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Art history's inscription of modern and contemporary African art

I. The dialectics of being and becoming

What does it mean for an African to be a modern artist; what does modern African art mean in art history? According to Bernard Smith, the concept of modernity in art has become historical and from our viewpoint in the early twenty-first century, it is no longer possible to confine the concept of modernity to the West alone (Smith 1998). However, in contemporary art-historical discourses, the idea of Africa and the idea of Modernity continue to be narrated as mutually exclusive concepts. Africans produce 'African Art' represented by supposedly pre-colonial modes of visual representation that are assumed to have remained static and unchanging from antiquity to the present day. On the other hand, European artists produced modern art (modernism) whose ideologies and notions of the artist as an 'avant-garde' were predicated on the idea of perpetual change and innovation.

The above tendency is most evident in art history survey texts with their relentless focus on Western European art and culture. These texts also imply that the validity of African art precludes any indication of change or influence from any foreign source. On the other hand, art history celebrates the ability of modern European artists to reinvent their visual culture by appropriating established conventions of representation from African art and other non-western art traditions. Thus art history validates Picasso and other European avant-garde artists for their appropriation of African conventions of art and modes of symbolic communication at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, at exactly the same time, modern African artists were reconfiguring their art by appropriating European conventions of representation to produce an African modernism. Art history denigrates this African experience although in both contexts such appropriations were fueled by the impact of modernity and both contexts produced distinctive new forms of representation that radically differed from their indigenous archetypes.

Despite a whole century of dedicated and innovative practice, art history still remains indifferent to the idea of modern African art. However, recent international exhibitions such as *The Short Century* (2001), *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*

(1995) and *Africa Explores* (1991) attest to the continued viability of modern African art and artists. In fact, the decade of the 1990s saw a rise in representations of modern African art in international museums and in exhibition contexts. In spite of these recent developments however, institutional art history has mostly written modern African art out of its narratives of twentieth-century art. As a result of this effacement, analysis of modern and contemporary African art is mostly carried on in special-interest journals that are generally ignored by institutional art history; accused of being less methodologically rigorous or just being plain inferior. Such journals include *Third Text* (London), *NKA: A Journal of Contemporary African Art* (New York), *Revue Noir* (Paris, France), *Glendora Review* (Lagos, Nigeria) and *African Arts* (Los Angeles). Their relative obscurity reiterates the subservient location and marginalization of African spaces of practice in the discourse of art history.

Clearly then, the inscription of modern and contemporary African art in the discourse remains an unfinished business, and by virtue of its longstanding effacement, an urgent one at that. Modern African art subverts the assumptions of institutional art history by asserting its difference and insisting on the validity of its conceptual and formal frameworks. The increasing impact of international exhibitions of modern African art raises the possibility that institutional art history is now ready to view this context of practice with the kind of critical and historical complexity it deserves. While this is a promising development, it engenders questions about how this history is to be written. The following essay contributes to this process of inscription through a general evaluation of the history and development of modern African art.

This essay is divided into two sections. The first part presents an overview of modern African art evaluated as a continental phenomenon. The second part of this essay briefly evaluates the history and development of contemporary art in three specific West African countries. A comparable regional analysis can be offered for the development of modern art in North, East and South Africa but the specific history of each region demands a greater scrutiny than this essay allows for. The modern and contemporary art of North Africa is subsumed within an Islamic aesthetic tradition that engenders particular modes of representation. In East Africa, art schools are a recent development and many of its prominent modern artists (at least until recently) are self-taught. The existence of a settler culture of white European immigrants in South Africa and its erstwhile apartheid policy towards its African population complicates any analysis of the nature of South African art. Moreover, a continental evaluation of modern African art encourages an idea of collective practice that undermines efforts to focus on specific developments in the art of individual African artists or national spaces. In any case, this essay limits itself to a general introduction.

II. Overview: modern African art

Modern art emerged in Africa as an integral aspect of modernization processes during a colonial period whose scope and impact became evident early in the twentieth century. As such, its history and development has similar broad outlines in different African countries. In all instances, modern African art emerges in the conjunction of indigenous African art traditions and the appropriation of European conventions of representation during a lengthy period of European colonization starting in 1885 with the Berlin Conference and ending in 1994 with the fall of apartheid in South Africa. It is also shaped by the unique postcolonial conditions of contemporary African existence. If the term 'modern African art' defines the matrix of twentieth-century African visual culture in its diverse forms, contexts and appropriations, then 'contemporary African art' defines specific manifestations of visual culture in postcolonial African spaces. The latter term thus defines more recent art practices rather than a temporal demarcation.

In different African countries, contemporary forms of cultural practice have gone through a period of implantation and early development, a colonial practice involving the first major practitioners of such new forms, a late-colonial reconfiguration of inherited aesthetic ideals, and a nationalist practice in the period after independence. In the contemporary era, this tradition evolves into a postcolonial phenomenon whose initial demarcation in terms of national spaces now gives way to a global, international practice. The specifics of the above historical structure differ in the internal dynamics and each country's experiences of colonialism and nationalism. However, the broad outlines are similar enough to permit the comparative evaluation of modern and contemporary African art carried out below.

Types of contemporary African arts include classical two-dimensional 'fine (beaux-) arts' – painting in different media (oils/acrylic/watercolor, etc.), printmaking (screen printing/linocut/woodcut/metal-plate etching etc.), photography, and recently, computer art. There are also three-dimensional forms like sculpture (in different media), textile design, ceramics, conceptual art and installations (the performative/post-industrial form typical of late-twentieth-century art/intellectual production). Related practices such as film and cinema attract an increasing number of practitioners. There are continuations of indigenous art forms as in the practice of Lamidi Fakeye of Nigeria (b. 1925) who works in the sculpture tradition of indigenous Yoruba culture. There are also many contemporary inventions in folk art and popular culture. Sign painting is perhaps the most famous example of these new arts.

The extent and complexity of indigenous art forms in various African countries differ in terms of internal population dynamics and how the modernization process played out in each nation. Strong traditions of indigenous arts survive in the contemporary era

where they engage changing social and cultural conditions by a process of continuous reinvention. Although contemporary African art appropriates indigenous traditions of visual culture in its search for significant form(s), it cannot be reduced to a continuation or reconfiguration of such traditions. Its conceptual focus and modes of visual representation differ from those of extant indigenous traditions thus making it a new form and a different context of practice. In instances where recognizable continuities exist between indigenous and contemporary art practices (sculpture, for example) there are major differences in the forms and functions of the objects produced, methods of art training, notions of art and cultural representation, and structures of production and patronage.

In addition to their use of indigenous aesthetics, cultural practices adopted under colonial control are reflected in modern and contemporary African arts. For example, developments in contemporary Senegalese art show the influence of French cultural and ideological practices while modern Nigerian art reveals Anglophone influences in practice and pedagogy. In the postcolonial era, contemporary African art engages ideological issues pertinent to its history and evolution, facilitated by the increased mobility of African artists within local and international spaces. This process builds upon historical antecedents such as the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar (le Premier Festival Mondial des arts Nègres) and the 1977 World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Nigeria. It also builds upon contemporary developments like the Dakar Biennale and the FESPACO (Festival Mondial Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou) international film festival in Burkina Faso and the currently defunct Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa.

Developments in modern and contemporary African art took different forms before and after the political independence of African nations. During the colonial period, some forms of modern art (the academic tradition in particular) closely followed European conventions and models. Many pioneers of this tradition received their education in British and French institutions. For example, Ben Enwonwu of Nigeria studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts at the University of London, Iba Ndiaye of Senegal studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, and the pioneer Nigerian artist Aina Onabolu attended the Académie Julian, also in Paris. Many of these pioneer artists (e.g. Onabolu) replicated European conventions of representation in their own practice. The conventions of these pioneers were challenged in the nationalist period as modern African artists directed themselves to the development of national cultures. In this era of nationalist struggle, many artists advocated a return to indigenous aesthetic ideals and a re-evaluation of the role of art in national and cultural independence. Prominent artists of the colonial and nationalist periods include Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), Ben Enwonwu

(1918–94) and Uche Okeke (b. 1933) of Nigeria; Papa Ibra Tall (b. 1935) and Iba N'diaye (b. 1928) of Senegal; Christian Lattier (1925–77) of Côte d'Ivoire; Momodou Ceesay (b. 1944) of Gambia; Kofi Antubam (1922–64) and Kobina Bucknor (1924–75) of Ghana.

Many narratives of modern African art stress the development of a formal, academic art practice based on appropriations of extant European traditions of art (especially painting) using imported materials and media such as oils, acrylic and watercolor paints on canvas and paper. There is also a modernist style of sculpture produced with imported tools whose effects and characteristics differ from that created by indigenous African artists using locally made tools like the adz. This academic tradition (located in institutions of learning created by the colonial governments – universities, etc.) is usually contrasted with an informal art tradition encompassing folk art and 'popular' culture. The latter term basically defines art and cultural practices operating outside the contexts of museums, art galleries and formal academic institutions. One of the most influential manifestations of the 'informal school' (or 'workshop') tradition is the Oshogbo School of Nigeria founded in 1962 by the German cultural activist Ulli Beier.

Interpretations of contemporary African art derived from the above narratives promote the idea that different forms of African cultural practice operate in distinctive and autonomous spaces. The practice of contemporary African art cannot be defined in terms of academic art/artists versus other (popular, naïve) forms since contemporary forms of cultural practice in Africa are noted for their eclecticism and hybridism. Practices associated with different sectors of art and cultural production have become integrated in the contemporary era. Artists move freely across genres and even within singular contexts of practice like academic art, they derive inspiration from a wide range of sources. Academic artists regularly produce works that are consumed outside their usual gallery and exhibition spaces, and the styles of practitioners of 'popular art' such as the Nigerian sign painter, Middle Art (a.k.a. Augustine Okoye, b. 1936) have since become canonical.

Contemporary African art is diverse and the development and extent of contemporary practices also vary widely. While Nigeria has a century-old tradition of formal European style art education and practice, there was no school of art in Cameroon until 1992 and in South Africa, black artists were prevented from receiving appropriate art education in the country's racially segregated apartheid system. In Burkina Faso, a lack of training institutions and facilities ensures that its few contemporary artists tend to be self-taught even though the country receives acclaim as the site of an international film festival (FESPACO). This festival has attracted cultural projects like the Olorun Foundation formed in 1993–4, which aims to promote African culture in cooperation with the Black community of Kansas City through artistic and cultural exchanges. Contemporary

Burkinabe artists like Jean Didier Yanogo (b. 1967), Saman Doulougou (b. 1967), and Henri Marx Terrason (b. 1960), all self-taught painters, have benefited from this initiative and have had the chance to exhibit their paintings abroad. The sculptor Goudou Saibou Bambara (b. 1966) sustains a family tradition of sculpture in the contemporary era.

In Mali, a vibrant culture of contemporary production uses indigenous textiles as a conceptual framework for innovations in fashion design. The syncretic designs of Chris Seydou (1949–94), which utilize local textiles and European fashion styles, resonate among many other developments. Contemporary painters like Abdoulaye Konate (b. 1953), Modibo Franky Diallo (b. 1954), Ismael Diabate and Brahima Kone (b. 1963) all attended the nation's only art school, the Institut National des Arts, and practice as contemporary artists with various degrees of success. Islamic aesthetics frame the practice of Niger's few contemporary artists as is evident in the paintings of Ali Garba (b. 1969) and Alichina Allakaye (b. 1963) with their devotion to calligraphic forms. Another painter (more properly an Islamic scholar), Malam Zabeirou, deploys Arabic and French texts on symmetrical and colorfully composed Koranic tablets with striking visual effects.

The legacy of strong indigenous religion and ritual traditions is evident in many aspects of contemporary African art. Many contemporary artists explore these contexts in their search for significant form and sometimes as a continuation of actual involvement with such ritual practices. For instance, the influence of Vodun/Orisa rituals and Fa (Ifa) numerology is common to most contemporary art in the Republic of Benin. Contemporary *Beninois* artists like Cyprian Tokoudagba (b. 1954) and Romauld Hazoume (b. 1962) whose paintings, sculptures and installations focus on such ritual imagery enjoy much international visibility even as critics fault the assumptions of primitivism that surround their presentation in the art-historical discourse. Calixte (b. 1958) and Theodore (b. 1956) Dakpogan who descend from a long line of blacksmiths now create sculptures from recycled metals thus steering the family trade into a new context of production. George Adeagbo (b. 1946) of the Republic of Benin and Pascal Martine Tayou (b. 1967) of Cameroon also produce sculptures and installations using found objects.

The predilection for symbolic form in contemporary African art does not imply mimicry of older, classical African forms but rather a creative encounter with cultural traditions that exert significant influence on contemporary sensibilities. We may interpret the use of ritual images and symbolic form in contemporary African art as a search for agency. Appropriation of such images varies widely among contemporary artists. Thus while a painter like Bakari Ouattara (b. 1957) of Côte d'Ivoire utilizes ritual imagery on standard two-dimensional surfaces, the New York based Nigerian artist Ike Ude (b. 1964) transfers such images onto living models thus extending their symbolic charge

into the performative context of everyday life. The fluid sculptures and installations of El Anatsui (b. 1944) of Ghana achieve their visual effect through judicious combination of ritual and secular subject matter. The naturalistic cement figures of the Nigerian artist Sunday Jack Akpan (b. 1940) build upon a European tradition of portrait sculpture and contemporary interpretations of Ibibio funerary practices. In Ghana, Kane Quaye (1927–92) contributed to the invention of a new art through his coffins whose forms were derived from plant and animal life (e.g. cocoa pods and cockerels), mechanical objects (cars, aircraft) and interpretations of local proverbs.

Expatriate patronage was vital to the sustenance of modern African art in the colonial period although the indigenous African *élite* also provided support for emerging artists. Expatriate patronage continues to be important owing to the harsh economic conditions that currently erode indigenous support of art and cultural practices in many West African countries. There are contemporary contexts of production specifically targeted to this expatriate patronage and most of the objects produced in this context are classified as tourist art. 'Tourist art' is a contentious term and the assumptions inherent in this classification are currently under scrutiny in the discourse of modern and contemporary African art.

The most recent development in contemporary African art is its growing internationalization and the emergence of a cadre of artists who live and practice in Euro-American countries. These include postcolonial African artists like Yinka Shonibare and Sokari Douglas Camp (both live in London), Ghada Amer, Bili Bidjoka (Paris), and Ike Ude (New York) who join an older group of expatriate nationalist artists like Skunder Borghossian (Washington D.C.), Iba N'diaye (Paris) and Ibrahim El Salahi (Oxford). The large number of these expatriate African artists complicates the evaluation of contemporary West African art in terms of national or indigenous cultural spaces. New conceptual frameworks are needed to interpret the production of these expatriate African artists and also to forestall the prevailing tendency to locate contemporary African art mainly in the practice of such individuals who live and work outside the continent. The following analysis of three West African countries provides insight into the historical development of modern and contemporary art in specific national and cultural spaces.

III. Historical developments

a. Senegal

Senegal is located at the confluence of several cultural influences – Islamic, Euro-Christian and African – all of which are reflected in its indigenous and contemporary arts. Pre-Islamic cultural practices survive in many forms in the contemporary era

although foreign incursions such as Islam, Christianity and colonial French policies of acculturation disrupted local art traditions through their aversion to indigenous concepts and images. Islamic influences are evident in contemporary patterned silver and gold jewelry and also in glass painting (*sous-verre*) with its religious subject matter. Contemporary Senegalese artists thus derive their images equally from indigenous masking traditions, Islamic art and appropriations of European visual culture.

The history of modern art in Senegal began with self-taught pioneers such as Cheikh Mahone Diop (a sculptor) and Mbor Faye (a painter) who were active during the colonial period. The first generation of academic artists includes Alpha W. Diallo and Mafaly Sene. Iba N'diaye (b. 1935) is probably the best known of these early pioneers. He attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris where he studied under the modernist sculptor Ossip Zadkine. N'diaye's paintings reveal a meticulous technique, flawless draftsmanship and an aversion to ideological issues. This latter characteristic makes his work unusual because contemporary art and aesthetics in Senegal are greatly influenced by affirmations of cultural identity.

Many important political and cultural figures in Senegal were trained in French institutions and were involved in the nationalist struggle for independence. After Senegal's independence, President Leopold Senghor defined a national aesthetic based on Negritude ideology. He advocated a formal standard of art production based on French *beaux-arts* principles (and considered by some an adaptation of 'International style' forms with 'Africanizing' formal and decorative elements). This form subsequently became the official art style and a staple of instruction at Senegal's main art school – the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Dakar (a.k.a. Ecole de Dakar). In addition to Senegalese instructors like Papa Ibra Tall (b. 1935) and Iba N'diaye (who headed different sections of the school), Senghor also appointed Europeans like Pierre Lods (1921–88) as teachers. Major figures of the Ecole de Dakar include Amadou Ba (illustrator), Ousman Faye (tapestry maker), Ibou Diouf (b. 1953), Boubacar Coulibaly (1944–82), and Souleyman Keita (b. 1947) all painters. The works of Senegalese artists under the influence of Negritude was apolitical, often decorative, and devoted to ethnographic representations of masks and 'African' patterns in painting.

By 1980, the historical impetus of the Ecole de Dakar had been exhausted, its ideologies made obsolete by new political and economic concerns. A younger generation of Senegalese artists initiated a reaction to the rigid formalistic structures of Negritude aesthetics. In place of the stylized abstraction and ethnographic inclination of much older Senegalese art, the younger generation focuses more on issues of representation within an international context of art practice. In the works of artists like Viye Diba (b. 1954), the modernist formalism of the Ecole was replaced by a greater concern with

conceptual issues. However, individual artists like Serge Correa (b. 1959) retain the Ecole's aesthetic orientation in their art. Among recent developments, Fode Camara (b. 1958) synthesizes figurative images with interrogations of cultural and artistic identity with great technical ability. The sculptor, Ousmane Sow (b. 1935) creates complex tableaus made up of naturalistic human and animal figures that parody ethnographic representations of 'primitive' culture.

The declining status of artists and reduction in state-sponsorship of cultural institutions after Senghor's tenure as President had a major impact on contemporary art in Senegal. From 1977 to 1983, an experiment in collaborative production centered at the Village des Arts flourished for a while. In other developments such as the Laboratoire Agit-Art, Senegalese artists interrogated the orthodoxy of their Ecole de Dakar heritage through installations and conceptual art. In contrast to the formal solutions of the Ecole and its striving for permanence, art objects were used as didactic tools within a context of performance and then discarded or recycled in subsequent performances. Leading figures of the Agit-Art initiative include Baba Maal, Issa Samb (a.k.a. Joe Ouakam, b. 1945), and Medoune Seye. Set Setal, a related development focusing on mural painting and urban renewal lasted from 1990 to 1991 before it withered under the excessive glare of international media attention.

Contemporary Senegalese art is made up of different spheres of practice and reveals great diversity in the art produced. The main context of the practices discussed above is the international (global) arena of contemporary art production and exhibition. Other relevant contexts of practice include 'popular art' where glass painting (*sous-verre*) is a dominant albeit eclectic form. The popularity of glass paintings peaked in the 1950s and has since diminished to the point where it is mainly sustained as a component of the tourist trade. Glass painting can best be classed with forms of contemporary African folk art found mainly in urban centers. Other components of these urban arts include the mass-produced *T'Chiwara* sculptures and local masks peddled on the streets of Dakar.

b. Ghana

Contemporary arts in Ghana build upon a rich and complex heritage of unique developments in sculpture, textiles and decorative arts. A traditional lost-wax casting technique is still used in the production of goldweights (albeit for a contemporary art market). Icons from Asafo 'military' fortifications and flags, which support indigenous notions of valor among Fante populations, have been incorporated into the practice of contemporary artists. The complex designs of Kente textiles, formerly reserved for an aristocracy, have moved into the visual language of twentieth-century black culture especially in the African Diaspora where it is deployed as a signifier of African identity.

Pioneer contemporary artists in Ghana were often constrained by a search for form in the colonial period. For example, Kofi Antubam (1922–64) perceived African art as a step in the evolution of painting within the realist tradition and structured his practice accordingly. Other artists like Oku Ampofo experimented with elements of classical African art in an attempt to domesticate the European orientation of his sculptures. Ghana's independence in 1957 inspired an artistic development that romanticized folk life and glamorized indigenous customs. Many artists sought to develop new forms of contemporary expression by using European techniques to explore indigenous aesthetics through appropriations of masking forms and stylized representation of abstract symbols (Kojo Fosu, 1986). Vincent Kofi (1923–74) used the ritual forms of Akan Akua'ba fertility figures to symbolize an emergent Ghanaian nationalism. Artists also experimented with new conceptual interpretations of art and cultural practice. In the 1970s, Kobina Bucknor (1924–75) produced paintings whose forms were based on the three-dimensional logic of sculpture.

By the 1980s, the nationalist spirit and its attendant ideas about cultural synthesis led to new developments in contemporary Ghanaian art. Ablade Glover (b. 1934) and Ato Delaquis (b. 1945) perfected forms of abstract impressionism based on mammoth crowds and market scenes, landscapes, and female figures. Glover and Delaquis were both influential teachers in Ghana's main art school, the University of Science and Technology at Kumasi. In the 1990s, younger artists like Atta Kwame (b. 1956) are revising the aesthetics of Glover and Delaquis by pushing their experiments with abstract impressionism to a logical conclusion. Many of Kwame's paintings are completely non-figurative.

Recent developments in contemporary sculpture in Ghana occupy distinct contexts of practice. In the realm of popular culture, Kane Quaye (1927–92) contributed to the development of a new urban art form with immense social and cultural significance through his fantastic coffins created in shapes derived from local flora and fauna, and technological sources. In the context of academic art, El Anatsui's sculptures focus on themes and images derived from Africa's history and an eclectic mix of indigenous African traditions. Anatsui uses a chainsaw as his primary tool and his enigmatic assemblages and installations receive international critical acclaim.

Urban art forms constitute a major context of art production in Ghana. A sign painter whose workshop is called 'Almighty God Art Works' has been collected and exhibited in international exhibitions of contemporary African art.

c. Nigeria

Nigeria has the largest and most diverse population of all the countries in West Africa and this diversity is evident in its art. Its indigenous traditions include the Ife and Benin

cultures whose sculptures reflect complex developments in form and aesthetics. The wealth of indigenous arts provides a vibrant background to contemporary expression. Continuations and revivals of traditional forms are common as is evident in the art of Lamidi Fakeye (b. 1925) who works in the classical formats of indigenous Yoruba sculpture. In Benin, young artists produce contemporary sculptures using the lost-wax technique of classical Edo bronze casting. A postcolonial artist, Demas Nwoko (b. 1935) resurrected techniques of terracotta sculpture of ancient fifth-century BC Nok traditions in his contemporary sculpture.

The academic style in modern Nigerian art began with Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), the first Nigerian to receive formal training in art. Onabolu's 1905 portrait of Mrs. Spencer Savage is considered the first major product of this genre and his strict adherence to classical academic techniques developed into a major formalistic direction in modern Nigerian art. In 1927 the colonial government hired Kenneth C. Murray to develop a curriculum for art teaching in Nigerian schools. Murray selected five students for special education in art. He emphasized imaginative composition rather than classical academic techniques and encouraged his students to seek images and inspiration from their local environments. Murray's students became art teachers and illustrators except for Ben Enwonwu (1918–94) who became an influential painter and sculptor in the late colonial and postcolonial periods after receiving formal training at the Slade School of Fine Arts of the University of London. Murray's teachings provided an alternative direction to Onabolu's mimetic realism and a conceptual framework for the idea of 'Synthesis' in modern Nigerian art. Akinola Lasekan (1916–72) was also influential in the colonial period. He developed a form of genre painting and provided political cartoons for militant nationalist organizations and media during the struggle for Nigeria's independence.

Modern Nigerian art was affected by the nationalist struggle of the 1950s. In Zaria, a group of students headed by Uche Okeke (b. 1933) challenged the intellectual basis of colonial art education and its implications for cultural practice in an independent Nigeria. They developed a modernist aesthetic framework around the concept of 'Natural Synthesis' and advocated a fusion of indigenous aesthetic heritage and modern media of expression as the basis for a postcolonial cultural practice. Members of this group (Demas Nwoko, b. 1935, Bruce Onobrakpeya, b. 1932 and Yusuf Grillo, b. 1934, among others) later became important art teachers and administrators, and influential contemporary Nigerian artists.

In the 1960s modern Nigerian artists joined other cultural producers in the search for an intellectual direction for Nigerian culture in the postcolonial period through the establishment of Mbari Art Clubs in different cities like Ife, Benin, Ibadan, Enugu, and La-

gos. This period also saw a resurgence of nativism in the numerous workshops initiated by European expatriates like Ulli Beier, Georgina Betts, and Suzanne Wenger. Ulli Beier was involved in the Mbari initiative and he transformed a 1962 workshop at Oshogbo into an informal training center for several Yoruba artists. The Oshogbo artists pioneered important technical developments such as the bead painting style invented by Jimoh Buraimoh (b. 1944) and intricate drawings and textile-design innovations by Taiwo Olaniyi (a.k.a. Twins Seven Seven, b. 1944). Nike, a female Oshogbo artist, has built a thriving practice around her batik paintings and fashion designs.

The confluence of formal academic and informal workshop traditions created tensions between different groups of contemporary Nigerian artists. The situation was amplified by a civil war (1967–70) that fractured an uneasy nationalism and created a resort to militant ethnicity in contemporary Nigerian art. Several ideological formations based on affirmations of ethnic imagery and symbolism emerged after 1970. In eastern Nigeria, artists reconfigured indigenous Igbo aesthetics and body-painting traditions into a format of contemporary practice with focus on social and political concerns. This ideology was codified as 'Ulism'. Since Uche Okeke pioneered the style in the early 1960s, Ulism has produced many distinct generations of contemporary Nigerian artists like Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1946), Tayo Adenaike (b. 1954), Ndidi Dike (b. 1960), Barthosa Nkurumeh, and Olu Oguibe (b. 1964). In 1986, thirteen of the most influential figures of the 'neo-Uli' movement formed the AKA (Igbo for 'hand') Circle of Exhibiting Artists. This group subsequently became a dominant factor in contemporary Nigerian art.

By 1990, several distinctive variants of academic art practice can be identified each with its specific ideological and conceptual orientation. In many instances, these variations cohered around universities and similar institutions where many contemporary artists held teaching positions. For example, the Uli movement was located at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, in the Igbo culture area. A similar concern with Yoruba identity in western Nigeria produced an ideological movement known as Onaism located at the University of Ife and involving artists like Moyo Okediji (b. 1956) and Bolaji Campbell (b. 1958). At the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, artists like Ganiyu Odutokun (born Abdul Raji, 1946–96) and his numerous students reconfigured the calligraphic orientation of Islamic art into a framework for contemporary abstract painting. Younger artists like Jacob Jari (b. 1960) and Jerry Buhari (b. 1959) are resurrecting the intellectual spirit of the earlier Zaria Art Society (1958–62) which launched a postcolonial reaction to colonial art education led by Uche Okeke. At the University of Benin, Edo arts and culture provide a comparable conceptual framework for interpretations of the modern experience. Yaba Polytechnic, located in Lagos, is identified with the pictorial verisimilitude pioneered by Aina Onabolu and sustained by contemporary masters like Kolade Oshinowo

(b. 1948) and Lara Ige (b. 1963) in addition to innovations in sculpture and metal work by sculptors like Olu Amoda (b. 1959).

In the 1990s, the formal codification of school styles mentioned above disintegrated under different creative impulses as distinct styles converged in the works of artists who no longer identified themselves with ideological bases but with the urban Lagos setting. In the institutions where these styles flourished, many younger artists are actively redefining themselves against the codified ideologies of their predecessors. For instance, students at the University of Nigeria are moving away from the ideology of Ulism in favor of a more eclectic involvement with new concepts and technologies of art production.

All the contemporary Nigerian art forms associated with the academic tradition have a corresponding representation in popular culture. Certain forms (textile design for instance) thrive in this context beyond anything that can be found in the matrix of academic production. Pioneer practitioners of sign painting such as Middle Art (a.k.a. Augustine Okoye, b. 1936) are now established names in the art-historical discourse. A category of objects usually defined as airport art (mainly targeted at expatriates and tourists) has found its way into the aesthetic choices of the local population. Certain crafts (e.g. Raffia woven products) formerly consumed locally have been transformed into a lucrative international trade. Expatriates and foreign cultural institutions are major patrons of contemporary Nigerian artists. However, a growing art market accompanied by increased number of galleries and exhibition venues in Lagos has produced an indigenous class of patrons. In addition to this local market, outlets for artworks now include Euro-American locales as artists find ways to market themselves internationally.

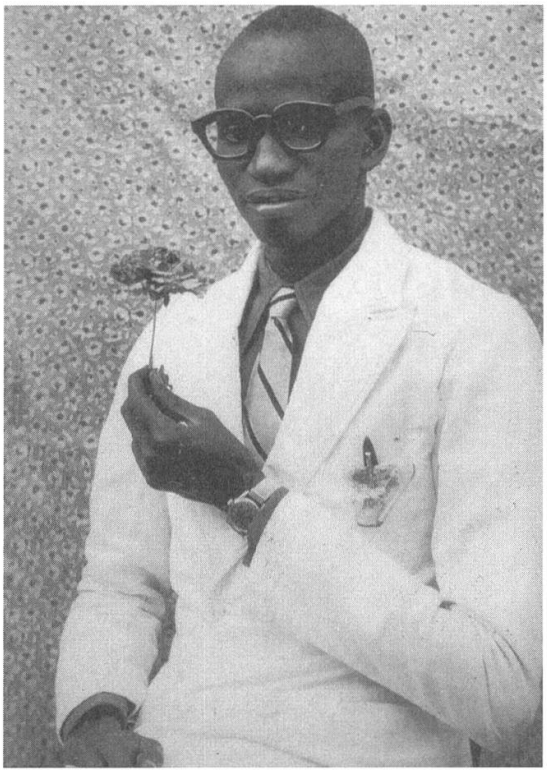
The mass exodus initiated by a deteriorating economic situation in the 1980s led to the emergence of a growing class of expatriate Nigerian artists. Although these individuals no longer practice in Nigeria, they utilize national and ethnic identities in their confrontation with 'mainstream' practices in expatriate locales. Much of their art production and discourse are thus directed to interrogating the implications of their identity as 'Africans' in an international arena of practice. In consideration of their liminal positions in the discourse, the production of such expatriate Nigerian/African artists is better evaluated in the context of their movements between and beyond circumscribed national boundaries rather than as mere extensions of extant national or ethnic spaces.

IV. Conclusion

Modern African art is significant to any narrative of modern art and the idea of Africa should now become normalized in art history as the locus of specific cultural memory

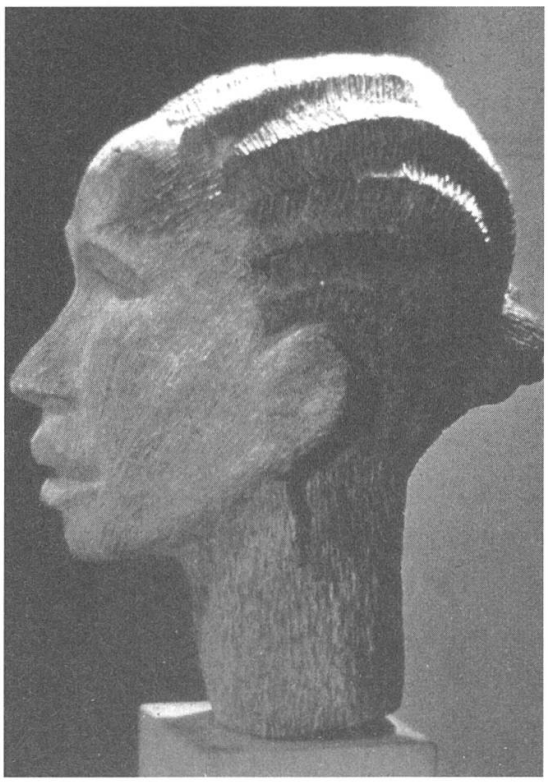
about modern art and modernity in general. Cultural practices on the continent have been affected by internal and external developments and historical and contemporary African cultures reflect an international scope. Art-historical narratives originating in the West have not always recognized this fact in their devotion to the Hegelian premise that Africa exists outside of history. This assumption makes it possible for Western discourses to periodically 'discover' Africa and reconstitute its history as a subaltern discourse forever subservient to the occidental ethos. The concepts of analysis deriving from this Hegelian postulate indeed prove most resilient. They frame Africa as an always-emergent context and allow the perennial questioning of the validity of African practices in occidental narratives. They also support a binary opposition between an imagined 'traditional' Africa whose cultural production stands in contrast to the impure, hybrid forms engendered by the modernization process.

The constitution of knowledge is rarely neutral. 'The anthropological view of culture that has so far shaped African art history depended on a clear distinction being drawn between "African culture" and "European civilization", an interpretative structure that James Clifford calls "the art-culture system" in which the status of Western art is dependent on its being distinguished from non-Western culture' (Mirzoeff, 1999: 130). This system not only denies Africa its history, it denies its centrality to the constitution of modernity both in Europe and Africa. The above general introduction makes a case for the complexity of African responses to issues of modernity in art. Hopefully, future art-historical narratives will take this complexity into question and direct their attention to this important context of modern and contemporary art practice.

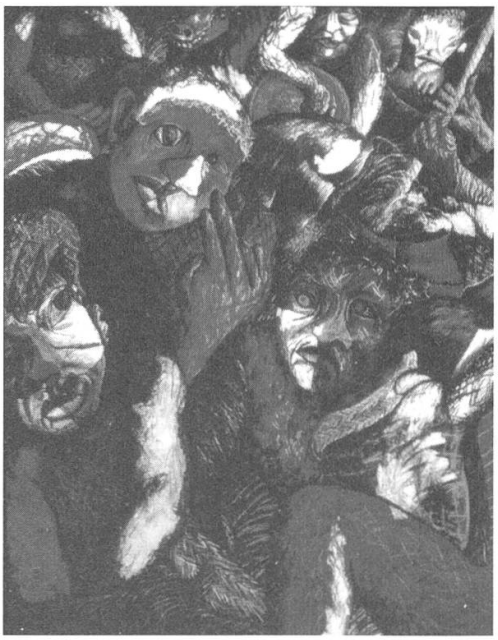


1 Seydou Keita, *Untitled* (portrait of a man), gelatin-silver print, 1958

2 Lamidi Fakeye, *Untitled* (warrior and musician), wood, n.d.

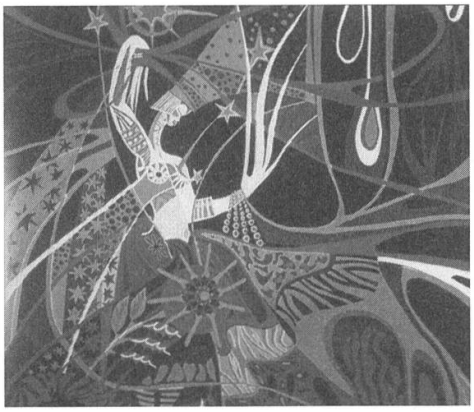


3 Ben Enwonwu, *Head of Yoruba girl*, Indian Mango wood, 1950

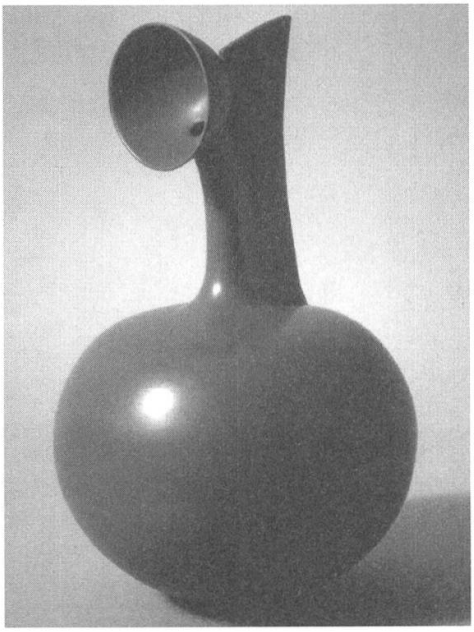


4 Helen Sebidi, *Mother Africa*, pastel and collage on paper, 1988

5 Samuel Kane Kwei, *Mercedes Benz shaped coffin*, wood and enamel paint, 1989

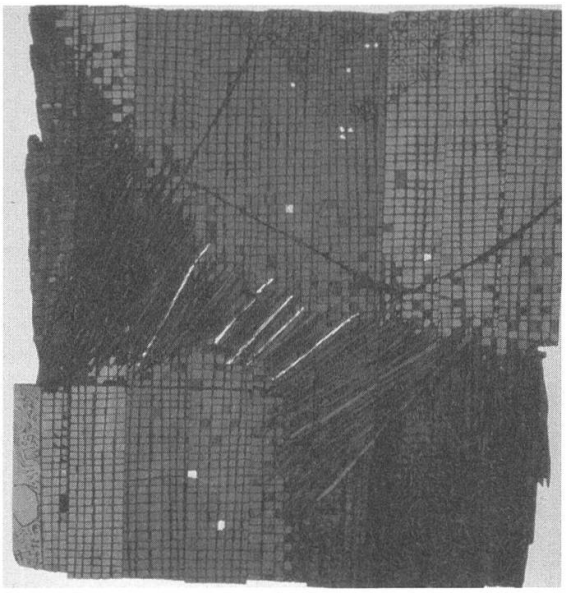


6 Papa Ibra Tall, *La semeuse d'étoiles*, wool tapestry, c. 1970

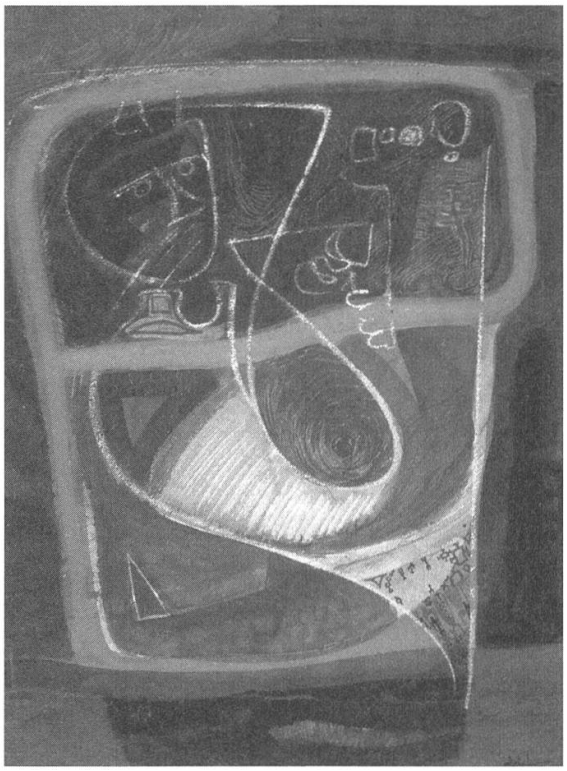


7 Magdalene Odundo, *Orange round neck*, red clay, 1987

8 Sunday Jack Akpan, *Display of portrait and generic figures*, cement and enamel paint, 1980–6



9 El Anatsui, *Earth-Moon connections*, wood and tempera, 1993



10 Obiora Udechukwu, *The prisoner*, watercolour, 1994

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Summary

Art history remains indifferent to the idea of modern African art despite a whole century of dedicated and innovative practice. Although international exhibitions of modern African art were already documented in London in 1937, in Paris by 1946 and, by 1950, prominent modern African artists were already famous in the American media, art history routinely ignores any mention of individual African artists. Recent international exhibitions of this context of practice such as *The Short Century* (2001), *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (1995) and *Africa Explores* (1991) attest to the continued viability of modern African art and artists. In fact, the decade of the 1990s saw a rise in representations of modern African art in international museums and in exhibition contexts. In spite of these important developments however, modern African art has been mostly written out of narratives of twentieth-century art. As a result of this effacement, analysis of modern and contemporary African art is mostly carried on in special interest journals generally ignored by institutional art history, accused of being less methodologically rigorous or of being just plain inferior. Such journals include *Third Text* (London), *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African art* (New York), *Revue Noire* (Paris, France), *Glendora Review* (Lagos, Nigeria) and *African Arts* (Los Angeles). Their relative obscurity reiterates the marginalization of African spaces of practice in the discourse of art history. Clearly then, the inscription of modern and contemporary African art remains an unfinished business in art history, and by virtue of its longstanding effacement, an urgent one at that. The increasing visibility of modern and contemporary African art raises the possibility that art history is now ready to view this practice with the kind of critical and historical complexity it deserves. While this is a promising development, it engenders questions about how this history is to be written. My paper contributes to this process of inscription through a general evaluation of the history and development of modern African art in the twentieth century.