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contemporary issues of discrimination by consciousness. To Baker's credit, he reveals that the provocative Deleuze who said that 'anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool', is the same Deleuze who kept cats all his life, and that Derrida keeps one now. In a recent essay Derrida speaks of a 'fundamental compassion which, if it was taken seriously, would change the very basis ... of the philosophical problem of the animal'. In other words, if wishing to dispute postmodern orthodoxy, and change the basis of the 'philosophical problem of the animal', just try kicking Derrida's cat and see what happens. ■

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No More Mumbo-Jumbo

Eddie Chambers

Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, 224pp, 74 col & 106 b/w illus, £8.95, 0500 230 288.

African art, what's it all about? In the old days, it was all so simple. African art was stuff made, up to the beginning of the last century, in the sub-Saharan part of the continent by black-skinned makers whose personal identities were not a primary factor in the making of the objects. The objects in turn were produced for a variety of rituals and practices that the West has traditionally regarded as not much more than superstitious mumbo-jumbo. At that time African art was the preserve of elderly white men in tweed jackets with leather patches on the elbows, who pronounced 'Kenya' as if it had

a double 'e' and an 'h' on the end. The last time we saw a spirited defence of this antiquated approach to African art was 1995's 'Africa Art of a Continent' presented by the Royal Academy.

Over the course of the past 20 or 30 years, various writers and researchers have, with varying degrees of success, made attempts to chart the development of a modern and contemporary African art that struggles to gravitate away from constraining and antiquated notions of African art. In this regard, a pioneering study was Ulli Beier's *Contemporary Art in Africa* published in 1968. We can think of Kojo Fosu's *20th Century Art of Africa*, published in Nigeria in 1986. We can think also of more recent efforts such as André Magnin and Jaques Soulillou's *Contemporary Art of Africa*, 1996, as well as the exhibition catalogues *Africa Now* and *Africa Explores*, both 1991.

This new Thames and Hudson book, written by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, effortlessly runs rings around earlier studies. It does so by weaving a range of narratives that work both to identify and unravel the complexities of the contemporary African artist and his/her practice. Indeed, Littlefield Kasfir clearly embarked on a wide-ranging and critical appraisal of preceding texts such as the ones I've just mentioned. In the writing of her book, as well as 'drawing liberally upon them as sources'.

In her introduction, Littlefield Kasfir states that, 'What this book describes are the major transformations that occurred within African artistic practice as a result of the colonial incursion, with an emphasis on the period beginning in the 1950s with the transition from late colonialism to political statehood'. We can glean some notion of the complexities of the arguments and debates that Littlefield Kasfir orders in her book by looking at the sub-headings in her introduction: 'Contemporary or modern?'; 'The modern and the colonial'; 'The postcolonial and the postmodern' and finally 'The new art map of the continent'. In the words of the preface, 'each chapter attempts to deal with

a major issue surrounding the history of contemporary African art since the 1950s'.

But in attempting to construct and describe a 'broader artistic geography', Littlefield Kasfir, perhaps unwittingly, irreversibly unravels the entire edifice of 'contemporary African art'. What becomes apparent in reading this book is that 'contemporary African art' has none of the clear-cut terms of reference that throughout much of the last century were used to describe ye olde worlde African art. Few of the artists described in this book are constrained by geographical borders. Contemporary African art has become an assortment of international commodities, no less than many of the artists discussed in this book – who live and work in countries/continents other than the ones in which they were born.

In what senses can we refer to 'contemporary African art'? Certainly not on the basis of skin-colour: Littlefield Kasfir includes and discusses white South African artists such as William Kentridge. Certainly not on the basis of country of birth: Littlefield Kasfir's discussions include artists who have long since ceased to live and work permanently within any African country (choosing instead to live/work in Western Europe or the United States). One of the principal enigmas of this unravelling is the means by which time and again Littlefield Kasfir is able to designate London-born Yinka Shonibare as a 'Yoruba artist', while simultaneously ignoring in their entirety all [East] Africa-born Asian artists such as Shaheen Merali and Zarina Bhimji.

Within these contexts it becomes almost a nonsense to speak of 'contemporary African art' as any sort of recognisable entity – however fluid and complex it may be. On reading this book the inescapable conclusion is that there is no such thing as 'contemporary African art' – only contemporary artists with an assortment of links to the continent – some strong, some tenuous.

Even so, this is a useful book, in which Littlefield Kasfir shows herself unwilling to shirk vexatious questions. For example she eloquently summarises the curious position

of black South African artists within their own country. A country which 'positions [them] there in ways that are reminiscent of African-American, Native American and Hispanic artists in the United States – enclaved groups defined primarily by race or ethnicity in relation to artworld institutions which are still overwhelmingly white'. Speaking of South Africa's white artists, critics, curators and academics, Littlefield Kasfir writes 'they cannot choose to ignore the conditions of their privilege'. Unless I'm very much mistaken, this is precisely what they have done. It would have been good if Littlefield Kasfir had taken this motley crew to task. ■

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Seeing Through Sexism

Cherry Smyth

Laura Cottingham, *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art*, G+B Arts International Group, Amsterdam, 2000, 213pp, hb, 90 5701 212 X.

Despite the increasing success of women artists, the artworld remains predominantly white, male and straight, and largely oblivious to the influence of Feminism. New York critic Laura Cottingham's nine essays, *Seeing Through the Seventies* ..., provide a convincing account of how sexism and homophobia have shaped curatorial and critical practice.

Almost all commissioned as catalogue introductions, the essays occasionally risk repetition, but there is enough fresh and well-argued material to make that a minor