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Objects and Agendas : New Attempts in Art and Cultural Exhibitions on Africa

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Objects and Agendas New Attempts in Art and Cultural Exhibitions on Africa

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During the last two decades, there has been a growing controversy over exhibitions in the museum. The peoples of the world who have been the object of ethnographic exhibitions have become more aware of their own cultures and histories, and they have begun protesting against the prevalent one-sided approach to exhibitions of 'other cultures.'

Why is it that while the creators of the works displayed in art museums are regarded as individual geniuses, the individuality of those who created the works in an ethnographic museum is completely ignored, and only the tribe and locality are written on the label beneath the work? Why has one always talked of Modernism in the West, while Third World Modernism, which developed simultaneously in the Third World, has been diminished by focusing only on the traditional aspects of non-Western cultures? One cannot deny the fact that an opposition between the 'open' self and the 'closed' other is posited here. The self is seen as complex and impervious to generalization while the other is simple enough to be regarded in generalities. The old opposition between 'primitive' and 'civilized,' which has its roots in the age of colonialism, is still operating. In view of this problematic distinction between the 'self' and the 'other,' or 'we' and 'they,' museum curators are now experimenting with a variety of new approaches in the field of cultural exhibitions.

At the turn of the millennium or the century, more precisely, during the short period between 1999 and 2001, major museums in the West, including the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History in Washington, opened newly developed African Galleries one after another.

In September 1999, the Ethnologisches Museum (formerly Museum für Völkerkunde) in Berlin renewed their African exhibition. For many years since the end of the World War II, the collection of the Berlin Museum had been divided between East and West Germany; after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the collection was unified and reorganized at several groups of museums. The new African exhibition at the Ethnologisches Museum, which is entitled *Afrika: Kunst und Kultur* (Africa: Art and Culture), presents the continent's artistic achievement with special reference to the history of collection by the museum.

In the United States, the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History opened a new permanent exhibition of African History and Culture at the end of the same year. In the

late 80s, the museum's previous 'Hall of African Cultures,' which opened in 1967 and remained on view till 1992, faced the strong criticism that it presented Africa in a timeless ethnographic present with little discussion of Africa's modernity. In response to the criticism, the museum decided to develop a new exhibition in collaboration with a team composed of more than 100 Africans and African-Americans. The new exhibition, with the title *African Voices*, which was completed after the six years of work, indeed resounds with the voices of Africans and African-Americans.

In April 2000, the Louvre in Paris finally made a space for the arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. African exhibits occupy the largest space in the temple-like gallery of the Pavillon des Sessions. It is the first time for African arts to be exhibited in this sanctum sanctorum of 'World Art.'

And in March 2001, the British Museum in London celebrated the opening of the Sainsbury African Galleries. The African collection had been housed for nearly thirty years in the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens. In conjunction with the creation of the Great Court in the British Museum, the collection has returned to the main Museum. In the newly developed galleries, contemporary objects by African artists are for the first time introduced in this the world's oldest public museum.

It is not a mere coincidence for these major museums to renovate African exhibits in such a short period of time. Africa has long been regarded as 'alien,' the furthest removed from the cultures of the West. It was even called 'primitive.' It is the region which has come to be a central object of research and collection for anthropology, ethnology and ethnological museums.

As mentioned above, however, there has recently been a burgeoning awareness of their own cultures and histories on the part of the peoples in Africa, and they have become more and more interested in the way they are presented in museums abroad. Africa, long regarded as a region which typifies 'otherness,' has led to a grave issue in the age of multicultural awareness, and thus became a central arena for museological challenges. Each of the newly developed African exhibitions aims at building a more positive relationship between Africa and the West. But they differ widely in their approaches. Among them, the *African Voices* exhibition at the Smithsonian is noteworthy in that it was developed with substantial input from Africans and African Americans.

How to embody *African voices* is also an issue in the field of art exhibition. The exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, which was held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 1995, was a milestone in the history of the representation of African art in Europe; it was curated by five Africans, although the whole project was co-ordinated by a European curator. Each African curator narrated one or two stories about modern art in Africa by means of displays. The recent exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*, can be

considered as an extended version of the *Seven Stories* exhibition. *Century City* tried to explore the relationship between cultural creativity and the metropolis, by focusing on nine cities from around the world at specific moments over the last 100 years. In the exhibition, each of 9 cities, namely Lagos, Mumbai, Tokyo, New York, Rio, London, Moscow, Paris and Vienna, had an independent display which was curated by a native curator. Since the historical moments picked up by the curators differed considerably, it was rather difficult for the audience to see the displays from a global point of view. However, the *Century City* exhibition was full of suggestions for multi-vocal exhibition. In the sense that it led to this kind of new exhibition approach, the *Seven Stories* exhibition can be ranked among pioneering exhibitions.

In the first session of the Osaka Workshop, Dr. Mary Jo Arnoldi, who coordinated the Smithsonian's *African Voices* exhibition, is going to present a detailed report on how she worked closely with a diverse Extended Team made up of professional Africanists, development professionals, journalists etc., as well as African and African American community members. In the second session, Mrs. Evelyn Nicodemus, who was involved in the *Seven Stories* exhibition, will critically review the show, and propose an alternative exhibition which represents as distinctively as possible the genesis and the fundamental development of modern art in Africa.

This workshop in Osaka, 'Representing "African" Art and Cultures: a review through African eyes' aims at finding new and more appropriate ways of representing African art and cultures by examining the recent challenging exhibition projects through African eyes.

At the National Museum of Ethnology (MINPAKU) in Osaka, we are facing the same problems that the Smithsonian had in the 80s-90s since we have not renovated our permanent exhibition since the opening of the museum in 1977. Now we are planning to refurbish our African Gallery together with some other galleries. We, staff members of the National Museum of Ethnology, are eager to gain new insights on how to represent Africa through the perspective of Africans from this workshop.

The participants of this workshop are composed of three groups of specialists; artists, art historians and curators from Africa who are invited by the Japan Foundation, members of JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency)'s Museum Technology Training Course, and members of the MINPAKU research project 'Museum-Anthropological Studies of Cultural Representation.'

At the Tokyo symposium, one important point was raised. We tend to think that one exhibition is enough to represent all of African Art, while thinking that one show is not sufficient to represent all of European Art or American Art. Why is that? What is at issue here is the distinction between the West and the non-West, 'we' and 'they.' To

tackle this issue, we also need to take into consideration the distinction between art and culture, art history and ethnography, art museum and ethnographic museum. Personally I have the expectation of deconstructing these distinctions and re-imagining a new system through African eyes. We do hope that this workshop will help us to gain fresh insights into issues of cultural representation in museums, and thus further mutual understanding between African countries and Japan.