetic predilections, governed by divergent mechanisms of mediation, translation, interpretation, and supported by agendas of identification or non-identification ground our understanding of contemporary art globally. This discursive diversity—the disorientation of monolithic trajectories and homogenous paradigms—is perhaps, what the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud refers to as the *altermodern*,³ in which he enunciates a deterritorialized conception of contemporary art, one that is no longer bound to an intrinsic or foundational point of origination. This idea is, of course, not a new one, being as it is a restatement of the theoretical arguments of postmodernist and postcolonial thinking that each sought another type of delimitation, namely undoing the grand narratives of European enlightenment and universalist spirit, and modernist totalization of history. Rancière’s notion of the politics of aesthetic, insofar as the distribution of the sensible is concerned, emanates from the “delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.”⁴ This view is very well in concordance with Terry Smith’s shaping of the idea of multeity (of things and practices all occurring at the same time in multiple locations) in his theory of contemporaneity.⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty offers another insight toward this expanding interpretation of history with the notion of the heterotemporal⁶ (multiplicity of temporalities) in the construction of the experiences of modernity. Giorgio Agamben interjects that “Contemporaneity is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it.”⁷ Finally, with specific reference to artistic practice, Rancière concludes: “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”⁸

The Drifting Boundary: Migration and the Discourse of Displacement

We understand the idea of migration, insofar as contemporary African art is concerned, in two senses: the physical movement of artists and objects of art, and the imaginary transmission of ideas and concepts. These two senses reflect the modalities and mechanisms of extension, distension, and boundary breaking (*to be in one’s own time and keep a distance from it*, or to constitute an artistic paradigm *around the properties and the possibilities of time*.) Therefore, the question of contemporary African art today strikes us as inexorably tied to the dialectic

of visibility and invisibility, rendered in the capacity of African artists to make visible forms of visual speech that organize the distribution of the sensible. The movement of this art, even when confined to a local, regional, national, or transnational landscape, is more or less shaped by the distributive tendencies to which events of globalization aspire, namely to bring into concordance samples of artistic production from given places and times within the locus of its diverse networks, without homogenizing its signifying specificities. This situation, as we already made clear, is subtended by another aspect of globalization, namely, the unceasing flow, not only of materials, information, commodities, signs, images, and objects, but also the movement of people traveling and negotiating multiple cultural systems and temporalities, inventing new imaginaries, and fashioning new ecosystems of production and reception. Migration, therefore, represents a core feature of the global condition of contemporary African art. Here we suddenly see entangled two principles in the responses of artists: the geopolitical and the geopolitic.

Take, for example *Exit* (1996 and 2007; p. 301) by the Paris-based Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed. His is a series of text-based neon sculptures spelling out the French word “Exil.” *Exit* exists in two versions: in melancholic blue and sulphuric yellow. Comprising a series of individual lettering emitting a whitish light set against the somber umbra of its primary color (blue or yellow), when installed in a gallery or museum, each neon lettering (as a sign specifying an incommensurable moment in space) is placed strategically in areas or corners of rooms that designate either an emergency exit in a building, or normal exits (such as doorways or windows) leading out of a room. The presence of the glowing (might “glowering” be a better qualifier here?) words, suggests a direction out of a confined space. It seems, with the title of the work (*Exit*), and the term (*Exil*), that Abdessemed intended not only a double reading, but also a double meaning, double reference, and double voicing of both words to simultaneously refer to the process of cataclysmic displacement and the condition of exile. First produced in the blue version in 1996, *Exit* signaled a sense of deep loss, and thus can be read both in reference to fragmentation and to an incomplete migration, which may engender the sense of becoming a stranger in one’s new context, and yet estranged from one’s own culture. With this very simple, direct form of speech, in which the strangled word emits its sentence of disorientation, Abdessemed stages the irresolvable entanglement of the geopolitical and the geopolitic. Such work is symptomatic of the situation in the 1990s when, because of political instability, economic crisis, and institutional deficits, the unceasing migration of a large group of Africans began to affect and to alter the landscape of contemporary African art.

But other artists much older than Abdessemed, such as Obiora Udechukwu in *Exile Train* (1980; p. 60)—a painting depicting mass exodus that was produced during one of the most fertile periods of his influential career—were foregrounding political issues of displacement (both internally and externally) within clearly established aesthetic parameters. Similarly, El Anatsui’s *On Their Fateful Journey Nowhere* (1995) and *Visa Queue* (1992); Rachid Koraichi *A Nation in Exile* (1981; p. 64); and Julie Mehretu’s *Dispersion* (2002; p. 234) explore and reflect on the themes of displacement, signaling in powerful sculptures, prints, and paintings the conflicted and traumatic effects that migration has had effects on the work of artists in Africa. But these works, far from illustrating a vexing political issue, ground discursively its social meaning and elevate the complex relationship between the geopolitical and the geopolitic. Migration further illuminates the paradox of contemporary African art with respect to the rise of globalization in determining the visibility of African artists in the 1990s on contemporary art maps, especially at a time when many of the artists were themselves experiencing displacement.

In the meantime, the significance of migration on the artistic networks of African artists has created a new dialectic between the so-called diaspora artists and those based on the continent. (Incidentally, it is our belief that the term diaspora is a misapprehension of a historical term and is, therefore, misapplied because, so far as we know, there

does not exist any network—outside of the historic African diasporic community in Europe and the Americas—of expatriate Africans that can be said to have molded itself into a visible cohesive community and that distinctly fashions itself as such.) As Abdessamed's work shows, for artists negotiating this split between home and exile, place and placelessness, a further dialectic between politics and poetics, ethics and aesthetics, identity and subjectivity, citizenship and power, continues to create new forms of critical meditation. These represent different regimes of artistic conceptualization and modes of subjectivization of the fraught relationship between art and life, politics and aesthetics, images and representation, and hence the preponderance and proliferation of figuration and quasi-documentary modes in the work of such artists as Marlene Dumas, Gazbia Sirry, Penny Siopis, Tayo Adenaike, Bruce Onobrakpeya, William Kentridge. With migration at the center of the artists' active memories of territorialization and de-territorialization, yet another realm of engagement could be discerned in the relationship between geopolitics and geopolitics. We call this realm *continentalism*.

Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism, and Continentalism

Between the categories of identity (ethnicity, religion, nation) lies the space of cosmopolitan African identity.⁹ This identity is global in its stance and transnational in its traversal of cultural borders. Cosmopolitan discourse is generally formulated without recourse to race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, or language. It is a way of being at home, so to speak, not in the world, per se, but living among others, drinking, as it were, from the stream of diverse experiences; in short, cosmopolitan discourse exists in proximity with difference. By no means do we take the idea as "anything goes" rootlessness, but rather as a tolerance for conditions of multiple temporalities. We take the definition of who a contemporary African artist is in a similar manner. The lines are not stratified into normative distinctions of belonging and exclusion, but around shared and aleatory patterns of identification. Much of this thinking was common to cultural debates among African intellectuals and artists in the post-independence period between cosmopolitans and counter-cosmopolitans. Two of the best known proponents of this contemporary characterization of African cosmopolitanism are the Nigerian and Congolese poets Christopher Okigbo and Tchicaya U'tamsi, whose poetry is dotted with references to Lorca, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Homer, Virgil, Eliot, Pound, Hopkins, Senghor, Yoruba *Oriki*, etc. In a now-famous incident at the First Festival of World Negro Culture in Dakar in 1966, Okigbo refused to accept the award for first prize, commenting that he was a poet, not an African poet. In a letter to the literary scholar Sunday O. Anozie, Okigbo writes: "About Dakar. I did not go. Did you? I found the whole idea of a negro arts festival based on colour quite absurd. I did not enter any work either for the competition, and was most surprised when I heard a prize had been awarded LIMITS. I have written to reject it."¹⁰ Moreover, according to Anozie, Okigbo himself suggested instead that U'tamsi was the better poet than he and therefore more deserving of the prize if awarded purely on the grounds of poetry.¹¹ The festival in Dakar was certainly an instance—like the conferences on African and diasporic African literature organized by Senghor and Alioune Diop in 1956 and 1959 in Paris and Rome, respectively—an attempt at the worlding of African aesthetic production.

So while artists may celebrate freedoms associated with globalism and transnationalism, such broader participation, detached from the markers of nationality and identity, is not without its contradictions. For it seems that, at the very moment when African artists could present themselves as part of a denationalized global field of artistic production, their Africanness is reified. Nevertheless, it is important to explore issues of uneven development in the conditions of artistic practice between African artists residing in Europe and North America in relation to those residing in Africa, as a consequence of SAPs. In the last two decades, as African artists increasingly migrated and settled in the West, avenues of opportunity were seen to have opened for them professionally, thereby widening their access to a variety of resources such as education, exhibition systems, grants, media, technology, and collectors.

Bolstering this access was the sense that entering a broader discursive circuit of international practice affected the production values of the work of these artists, and provided transnational African artists residing in the West more advantages over those living on the continent. Working in the West also conveyed discursive visibility.

In recent years, as a response to this discrepancy in access, a kind of *continentalism* and prideful authenticity has been noticed as artists and curators who live and work in Africa seek to reverse forms of cultural capital accruing to the perceived privileges of "diasporic" and transnational Africans working in the West. This new debate, in which authenticity is argued solely on the basis of being on the ground (but not necessarily being from a place) emerged exactly at a moment when contemporary art, and especially the art of African artists, had become globally visible through countless group and solo exhibitions. Especially of concern is the fact that very few of these exhibitions are ever seen on the continent, making contemporary African art a sort of privileged export, to be enjoyed only in the West. Some of these concerns have merit; but the reality is quite complex. And when treated with simple-mindedness, a distorted picture takes precedence over the radical reshaping of the field of contemporary art in general, in which contemporary African artists are playing an important part.

The issue of *continentalism* can also be understood in geopolitical terms, as yet another form of resistance having to do with the contestation of contemporary African art being defined from the outside, either by intimate outsiders or diasporists with access to institutional power. The seeming ambivalence towards so-called diasporic Africans is one legacy of SAPs.¹² It compels a debate between those who stayed behind and suffered the deprivations of scarcity, institutional deficits, political marginalization, and social invisibility, and those who left and supposedly enjoy the fruits of plentiful resources bestowed in the West. But fundamentally, the issue of continentalism is part of the politics of resources within artistic networks on the continent, deracinated by chronic official institutional deficit. By highlighting what seems to us a simplistic line between residents and expatriates, between natives and transnationals, continentalists and diasporists, we draw attention to issues of resource control in framing how artists who build careers in Africa are valorized, and how different orders of authenticity are produced by those who control not only resources but also wider access to global networks.

This circumstance, perhaps, makes African artists far more attuned to the imbalances that define the current stage of globalization. It certainly points to how they are engaged with the world-making mechanisms that today describe contemporary global, geopolitical, social, and cultural strategies. Against the backdrop of the large-scale global change that has witnessed the emergence of diverse postcolonial societies, in view of the wide-ranging social and cultural realignments taking place within many African societies, and in the wake of the globalization of capital and culture, it comes as no surprise that the circumstances of contemporary African art are marked by such dynamic and exciting processes of critical possibility. The creative ferment that this has unleashed is certainly a great boon to what is constantly underscored throughout the different sections of this volume.

What the economic and social conditions of the 1990s underscored and made vivid is that mass migration not only produced massive instability in cultural and intellectual networks, it also illuminates the fact that migration's concomitant effects produced new cartographies and reordered the epistemological and artistic networks of contemporary African art, while also calling into question standardized perceptions of who is an insider and who is an outsider, who is a stranger and who is estranged, who is rooted and who is displaced. But as the work of contemporary African artists became more globalized, it revealed a bifurcated space of production and reception between artists who migrated to the West and those who stayed on the continent. It brings into sharp relief, and challenged the ideological systems that concentrated power in the institutions and markets of Western centers, while at the same time revealing a gate that showed the processes of decentralization

occurring as new scenes of artistic discourse were being constructed within Africa itself. Such changes are evident in such exhibition events as *Dak'Art: Biennial of Contemporary African Art* in Dakar, and *Rencontres africaines de la photographie* biennale (1994) in Bamako. The first decade of the twenty-first century, therefore, belongs to the visible effects of globalization which cemented the centrality of artistic practices formerly existing on the periphery of mainstream practices.

With these changes in the routes and networks of contemporary art and culture, this chapter, therefore, concerns the new situation in which contemporary African artists are working: the massive migration that took place in the 1990s and the globalization immediately following it. Since these developments, interest in contemporary African art has grown, requiring both historical and theoretical perspectives to grapple with its complex critical and formal conditions. The task at hand is to map the connections between African artists and the larger global public sphere, as well as to examine the discursive circuits in which these artists operate, from local to global, national to transnational, continental to transcontinental. The diverse affiliations, networks, circuits, routes, boundaries, and trajectories, etc., in which the artistic activities are conducted, offer capacious spaces for this examination. Here, new situations of production reveal new artistic archives and extend the various artistic, cultural, and conceptual mechanisms that give rise to the landscape occupied by African artists living both on the continent and outside of it, from 1980 to the present. To come to terms with the disparate practices drawn from all regions of Africa, as well as from Europe and North America, it is important to position the understanding of contemporary African art in this larger historical context.

A Bend in the Road: Geocultural Diversity and Aesthetic Heterogeneity

Like any survey concerned with the contemporary art of a given geographic area, this book is bound to raise questions about the efficacy and comprehensiveness of its account, about who is included versus what is left out. Some of the commentaries will wrestle with the categories and historical reasoning that underpin the analysis. Such questions and commentaries are essential and necessary. They are the serious measures on which a field of practice can be thought, and they will determine how the analysis of its critical content can be articulated. We welcome them, not so much because this book organizes concrete historical points of rereading contemporary African art, but because it is an attempt to elaborate an uneasy synthesis between the ethnographic and the art historical. Therefore, we tend to think of our critical program, not as an absolute caesura but nevertheless as a break from earlier analyses of contemporary African art, but instead as a methodological bend in the road, around which a new corner is turned.

With a continent such as Africa, and its manifold differences, shifting political currents, and unstable cultural frontiers, even more complex issues become part of the bargain, especially if the focus on geographic specificity shifts to geocultural diversity and the artistic heterogeneity that it entails. Over the past thirty years the production of contemporary African art has been shaped precisely by the wider recognition of points of epistemological rupture and discursive convergences such as we have detailed in the first two chapters, along with the recent issues highlighted by the processes of migration, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and globalization. Though the current geopolitical composition of Africa was formed between the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries, according to the various spheres of influence composed by ruling colonial powers, it is nevertheless axiomatic that Africa is not one unified entity, but rather a bundle of many competing cultures, a collision of multiple temporalities, national frontiers, political boundaries, and linguistic particularities that have been in flux for centuries. Given this basic dimension of Africa, the identity of contemporary African art and its many cultural spheres cannot in any sense be perceived in one sweeping, singular overview. Instead, we survey it here as a tapestry of overlapping, contingent, and incommensurable spaces of production whose features change and blend into new aesthetic systems

and artistic cultures as they interact with and absorb diverse influences, both in situations of engaged exchange and in critical resistance.

Contemporary African art varies, however not only according to this logic of diffusion and reception based on historical factors, but also by means of the diverse traditions and aesthetic archives from which it derives. As a result, the art which is labeled contemporary African art becomes precisely discontinuous due to the nonuniversal and nonlinear nature of the development of the arts in different parts of the continent. These include the diverse colonial legacies (Anglophone, Franco-phone, Lusophone, and Arabophone) in which they are grounded; the receptions and experiences of modernity that delimit distinct aspects and textures of cultural life—between indigeneity and coloniality, local and foreign, tradition and modernity. One remarkable part of the African experience is the cultural and ethical entanglement reflected in what Ali Mazrui characterized as Africa's "triple heritage" of Islam, Christianity, and indigeneity.¹³ This tripartite space means, for instance, that the cultural traditions and archives of Northern Nigeria—with its rich Islamic heritage and with its centuries of trans-Saharan trade and exchange—reflects a distinctly different frame of cultural contact than that of Southeastern Nigeria. Or consider, as well, the differences between the Southern and Northern Sudan. Questions of race, ethnicity, religion, language, political institutions, civil society, and educational systems play no less a role in defining the remarkable diversity of the African continent, rendering a map composed more on jagged spatial contiguity than seamless temporal continuity. From North Africa to Southern Africa, East, West, and Central Africa, modern African identity has been profoundly shaped by many encounters, points of interaction, processes of exchange, acculturation and deculturation; the continent has been transformed in diverse ways by colonial encounters and global movements, by intra-African exchanges and pan-African solidarities. Each of these dimensions of the modern and contemporary African experience, in turn, have been organized according to other spheres of influence, social and ideological allegiances; and from them contemporary postcolonial institutions and identities have emerged.

The overlapping narratives of colonial and postcolonial processes that regulated these structures make obvious the case that contemporary African subjectivities are formed by far more complex, deeply entangled relationships. For instance, contemporary cultural and artistic productions tend to respond to multiple references through the specificity of local discourses, but also in response to cosmopolitan artistic conditions. The forging of symbolic, conceptual, and formal languages of art, often occurs as a result of the aleatory structures of reception and the development of aesthetic models, along with an attraction and sometimes resistance to either local or foreign artistic paradigms. As a consequence, contemporary African art as an outcome of the globalization of artistic regimes is imbued with a certain sense of radical alterity, both in relation to forms that may be deemed indigenous, i.e., "African," and to those understood as foreign to it. Contemporary African art, like all contemporary art across the world, exists in the gap between influences and zones of exchange. This compels the adoption of a strategy of combative ambivalence towards any master thesis defined as artistic tradition. Consequently, what emerges as contemporary is an art of the supplement and citation, set between diverse archives: between and among traditions; set in its own invented traditions: colonial and postcolonial, local and global, regional and transnational, diasporic and cosmopolitan spaces.

Because of this strategy of combative ambivalence, upon close scrutiny, it appears that one underlying model shared by the artists whose work is featured in this book is a type of aesthetic doubt about what qualities embody authentic contemporary African art. This aesthetic doubt is a boon to the formulation of this book, in that we have not attempted to engineer a holistic continental artistic style shaped by a grand narrative. *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, therefore, is an attempt to link different episodes in postcolonial African artistic development. It does not seek to unify or summarize; rather it consciously reflects an account of thirty years of art-making that is spatially

contiguous rather than seamless, temporally multivalent, discursively polyphonic, and strategically heterotopic. Again, emphasis is brought to bear on the degree to which all these activities have occurred between the transformational and idealistic period of the post-independence years of the 1960s, the self-reflexive interregnum of the '70s, the crisis of the '80s, the migrations of the '90s, and the globalization of the twenty-first century.

The task we have set before us, therefore, is not to reconcile these various historical periods into one unified, totalized, and universal vision of artistic culture, but to present its fragments, its discontinuities, its elliptical narratives. We do so, first, to illuminate those moments of cultural convergence and shared political conditions that help provide insight into how specific discourses and aesthetic languages have been developed; second, to review the works of art produced during this period; third, to explore the paths these works of art have traveled

out of the transitional cultures from late-twentieth-century Africa to the twenty-first century global stage. We have also mapped the artistic strategies, along with the ethical legacies that appeared in response to the complex political and historical shifts occurring throughout Africa in the 1980s. We examine the turn in the 1990s toward articulating the rupture with geography through open-ended forms of transnational and pan-African identification with Africa. Finally, we have explored the globalization of contemporary African art at the end of the twentieth century into this century, and the shifts in the receptions of African art during the last decade. Brought together, the view of contemporary African art represented during this period is distinctively multicultural, transnational, cosmopolitan, diasporic, and pan-African. It presents a view of practice that essentially denotes a geographic point, but departs radically from it and flows into other networks, maps fresh affiliations, and invents new imaginaries.

1. We have borrowed this phrase from the Chinese-French critic and curator Hou Hanru from his exhibition project for the 10th Lyon Biennale (2009). See: <http://www.biennaledelyon.com/contemporart2009/>

2. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.

3. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

4. See Rancière, 13.

5. Terry Smith, "The Contemporaneity Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, preface to the 2nd ed., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), xvii.

7. Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

8. Rancière, 13.

9. The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has written a penetrating reflection on the idea of cosmopolitanism, exploring the ways in which African cosmopolitanism stages a new ethical space beyond the ready-made issues of tradition and authenticity. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

10. For an account of this incident, see Sunday O. Anozie, *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), 21.

11. Anozie, *Christopher Okigbo*, 22.

12. We prefer to use the term "transnationalism" to describe the present situation of African immigrants living in the West, but also to distinguish those Africans from the Black Atlantic African diaspora that emerged out of the experience of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, the term transnational better captures the process by which many Africans move back and forth between Africa and the West, because most African emigrants maintain strong familial connections with the continent, whether through remittances, second homes, regular annual visits to the

continent, and participation in new discursive networks in critical debates within the various countries they supposedly left. It seems to us, at the moment when thousands of Africans die at sea each year while trying to reach Europe, that it is especially inappropriate to confidently suggest a different frame of dwelling between those who reside inside the continent and those who live elsewhere. As the news of their deaths reaches us through the media and international relief organizations, it becomes even clearer that many African countries are still in the process of exorcizing the impact of SAPs.

13. Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986).

PART II

STRATEGIES AND THEMES IN THE WORK OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ARTISTS

Chapter 4

Politics, Culture, Critique

It is often that art, in imitating life, can mirror the world more clearly than a simple recounting of events. In his 1992 film *Guelwaar*, for example, Senegalese writer-director Ousmane Sembene tells the story, at once serious and light, of a bureaucratic bungle that leads to religious conflict. The plot revolves around Pierre Henri Thioune, a.k.a. "Guelwaar" (Wolof for "noble one"), a firebrand social activist and fervent Catholic whose opposition to foreign food aid led to his murder, possibly by government agents, and whose body ends up in a Muslim graveyard. Guelwaar's son, just returned from France for the funeral, could not sympathize with endemic corruption in his homeland; his daughter, who lives in Dakar, had turned to prostitution to support her family and would eventually take her widowed mother back to the city. Toward the end of the film, when Muslims and Christians gather at the graveyard ready for violent confrontation, restrained only by the police chief and his men, the Mayor arrives in a glistening Mercedes Benz. To pacify the irate Muslims—whose Imam, despite threats to his person, returns Guelwaar's body to his people—the Mayor announces the arrival of the food aid in the village. This news instantly transforms the roiling crowd into a cohort of praise singers who then disperse, praying for the Mayor's long life, as the body of Guelwaar is loaded onto a cart and off to his delayed funeral.

While much of the film centers on the effort by Guelwaar's family and friends to retrieve his remains from the graveyard of the Muslim community, it is fundamentally a biting critique of the postcolonial dependence of African countries, led by corrupt politicians, on Western aid. This trenchant commentary on socio-cultural practices occasioned by global neoliberal politics and neocolonial forces in postcolonial Africa is emblematic of a crucial mode of critical address in the field of contemporary art, and is one that gained critical mass in the 1980s, in the wake of widespread economic and political crises.

The 1980s, we emphasize again, were remarkable for the consolidation of diverse political and economic forces, not least of which are internally generated and proxy wars, rampant military and civilian dictatorships, fragile democratic systems, decline in national earning power, and austerity measures forced upon states and citizens by the conditionalities of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The result was the proliferation of unstable socialities and para-state networks, plunging human development indices, and the so-called brain drain or emigration in significant numbers of the continent's intellectual elite. In addition to the economic crises, the spread of radical Islam, anticipated by the founding of Al-Jihad in Egypt in 1980, signaled new strategies of oppositional politics and repressive governance in the region. In South Africa, the attempt by the apartheid regime to muzzle the resistance movement in the mid 1980s, amped up its brutal security measures and declared a state of emergency. These exacting conditions occupied, more than ever before, the critical attention of artists who, like their compatriots, witnessed the unfolding drama of late-twentieth-century Africa with all but total loss of faith in the nation-state as a basis for progressive collective and individual subjectivity.

This chapter is concerned with the various modes of visual speech adopted by artists, to whom commentary on society's evolving dynamic constituted a crucial part of their critical practice. We find them re-imagining the formal parameters of traditional artistic media—such as painting, sculpture, and photography—or adopting the relatively new forms such as video and sculptural installation in order to meditate, comment on, and examine real or imagined personal and collective histories, as well as the dialectical tensions between old and new cul-

tural practices, between political systems and individual subjectivities. Whether or not their works require close reading to tease out their central subject, what is certain is that contemporary African artists—regardless of their levels of technical sophistication or their formal ambitions—contribute to debates about the fate and experiences of the late-twentieth-century Africa, its constituent states, and its peoples.

Central to this social engagement is the artists' conviction that the notion of the modern artistic persona existing in the closed space of self-referential imagination—unfettered by the pressures of the social sphere—ran counter to the ineluctable connection between art and life, between the fantastic trajectories of the artistic imagination and the compelling desires to bring these to bear on multiple facets of the socio-political world. In retrospect, the rise of this critical mode in the 1980s was inevitable, given the drastic turn in the fortunes of African states—that is, the consolidation of military dictatorships, the proliferation of internally generated and neocolonial proxy wars, and so on.

Toward an Aesthetic of Austerity

One important example of this development was manifested in Nigeria, where the so-called Oil Boom Era of the mid 1970s tremendously expanded the state's income capacity, leading to an unprecedented expenditure on urban infrastructure in Lagos, the then capital city; the growth of the middle class; and, unfortunately, massive official corruption. On the strength of its financial muscle, Nigeria wielded tremendous political influence in Africa, becoming a powerful voice in the anti-apartheid campaign. In 1977, it organized the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), arguably the most extravagant celebration of black culture in history. However, by 1979, when the military regime gave way to the Second Republic, economic stagnation had set in, leading eventually to the IMF-mandated Austerity Measures of the Shehu Shagari government in the early 1980s. The effects of these mandates were immediate and far-ranging, manifesting themselves, among other things, in the devastation of the educational sector, widespread impoverishment of the masses, and the emigration of large sections of the intellectual class. With rapid economic decline, massive unemployment, and the changing fortune of the social body, artists began to adopt a realist approach to painting to depict the evolving political landscape. Realism was not only a representational device and method of picturing the malaise of crisis, it was also an important strategy of ethical identification and participation in the development of the public sphere. Obiora Udechukwu, a painter and poet at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is exemplary of contemporary Nigerian artists whose work addressed these questions. In his poetry, drawing, and painting, he pointedly examined the growing impoverishment and corruption of the political class. He developed his formal style in the 1970s by experimenting with traditional Igbo *Uli* body art and murals and with the Chinese literati drawing style. In some of his paintings and drawings the combined lyricism of gestural line and the brevity and terseness of the graphic mark led to works one might associate with political cartoons. The drawing series *No Water* (1982) and *Rhythms of Hunger* (1985, p. 93) underscore Udechukwu's focus on realism during this period, which subtends his later return, in the late 1990s, to more muted figuration and full-blown abstraction. His commitment to realism is most vivid in *Tycoon and Stevedores* (1980; p. 60), where, for instance, the podgy head of a cigar-smoking political chieftain sits atop a blue bubble that represents at once his vast elaborate gown and an asphyxiating space in which stevedores toil under the weight of massive imported rice sacks being unloaded from ships on the distant horizon.

Udechukwu was not alone in this examination of the opulence of the ruling class, the anomie of Structural Adjustment, and draconian military dictatorships. Tayo Adenaike, a leading member of the Nsukka School, adopted deceptively simple forms and a monochrome palette to meditate on the hardships experienced by ordinary folk. Indeed, Adenaike, Udechukwu, and other artists associated with Nsukka developed what we might call an aesthetic of austerity during this period, through their use of ink / wash drawings, restricted palette, somber themes, etc. One of the most ambitiously political works by a Nigerian artist during the late 1980s was made by Olu Oguibe who created a series of collages, including *And the Beast Had the Face of One I Know* (1988; p. 114), in which the artist sutured a photograph of the face of General Babangida, the Nigerian head of state, onto a line drawing of a multi-horned beast.

Other Nigerian artists, such as Dele Jegede, well known for his political cartoons in the *Daily Times* (Lagos) in the 1970s and '80s, examined various instances of social distress across Nigeria in *Paradise Battered*, an exhibition of paintings at the National Theatre, Lagos in 1986; and in yet another series of satirical paintings (included in his 1991 show, *Eko Re E* (This Is Lagos)), he tracked the increasingly chaotic and unruly disension of the Lagos metropolis beyond the control of city and national governments. At Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria—another bastion of artistic activity in Nigeria—Gani Odutokun employed the space of painting to tease out a kind of apotheosis of tyrannical power, in a series of dramatic paintings: *King, Queen, Moonlight and Fire* (1988) and *The King, The Queen and the Republic* (1990), which tracked the transformation of General Babangida from benign popular dictator to ruthless sovereign engaged in fatal struggle with the people and republican forces. To be sure, not all artists in Nigeria were engaged in these kinds of overt political works. However, with recourse to realism, Udechukwu, Adenaike, Jegede, and Odutokun, and Oguibe were developing a praxis of art, not purely from the standpoint of social commentary or the analysis of power, but in the spirit of Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *engagement*. Here, art not only depicts, it also creates the condition for a lively space of social engagement, activism, and civic identification.

Art from Below: Laboratoire Agit-Art and the Critique of the Postcolonial State

A different kind of transformation in the contemporary art of Senegal was taking place in the early 1980s. The decade began with the end of twenty years' rule by the first president of independent Senegal, the poet-philosopher Léopold Sédar Senghor, whose massive program of art patronage belied both a worsening economy (in the latter part of his tenure), and the threat to Senegal's structural integrity caused by separatist forces in the Casamance Region. Government sponsorship of contemporary art—especially of artists associated with l'Ecole Nationale des Arts (National Institute of Arts), also known as l'Ecole de Dakar, directed in the mid 1960s by the French artist-teacher Pierre Lods; and with the Tapestry Center at Thiès, directed by leading painter Papa Ibra Tall—inadvertently led to contemporary artists' rampant dependency on state patronage and the institutionalization of the romantic Africanity promoted by Senghor. While his program of transforming the contemporary Senegalese art world into a field of manifest Negritude never quite became an uncontested reality, his cultural politics—in particular state control of cultural production by massive patronage—nevertheless forced the deferral of discussions about contemporary art's critical agency within the context of the evolving, unsettled, postcolonial state.

Earlier, in chapter two, we discussed the 1970s as a moment of pause, an interregnum in the evolution of the postcolonial state and, as such, a moment of artistic reconsideration of the postcolonial project. The Laboratoire Agit-Art, an interdisciplinary workshop founded in 1974 by the theatre practitioner Youssouf John, evolved out of this reflection. It was conceived as a critique of the Senghorian status quo. Like Western neo-avant-garde artists, Laboratoire's project epitomized the radical declaration of artistic autonomy from the political apparatus. It was an affirmation of the social role of contemporary art

and its critical and discursive potential. The critique of the state and of the beaux-arts conservatism of l'Ecole de Dakar explicitly adumbrated the group's conceptual solidarity with rural and impoverished sectors of Senegalese society, and even more so with the collectivist ethos of rural arts production. Under the leadership of Issa Samb, who replaced John, the Laboratoire developed a conceptual practice characterized by idiosyncratic anti-formalist performance work, constantly evolving and deconstructing installations in its anti-elitist environment (in Samb's compound in the center of Dakar), which incorporated found objects and unskillfully made objects and paintings, and in which participants engaged in theatrical encounters reminiscent of early-twentieth-century European Dada performances and the so-called art happenings of the 1960s. Against l'Ecole de Dakar's flirtation with modernist primitivism, its racial and nationalist idealism (what Elizabeth Harney has called its "strategic essentialism") the Laboratoire combined collectivist aspirations—as in its argument for the communal rather than individual basis of artistic production—with Marxist theory and European avant-garde theatre to create radically new environments, forms, and performances meant to completely disentangle contemporary art from stifling state control.¹ Consistent with the group's rejection of Senghor's neatly articulated vision of creativity as a celebratory act of national or racial affirmation, achieved through grand painterly and embroidered gestures, which aspired to evoke colors, patterns, designs, and compositions supposedly redolent of an essentially African sensibility. Such artists as El Hadji Sy's decision in the early 1980s to paint with his feet on rough-woven jute sacking, or Issa Samb's insistence on deskilled image-making, was meant as a critique of the aestheticism and high art ethos of the Ecole de Dakar. These decisions paralleled the development of the aesthetic of austerity in Nigeria around the same period.

By the late 1980s, in the wake of gripping political rivalry between President Abdou Diouf and the leading opposition candidate, Abdoulaye Wade (who eventually succeeded Diouf), combined with anti-Moorish ethnic violence in Dakar in 1989, Senegal was under tremendous distress.² With the devaluation of the CFA franc currency by 50 percent in January 1994, a faltering economy further revealed the extent of discontent, particularly among the urban populations in Dakar. The memory of Senghor's project of national mythmaking under the banner of Negritude was all but totally eclipsed by the harsh realities of the postcolonial state. Against this background, Sét-Sétal (be clean / make clean), an urban rejuvenation project that had its origins in the beginning of the decade, re-emerged with greater vigor in 1990–91, supported by urban youths yearning for social change. Through a program of mural painting on city and neighborhood walls, as well as the installation of sculptures at traffic circles, the urban youths were supported first by the members of Laboratoire and later by the city government and politicians. Sét-Sétal was an act of refusal of the ennui that had cloaked the city and the nation, an assertion of both the agency of disenfranchised youths and the value of communal and popular artistic interventions in contemporary Senegalese social practice and political discourse. Remarking on the project of remaking the city³, Samb articulates the fundamental disjuncture in urban praxis as another form of *engagement*: he writes that "Sét-Sétal... is a victory of the out-of-luck, the out-of-work, the *camisadas* (comrades)—as one would say in South America—in relation to those on high."⁴

For all of Laboratoire's radical stance vis-à-vis the state, its proximity to the official art bureaucracy, together with its identification with an avant-garde ethos, diluted its critique of the Senghorian cultural vision. Even its argument for a social or communal basis of contemporary art achieved limited socio-political impact. On the other hand, Sét-Sétal, short-lived as it was, because it emerged from beneath the urban fabric of popular sovereignty, demonstrated the critical potential of art in the hands of youths committed to the re-imagination and renewal of the urban space. With Sét-Sétal also emerged Huit Facettes, another artistic group devoted to generating a critical coalition with urban and rural communities and uniting the creative efforts between those communities. In the end, while the specific nature of the relationship

between Laboratoire and Sét-Sétal, that is, what particular roles the avant-garde group had in instigating the popular mass action, has not been properly documented. What is certain is that they both constituted different approaches to critique of the political, cultural and social status quo in 1980s and 1990s Senegal.

Art as Cultural Activism: Sisi Kwa Sisi and Postcolonial Kenya

The alliance of progressive cultural activists, artists, and intellectuals with urban and rural communities in the bid to redefine the social role of art in the postcolonial society was important to the development of contemporary art in Kenya during the 1980s. But in Kenya the motivation, compared to the Senegal example, was different. This was primarily due to their unique colonial histories and neocolonial realities, particularly in Kenya after independence in 1963. Independence in Kenya came out of a drawn-out, brutal nine-year anti-colonial insurgency spearheaded by a loose confederation of insurgent forces known as the Land and Freedom Army (a.k.a. Mau-Mau). Some of their celebrated leaders were Dedan Kimathi who, in the 1950s, led efforts of harassment against the sizable population of British settlers. Even after independence, many Britons controlled, and were still running, the official art and culture industry well into the late 1980s. However, by the late 1970s deep-seated discontent surfaced about the continuing influence of white settlers in Kenyan cultural production. Kenya had yet to completely decolonize, and this argument was best articulated in the criticism and novels of its most influential writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

The foundational moment in the rise of critical theatre and visual arts in Kenya was the refusal of the authorities to allow normal theatrical production of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, written by wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, and *Betrayal in the City* by Francis Imbuga at the settler-controlled Kenya National Theatre, after the successful presentation of both plays as Kenya's official entry at the Lagos FESTAC 77. Wa Thiong'o and Mugo moved their production to Kamiriithu village, a move that read as a form of solidarity with mass popular appeal. The plays of the Kamiriithu group, performed in Kikuyu, reflected a social consciousness with which the masses could identify; in fact, the cast often included members of the village performing on stage for the first time. Such theatrical productions evoked the influence of Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, a form of street theater in Brazil during the military dictatorship there in the 1960s. This sidestepping of official cultural arenas converged with forms of popular sovereignty in the argument against vestiges of colonial domination. The production of plays with subversive possibilities meant that the work of the Kamiriithu group and other groups inspired by it, especially theatre students at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University in Nairobi, constantly faced bans by the increasingly paranoid and oppressive government of Daniel arap Moi (ruled 1978–2002).⁵

These developments in contemporary theatre played an important role in the emergence of the visual arts equivalence, the Sisi Kwa Sisi (For Us, By Us) movement in Nairobi in the early 1980s. The harmonization of tertiary education in colonial East Africa by the British had resulted in the establishment of fine arts training only at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. On the other hand, the first fine arts program in Kenya was established at Kenyatta University in Kenya in the 1970s. However, despite the relatively few artists produced by Kenyan universities, there existed a thriving art scene supported by the country's robust tourism industry and by galleries originally established by white settlers. As with contemporary theatre, Sisi Kwa Sisi evolved out of the decision of university-trained artists, critics, and activists to sidetrack the established gallery system, which was notorious for its indifference toward works with socio-political content. Sisi Kwa Sisi organized outdoor exhibitions, and thus succeeded in taking art to the streets, which all but alienated the artists from the settler-owned art galleries. Sisi Kwa Sisi thus fulfilled its organizers' objective of using art as an effective means of communicating with the underprivileged populations, but also as social and political critique.

Occasional censorship of works presented in the open-air exhibitions

of Sisi Kwa Sisi between 1981 and 1983 indicated the level of discomfort by local authorities concerned about the subversive undertones of the group. Whereas the established art galleries preferred landscapes and non-confrontational themes, in the work of Etale Sukuro, Lee Karuri, and other artists associated with or influenced by the rhetoric of Sisi Kwa Sisi, a proliferation of biting social commentary reflected the extent to which the movement provided a critical platform for artists usually ignored by the mainstream Kenyan art world. The work of Etale Sukuro, an artist, critic, and cultural activist, is exemplary of what we call the Sisi Kwa Sisi aesthetic; it combines a raw, unsophisticated, illustrative style with direct satirical commentary on import-dependent consumerism, rampant social injustice, dereliction of basic responsibilities by the state, and Western economic imperialism. Sukuro's paintings, for the most part, were unconcerned with the demands of the gallery system for pretty pictures and non-confrontational subject matter. His paintings have an urgency and directness to them and a bear witness to a compulsive assertion of the primacy of message.

The manifestation of art as critique of the social and political in the postcolonial state, as shown in the examples of Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya, depended on artists' commitment to an engagement with their local visual publics. Contemporary art within the African public sphere thus constituted a mode of social transaction, or more precisely a vehicle for participating in debates about governance and popular sovereignty, and self- or communal representation within a field of complex and competing symbolic representations and communication. The radical emergence of Laboratoire Agit-Art, Sét-Sétal, Kamiriithu, and Sisi Kwa Sisi speaks to how self-organized groups of artists sought directly to motivate and inspire popular participation in the public sphere through the instrumentalization of art.

The Painting of Everyday Life: Art and Social Engagement

The context and history of socially engaged contemporary work from Kinshasa and other cities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly since the 1980s, differ markedly from that of Nigeria, Dakar, and Nairobi, in the sense that it emerged from nonradical modes of political critique and was made by artists who were working within their local visual cultures. In other words, whereas the manifestation of critical art as a consequence of popular action depended on spontaneous recognition of art's value as a vehicle for asserting collective social consciousness (as in the case of Sét-Sétal) or on the support of ideologically sophisticated artist-activists (as happened with Sisi Kwa Sisi), in Kinshasa we see an organic relationship between the work of socially engaged contemporary artists and local traditions of critical commentary in other media.

Since gaining independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960, Congo has had a troubled political history. From the assassination of the country's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, who was murdered in April 1961, his first year in office; to the four-year political crisis following the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga Region under Moise Tshombe; and finally the putsch that brought Mobutu Sese-Seko to power in 1965, the early postindependence history of the Congo represented a microcosm of Africa's political crisis during the 1960s. Sese-Seko's revanchist *authenticité* program in particular aimed at renationalizing the identity of the state and its citizens and demonstrating true autonomy from the imperial West. Yet popular response to the forced recalibration of individual postcolonial subjectivity manifested in the diverse, often subtle resistance and critical tactics in music, literature, social practices, and the visual arts. The body of work produced by artists long classified by scholars as "popular art" is one of the most important instances of social and political engagement by contemporary African artists. The social context, formal procedures, and circulatory network of this art are reminiscent of the so-called Onitsha Market Literature in Eastern Nigeria after the Second World War.⁶ In both instances, the popular imagery in art and the epistolary narrative in writing emerged in response to dramatic changes, both because of urbanization and due to access to literary and artistic markets. No doubt the features of the visual imagery

and the narratives explored anxieties of modern disjunction and the displaced individual subject under postcolonial modernity.

Chéri Samba's iconic self-portrait *The Draughtsman* (1981; p. 67) is significant for it signals, contrary to the usual tendency to see his work and that of his contemporaries (who include Moké, Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu, Cheik Lédy, and others) as part of a nebulous system of urban or popular art production and exchange.⁷ Fashionably attired in a trim dark suit and a yellow shirt, stylish white go-go boots, and beautifully coiffed halo-like afro hairstyle, he depicts himself seated on a large upholstered red chair, in a living room loaded with key symbols of late-twentieth-century African residential modernity: turntable, TV, standing fan, refrigerator, and plush carpet. However, as important as the statement conveyed by this theatrical self-representation—a performance of his individual subjectivity that draws on a tradition already established by modern African photographers—what stands out is the argument he makes in the trilingual text at the bottom of the picture about what distinguishes his work from that of his contemporaries: his combination of humorous imagery and explicatory text in his compositions, along with his mastery of portraiture. Samba's emphatic assertion of his individual and artistic subjectivity in *The Draughtsman* thus disentangles his work from the popular visual culture from which it emerged, though he retains the humor, critique, and satire that made the latter a space of resistance against and commentary on the political status quo. Moreover, given the personal cult Mobutu Sese-Seko enforced through state-owned mass media, Samba's insistent self-representation in his own work must then be read as a transgressive act, a contestation of the state's power to determine his own subjectivity and a claim to the autonomous space of critical art.

In their paintings, Samba and his younger brother, Cheik Lédy, assume the role of social critics who comment on social behavior, individual comportment, and the public good; and who analyze the zones of friction within postcolonial Congo. The illustrative simplicity and directness of their pictorial programs—though the addition of text is meant to guarantee their legibility—often masks the semantic density and rhetorical complexity of the paintings. In other words, their work simultaneously addresses multiple spectatorships, even when the subject matter is informed by local events, episodes from the artists' biographies, or Congolese history. This multilevel mode of expression is not easily explained, as scholarship on their work often emphasizes, by the distinction between local and foreign patronage. In *La Bourgeoisie* (1981), for instance, Samba sets up with imaginative precision the quadrangular vectors of conflicting desires and tensions characteristic of the African postcolony. The decadent excesses of the elites and their Western accomplices feed the simmering disenchantment of the exploited, impoverished working class; and the woman's longing for the good life runs smack against the frustration of her male companion, whose insecurity stokes his own desire for control of the female body. All this drama, meanwhile, takes place in a theatrical space in which the status of the nation-state—reduced to a cheap hotel, a locus of vice and untold decadence—is all but questionable. This work reveals an aspect of Samba's or Lédy's art (*Moral Absence*, 1990): its unrepentant hypermasculinism and its reduction of the woman to a caricature figure, as either a despicable vixen or a docile, exploitable female. We draw again the parallel between this brand of gender politics and what Stephanie Newell calls the "anxious masculinism" of Onitsha writers:

In the bulk of this literature, an anxious "hegemonic masculinity" can be seen constantly attempting to encircle sexually self-determining female bodies, repeatedly punishing those who move away from the bounded, ideal femininities—such as the "good wife"—which are actively promoted in the literature. The public face of manhood in male-authored literature is, nevertheless, not necessarily confident and assertive: its masculinist expression, which permeates the texts, is anxious, threatened by the women in society who cannot be reined in, who escape the gender ideology's control to declare their own set of self-created, more egalitarian goals.⁸

Where Samba, for the most part, focuses on the political resonances

of individual subjectivity in postcolonial Congo, Lédy and Moké have, on occasion, made direct commentary on political events. A veritable visual journalist, Moké had an eye for the pictorial thrill of mundane experience, of the urban folk, or the spectacular performance of official pageantry. The scintillating, almost iridescent palette of *Utex Africa Oye* (1989; p. 124), combined with the robust bodies of the frolicking partygoers, speaks to the resilient vitality of popular culture despite the political realities of the day. His best known work, *Mitterrand et Mobutu* (1989), not only shows the extravagant, staged populism of Mobutu's regime, it makes clear the convergence of neocolonialism and Cold War politics, particularly the support of corrupt regimes in Africa by Western powers. For his part Cheik Lédy, employing what we might call hyperbolic figuration and a high-key palette, paid as much attention to the moral bankruptcy of the contemporary city dwellers (*Moral Absence*, 1990) and the travails of the nation-state subjected to extreme stress by civil strife, competing political visions, and a tragic postcolonial history (*3ème République*, 1991).

Art, Resistance, and the Political Unconscious

If most of Africa contended with the repercussions of the economic downturn and frail polities manned by military and civilian dictatorships at the beginning of the 1980s, the decade began in Southern Africa on the bright note of Zimbabwe's independence from Britain. Yet the confrontation between the apartheid regime's "Total Strategy" of counter-insurgency and resistance forces—that had been consolidating since the Soweto Massacres in 1976 and the death in detention of Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness Movement leader in 1977—defined and dominated the political landscape of South Africa throughout the 1980s. Fundamental to the role of the contemporary artist in the debate about the soul of South Africa was the Culture and Resistance Festival hosted in 1982 by the Medu Art Ensemble (a non-racial network of exiled South Africans, Botswanans, and some American and European artists, writers, and activists residing in Botswana). The festival and conference laid the grounds for the emergence of the idea of the artist as a politically engaged "cultural worker."⁹ Whereas most black artists worked within the formal traditions of illustrative realism referred to as "Township Art" and their white counterparts largely avoided direct confrontation of the socio-political status quo through their work, the radicalization of black and white artists—variously motivated by revolutionary ideas reaching them through the Black Consciousness Movement (and the earlier Black Power Movement in the United States), Communism, and anti-colonial writings of Frantz Fanon (1925–1961)—got ballast from the call at Botswana for collective action against apartheid through art. This coalition of cultural workers against apartheid anticipated the formation in 1983 of the most important political opposition network of the period: the United Democratic Front which, in adopting the ANC's "Freedom Charter," laid the grounds for a nonracial post-apartheid South Africa.

Yet as the South African art of that decade and beyond demonstrates, the meaning and tone of political engagement differed within and across racial lines. Paul Stopforth's graphite drawings of disembodied body parts barely visible from the surrounding pitch darkness, and his monumental *Elegy* (1981; p. 63)—all of which were based on the medical examiner's photographs of Steve Biko's battered body—were important moments in the conscription of bodies of apartheid's victims as critical devices, visual testimonies, and arguments against the regime's programmatic barbarism. A decade later, perhaps because the circumstances of Biko's death remained a matter of speculation due to the state's incoherent, fudged reports, Sam Nhlengethwa returned to the subject with his own equally iconic, even more brutal reconstruction of the event. He named the collage painting *It Left Him Cold—The Death of Steve Biko* (1990; p. 134), after a statement by the South African Justice Minister who had announced that Biko's death "left him cold." Nhlengethwa's collage includes a media image of Biko's battered head, his youthful naked body stretched stiffly across the floor of a room, empty except for the portrait of a security officer on the wall and what must be police office furniture, a uniform cap, and a pair of glasses at the lower left corner.

Stopforth and Nhlengethwa in these works, or Ezrom Legae in his *Jail* series (1981), do not sidestep the question of the artist's participation in the political struggle as it played out in the realm of imagery. Similarly, Sue Williamson's *Last Supper* (1981; p. 63), an installation based on her documentation of the destruction of the home of a colored family by the state as part of its program of forced relocation of blacks and coloreds from lands designated as "whites only"; and her series *A Few South Africans* (1982–87, p. 77), portrait photographs of heroic women whose contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle—though they received little attention—were acts of recuperation through direct documentation of "minor" yet significant lives and stories of the struggle.

Artists such as Penny Siopis adopted a philosophical or meditative, yet no less critical, tactic against apartheid. Siopis took to non-narrative history painting in a series of monumental canvases she painted between 1986 and 1991, a period spanning the height of the resistance movement and the end of official apartheid in 1990. Siopis's history paintings, with nonheroic women, both black and white—victims of political and social systems invented and managed by men—as the main characters, proposed a feminist perspective on South African history, a subject in which the apartheid regime was heavily invested. Where the history of the nation, as constructed by Afrikaners, was one of resounding progress, of triumph of good over evil, of civilization over barbarism, light over infernal darkness, Siopis, in *Patience on a Monument* (1988, p. 116), sees instead a wasteland of history, a mountain of rubble on which a black woman sits, peeling an orange. In *Piling Wreckage Upon Wreckage* (1989, p. 119), a similarly clad black woman reveals or covers this pile as though she, the lowliest of apartheid's victims, holds the key to the redemption or indictment of the very past through which the oppressive, hyper-masculinist socio-political system is imagined.

The multimedia artist William Kentridge, like Paul Stopforth, was involved in the Market Theatre, a major non-racial cultural space in Johannesburg where progressive, sometimes subversive, theatrical work could be seen during the apartheid era. Yet Kentridge's involvement in the production of agit-prop drama and political posters for the resistance did not translate to overtly political art in his subsequent drawings, prints, and animated films. For Kentridge, as for Siopis, the site of struggle against apartheid was not so much the heart of the oppressed masses as the same psychological and philosophical grounds upon which the rhetoric and practice of apartheid was built. By revealing hidden pathologies and psychic dross that constitutes the increasingly fragmented, insecure self, his work unsettles and renders precarious the system of signification from which this self finds its bearing. In his triptych silk-screen prints *Art in a State of Grace*, *Art in a State of Siege*, *Art in a State of Hope* (1988, p. 112), Kentridge critiques plans for Johannesburg's centenary celebrations in a complex set of images that simultaneously questions the validity of art evacuated of political consciousness and the revolutionary efficacy of art. The central panel features the head of Soho Ecstein, the wealthy, mean industrialist and symbol of the South African capitalist system who would become a recurring character in Kentridge's inventive animated films—which the artist calls "Drawings for Projection"—including *Johannesburg: The Second Greatest City after Paris* (1989, p. 125), *Felix in Exile* (1994, p. 189), and *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).

At the end of official apartheid in 1990, the question of the place of art in post-apartheid South Africa took center stage, especially when Albie Sachs—a prominent anti-apartheid activist, a member of the ANC, and a future judge of the Constitutional Court—argued that the attainment of political freedom must be accompanied by rejection of politically engaged art and the ANC-endorsed idea of the artist as cultural worker, both of which had more or less outlived their relevance.¹⁰ As it happened, the end of apartheid came with new sets of social and political realities, not the least of which were issues of racial integration, resolution of past injustices, wealth / land redistribution, and the consequences of black political ascendance. Sue Williamson's *Truth Game* series—which reflects on the spectacularization of crime and victimhood during public testimonies to politically motivated crimes at the 1996 to 1999

Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings—and David Koloane's series of dark paintings and drawings in which menacing, stray dogs—reminiscent of the vicious canines prowling the dystopian landscapes of Jo Ractliffe's *Nadir* series of lithographs (1988, p. 115)—seem to suggest the persistence of trauma years after apartheid. On the other hand, Kendell Geers's provocative conceptual and installation work subjected prevailing ideas about political citizenship and the pathological violence of apartheid to searing critique. His *Untitled (ANC, AVF, AWB, CP, DP, IFP, NP, PAC, SACP)* (1993–94), consists of membership cards for the South African political parties that were locked in a terrifying struggle for political power in the period leading up the 1994 general elections. Geers had, in fact, acquired the cards by registering with each of the parties—from the multiracial African National Congress to the white supremacist Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, from the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party to the South African Communist Party—thus demonstrating the porosity of the apparently impenetrable ideological walls dividing a nation in dire need of more sympathetic vision of the political, racial, and cultural other.

Islam and (Trans)national Subjectivities

The injection of political Islam—what some have called Islamism—into mainstream political discourse and practice in Egypt at the beginning of the 1980s was emphatically announced with the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 by members of Al-Jihad, who were vehemently opposed to his Peace Treaty with Israel in 1979. The Muslim Brotherhood, established in Egypt in 1929, figured prominently in the country's politics prior to the 1952 Revolution; however, its subsequent suppression by President Gamal Abdel Nasser until his death in 1970 kept at bay the Brotherhood's goal of establishing an Islamic state. Sadat's government, in addition to promulgating a very controversial economic liberalization policy, unbanned the Brotherhood. Returning to the political limelight, the Brotherhood and other more radical Islamist groups campaigned against art and cultural production committed to a secularist ethos. This tension between Islamism and secularism significantly affected networks of artistic production, debate, and exchange, as did the equally important question of Egyptian (and Arab) identity in an era of rampant Westernization.

Throughout the 1980s and beyond, the work of the painter Gazbia Sirry grappled with these complex issues of Egyptian nationalism and subjectivity and the effect of the confrontation of political ideologies on the social life of the nation, especially the people of Cairo. The reappearance of the human figure in her canvases in the early 1980s—after its fragmentation in the pictures she painted in the wake of the devastating defeat of Egypt during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War—suggested a coming to terms with, and cautious optimism about, new realities of the Egyptian nation. But this was especially so after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which somewhat restored national and Arab pride. Yet the subject matter, fervid paint application, and evanescent figures in such paintings as *Cairo People* (1983, p. 79) and *Loneliness* (1988, p. 117) are equally suggestive of a state of uncertainty and anxiety about the survival of secular citizenship, individual subjectivity, and artistic freedom. Similarly, Ghada Amer's focus on women and the female body in her embroidered canvases constituted a firm assertion of the rights of women to their bodies at a time when resurgent radical Islamists called for its control in the public sphere. To be sure, the theatricalized gestures of her naked, autoerotic women confront the rhetoric of modesty and proper female comportment implied in the Islamists' campaign for imposing the veil over Muslim women. We shall return to this question of the female body as an expressive tool for articulating political action in the work of Amer and other artists.

For the moment, we note that if the Muslim Brotherhood—despite its far-reaching influence in Egyptian and Arab social, political, and cultural discourse—remained an opposition movement in a fraught relationship with the political leadership, the military coup of Omar Bashir in the Sudan in 1989 brought the Islamic Charter Front, the Sudanese affiliate of the Brotherhood, to the corridors of state power. Devastated

by two civil wars (in 1955–1972 and 1983–2005) that were caused by deep cultural and religious divisions between the northern Arab populations and southern black peoples, Sudan has also been plagued by military coups and official attempts to transform this culturally and ethnically diverse nation into a federation bound by Islamic law. The second civil war, for instance, was caused when the Brotherhood successfully pressured President Gafaar Nimeiry to reverse his earlier liberalization policies and prompted his attempt to introduce Islamic Law beyond northern Sudan.

One of the most eloquent works of art made in response to the murky, dire political landscape of Sudan during the mid 1980s is Ibrahim El Salahi's *The Inevitable* (1984–85; p. 95). Salahi, a leading member of the Old Khartoum School and undersecretary for culture and information in Nimeiry's government during the early 1970s, was detained for six months by the Sudanese government, after which he went into exile in Qatar. In any case, the ambitious scale of *The Inevitable*; its multipart grid, the visual tension between dark, finely worked sections and open, negative spaces; and, most important, the imagery of the figures locked in an asphyxiating maze of biomorphic forms with powerful arms and clenched fists defiantly jutting above: all of this not only evokes Sudan's turbulent, war-torn environment, but also seems to signal a desire for the triumph of the people's will.

The official promulgation of Islamist law by the Bashir government in the Sudan led to rampant suppression of secular cultural production, as well as imprisonment, exile, and emigration of leading Sudanese artists to the Gulf States, Europe, and the United States throughout the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹ The work of Hassan Musa, who emigrated to Italy in the late '70s and today lives in France, is exemplary of the work of many artists critical of the centrality of the discourse of national culture and continental or racial identity. His work depends on a re-reading of African and Arab encounters with Western political and cultural imperialism, and thus registers the tactical shift away from specificities of Sudanese political history to the field of global cultural politics, the experience of which is magnified or reified by his residence in Europe. His *Alien's Dream* (2003, p. 248) mirrors and reimagines the French painter Henri Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy* (*La Bohémienne endormie*, 1897), replacing the soporific calm and phantasm of Rousseau's work—in which a shepherdess sleeps peacefully in the desert while a lion approaches her from behind—with a scene in which the lion is on the verge of dismembering a recumbent figure of Osama Bin Laden, the figurehead of radical Islam. Yet by transforming the gypsy's staff into Bin Laden's gun, the moonlit landscape into a flat space collaged with American stars and stripes, Musa describes a scene of incipient savagery motivated by violent clash between two triumphalist ideologies. For Musa, as for the members of the Crystalist Group working in Khartoum in the late 1970s and early '80s, colonialism had ineluctably brought Sudanese, African, and Arab artists into the discursive orbit of Western art, its legacies, methods, and formal procedures. It is within the new space made possible by this encounter that the contemporary African artist must define and negotiate his practice.

As we have previously noted, the mass migration of African intellectuals and artists had devastating consequences on the productive capacities of African nations, and adversely affected the thriving public

sphere within the African continent. But it also contributed to the formation of various transnational ethnoscapes, to use Arjun Appadurai's term.¹² In his meditation on the "tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" in the era of globalization, Appadurai describes the ethnoscapes as "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree."¹³ Where normative communities form around claims to imagined historical connection to a fixed location, the new landscape of persons, because it is constituted by bodies unmoored from the statutory certainties of the nation-state, refuses the authority of the state but also—and this is crucial—can become a site of dynamic and radical contestation and critique of regimes of power associated with (inter)national politics.

The idea of an ethnoscapes helps our understanding of the shifting networks of Pan-Arabic artists, writers, and activists in European and North African capitals. For years, Maghrebian and Middle Eastern artists and writers, radicalized by the Arab-Israeli conflict, have used their work to advance Arab and Palestinian causes. To cite one prominent example, the Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi produced forms of political art and propaganda in collaboration with other artists, including the Tunisian painters Gouider Triki and Farid Benyahia, but also with Arab writers. Koraichi's friend was the Mauritanian Mahmoud Saleh, the representative of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Paris, who was assassinated in 1977.¹⁴ In the two-part *The Nation in Exile—Hymne Gravé* (1981; p. 64), Koraichi's etching is composed graffiti-like, with Arabic calligraphic texts, and is juxtaposed with the poetry of the then-Tunis-based Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish the verses scripted in gold by the Iraqi calligrapher-artist Hassan Massoudy. Ostensibly a commentary on the statelessness of Palestine peoples, a major locus of Pan-Arab political activism, this work suggests that exile can provide alternative spaces for constituting a nation in the absence, or until the realization, of the normative conditions of nationhood. Conversely, the collaboration between Koraichi, Darwish, and Massoudy suggests an attempt to forge a postnational sphere of artistic and intellectual collaboration across fragmented national imaginaries and in the fluidity of transnational formations.

We began this chapter by noting the strategies deployed by artists engaged with the realities of societies in transition or undergoing political distress at the beginning of the 1980s. It should be obvious that we have focused mainly on that decade in order to demonstrate the discursive affinities between artists across national frontiers and along similar socio-economic trajectories, and to reveal the rich insight that decade provides towards the understanding of contemporary African art. To follow the events of the past thirty years is, therefore, to reflect on the confluence of historical events that have determined social reality and transformed popular sovereignty in key ways. Most importantly, such a period has shaped an artistic landscape that has been formative in the emergence of an unprecedented, rich, and diverse body of work through which we can track the political history of late-twentieth-century Africa.

1. See two works by Elizabeth Harney, "The Ecole de Dakar: Pan-Africanism in Paint and Textile," *African Arts* 35, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 13–31 and 88–90; and *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 105–120.

2. Fiona McLaughlin, "Dakar Wolof and the Configuration of an Urban Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (December 2001): 153–172.

3. For an important analysis of programs of critical urbanism reflected by actions like Sét-Sétal, see Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 259–284.

4. Quoted in Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 208.

5. See Ngugu wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms, Studies in African*

Literature series

(Oxford: James Currey Press, 1993), 72.

6. Ulli Beier, "Public Opinion on Lovers: Popular Nigerian Literature Sold in Onitsha Market," *Black Orpheus* 14 (February 1964): 4–16; Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

7. See Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Collective Memory and Its Images: Popular Urban Painting in Zaire—A Source of 'Present Past,'" in *Between Memory and History*, ed. Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Lucette Valensi, and Nathan Wachtel (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1990), 183–194; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of the Self," in Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New

York: Center for African Art, 1991), 130–151.

8. Stephanie Newell, "From the Brink of Oblivion: The Anxious Masculinism of Nigerian Market Literatures," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 50–67. Newell borrowed the term "hegemonic masculinism" from R. W. Connell's, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, and Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1987).

9. See John Peffer, *Art at the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 74–98.

10. Albie Sachs, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," in *Art from South Africa* (Oxford, U.K.: Museum of Modern Art, and London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 10–15.

11. See Constance L. Kirker, "This is Not Your Time

Here: Islamic Fundamentalism and Art in Sudan: An African Artist Interviewed," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 5–11.

12. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

13. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.

14. See Paul Martin, "Zionists Blamed for Paris Murder of PLO Envoy," *The Times* (London), Wednesday, 5 January 1977: 4. There is a pdf of this issue at: http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/582/998/72372454w16/purl-rcl_TTDA_0_CS69173285&dyn=8xrn_48_0_CS69173285&st_1?sw_aep=prin77918 (accessed August 4, 2009).

Chapter 5

Archive, Document, Memory

When the elegant portraits of the great Malian photographer Seydou Keïta (1921–2001) were rediscovered in the early 1990s, the appearance of his crisp photographs before a global public—previously unaware of the work of this incomparable master and his aesthetic achievement in the immediate post-war period in colonial Mali in the 1940s and 1950s—was undoubtedly a photographic event. Not only did the matchless elegance and iconographic power of Keïta's photographs place him in the top ranks of the great modern portraitists, the depth of his work also provoked—among serious thinkers of the history of photography—a reassessment of the history of the medium. Keïta's images were documents of a social and cultural milieu so rarely visualized in the public representations of modern Africa. At the same time, they were trigger mechanisms, mnemonic time bombs that exploded the mythologies and ethnographic obsessions of Africa by the likes of the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003) and other safari photographers. Rather than feed the obsessions, Keïta's photographs inverted the logic of such image repertoire, and gave an indication of a sophisticated and unique visual language that remains unmatched by anything that came before or after.

The effortless grace of his portraits, their concise humanism, and the delicate balance he achieved between pictorial simplicity and iconographic artifice were things of enormous beauty and visual pleasure. The only other parallels to his work one can think of—in terms of its cultural overview—are perhaps with the work of other modern photographers such as the French photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927), whose work was itself also threatened by oblivion until it was pulled from the abyss of disrememberance, when it was rediscovered in Paris in the early 1920s. The other photographer to whom Keïta can be justifiably compared is the German studio portrait photographer August Sander (1876–1964), whose epic series *People of the 20th Century* came to stand for the attempt (like Keïta's) to encapsulate an entire era of a culture through the ordinariness of the people portrayed across class, social, and political structures.

Keïta's rediscovery is also a complicated mnemonic event, for what it underscored was not only the release of the images that cemented his cultural achievement from their historical incarceration, but also the unlocking of an enormous cultural archive that spearheaded the introduction of a new field of modern African aesthetic and visual studies. The importance accorded the work of such photographers as Malick Sidibé, Samuel Fosso, and J. D. Okhai Ojeikhere would have been impossible without the ground prepared by Keïta's work, which unites the idea of the archive and the oeuvre, and placed within the public imagination a visual narrative of African modernity. It is possible then, to look back at the archive of Keïta's photographs—which number more than 7,000 well-preserved negatives—as the foundational moment in which a new understanding of African visual culture was inscribed.

Therefore, we can think of the mechanisms that constitute Keïta's archive not only in terms of its composition, but also in relation to the language of appearances; the gestures of civility and self-proclamation; the triangulation between the photographic event, photographer, and the subject in an aesthetic system; as well as the social correspondences and reflections it incites in the traffic of images. More importantly is the manner in which his oeuvre delineates the proper—that is, how it maps through aesthetic symbols the grammar of visual signs, and the cultural presence of the African subject within the iron law of the colonial system. Keïta's oeuvre also gives rise, not only to these questions of representation, presence, gesture, and appearance; it provides an important link to the mnemonic drives around which the processes

of archivization and documentary are registered in both photographic practice and, more generally, in its expansion into the field of art. Thus, Keïta's work speaks equally to the conception of the archive as a mechanism of historical purpose, but as a laboratory of entangled memories. The registrations of the archival are fundamental to the works of art and images we will survey in this chapter.

With these considerations in mind, there are three distinct constellations around which this chapter is organized: the method of archivization, the mode of documentary, and the principle of the mnemonic. The idea of the archive as the organizing structure for probing into events and organizing the interpretation of visual knowledge has played a significant role in the work of contemporary artists over the last century. From Synthetic Cubism, which integrated collage elements into the broken planes of the composition, to Surrealism, Dada, and photomontage by such artists as John Heartfield (1891–1968) and Hannah Höch (1889–1978); the film montages of the Soviet filmmakers Dziga Vertov (1896–1954) and Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948); the decollage works of the French artists Raymond Hains (1926–2005) and Jacques Villeglé (born 1926); Pop Art, Conceptualism, and Appropriation; artists perceived a new ecology of images that was a fundamental part of the visual production of modern media. As photography, film, and printed media became staples of modern communication systems, images that appeared in advertisements, magazines, cinema, and other mechanically generated techniques inaugurated an archaeological system ripe for artistic exploitation, critical interpretation, and aesthetic engagement. As methods of archivization and taxonomic practices became increasingly absorbed in art, we witness the reindexing and reanimation of the surplus images and artifacts as signs, all directed at reshaping the nature of an artistic oeuvre. In so doing, this archival impulse,¹ or what Jacques Derrida described as archive fever,² revealed how the conception of the image has come to rely on technological repetition, and how the recursive traffic has made them into cultural objects. Because the very nature of all mechanically reproduced images lies in the infinite reproducibility of any material, and given the fact that photography was the archival medium par excellence, the use of the archival document became both an artistic form and a medium. It made the document the principal tool not only for generating a stream of endless copies, it also created a demand for taxonomic systems and the appetite for mixing and remixing, assembling and disassembling, constituting and deconstituting visual hierarchies, thus questioning the idea of originality. In many ways the social value of the archive became a means for confronting, questioning, and contesting ideas about the past and memory.³

While the archival form was concerned with the overarching agenda of all types of secondary sources—including images, texts, documents, even objects—the documentary form was focused specifically on the attempt to link mechanical reproduction and technological repetition with the immediacy of the real, in order to both generate and mediate its social transmission as evidence and pictorial truth. The correlation between the document and the evidentiary, and the documentary and veracity, form the core of a mnemonic concern, as well as the perpetual attempt to conceive of the historical past in connection with forms of memorialization, especially against the tendency toward amnesia and the disappearance of memory. In the context of the three constellations we laid out at the beginning, we witness artists working on different registers with an enormous awareness of the tension between past and present, the real and the fictive, the historical and the contemporary.

But quite often these seeming dichotomies are entwined to register the affect of temporal disruption and spatial continuity, such as in the

employment of photomontage by Candice Breitz, Wangechi Mutu, and Jo Ractliffe; the reconsideration of the archival through the decollagist use of excess printed billboard advertising posters by Kay Hassan, especially in his major post-apartheid collages *Flight* (1995) and *First Time Voters* (1995); in the large, open-ended compendiums of Frédéric Bruly Bouabré; and in the carefully calibrated, ordered, and—despite their seeming chaos and disorder—epistemological atlases that define Georges Adéagbo's archaeologies of African signs, visual, and historical systems. At the same time, a strong documentary impulse pervades the structuring of the relationship between the image and the real, especially in the articulation of the wounds of history—as is often encountered in the sober, focused, and reflexive photographs of David Goldblatt, whose images over the past half-century have come to stand as a model of documentary rigor for photographers as diverse as Santu Mofokeng, Mikhael Subotzky, Guy Tillim, or artists such as William Kentridge. Goldblatt's work, which focuses entirely on South Africa, employed a documentary style to analyze and to pose pointed questions about apartheid, even though he eschewed the notion of the big truth in his work. In response to the "struggle" photography that characterized documentary photography of the 1980s, Goldblatt dissociated his work from the claim that the camera is capable of telling the truth. He was strongly against the idea that his work could be simplistically appropriated for its political message.⁴ Rather, he emphasized the accretive process by which his work always aimed for the truth of the image, even when the facts of the evidence might appear ambiguous. A great example of Goldblatt's ability to illuminate a scene without the bravura of dramatization and the cheap thrill to which the documentary often succumbs is *Fifteen Year Old Lawrence Matjee After His Assault and Detention by the Security Police, Khotso House, de Villiers Street, Johannesburg. 25 October 1985* (1985), a black-and-white photograph of a young black boy staring intensely at the camera. An unfocused scrutiny of the photograph would have missed what the image reveals: that it is not a picture of a brave boy but one who is frightened, perhaps even disoriented, given the insistent, almost blank stare at the camera. But most importantly, the white plaster casts, which cover both of the fifteen year old boy's arms almost to the shoulder, is the essence of this masterpiece of subtlety and restraint, for it documents and shows the bald of brutality of his two broken arms.

Thus, Goldblatt's documentary work was a pictorial window into one of the most contested political spaces of our time. The unique exception that apartheid was, equally meant that the documentary tradition was highly developed and sophisticated, thus making it one of South Africa's strongest cultural achievements. However, as we will show, other approaches to the documentary, principally allied to the depiction of the self through the pictorial device of portraiture—be it self-generated, as revealed in the auto-portraits of Samuel Fosso, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Oladele Bamgbose, Ingrid Mwangi, Berni Searle, Youssef Nabil; or in the playful studio portraits of Malick Sidibé, or the social portraits of Zwelethu Mthethwa and Luis Basto—have been much more prevalent in the discourse of photographers and artists working outside the South African context. Other archival iterations, such as Allan deSouza's series *Lost Pictures* (2005), Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album/Look at Me, 1890-1950* (1997), Penny Siopis's *My Lovely Day* (1997), and Sue Williamson's *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart* (1990, p. 132-133) have delved into the reserve of images drawn from old family albums, Super 8 home movies, and identity papers tracking the fate of one innocuous individual among millions of other similar individuals, as tools of historical inquiry that link images and documents to critical projects of historical interpretation and the evocation of memory.

Archive and Memory

One major archival project that could be related to Keita's oeuvre is Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album / Look at Me, 1890-1950* (1997, p. 198-199), which offers an impressive distillation of the method of archivization as a means of tracking the shadows of the lost, the forgotten, or the socially repressed. Mofokeng, who is known for his poetic black-and-

white documentary photographs, established his reputation in the mid 1980s as a member of the photographic collective Afrapix, founded in 1982 as a photo agency of young, politically-minded photographers who wished to use photography towards anti-apartheid causes. Afrapix's commitment to the idea that photography should play a role in the struggle against apartheid is antithetical to the documentary principle assumed by Goldblatt, who was himself no less committed to the struggle, but in a different way.

Black Photo Album/Look at Me, 1890-1950, however, is entirely different. Both in its concern and its methodology, it carefully deviated from conventional documentary, aiming instead for a dialectical exploration of the tension between document and documentary. But its central feature is documentation. The work is the result and a culmination of Mofokeng's time as a researcher and documentary photographer at the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. In the early 1990s, while working at the university, he embarked on an ambitious archival research project involving the search for and recovery of photographic images of urban middle-class Africans in South Africa in the years between three wars: the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the First World War (1914-1918), and the Second World War (1939-1945). To collect the large number of archival photographic portraits, Mofokeng visited families in black townships across South Africa and followed leads about defunct photographic studios. Paradoxically, *Black Photo Album / Look at Me* could be likened to the work of oral history, a recollection of the vanished, or the soon-to-be-lost from collective memory. The major focus of his research are the images of middle-class black South Africans, or at least those who had regular interactions with Europeans—but who were not subservient—especially those members of the black community of high standing such as bishops, teachers, composers, or farmers. Part of the motivation behind Mofokeng's choice of images was the desire to reveal contrary images that were against the ethnographic type. The photographs he collected were carefully chosen: first, to question first the prosaic assumptions of a modernity without Africans; and second, to show self-representations of Africans in a system that did not recognize their human qualities. The central idea behind his project was the crisis of the black photographic image in the memory-bank of colonial and apartheid South Africa. But it is also a discourse around the social rituals of the photographic image. In a short introduction written on the project, he explains the underlying issues of his inquiry:

These are images that urban black working and middle-class families commissioned, requested, or tacitly sanctioned. Some were left behind by dead relatives. Some hang on obscure parlor walls in the townships. In some families they are coveted as treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage, and personality. And because to some people photographs contain the "shadow" of the subject, they are carefully guarded. . . . Sometimes they are destroyed with other rubbish during spring-cleaning because of interruptions in continuity or disaffection with the encapsulated meanings and history the images convey. Most often they are rotting through neglect, lying hidden in chests, cupboards, cardboard boxes, and plastic bags. . . . When we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. How we see these images is determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own... The images depicted here reflect their sensibilities, aspirations and sense of self."

In *Black Photo Album / Look at Me*—which comprises two exhibition strategies: mounted gelatin-silver reproductions of the found archival prints, and a narrative-length, eighty slide projection that intersperses text and image—Mofokeng establishes a discursive relay between the historicity of the photographic object and the pictorial traces of the smudged prints. In doing so, a clear relationship between what could be called the verities of the ethnographic lens and a testamentary stance are forged out of the documentation and text that asks us to see the images in light of the histories of their owners, their social circumstances, and above all in terms of how the subjects wished themselves to be seen. Even if the portraits, as Mofokeng writes, may be self-construc-

tions, they nevertheless are constructions which have been authored and authorized by the subjects. Therein lies their fundamental truth, not as image, as such, but in the constructions that direct us towards the images' internal logic, as a prop for the subjects' own idea as a historical subject. The second principle is the role that memory plays in the recollection of these facts. However, the photographic object is itself not necessarily the carrier of an absolute truth about the subjects. What it does is permit a certain form of archival visibility and visualization; the photograph functions like a kindle in the tinder-box of memory, which engulfs and haunts our experience. The archival could therefore be characterized, as Michel Foucault describes it, as "that designation of the visible which, by means of a kind of pre-linguistic sifting, enables it to be transcribed into language."⁶

The language of the image and the traces it carries from the past are the subjects of Allan deSouza's *Lost Pictures* (2005, p. 274). Unlike Mofokeng's work, deSouza's project is shot through with ambivalence. It is covered with a thick cobweb of derealization. It conceives of the archival as an act of unremembering, as a zone of decay, of things that are irretrievable, unimaginable, or simply, mnemonic dust. The process of bringing the photographs to their final state of realization required, initially, that the images be subjected to acts of radical destabilization rather than transformed into objects of veneration, as a form of memory worship. Rather than sharpen their pictorial clarity, deSouza, who was born in Kenya to Goan, Indo-Portuguese family, took the images—which are derived from a series of color slides shot by his father in the early 1960s in pre-independence Kenya, several years before the family's permanent emigration to Europe—to murky depths. First he made inexpensive machine color prints from the slides, then taped the photographs to surfaces around the apartment: —the bathroom sink, the dining table, areas of busy foot traffic. By exposing the images to the effects of his domestic life—for instance, the images on the bathroom sink were splattered with water, deposits of shaved stubbles, or those on the dining table became coated with food crumbs, spills, and smudges. Through this process of exposure, over time, the photographs began to decay and to degenerate through their subjection to the everyday wear and tear while the acid of daily living started eating into the images, thus erasing, obscuring, and finally transforming the entire archive into abstract surfaces on which hover ghostly shadows. The resulting pictures look like weathered billboards, or of images that have been partially scraped off. Yet even as the images had degenerated, once deSouza scanned and printed them, the deposits on their surfaces seemed to bring the photographs into a new zone of visibility and stability. In the act of desacralizing the archival object, *Lost Pictures* posited an interpretive account of memory by questioning how we remember and what such remembering manifests.

Self-Representations

As revealed by the two projects *Lost Pictures* and *Black Photo Album / Look at Me*, the arena of the archive is deeply entangled within the taxonomy of representations and self-representations. The photographic album in these two instances is the scene in which the analysis of these self-representations take place or are deployed to make sense of the past, in order to designate the visible in accordance with the wishes of how the individual portrayed in each unit, and framed by their desires to be seen. Photographic portraiture is therefore the domain of a desire to become visible, to stage a manifestation of the self. Thus, an important juncture at which the archive, documentary, and memory have constantly intersected is in the use of portraiture as the pre-linguistic sphere in which the appearance of the self is reflected in accordance with the taxonomy of self-representations. As Keïta's portraits make all too clear, the photographic studio is the site of this romance.

It has been said that photography is a site of memorialization, a record of what has been, the draining of the instant into the posterior of memory, and therefore a representation of the past. All photographic images serve to remind us of a past event, as the surrogate of ourselves, or as synecdoches of memory. The French social and liter-

ary critic Roland Barthes (1915–1980) conceptualized three dominant structures in which the image is produced: in the first field resides the *operator*, namely the photographer; in the second is the *spectator*, that is ourselves; and the third is "the *spectrum* of the photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead."⁷ But beyond the morbid element of this insight, the *spectrum* could be likened to the studio. And artists would seize this space not only as a site of spectacle, but also as a representational device, and a discursive vehicle in the interplay between the self and the other. A famous example of this conceptualization of the *spectrum* are the studio fictions of American artist Cindy Sherman. Similarly, at the time Sherman was conceiving her magnum opus, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), Samuel Fosso also began his own extensive fictions at his studio in Bangui, Central African Republic. The earliest of the self-portraits by Fosso are contemporary with Sherman's film stills.

In the mid 1970s, after serving a short apprenticeship in a commercial photographic studio in Bangui, the Cameroonian-born Nigerian Fosso, then still a teenager of no more than fifteen years, opened his own small studio, *Studio Photo Nationale*. By day, Fosso devoted his time to fulfilling the orders and wishes of his clients, producing an array of portraits, documenting all kinds of quotidian rituals: birthdays, weddings, or simply inscribing the desire of individuals to be photographed and therefore to enter a record of themselves in popular memory. These images—small 5 x 7 prints and sometimes larger—would, in turn, be put on display on the back wall of the studio's cramped reception area. However, at the end of his normal working hours, Fosso began transforming his studio into a performative arena in which he started to generate a series of self-representations that was as much a work of vanity as it is a taxonomy of masculine desire. He would stage himself in various guises, outfits, and assume different poses, with a theatrical awareness of the power of the lens that was quite unusual for someone so young. In some of the images, using Letraset, a commercially made dry-transfer lettering, he added appealing aphorisms or proverbs appropriated from magazines or from common usage. With these image-text combinations—one reads "La vie c'est la liberté" (Life is Liberty); another reads "Lisons dans le future car le passé est là pour nous transformer" (Let us read the future because the past is here to transform us); and another, "Belles sont les caresses, douces les tendresses" (The beautiful caresses, and soft tendernesses)—Fosso imprinted his work with another discursive element, the idea of the photograph operating independent of the image, but as a locus through which to channel inner dialogue with the self.⁸

Fosso's precocious work of the late 1970s, like Keïta's, opened up another gallery of African self-representation and the notion that the self embodied not only different assortment of desires but is also a field of knowledge. These ideas would be revived with the *Tati Series* (1997, p. 196–197), which signaled Fosso's return to self-portraiture after years of not making any portraits, owing to the fact, that by the early 1980s, the studio photography genre in Africa was in decline, a crisis precipitated by the advent of inexpensive, commercial machine-printed color photographs and the wide availability of instant cameras that displaced the need to use a photographer. Having witnessed the collapse of his clientele, Fosso switched to working as a dealer in photographic materials procured from Nigeria and sold to street photographers in Bangui. In the *Tati Series*, styled in garish outfits bought from the popular Parisian bargain-basement purveyor of cheap goods, Tati, and photographed in saturated color, Fosso pushed his work toward the idea of the masquerade. Rather than purely self-portraits, the images in the series, portraying different characters—sailor, pirate, business executive, golfer, African chief, biker, drag queen—were humorous send-ups of social types.

Fosso's more recent work, *African Spirits* (2008, p. 330–331), is a gallery of fifteen pan-African portrayals and representations of contemporary and historical moments of major African or diasporic African figures, whose impact on postcolonial thought has left a significant mark

not only through their individual work, but also through the signifying language of both their public and their own self-representations. The images of historical figures such as Mohammed Ali as Saint Sebastian on the cover of Life magazine, Angela Davis in her "Black Power" Afro, Nelson Mandela as a young Xhosa chief, Patrice Lumumba as the young Congolese prime minister, Léopold Senghor in the ceremonial uniform of his induction into the Académie Française, Kwame Nkrumah in an official portrait as Ghana's first prime minister, Martin Luther King speaking before a podium, John Carlos, the American sprinter with his fist raised in Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, among others, have all been refashioned by Fosso as a commentary on the postcolonial archive and the memories it provokes.

In this gallery of images, Fosso renews the engagement between archive, documentary, and memory, an idea that also gained an incredible form of historical reflexivity in the images of Rotimi Fani-Kayode. If Fosso's *African Spirits* enunciated a political allegory of African public self-representation, Fani-Kayode simultaneously examines the intersection of the classical African self—seemingly whole and authentic—and the gay African body—supposedly diseased, shamed, and inauthentic. The collision of these fields of knowledge, between the self and other, between the inauthentic and authentic, is framed in a series of dense black-and-white portraits in which the artist employed copies of classical African sculptures: an Ife bronze head in *Bronze Head* (1987, p. 107), in which the head serves as a phallus penetrating the male figure; a Dan mask in *Dan Mask* (1989, p. 123), whereby the mask is held up to the artist's face, both as a mirror and as the portrait of the self-same face; a Gelede helmet mask in *Ebo Orisa* (1988), which similarly enacts the intersection of the idea of the façade—as the nominal site of appearances—and the mask as the cover under which appearances are seen in disguise. These reflections on self-representation as part of different modes of imaging the body, owe their profound iconographical insight to the artists' recursive return to different parts of the African archive. Zineb Sedira explores the archive in relation to the way social constraints frames the female body in *Self Portrait or Trinity* (2000, p. 221) a series of photographs in which three female figures are entirely shrouded in white habits or burkas. Ingrid Mwangi's *Static Drift* (2001), is a double photograph showing two moments in which the outline of the African continent and shape of Germany are traced across the artist's torso between lower part of the chest, just beneath the breasts and below the abdomen. In the first image the map of the continent is traced out in a shade of skin demonstrably lighter than the rest of the surrounding brown skin. The phrase "Bright Dark Continent" is inscribed in a tone comparable to the brown part of the body and can be read as it curves from the upper northern reaches of the map to the southern portion at the bottom. The second image reverses the process in the first: here the portion in which the map of Germany is fixed is considerably darker than the earlier one of the continent. A different phrase, which reads "Burn Out Country," can be similarly read against the dark brownish blot. Because Mwangi is of Kenyan and German parentage—her father is Kenyan and her mother German, and therefore she is simultaneously African and European—*Static Drift* articulates the incommensurable field of African identity, and the relationship of race and ethnicity in the archive of selves among the diverse self-representations. Berni Searle draws on similar enunciations of racial difference and hybirdity in *Red, Yellow, Brown, White ("Colour Me" series, 1998, p. 202)*, a four-panel photographic portrait of the artist's body covered in different pigments, as if from a color chart. This work not only addresses the complicated nature of racial categories in South Africa and the exploitation of the classifications of communities according to the hierarchy of color, with white being the most desirable under apartheid, it also opens up a zone of critique of essentialist African identities that is being staked out in postcolonial studies. Each of these artists works with a historical awareness of the diverse representations of the African self and have worked out a richly reflexive examination of its contemporary resonances be recourse to the archival imprint.

Document, Documentary, Verité

The relationship between the document, documentary, and verité was broached earlier in the discussion of David Goldblatt's documentary work in the way such work oscillate between different points of discourse and orders of representation. Though Goldblatt's assumed distance from the eagerness of the documentary to direct the gaze to an event of truthful consequence is marked by anxiety, such documentary, especially those that typified the engaged work of "Struggle" photography—what Cornell Capa called "Concerned Photography"⁹—have also clarified the fact that no distance can fully absolve the photographer from the proximity of the event. And that the objective, calibrated approach is part of the other side of the coin on which the subjective, highly political forms of the documentary is stamped. French photographer Marc Riboud states the objectives of the photographer as a commitment to real events. He says: "For me, the photographer is a witness. His job is to record real events rather than to stage or create something in front of the camera."¹⁰ However, by the 1990s, photographers in South Africa such as Guy Tillim and Mikhael Subotzky embraced the full measure of the documentary form, and in a series of works have, in fact, made the revival of the photo-essay the core argument of a new documentary practice. Rather than strike a stance of ambivalence towards the documentary they, along with Pieter Hugo, Boubacar Touré Mandemory, Randa Shaath and, to some extent, Yto Barrada, and Fatou Kandé Senghor, have each devoted considerable energy to reinventing the documentary and making it speak to diverse discursive strategies. Subotzky, a young Cape Town-based photographer gained prominent public attention with his sensational *Der Vier Hoeke* (The Four Corners, 2004–05), a photographic essay documenting the situation of prisoners and the conditions in which they are incarcerated in two prisons (Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison and Voorberg Prison) in the Cape in South Africa. After being granted permission and extraordinary access by the prisons' authorities, he spent six months photographing some of the most hardcore and dangerous inmates and gangs in the prisons. Images of the overcrowded cells, packed with bodies lying about in bunk beds and mattresses on the floor, and the intense focus on the prisoners themselves, their tattooed bodies, or accompanying the bodies of dead prisoners being shipped back to family members for burial, revealed an extraordinary sensitivity.

What is even more remarkable is that *Der Vier Hoeke* was first presented as the undergraduate thesis by Subotzky at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town, from which he graduated with highest honors. His other bodies of work, including the series on homelessness such as *Hermanus on Mattress, Icon Building, Cape Town* (2005, p. 280–281) and the documentation of the inhabitants of the town of Beaufort West in the Karoo Desert, such as the image *Samuel (Standing) Vaalkoppies (Beaufort West Rubbish Dump, 2006, p. 299)*, inscribe the attitude of the new confident documentary mode. Guy Tillim, who has been a prolific practitioner of this form of documentary over the last decade, was, like Santu Mofokeng, an original member of Afrapix in the 1980s and today continues to photograph not just in South Africa, but across all of Africa. His photo essays, such as *Mai Mai militia in training near Beni, eastern DRC, for immediate deployment with the APC (Armée Populaire du Congo), the army of the RCD-KIS-ML, December 2002* (2002, p. 242–243) *Kinhunga Portraits* (2003, p. 255), and *Jo'burg* (2004), have each taken up themes of socio-political transitions, urban transformation, and conflicts in different African contexts.

Yto Barrada's *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (1998–2003) is a body of work spanning five years of quiet observation of the changes occurring on the shores of Tangier in Morocco as the border between Europe and Africa was transformed into a formidable *cordon sanitaire*, a space of limit, a shuttered border where desperate young men and women congregate, seeking to emigrate to Europe in search of opportunity. Barrada, whose images have the soft focus of poetic documentary, photographs her subjects from a distance and avoids the kind of suffocating intimacy that is the hallmark of documentary reportage. In the unfolding narrative of the series, we see landscape intermingled with

portraits, factory interiors situated next to rusting cranes in the harbor, a wallpaper of a forest, a faded poster of a resort, a young man isolated against the barricaded gates of a closed shop, a young girl enthroned in a chair as bride. These eclectic scenes reveal the porosity of the situation being analyzed, and show that there is no one single image to describe the devastation—psychic or otherwise—which the series subtly suggests. Such poetic meandering is also perceptible in Maha Maamoun's *Cairoscapes* (2001–03, p. 228) a photographic series depicting the bodies of Cairene women, as if they are simultaneously an abstraction and a landscape, owing to the fact that the images never reveal who the subjects are, but rather show a common pattern between them through the floral designs of the dresses each is wearing. Mandemory's images, like Maamoun's, are engaged with the urban form, with its bodies, colors, and movements. His photographs of Dakar are shot in extreme angles, evoking vertiginous spaces between bodies and the surrounding landscape, or suggesting the quality of movement as if the bodies are in perpetual motion.

On the more conceptual aspect of the document and documentary alignment are the video monuments of Candice Breitz, which samples the archives of pop culture imagery and popular songs to compose por-

traits of celebrities as icons of our contemporary collective unconscious. In her sixteen-channel video installation *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson*, 2005, p. 272–273), for example, the so-called King of Pop is celebrated, sampled, and parodied through stock images of his eponymous self-constructions: dress, dance movement, pose, gesture, voice, and song. Kay Hassan's *Negatives 1–6* (2006, p. 290–291) works directly with found imagery and the materiality of the archival object in the collages of found Polaroid negatives, while Robin Rhode uses seriality and documentation to stitch together real-time performances staged purely for the camera. All these manifestations address the intersection of archivization, documentary, and the mnemonic, as well as the conceptual, discursive, epistemological, and pictorial orders they inscribe in the making and meaning of contemporary African art. As we have suggested throughout, the reasons for the relentless recourse to the archive and documentary owes a great debt to the way in which mechanical reproduction and technological repetition in modernity, as well as the techniques of photography, were placed at the helm of redistributing the events of the everyday, marking them with their mnemonic stain and engendering a prolific attention to the archive and the proliferation of the archive's iconographic and documentary remainders as they feed the tributaries of memory.

1. See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22.

2. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

3. These issues were explored in the exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, curated by Okwui Enwezor at the International Center of Photography, New York. See also the accompanying catalogue, Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New

York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2008).

4. See Okwui Enwezor, "Matter and Consciousness: An Insistent Gaze from a not Disinterested Photographer, a Conversation with David Goldblatt," in Corinne Diserens and Okwui Enwezor, *David Goldblatt: Fifty One Years* (Barcelona: MACBA, 2001), 13–43. For a discussion of resistance or struggle photography, and its tension with Goldblatt's renunciation of the idea that the camera can be an effective overt tool for calling the legitimacy of apartheid

into question, see the insightful essay by David L. Krantz, "Politics and Photography in Apartheid South Africa," *History of Photography* 32, Number 4 (Winter 2008), 290–300.

5. Santu Mofokeng, "The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950," *Grand Street* 64 (Spring 1998), 157–158.

6. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1973), 138.

7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on*

Photography, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 9.

8. For further discussion of Fosso's work during this period, see Maria Francesca Bonetti and Guido Schlinkert, *Samuel Fosso* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2004).

9. See Cornell Capa, *The Concerned Photographer* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972).

10. Ibid., frontispiece.

Chapter 6

Abstraction, Figuration, and Subjectivity

Abstraction and (Post)colonialism

One of the thorny issues artists and critics grappled with in the early years of Nigerian independence, a time of significant shifts and realignments in the Lagos art scene, was the perception that several of the young artists—including Erhabor Emokpae, Okpu Eze, Uche Okeke, and Collette Omogbai—had given in to the corruptive influence of abstract painting. Critics scoffed at the amounts of money the artists asked for empty canvases that did not show substantial labor or complete mastery of figurative drawing and other aspects of academic painting.¹ Moreover, in a widely read essay, “*Into the Abstract Jungle*,” the renowned contemporary artist Ben Enwonwu (1918–1996), who studied at London’s renowned Slade School of Fine Art, accused the artists he saw as impressionable dilettantes, of exposing Nigerian art to dangerous and unwholesome aspects of modern European art by embracing “abstractionism.” Enwonwu further argued that “the invasion of Nigerian art by abstract art [was] part of the system of artistic colonialisation (sic).”²

Three crucial points on the question of abstraction ought to be clear from this. First, the critics of the so-called abstract tendencies in the Lagos art scene regarded this formal language as reflective of an impoverished imagination, a failure to demonstrate one’s artistic integrity, and a betrayal of the Nigerian modernist tradition established by the pioneer artist Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) and sustained by the painter and political cartoonist Akinola Lasekan (1916–1974), along with Enwonwu. Second, in declaring the incursion of abstraction as artistic colonialism just years after the attainment of political independence, Enwonwu renounced the apparent continuation of European and Western cultural and artistic hegemony; in short, abstraction was, to him, antithetical to the very conditions of postcolonial subjectivity. His pronouncement might strike us today as regressive, but not if we remember that just in the preceding decade, the Cold War was being fought through art, with the elevation of the New York School’s Abstract Expressionism as the artistic form of Western capitalist democracy, pitched against the figurative work of Socialist Realism. Seen in this context, Enwonwu’s rejection of abstraction reflects not only his awareness of the ideology of artistic form during the Cold War, but also his recognition of the need for a new approach to form and artistic language in the work African artists who had only just won their political independence from western Europe. Third, the fact that Enwonwu was an alumnus of the Slade School of Fine Art, University of London—with its strong figurative tradition and remarkable renunciation of modernist abstraction—suggests more complex motivations for his criticism of abstraction.³ In any case, Enwonwu’s argument and the critical responses to abstraction nearly half a century ago foreground the discursive context of the formal language of contemporary African art during that period.

The parallel between this debate in art and a contemporary controversy, tackled at the 1963 writers’ conference at Makerere University, Kampala, around the relevance of colonial (European) and indigenous African languages in the postcolonial African literature, suggests to us a general attitude toward form in contemporary African art and literature: artistic and literary language is ineluctably bound up with question of subjectivity. In other words, the Kantian notion of pure aesthetic inquiry or fundamental formalism—that is, the idea of art uncorrupted by the political, the ethical, and the social—could not be part of the discussion about the use of artistic form, whether abstract or figurative, by postcolonial African artists. For the most part, this is because art indeed had work to do in addition to, or apart from, inciting visual pleasures or attaining aesthetic grace. In an era when a majority of Africans were still mapping the full implications of political sovereignty, the outlines

of national cultures, and the proper modes of postcolonial subject formation, the debate about the appropriate language of art and literature shows the extent to which artists and writers imagined their work as an important part of the politics of being. If, as we have argued in this book, the years since the 1980s marked a fundamental shift away from the social and political realities of the ‘60s and ‘70s, it seems appropriate to wonder if this shift also meant, for instance, a different attitude to form and visual language. As we show in the following section, the problem of abstraction and figuration in the work of contemporary artists was not unique to Nigeria nor did it end in the 1960s.

This chapter grapples with the nature of abstraction or figuration in contemporary African art since 1980. Here, we will focus on exemplary uses of abstract and figural forms by artists, for we are convinced that examining the conditions of their use is crucial to understanding the often complex connections between the artists’ formal experiments and interests, and the discursive terrains of their work. But what, precisely, do we mean by abstraction and figuration? There is no doubt that the two terms, and we might add any other alternatives, are bedeviled by a fundamental inexactitude. Yet we take to heart Robert McVaugh’s description of abstract as a collective term for “all works of art which deviate in some notable way from the optical literalism.”⁴ However, it will become obvious that we are much more concerned with extreme deviations from optical literalism; in other words, images composed of supposedly pure or non-objective forms. For such works not only show the dramatic collapsing of radical formalism and conceptual densities characteristic of the work of many African artists, they also point to the artists’ adoption of postmodern and postcolonial rejection of the ideology of abstraction, even when their work is apparently circumscribed by formalist preoccupation. On the other hand, by “figuration” we mean the various modes of deploying the human figure for its formal and expressive potential. We are not so much interested in the use of the human figure as demonstration of mastery of artistic techniques as in what Thomas McEvilley calls “new figuration,” referring to the rejection by Western contemporary artists in the 1980s of the worn notion of representational neutrality while exploring the figure’s inherent ability to convey specific codes and their underlying ideologies.⁵ Our choice of the term figuration rather than, say, realism is informed by the insistent presence of the human figure in the work of contemporary African artists. We seek to understand the rhetoric of the figure and, in the larger scheme of this chapter, its dialectical relationship with abstraction. It is important also to note that we recognize a long figurative tradition in modern African art, a history that goes back to the affirmative figuration of Aina Onabolu and the Egyptian Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891–1934). As the work of these two pioneer artists and others active in the colonial period testify, the human figure was often conscripted into arguments for Africa’s modernity and the humanism of its peoples. On the other hand, the new figuration of late twentieth-century African artists is remarkably “renunciatory,” to use McEvilley’s term, in the sense that it is frequently critical of the postcolonial human condition.⁶

The Politics of Abstraction

Coming a few decades after the abstract expressionism of the New York School, particularly the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, the canvases produced by the black South African artist David Koloane (p. 320) in the later half of the 1980s seem derivative and unremarkable. Yet contemporary critical reception of this work in the largely white art world suggests that Koloane was engaged in a radical intervention, or rather that he used the work to announce the arrival of an alterna-

tive, unsettling artistic subjectivity in the racially fraught apartheid-era South Africa. Systemic apartheid placed serious limitation on black artists' access to the art training in the whites-only art schools, while the only spaces available to black artists were art centers that existed at the margins of the art industry. The first and best known of these centers, Polly Street Art Center in Johannesburg, established under the direction of white artist Cecil Skotnes in the early 1950s, was significant to the process of constituting "Township art," the dominant apartheid-era painting style mostly associated with black artists.

While we can trace Township art's documentary realism to the work of early black artists—including John Mohl, Gerard Bhengu, Gerard Sekoto—the Polly Street graduates, supported by the new opportunities that opened up for their work in spite of the strictures of apartheid, became the new authentic black artists committed to representing black life in the impoverished townships. The realism associated with this art was favorably regarded by white collectors and critics who considered modernist abstraction beyond the reach of black artists, and by the operatives of the resistance movement, for whom a realist style of painting seems the more effective in accomplishing the cultural work required of engaged artists. Abstraction in the hands of black artists was thus perceived by critics as a mark of black inauthenticity, a declaration for the sort of individualism alien to an imagined black essence; it was also a sign of abandonment of both the political cause and community, and a gesture of the artists' social irresponsibility. Sidney Kasfir has suggested that the resistance to black abstraction in South Africa did not so much reflect a racial attitude as it reflected the fact that South Africa's marginality to the European modernist movement meant widespread suspicion of abstraction in favor of realism-based genres. The history of South African modernist art tells a different story. From the expressionist work of Maggie Laubser (1886–1973) and Irma Stern (1894–1966), who moved in the circles of major German expressionists in Weimar Germany, to the biomorphic abstraction of Cecil Skotnes (1926–2009) and non-objective imagery of Douglas Portway (1922–1993) and Bill Ainslie (1934–1989), there is documented history of white South African familiarity with modernist work to make further exploration of it by contemporary white artists not as radical—and objectionable—as black artists' appropriation of this formal language.⁷

In any case, the introduction of abstraction to the work of black artists in the 1980s reveals complex discursive contexts of contemporary art at the height of the anti-apartheid resistance. One crucial factor in the dissemination of abstraction in black art was the inaugural Thupelo art workshop organized in 1985 by Bill Ainslie—the founder of Johannesburg Art Foundation, an alternative, multiracial, art school—and his former student and colleague Koloane. Thupelo, the inaugural session of which was led by the American abstract expressionist painter Peter Bradley, encouraged artists to liberate their imagination from the burden of representation through experimentation with gesture, surfaces, and compositional elements. Thus the conjunction of the rhetoric of experimental aesthetics championed by the Thupelo Workshops, the intervention of black critics such as Njabulo Ndebele and Eskia Mphahlele, concern about the dangers of propagandist art, and Ainslie's own attraction to abstraction after years of making figurative work inspired Koloane to turn to this mode in the mid '80s.

However, deployment of the formal tactics of abstract expressionism—dripping paint, vigorous drawing, and most especially non-objective imagery—in the work of Koloane, Pat Mautloa, Dumisani Mabaso, and others—did not imply acceptance of the very basis of pure abstraction, the evacuation of (political) content. The dense, roiling surfaces of Koloane's canvases, such as *Untitled* (1987) in the Robert Loder Collection do not so much compel the viewer to appreciate the gestural freedom and controlled randomness of paint application or the richness of the field of color, as suggest a scene of violent clash from which mangled human figures are about to emerge. It becomes clear that by resorting to this specific type of abstraction—rather than, say, hard edge or color field modes—Koloane wanted to make the connection between a vigorous, almost automatic process of this type of image making and

the social landscape of 1980s South Africa. Against the background of the restive, roiling '80s, abstract expressionist painting became, in the hands of the few black artists attracted to it, an alternative, more loaded vehicle for expressing in paint the apartheid culture of violence. In Koloane's later work, such as the haunting *Dog* series, or the recent meditations on the night (*The Night Has a Thousand Whispers; The Night Has a Thousand Conspiracies; The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, all of 2008, p. 320), crowds of people and stray dogs—enduring symbols of the unruly violence of the South African streets in his and other artists like Jo Ractliffe—are simultaneously defined by and enmeshed in a field of rapidly applied strokes of paint resulting in an uneasy tension between abstraction and figuration.

While Koloane and his South African compatriots arrived at abstraction in the 1980s by way of their engagement with American abstract expressionism, in North Africa the Islamic aniconic mandate, its apparent proscription of the figure in visual expressions, provided contemporary artists opportunities for exploration of alternative—that is to say, non-Western—forms of formal abstraction. In the 1950s and '60s artists of the Old Khartoum School focused on the plastic potential of Arabic calligraphic script; El Salahi, the school's leading artist, subjected the text to such analysis that the result was a series of new graphic, noniconic forms with which he constituted non-objective and figurative paintings that explored mnemonic, political, and sacred subject matter:

I took the calligraphy itself and took away the meaning from it... Then I had to break the forms of the letters themselves and try to see the bones of the letters... starting to break [the letters] and reorganizing them in a different shape. It then became the beginning of a new pictorial idiom from which I started creating my pictures.⁸

The sort of deep structural analysis to which Salahi submitted the calligraphic form depends on appreciating scripts as abstractions to which specific or shifting semantic content is attached. Thus even in breaking and reconstituting the calligraphic forms into non-textual abstract forms, they retain their ability to carry and sustain meaning beyond their manifest visuality. There is also another important aspect to Salahi's use of abstraction in his work, and that is his immersion in Sufi mysticism. His visual meditations on abstract ideas such as metaphysical unity, sacral silence, and the manifestations of the axis mundi in the natural world, places a premium on clean, simple composition lines, and the expansive negative spaces of his recent work. His technical process approximates a cleansing and refining process that removes the dross of nature, leaving a visual equivalent of pure essence, a heightened spiritual state. All this comes together in his recent series of drawings based on the Haraz tree ("The Tree" series, 2000–2002); the progressive transformation of this hardy, gnarly, drought-resistant acacia tree into a geometric abstract composition that counterpoints strong vertical and horizontal lines, is reminiscent of the theosophy-inspired neo-plasticism of the Dutch modernist painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944).

Salahi's formal simplicity contrasts remarkably with Nja Mahdaoui's elaborate abstract composition (p. 188), which is also based on Arabic calligraphy. Less concerned with mystical possibilities of the script or its function as legible text, Mahdaoui deliberately stripped the same graphic forms that constitute the alphabets of their legibility by reconstituting them in a manner determined solely by his own imagination. Characterized by stunningly crisp, intricately worked rectilinear or looped marks, and the interplay of bold and delicate lines, Mahdaoui's compositions, by not alluding to recognizable pictorial or textual form, seem like indexical marks of a complex dance movement.

If Mahdaoui's formal purism depends almost entirely on manipulating the solid, penned line, and thus acknowledges the primacy of calligraphy as art in the Islamic tradition, Odili Donald Odita (p. 309) explores the connection between abstract, flat color compositions and the experience of virtual and real space in and through non-objective painting. Despite the fact that the insistent horizontality of his canvases allude to imaginary landscapes, and thus anchors the work to the real, they are nevertheless the result of a painstaking process of permutation with flat

colors to approximate human emotion of the sort one might associate with blues music. His recent mural painting, somewhat reminiscent of the conceptual wall paintings of Sol Lewitt (1928–2007), intervenes and reshapes the viewer's phenomenological experience of the architectural space. Through the mural's strong palette and dynamic shapes of color Odita incites in the viewer an energetic sensation of the environment perceptually restructured by the painting.

Like Odita, the Ghanaian painter Atta Kwami (p. 308) also uses abstraction that depends on the manipulation of color shapes. But if Odita uses commercial paints for hard-edge compositions in which the painter's hand is only barely visible in the subtle textures of the paint surfaces, Kwami until recently worked his paint surfaces to reveal the sensuousness of the act of painting. There is an unmistakable echo of the vigorous abstract expressionism of, say, the German-American painter Hans Hoffmann (1880–1966) in Kwami's compositions, which have rectangular patches of heavily applied paint. He also explores on the one hand the vexillographic and textiles traditions of the Akan peoples of Ghana—specifically the well known Kente strip-woven cloth and the vividly colored, narrative-rich, appliquéd military flags of the Fante—and on the other, various West African mural traditions. The chromatic richness of Kwami's compositions dramatically differs from the foreboding, earthy monochromatic range of Viyé Diba's canvases (p. 167), and this is because while Kwami sources are known for their flamboyant, intense color, Diba looks instead to the ritually potent but chromatically restrained protective garments worn by hunters and warriors in many West African cultures. Often these so-called power shirts are covered with ritual packets and amulets, the fabric surfaces encrusted with dried sacrificial material; in Diba's canvases, single or multiple packets attached to the richly worked surfaces provide occasions for pause and contemplation as the eyes roam across what can seem like expanses of apocalyptic space. Despite this direct reference to a West African source, Diba's painting, by introducing physical objects to the canvas surface in a way that invites yet ret rejects narrative, is emphatically connected to a mid twentieth-century modernist tradition that counts among its luminaries the American abstractionists Jasper Johns (born 1930) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008). In the work of Kwami and Diba, this simultaneous allusion to methods of modernist abstraction and to the color and pattern sensibilities one might associate with specific West African art forms describes the postcolonial hybrid aesthetic anticipated by Uche Okeke's "natural synthesis" theory of the early 1960s.⁹

Indeed this disposition to developing new forms of expression through a process of experimentation with indigenous African ideograms and syllabaries accounts for a significant shift toward abstract imagery in recent work, yet has its roots in the question of constituting a national visual culture during the independence era. The paintings of Wosene Kosrof (p. 72–73) and Owusu-Ankomah (p. 145) show the formal range of this mode of abstraction, but they also show the different ways contemporary artists negotiate their multiple subject positions as transnational artists simultaneously rooted in diverse art and cultural histories. Kosrof, for instance, has based his work on sustained and systematic analysis of Amharic text—the national language and script of his native Ethiopia—as well as Ethiopian Orthodox religious imagery, resulting in their decomposition and transformation to the point that they lose their semantic function, a process similar to Salahi's work with Arabic calligraphy. These reconstituted pseudo-texts, in their new pictorial environments populated by abstracted mask and figural forms, floral and cosmic signs, still evoke—but only momentarily—the ritual symbolism of the artist's source material. At the same time, they evince certain playfulness, an irreverence that comes from the re-imagination of the self as a post-ethnic and post-national being whose utterance can be understood cross-culturally. In Ankomah's work, the figure is never quite banished from the canvas. From its assertive presence in his early 1990s work to its absorption into a field of abstract symbols in more recent paintings, this negotiation between abstraction and figuration reflects Ankomah's traditions of image-making that he claims as his own. In using as his base material Akan *adinkra* ideograms—the highly

schematic forms printed on traditional mourning cloths and invested with complex ideas—to generate fields of abstract patterns, Ankomah affirms his link to Akan visual cultures. Yet his nude male figures, with their characteristic burly and showy physique, speak to his fascination with the hyperbolic figuration of Michelangelo and the Italian baroque. Thus in his recent canvases, Ankomah resolves not just the tension between abstraction and figuration, but also the otherwise disparate art histories—Italian Renaissance (Western) and Akan (African)—that he inherited as a postcolonial African residing in Europe.

If Ankomah's work insinuates resolution of difference through the conjuncture of abstraction and figuration, in Ghada Amer's canvases (p. 139) the same tactic suggests instead a confrontational and antagonistic relationship between the two. The embroidered outlines of autoerotic female figures seem always on the point of total obliteration by veils of mangled threads that may be seen as synecdoche for the ideologically fraught Muslim veil or, as in *Red Diagonales* (2000), by dripping paint reminiscent of the macho gestures of American abstract expressionism.

The sculptures of El Anatsui (p. 145) share some similarity with the work of Ankomah and Kosrof in the sense that Anatsui's wood panels sometimes incorporate graphic marks derived from *adinkra*, but also from several other West African scripts, including the Bamun and Vai syllabaries respectively from Cameroon and Liberia, as well as *Uli* symbols and *nsibidi* signs from southeastern Nigeria. But more often these influences function as textural fields and compositional elements alongside passages of applied color and rough marks made with a wide range of power tools, especially the chain saw. Even when human figures appear in Anatsui's wood reliefs, they are often crowds represented with highly schematic marks overwhelmed by the assertive, nondescriptive, burned-out saw marks. Similarly his metal sculptures, composed of numerous liquor bottle tops and seals, each bearing the logo or brand name of a specific distiller, are primarily abstract compositions despite the fact that the color composition alludes to Akan Kente cloth. In any case, although the Kente colors and patterns are known to be loaded with symbolism, Anatsui's attraction to this cloth is reminiscent of Atta Kwami's; both seek to develop spectacular sculptural compositions that rely on the same visual mechanisms at play in the Kente: juxtaposition of color, pattern, and shape.

The use of complex mark-making to generate compositions of sheer visual splendor is at the basis of the paintings of Julie Mehretu since the late 1990s. From the initial drawings, consisting only of assertively multidirectional lines (*Migration Direction Map*, 1996) to the series of counterintuitive "maps" populated by simple quirky marks (*Map #4*, 1996), to the agglomeration of almond-shaped marks suggestive of surging crowds or regimental formations, Mehretu has developed an immense array of cartographic, architectonic, and gestural mark-making with which she builds the multilayered, diaphanous surfaces of her monumental canvases (such as *Dispersion*, 2005). Even if close inspection of, say, *Stadia II* (2004, p. 260) might reveal the outlines of recognizable architectural landmarks, or emblems of specific corporate or national entities—all symbolic of classic and contemporary systems of control of bodies and ideas—the unruly movement activated by strong allover vectors in her canvases, powerfully insinuates real and virtual conflicts resulting from confrontation order and disorder of the global, postcolonial condition.

Troubled Figures, Anxious Times

In describing the return of the figure to the work of contemporary Western artists of the 1980s as new figuration, McEvilley argues that the emphatic re-emergence of realism and figuration after the reign of abstraction and later conceptual art for most of the twentieth century was not just a return to the normative, affirmative figure, the visual manifestation of Western humanism. Rather the "negative or renunciatory figuration" derived first from the need on the part of artists to re-engage the political and social through representational imagery handled with distrust of its semantic value.¹⁰ We draw parallels between McEvilley's idea of neo-figuration in the 1980s Western art and contemporane-

ous work by African artists, but there is also a significant difference. Unlike Western modern art, representational work in general and the human figure in particular never quite became unfashionable (except, of course, in those parts of Africa where the Muslim aniconic mandate held sway) once they were introduced by pioneer modernists at the beginning of the twentieth century. And this is indicative of the fact that modernism in the West and in Africa was, for the most part, running on two opposing tracks defined, respectively, by ideologies of abstraction and representation. Despite the radical introduction of different orders of "semantic abstraction" by independence-period artists (including Ahmed Cherkaoui and Farid Belkahia in Morocco; Salahi and Ahmed Shibrain in Sudan; Skunder Boghossian and Gebre Kristos Desta in Ethiopia; Ibra Tall in Senegal, and so on), the figure remained a central motif in modern African art.¹¹ But where it was used as a crucial part of the argument for the humanity (and modernity) of African peoples during the colonial era, or to affirm the autonomy of the postcolonial self in the post-independence period, the 1980s saw a renewed engagement with the figure as a site of trouble, a symbol of the anxious body politic. It is thus clear that although Western and African artists simultaneously developed renunciatory figuration, they arrived at it from different historical paths. South African art of the 1980s and after makes this point.

Earlier in the chapter we noted that traditions of modernist (semantic and aniconic) abstraction—took hold in South Africa before the end of the First World War with the work of such artists as Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, yet Afrikaner and apartheid ideologies were heavily invested in representational art and, more specifically, in the landscape and the figure. While representations of the landscape were important to Afrikaner claims to the land, figural work of the classical, heroic style was often conscripted into the visual narratives about the triumph of the Afrikaner self over treacherous natives. It is against this background that the focus of many white South African artists on the human figure during the 1980s, at the height of resistance movement, marked a profound shift, a new attitude to how white bodies were represented in art. This new figuration, in a sense, projected the contradictions and crisis of the apartheid body politic onto the very body the system was meant to protect from contamination. The sculptures of Jane Alexander and the paintings of Marlene Dumas are exemplary of this type of figuration.

Alexander developed a form of figural realism that may seem conservative in the context of late-twentieth-century sculpture, but which in fact is progressive, for it not only troubled the idea of the wholesome, pure, racial body imagined by apartheid, it subjected the figure to the same kind of skeptical regard as her American and European contemporaries. The deformed, monstrous bodies in *West Coast African Angel* (1984, p. 82) and *Butcher Boys* (1985–86, p. 88) seem like denizens of a post-apocalyptic world, or the result of a rogue genetic experiment. They speak to the possibility of corruption of the white body resulting from the terrors and evils the state committed on its behalf. In other words, where for instance favorite Afrikaner sculptors Anton van Wouw (1862–1945) and W. H. Coetzer (1900–1983) celebrated the unblemished, superior white body based on Western classical and academic figurative traditions, Alexander returns to these traditions but only to use them as foil for a merciless pronouncement on the somatic effect of the moral bankruptcy and systemic violence of apartheid culture. Similarly, the paintings of Dumas take aim at the myth of the exemplary white body and sees in it signs of the troubled times. The woman portrayed in *White Disease* (1985, p. 89) seems overcome by a terrifying infection that has her blanched skin erupting in rosy lesions, her teeth eroded to the gum. But the title is ambiguous. Does it refer to an individual stricken with a disease of whiteness or to a kind of infection carried by white folk? In another work, *Teacher (Sub a)*, (1987, p. 101), the viewer is confronted with what must be an end-of-year class photograph, in which both teacher and students seem to suffer some affliction that has reduced them to shrunken, beady-eyed, middle-class imps, little terrors of apartheid's tomorrow. What is more, in declaring the presence of a white disease at that particular historical moment in South Africa, Dumas seems to suggest the arrival of a threat more real—in the sense

that it is embodied—than the "black peril" the fear of which is at the basis of white racist ideologies in South Africa and elsewhere. Alexander and Dumas turned the argument about the repressive violence of apartheid on its head by locating the result of such violence not on the black body but on the white self.

Discrepant Figuration

While the new figuration was used by South African to address the faltering realities and crises of apartheid in the 1980s, its conscription into the work of artists in the post-apartheid years reflects the recognition of a different kind of crisis of white subjectivity in an era of black majority rule. Throughout the four centuries of white domination in South Africa, the question of white Africanness was circumscribed by a national imaginary of white transcendence. But with the victory of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress in the 1994 elections, many white artists took to figuration to examine white subjectivity within the context of a newly multiracial nation, and to deal with the trauma of apartheid. An important part of this work focused on the body, but in a way that was different from the specific issues of figuration and abstraction with which this chapter is concerned; we will therefore consider some of this work—including, for instance, the figurative collages of Candice Breitz—in chapter 7. Nevertheless, we note here the painted wood sculptures of Claudette Schreuders, for they propose a new language resulting from a synthesis of African and European figural forms. Inspired primarily by West African *colon*—sculptures representing Europeans—and *blolo* spirit-spouse figures of the Baule, this body of work draws also from medieval European ecclesiastic and Egyptian pharaonic wood sculpture. We are thus left with figures of which the sculptural identity is rendered ambiguous and paradoxical rather than singular and resolved. The realism, made more so by the use of paint, is at once lively and disturbingly intimate, lacking the formal gravitas of the similarly painted sculptures of the Nigerian Sunday Jack Akpan, whose work is inspired by Ibibio tombstone sculpture. The cuteness of Schreuders's *The Couple* (1998, p. 208)—a double figure composition that simultaneously reminds us of biblical Adam and Eve and the primordial / ancestral couple so pervasive in African sculpture—also suggests an arrested development; pensive or anxious adult figures trapped in tiny bodies. Schreuders's work is exemplary, then, of the post-apartheid search for the Africanness of (white) South Africans.

On the other hand, Johannes Phokela grounds his painting in the tradition of Dutch and Flemish Old Masters. While he often faithfully copies the compositions and details of his Northern European models, he corrupts them by introducing or substituting black figures for white characters, thus creating paradoxical, racially tense mise-en-scènes. Phokela's choice of Dutch and Flemish baroque history and genre painters (Peter Paul Rubens, Jan Steen, Jacob Jordaens, Jacques de Gheyn, etc.) as his models is significant because this art, a product of the so-called Dutch Golden Age, was contemporaneous with the first Dutch settler communities in the Cape. By re-creating scenes of Dutch life in which black people figured, albeit problematically (as in, say, *Tender, Loving Care*, 2006, p. 278; or in *Roman Charity*, 1997), Phokela seems to contest the racially sanitized history of the Afrikaner descendants of the Dutch. Scenes of lounging, naked black men and white women, (*Candle Bathing*, 1998), by insinuating possibilities of miscegenation among the ancestors of present-day Afrikaners, insinuates a history of South Africa hidden from eyes jaded by myths of racial and ethnic purity. Here we are reminded of the work of the Kenyan Richard Onyango, particularly the theatrical paintings in which he narrates his steamy affair with his corpulent white lover, Drosie (*Aventures de Drosie et Richard N° 1*, 1994; p. 163). Onyango's sexualized, physically dominant white female is reminiscent, by way of contrast, of the languorous yet burly black males in Phokela's pictures. In any case, as if to emphasize both the artificiality of his own pictorial constructs and the constructedness of the history he examines, Phokela compromises the realism of his paintings by imposing on them characteristically rigid, white grids. Yet, the grids—the modernist device for evacuating the picture surface of any meaning beyond

the fact of the painted surface—fail to rein in the surplus theatricality of the paintings. In juxtaposing figuration and abstraction in his canvases, Phokela makes the viewer aware of their limitations as tools for modeling or structural pictorial experience.

The diversity of the figurative language in contemporary African art is indicated, beside the work of artists considered so far, by the formal variations evident in the work of Senegalese sculptors Ousmane Sow and Moustapha Dime. Sow's training as a physiotherapist profoundly influenced his sculptural work, particularly his idiosyncratic application of anatomical realism in the making of his figures. Working with a cocktail mix of clays, fibers, and other secret materials macerated for years, Sow developed a sculptural language that is at once disturbingly real and strange; real because he on occasion would go so far as to simulate natural skin texture or render the eyes of his figure with the fidelity of a medical illustrator, and strange because the same figure might show passages of anatomical correctness and areas described so summarily as to be profoundly deformed and unnatural. For his part, Dime arrives at his own figuration by keeping a healthy distance from anatomical verism,

and the result is the semantic abstraction evident in *Femme Calabasse* (1992, p. 142) and *Le Gardien* (1995, p. 174). Often constructed from discarded utilitarian objects and beached wood from the shores of Goree Island, the figural integrity of Dime's sculptures depend on his ability to see formal correspondences between the chosen compositional elements and human anatomical parts. Rejecting the use of western tools and media, he, like the Vohou-Vohou and in the spirit of the Laboratoire with which he was associated, adopted local carving tools, schooled himself in artisanal visual cultures, and restricted his materials to objects available in his environment. The different approaches to figuration by Sow and Dime point to divergent conceptual motivations. For whereas Sow uses his faux naturalism to call attention to the humanity and integrity of African peoples (as in *The Nouba* series, 1984-87, p. 80-81 and *The Masai* series, 1989) or to revisit histories of indigenous resistance against western colonial expansion (*The Zulus*, 1990 and *Battle of Little Big Horn*, 1998), Dime sought to make manifest through his sculptural media and formal choices the need to disentangle his postcolonial self from western cultural hegemony.

1. See Cyprian Ekwensi, "The High Price of Nigerian Art," *Nigeria Magazine* 88 (1966), 36-41; Yussuf Zaki, "Towards an Art Revolution," *Nigeria Magazine* 87 (1965), 235, 304.

2. Ben Enwonwu, "Into the Abstract Jungle: A Criticism of the New Trend in Nigerian Art," *Drum* (Lagos, June 1963): 25-29.

3. Most artists associated with the Euston Road School, arguably England's most influential artist group in the mid 20th century, worked in the figurative and realist mode. Sir William Coldstream, a founding member of the school, became the leading

painter and teacher at the Slade from 1949.

4. Robert McVaugh, "Abstraction, Non-Objectivity and Realism," in *Abstraction, Non-Objectivity, Realism: Twentieth-Century Painting* (Hamilton, New York: The Picker Art Gallery, 1987), 11.

5. Thomas McEvilley, *The Exile's Return: Toward a Re-definition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 100.

6. McEvilley, *Exile's Return*, 96.

7. See Sidney Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 96-97. Although Ernest Mancoba, a member of the COBRA group in

Europe, developed abstract art while in exile, his work was largely unknown in South Africa during the apartheid years.

8. Sarah Adams, interview with Ibrahim El Salahi, Oxford, England, April 2002. Published in Sarah Adams, "In My Garment There Is Nothing but God: Recent Work by Ibrahim El Salahi," *African Arts* 39, no. 2 (1 July 2006): 26-29, 31-33, 35, 86-87. See: <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed August 5, 2009).

9. We have discussed this aspect of Okeke's work in chapter 2.

10. McEvilley, *Exile's Return*, 96.

11. Harold Osborne defines semantic abstraction as "an incomplete or restricted representation of natural appearances." It thus covers the entire range of pictorial possibilities between photographic realism and total or non-objective (or as he calls it, "non-iconic") abstraction. See Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 27.

Chapter 7

The Body Politic: Difference, Gender, Sexuality

Myth and the Revolt of the Body

A powerful image once took hold of the African imagination in 1929. That image, though it does not exist as a physical artifact, nevertheless lives on in the African consciousness. It is the image of a group of Igbo women, in the Southeastern Nigerian commercial city of Aba, who had gathered in defiant protest against the taxation policies of the British colonial administration. The Aba women's protest is historically remembered as one of the earliest instances of the modern Nigerian feminist movement, as well as an example of the postcolonial critique of colonial power. What made the protest especially poignant and its image singularly iconic was the women's decision to use their naked bodies to express their public disapproval of excessive taxation in the absence of democratic representation. Within the colonial regime, the naked African body was frequently framed by two types of discourse: through the language of anthropology and with forms of social repression that often accompanied systemic violence.

Closer examination of this act will show that the women's choice of displaying their naked bodies was not only about participation in forms of public address, but was also a clear attempt to forge an iconography of resistance, a representation of subaltern power, and thus expose themselves to Michel Foucault's idea of *biopolitics*¹ or, as Giorgio Agamben frames it, *thanatopolitics*.² The two concepts by Foucault and Agamben are connected to the inseparability of life and death, which underlines a form of discourse in which the power of the law is disproportionately featured. Achille Mbembe extends these two combinations, which speak to life and death as instruments of bureaucratic control, by making explicit the connection between the colonial regime—including the administration and management of territories—and what he calls *necropolitics*.³ Between Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe, the specificity of the Aba women's revolt through the figure of the naked body generates a counter-politics, namely the politics of a body which seeks to mark itself as sacred, as untouchable, and therefore challenges the machineries of power and violence that the state, or colonial regime, reserves exclusively for itself.

Though no documentary trace of this event exists today—in terms of its visual representation—there was, in any case, an extensive commission of inquiry that documented the event through interviews with leaders and participants in the revolt and produced a report that was accepted by the colonial government. Thus, the protest's eventfulness is imbued with historical insight, that its very reimagining in representation constructs what can perhaps be attributed to be its mythic quality: namely, the extent to which the French social and literary critic Roland Barthes (1915–1980) described myth as "a system of communication, that it is a message." Barthes went on to qualify the condition in which myth functions in a system of communication, writing that "myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message..."⁴ The women's clear message is the sacredness of the naked female body, and through it to expose the vulnerability of the colonized body at large. Thus framed, the African body politic which, even at its most vulnerable, remained a vehicle of powerful ethical response. The effect of the women's message, in terms of its communicability—and in reference to its modes of subjectivization—has led to the proliferation of the image of the naked African female body as an object of postcolonial critique of power and as a representation of the body's social agency. In this way, the naked body is invested simultaneously in the regimes of *biopolitics*, *thanatopolitics*, and *necropolitics*; in other words, in the politicization of the health and death of that body, in its realization and de-realization.

In this way, the image of the naked protest would recur as part of the visual repertoire of postcolonial social rebellion in Uche Okeke's swirling, impastoed expressionist painting *Aba (Women's Revolt)* (1965), in which a massed group of bare-chested women with raised fists takes command of the center and corners of the vertical panel. By referencing the message of the Aba protest, Okeke's painting visually expresses and communicates the aesthetic principles of the unruly African body at the center of contemporary postcolonial biopolitical representation; as a vehicle of the radical critique of violence and the bureaucratic power to which the body must submit itself.

As a result of the 1929 protest, the women's tactic of stripping naked as a sign of opposition to political or social wrong is today well ingrained in contemporary Nigeria and has also been observed in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, among other African countries. The origin of this act is not completely clear, but in stripping naked, the Aba women put in force a strategy of body politics as a potent symbol of their repudiation of an extravagant, uncommunicative, dictatorial power, not only to shame the colonial officers, but also to assail and disavow an unjust system. In fact, nakedness is not just a tactic to shame, but an act of social protest, a vehicle of gendered radicality and feminist power. On the other hand, the naked African body also serves as a social symbol of sacrifice, prefiguring its own decapitation, and as Agamben has elucidated, placing itself at the threshold between sovereign power and bare life which reflects "the *technologies of the self* [Agamben's emphasis] by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power."⁵ According to Agamben, bare life describes the zone where the trace of the body is revealed at the point in which violence and the law meet.⁶ However, such a life, *homo sacer* (sacred man) can exist outside such a conjunction because, as Agamben writes: "*sacer* designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying. . . ."⁷ In the context of the Igbo women protesting in Aba, the rich symbolism of dirtying is no longer just suggestive, but explicit in the form of its iconographic codification. The (premenopausal / postmenopausal) female body—as bearer of life and thus the vehicle of communal survival and regeneration—offers a vessel of awesome ritual power at the point it might no longer channel its inherent sacred power to the making of another life if sacrificed by the violence of the law. This is the fundamental threat and threshold which the naked African female body constructs.

The Real, the Body, and Bare Life

This chapter considers, then, the deep entanglement of the body—expressed in representation and in connection to art's relationship to the depiction of the real—in the machineries of power and of violence, and the role of gender and sexuality as vehicles of subjectivization and resistance to devices of social limitation. On the one hand this chapter examines how the artistic agendas of contemporary African artists have produced different iconographic resonances by linking nakedness to bare life, thus revealing the vulnerability of exposed flesh to acts of violence. In 1981 and 1983, Paul Stopforth produced two very important series of graphite drawings: *Elegy* (1981, p. 63) and *Interrogation Space #1–5* (1983, p. 52). *Elegy* focused on and depicted the tortured and broken body of the South African Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko, who died from massive head injuries while in police custody in 1977. *Interrogation Space #1–5* (1983), which encapsulated the dark, subterranean chambers in which apartheid security forces tortured the system's opponents consists of five panels each detailing

sparingly furnished cells—except for the instruments of torture—and prisoners at different stages of interrogation. In *Elegy*, Stopforth places Biko's naked body under spectatorial isolation, stretched out on a metal gurney, stiff with rigor mortis. Only thirty years old at his death, when documentary photographs of Biko's autopsy were circulated in public, the visual account of the state of the bruised and battered body transformed him into a figure of sensationalistic meditation on the nature of political violence, which Hannah Arendt expressed as the banality of evil⁸. At the same time the condition of reception of the autopsy image placed it at the intersection between the real and the documentary, transforming Biko into a martyr. In this way, Biko was the quintessential figure of *homo sacer*, he who can be killed but cannot be sacrificed. Stopforth exploits these philosophical, political, and theological figurations of the body in *extremis* to compose a reflection of Biko's body as a sacred wound. Consequently, *Elegy* though clearly a secular figuration of a political death, hews closely to the iconography of Christian martyrdom and its commentary on suffering and sacredness. Like Andrea Mantegna's prone *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (circa 1490, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) and Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521, Offentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel), the body of the dead Biko is depicted by Stopforth in a spare grey monochrome and highlighted against a red ground. It is an image of ritual sacrifice, the tortured body reflecting both its moral force and its eternal suffering.

Stopforth's *Elegy* marks a very important and vital phase in the struggle against apartheid, a system that represents the pure embodiment of *necropolitics*, but it also directs our attention to the increasing involvement of biopolitical representations centered on accounts of the body in contemporary African art. Two fellow South Africans, Sam Nhlengethwa in the painting / collage *It Left Him Cold* (1990, p. 134) and Marlene Dumas in *Suspect* (1999) and other similar paintings, have each addressed the condition of the vulnerable naked body in terms resonant with Stopforth's forthright representation of Biko's death. Nhlengethwa mines the same documentary photograph that was the source of *Elegy*, but in employing the device of collage, he transforms the image into an emblem of decapitation, especially in the way in which the head is attached to the body. Instead of the body being depicted as lying on the gurney, it is shown placed on a damp concrete floor; the limp, lifeless body becomes dissociated from the distorted scale of the enlarged head, with its bared, crooked teeth poking out of its battered mouth. Here we encounter not a body of sacrifice, but a portrait of the apartheid grotesque. While Dumas's *Suspect* is not a direct reference to Biko, it is very much engaged with the same attitude of the theatricalization of public death and can be read analogously as connected to Biko. The posture of the political figure stretched out in death has become a signature icon of contemporary biopolitical depictions. From the public photograph of the dead Argentinean revolutionary Che Guevara (1928–1967) captured by the camera in the Bolivian jungle, to Gerhard Richter's paintings of the German left-wing revolutionaries Andreas Baader (1943–1977) and Ulrike Meinhoff (1943–1976) in his fifteen-painting cycle *October 18, 1977* (1988), to images of tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison and other notorious prisons and detention centers, various contemporary artists (including Leon Golub, Luc Tuymans, and Marlene Dumas) have relentlessly explored these themes in *thanatopolitics* in recent years, to fix the public imagination around theatricalizations of martyrdom and sacrifice. In another painting, *The Brother is Dead* (1998, p. 207), Nhlengethwa again takes up similar questions about the relationship between sovereign power and bare life revealing his ongoing exploration of that relationship. In this painting, he placed the twisted supine figure in the foreground, lying in the middle of street. In the distance, a security police vehicle barricades the township street where the incident has occurred. Two other figures share the same picture plane: one runs toward the body lying on the ground, the other runs off between two buildings along the otherwise deserted street.

Two other reflections on the biopolitical structure of apartheid were

done by Kendell Geers who, in classic conceptual fashion, works not with depiction through an image, but by structuring the figure through a metonymic frame and language. For example, *Tyre* (1988, p. 114) a piece of chilling precision, is composed of two black tires etched with the text of the racist nursery rhyme—"eeny meeny miny mo / catch a nigger by his toe / if hollers let him go"—and in so doing deploys through language the verbalization of incipient violence as it concerns the black body. But *Tyre* also alludes very strongly to the acts of vigilantes in black townships who, at the height of the State of Emergency in South Africa, would hunt down and immolate those accused of collaboration with the state by placing a tire around their necks. The second work, *Untitled* (1976) (1976–1993), is a found mortuary ledger on which autopsy reports were registered. The significance of this ledger is that it was obtained by the artist, under circumstances that remain unclear, from the Johannesburg General Hospital. On one of its pages is the entry that documents the death of Hector Pietersen, the first child killed by police on the first day of the historic Soweto uprising in June 1976.

While works by such artists as Stopforth, Nhlengethwa, and Dumas explore the image of the male hero as martyr, Geers' work is more philosophically grounded in the very nature and meaning of death under regimes of political violence. By contrast, two female artists: the Egyptian Amal Kenawy in *You Will be Killed* (2006, p. 288–289); and Nigerian Marcia Kure, in *Woman with Blood* and *Woman with Blood II* (1996, p. 185), bring us back to the domain of the naked female figure as the ultimate object of patriarchal sacrifice. Both Kenawy and Kure, two relatively young artists, can be classified as feminists in terms of the concerns of their work and the overt nature of their modes of address. It is important to caution, however, that such a label at best provides only provisional clues to the scope of their ideas, because their works are concerned with different topics and cannot be reduced to ideas of gender alone. Nevertheless, a number of their most fruitful works have been focused on exploring issues of gender, particularly around social taboos about the woman's body and female subjectivity in terms of eroticism, sexuality, and desire.

The works produced by Kenawy and Kure have variously addressed the precariousness of the woman's body under the edicts of conservative Islamic policies, as revealed in Kenawy's *You Will be Killed*—a title which is far more suggestive of a warning than a declaration—and in Kure's burka performances. Kenawy works across multidisciplinary platforms using video, animation, sculpture, performance, and sound. In the work featured in this discussion, she combines staged photography, performance, and drawing in filmed animation, to trace an ambiguous narrative of her endangered protagonist. Kure's primary medium is drawing. Her sure-handed skill in drawing and watercolor allow her, through an economy of means, to explore powerful narratives of femininity and, on the other hand, to deploy a more overtly politicized gesture in the series of works that more directly engage the question of violence, death, and the woman's body. In Kure's drawings *Woman with Blood*, for instance, the outlines of the female figure are splayed across the paper's surface as the figures are alternately suffused and submerged in spreading brownish and reddish stains, as if a violent act had already taken place.

Stitched-up: Montage, Ethnophilia, Pornography

One of the most controversial paintings of the 1990s by a contemporary artist is Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996; p. 184), a work which, on its appearance in the 1997 exhibition "Sensation" at the Brooklyn Museum provoked a feverish response and public recriminations. The public attack and denunciation of the painting was led by New York's mayor, Rudy Giuliani, who condemned the painting as blasphemy. The artist's depiction of the Virgin Mary, he said, was not in alignment with her sacred character, and he demanded the painting's withdrawal from the exhibition in the city-funded museum. The painting was later physically attacked and defaced by an enraged visitor, leading to its permanent removal from the exhibition to avoid further damage to the work. But why did Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* elicit such passion and so offend the Catholic sensibilities of the mayor and of his conservative, anti-contem-

porary art supporters? Even though Giuliani never saw the painting, he claimed that the painting's offensiveness was based solely on the fact that the artist had painted the Virgin with one breast exposed, and on that breast had affixed a lump of elephant dung decorated with beads—a recurring object in Ofili's signature paintings during that period. But there were other issues as well, owing partly to the context in which the reception of the painting was embedded. One of these, perhaps, could be the fact that the Virgin was represented as a black woman against the backdrop of misogynist hip-hop imagery. Another related point is the chain of sexualized associations related to the surface onto which the Virgin's female form was projected. Throughout the painting's surface, Ofili had collaged multiple images of black women's naked buttocks and sexually explicit images of their vaginas, which he had cut from pornographic magazines. To be sure, this combination was meant to be provocative as well as irreverent. The collages and the cut-outs provided a charged surface for a meditation on the idea of nakedness, the black body, gender, sex, sexuality, and spirituality—issues that, when combined, made for an explosive and irresolvable debate around the politics of the body.

Some of these issues are equally addressed in the early works of Candice Breitz and Ghada Amer, two artists whose respective practices engaged directly with the politics of representation of the gendered and racialized body. Breitz and Amer, like Kenawy and Kure in their respective critical stances, assume a feminist position in relation to the issues of the body, gender, sexuality, and desire. Breitz's work, however, emanates from a disciplinary interrogation of fetishism, ethnography, sexuality, and exoticism going back to Surrealism and the political photomontages of Berlin Dadaists. In her own photomontages, in *The Rainbow Series* (1996, p. 183), for example, she deploys images derived from ethnographic tourist postcards of naked young black women and organizes them into jarring compositions with images of naked white women found in pornographic magazines. *Rorschach* (1997) continued her exploration of the montage form, but here multiple body parts are collapsed and joined to form a tapestry of incongruous and flickering scotoma. In another body of work, *Ghost Series* (1994–96, p. 163), she continued her attempts toward the deconstruction of visual ethnophilia by appropriating the postcards and the discourse of exoticism centered on naked black women's bodies, and then carefully using Typex correction fluid to cover their exposed body parts, thus rendering the physiognomy and bodies of the women even more "other," more estranged from the processes of subjectivization, while increasingly exposing those bodies to traumatic objectification.⁹

The combination of the traumatic and the ghostly, the ethnographic and the mechanical montage, the cut and the seam, makes Breitz heir to the early photomontages of the German Dadaist Hannah Höch (1889–1978), the artist most associated with forging the uneasy alliance between primitivist ethnophilia and mechanical montage. But if Breitz's work embraced Höch's interest in this conjunction between the two World Wars in the 1920s and '30s, Wangechi Mutu's dazzling, riotous, spectacular montages most resemble Höch's later montages, which were closely allied with Pop Art and fashion imagery in the 1950s and '60s. Mutu's work surpasses Höch's by dint of its eye-popping decadence. With its fature of the mechanical and the hand-painted, kitsch and cerebral, weird science and nature, Mutu's large-scale *A Shady Promise* (2006, p. 292), built out of a field of silvery glitter, magazine cut-outs, and spray paint on a Mylar ground, exudes a magical realist force in which Breitz's reflexive coolness does not partake. Mutu's work, however, is less about ethnographic figurations and their morbid obsessions on the naked black body. While some of her most iconic works splice and suture that body into anthropomorphic distortions and displays of fantasmic and carnal excess, one serious point of concern in all her work is the relationship between violence and voyeurism. In this way, *The Ark Collection* (2006, p. 293)—a series of small-scale, postcard-size collages presented in custom-made black vitrines as though they were ethnographic trophies—shares the greatest conceptual ground with Ofili's paintings of the mid to late 1990s, with their irreverent appro-

priation of pornography, and with Breitz's own collapse of pornography and ethnography as the same side of the exploitative coin on which the woman's body lies.

In Egyptian-born Ghada Amer's embroidered paintings, the female body is represented foremost as a battleground in which a war of tradition, religion, secularism, and social agency is waged. The wager of her work is the delimitation of the discursive zone between social incarceration and self-liberation of the female body from the strictures of identity politics. It is against this backdrop—dealing with questions of female desire and empowerment or, more specifically, representations of that desire as a formal and political critique of the male gaze—that feminist artists like Amer have sought to analyze the zone between pornography, which attacks and demeans the female subject, and female self-representations. In so doing, her work elaborates a critical rereading of the independent sexuality and power of the woman in control of her own body, both in the contemporary public sphere and in the private domain. But agency alone is not sufficient for understanding Amer's embroidered paintings, a mode which utilizes the traditionally feminine handicraft of embroidery; for in the historical space in which her work operates, the formal mechanisms of the embroidered surfaces become an attempt to unravel the modernist account of an internalized, self-contained, and decontaminated space of painting as pure surface, devoid of both content and narrative. By its acknowledgment of the problem of the female form in representation, Amer's work begins with narrative. Thus its first formal gesture is the contamination of the autonomous surface of modernist painting¹⁰ in order to reclaim and reanimate painting's discursive potential. Her early embroidered works first adapted minimalist seriality through the repetition of the same iconographic motif of isolated female characters in auto-erotic poses and gestures. More recently she has introduced abstract expressionist gesture into the surface, either as a ground for or an overlay of the embroidery, thus seemingly appealing to both the Apollonian and Dionysian strands in high modernism. Her images—which may fall into the category of "naughty pictures" as they eschew hard-core pornographic imagery—often require close viewing in order to decipher them from the cloud of threads in which they are embedded. Arranged in horizontal and vertical bands, the images function more as sketches for a deeper psychic situation. However, since the late 1990s, her work has shifted into a more hybrid space between embroidery and painting. In her latest works, Amer's interest in narrative is more playful, with slight intimations of gallows humor, especially when she collapses two gender stereotypes: the gestural automatism of macho-style drip painting and the delicate stitches of feminine embroidery. But her work is equally focused on the critique of cultural and religious proscriptions applied over the same body—through veiling and other forms of sartorial incarceration—that obtains within her own Arabo-Islamic heritage. The entangled threads from which the female form struggles to release itself sometimes read like a commentary on the strong reemergence of fundamentalist rhetoric in political Islam, which has recently tried to keep the female body out of public sight.

The Body in Pieces

The turns, diversions, and deviations in African identity politics are bound up in a field of contradictory signs. Sometimes these signs are reflected in the very way identity is literally embodied in anthropological discourses—such as gender and sexuality—or, as the case may be, the wrath that identity incurs when it becomes disembodied under regimes of violence. We explore these two symptoms of African identity insofar as they are mirrored within similar ethical concerns that structure biopolitics, biopower, and difference. In terms of the regimes of violence, we are made all the more aware of what the continent's many inhabitants have had to endure under tyrannical sovereigns. This was most apparent in the political conceptualization of apartheid as the preeminent sphere of the "state of exception,"¹¹ in which the differenced body resided in a precarious state. On another level, we are reminded of the crisis of the body politic when considering forms of ethico-politico

subjectivities—such as gay, lesbian, and transgender identities—which so-called traditional African culture had remanded to a zone of utter exclusion and made it further vulnerable by the lack of the protection of the law, as was the case in legislations in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Sudan and other countries that either banned gay identity as antithetical to an African way of life or otherwise criminalized it.

We should also recall that, under apartheid, racism accorded racial difference a negative value. This was made effective by a juridical prohibition that territorialized segregation. But the border of race, as in gender, was always actively and constantly transgressed. This transgression is at the center of representations of the body in the work of several contemporary African artists, such as Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Zanele Muholi, Berni Searle, Tracey Rose, Oladele Bamgbose, Samuel Fosso, and Peet Pienaar. The work of each of these artists addresses what we would call the body of difference in the artistic sphere of identity politics.

But before we consider the critical examples, it is important to note that, when dealing with questions of the body as an embodiment of certain traces of identity—between the embodied and disembodied, the biopolitical and the ethical, the gendered and the racialized—there is always the sphere of the ethnographic body which has provoked a range of critical reflections around the notion of the sacred and profane, either when connected to traditional African culture or in relation to race and color. The performance artist Peet Pienaar's work exemplifies some of the most radical provocations on the issue of the ethnographic body. In his performance piece, *I Want to Tell You Something* (2000), presented at Brendon Bell-Roberts Gallery in Cape Town, the artist had himself circumcised live in the gallery. While the very act is not controversial in itself, it gained notoriety in relation to the artist's proposal that linked the performance to the ritual circumcisions of young Northern Sotho and Xhosa boys, a rite-of-passage practice that is secretive and sacred to the groups. Here is how Pienaar framed his proposal:

My idea for the exhibition is to get a medical doctor to circumcise me live in the gallery. The whole event would be broadcast live on the Internet, members of the public would be charged to access the site. After the performance, my foreskin would be auctioned live via the Website. For the remainder of the show I would like to show daily pictures documenting the healing of the penis which would also be displayed.

Concept: In African tradition you are not a man unless you are circumcised, it is also a token of initiation as a man into society. The tradition is highlighted in the Xhosa culture where "manhood" or "initiation" rituals include circumcision, a practise which has become increasingly controversial in South African society, due to the deaths and infections which often accompany the ritual.

While, in traditional culture, circumcision would be performed in a group ritual for young adults, in white culture it is an embarrassing thing to get circumcised when you are an adult and it is an operation that would normally be private and confidential. Thus, by showing the performance live on the Net, in front of an audience, I am highlighting the strange tension that exists in this country between tradition (traditional concepts of masculinity) and technology (new concepts of masculinity). By auctioning the foreskin I am exploring how new concepts of masculinity are built around money and capital worth as opposed to the tradition and physical.¹²

Pienaar's project—occurring exactly a decade after the documentary photographer Steve Hilton-Barber published a photo essay of young Northern Sotho boys after circumcision, which caused an uproar in the media—reflects the state of the ethnographic body and race.¹³ As a direct consequence of apartheid, that state is all the more emotionally and intellectually charged when the boundaries of ethnicity, race, and gender are transgressed, or when the border between sacred and profane is breached. The public commotion over Hilton-Barber's photo essay, as with the controversy surrounding Pienaar's attack on so-called traditional culture, are of a piece with Zanele Muholi's loving but militant meditations on the condition of young lesbian and transgender African women living in South Africa. In her photographic work, Muholi documents her subjects in various contexts of the everyday, especially

in domestic settings, revealing zones of cultural opacity that, until recently, received limited critical consideration. Again, in each of these instances, identity politics is transmitted through acts of embodiment (the nature of lesbian, gay, or transgender identity) or explored through radical acts of disembodiment, as in Pienaar's brutal public circumcision.

All these discourses are equally conceived and conceptualized at the basic level of what Michel Foucault called the "*anatomo-politics of the human body* (author's original emphasis)."¹⁴ Such artists as Berni Searle and Tracey Rose, whose photographic, video, performance, and installation projects move restlessly across the threshold of race, gender, and ethnicity, or actively solicit artistic accounting of racial difference in relation to "colored" or mixed-race identity in South Africa; or Rotimi Fani-Kayode, whose bold, forthright exploration of homo-eroticism and his own homosexuality in the face of the devastation wrought by the AIDS epidemic, through photographic images reminiscent of Robert Mapplethorpe's work, expose these accounts of a different body politic. In their incessant and obsessive self-portraits, Oladele Bamgbose and Samuel Fosso respond through the ambiguity of auto-performances, and stake no claims to either a sexual or gender politics. Nevertheless, their images raise important questions as to the propriety of any exclusive identity. As such, they represent a modulated approach to figurations of the body. But what brings each of these projects in critical accord—despite their differences in motivation, or the theoretical formulation under which each artist undertakes his or her experiments—is the way their work enunciates the fundamental ideas of biopower, especially in the process of framing the relationship between the self and the body, identity and society. As Foucault further argued:

If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.¹⁵

Hybrid Machines: The Human and the Animal

In the preceding discussions it is clear that the body in contemporary African art is situated in a tumultuous biopolitical discourse in relation to violence, in the "*analytics of sexuality*"¹⁶ in terms of gender, and in the sphere of ethnographic dissonance with regard to race. In their figurative sculptures, Jane Alexander and Nandipha Mntambo depart from these three discursive frames and plunge into a phantasmagoria in which the human and the animal are engineered into hybrid machines that expose the limits of the rationality of humanism as the threshold of social recognition.

In the figures sculpted by Alexander, the animal is laid over the figure of the human; in those made by Mntambo, they are embedded in the animal, as human figures fashioned from stiffened animal hides. In *Butcher Boys* (1985–86, p. 88), Alexander's muscular monsters possess the athletic bodies of a species of men who seem to have been built purely as machines of fearsome cruelty. Another sculpture, *West Coast African Angel* (1984, p. 82) the figure has an avian head and feathered torso (specifically that of an ostrich farmed in abundance in South Africa) and the lower body of a human. In *Butcher Boys* (each body is adorned with a different type of ram's head and horns), the three figures are slightly larger than life size and they are seated in a single horizontal row on a wooden bench while staring away from or out at those who may be looking at them. The confrontation with these hybrid entities is disconcerting and captures the paranoiac atmosphere in which ordinary South Africans thought of the state in such a beastly incarnation. In Mntambo's *Balandzeli* (2004, p. 262), *Beginning of Empire* (2007, p. 310), *Indlovukati* (2007), and *The Fighters* (2006), human forms—specifically female figures—are sculpted out of various types of untreated cowhide and arranged in tableaus or as a group of multiple figures, albeit headless, either hanging across pristine white walls or in the center of the gallery space. Each of these installation strategies permits the viewer to take in different scenes and arrangements to con-

vey a complex narrative. *Europa* (2008, p. 323) a photographic image in which the partial head of the mythic bull has been grafted onto the head and body of the artist, seems like a direct reference to Alexander's *Butcher Boys*, but its influence is perhaps more accurately attributable to the disturbing and violent drawings of the South African artists Ezrom Legae (1938–1999) and Dumile Feni (1939–1991). By removing the body from the accustomed scenes in which its traces litter the field of African identity politics, Alexander's and Mntambo's works repeatedly

stage a strange mimesis of the deformed, the terrifying, and the incomensurable.

At the core of all these works is the relationship between representation and the real. But it also concerns how art is powerfully deployed to examine complex sociopolitical conditions and to comment on emergent aesthetic approaches to imagining, figuring, and translating the body politic.

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 135–159.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 153.

3. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 12.

4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 109.

5. The notion of "technologies of the self" is central to Foucault's formulation of the theory of governmentality. See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*. For the source of this quote, see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 5.

6. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 63.

7. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 79.

8. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994). Arendt's famous and controversial analysis of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the notorious Nazi who was tried and executed in 1962 in Israel, was not to absolve Eichmann and the epic crimes of the Nazis, but to show the ways in which ordinary people, even if the most evil ordinary people, come to serve a system, to the extent that their actions as functionaries become part of the routine of violence. Her point was that Eichmann was not an exception but rather the rule among such figures and therefore to make him an exception is to manufacture a mythology of evil. The apartheid police state was a space that reproduced the conditions of the Nazi death camp, and its officers made killing a routine function of the security apparatus.

9. For a discussion of some of the issues underlying a critique of the *Rainbow Series* and *Ghost Series*, see Okwui Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African

Representation," in, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, ed. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 377–399. This essay had previously been published in *Third Text* 40 (Autumn 1997): 21–40. For a response to this critique, see Brian Keith Axel, "Disembodiment and the Total Body: A Response to Enwezor on Contemporary South African Representation," *Third Text* 44 (Autumn 1998): 3–16.

10. For an insightful reading of this thread of thought, see Candice Breitz, "Ghada Amer: The Modeling of Desire." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 5 (Fall 1996): 14–16.

11. For a discussion of the correlation between the concept of the "state of exception" and biopolitics, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

12. Statement by Peet Pienaar, Brendon Bell-Roberts

Gallery, Cape Town.

13. In 1996, a controversy erupted in the South African press over the work of art student Kaolin Thompson, titled *Useful Object* (1996), a ceramic sculpture in the shape of an ashtray modeled in the form of the interior of a vagina. The object of the controversy, the sculpture, was attacked by black viewers, who saw its dark brownish glaze as a pointed reference to the body part of a black woman, and therefore was insensitive to the history of violence against black women. See Hazel Friedman, "Is This an Insult to Black Women?" Johannesburg, South Africa, *Mail and Guardian*, 16 August 1996. The trail of responses to the controversy is a rather long one, which reveals the fraught social lines demarcating race and ethnography in contemporary discourse.

14. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139.

15. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 143.

16. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 148.