

Meanwhile in Africa...

Table Talk 12.11.04

At the occasion of this 9th table talk, I would like to present my project "Meanwhile in Africa..." which I have developed for the Africa Focus programme of the Federal Agency for Civic Education and which will be realized next year.

Rather than putting together another "Africa something" exhibition, I propose an approach to art from Africa that examines the historical and conceptual dimensions of both, the practice of artists in Africa and the reception of their work.

This project will be organized on three levels:

The first one will be university and art school seminars, which survey the history of modern art in Africa, its different eras and their reception in Europe.

The second will present examples of present day artists' groups, art initiatives and art journals from Africa in the form of a documentary exhibition.

In the third one artists from Africa will be invited to specially conceive works for the project and to realize them here in Germany.

In the west contemporary African art is repeatedly confronted with a number of fundamental questions, which I myself encountered time and again, when I discussed the project with potential but doubtful partners.

Summed up these questions are:

Can the western concept of art be applied to "other" artistic practices like those in Africa?

How can art from Africa that works with a western concept, namely of "autonomous art", which is supposedly alien to African culture, be authentic?

To answer these questions one has to carefully look at the terms used and the ideas linked to them. In fact they seem to be more doubtful of the western concept of art - as if one has to guard its borders to keep it working - than of the alien culture concerned. However these questions cannot be simply dismissed as a problem of the west only, but reveal contradictions within the concept of "autonomous art", concerning anyone who refers to it.

Eventually these questions became guidelines in the setting of my project. Its two major coordinates being on the one hand the context in which art is produced in Africa and on the other the expectations and preconceptions African art is bound to, especially as far as its reception in the west is concerned.

To analyse how the ideological preconceptions have evolved, I want to line out some of the periods crucial to the history of modern art in Africa, which will be worked out in detail in my project's seminars. I've chosen 8 core topics as a framework for this overview, with each topic corresponding to a certain era.

1. Autonomous Art vs. Timeless Primitivism

The basis for the predicament of African art was laid out with the theory of a progressive autonomous art and its reverse, the theory of a timeless primitive culture without history for which Africa was made the role model, both emerging simultaneously and linked to each other in Europe at around 1800.

African culture was seen as incapable of entering history altogether and in consequence it had to disappear with any outer contact. Authenticity as its major value was attributed to African art placed in this pure, timeless past and any defilement through outside influence was considered as leading to the loss of this authenticity and the extinction of its artistic potential.

2. The Discovery of African Art

At the beginning of the 20. Century artists like Picasso became attracted by African art followed by a growing interest that made Africa fashionable.

Some artists and scholars were able to relate artistic forms and conceptions in African art to ideas they themselves were working on at the time like the cubists with their transformation of the illusionist picture space into an object.

This discovery came at about the same time as the promotion of exotic fantasies in the display of Africans and products from Africa in colonial exhibitions, staged to chime the European public with the increasingly violent colonial exploitation of the African continent.

3. First Encounters of African artists with Western Art

The first African artist pioneer in the west was the Nigerian Aina Onabolu, who explored the art schools in London and Paris from 1920 on - and he was followed by many more: Ernest Mancoba left South Africa for Paris and joined the COBRA group in the 1940's.

Coming to London in 1944 Ben Enwonwu was the first African Artist to make an academic career, graduating at the Slade School of Fine Arts and the Goldsmiths College to become the first "famous" African artist in Europe.

Just to mention a third one, the sculptor Christian Lattier came from Ivory Coast to France in 1935 and started his studies in 1946 at The École des Beaux Arts in St. Etienne and Paris, in the following year.

The "Meanwhile..." seminar will trace the experience of these artists in Europe, the kind of impact it had on their work and the paths they chose for their artistic careers.

4. Art Schools in Colonial Africa

The foundation of influential art schools in Africa largely grew from the efforts of committed individual Europeans, such as Kenneth C. Murray, who was commissioned by the colonial authorities in 1926 to create an artistic education programme in Nigeria. Margaret Trowell established a Fine Arts programme at Makerere University in

Uganda in 1937 and Pierre Lods founded the "Poto Poto" art school in Brazzaville, Congo. Lods and Trowell were both artists themselves. Frank McEwen became director of the Rhodes National Gallery in Salisbury (today Harare), inaugurated 1957 and was engaged in the development of an artistic education out of which eventually evolved the so called "Shona" sculpture. Many other art schools were associated to missionaries and their teaching was devoted to Christian themes. These projects all promoted the idea of an African art free from corrupting western influences and to instead express innate African qualities.

Such a stance led for example to the absurd confrontation between Onobolu, who after returning from Europe taught the rather conservative academic style he had brought back with him in various Nigerian art schools and Kenneth Murray's ideas of an indigenous African aesthetic.

5. Art and the Liberation and Independence Movements

The most prominent liberation philosophy was the "Negritude", founded in the thirties in Paris by the students Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. In this an idealistic picture of African culture was propounded, drawing mainly on ethnological studies, which, at the time, were popular with many intellectuals. It proclaimed a renaissance of an African identity by reviving those rather essentialist qualities, such as rhythm, emotion and vital force, that were pathetically assigned to it.

This ideology was met with sympathy by western intellectuals, with a critical stance against European imperialist politics like Jean Paul Sartre.

6. Art in the Independent States

When many African states won independence around 1960 numerous art schools were newly founded and artists, who had studied in Europe, came back to teach there, like Ibrahim El Salahi to Khartoum, Christian Lattier to Abijan and Iba N'Diaje to Dakar. A number of Europeans also played an important role for such schools as Pierre Lods, who was called to Dakar from his school in Brazzaville while Susanne Wenger and Ulli Beier founded the Mbari Club first in Ibadan and later in Oshogbo.

Independence opened up new perspectives and fuelled hopes of a prosperous future. The modern academism, so prevalent in European art schools in 1950s, was adopted to African forms and traditions, with the aim to celebrate artistically an idealistic African culture, which had become both national and continental priority. Even today, many Africans remain tied to the fictional idealism of this period, a major focus of nostalgia and identification for those unwilling to view its ideological implications critically.

7. The Decline of Africa's Cultural Politics

However, the ambitious cultural politics of "Panafrikanism" were short lived, as Africa became embroiled in civil wars and bloody dictatorships leaving the economies shattered.

In the late 1960s and in the 70s, artists began to voice opposition to the essentialist idealism taking a more critical view of African reality. The "Laboratoire Agit Art", in Dakar, for instance joined the international protest movement, provoking the authorities with antiacademic Fluxus and Agit Prop style performances and installations.

8. African Art in the Postmodern Age

The post-modern approach to African art was introduced by two major exhibitions, the "Magiciens de la Terre", 1989 in Paris and "Africa Explores", 1991 in New York. These opened up the scene to more experimental art practices, with the latter also including photography, an art form with a major tradition in Africa, but one unrecognised as art by the dominating academism, inherited through colonialism. Major art institutions in the west now opened their doors to African art, that had so far never been shown in the same venues as western avant-garde art.

At the same time sign painting, naïve sculpture and crafts were introduced with the notion, that African art couldn't be far enough off the western concept of art. This was followed by heavy criticism from the side of African artists and critics, who saw in this purported integration of other practices just a new edition of the classical dichotomy of the highly refined, self-reflective western artist versus his black, uneducated counterpart, thus reassuring the west's superiority.

Ideological Patterns

Although most of these episodes in Africa's cultural history during the 20th century seem to be far gone, I have listed them here, because the basic ideological patterns connected to them are recurring in different forms until today. The basic predicament of art from Africa was laid out with the dichotomy of the progress of culture in the west versus the timeless, unhistorical culture in Africa. This predicament determined the ideological concepts for both African Arts and its reception in the west, that have developed over time. I want to give three examples of recurring approaches often found in the way art from Africa is dealt with today:

1. The Workshop

From the early days of colonisation African culture was understood as unable to survive the contact with the outside world and with history. It was and still is regarded as indigent and foreign aid has become - apart from the exploitation of natural resources - probably the biggest industry on the continent. Given the lack of functioning cultural institutions, the influence of these "development" agencies can't be underestimated. They usually apply the workshop model, supposedly meant to help Africans express themselves and to regain their identity. This approach is not only to be found with aid agencies, it is also used by cultural institutions like the Goethe Institutes. It seems to me quite obvious, that these workshops are not empowering African identity.

Instead participants are degraded to objects of education, unable to develop their own imagination and initiative.

2. Craft

These workshops are often about the recuperation of traditional crafts which also reappear notoriously in exhibitions of art from Africa - or, if not in the show itself, at least the museums shops are keeping up the "tradition".

The intentions behind this problematic blur between art and craft are quite different: South African "Resistance Artists" wanted to see popular art forms included in national art exhibitions, to open them up to black artists, who in the Apartheid system had been denied access to the fine arts and art schools.

At the same time there was the post-modern approach with its problematic implications, that I have already mentioned. But whatever intentions lie behind including different art practices, if these are to be taken seriously, their quality has to be examined critically rather than extenuatingly.

3. Trendy Appearance

A third, more recent phenomenon can be located in the same tradition, despite it trying to escape the predicament of both models of the African artist, as the indigent needing guidance or the funny and naïve sign painter. What I mean is the attempt to stage African art and culture at the "state of the art" in the western centres, formally matching the latest trends, as if Africa's contemporaneity was to be proved.

Enthusiasm by western intellectuals for African Hip Hop, to name one example, is unable to get the least glimpse of what the pieces are about, unless it comes with an analysis of each and every word with all its connotations, as does for instance Prof. Wolfgang Bender in his research. Ignorant enthusiasm, which in its own understanding celebrates the arrival of Africa in the contemporary world, repeats colonial encroachment by imposing its notion of contemporaneity on it.

In my view Prof. John Picton's attempt to overcome the common separation of contemporary and traditional African art represents one of the most ambitious approaches here. He investigates the interrelation of both with their historical and cultural dimensions, when he examines for instance the concept of masquerade in different appearances in African art and culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion I'd like to return to the fundamental questions about the western concept of art, its possible application to art from Africa and the latter's "authenticity":

In my view authenticity seems to be altogether a rather inadequate term for the understanding and interpretation of art, because it supposes a basic, if not inherited condition for art to be real or

to produce something real. Art on the contrary more often than not puts into question this reality, by creating an artistic logic outside of it and reflecting the real through this difference. Artistic identity works by putting any fixed idea about it into question and places itself in this disruption of reality.

Concerning the western concept of art, I want to question its supposed uniformity. Today all the different conceptions of art, that one after the other in the 20th century claimed exclusive validity, appear rather relative. Now we have a whole number of art scenes and their associated theories, that neither take notice of nor care for each other.

Modern African culture is characterised by a simultaneity of different currents in time and space, overlaying and melting into each other. It is far more complex than just the opposition of African traditionalism vs. western modernity. New forms of religious and magic practices have emerged and there is also a strong cultural input to the continent from Asia and South America for example through Bollywood and Telenovelas.

Instead of giving up the idea of a concept of art all together I want to suggest, that it is neither obvious nor a universal language but its meaning has to be decoded from the different levels of significance inherent in and related to it.

Such a decoding has to review in any case the complex relationships between the artists' concepts or intentions, the artistic practices that transform and materialise them and to relate this process to the field or context of the culturally or sub-culturally charged signifiers.

Independent Artists Groups and Art Initiatives in Africa Today

Beside this critical review of ideologies linked to art from Africa a main focus of my project is the present day generation of artists who have formed independent artists groups and art initiatives, which one can find all over the continent. They operate in the most diverse circumstances from the large metropolises like Lagos or Cairo to remote villages. They are confronted with different political challenges, like the aftermaths of the 40 year long war in Angola or of the Apartheid regime in South Africa; the threats from violent dictatorship in Zimbabwe or Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt. What they share, though, is their fundamental doubt of official cultural policies and institutions.

Nonetheless some of them try to involve the responsibility of the local public authorities, but they find support rather from outside the continent. In any case public space is the main platform of their activities and their work deliberately confronts not just the art scene but a wider audience. The content of these works - in contrast to contemporary western art's self-referential tendency - addresses social and political realities in a manner we find surprisingly open.

I will present about a dozen of such projects together with four journals published in Africa in the form of a documentary exhibition/archive.