

Comment

著者(英)	Jerry Buhari
journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Reports
volume	54
page range	93-97
year	2005-03-30
URL	http://doi.org/10.15021/00001680

Comment

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African Voices is a brilliant project and a good apologetic for those still unable to understand the enigma of the “dark continent” called Africa. Despite the tremendous explosion of information through IT we cannot even today afford to think that most Americans or the Western world would know and appreciate what really Africa is as a continent. The multimedia Strategy of the *African Voices* project therefore makes the continent both informative and revealing. The fixed readings of the West about Africa require this approach.

From Arnoldi’s account also the positioning of the display halls makes it an inevitable encounter. Therefore a continued encounter does not only succeed in commanding attention, it also commands a presence and perhaps subsequent acknowledgement.

Furthermore the seeming simplicity of the display strategy provides a wide spectrum of approach for diverse audiences. In this context therefore *African Voices* must be seen as a brilliant beginning which requires review from time to time where a deliberate thematic curatorship becomes the backbone of its review and expansion.

I must not fail to say here that this symposium is not only timely but appropriate and perhaps very site specific. The western arenas of artistic dialogue may have long been exhausted. It was about time that the venues change. This I believe has the capacity to offer all of us fresh perspectives to the study of art as a growing universal phenomenon in a global village. Symposium Africa 2001 therefore for me should be seen as a new approach not only in the understanding of art in Africa today but to the appreciation of regional visual activities that are inevitably connected by reason of information technology. In my opinion the most appropriate place to commence this meeting could never be more appropriate than the corner of the Mother of all technology. I thank the Japan Foundation, Kawaguchi through the Setagaya Museum, other bodies and personalities involved in this project for shepherding me here.

I see my role in this symposium as being that of a representative. Before producing this comment therefore I asked a few Artists and some simple but well-informed scholars to comment on *African Voices*. This is the result of that consultation.

Sometimes a person can set ambitions and goals that are utopian in nature, which become a blueprint for its failure, particularly if the goal lacks focus and deliberate limitations. This perhaps for me is the fundamental problem of the project *African Voices*. It appears that each time a project on African culture is undertaken it takes a bogus and limitless dimension reducing the continent to a small geographical

region. "To capture Africa's diversity, its dynamism and its global connections throughout its long history and continuing today" is an unimaginable and amorphous project that only Walt Disney may be able to execute. Africa is not a country for God's sake! This is a continent, second biggest in the world with 50 countries. It is most contrasting in geography, in racial variation, language, and people groups. Its culture as diverse worlds is yet somewhat homogeneous. One of the world's earliest human cultures originates from here. Africa is perhaps the only continent which has suffered the most devastating traumas and tragedies of forced foreign occupation and exploitation. Africa was plundered, is still being plundered yet not vanquished. Africa cannot be summarized, please!

Another question one may raise in the strategy of the project is the democratization attempt in the use of a seeming all-inclusive person, professional Africanists, academics, development professionals, journalists, African Diaspora, African-Americans, et cetera. This rather defensive posture without the identities of some of these masquerades almost persuades one to feel deficient to criticise the project freely. But *African Voices* is like any work of art, once presented open to inevitable critical comment.

I need to clearly point out my limitations here before I proceed. One, I have never been to the Smithsonian Institute so I can not even imagine the location of *African Voices*, the size and context of its presentation. The paper is like a report, very broad and rather too general to enable one to dissect its structure for a more critical analysis. An accompanied video or slides with the paper would have aided this comment. I will therefore only proceed to comment also broadly and generally along the line of the paper.

The compartmentalization of *African Voices* despite its systematic approach still leaves the work fragmented and renders its coherence rather weak. It has too many bits and pieces that make an attempt to piece the jigsaw puzzle "impossicant" (meaning impossible-apologies to the Nigeria dramatist-stage name Zeburdaya).

Perhaps the title *African Voices*, which seems to suggest the conceptual framework of the project may account for part of its weakness. While its sight and sounds offer tantalizing appetite for the project it fails short of the intellectual depth that one would expect of its engagement. It is perhaps more tourist in its success and here one cannot again avoid seeing the "curious gaze."

A Few Specific Comments

The role of Africanists or "professional Africanists" (whatever that may mean) must clearly be stated here does not often represent the current opinion of some African intellectuals, particularly some who still live and practice within the continent. To some of us we see some Africanist positions as sycophantic court jesters of eurocentric audiences. They are hypocrites, mercenaries who cash in easily on the Western

appetite for the exotic stories of the “natives.”

Consider for example a modern or contemporary African Artist in Europe who puts up paintings or sculptures in a Western site and insists on subjecting his/her Western audience to a ritual performance as a necessary vehicle to transport them into the deep mysteries of these rather simple ordinary works. This only achieves two eurocentric press expectations. One, it confirms what they expect to see. Two, it helps the sales and press review. But sadly it is short lived and despite all theatrical efforts, is unable to situate the works in the mainstream eurocentric arenas. This is the typical so-called Africanist posture. No doubt it guarantees a meal ticket.

In this century, any continuing attempt to set contemporary African art through anthropological studies of any modification, no matter how modern will only continue to subject it to the pigeon hole of primitive history. We all know that Euro-American art is yet to attract this kind of scholarship.

To have *African Voices* under a single shelter as a curatorial strategy may seem generous because of its pioneering position, it becomes however instantly unreasonable to house a whole continent under a single physical roof. Even the “alternative Documenta” which I {Begegnung Mit Den Anderen-Encountering the Others by H.el Attar} attended and had the privilege to participate in, in 1992 when it happened parallel to the official Documenta, had six sites. Four in Kassel, two in Hann-Munden. Africa must be seen as site specific, if one requires an authentic experience.

Changing Attitudes

But *African Voices* still represent the healthy wind of change in the representation of the art from Africa in both Europe and America compared to what used to obtain in the recent past. For example the expansion of the Museum of National History in the Smithsonian Institute, the opening of the Sainsbury African galleries, the provision of a corner in the Louvre for African art, the creation of a space for the beautiful antiquities (now recognized as sculptures) in the collection of Iowa University Museum are significant attitudinal changes in the representation of African art.

Furthermore African scholars in diaspora have strategically positioned themselves along the corridors of Western artistic arenas and often infiltrate their worlds to raise questions and challenge not only how African art is discussed but even how Europe can be “unpacked” (Salah Hassan et al.). However for these efforts to have greater impact in the process of decontextualising African art from the Eurocentric trappings of the past the efforts must constantly change in form and strategy pursuing organic, fluid and interactive approaches alongside other cultures. All these must be done in the true spirit of globalization and global neighborhood.

Sad Realities

I have to conclude by making some sad apologies for Africa. I am one of those who feel very strongly that after a time, a victim of rape (whether male or female) must “rise up, dust up himself and start all over again” (like Kenny Rogers will say). There is the need for African scholars to move on from a wailing scholarship. Secondly, some African scholars today arrogate to themselves certain exclusive expertise on the history of African art. They are “too big,” impatient or arrogant to return to the “jungle” to face the work needed. They tend to have a sweeping assessment of the contemporary artistic activities going on inside it. They employ a curatorial strategy I would simply call, taken for granted. Very few can tell where artists live or work. Very few know artists by intimate study. Very few attend exhibitions or any art functions. These categories of scholars think that the text is the same as the work.

For example in Nigeria where I live and practice, I am yet to be visited by any art historian critic who I would say, dedicated 2 days or a certain period of time to visit my studio and do any critical work. Until this week I know no artist who is a subject of close study by any art historian. This is often regarded as unmerited favor.

Most African scholars living abroad rely on second hand information collected by untrained resource persons to produce gloss publications. These types of publications became authoritative materials due to the dearth of more scholarly publications. At this moment what may seem to be an important book project is being put together titled “A century of Art in Africa 1900–2000” by the publishers of *Revue Noire*. I consider the approach detached and arrogant armchair scholarship. In this case a photographer was sent to Nigeria without a script. He came just to take any photograph of works available. This type of scholarship suggests that African artists are still anonymous. It seems so akin to the very problems we attribute to the early tourist writers of our history. What an inheritance.

The problem of food, shelter, security and the ability to plan for tomorrow, due to the lack of a stable polity perhaps to my mind constitute the most frightening obstacle to a healthy development of contemporary art in Africa. Art, to a large extent is fashioned in the end as an object and therefore inevitably subject to commodity and object of merchandise. Ordinarily this should be a healthy atmosphere for contemporary art to thrive in Africa; but the type of materialism that is practiced in most parts of the continent is that which pursues a dense obsession with the mundane than with the transcendental values of life that art seeks to promote. Furthermore the dearth of a critical art discourse across the continent continues to obscure the vibrant creative work that exists.

Conclusion

Despite all these sad realities, believe it or not, art activities among contemporary Artists in Africa cannot be any more vibrant than they are today. The secret lies in the resilience of the “average African.” Where hardship or impossibilities abound so also does creativity. This is a creativity that is not after a fashion or mould. It is a creativity that is contextually relevant and defiant. This is the spirit that keeps the art from Africa alive! Africa is known for its ability to constantly adapt and develop alternative survival techniques. I conclude by sharing with you a few slides in 5 minutes of some contemporary art trends in Nigeria. No sound. No voice. Thank you.