

Objects and Agendas After the Banquet : African Art since 1989

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Objects and Agendas

After the Banquet: African Art since 1989

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Let me start today's symposium with a plain explanation about its background and intention. Today's symposium consists of two sessions and a general discussion. In the morning session, Mr. Krydz Ikwuemesi from Nigeria will present his view on how Africans evaluate the boom of African contemporary art in the world since the 90s. Then in the second session in the afternoon, Mr. Colin Richards will talk on some aspects of biennales, which are now in fashion all over the world, based on his personal experience of the Second Johannesburg Biennale. A general discussion will follow the sessions.

After September 11

After September 11, the world changed: we have heard these words many times in newspapers and TV news show since that day. Indeed such phrases as "IT Revolution," "globalization," and "USA as the single winner" are fading away so rapidly as to lose their power, and things suddenly begin to look confused. The world is now trembling. Is this an omen of a more confused world or a sign of a hopeful new order in the 21st century?

But on the other hand, the world appears almost unchanged even after September 11 in terms of things related to Africa. As far as what is reported by the media of Europe, the USA, and Japan is concerned, the world appears to be made up of the free nations led by the USA, the Arab Islamic nations, and China and Russia biding their time between the two camps. Almost nothing has been covered concerning Africa, unfortunately enough. In other words, Africa has been, and still is, excluded from the framework of world history.

It is curious that Africa is excluded in a situation where Islamic countries are being so much taken up, since Sub Saharan Africa is a world famous Islamic area. Above all, the northern half of Nigeria, with a population as large as 120 million is a famous Islamic area, and Nigeria has the fifth largest Muslim population in the world. Of course, in addition to Nigeria, Africa has many other Islamic countries such as Sudan in East Africa, and Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali in West Africa. In spite of this, little attention has been paid to these countries. As far as I remember, the only news on Africa covered by the Japanese media this year was one in mid-October, reporting that some 200 people were killed in an anti-American riot in Kano in Northern Nigeria. Let me add the fact that Egypt, a country known as the most populous Islamic country in the Near and Middle East, is just the sixth or seventh in terms of population.

From the very beginning, my speech might have been sounding a little bit political, far from art. However, it is my opinion that so-called art is never unconnected to the vivid reality of the world political economy.

After 1989

The year 1989, as you most probably know, was a special year in talking about African contemporary art. That year saw the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris, celebrating the bicentennial of the French Revolution. This particular exhibition was an epoch-making one for that day and age, inviting 100 living artists from all over the world. Sixteen artists from Sub-Saharan Africa were invited to participate, as well as four Japanese artists, including Hiroshi Teshigawara and Tatsuo Miyajima. The exhibition can be described as being innovative on two levels. First, it showed a cross section of the current global art world. Secondly, it focused attention on objects not only from Africa, but extensively from Asia, Oceania and South America, areas which had hitherto been excluded from the contemporary art world.

However, with the opening of the exhibition, an intense debate arose between parties who supported the exhibition and those who were against it. The main argument from the critical side was that the exhibition represented French neo-colonialism. For example, all the artists from Africa were those who had not received any formal art education, representing popular local art. The artists from Japan, such as Hiroshi Teshigawara, created an installation using bamboo which was widely acclaimed by Westerners as a “Japanese style” work and even Tatsuo Miyajima’s work, using digital signs, was regarded as faithfully portraying the image of Japan as the land of technology. In conclusion, Europe had once again created a simplistic image of the ‘other’ culture according to its own perception. It is also interesting to note that this critical debate arose in the year 1989, which was, needless to say, the bicentenary of the French revolution.

However, after this exhibition, art from the periphery such as Africa and Asia began to attract the world’s attention. Exhibitions, symposiums, publications followed one after the other. As for Africa, in 1990, on the opposite side of the Atlantic, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, an exhibition was organized with the title *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition*. This was followed in 1991 by *Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art* which was held at the Center for African Art, New York. Susan Vogel, the curator of *Africa Explores*, mentioned that the exhibition was her response to *Magiciens de la Terre*; she criticized the latter as not taking into account the context of each individual work. In the exhibition which she curated, Vogel proceeded to group 20th century African objects, albeit it rather forcibly, into five categories. In the same year, back in Europe, the exhibition *Africa Hoy* was held at Las Palmas, Canary Islands in Spain. This was followed in 1994 by *Otro*

Pais, also held in Las Palmas. In 1995, *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* was held in Tokyo at the Setagaya Art Museum. This was almost simultaneously followed by *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.

As can be seen from above, throughout the 90s, exhibitions focusing on African contemporary art were held consecutively in Europe, Japan and the United States. Besides this, the Dakar Biennales on African Contemporary Art have been held in Senegal since 1992 and the Johannesburg Biennale was held in 1995 and 1997 in South Africa. The fervor was something like the Gold Rush and people working in the art world competed with one another, visiting Africa and searching for new African artists.

Meanwhile, artists who participated in *Magiciens de la Terre* such as the Nigerian artist, Sunday Jack Akpan, who specialized in making decorative sculpture for shops; Cheri Samba, the rising star of art populaire in former Zaire; and Kane Kwei, the coffin maker from Ghana, all became star players of contemporary African art and were the focus of attention among exhibitions and museums worldwide.

The Voices of Africa

Although I welcome this boom in African art, I cannot do so without some reservations. This is partly because African art has been interpreted one-sidedly by Europe, Japan, United States and partly because the views of African artists were not being fully recognized. Although in every exhibition, a text by an African author would be printed in the exhibition catalogue and specialist periodicals such as *Third Text* and *NKA* would publish texts by African writers, their voices were very rarely taken up directly and actually implemented within institutions, such as exhibitions or museums.

The only exception was the Seven Stories Exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, which formed part of *Africa 95*, an event held in London to celebrate the abolition of Apartheid. This exhibition focused on works from seven African countries; Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda. The five curators who organized the show were originally born or currently living in one of the above countries. These five curators working in cooperation with a British curator portrayed their version of African modern and contemporary art. The attempt to introduce the African voice directly into the exhibition held an important meaning. Looking into the background of such an attempt reveals how criticism was increasing towards Western museums and their one-sided attempt to narrate and represent the other culture, in this case contemporary African art, through the system of the exhibition.

However, to put it bluntly, even with the *Seven Stories* exhibition, the curator, who came up with the initial plan and organized the exhibition overall, was European, in this

case a cultural anthropologist, and the African curators were required to act out a passive role within a pre-arranged European setting. Above all, the role given to them was to narrate their own personal story. In other words, African curators and artists were being called upon to represent Africa and thus trapped within the construct of narrating themselves. Whereas in Europe, Japan or the United States, curators and artists not only represent themselves but also have the opportunity to display the art and culture of other countries.

This issue is probably not just confined to the *Seven Stories* exhibition but can be carried a step further to relate to “the act of representation,” including the system of exhibitions, and how representation is inevitably linked to the issue of power. Either way, be it the museum, journalism, academia, or entertainment, once representation takes place through a socially constructed medium, it becomes a force. Are there any alternatives to overcome this situation?

Light and Shadow of Biennales

Among many institutions in today’s art world, the biennale is one of the most influential. When I say biennale here, I mean international festivals of contemporary art in general. That is to say, there is no difference if it is biannual or triannual. So, it includes both triennales and any kind of art festival.

Now we see triennales opening in Yokohama and Osaka. These styles of international art festivals are in their heyday in every part of the world. Though there are several reasons for this, the most primary and important one is that biennales have the function of disseminating the latest information on the local trend of contemporary art in various parts.

This year sees the *49th Venice Biennale*, the first one in the 21st century. This biennale opened June in Venice. Ten years have passed since African artists were first invited to the *Venice Biennale*, which has been reigning supreme in the global art world with it’s the longest history in the world. Today the simple fact that African artists are participating in the *Venice Biennale* cannot even be a topic of the art world.

Several months ago, in taking a glance at the list of artists invited to the *Venice Biennale* this year, a very familiar name caught my attention. The name was Sunday Jack Akpan, whom I mentioned above. Akpan originally used to be an all-round sculpture maker in South-eastern Nigeria, making various sculptures for decoration to order.

In fact, on the business card he handed me when I met him for the first time in 1994, he presents himself as “Managing Director, Sunjaans Natural Sculptor Company,” followed by such lines as “Undertakes construction of Images, Statues, Tombstones of all kinds, Pottery Products, Marble Tombstones, Decoration of House Furniture, Drawing and General Arts,” expounding his repertoire. In 1989, when his grave statue — a wooden pole based on concrete blocks, covered with cement and

painted with acrylic — was taken up by the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, the course of his life drastically changed. He visited Japan in 1994 to work for an installation in Tachikawa, in the western part of Tokyo, and I myself exhibited two of his works in the exhibition I organized in 1995, *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time*.

I could not understand why it was now that Akpan was being called up to the Venice Biennale, for he is already world famous and his works have been acquired by many museums around the world. To put it a little ironically, I imagined that *the Venice Biennale* could not find new stars to ship over, though the exhibition is known for its efforts to dig up, or rather to ‘discover’ unknown African artists.

By the way, being invited or not to biennales means quite a lot to artists in Africa where infrastructure in the art world such as museums or art dealers is poor and financial support cannot be easily expected. To be invited to a biennale is literally a gateway to the global market for them. This simple fact suggests us that biennales have another function than the one of transmitting to the world the latest information on contemporary art. Of course such a function must be utilized widely by artists aiming at the global market from America, Japan, or anywhere else.

In other words, international art exhibitions like biennales stand as a huge power institution to artists. Particularly to artists from areas without an infrastructure of art, such as Africa, this has a crucial meaning. For the artists selected to biennales from such areas are often represented in relation to their own national culture. For example, when Sunday Jack Akpan is exhibited in Venice, his grave statues are always represented in relation to the Nigerian cultural background and its history. But happy are the countries whose artists are invited to Venice. What about the countries which are ignored by the biennale? For those countries, it is the same as being declared by the biennale that they have no contemporary art.

As a result, we can point out the following fact as the trait of biennales: they are sometimes nothing other than a huge power institution for artists or nations with a poor infrastructure, controlling their fate. If offering the latest information on contemporary art to the world is the positive aspect of biennales, then this is the negative one.

Here I cannot free myself from the temptation to compare this negative aspect to a familiar example. It is Moody’s, a famous company rating government bonds or company bonds in the world. It is possible that biennales rate the world through art.

Or changing the viewpoint completely to pay some attention to biennales held in Senegal, Korea, Australia, Central and South America, probably the organizers themselves have some inevitable reasons to arrange those biennales.

Reviewing them this way, we can say that what we call biennales have various faces according to context. What does this phenomenon, that such international art festivals with so many intentions and meanings are being enjoyed all over the world, mean to us? With art, Africa, and the world structure represented and amplified in such a way, can they preserve themselves unchanged? Or rather, will it be possible in the

future to have any other style of expression than the present one?

Conclusion

The symposiums held in Tokyo and Osaka at this time give top priority to listening to the voices of Africa. Here in Tokyo, some of the Japanese panelists invited are not specialists on Africa. This is so that all those present here can share widely pluralistic values and viewpoints.

Of course, taking into consideration the fact that this symposium itself is arranged and programmed by the Japanese side, it cannot truly offer an equal opportunity both to Japan and the African countries, such as I referred to in the case of the Seven Stories exhibition in London. However, I would like the panelists from Africa to talk freely on the African contemporary art boom seen since the 1990s in Europe, America and Japan. I would like the Africans here today to speak freely on the future of art, Africa and the world. The voices of African panelists should present more questions and proposals than reports from Africa. I would like all the panelists here to join the discussion. That is the only way for us to reexamine all the existing institutions in the art world including art itself, and biennales from an African viewpoint.

I think today's symposium has major historical significance in the following three respects. First of all, that we listen to the voices of Africans to have a frank dialogue between the African and Japanese sides. Second, that Africans represent not only Africa but the other such as Europe and Japan. Third, that a symposium with such a historical meaning is held not in Europe but here in Tokyo.

Now the world has been historically just a noisy discord. However, I believe that building a long series of dialogues across historical and cultural borders is all the more important for that very reason. By walking the narrow and steep path of mutual dialogues, I am sure that we can see a new light in which to repose some hope for the future.

Finally let me give my heartfelt thanks to those panelists here from African countries and Japan, and to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Japan Foundation for providing us with such a meaningful opportunity. Thank you.