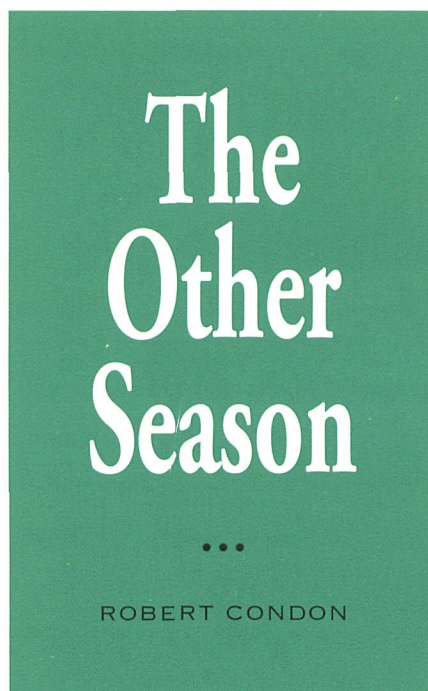


## REVIEWS

Nearly three years after its initial stirrings, at a symposium organized at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies to explore its viability and efficacy for a public that goes beyond the usual captive audience of Africanist academics, Africa95: "the season" arrived. As the press release repeatedly informed us, almost to the point of crassness, Africa95 was conceived as a "season" of events, which would put the arts of the "entire African continent" in the shiny spotlight of postmodernist incongruity. So much for modesty. Amidst the cautionary tales and bastard narratives of prior attempts to rein in this elusive subject, Africa95's one-stroke attempt and determination to make its story definitive, essentially recapitulated that unsavory paradigm of casting Africa as entertainment and spectacle.

Thus we had collapsed, once again, into the big pot of soup in which everyone is encouraged to bring their own ingredient; gallery and museum shows, theater performances, music concerts, radio programs, conferences, lectures etc.: all to happen at once throughout the United Kingdom. In this hail of noise, it is not surprising that we are left with very little option, even in



the face of memorable moments, but to contemplate the very meaning of attempting to narrate Africa in a no-frills, one size fits all package, neatly boxed in the redundant iconography of the cowry shell. Since we were unable to be entertained by the sheer volume of the visual information, which was minimally contextualized, apart from the Africanness of the participating artists, the music became the prime source of discussion amongst those who were able to afford the overpriced tickets: "Weren't Youssou N'Dour and Baaba Maal great the other night at the Royal Festival Hall?" So entertaining these Africans. It's in their blood.

I feel my own blood boiling at the very thought of turning an entire continent into what amounts to a cultural sushi deluxe. As Europe's own

cultures have progressively devolved into a series of cut-and-paste cheap thrills, the Africa95 organizers' full assimilation into a fin-de-siecle mood of obsolescence, seemed bent on appealing to the commonest denominator: money and tourism. The news of Euro Disney's failure in France perhaps never reached them. Even the collaborative dialogue between artists and organizers (in the optimistic and delusional view of the chief architect Clementine Deliss) was a grand undertaking. It attempted to bring the vast array of representations and productions that comprise African artistic practices together, for a public that was, for the most part, ignorant of the extent of such practices, let alone of their existence.

The staging of an event such as Africa95 must take into account, with careful consideration, some of the major conceptual questions and problematics which often plague the exhibition of African artists in the west. What, for instance, are the ramifications of presenting a festival of African arts in the context of a western metropolitan center which has historically devalued, if not completely eradicated, African contributions to dominant cultural discourses? Brian Sewell's phlegm-



coated invective, which was published in the Evening Standard, might help us to start considering the full impact of such devaluation. In his race-baiting manner, Sewell writes of his overall impression of modern African art thus: "The overall impression given by recent art in Africa is that it is largely of wretched quality, a multi-cultural confusion of African past and European present, the easy worst of western contemporary art too readily mimicked, the distinction of the native past denied its fetish function and degraded."

Indeed, such crude jokes can be enjoyed at Africa's expense. But would a festival of this nature have been more viable if it was staged elsewhere in a non-western context? Was Africa95 created, as its organizers insisted, to foster "long-lasting ties between artists and audiences in Africa and the UK"? And thus, in essence, to bring into the fold a prodigal son who has at long last repented for his errant ways, and might thus be allowed to gain entry into the exclusive club of western modernism? Or, was the festival merely an exotic necklace that could be strung out across the UK, to be admired by friend and foe alike, but eventually to be discarded after the novelty wore off?

The African artist stands in the middle of a battleground between the prevailing forces of a western modernism intent on protecting its canons (as well as their lofty, if at times dubious, sources) and an emerging, yet



Georges Adeagbo, *Art and Evolution*, 1995 (detail).

autonomous discourse on African modernism. Almost from the outset, she must be granted cultural permission or else be forced into the role of an insurgent, even a terrorist, in her efforts to enunciate a vision that represents a

suitable expression for her lived experience.

Despite all of its seeming diplomacy, Africa95 is plagued by a certain degree of heavy-handed didacticism. Though this is not always



without merit or usefulness, the curators and organizers too often attempt to reassure viewing audiences that the artists' work is worthy of serious contemplation, rather than affirming the achievements that are immediately evident in their productions. Added to this, is a rhetoric which, in places, imbues the entry of these artists into these institutions, with a sense of "discovery" and "wonder", which would seem more appropriate to a colonial expedition than it does to a project intent on expanding our notions of cultural plurality.

To some extent, the Whitechapel Art Gallery's "Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa", attempted to right some of these glaring inequities, by inviting African artists and historians to curate an exhibition of their personal interpretations of significant artistic movements and schools in seven African countries (Nigeria, Sudan, Senegal, Ethiopia, South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda) from the 1960's onwards. The result of this conceptual framework, was a sprawl of over 60 artists, crammed into a space usually reserved for no more than a handful. One can well imagine the dilemma of the curators at the Whitechapel who had been asked to "tell their stories", and would no doubt have wanted to do them the justice which they deserved, but who were then rationed a mere three walls, a few corners, and perhaps a stairwell; circumstances unfit for the telling of even an abridged version of a single

artist's career, let alone the artistic output of an entire nation.

Despite the inclusion of some superb artists (Erhabor Emokpe, Ibrahim El Salahi, El Anatsui, Wosene Kosrof, and Amir Nour to name a few), the sections were uneven in their



Ali Omar Ermes.

choice of works. The Kenyan and Ugandan sections, split between phantasms of war and the presentation of "untrained" artists, focused too narrowly on tendencies, rather than on concepts or achievements, leaving little else in between. Senegal, represented as it was by a mere three artists (El Hadji Sy, Issa Samb, and Souleymane Keita) failed to satisfy, with its translation of the performative strategies of Laboratoire Agit-Art into the space of the gallery, an attempt which amounted

to a static display of props and paintings.

The Serpentine Gallery's "Big City: Artists from Africa" brought together a grouping of artist organized more by their diversity of practices and the scope of their vision, than by a neat

narrative based on a fashioned notion of "Africanness". While the concrete yet ephemeral inscriptions of Georges Adeagbo's installation, the elegant grandeur of Seydou Keita's photographs, and the visionary language system of Frederic Bruly Bouabre represented historic projects of vast dimensions, Cyprien Tokoudagba's "Vodu" wall paintings seemed anachronistic and out of place in the show. In his catalogue essay, Andre Magnin asks, in an oversimplified, universalizing rhetoric:



“What is there of the past and what is there of the present in these ‘Africas’ whose artistic landscape has never been so varied?” He suggests that western contact has resulted in a wellspring of artistic inventiveness that heretofore remained dormant, waiting to be “discovered”. Furthermore, one could scarcely ignore the obliteration of any discussion of artistic self-determinacy, effected when Magnin patronizingly suggests, amongst other things, that Keita’s photographs are of value above and beyond their “sociological interest”.

In contrast to the congested narratives at the Whitechapel and the patriarchal tone at The Serpentine, “Mayibuye I Africa” at the Bernard Jacobson Gallery offered a more critical investigation into the ways in which artists formulate a narrative of artistic and cultural identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Recovering an identity was not on the agenda, but rather the indeterminacy of such an endeavor. Featuring works by Willie Bester, Kendell Geers, William Kentridge and others, the exhibition tested the boundaries of the historical conceits that have divided artists along cultural lines, by locating itself in the present debate over cultural authenticity within the South African context.

“On The Road” (at The Delfina Studio Trust) featured many of the same artists as “Mayibuye,” but was expanded to include artists from Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The exhibition’s discursive framework was



Willie Bester. *Apartheids Laboratory*, 1995.

intent on exploring the psychic, geographical, and cultural intersections - as well as the sometimes contradictory histories of past and present realities - which inform the work of artists from Southern Africa today. The displacements created by war, violence and social upheaval in this part of the world, find parallels in Willie Bester’s mechanic constructs of british force and bureaucratic dehumanization and in Norman Catherine’s subversive (if at

times saccharine) caricatures of state-sponsored oppression. Antonio Ole’s installation of a boat, capsized under the weight of its cargo, found resonance in Berry Bickle’s charred, yet resurrected crafts, resulting in the transcendence of an unresolvable past into a contestable future.

The Barbican Center’s “Signs, Traces, and Calligraphy” presented 6 North African artists whose text-based works inscribed another vector of



African cultural identity. Beautifully installed, the works evoked the power and majesty of the text as a structure, both metaphorically and literally, to produce works which were simultaneously both personal and communal articulations of faith, resistance and poetic freedom. The minimally executed mantric canvases of Mehdi Qotbi, and Rachid Koraichi's banners with their eclectic mix of signs and ideograms, both elude conventional reading by abstracting writing into an emblematic construction of shifting meanings, thus articulating new relationships between artist and society. Even if the exhibition was somewhat overdetermined in its situation of calligraphy as the prime vehicle for African-Islamic expression, the show

nonetheless did justice to its practitioners.

That Africa95 left one feeling somewhat empty, in the midst of a season that promised a bit of something for everyone, should not come as any surprise. What remains to be seen, is how dedicated the participating institutions actually are, to expanding the discourse on contemporary African art, or even to furthering the notion of a more inclusive internationalism. The latter has been anathema to western modernism, which, despite its claims, has always fostered exclusion as one of the main criteria for contemporary production. It is more than likely, that once the fanfare surrounding Africa95 begins to wane, the artists that were its centerpiece will once again be driven

into exile, until the next pangs of western self-consciousness bring the west to address the degree of its cultural isolationism in the world arena.



Rachid Koraichi. *Untitled*, 200 x 300 cm.



W. Kentridge. *Waterfall*.  
Charcoal / pastel on paper.