Is there such a Thing as “African Art”?

Philippe Dagen

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1117>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1117

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2005

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Philippe Dagen, « Is there such a Thing as “African Art”? », *Critique d'art* [Online], 26 | Automne 2005, Online since 03 February 2012, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1117> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1117

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Is there such a Thing as “African Art”?

Philippe Dagen

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Amselle, Jean-Loup. *L'Art de la friche : essai sur l'art contemporain africain*, Paris : Flammarion, 2005

L'Art africain contemporain, Paris : Scala, 2005, (Tableaux choisis)

Africa Remix : l'art contemporain d'un continent, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2005

Les Afriques : 36 artistes contemporains, Paris : Autrement, 2004

- 1 Are we witnessing an attack of fleeting guilty conscience, or a harbinger of readjustment? African art, of the living variety, is currently attracting an attention in the West which has hitherto been refused it. The surest clue is the organization in Düsseldorf and London, then in Paris, at the Pompidou Centre, of the exhibition *Africa Remix*, which is scheduled to wind up its travelling show in Tokyo, and the publication of a weighty catalogue. In its French version, this latter differs from the German and British editions. Not only have the artists' biographical notices been considerably filled out, but a most significant contribution by Thomas Boutroux and Cédric Vincent has also been added to the introductory texts and essays. In 130 entries and articles, their “Africa Remix Sampler” presents a cornucopia of diverse information, all arranged in alphabetical order. Magazines and reviews, exhibitions and shows, and venues, as well as political movements and leaders, research centres, and congresses and biennials are all dealt with in notices that are clarion clear and accurate. This dictionary-like presentation certainly does make consulting the book easier, but it also foists a rather bitty reading on its users. Is this a shortcoming? I am not sure. But in this format the authors run no risk of toppling into the generalizations and platitudes—be they well-intentioned or otherwise—that have long dogged reflections on Africa.

- 2 It suffices to see the extent to which the essays at the beginning of the catalogue refrain from expressing too much certainty: "We shall go on groping in the dark. We shall still be trying to understand the incomprehensible, and grasp the elusive", writes Simon Njami, overall curator of *Africa Remix*. In Jean-Hubert Martin's introduction to an historical outline of the way present-day African art has been received since the end of the colonial period, he reminds readers that the exhibition is "the reflection of a state of our knowledge, in the awareness that there are many places which Simon Njami has not had time to visit". David Elliott powerfully echoes this observation: "Africa has long been the grave of the exhibition curator. Immense, "dangerous", impossible to encompass, this vast continent is impervious to any attempt to be summarized, and many an exhibition of contemporary African art has merely strengthened the usual stereotypes-backwardness, exoticism, dislocation-that their curators and organizers have striven so hard to fight against." The statement is uncompromising, and final.
- 3 Curator's grave, then, and possibly also the historian's? and the critic's? The thematic arrangement of the artists which prevails in both catalogue and exhibition actually only makes swift allusion to this. Three "subjects" have been singled out, "Identity and history", "Body and mind", and "City and land". To which is added a final section, "Fashion, design and music", whose title suffices to suggest that it does not hail from the same classificatory principle. Yet it is hard to see why a piece of music or a fashion should not raise the issue of identity, city, and body. But this would be to presuppose that we have done with the distinctions between disciplines and media, done, too, with bringing sounds and colours together, for example, and *Africa Remix* fails to show that it is capable of as much. If the exhibition demonstrates that today's African artists are acquainted with the current international state of affairs in the arts-but are we in any doubt about this?-, and if many of these artists work more frequently in Europe and the United States than in their countries of origin-but did we not know this already?-it cannot go beyond an anthological listing, and a collection of masterpieces and names. The diversity of histories, national and personal alike, the diversity of cultural and political references, and the diversity, lastly, of the various activities of the artists clearly render impossible the task consisting in regarding African art as such, as an ensemble apt for analysis, and suitable matter to be theorized over. Here again, whom might this come as a surprise to? Who would risk defining a swathe of European art extending from Dublin to Kiev, or American art extending from Chile to Canada? The very idea is absurd and it is obviously the consequence of thinking habits focused on the West to postulate that, seen from afar-seen from France, for example-there is an African art, when there are just artists and works, in histories and geographies.
- 4 *L'Art africain contemporain* by Christophe Domino and André Magnin, and Olivier Sultan's *Les Afriques* thus stick to listings: for one, 12 artists, for the other, 36, this larger number being due to the presence of quite a few Westerners, from Jean-Michel Basquiat to Orlan and Robert Combas. Today's best-known Africans feature in both anthologies: Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Bodys Isek Kingelez, Chéri Samba, and Seydou Keita. A comparison between the two books comes down in favour of the first, less for its overly laconic introductory pages than for the remarkably detailed introductions to the artists, rich in comparative factors and references. The issue ever lurking just beneath the surface to do with relations between "primary" (French: *premier*) African art-to use the debatable terminology of the Musée du Quai Branly-and current African art, is thus relevantly raised and dealt with by means of persuasive comparisons and genealogies.

- 5 This issue also features, among many other things, in *L'Art de la friche*, by Jean-Loup Amselle. Subtitled *Essai sur l'art africain contemporain*, the book is pamphlet-like, a present-day chronicle involving a movement of mood. In this book, peremptory verdicts come hot on the heels of thunderous maxims, and if it is very swiftly understood that the author is railing against the comforting truisms, the reassurances of thought and the dubious innuendos which have sullied the eye cast on artists, it is less easy to make out what he wishes to deduce from this radical critique. It is undeniable that any eye cast on another culture will be determined by the beholder's presuppositions: this is a prime principle of any history of arts and tastes. Is Africa "a warren with fantasies"? Obviously. But no more nor less than so-called "classical" Antiquity, or the "Christian" Middle Ages. It is also obvious that it is important to name these "fantasies" and break them down in order to shed them. In this case, however, it would be a good thing if analysis went beyond imprecations and oversimplifications.