

# Enigmas of the crossroad: Vision and Light. Reception and distribution of African Art\*

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To begin with, I want to express my gratitude to the authorities that have invited me to participate in this debate. The occasion seems similar to the kind of joyful celebration experienced by Africans upon the reencounter with their talent and genius during the artistic manifestations that took place at the first World Festival of the African Arts, in Dakar in 1966.

The Musée Dynamique held during this occasion an exhibition organized by Iba N'Daye: *Tendencies and Confrontations, the Contemporary Arts*. This event stimulated, among others, one of the most Senegalese virtues: *Teranga*, hospitality or availability, and especially, utter probity and generosity when considering the master works of African Art. Art, is indeed, the image of the soul. As a path to essence, it leads man most intimately to the fulfilment of love. For this reason, the reception of a work of art in our traditional societies was put to the test within a symbolically determined ritual. Poetry, dance and music fused in a law that belonged to that moment of communion with the invisible. Nothing would be more true than this inner trembling and the harmonious reaction that stemmed from the identity that symbolic images in initiation rites or any other vitalistic celebration possess and provoke. Art and education reciprocally strengthened the community's well-being.

I wouldn't mind if the painter, the restorer, the museum expert all had their say, but I'm a son of this earth, and I've always felt the need to be myself. To broach the subject of the reception given to African Art within its context abroad enables us to evaluate the state of preservation of its virtues. It is pertinent to remember, in spite of the bad taste

\* This lecture was given as part of the debates that took place in Dakar, Senegal, on the occasion of *Dak'Art 92*.

it leaves most historians, that the genocides and the colonialism that have sadly disrupted Africa's history, have simultaneously determined certain of our reactions towards our cultural values.

The alteration of our territory by these tragic invasions, to which we must add the forceful influence of foreign religions and certain contributions of industrial civilization have had great repercussions on our sensibility. They are facts that have perturbed and vexed the development of African Arts. However, and I don't say it in vain, none of these manifestations will lose neither the spirit nor the strength of their originality.

Our aspiration to independence reveals one of the stages of this history; regained freedom to choose the most adequate means that secure the best continuity for our traditions and our heritage. This privilege confers on us the responsibility, of protecting and increasing these values, for future generations. To carry a bit further and humbly, like in a caravan, the memory of those we love, passing on to the new generation that eventual responsibility; that's what we can all achieve united.

To preserve this heritage means to prepare the way for its reception, its distribution and its appreciation. To measure the capacity of its present information and the initiative of host institutions, foments simultaneously, rather than a change, progress based on truth and precision, making all aggression futile and impotent. To the extent that we are able to deploy our strength with greater efficiency, this recovery of the vigour and the resistance of our art to any manipulation by speculative phantasy will represent a transformation and an innovation, and the most sane behaviour. The renovation or the revolution of creativity traces the history of the art work, of the ori-

gin of its changes and its incombustible surprises.

This dynamic encourages criticism oriented to stimulation and thought armed with manifold criteria of the perception of the art work as common property and not as the exclusive right of a minority. To conserve our cultural legacy is to revitalize it in the memory and in the heart of people. We find traditional references in the collective subconscious that appear as concerns to be divulged to the new generations. In 1945, referring to the state of conservation of our heritage, Léopold Sedar Senghor said:

"Old Africa is dying. Customs and language are being transformed at incredible speed. There's only enough time left to photograph its face at this moment, a visage that still mirrors its eternal features. Tomorrow shall be too late."

Imagine my astonishment when reading in the catalogue of the exhibition *Africa Today*:

"Being African doesn't imply the fact of belonging to any community."

Actually, in Senegalese society, animist, moslem and christian traditions coexist. The racial plurality that characterizes our society, is accelerated daily by the annexation derived from economic and technological progress. To detect the imprint of its impact on the situation, public opinion and adopted behaviour gives us a far more precise approach to the cultural phenomenon. Under this condition of economic sub-development, we can, without generalizing, imagine the obstacles cleared by africans responsible for effecting a fairer and more rational reevaluation of our heritage than the one conducted by ethnography at the service of colonialism, or the black slave trade and the prime products derived from it that favoured the industrial revolution.



CENTRO ANDALUZ DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO

Though History's time leads our way, to situate the beginnings of contemporary African art within the framework of independence may not be very accurate. For us, ancestors are contemporary. They have never gone, they keep guard over their descendents. Sighs, exiled as we are (the poet sings), they refuse to die. Their art is a necessary reference in History, though encyclopedias of universal art, don't find it convenient, when referring to their qualities, to justify the ambiguous pretext of Arthur de Gobineau in his book: *Essay on the inequality of the human races*, concerning the "superlative degree of the sensual faculty the negro is endowed with and without which no art can possibly exist". Yet, he also stated, "he required the help of the white race to promote its values". History took no time in proving the contrary. Our art has proved it, surviving as a vehicle for memory, sensibility and the human imagination. Therein lies its originality.

With its rhythm, its charm, its indomitable power of fascination and its classical force, negro art triggered off the fascination of western artists with a new aesthetics of surprising spontaneity if compared with the mechanical systematizations of academies and with a clarity that somehow acted as a redeeming spell for art and artists trapped in one way or another by positivism, and later by materialism. This perturbing charm, though frequently distorted by certain isolated and ill-adapted formulas, rather than spiritual inspiration, remains as a strange, curious object for the absent minded. See what Michel Leiris says about Cubism:

"...the support these works could give to European artists in search of new techniques. Fauvists like Vlaminck and Derain (in fact, Picasso attributes the true discovery of cubism to Vlaminck), anxious to return to the origins observed with sympathy, popular or primitive works which moved away from the greco-roman ideals extant since the Renaissance, and apparently created with utter innocence seemed examples of an art devoid of sophistication."

We regret the fact that today the most beautiful examples of these works are to be found in museums and collections far away from us. The scarcity of information about the knowledge they cumulatively possess, condemn the few surviving pieces to the iconoclasm of the invaders, to being the constant prey of poaching, to unlimited commercial speculation or irreverent imitation that vilifies the appearance of airports with tourist galleries in Africa and throughout the world. We might think we were in the heat of discovery, when masterpieces in gold by original creators were melted down into lingots in order to feed mercantilism. Price substitutes all values and becomes economic and political power. The works, labelled and distributed in commercial and market forums. The sanctuaries of desecration and its priests are able to find with the same strategic energy applied to all international relations a price for everything. All of this represents a serious handicap for us Africans. I imagine it is the same

type of handicap that most of our masterpieces suffer condemned to oblivion in crates, in inadequate repositories, in museums jampacked with objects or in offices. The absence of African Art in the academic programmes of schools is simultaneously mirrored by the inefficiency of the teaching models used. The clinical history or the diagnosis of these works analyzed in terms of the feminine or the masculine, the organic and the inorganic, the tangible and the intangible, point out just how much work has to be done in order to secure their integrity and to free the efficiency they contain.

In the preface to the book of the *Dakar Museum*, André Malraux says that we wouldn't know how to find the state of grace, that enabled the hands and the eyes of the traditional artist to engender the forms and the colours of the invisible. Our search, far from imitating the ancestors, is made evident by the following quotation by Senghor from the same book:

"It is still impossible, contemplating to the point of hallucination, the masterpieces of African Art at the Dakar Museum, to reencounter not only the forms and colours of the ancient artists, but their style that flows from the very source of négritude. As this is not impaired, we only have to make an inner return, to sink to the depths of our soul, till we reach the place where the underground river flows beneath the sand, so that vision emerges and the rhythm of the Kingdom of Childhood begins to beat. That's the advice we've given our young artists. "Visit frequently our Museum", I've told them, "Behold these violent and pure forms until they possess you obsessively. This is the idea with which we've built, on the west coast of Dakar, facing the Atlantic ocean, a modern museum of Negro-African art where the more than 26.000 pieces that are still packed will find a place."

Museography in this part of the world is far less eloquent than the Master of Words. We regret that the modern museum has remained a project. The collections of the contemporary cultural heritage similarly share the same conditions of conservation. The failure, or the frustration of this kind of investments, even in the case of a staff devoted to the conservation of cultural heritage, (estate or chattels), or to its continuity, approaches the turbulent image of the present that informs and illustrates most of the articles of the *Anthologie des Arts Plastiques Contemporains au Sénégal*.

Furthermore, certain notorious contradictions of the cultural politics within the context of Senegalese artistic reality are lengthily debated in two articles of the exhibition's catalogue: *Africa explores: 20th Century African Art*, organized by the Centre for African Art and the New York Museum of Contemporary Art, and *The Official History*, by Susan Vogel, and *Négritude: Between Mask and Flag, Senegalese cultural ideology and the École de Dakar*. Later on I'd like to come back to these articles.

As far as the Musée Dynamique goes, where our contemporary art meets masterpieces of twentieth century art like internationally released credit notes, the strange function that currently distorts it, reduces the space symbolically prepared for stimulating processes of familiarization, attendance, adaptation and the deference we demand for our ancient or contemporary art. This monument is awaiting the restoration of its purpose and style. It hasn't been adapted to our needs; thus the silence that has condemned it to its present circumstances. The study of the reactions of Senegalese people to works of art is pending so that we can effect a better museographic reform of our heritage.

The lack of competent staff in the field of conservation, restoration of cultural heritage and museology makes the situation for private and state collections more difficult. We have examples that explain the absence of investigating the state of our art's conservation and our aesthetic education in schools and universities. There aren't national or regional museums that house permanent or temporary exhibitions of our ancestors' masterpieces. The scarce bibliographical references published by africans to protect the wealth of perpetuable traditions which transmitted art from one generation to another, monographical studies with illustrations of the life and work of the artist that distinguish our history, make these less known at home than in other places.

Exhibitions organized by the state, artists and private galleries, though surprisingly covered by the press, avoiding the limitations of type-casting, are received indifferently by the public and the critics. Criticism that is assembled by itinerant exhibitions organized by the state abroad, only reach us through the filter of sensationalist press communiqués. Abroad, in art history books, catalogues and exhibitions, there is hard criticism of cultural policies and the contemporary arts in Africa.

For André Magnin, curator of the itinerant exhibition *Africa Today*, his adventures are resumed in this depiction of the continent at the present moment:

"...When politicians lament profusely the loss of African identity, due to colonial and neo-colonial oppression, there's a lack of initiatives and money to set up permanent collections."

Susan Vogel, curator of the exhibition *Africa explores: 20th century African Art* and director of the New York Centre for African Art where it was held, states:

"A serious problem, though less for artists and officials, is the absence of compromised criticism. Artists in Africa, are limited by a lack of perspective in their work. They hardly see any art works produced by artists outside their environment. The official infrastructure is monolithical and unavoidable, and it dispenses indiscriminate support, that counts on critical reception in the press that

wallows in flattery. The only opinions available to artists, come via friends or teachers, and artist associations where criticism is limited by politics and closeness. Isolation, frustration and complacency are the gravest problems that beset African International Art.”

Taking the opinion of these specialist entrusted with the task of contextualizing the collections of African Art, we can imagine easily how the foreign public is ideologically oriented towards knowledge of our art, our artists and our cultural politics. These catalogues progressively become books of increasing importance, by the careful selection of author and edition, that sometimes are better than the exhibition. They are sacralized by experts, specialists and leading intellectuals (fortunately some fine sensibilities appear among them), for the collector and the specialist. The production of spectacles for the profane is abundant in supermarkets and libraries.

The impact of the deficiencies and absences recorded as interferences in the development of the artistic education of artists, students and public, is made evident by the lack of a constant organized and institutionalized criticism that includes different manifold criteria of approximation to black African art and the aesthetics that gives it substance. This blank gives rise to the following western statements on the panorama of African Art today:

“...With the exception of rare examples, we don't find there museums, collections, galleries or art criticism...”. “...The arrival of the europeans was necessary to give painting the standing it required”. “I searched for art and artists. This exploration was somewhat ill-fated. I had to observe, to what extent, art (or should I say magic), had been uprooted from the very central and existential place that it had once occupied in the life of African man. Some tried to keep up my expectations, in... For even in the most sophisticated circles, art appeared as an alibi to conceal the loss of ethnic personality, cultural ignorance or indifference. Not only consideration but even respect were missing for art.” “This also carries, however paradoxical it may seem, an implied danger. The main client of the Third World's new art is still the First World, and this situation dated from decolonization. From the time when freedom of movement had no boundaries. It is European travellers, north Americans and Japanese, or foreigners with temporary contracts, who at the most spend only a brief time, that determine the African artistic market. A series of factors, like the lack of culture poverty, the absence of a large educated middle-class and tendency of cultured people to imitate European models and to organize consumerism round the products of industrial society (especially cars, electrical goods, sports wear and luxury upholstered furniture), have led developing countries to underrate their own art. Given that most of the population still live in rural communities, it has no contact with art created in the cities. Only a very reduced group of the African

Sadih-Babacar Traore (Senegal, 1956).



*élite is devoted to collectionism. For most Africans, art is still something apparently futile, since it has lost its ancient magic powers. For this reason, art is reserved to foreigners, without any regrets or jealousies". "The Oldenburg Kunstverein dares to exhibit Senegalese art."*

Similar statements about an art clientèle could already be read in Marshall Ward Mount's book: *African art, the years since 1920*, published by Indiana University Press, in Bloomington and London, in 1973.

This barrage of quotes comes from the different authors of the catalogue *Africa Today*, organized in Paris with the works of the Contemporary African Art Collection and in collaboration with the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, with the itinerary, Las Palmas, Mexico and God knows where else. Though its selective principle may appear arbitrary with respect to the altruism of the organizers, it only wants to project a prodigious event that breaks the castrating silence of the taboos imposed on African artistic creation and also plays down the ridicule of the artists that participate in this kind of exhibition. These opinions can be read in French, Spanish, English and in almost all European languages and generally the world over since some time ago, with the sole purpose of favouring the annulment and exploitation of the *Other*. Is the silence on behalf of African authorities a sign of tolerance, indifference or lack of information on the subject? I would like to ask why in the catalogues of exhibitions organized by the state, we find the names and the unbelievable opinions of those who in other contexts denigrate it. Even worse, in shameful cases, these attitudes and denigrating arguments are adopted by local officials who shake off allegiances and score own-goals. This corrodes the sporting spirit that Art requires. Günter Peus said in connection with the 1977 FESTAC:

*"In the context of this pan-african exhibition, where the artists were chosen by the official representatives of fundamentally dictatorial governments, an art exclusively destined to the glory of the powerful has prevailed, creating a martial kitsch."*

Can we generalize so easily? We realize that the disinformation accumulated on anthropological discoveries, ethnohistory and archaeology in Senegal, leads many misinformed writers to affirm imprudently that the fine arts don't have any real tradition in the country. We quote, precisely in order to reflect justly on the problem, the excellent article by Ibrahim Baba Kaké: *African culture, cultural identity, development and dialogue between cultures*, that appeared in the magazine *Ethiopiquest*. The historian reminds us that:

*"...The rural paintings of Tassili in the Sahara, and those of the Kalahari desert provide a testimony of a pictorial art separate from architecture where painting can be considered an art per se. The arts of communication have enjoyed a similar status in African societies. Furthermore, many ritual ceremonies*

*and many popular gatherings include a theatrical and communicative element where dances and music frequently are integrated in ritual processions and poetic recitals, making up a dynamic whole that derives its meaning from the ritual character of the event. If we examine the religious dimension we can only confirm that Africa is the paradise of animism."*

With the following reference the historian concludes his analysis of the predominant situation in presentday African Arts:

*"...Black African culture is not the apparent syncretism conceived and supported by the mass-media of western countries or of new african states."*

Starting from a critical and objective vision of current african reality, he adds later:

*"It is worthwhile defining the contemporary social structure of Africa and finding out if it contains elements of valid reform..."*

Having proved in a rigorous analysis the persistence of a notably infiltrated colonial mentality, bent on perverting the development of the arts with the aid of certain officials who have replaced the traditional chiefs, he states:

*"...The African believes that political and economic domination don't necessarily imply the destruction of the other's cultural values. The West, with its universalist conquest, doesn't separate territorial conquest from cultural invasion."*

Since the 11th century we've inherited this same memory that many africans believe genetic while it is solely historical. This relative ignorance, compared to the avidity of the International Empire of profit and its lucrative operations, and especially with real cooperation, proves that the inadequacy of the methods applied to cultural investment, the inadaptation of museographic institutions, together with the notorious rift between culture and education, hinder the just reception due to African art at home and in other parts. To the contrary, the growing void created by the lack of decolonization of the imagination brings the bombardment of new stereotypes, new temptations that overcome us helplessly.

In his article, *Black African creation under superior tutorship*, Mamadou Traoré Diop, cries out in favour of establishing replies suitable to the demands of cultural creativity, for *"...a new model of more limiting relations tends to be dramatically imposed, in terms of a deviation from creation and artists, pursuing only the interests of a hegemonic policy of presence and influence..."* International exhibitions, better curated by some, are increasingly preferred by governments than national ones. Within a framework of cooperation, they are more efficient for the development of cultural exchanges. But, let us be sure for once, that only through knowledge of our own values shall we be known by others and this awareness gives us a better knowledge of the other.

Our artists, ignored by criticism in the most part, yet recorded by geopolitics that pretends to establish a self-proclaimed cultural standardization, are tracked down and damaged in their development by wily merchants who would like to reduce them to those formulas that have guaranteed their success and the hegemonic aspirations already mentioned. The pitiful conditions that marginalize these artists to the bohemian and the exotic, simultaneously leads to the extroversion of their cultural values.

Deprived of status and means, their abandonment and their dubious integration propitiates alienation of their sensibility, and opens the way to the criticisms of the mentioned catalogues. Harrassed by the huge barrage of prefabricated illusions, of stereotypes alien to our reality, exported or imported as models, they favour, beyond the mere aesthetic appreciation, an assimilation of implied figurative ideologies: Superman, Batman, Badpainting, and also violence and power.

These iconographic doctrines ensure our interior decorating.

In our homes, the works which stem from our imagination and enhance the habitat are substituted by chromolitographic reproductions, posters, nudes, plastic ware, foreign cinema, pop and sport stars; calendars and hyperkitsch associations. For an alternative history of art, the North American Susan Vogel comments:

*"A far more useful history of art could be structured round two great ideologies we have just discussed (Authenticity and Blackness). The first defends the right of the Africans to create whatever art they want, including works resembling European art, and the idea that their art should be accepted as "african". The second, well-defined by Senghor as négritude, maintains that the artists should reject the influences and the materials from abroad and delve into their own african-ness."*

After indicating that it is difficult for us to find materials and space appropriate for creativity in Africa, and noting with surprise that a poll reveals that no african artist subscribes to Art Forum, we have, according to her, the reasons that explain why the best international artists prefer to live abroad, especially in the First World, because it is the best and perhaps the only road to salvation recommendable for their careers. What's more, the Afro-American Ima Ebong, Susan Vogel's aide-de-camp, whom I saw in Dakar, in June 1990 assures us:

*"Négritude became a national discourse that decided which groups and which individuals in the world of the arts were incorporated into the principal trend and which were marginalized."*

Further on, after mentioning the deplorable desertions of artists from the Village des Artistes, the ruining of the Musée Dynamique, condemning the fact its archives have

become repositories distant from the city, she compares the École de Dakar and the AGIT-ART lab with the alleged manipulations of cultural politics after independence. Senghor is seen as the idealist, but after his loss, the artists are badly treated by Abdou Diouf's pragmatism. I would rather read what she says to avoid confusions:

*"Nevertheless, négritude was limited in many cases as an aesthetic, not only due to its consideration of ancestral african art forms but to the abstract characterization of the values it reckoned to be intrinsically african, like intuition, emotivity, rhythm and vital force. These values followed an order established by a specific and formalist agenda conceived for contemplating the metaphysical dimension attributed to them. Négritude also seemed to act as a litmus test, valuing the capacity of any artistic manifestation to satisfy the requisites of Senghor for a national culture. That's how Senghor in effect limited the aesthetic options of the École de Dakar to a formal and strictly ideological allotted area."*

She elaborates further:

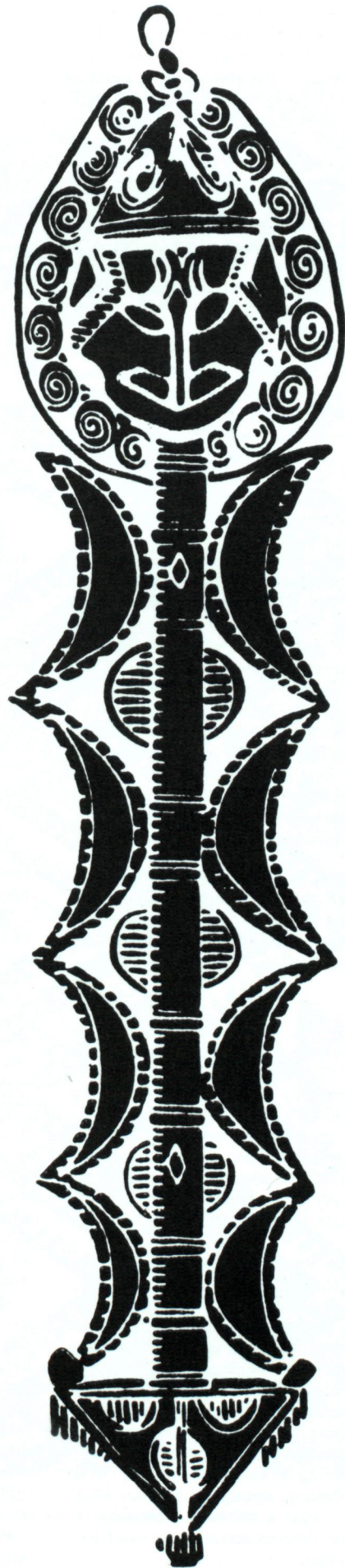
*"The departure of Senghor as president in 1980 revealed that the favourable position he had given artists was really fragile. The images and identities the artists had created to support national cultural politics were not interpreted as superfluous symbols that could no longer find support in the new spirit of economic and political pragmatism, and were ideologically at odds with the reality of life after Senghor. In fact, it seems that towards the 80's, the historical importance of the École de Dakar's work was exhausted."*

According to her, neither of our presidents has managed to solve the crisis of the artists, AGIT-ART does it better. *Between Flag and Mask*, a work by Issa Samb, is the evidence. The iconographic interpretation that this individual construes of the flag and the mask hanging from a tree and swaying in the wind reveal that:

*"...In a certain way these objects are a group of ideas that act as reference to contemporary art in Senegal... This grouping is a paradigm that suits Senegal's case admirably."*

Faced with such rigidity of spirit, I think that the least effort undertaken by these authors causes grave damage to Africa and to the whole world. Similar facts force us to recommend to the authorities that cooperate with institutions, patience and prudence. It's best to do things well than to do them without thinking of their possible effects, implications and repercussions. The quoted references are the product of a superficial mentality that delights more in quantity than in quality. For it, the number of exhibitions and their publicity are superior curricular values than investment in the formation of staff for the conservation and the continuity of african artistic and cultural heritage. Though there is a certain margin of disagree-

Grabado de los pilares de los templos Yorouba.



ment between both Americans, we can perceive the sarcasm and the absurdity of these debates that tour the world as if they were our true history in the absence of something better. Isn't it time we read the history of contemporary senegalese art from the pen of a compatriot? Can the lack of material means eventually blind our spirit? All the speculation and senseless experimentation that come from misinformation or from bad intention can be denied by our will, in my opinion, to combat ignorance and overcome this aggressive passion that forecasts destruction. All together we can replace it with creativity.

These catalogues are aimed at creating the idea that Africans tread on their own mine field. Like television, a model media that day by day replaces the traditional teller, these trap-exhibitions, disguised under the mask of impartiality, with an aura of idolatry, philanthropy and paternalism, are very good at taking in the less wary. There's no person alive who's written with so much originality and precision about african art as Léopold Sedar Senghor. This, has always been admitted by Issa Samba. His prose, and above all his poetry, his vision and sensibility have emancipated, the one inextricable from the other, forms and colours in preeminent clarity, a transparent opaqueness that only foolhardy antagonism ignores. As a political man, history sets him among those who defend and reinforce our culture with intuition and intelligence; with a lucidity inherent to the well-being of our mental and spiritual faculties. I think that these authors and their informers haven't read Senghor due to an intellectual blindness that confuses them.

The publicity of their marketing is nuanced in the words of Jean Pigozzi, collector and promotor, as he points out, of artists with foreign names and ignorant of the West's values, financier of the safari *Africa Today*, he says:

*"I hope Africa Today will bring you as much pleasure and delight as it has to me. Watch out! Collecting contemporary african art can turn into a passion and requires much time, but it's much cheaper than collecting Van Gogh and Cy Twombly! (Let's not forget the end). P.D. We sincerely hope that André Magnin isn't devoured by a lion. That would seriously set back the development of this passionate collection!..."*

As you may see, this strategy doesn't differ very much from Marketing, animal skins, ebony or ivory smuggling, or from brain washing. These agents of a new fashion that make eclecticism the exotic menu of the market, think they are Christopher Columbus. Afflicted by mental amnesia, the worshippers of "savage thought", provoking among themselves and others black holes in memory blanketed by a strange innocence, believe obsessively that seeing is living the illusion. It is difficult for them to distinguish between what is Africa, and what is the extra dimension of their voracity. This observation is valid for the whole world.

Their market has created and produced, starting with the art collection of the past, profitable curiosities to please the demands of eccentricity. This same situation threatens the art of the present. Artists and artisans everywhere have been the willing or the unwitting victims of the trap set by industrial or mechanized production. Their art means far less a group of ordered aesthetic values than ideological or monetary profitability. The stated example of Van Gogh is the example that reveals the power of the market over reason and art.

The combination of the commercial and the creative demands caution and moderation, but, especially, thought on the lamentable consequences of projects like the craft village for tourists and on the genuine cooperation that we all desire. This means achieving unity in our efforts within a harmony that is liberating and generates human energy.

At the present moment, in name of a corrupted and deviated concept we can observe the proliferation of a range of projects of cultural standardization that is everywhere presented as globalism, post-modernism, internationalism. The sub-products of this standardized culture, whose true name is alienation, are foisted on the group of dependent countries. Although effort is made to vary the menu in order to increase profit and control, we must remember that the scars left by totalitarianism and the confusions that shake capitalist societies, question and contest the actual situation. This impasse, whose exit is the secret of an awareness-process, remains blocked (in the sense of effective correlation between a problem and its most efficient and operative solution in terms of real experience), by the lack of liberating solutions on behalf of the dominant ideologies, because, ideology, in short, can't be the origin of art. To the contrary, blessed are those that avoid its triviality, the demagogy and the arbitrariness that tend to glorify provocation as a banner, paralyzing any attempt at originality.

However, including all obstacles and paradoxes, that are interferences to be overcome, nobody can deny the efforts made by the state. Thanks to its insistence in resolving these problems, it guarantees, in relation to its means, education. This biennial, this debate, are exemplary occasions that we would all like to see with greater frequency. The rest, pertains to us, it is our responsibility to look after it and to contribute, because we have to realize that the state has limitations and limits that a community's will and initiative can develop with interest in mutual collaboration, and sublimate them for the benefit of society. The artists are voluntaries of this community that offer the participation and the reception of their art's communion. Private enterprise has here an example to support and to define in all fairness.

What this contribution pretends is an invitation to revise thoughtfully the subject of

the reception and distribution of african art, far from setting out to be a conclusion or a deterministic definition, precisely this: the reactivation of research and the conservation of our cultures, of our history and of our art in a moment of change and world restructuring, which is for us more than an instrument of knowledge. A symbol of our identity, it is a source of wisdom and of faith in our own complexity, in our cultural wealth, that is, among other central priorities, a hard, but dynamic succession of crossfertilization, collisions and integration; but above all a succession of acts of faith.

It is also interesting to note that despite the lack of direct contact and frequent contact that we would wish with the work of artists that have preceded us and access to theoretical formulations of aesthetics, Africa's contemporary art, within its diversity and its unity reveals certain peculiar characteristics that mark its aesthetic and its spontaneity.

Our traditions, actions and reactions incorporated into the accumulated wisdom of mankind, are the first factors of this result. Without artistic sensibility, the intuition and emotive power required by these object-subjects that continue to represent their creators and perpetuate their presence among the living, wouldn't exist. Our tribute will be constant to the wise creators of this heritage that is gaining definition.

How we would like to have the opinion of those artists who have had considerable practice and experience when transmitting our aesthetic values! To be able to find it illustrated in books, newspapers, magazines, audiovisual media, naturally accessible to all homes. And what about the opinion of those other intellectuals, the whole of society?

We can be sure that our music, our dances, our literature and also our story-telling have a vigour that maintains the power of language, and its correspondent diffusion through the media in the senegalese home. Why do the fine arts lack this privileged publicity space? Can we disregard the manifestation of our present values?

André Magnin, collaborator of the Georges Pompidou Centre, says about his selection:

*"There are hundreds of creators living and working throughout Africa; it would be ridiculous, with fifteen artists, to give an idea of a whole continent's art, with such a complex history, a definitive or exhaustive idea. I don't know if they are the best artists. I don't know what the word best means when we apply it to an artist. This selection is the result of compromise and affinity; I have certainly trusted my Western memory, but I've tried to forget its mirror-image in a Europe far too blinded by sacred hallucination, that simultaneously dominates its narcissistically enclosed art."*

Let him discern the dissonance between the works and the functions he attributes to

them to avoid the utopia of forgetting his mirror. To forget means repression, and remembering too, and this should be noted by the new Africanists searching new Social Sciences. Let them consider what Paul Eluard tells us: "...artists give us new eyes, art critics new glasses."

Africa is more than a vision, its reality goes beyond the promised good vision of the binoculars that believes it is mirrored as a mirage, as an object or as another merchandise. Let's meditate this, without the onus of Cartesian objectivity or the Hegelian scheme where Africa didn't fit in. I believe, that for everybody's just benefit, a better reception at home and a better national distribution will make African art the symbol of recognized progress forged by all of society. It is this that would enable a better cooperation between artists and the world as the hindu sage Rabindranath Tagore wished:

*"...towards a future so different from the past as is the tree from its seed."*

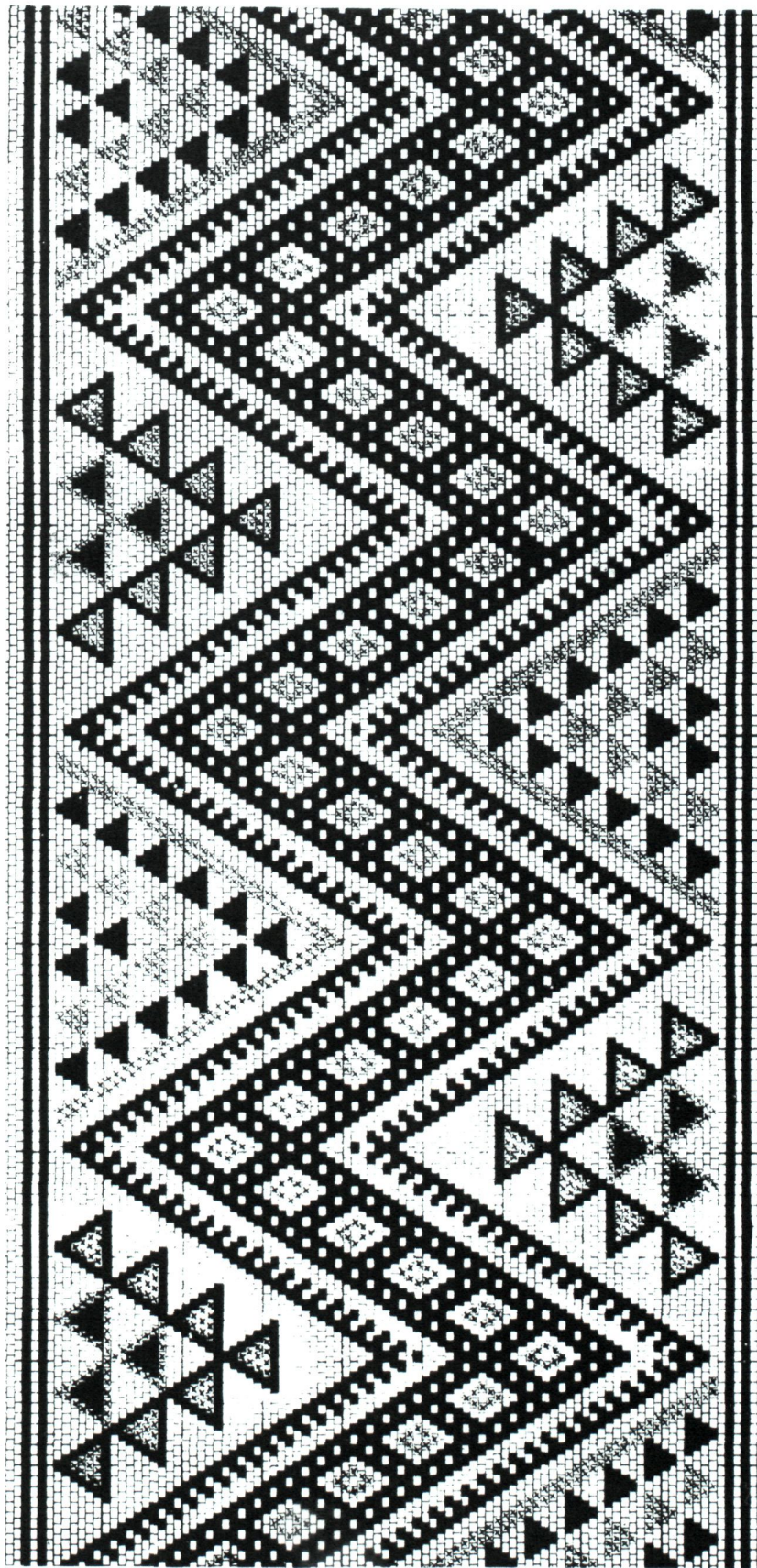
As a Mandinga that has travelled through the verdant Casamance, I can assure you that the succulence of ripe fruit comes from the fact that the tree has been planted in the most fertile soil and has received the best attention. Art, as the most fertile land of Africa, can't conceive artistic creation as sub-developed or peripheral. This truth, that thank God is firm, we must turn into our presence:

*"...To admire black art badly, is to run the risk of gathering no fruit."*

To stop at the superficial appearances of art suppresses the quality of the sincere dialogue we can build with its richness. Let's listen to Léopold Sedar Senghor's advice in his article, *Black African Aesthetics*. Its generosity, like new sap, surges again, isolating and displacing the parasites that invade the tree. Our art is only the expression of an intrinsically african spirituality. Imbued with its past, that the work appropriates, an emancipatory longing reactualizes it and purifies it anew, transforms it and turns it into an infinite reply similar to the one Amadou Hampaté Ba defended:

*"...To take Africa to its maximum expansion, by the path of gentleness, good behaviour, respect for our neighbour's ideas, none of which excludes firmness, constancy, perseverance in our own ideas and the unrelenting pursuit of their realization. Such is the vocation of twentieth century Africans."*

We can't turn this ancestral wealth and its mystery, into a passtime for the amateurs of exoticism. Its magic isn't importable. We want our heritage to be rid of formulas and clichés that make it mediocre, lead it to convenience and banality; to repetition and to terminal folklorism. How can a curator affirm that art in Africa has *nothing to do with a progressive history, made up of the succession of real problems that are solved, according to him, when one talks about western art because artists have believed in the dimen-*



*Kairouan flat-woven textile motif: Banners.*

sion opened up by Picasso and Duchamp? Our art dates from before prehistory and during its life it has never stumbled over false problems; it merely resumes that which fulfills us and gives us faith in life.

Our works have denied the impossible and given it form. Francine N'diaye has underlined it: "...the African patrimony is recuperated by a universal pictorial language that generates a powerfully personal expression". Also, Iba N'diaye states: "...the artists of New Africa will help their fellows to get out of the cultural ghetto where certain people would like to see them confined more or less consciously". The poet Joe Bousquet defends the same attitude:

"...the soul shines naturally with the generosity that it has been able to find. I'm impatient; Man is grotesque when he fears man."

For us, man is the principle of remedy. Art takes us nearer to him without creating distance simultaneously. It is thanks to virtualities that have survived that our feelings have found in artistic creation a natural model of expression. Far from setting out to explain, these works only communicate and present their own essence, the interpretation of destiny. At least, our's is never absent.

Youssou N'dour sang this in the melodies of "Set" and "Yaru", clear vision, limpidity, propriety, respect, courtesy and humility, essential values for any recuperation and any intelligent revision. Source and recapitulation of the true and the real, the works correspond to our need of expressing sensibility and our knowledge of foreign and national traditions. Therein lies the significance of our art. True to itself despite the smallest change and celebration. Perpetual abstraction, bridge or road between the absolute and the transient; about its rhythm, the Senegalese poet says:

"...The architecture of being, the inner dynamics that gives it shape, the pattern of waves it emits for the attention of others, the pure expression of strength, the vibrant collision, that through our senses, touches the very fibre of being."

This constellation, a prism through which the spirit takes shape, is a path along which the eternal enters human reality in order to have effect, transformed in new appearances. Incarnate spirituality, artistic african creation also makes man:

"...the crossroads of symbolic correspondences, that go from the world to man, and vice versa."

In sympathy with the Senegalese philosopher Alassane N'Dew, the poet from Martinique, Aimé Césaire sings, calming us:

*Eia for the royal Kailcedrat*  
*Eia for those who've never invented anything*  
*For those who haven't explored*  
*For those who haven't conquered*  
*But abandon themselves, inspired, to the essence of all things*

*Careless of domination, though they follow the rules of the world.*

*Truly, older sons of the world*  
*Sensitive to all the world's stirring*  
*Fraternal wind of all the world's stirring*  
*Pure bed of all the world's waters*  
*Spark of the world's sacred fire*  
*Flesh of the flesh of the world pulsating with it.*

Amadou Hampaté Ba similarly takes part in the celebration of island and continent:

"...Synthesis of the universe and crossroads of vital energies, man is therefore called upon to be a point of balance, where, through him, all of the different dimensions he represents may flow. Then he will deserve the name of Mea-Kumanyon, the interlocutor of Maa-Ngala (the supreme being), and defender of creation's harmony."

To quench one's thirst in this wisdom that identifies the source of its existence in the roots of being and that, also, has known to exalt in its art and thought, the imagination becomes the secret law of the real, which is to incorporate it more intimately and actively into our creativity. It is to value the underlying unity and the superior coherence that articulates it. The clear sighted will and the enthusiasm to explore these territories, sometimes mysteriously mutilated by History, requires from us, preparation, purification and unification without confusing the passage between levels of this vast symbolic network. Only the wise recovery of our languages that pits known sensations against learned formulas can open the way to a reality that we can experience and express forcefully, with love and respect when explored.

It is clear for us that the artist instructs us how to look not only through his works, but through the best part of his personality, with the honesty and generosity that all truth contains, and with love; at least, that of the artist. His work purifies of all influence what is intrinsically his. He therefore expresses in the most original way which is most singular and universal. Longing to surpass himself continually to satisfy this essential need, to create sincerely, excuses him from accumulating useless knowledge through work and purification. He develops transgressing the application of assimilated techniques, purging them of artificiality, of arbitrariness and of the parasites that disturb the legitimate clarities of the spirit. It is there, better than in any other part, that conscience, that organizing will, when it illumines passions reveals unity within multiplicity, the simple within the complex, order in disorder, in one word, animates "the intelligibility of the living".

Our much missed Gera M'bengue, virtuoso of the *suweer*, said:

"I like, especially, talking with draughtsmen, with those who love drawing. I can't explain it to anybody who doesn't feel love. A draughtsman is always a student, he searches, and he is also a man of good heart. The pen must be left on its own, shapes will come, and that is all."

This advice, immediately takes us to the boundary where the realm of values, where beauty and generosity of the work meet, for those that can master the rebellion of sight, like the Dogon lock that scares indiscreet onlookers away. He who is able to unite the soul with the heart of matter, as Gaston Bachelard says, defending, "a really alive material imagination", close to the one devoid of sophistication and complex that Michel Leiris suggested in relation with black african art and artists, an imagination that is able to possess the inner essence of universal matter, the great natural substances of Nature: water, night, sun light, substances that presuppose a "refined taste", and require no additives.

This locus that we explore has the same generosity that it proposes as an answer to our wish for adorning it emotionally. That is how the controlling and moderating task of museography is defined, that tries to show us an exhibition in a more intelligent way. However, as you well know, the materialism of this society, though it revolutionizes our knowledge beyond any doubt, fails in the territory of art. It will be futile to travel through the world seeking art, for he who doesn't carry beauty within will never find it. For this reason, art has always been a mark of beauty and goodness. Here *Teranga* is manifested. I can't help quoting Baudelaire, who wrote in August 1851, in *Au fur et à mesure que l'homme avance dans la vie*:

"...Beauty shall only be the promise of happiness (Stendhal, I believe, said this). Beauty will be the form that guarantees maximum goodness, faith fidelity to oath, loyalty in the execution of a contract, finesse in the intelligence of relationships. Ugliness will be cruelty, avarice, stupidity and dishonesty. Most young people ignore these things and assume them as their own risk. Among us, some have already learned it, but it is something we learn only by ourselves. What efficient means could I use to persuade a young rake that the irresistible affection I feel for old ladies, these people who have suffered for their lovers, their husbands, their children and also for their own errors, carries no sexual desire? If the idea of universal love and virtue accompany us during all our pleasures, these would become torment and remorse."

Here is something that would do good to Jacques Soullou and Susan Vogel that dare to wish that African artists connect with the main stream and the perennially open horizon that defines Western actuality, tentidiously exemplified, where the new world order of the North Americans won't survive unless multiculturalism rectifies their vision. They dare to cast judgement, forgetting the iconoclast and the barbarity, the despotism and tyranny perpetrated in all of the conquered territories. Jacques Soullou comes out with the following:

"...Wanting to prove at any price that creativity is in good health, many exhibitions of so-called african art err on account of their quantitative optimism and lack discerning capacity. Furthermore, this can be explained due



to the absence of a market, of exhibition structures, in short, to everything that acts as a stimulant and catalyst for talents.”

This is the bait tendered to the ill-informed, be they artists or authorities with positive or negative inclinations. To enjoy African art, we have to be acquainted with the widest implication of the term, as is indicated by our relationship with ancestors. Commercial greed and historicism aren't enough to love and communicate its artistic merits. Quite the opposite, this is only good for the missionaries of art, reward seekers, safari hunters and the clientèle who are the object of this pernicious promotion of the image that the merchants deem profitable for their country's or their global planet's hungry pockets. Let them not forget what Jean-Paul Sartre said in *Orphée Noir*: “...Seen from Senegal, globalism appears principally a beautiful dream.”

The vanity of the superior pretensions always subagent in the monologues which certain western galleries and their associates have with artists from other cultures finds its maximum expression in the neutralization or the reduction of the other, while keeping the appropriate distances. In the preface to the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, inaugurated in the celebrations of the Bicentenary of the French Revolution, the head curator, Jean Hubert Martin, argues in order to prove that we are dealing with power relations and not with natural powers in this encounter fabricated round the word magic, that:

“...We must distrust our schematic labels that carry the risk of concealing the complexity of certain local situations. The criteria used to select the artists are akin to those that would determine a Western selection, applied, however, with a considerable number of variations.”

You can imagine the charlatan's market; there you can buy liberty, fraternity and equality. What perturbs us about these real facts, is the growing number of people who having seen this kind of exhibition, come to check the veracity of the information received. What is disconcerting and ambiguous, is that in all the catalogues I have mentioned, insults and acknowledgements are found pell-mell, addressed to our artists and authorities, thanking them for their kind participation “in the success” of the event. To rub salt into the wounds, the authors of these irreverent remarks appear in catalogues of modern Senegalese art where the quality of edition and printing are clearly deficient. Spellings aren't checked, neither factual errors. These documents reflect the consideration we give to our aesthetics and to its contents, to our foremost banner in matters of cultural cooperation. Meanwhile, in other parts, television programmes and articles on the subject continue. Though in the world we find sensitive people who can observe art, without having to read the accompanying text, it isn't the majority. To the contrary, the most part refer to the media and to guides for blinkered tourists following sensationalism. Is the responsibility for this situation due to an incompetent system?



Leon Paul Diatta (Senegal).

Ibrahima Baba Kaké expressed it well:

“...A country without a leader, unprotected, can only conserve fragments of a culture that has become inorganic and is given over to the formality of these officials, who have substituted the traditional chiefs chosen in the past for their beliefs and their devotion to the protection of a community of interests inherent to social “well-being”, whether western or “advanced locals”, produces the same results: the denial of a traditional culture that is despised.”

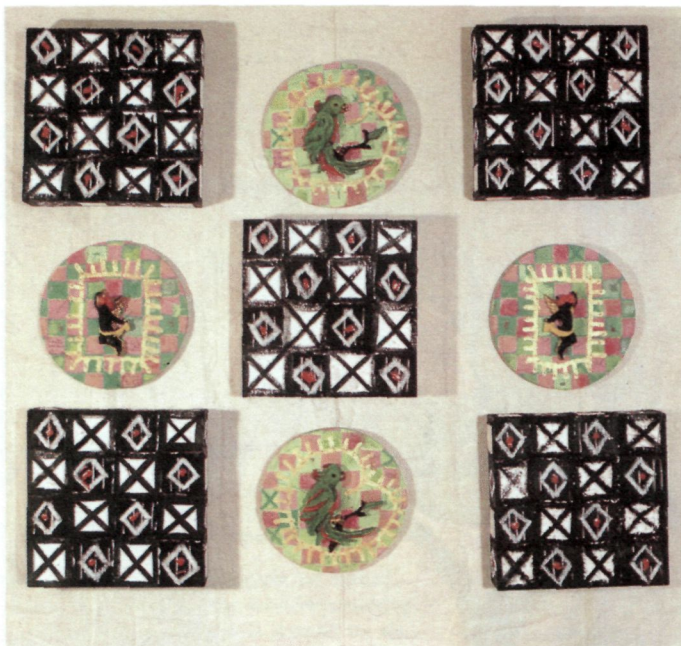
As an example, we have the reply of Frans Haks, director of the Groningen Museum to Giaconto di Pietrantonio, collaborator of *Flash Art*:

“G.D.P.: Referring to what we were saying about the colonizing absorbent West, that feels the need to appropriate the East or Africa in order to recharge its energies, do you think this crisis could be solved through loans or by ravaging other countries?”

F.H.: Yes. For instance, when the Japanese exhibition took place, we had another exhibition of contemporary Russian art at the same time, which seems a great shame to me. I think we must be patient until results come up. I mean, that it took Africa twenty years of democracy and postcolonialism before we had any results.”

Presentday cosmopolitanism denies the egalitarian right of difference, and internationalism only exists to the extent that each culture conserves its possibilities, its vitality and energy. The economic and cultural globalization demands from the Senegalese the redoubled responsibility of not letting their country become the object of powers alien to their interests. Which model of modernization are we heading for? It is vital to think about this, for given the loss of the native values of sensibility, the mimesis of the foreign becomes a generalized practise in all teaching institutions. Thus, loss of identity and the channels of expression can't be modernity, or modernization; quite the opposite, it's a regression that pivots on itself.

Western utopias sink, yet the damned of the earth remain everywhere, become potential refuse consumers, of the most toxic kind, victims of xenophobia and inequality before the law and difference. The violation of the cultural integrity of the others continue, transforms their patrimony into monuments of signs, strong currencies, profane objects by virtue of the miracle of the new decodification laid down by the expert and readjusting eye of certain foreign merchants and some Africans oriented in business.



Barbara Prezeau (Haiti).  
*Le polyptique dubon sauvage. 1992.*

Their perfect projects decontextualize, through *salon* painting, the sacred atmosphere of museums to idolatry and desecrate the visions and ideas contained there. Yet they can't help us noticing that the sermons and well designed cults conceived as mechanical practices of conversion cold-bloodedly imposed on us as symbols of cultural cooperation, are projections of the unconscious that turn the Other into a big alibi. In the catalogue of *Magiciens de la Terre*, Pierre Gaudibert tells us, with great difficulty, I imagine:

"...The symbolic violence of the West's artistic power of legalization, with a naturally universal pretension, is applied with terror to all artists of these "other" countries. They are judged immediately and almost automatically as followers and exponents, as poor imitators of Western artists, known and considered as desirable visual objects apt for domestic collection but unworthy of being in real or imaginary museums. A dilemma that traps them diabolically, beyond real action and proposition, with the exception of very rare examples of brilliant synthesis or extreme individual singularities. What's more, it's true that to find the balanced attitude between consideration and contempt when judging artists of cultures so different to ours is difficult. The idea of decentralization is necessary without giving up any criteria of creative quality. A close watch benevolently practised seems preferable, in spite of its subjectivity and arbitrariness, to the official selections that we have been able to appreciate in certain biennials."

Universality isn't the exclusive property of any civilization since we can only identify it in the relationship between all civilizations. True dialogue presupposes the recognition of the Other, both in terms of identity and au-

thority, and without this, any attempt at universalizing reconciliation is futile. Such concepts appear in *La Pensée Africaine* by Alasane N'daw. I'd like to remind these critics that they take a look at their own history before opening their mouths. Let them reread the history of the Impressionists, and see how the press kept on treating them as mentally insane, affected by optical disfunctions that would be a challenge for specialized ophthalmologists: Joseph Emile Müller gives many examples of the persecution of these artists by the press that today are so magnificently priced:

"In 1877 Albert Wolff, the Figaro columnist, wrote: «...it's a case of madness», and another newspaper, on the same theme, «it's a compromise with the contemptible and the disgusting»..."

Why did the Salon des Indépendants open? What was the principle of selection of the official Salon that forced the rebels to defend their freedom in heterodoxy? Today those that exhibited regularly in the official Salon aren't even spoken about. Let them reread the "damned poets", especially Baudelaire, in his critique of the salons, his posthumous work, *L'Art Romantique*, criticising the reticence of the French to Wagner's music and American society's to Edgar Allan Poe. Let them reread Daniel Henry Kahnweiler's *Aesthetic Curiosities* and his *Aesthetic Confessions*. Or listen to Picasso telling Hélène Parmelin that when he painted he was surrounded by a brotherhood of artists like Paul Eluard's *Frères Voyants*, and that they were aware of having spoiled the contemporaneity inaugurated by Picasso and Duchamp. Let them reflect on the rebellions of Miró, Masson, Max Ernst, Victor Brauner and so many others against the admirable poet André Breton. It's obvious they've learnt nothing from Malraux or Kandinsky, or from Barthes' *Cri-*

*ticism of Truth*. The phenomenon isn't new. It's a question of comparing the points of view adopted in the books by Elie Faure, Kenneth Clark, Klaus Honnef and Edward Lucie Smith; Gaudibert states:

"The nostalgia of the South, isn't only that of the lost paradise, of nature refound and recomposed unity, but a search for spirituality and energies whose absence generates suffering for an increasing number of the North's citizens. Furthermore, perhaps the journey through the art of the Other could stimulate the searchers. Or, if not, do western artists only hope to rejuvenate, revitalize and refresh themselves? To have a blood transfusion? To effect a return to the origins, the beginnings, the sources, to the Mother, to uterine life?, Perhaps."

Do they really want to go on a regressive trip, after all that was done to imitate the cubist experience with oriental art? Let's not be astonished, because in all attempts at schism, what is contemptible, though universal, stands in the limelight alongside the marvels of art and aesthetics. From Manzoni to John Miller, including Arthur Craven, who in 1910, wrote, "I'm going to eat my shit", to Jeff Koons who exhibits photo-murals of his sexual or pornographic activities with his wife, fecal expression has become a commonplace of contemporary Western art. The mosaic on the front cover of *FLASH ART* (International Ed), which no doubt you have seen, is called *Panoramic View*. Bits of shit making up a pattern reproduced in ceramic. The work is fit to decorate a dining room, a gallery, a museum or a palace. Can this be the horizon Soullou intends for us? The work was shown in the selection by Jan Hoet, director of the Ghent Museum and general curator of the IX *Dokumenta* at Kassel.

Eventually Jan Hoet decided that Africans could take part in Kassel. That's why we were able to see the sculpture of the Nouba wrestlers by our compatriot Ousmane Sow. The conclusion of the article that considers this exhibition and its curator, *Dokumenta IX, more is a mess*, published in *Art News* states:

"...Considering what may result from Hoet's ambitions concerning ecstasy, passion needs order to be comprehensible and balanced. Every art-loving person likes to think he is touched by divine power. The pity is that Hoet has been burnt out by it."

I prefer the audacity, the boldness and the radicality of Picasso and Duchamp. This kind of deconstruction that contradicts the history of the European museum celebrates the triumph of its victory over the rigidity of a past that it rejected for its corruption. It's a local and not a world scale phenomenon. We recall, don't we, that the birth of the museum, after the Muses, comes from the accumulated loot of robbery sanctioned by the Church and the Nobility as example of their civilizing task. In the so-called third world, museums have been adopted, and they must be adapted to legitimate the rights of independence and cultural heritage.

Mexico 1992.