

african arts

Are We There Yet?

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Chinography

His work as painter
- art objects

first word

ARE WE THERE YET?

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago has become a fixture in the city since it relocated in June 1996 to a new building on the lakefront with spacious galleries and a breathtaking view of Lake Michigan. When operations began at this new site, the MCA restated its intention "to be an innovative and compelling center of contemporary art where the public can directly experience the work and ideas of living artists, and understand the historical, social, and cultural context of the art of our time." The museum has lived up to its goal, judging from a string of successful exhibitions and an abiding public interest in its activities. On any given day, it is packed with both Chicago natives and those tourists who chance upon it as they make their rounds of North Michigan Avenue, otherwise known as the Magnificent Mile. In the final years of the last decade, when I still lived in Chicago, I frequented the museum and observed these visitors as they struggled to come to terms with its often esoteric displays of cutting-edge contemporary art. Then as now, enthusiasm abounded but not necessarily enlightenment, and for many, the lakefront view from the upper gallery continues to provide a soothing counterpoint to the complex newness within.

I returned to Chicago last December to revisit the MCA and view two landmark exhibitions of African art presented there. One of these was a retrospective of works by the South African artist William Kentridge that ran from October 20, 2001, to January 20, 2002. The other was an exhibition of modern art titled "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994" (September 8-December 30, 2001), organized by Okwui Enwezor, director of the upcoming Documenta XI. (This premier international exhibition of contemporary art will be held in Kassel, Germany, from June 8 to September 15. The selection of Enwezor marks the first time an African curator has been appointed to that position.) This time around, I was the tourist struggling to make sense of my emotions as I walked around the MCA, absorbing the astonishing fact that its galleries had indeed been given over to exhibitions of modern and contemporary African art. The Kentridge exhibition occupied the entire ground floor in galleries divided equally between framed works on the wall and his famous "drawings for projection" housed in several cubicles. "The Short Century" occupied the upper galleries and was anchored by looping videos depicting important political moments in the African struggle for political autonomy. In addition to a significant display of artworks, the latter exhibition included documents of everyday life from many African countries: here an old record album, there a

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first word *continued from page 1*

re-creation of the kind of shantytown interiors one might encounter in a Zwelethu Mthetwa photograph.

The exhibitions were well advertised with posters occupying several prominent locations in the city. The MCA organized its entire fall season around both exhibitions of African art, and all its publicity stressed this principal theme. A huge map of Africa adorned the cover of the season's program brochure, the continent's massive outline etched in black against a midnight blue background. A broad array of books about Africa was displayed in the MCA's gift shop, where I lingered, leafing through several now canonical volumes by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Rodney while African music played in the background. The two exhibitions boasted well-produced and glossy catalogues. The one for "The Short Century" was more comprehensive, a roughly 500-page anthology of texts with a vast compendium of images.

Artworks were well displayed and many visitors approved of the exhibits, praising the obvious mastery displayed by the various artists. I could not help being elated by the positive response of this crowd. As someone who regularly complains about modern African art's lack of visibility in contemporary exhibitions, this dual presentation was a balm for the spirit, a hint of better things to come.

In all respects then, the MCA's exhibitions of modern and contemporary African art were a major landmark in the discourse of art history, since they located contemporary African art among those practices that occupy the "historical, social and cultural context of our time." They also inadvertently revealed the scope of art history's effacement of this context of practice. As I walked around the exhibition halls reacquainting myself with works by several African artists, my companion, an American art-school graduate and collector of classical African art, came to a halt in front of *Night Flight of Dread and Delight*, an explosive painting by the Ethiopian artist Skunder Boghossian. She expressed an interest in this work, and after I spent a few minutes narrating to her the history of Skunder's migration to the United States and his appropriation of indigenous Ethiopian aesthetics, she turned to me and asked: "Why haven't I heard of this artist before now?"

My companion's question parallels similar ones put to me by students in my introductory courses in African art, usually about four weeks into any given semester: Why haven't we heard of such African practices before, and why are we not taught about these artists in our art history classes? In other words, why has institutional art history mostly written modern and contemporary African art out of its narratives despite the presence of accomplished artists like those whose works were on display?

An obvious answer is that art history undervalues African art. The MCA confronted this problem directly through these two exhibitions by reinserting modern and contemporary African art into the art historical record, achieving in the process a recognizable distinction between the narrative contexts of Africa's historical past and its contentious present. We were clued into this not-too-subtle Hegelian inference by the "dark continent" implications of the brochure, with its image of a continent struggling to emerge from the shadows. The brochure locates modern and contemporary African art at this point of emergence and maps the distinctive attributes of each context of practice. Their individual trajectories in this exhibition space also reveal the divergent welcomes accorded modern and contemporary African art in art history—a contrast evident in the continental overview of "The Short Century" and the crystalline focus afforded William Kentridge by virtue of his solo exhibition.

There is an important narrative at work here in the juxtaposition of modern African art of the Independence era with the contemporary international practice of an individual African artist like William Kentridge, both viewed through an international art discourse engaged in selective identification with a context it still considers exotic. The movement here is from the "modern" to the "contemporary," from affirmations of national spaces by individual (and mostly black) African artists to recent operations in the fluid frontiers of contemporary practice. This movement also marks the different levels of validation

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DOGON 49cm/19.5"

Photo: Ferry Heinebrugh



**KATHY VANDERPAS
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a f r i c a n a r t

About writer's experience

accorded someone like Skunder, whose practice, although located in the United States for several decades now, is still evaluated as a reflection of the ethos of a nationalist space, hence his continued identification as an "Ethiopian" artist. In contrast, Kentridge's exhibition narrated the complexity of his works, and their intense political overtones bespoke a creative faculty engaged in local issues but with a truly cosmopolitan and international flair. Staged against the fixed locations from which one perceives an artist like Skunder, "The Short Century" functioned as a broad context from which Kentridge's international status emerged: the artist himself adopted as evidence of contemporary African art's ability to transcend ethnic or geographical identification.

The success of both exhibitions is cause for celebration, but it also raises major issues for the discourse on contemporary African art. According to Sidney Kasfir, Okwui Enwezor's position as the director of Documenta XI has elevated him to a stratospheric level among international curators of contemporary art. Already well known for exhibitions that mainly validate contemporary African art practices located in Occidental spaces, Enwezor stakes out crucial ground by lending his considerable fame to an archaeology of modern art in Africa, providing in essence an overture to critics of his Eurocentric curatorial orientation.

The validation of William Kentridge in recent art historical discourse is equally remark-

able. The MCA exhibition continued a tour that originated at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.; it was already shown in New York and, if I am correctly informed, is scheduled to travel to other locations after its run at the MCA. Major publications on Kentridge's artworks abound, and last year Rosalind Krauss inducted him into the pantheon of "great" contemporary artists, with her close reading of his "Drawings for Projections" in the journal *October* (Spring 2000, pp. 3-35).

Kentridge is a white South African, and I suspect that his ethnicity factors into his reception by the international art community. Let me state clearly that he is an accomplished artist who deserves his current fame and that we need to distinguish between the artist's project and the uses to which different individuals put that project. However, when I read Krauss's article in *October*, I was struck by the rather transparent manner in which her analysis absorbs Kentridge into an institutional art historical narrative, the ease with which she interrogates his works' visual complexity through a reading of Walter Benjamin and Benjamin Buchloh.

I was also struck by the ease with which major international museums adopted Kentridge as a prime example of contemporary African art, especially when I visited his retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum earlier last year. In 1997 I had proposed an exhibition of contemporary African art to the Hirsh-

horn's curators and was pointedly asked to direct my proposal to the National Museum of African Art, where, incidentally at that time, I was consulting for an inaugural exhibition of its Sylvia H. Williams Gallery of Contemporary African Art. The Hirshhorn obviously felt that exhibitions of work by modern and contemporary black African artists should be handled by its sister institution in the same way that exhibitions of Sokari Douglas Camp's mobile sculptures are sometimes directed to museums of natural history. As we see from its embrace of Kentridge, the Hirshhorn did not doubt the validity of his art in the way it doubted that of, say, El Anatsui. I perceived the same process of validation at work in the MCA retrospective.

The art historical validation of Kentridge thus signals a tendency that I think will prove problematic for the discourse of contemporary African art in the future: art history may be setting up South Africa as a cultural gatekeeper for the entire continent, making it a prism through which all other practices are reviewed and confirmed. We can see this reflected in the number of South African entries in "The Short Century" and the overwhelming impact of the Kentridge show on the rest of the exhibition displays. It is also reflected in the current struggle between Nigerian and South African curators for control of the discourse, a confrontation as yet muted but destined to become explosive. This impending struggle is not inevitable and

can be avoided by earnest cooperation among curators and representatives of these two dominant areas of cultural activity on the continent. In any case, concerns about hegemonic ambitions of one faction or the other already structures the parameters of a debate that will call into question issues of race and the unresolved nature of South African identity in relation to the rest of the continent. It is already apparent that black South African artists are not receiving the same kind of validation accorded Kentridge, and that politically engaged black South African art of the apartheid era is generally dismissed these days as unsophisticated agit-prop. It will be interesting to see how such artists are subsequently narrated in the art historical discourse as the immediacy of their struggle against apartheid fades in the international imagination.

The MCA deserves commendation for its focus on Africa this last season. These exhibitions, combined with other recent significant developments, such as the greater visibility of African curators like Okwui Enwezor, indicate that contemporary African art will no longer be silenced in the discourse of art history. As ever, though, I am concerned about the manner in which this practice is absorbed into art history, the need to validate equally its divergent impulses and to accord to modern and contemporary black African artists the same kind of focus given an artist like William Kentridge. To paraphrase the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (*Vision, Voice and Power: Feminist Art History and Marxism*), as we integrate African artists into institutional art history, we must ensure that their works will be permitted to transform our conception of art, of art history, and modes of art historical research and explanation.

In the best world imaginable, the MCA (and the Hirshhorn Museum for that matter) would plan and execute exhibitions devoted to modern or contemporary black African artists like Skunder Boghossian, Iba Ndiaye, El Anatsui, Ben Enwonwu, Obiora Udechukwu, PiliPili Mulongoy, Yinka Shonibare, Ezrom Legae, Wosene Kosrof, and other such notables. Rosalind Krauss would evaluate the art of black African artists with the kind of critical and historical complexity exhibited in her analysis of Kentridge. Publishers would accept books about these artists without the usual injunction that their authors "broaden out the text to increase its financial appeal." Above all, critics and historians of contemporary African art would see the need to address artistic practices located in Africa even as they devote considerable attention to activities of the so-called transnational artists. The possibility of these auspicious events occurring in the immediate future is yet vague, but it furnishes a set of ideals to guide our vision as we engage those practices and artists currently languishing at the edges of memory. We are all bound for the same goal of creating greater visibility for African art, but as the poet Christopher Okigbo once declared, the question remains, "How shall we go?" □

Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbachie



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Published: *Beards, Body, and Soul*
UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural
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ART, INNOVATION, AND POLITICS IN EIGHTEENTH- CENTURY BENIN

Paula Girshick Ben-Amos

Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999. 178 pp., 50 b/w illustrations. \$35 hardcover.

Reviewed by Robin Poyner

More is known about the art of the kingdom of Benin than perhaps any other kingdom on the African continent. In *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Benin*, Paula Girshick Ben-Amos brings together an understanding of Benin art and politics that is based on her own extensive fieldwork in Benin, which began in the 1960s with her collecting of oral traditions. She is also familiar with a huge body of relevant historiographic and archival information, with recent research by other Benin specialists, and with Benin objects, including their intricate iconographical details. Using this extensive background, Ben-Amos questions to what extent art operates as political strategy, how objects acquire political meaning, and how the use of art enhances and embodies power and authority.

Today the people of Benin see art as commemorative. It enshrines the past and captures images for posterity. But Ben-Amos suggests that during the period that is the focus of this book, art in Benin was strategic—as much about how to attain ancestral and political legitimacy as about the legitimacy that was attained. Artistic creation included a complex of processes and performances involving its commissioning, production, and display. At each stage there were negotiations about meaning and outcomes.

The stability of Benin's ruling dynasty was threatened in the mid-seventeenth century, and it was only in the eighteenth century that reigning monarchs were able to stand firm against the challenges of powerful chiefs. In spite of social and political unrest, it was a period of remarkable artistic invention. Choosing a specific period of some sixty turbulent years, from around 1690 to 1750, Ben-Amos seeks to discover how art was created, allocated and used, by both kings and their powerful rivals, to control historical memory.

As past studies have emphasized, art has always been an instrument of political ideology in Benin. Ben-Amos argues that to understand such use, we must look at political agendas and use available oral and documentary evidence. Western fascination with the art of Benin and how it reflects the ruling political system began early. After the 1897 British Punitive Expedition to Benin, hundreds of objects were auctioned off to pay for