

# Master SOW or "When attitudes become forms"

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An old man slices a bullock's throat. One of his children holds the animal down. A man, at a distance, looks on. A woman supervises the sacrifice. Is it a sacrifice? In the little boy's face horror shines. Kneeling on the sand a Peul woman delouses her husband's hair. We are impressed by the hieratic poses of Ousmane Sow's most recent sculptural characters. The misery and the dignity of an ancient race, the Peuls, who are now moslems, is expressed by their gestures and in their faces, where deep misfortune hardly troubles serenity, the beauty of women, the contained strength of men, the precision of the old man's action. Ousmane Sow, himself a Peul, sculpts his own race, a people who have lost their tradition. He models situations and actions. He offers a journey through an imaginary world, he traces the movement of men through a delicate fusion of form and matter. His work explores appearance, and searches ideal human physiques, to be conceived in artistic form, for this artist tries to express emotions that arise from the past. His most dazzling work has that rich bronze sheen, though sometimes, by contrast, is retains the hardness of raw material, that the artist has specially prepared, and which lends his sculptures both an archaic and contemporary feel. His attitudes turned to sculpture create exaggerated artistic forms. His Nouba warriors are an example, powerful and fragile at the same time, they perform a traditional, country type of wrestling practised by the Serer and Wolof tribes, during harvest time, by the flickering light of wood fires. Today it's become a popular sport. These Nouba warriors were shown at the last *Dokumenta* in Cassel.

Two or three metres high, his men are naked, their organs hanging. Perhaps each figure corresponds to a real life man. Sitting, laying down, sparring, all in a scrum. A neck about to break, winded, their calves all tensed. The group has been treated with perturbing realism, including the attention and respect the artist gives to the modelling of their genitals. Such representation of the body by a moslem artist, of the african Islamic tradition, no doubt smashes any prohibition on the concept of anthropomorphic representation and of nudity. Perhaps it is a combination of lyricism and vital strength that surprises, shocks, and astounds us, and is probably the most original contribution of the artist. Attitude determines forms

that bear romantic influence, in terms of the subject's place and location, re-presented in the world. Ousmane Sow makes Africa so real, so palpable, in his work that he runs the risk of tipping the scales in favour of ethnographic recreation. He lets us weigh the fascination that the Black Continent exerts on the West. Black, sculptural bodies, of wrestlers or powerful old men, as if by dint of beholding Africa as the land of physical beauty and strength, of sensuality and rhythm, Ousmane Sow wanted to get rid of Epinal's image once and for all.

He proposes "more of the same thing", as remedy in this will to change. Yet he goes further, he keeps his art in constant evolution, both rigidly and loosely structured, retaining the impact of violent physical pleasure, the mark of his conscious project, the despair and exaltation of the creative act. Ousmane Sow provokes us with an excessive, over the top realism, that he dates from Michelangelo through to Brancusi, passing by Rodin, Carpeaux and Bourdelle. This reality which he expresses with anger presupposes a long and painful tradition, for as he believes in Africa, including its underdevelopment, he refuses to reduce it to pitiful tribalism. He sculpts man's pain, his own suffering. His themes, beside that of his own suffering, his materials, the constant provocation, the almost romantic expressionism prevent any reductionist attempts. Sow's work is a combat, the same wrestling match that his Noubas, Massais and Peuls hold, the combat of representation, of movement, of the subject, of concept and conception, and at no time a mere polaroid of Africa's social history.

The Golden Lion of the Venetian Biennale was awarded to the german pavillion, rewarding the merits of a rather discreet Nam Jun Paik and an emphatic Hans Haacke. Over the pulled up floor the shadow of a huge photograph of Adolf Hitler who visited this town in 1943. A polemical work that projected a strong symbol. Both jury and public answered the challenge and proceeded to walk in over the upturned floor.

Ousmane Sow.  
*Couple de Lutteurs corps a corps. Nouba. Photo: Actes.*

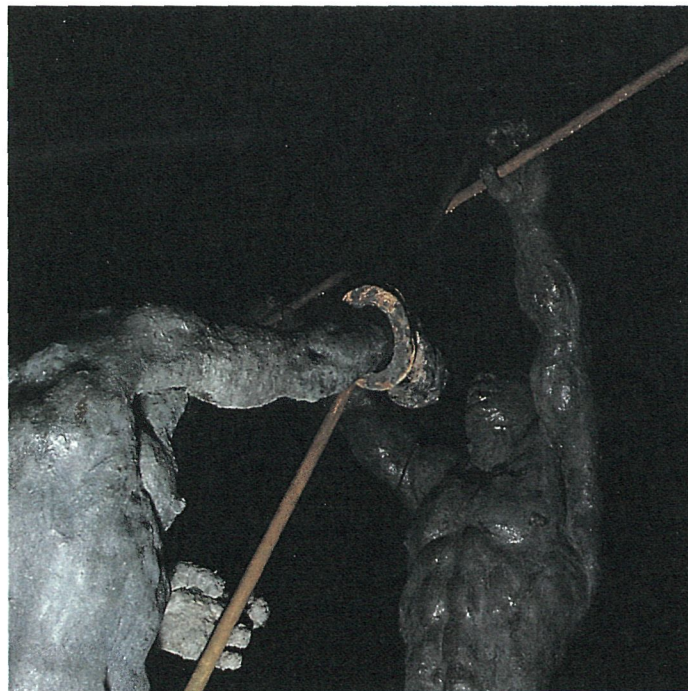


Achille Bonito Oliva, head curator came out with the idea of deterritorialization, wanting to redefine the North/South. East/West axes of contemporary art. Risk is forbidden in our age of melancholy and indifference. It was a biennial against nationalisms, racism and war; it's all very well to deliver the commonplace of euroconsciousness in one parcel. After Kassel, that wallowed in optimistic humanism, we had Venice, at the gates of Zagreb, that gazes at its image in the mirror of good feelings. Art is the reply to generalized desillusion. The biennial of the city of the Doges pretends to design an egalitarian world-map, although it still discriminates the south, whose countries can ill-afford crummy underground show space.

Senegal, that lacks cultural policy ever since the death of Léopold Senghor, presented three artists already noted at the Dakar biennial. Mor faye, Mustapha Dime and Ousmane Sow. Senghor's years are but vague memory, and the artistic climate they engendered, an exceptional experience for Africa, is about to founder for good after the closure of the Village des Arts and the Thiès factory, with paltry budgets, ruinous buildings, and hovering threats of pogrom at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, not to mention the fact that the Musée Dynamique has set up as a law court. However, paradoxically. Senegal vibrates with fresh talent. Africa doesn't tumble, and looks out proudly. Each megapolis of Central Africa, Lagos, Cotonou, Libreville, Barsaville, teems with young talent, that search, work and often find their recompense. Ivory Coast presented, meanwhile, Gérard Santoré the great Ouattara, and Tamir Dia.

After two years Ousmane Sow at last has got to enjoy international recognition and fame. After the exhibitions in Japan and in numerous european countries, he is invited to present his work at the Kassel Dokumenta in 1992. He rejected taking part in the *Magiciens de la Terre* show, held at the Georges Pompidou, an exhibition that committed the falacy of presenting on equal terms ritual artists of the south of the continent (we aren't wishing to be offensive), who were bearers of ancient tradition, and artists from the north, who currently work with far more penetrating concepts. As a contrast to that show, that seemed to reassure those who worried about the fate of ritualistic art, we have the Venice Biennial, offering a new range of sculptures, of Massai origin, that in order to be shown on time had to be shipped two months in advance. Deterritorialization venitian style didn't go beyond asking such questions as whether Louise Bourgeois is a french artist included in the american pavillion or an american sculptress born in France. Ousmane Sow is the paradigm of this concept in its true sense; every part of his history, his origins, the decision process that led him to art, his return to Dakar after twenty years in Paris, are some of his fundamental semantic elements.

Ousmane Sow came to the Paris of the reconstruction, that had still not developed xenophobia towards immigration that soon was to occur on massive scale. He didn't have a bean in his pocket, and his only baggage was the fervent desire to be an artist. He wanted to matriculate at the Beaux Arts and train as a sculptor. Behind him he had some suburban exhibitions, a few paintings, and Dakar, that chatty city where talk is a beloved occupation, and of course his Peul origins, a nomad people without a statue making tradition, who since the fifteenth century have roamed the geography of sub-saharian Africa as nomads. Being black in Paris has one advantage: it avoids further ethnic confusion. He came to be an artist and left two decades later as a kinotherapist, which



Ousmane Sow. *Couple de Lutteurs aux batons. Nouba.*  
 Courtesy: *Revue Noire*. 1987.

may account for his liking of well formed bodies. Not until his return to Africa does he take sculpture more seriously. In 1966 he shows at the first black festival in Dakar, when Senghor's initiatives were in functioning. Since 1986 he devotes himself entirely to his art, at the age of fifty one.

Ousmane Sow, Master Sow, has been considered for some time now as one of the most important african sculptors living, one of sub-saharian Africa's great values. We may be surprised at the disappearance of african art, especially in the field of sculpture, a trend that began in the nineteenth century and has grown throughout the twentieth. We well know that the links uniting art and society are direct and causal, and that such a relation is determined by home and place. The desintegration of african societies in practically the whole of the continent, due to colonization, slavery and the decline of animist religions because of prolonged contact with certain western phenomena, and prominent islamism, have no doubt generated disappointment among the artist community, and apathy with continuing normal production. Or perhaps, more simply, the creation of masks and statuettes devoted to deities lacks the necessary meaning to persevere with its tradition. Furthermore, it seems apparent that certain inherent factors of african life, and the lack of value that its art suffers, have only contributed to accelerated decadence.

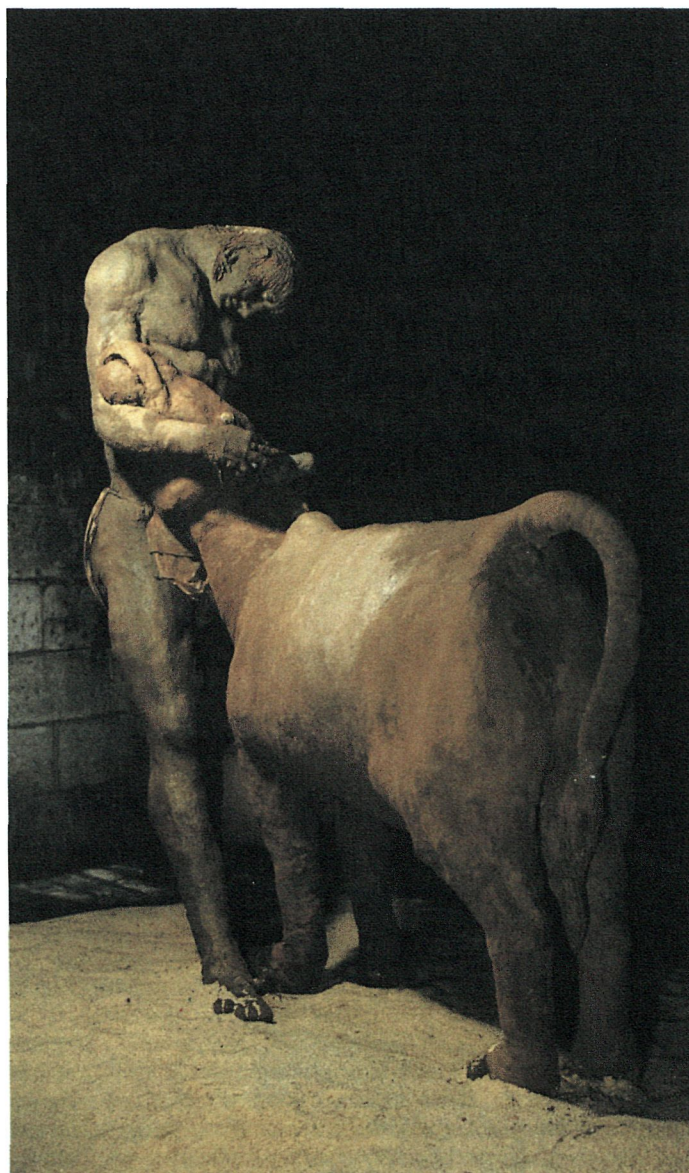
In 1993 Africa rots away with our contempt. After thirty years of colonization its health had never been in such poor shape. There's rampant demography that duplicates the normal number of children per woman. We cant but shudder at this accumulation of fatalities. The World bank is apologetic about such a disastrous decade. Between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn deforestation, the devastation of guerrilla warfare, the collapse of basic structures, corruption, strong migratory trends, the spread of epidemics and AIDS, all seem to have concentrated their power. Just to give a terrible fact, 90% of Libreville's prostitutes are AIDS' carriers. Neverthe-



Ousmane Sow. *Couple de Lutteurs aux bracelets tranchants. Nouba.* Courtesy: *Revue Noire.* 1987.

less, Africa teems with life; the beauty of african culture, the wealth of its interpersonal relations can't be included in a GNP. We hear its music in New York, Paris and London. The Ouagadougou Festival, after two decades of life, is a necessary stage in international film criticism's agenda.

For far too long Africa's image has been confined to the wonderful postcard. A photo that gave off a magic scent, of tribal strength, of primitivist purity. All of this kept the West from being too concerned about a continent that seemed to live in a permanent time-warp. This fuelled indifference. The arts suffered from sleeping sickness. For most of us, until very recently, African art was limited to Senoufo masks and Yoruba sculpture, as Laude taught. Yet Africa isn't at all asleep. It is the privileged land of innovation and vitality. The kingdom of rhythm and form. The silence, and the discretion it observes could well make believe the opposite. But appearances are misleading. Africa sings, cries, writes, paints sculpts, yet we only hear whispers. It's a non-structured art, without a market, where artists have to be on their feet, and struggle single handed against governments, galleries and international disdain. Yet it exists, and all the more vigorously, given the difficulties its creators have to master it exists against all odds; Ousmane Sow is the prime example, who has only been able to devote himself fully to art after half a century of life. We begin to be familiar with african art's major names. Ouattara's luminous canvases, Sokari Douglas Camp's iron-founding gods, Bete Selassie's papier mâché sculptures, and Ousmane Sow's plastic and clay characters. They have nothing to do with a paralysed Africa, as if they, each one in his own way, had attempted to return to their myths and to Mother Earth in order to become citizens of the world. All of these creators of contemporary Africa map the dimensions of an incipient inspiration, they create their own art history. We say that the old continent is experiencing historical transformation. Africa, freed from paternal obligations, has no axe to grind. Ousmane Sow dips his hand into a



Ousmane Sow. *Buveur de sang et buffle. Masai.* 1989. Courtesy: *Revue Noire.*

barrel. He takes out a kind of dark mud that he then puts onto a cast iron structure covered with synthetic straw. The red ochre clay is found on the slopes that along a road in the outskirts of Dakar. This clay is mixed, in the artist's secret formula for the material, with a plastic resin recovered from the discharge of an old lebanese tinker's shop, a mixture that he then ages in small barrels for years. On his studio floor traces of different kinds of soil remain, and Ousmane Sow can recognize where they all came from in his sculptures, from Nouba, Massai, or Peul. In Oualof, the word *jagal* means recovered or recycling. Jagalism is the art of making an old colonial automobile run again. Jagalistes in Dakar transform waste matter into anything, every thing is recycled, wood, iron, aluminium, steel, sackcloth, to be turned into plates, cupboards, kitchen ware. Jagalistes work frequently on the streets. They make up a parallel economy that is organized into a powerful lobby, although it goes beyond interests; jagalism is a kind of survival philosophy. Ousmane Sow buys his cast iron from these merchants; the sack-cloth that he uses to build up volume, his plastic straw. He, in his own way, is also a jagaliste.