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(General Discussion) Art and Africa in the 21st Century : Seeking for the Possibilities of Mutual Representation

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Session 3 (General Discussion)

Art and Africa in the 21st Century: Seeking for the Possibilities of Mutual Representation

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KAWAGUCHI

About five minutes only can be given to each of this session's special panelists to explain the situations in their native countries. One participant from Ghana was unable to reach Tokyo due to flight trouble, so we'll ask the remaining three participants who were scheduled to speak.

First, Ms. Nicodemus, who has been outside Tanzania for 20 years. Let me start first by asking why she left Tanzania.

NICODEMUS

I left because I fell in love and ended up in Europe, and there is nothing more to say. Now I am too selfish to return, you could say, because of the undeveloped infrastructure there that would keep me from being able to do what I most like. My writing on art does reach Africa, and hopefully Tanzania as well.

What is today known as Tanzania is comprised of 120 different languages and the peoples who speak them, held together by the official African language of Swahili.

Tinga-tinga paintings, now a brand, were cited as always being a hit with Western tourists. Tinga-tinga is a type of popular work using bright colors on small panels. This is one of several

different well-known tourist art forms in the Tanzania area. The tourists who buy these have rather prejudiced perceptions of Africa as being primitive. Nevertheless, that the affair turns a profit is of interest. Thus Tinga-tinga was exhibited in Paris as if it were the national art of Tanzania, though it is not.

Tanzania has been late to take up the subject of modern art. The socialist policies of the recent past did much to relieve the severest of poverty, but did not have the same cultural priorities as was seen in Senegal, for example.

As far back as the 50s and 60s, modern Tanzanian artists did engage in art activities. Much of these activities have taken place outside of Tanzania, e.g. in Uganda and Kenya. The art activity that followed upon independence in Nigeria and Senegal was not witnessed in Tanzania. Western-style oil and water color painting and sculpture were seen early on as recreational activities for expatriates.

The country is today among few in southern African countries offering B.A. and M.A. programs in the arts. Until recently, art students had to travel as far as to Nairobi or to Kinshasa to study visual arts. But these tardy improvements in

policy have not yet left traces of informed modern Tanzanian visual art that regularly garners attention. Basically, Tanzania does hardly exist among the known locales for modern African artists. Thank you.

NAGAWA

My formal education was entirely in Uganda, until I went to the U.K. to study for an M.A. in curatorship. The following is how I perceive Uganda.

Uganda does not contain all of its artists. Many artists and art professionals are working outside of the country. Art and its structures are located in and around the capital, and therefore artists tend to live there. One national gallery and a handful of private galleries exist in the capital.

Before the breakup of the East Africa Community, art students from the whole region studied here. These early students of the 1950s went on to become art teachers and respected artists.

Let me show some slides; pottery created in traditional methods, ceramics fired with modern tools, and modern art by a native Ugandan, and by Ms. Nagawa herself.

Patronage of the arts is almost totally limited to the expatriate community, though only a few of these people will buy art. And even those few are not necessarily dedicated art lovers, desiring nothing more than decorations or souvenirs. Such a market was cited as troublesome.

The government's only support to the arts is in a minute role by providing a

building for a national gallery, but no funds to run it. Therefore the national gallery ends up operating like a private gallery to survive.

There are no government artist grants. The funds conspicuously advertised are for the Universal Primary Education as well as the security system along the country's borders.

The other important support structures for the arts are nonexistent. However, certain art catalogues are beginning to appear with critical writing included. As far as I know, I am the only professionally trained curator, per se, in Uganda, except for an Israeli Rebeka Uziel who for five years visited occasionally to do projects with the Makerere University Art School.

What is the color of the future? How can we see where we're going? On the positive side, communication facilities—especially phones—are improving. Therefore internet connections can be found, though mainly in urban areas. And there are closer links between artists with the spread of mobile phones.

Of the four private galleries in the country only one is owned by an Ugandan.

The "brain drain" is slowing. Artists are getting involved in art projects outside of the country.

We the artists and intellectuals in the country have the responsibility to mend the holes in the art scene. Overall, I believe the color of the future is bright.

KAWAGUCHI

Thank you. I'm happy to hear that

positive, good news at the end. And now let's hear from the third speaker, about the Ethiopian situation.

BEDIMSU

Historically, Ethiopia was attached to both the Mediterranean as well as Eastern civilizations. In the time of Marco Polo, Ethiopia had trade relations with India and China. Christianity brought change to the country. Strong political and religious links existed in the 15th century. This gave rise to "Magic Scrolls," an art form born from the European religious connection in the country.

Even though the direction of art took place in the distant past, they have an effect to day on modern art. Christianity was accepted as the official religion, and the making of monolith churches did not cease. The churches feature special architectural aspects. For example, the sanctuaries in these churches are always square, while the outside walls are rounded. With European monks, paintings were introduced in Ethiopia.

Many Ethiopian artists trained in European art academies. In 1957, a fine arts school was finally founded within Ethiopia, giving birth to stronger art awareness within the country. The establishment of the school stands as the second turning point for art in the country.

In the future, the main determinant factors for growth in the Ethiopian arts are the political and economic stability of the country as well as the world. Thank you very much.

KAWAGUCHI

Moving on to the main discussion, we outside Africa show little interest in the contemporary arts, as was pointed out in the morning by our African colleagues.

If there is modern art in Africa, then what is its relation to "authentic" African art? Then the issue comes up as to whether that art is authentic or not. African participants are asking us to discuss modernism in Africa, which has been ignored, so let's start the discussion.

IKWUEMESI

Modernism is as much an issue of nomenclature as anything else. The question I always ask is, in what context is "contemporary" measured? Is it something bound by time? If it is bound by time, what time frame can we use to talk about "contemporary?" In Nigeria, for example, back in the 1920s, there was a Nigerian artist who was trying to paint like any European artist. I mean, the late Aina Onabolu. He pursued nationalism not from a political angle, but at a creative level, through his naturalistic paintings. Is that where we want to begin to look at "contemporary," or are you talking about a timeframe of only 20 or 30 years going back from now? Such issues (of nomenclature) are offered overlooked in the study of African art.

When we say "modern," we imply artists who had a Western-style education. That is why we need to look at who a modern African artist is, and how we can begin to fix the fact that we have

not tried to articulate the history of African art. I refuse to talk about "traditional." "Classic" art is a much more reasonable term. Traditional is really a continuum. So far, no one can say where it starts and where it ends. It is part of the by-product of anthropology. African art scholarship must move beyond the dictates of anthropology.

KAWAGUCHI

It would take a lot of research to accomplish that worthwhile goal.

NICODEMUS

History is always under construction. Why can't we use the same art historical methods in studying African art? First, when did the paradigm shift occur? So far, my research suggests that we can start with the Aina Onobolu. When Picasso was appropriating from classical African art, Onobolu in Nigeria was appropriating from European academic realism while establishing a new art paradigm in Africa. Both created something new out of what was seen as passé. Onobolu did not initiate the new way of seeing because it was imposed by the European colonial masters but as a revolt against their thought that Africans could not produce fine arts. He took it upon himself to educate himself and also to introduce a new notion of art in his society. He was not acting out of colonial guidance. On the contrary.

Knowing this, it should be researched who the other artists were who later on followed his example in different parts of Africa. Who were they, where did

they get their influences, when were art academies established, how did they function, who studied there? And when did the students "revolt" against the schools's style as always happens in art academies...

What is lacking in African art history is written documentation. Art scholarship exists in Africa, but it is "patchy." An effort needs to be made by trained professionals to document what we have as evidence concerning art.

Scholarship on African art history needs to move forward. If it is done by Africans is not the important thing. It is difficult because of the lack of financial resources for this research. Africa is becoming poorer and poorer. Its future is less bright now in this respect, perhaps even worse than when I was young.

Africa has come to the stage where something resembling a stable middle class can be seen. This is where an art public might emerge. As we know, people start to value art when they have "surplus," and now there are signs this will occur.

Art schools have existed for some time on the continent, but they have been constantly neglected by the West and not been assisted because they are not perceived as "authentic" entities. That issue cannot be addressed by Africans alone.

KAWAGUCHI

Africa should write its own history too, and international assistance should be given to that scholastic effort. But

poverty has exacerbated the prospects for a bright future.

Let me now ask what poverty specifically means here, because this morning we mentioned terrorism and seemed to agree that terrorism comes from poverty (being marginalized).

NICODEMUS

It's difficult to describe, but by poverty, I mean that in general people do not have a good roof over their head, they can't have three meals a day, go to school, or drink clean water. That is how I would describe poverty.

BUHARI

I see poverty as a political product. As a Nigerian who speaks from a somewhat privileged position, I think that we need to take a look at viewing challenges as stepping-stones to success, as I believe a Chinese proverb states, and leave the cycle of complaining.

IKWUEMESI

Poverty is not necessarily material. People on the continent are generally poor in vision. We are unable to look beyond our nose to see how we could do better, to see how to make the best of a bad situation. The tendency until now has always been to look to the West for help.

In art, we all want to be recognized by Western markets, but no one seems to be thinking about building a market in Africa so that we could aspire to greater heights.

We should come to a situation where

we should be able to solve our problems with little or no assistance from outside.

KAWAGUCHI

There may be poverty of ideas as well, which should be regarded as an opportunity or challenge more than a barrier.

As another question, how would you characterize a brighter future for African art?

NAGAWA

The artists themselves might be the first solution. If we begin to address the issues that friends and family and government wants to hear, then this will begin to make a change.

KAWAGUCHI

The importance of Africans helping themselves is obvious.

NICODEMUS

The key is also education. The African people who have money are so illiterate in culture that as soon as they get money, they buy things from the west. Culturally we are primitive, hanging the same art on our wall as Westerners would collect because they've defined what good taste is. We've bought into that mindset.

KAWAGUCHI

Thank you. The key word you mentioned is education. Mr. Koloane.

KOLOANE

We need to pull our resources together, to

do things for ourselves. To make a plan of action after we decide what the most important immediate goal is. We have to come up with regional solutions through understanding and share the choices and skills we have.

KAWAGUCHI

Speaking on regionalism, one symbol of the weak links between African countries is the few number of flights available within Africa.

So my question is how do you affect these changes? Do you want to do it through government, through business, or some other way?

BEDIMSU

It's hard to talk about the development of art because everything in the country is interlinked. We cannot only discuss culture.

KAWAGUCHI

Thank you. The same question again. What is the unit for your self-help? The tribe, the community, the country?

ADEWUNMI

We must continue to struggle. Our governments have failed us, they are corrupt. We have to do something ourselves. It may take a long time, but we have to try. The individuals must take action. Also to continue to copy Western system of education, which we have now, would be a mistake. It may take a long time, but if we don't relent we shall succeed.

KAWAGUCHI

In summarizing, governments cannot be relied upon to take care of all societal needs, including those for arts. Western education is failing to accomplish what needs to be done.

Let me ask what "language" you use when you formulate these concepts?

ORCHARDSON

I would rather be more positive than what is being stated now.

In the same way that we cannot talk about Africa as one entity, we cannot talk about problems as one consistent factor throughout Africa.

Africans are resilient. Everywhere in Nairobi, which has its share of insecurity, there is proof of people fighting to survive.

In Kenya in 1985, the government made arts and crafts a compulsory subject at primary level. Since then, interest in art has spread to remote areas where schools don't even exist. Or if a library exists, for example, books may be carried by camels. But the effort is still made by all, because we all take the same exam.

I like the idea that my colleague said about viewing all of the country's art in a collage. Let's call it post-colonial art or modern art. Developments included artists who practice in more naïve styles, others who practice in the abstract, yet others who are representative. I would like to see this as dialects with accents, pinpointing where our developments are.

Africans do think; we are not culturally

ignorant. We know what we want. But economics does play a large part, as my colleague said, if for nothing else than to be able to buy art supplies. People know how to survive in a market in which art supplies must be bought, and those art supplies are imported.

It's important to recognize and be thankful for the contributions that have occurred before to help us document our own culture, by ethnographers, collectors, etc. Because I've seen African art abroad more than at home, I can be glad that it is at least somewhere in the world.

KAWAGUCHI

African people indeed have a resilience and power that no one denies. If that power is directed carefully, things may change. It is not that African countries need a huge volume of assistance from overseas.

Yukichi Fukuzawa quote recited: people without a spirit of independence will not be able to think politically about how to improve their country.

NICODEMUS

What I'm hearing now is pretty romantic. In this field of art, artists are on the low end of the power ladder.

First, before an object can be identified as art, it needs to pass through a series of stages and to be consecrated as art. The various stages that a work passes through on its way to achieving the rank of art requires a consecrating structure of art patrons, of government support, a cultural policy which is

favorable towards art, art collectors, critics, museums, private galleries, art magazines... And finally there is the question of quality. Not every object that is produced can be art.

Unless you have a comprehensive art infrastructure, selections will be made on criteria other than quality. This infrastructure consecrates a piece into art. The artist is the manufacturer, but one that does not operate on a mass-production level.

Unless somebody comes to buy the art as art to preserve it, it is not art. It is just an object.

KAWAGUCHI

You've explained how important it is to have an art infrastructure. We heard about the necessity for a mechanism to turn an object into art.

KINOSHITA

This is the topic I believe is critical. You need a mechanism in society to change an object into art. Maybe you could have an African mechanism to do this. Maybe we should have one in Asia.

But that mechanism seems quite westernized to me. I'd like to put that question out to the other participants. Can there be an African mechanism?

Japan in the last 100 years has tried to develop an improved infrastructure but is overbuilt with galleries and museums.

KAWAGUCHI

I think the question is "do you want to be Western or African?" If African, what kind of African? If that is the gist of

the question, then maybe this is a question for Japanese people too, I think.

NAGAWA

I must disagree with Nicodemus. I think artists are not that insignificant. I believe they do have power in being the creator, but they choose to give it up. Or, they do know that they can't keep this power by being the maker of the artwork.

I also don't believe you need the full art world structure and don't need to wait to be discovered by a curator from abroad before making a statement with your art.

If you want people to listen, you do not have to wait for a curator to find you. You can use the structures in your own setting, for instance the marketplace, however meager they may be.

NICODEMUS

You're talking about the populist view. I am talking about the fine arts. Fine artworks require a different consecration process from those of the popular arts, which are consecrated in the marketplace.

We have different ideas. You take the populist view, while I take that of the fine arts which speaks differently about quality.

KAWAGUCHI

This seems to be a heated discussion. But the Japanese are thus far silent. Would you like to make an intervention, Mr. Inaga?

INAGA

Speaking on what kind of market or system we should establish, I want to make a metaphor with the PC revolution and office automation. To obtain a universal language with which to communicate with people worldwide, we must in a way bow to the dominant operating system. Chinese and Japanese writing characters may not always be compatible, and that is because the dominant operating system is based on the phonetic-alphabet of 1-bit characters, not 2-bit characters as is required by kanji. In the same way without being connected with a compatible operating system, we are excluded from the dominant art market. So the question is whether we have to rely on a common language when we create art. For example, should we be using a sort of Esperanto in plastic language?

My question to Ms. Nagawa is as follows: when you choose the "local" alternative — not an internationally recognized code — then what is your marketing strategy to circulate your own artistic creation in that way?

NAGAWA

We must not rely on the New York art market everywhere in the world.

I think that you have to speak to your audience. Even if educated at the best art school in Africa, unless someone is listening to you, you're irrelevant.

You have to know who you want to sell to. Don't wait to be discovered in your small studio. Take your work to the people.

KAWAGUCHI

I'm sorry to interrupt, but we've been asked by Mr. Inaga how to challenge the champion. I believe that is the question before us now.

In talking about how to challenge the "Microsoft Empire in art," I realize I'm not supposed to speak this way as the chairperson, but the issue is one of an open system versus a closed one.

The Japanese market has been protected by a strong wall of language, unlike the African market. So how can you fight the empire when you don't have the local market? This can be called a hidden problem.

NICODEMUS

The system I talked about was in Africa, not in New York. I'm trying to say that Africa needs the establishing of this kind of system on the continent. I want you to imagine an art infrastructure in Africa for addressing African artists to address. As with Japan, a Japanese artist doesn't need to go abroad to find Japanese buyers, Japanese academies, Japanese critics, etc.

I was simply talking about an art system being able to function as an art system.

RICHARDS

With the metaphor of an operating system, remember that people can hack into such a system and turn it against itself. And then there are viruses. So having a system is important, but it is not the ultimate power. The system works in many directions. Along with

this, I wouldn't encourage us to separate ourselves from others, but to recognize where interaction happens is probably the most important part of culture. We have to work together, develop and respect agency at the collective and the individual level. I believe the system in Africa needs a high degree of hybridity and flexibility. The relational and responsive quality of any system must be maintained, or else you go down roads which end in defensive isolation and worse.

KAWAGUCHI

I would like to invite some Japanese to speak.

TOYODA

I'd like to ask Ms. Nicodemus a question. You said education is quite important. And you said that education in Africa is sort of westernized. So by promoting education as it is, Africa could become more westernized. It must have been a sad thing for you to be introduced to African art for the first time by going abroad. I think it is an opportunity to blame the colonialism of Western countries.

NICODEMUS

I am talking about a basic education. About science. You have to incorporate what you need from wisdom of different countries, but knowledge belongs to everyone. There is no African knowledge. African wisdom... Yes! There is no Japanese knowledge. Japanese wisdom ... Yes!

If we go back in Japan's history, how much did you appropriate from China, such as the writing? So in Africa, how can we incorporate African knowledge when there is barely any such thing due to the lack of scientific scholarship? There is African wisdom, and it can be used to understand how to better learn from what is around, the way Japan learned during the Meiji era.

I'm talking about education as it exists today: mathematics, history and so forth, along with the wisdom of your culture. If science improves, you can extract new knowledge from the wisdom. In medicine, we can see the wisdom of other peoples in the herbs they use. But scientists turned it into pharmaceutical knowledge which can be further developed. The art world is not so different from that system of learning.

TOYODA

As far as natural sciences are concerned, of course you can accept from the West. But African art has been heavily influenced by Western anthropologists, as Mr. Ikwuemesi told us many times.

NICODEMUS

The art discourse is another discourse altogether from anthropology or ethnography. There is no reason why a modern piece of art should be looked at from the anthropological perspective or the ethnological perspective. We should know, for example, how a piece of art becomes consecrated as art.

KAWAGUCHI

Maybe we should invite anthropologists to speak. They have been rather silent so far. Perhaps it is because of the number and the proportion of members in this sort of symposiums.

YOSHIDA

Personally I don't distinguish anthropology and art history. It is partly because I have been trained in both disciplines, and partly because from the historical point of view anthropology and art history are two sides of the shield. What is important is to identify and overcome academic barriers and divisions between the two, and thus to find out more fruitful ways of viewing the world.

I've been silent because I'm perplexed about the need for westernized education in Africa. Japan has pursued the Western model of museum systems since the Meiji era. In many ways these systems are no longer functioning smoothly. That's similar to the problem of education, which is basically Western. As is shown by school violence, it is not functioning well now in Japan.

The institution of the museum has become so powerful that you cannot even criticize it. There are too many links to authority. The people who visit museums must simply accept what is shown by museums. You're not allowed to be critical in any way. Museums have assumed so much power that I struggle to overcome it.

The same is true in education.

Education should be open to anyone, even if it is somewhat westernized. We cannot deny the need for education in Africa, simply because it is westernized. Otherwise, we Japanese have to deny our own modern history. I do believe Africans can even learn from our bitter mistakes in Japan and do a better job than we have, in establishing a good educational system or art support system.

As for the issue of westernization brought by the modern educational system, that kind of influence is now actually reflected in both art and education in Africa. Since Ms. Tsukada is a specialist in art education, perhaps she can comment more on this.

TSUKADA

Thank you. As for education or a museum system, once it is established, it has a lot of power and authority. These institutions originally come from the Western world, and we continue to ask, "Can we ever get away from the overwhelming influence of the West?" Perhaps Africans can make a better system than in Japan or elsewhere.

But I'd like to ask about the empowerment of art education. "Empowerment", which leads to reform and change, is the keyword. Indeed the museum or educational system was originally introduced by the West and we dealt with it in a certain way in Japan that may have led to some failures, but we did succeed at adapting it. Through the aspect of empowerment, perhaps Africans can succeed and do it better

than we did.

I have a question to the African delegates about intellectual imperialism. How do you deal with this cultural or intellectual imperialism in your educational practices?

RICHARDS

I don't know how we got to the concept of knowledge being 'owned' by a certain culture. It isn't. If we get too preoccupied about who "owns" that knowledge, 'proprietary' rights on knowledge, we only hurt our own cause. If someone says they 'own' knowledge, then we must disagree with them. If we think ideas belong only to a particular group, we must think again. Knowledge indeed gives us power. It is possessed in process by all of us as part of the human community, and anyone wishing to patent knowledge as the preserve of a particular group should be challenged.

About your question, I teach at a university, and we encounter widely different groups of people. We try to do two things in respect of knowledge. Firstly we try and subject current forms of knowledge to criticism, so that forms of thinking which have dominated our perceptions and relationships and in some ways led to our impoverishment are recognized as oppressive. Internal or self-criticism is part of this. The other thing we try to do is to make knowledge that is not obvious and visible to become so; to reveal knowledges perhaps buried and overlooked within our communities and ourselves. I presume this happens elsewhere in the

same way.

BUHARI

I agree with Colin, and I'll say that at various levels there are problems that need to be addressed. For one thing, we are trying to see that students are introduced compulsorily to philosophy. Students may be too focused on their own majors. We want to provoke students to challenge the things they run into in life.

In fine art, as we now try to do in my department, we have a course called Development of Individual Ideas. In this course we seek to provoke students to encounter what they are certain to run into in the real world.

In my last class, I had students pick up everything on the ground, and then try to use those to recreate the world around them. First we want to remove them from the conventional campus, and ask them to address the issues that deal with them.

KAWAGUCHI

Thank you. Institutions also work as media, by amplifying certain knowledge. Perhaps we can amplify and transmit these things at a louder level.

INAGA

I made a proposal about a sort of refusal to participate in media circulation. Colin Richards added another possibility — to become a virus that has the function (attribute) of destabilization in media circulation.

Another possibility for an artist is to

create an object we do not know how to use, something inconsumable or which we cannot deal with.

Mr. Buhari's lesson plan was very interesting, and is an example of making students grasp the realities around them.

In talking about media, I made a proposal about the refusal of the current modes of media circulation. I would like to ask again to our African participants what Ms. Tsukada has asked, because I think there is a point of confusion as for the role of media and education.

BUHARI

What did the young lady from Setagaya say about education? Could you repeat the question?

TSUKADA

I wanted to know what kind of empowerment methods and mechanisms you are using now.

IKWUEMESI

We've been talking about African history here. When I was doing my B.A. studies, I studied European masters, as must so many Africans who study art.

We are not empowered to talk for ourselves as a people and as artists as long as the art curriculum looks westernized. Some young artists who do not even know who has created what. We cannot talk about indigenous history, by African historians or not, without knowing what traditions they come from. We should be concerned as Africans to see that the same European names come up over and over again in

our teachings and courses in the history of art

KAWAGUCHI

We're short on time, but please go ahead, Mr. Koloane.

KOLOANE

I also think it's a problem of terminology, because "empowerment" means different things to different people.

In Africa you deal with people at different levels economically and socially, so it's difficult to say you're dealing with a cohesive group. Artists operate at different levels with different goals.

KAWAGUCHI

This is going to be the last comment.

ORCHARDSON

I think we all have different ways of empowering our students. But in the past few years we have had a Japanese artist from the States coming to Nairobi. She went into the worst slum community and she worked with children with what was left — the garbage, if you like — and transformed the lives of people into something of hope. The children there have now started a cultural dance group; they produce art; there is a football club that is also funded by an NGO. This Japanese artist really worked with what was physically in the community and succeeded with connecting with people.

I'd like to see more positive changes.

Positive exchanges are important, as Colin said, because we are interlinked. We should be aiming for building a humane and unified strong society that uses art to transform itself, and not making an isolated society.

KAWAGUCHI

Thank you very much for your fruitful discussion, everybody.

Now I am recollecting a proverb by an African author Chinua Achebe introduced by Mr. Ikwemesi in his presentation.

Africa is required to make a willing effort to represent its own message, then the intimate outsiders including some Japanese are also required never to impose their own values under the title of cultural interchange.

Today's discussion made me notice how it is important to build up the common structure for an incessant dialogue between African countries and Japan which can easily reflect the voices of both sides.

The discussion will be going on still in Osaka. I hope Osaka will see more hot sessions.

Thank you very much again.

