

Comment

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by **Mayako ISHIKAWA**
The Little World, Museum of Man

Ms. Nicodemus pointed out that the emergence of modern art in Africa is the result of a drastic paradigm shift in the field of arts. According to her, the art system of pre-colonial Africa and that of modern Africa are substantially different and therefore they should not be consolidated into one category like "African Art."

For us, anthropologists engaging in museum activities, it is not easy to accept what Nicodemus pointed out. However, perhaps anthropologists should recognize the substantial difference between objects which belong to the pre-colonial system and objects of modern art. In other words, the paradigm of art shifts, then even the paradigm of analysis should also change accordingly.

Ms. Nicodemus said that an artist, whether he or she is based in Africa or not, is facing the world as an individual. If he or she at all represents anything, it would be the common human situation rather than Nigeria, Uganda, or Japan. I understand that she is tired of being categorized as "an African artist" or being appreciated within the framework of "Africa". This feeling of exasperation is not limited to African artists, but is widely shared by non-Western artists. For example, Rasheed Araeen, a Pakistani artist living in UK, who is one of the founders of the journal, *Third Text*, of which Ms. Nicodemus is an advisor, warned in his 1987 article that the category like "ethnic art" might regenerate early 20th century Primitivism in a different form.

In the symposium on "Latin American Art" held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in NY in 1997, discussion pivoted on the issue what "Latin" in the label of "Latin American Art" means. A panelist underlined that as far as an artist works under that label, he or she will stay in the "second circuit" of art. He pointed out the limitations of the "new" categories in the contemporary art world such as African Art, Latin American Art, Chinese Art and Native American Art, etc.

The 1997 exhibition in New York entitled *too Jewish* also questioned the artistic categories based on ethnicity, by sarcastically forging a new category, "Jewish Art." The exhibition was composed of contemporary art works showing a stereotyped image of Jews. The curator of the exhibition said in the catalogue, "Jewish artists could not successfully use ethnic subjects because they have already been incorporated into the main art stream." This statement could be understood as a strong criticism of the excessive multi-culturalism and political correctness that prevailed in the art world in the 90s.

Museums became too much dependent on political correctness during the 1990s. Excessive political correctness has made the real voice of those exhibited fade away.

Some artists are eager to be incorporated into a universal category of art. However, is giving up titles such as “Latin” and “Africa” a productive solution? I doubt it.

In the Tokyo leg of this symposium, we discussed whether there exists an entity called “Africa.” Based on my observation of African diaspora culture, I believe the idea of “Africa” does exist as the source of creativity. For example, “Africa” is taken up as an important motif in contemporary Caribbean novels. This “Africa” is not a real place, but an imaginary one. The image deeply rooted in the memory of Caribbean people is something that could be called “Africa.” I would like to ask panelists. “What do you think of the ‘Africa’ which people of the African diaspora are trying to regain?”

The main points of my argument can be summarized as follows. We should be cautious in labeling an artwork based on the ethnicity of the artist. On the other hand, instead of a complete rejection of the colonial notion of “Africa” or “Latin” America, we may rethink the diversification of those notions in the contemporary meaning.

These points inevitably lead to the issue of authenticity in representation. I would think that “authenticity” is not absolute or definitive in an object or a person but dependent on the situation and context. As for an art exhibition in general, authenticity depends on the artist, audience, curator, venue, etc. The authenticity of an artwork is co-produced by artists, curators, audience and venue. An exhibition that is too much dependent on the curator’s intention or that forgets the audience and the venue can produce misconceived authenticity and is doomed to failure.

Ms. Nicodemus pointed out anthropologists, art dealers, and collectors have often been unaware of the significance of a piece for the creator when they place the piece in an exhibition framework. That is the reason she once took her work out of an exhibition.

Another important factor in an exhibition is audience. I was very much impressed by Mr. Koloane’s comment. He said, what was the most problematic in the Second Johannesburg Biennale was that it could not involve the people of Johannesburg as its audience. Ms. Nicodemus also pointed out the necessity of a well informed public as an element of the modern art system. I am very much disappointed to hear that the Johannesburg Biennale didn’t continue, because it is my opinion that the venue of an exhibition can play a vital role in revising misconceived authenticity.

Lastly I would like to ask Ms. Nicodemus about the impact of the fact that the *Seven Stories* was held in London .