*Travel & See Better. African-American Art, Black Art
and the Diaspora*

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REFERENCES

Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*, Durham : Duke University Press, 2016

I Got Rhythm : Kunst und Jazz seit 1920, Munich : Prestel, 2015. Sous la dir. de Sven Beckstette, Ulrike Groos, Markus Müller

GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2016

Sophie Orlando, *British Black art : l'histoire de l'art occidental en débat*, Paris : Dis Voir, 2016

- 1 The National Museum of African American History and Culture was inaugurated on 25 September 2016, on Washington D.C.'s National Mall. Built on the vestiges of an old slave market, it is the latest museum in the United States to be devoted to a community, completing the national edifice, together with the National Museum of the American Indian (2004) and the National Museum of African Art (1979). These institutions are the symbols of a diverse nation, built on the contributions and the mix of populations, but they also reveal the State's willingness to represent and make visible the history of a people, in order to bring its different constituents together. "African-American history is not somehow separate from our larger American story, it's not the underside of the American story, it is central to the American story" stated President Barack Obama at the opening ceremony. "The story told here doesn't just belong to Black Americans; it belongs to all Americans – for the African-American experience has been shaped just as much by Europeans and Asians and Native Americans and Latinos." Nowadays, this dual identity (ethnic and national) seems obvious, but the fight to obtain it was difficult. From

slavery to segregation, for a long time African-Americans were not included in the national narratives, and artists were no exception. However, when one compares the history of institutional recognition to the contemporary art scene, one stumbles upon a hiatus: on the one hand celebration, growing visibility, validation; on the other a certain form of weariness on the part of the artists regarding what Kobena Mercer calls “the burden of representation,”¹ and the will to belong to globalised art, where identities would no longer be distinct and determining categories, but the different modes of a fluctuating, shifting creativity. According to Kobena Mercer, the very fact of wanting to evoke questions of identity and representation seems out of date. “One of the distinctive features of the contemporary international art world is that although cultural difference is now more visible than ever before, the unspoken rule is that you would look a bit dumb if you made a big issue out of it.”² The tension between desiring to be recognized and to belong to the mainstream is nothing new. It is not enough to accuse the backwardness of institutions, because this duality is part of the very evolution of art history, and it did not start with globalization. Several recent publications explore this history and shed light on the processes at work in the international developments of contemporary art.

- 2 *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* brings together eighteen articles by the art historian Kobena Mercer published between 1992 and 2002. This collection reveals the progression of the author’s thought, analyses and questionings regarding the rise of the art of the “Diaspora” that he himself contributed to make visible and understandable. “The writing in *Travel & See* is animated by my dissatisfaction with the biographical and sociological reductionisms that pervade the literature on black visual arts, which ultimately leave intact opposing tendencies that write out race and ethnicity in the name of an outmoded formalist universalism.”³
- 3 By bestowing greater attention on the study of artworks as well as their circulation and the different meanings that the artists draw upon, Kobena Mercer identifies what is at stake and how the artists challenge the norms and conventions that govern the art world. He clearly stands apart from more conventional tales of recognition, which he regards as mere celebrations of the crossing over from shadow to light that avoid the real esthetic, political and critical issues posited by the artists. “Far from being a matter of those who were once marginal asking for inclusion so as to make good past omissions of race and ethnicity in art history’s narrative of civilizational value, the questions erupting from the epistemological break of the 1980s call for a rethinking of the entire field in which the study of visual art upholds the humanistic vocation of critical self-knowledge.”⁴ Shaking the binary foundations of modernism, that opposed the “modern” and the “primitive”, the original and the copy, authenticity and imitation, has revealed the connections and exchanges that have always existed within art history. According to Kobena Mercer, the art of the Diaspora imposed a reflexion about circulation and transfer, giving rise to notions of hybridity, multiplicity and transculturalness. This theory, made of in-betweenness, interstices and multiplicity compels us to a decentring whose ambition, though it is far from established in effect, is nonetheless attention worthy.
- 4 In France, studies on the subject are all too rare, and the publication of Sophie Orlando’s book is quite timely. *British Black Art : l’histoire de l’art occidental en débat* questions the relationship between the artistic and militant practices of self-defined Black artists in Great Britain in the 1980s, including, but not limited to, their ethnical and sociological identities.

- 5 “‘Black’ does not refer to an ethnicity, or a color,” writes Orlando, “but to a space of political statement that is shared by migrants and British citizens of migratory descent.”⁵ Whereas the first generation of artists born in the colonies in the 1920s and 1930s fully embraced European modernism, the second generation, to which belongs British Black Art develops a more radical and politicized approach. But breaking free from their predecessors was not an easy process. Supported by a rich bibliography, Orlando gives a voice to the different constituents of the movement, and even emphasizes their occasional differences of opinion, for example when primitivism is discussed.⁶ Should the artists prolong the efforts towards integrating the modernist framework laid out by their predecessors, or should they join in the political demands of the minorities? Was it still possible for these artists born in 1950s Great Britain and suffering from discriminations and institutional rejection to conform? Or should they contest? The artist, art critic and founder of the journal *Third Text*, Rasheed Araeen, expressed serious reservations as to the production of an ethnicised Black category of art, which would, according to him, amount to neo-primitivism, as the much criticized exhibition *Primitivism* (1984) was being held at MoMA, and Jean-Hubert Martin was organizing *Magiciens de la terre* in Paris (1984). Identity was becoming a crucial issue, a way of taking position, but it was also a way of being stigmatized in return. From invisible, Black people were becoming, in the words of Kobena Mercer “hyper-visible”, in a period where contemporary art was converging with mass consumer society, from the middle of the 1990s. In the United States, African-American artistic production had followed much the same pattern, with a few years’ difference. In fact, the Americans served as a model for British artists to contest and question the authority of the “White” gaze.
- 6 When it was published in 2004, Elvan Zabunyan’s reference book *Black is a Color* was one of the only works in France to tackle the issues that the Black American community introduced in its tense relationship with the mainstream. Daniel Soutif’s exhibition at the Quai Branly Museum, *The Color Line: les artistes africains-américains et la ségrégation* (until 15 January 2017), develops this history, by drawing on a rich choice of works and documents that emphasize the different trends and questions that were raised by the African-American community from the 1920s onwards. The exhibition neither victimizes nor condemns, but strongly and subtly shows the diverse aesthetics, view points, historical events and personal experiences of a whole population struggling with itself, as well as those of the specific African-American community. It is in the wake of *Siècle du Jazz* (2009) from the same curator, and echoes *I Got Rhythm: Art and Jazz since 1920* (2015) that was held at the Kunstmuseum in Stuttgart. Compared to the former, that aimed at highlighting aesthetic, sensorial and erudite aspects of jazz in relation to visual art, *I Got Rhythm* developed a more critical analysis of the political issues that were given rise to by the encounter of jazz and visual art, giving particular attention to the question of representation. The specific analysis of the German artists’ ambiguous relationship to jazz provides a real contribution to the subject. One can only regret that the study of the period following the 1960s was so little developed.
- 7 The starting point of GerShun Avilez’s book, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, is precisely the 1960s in the United States, and he questions the nature of the ties between the Black nationalist movement and the African-American arts (literature, film, contemporary art). “For some thinkers,” writes the author, “Black nationalism has helped to provide the language of radicalism and social change; for others, it is often characterized by strains of sexism and homophobia that weaken its progressive potential.

Therefore, my move to craft a critical framework through QOCC [Queer of Color Critique]⁷ and nationalist thought might be a surprising one.”⁸ And the reader will indeed feel surprised throughout the book, by the connections and conclusions GerShun Avilez establishes. For instance, though Adrian Piper’s series “The Mythic Being” (1971-1973) did indeed fall under the category of radicalism at the time it was created, this does not necessarily entail it partook of nationalism. The reader will find it difficult to follow the author when he connects Adrian Piper’s process to a political movement that most probably did not share her sense of humor, or her inquisitive exploration of issues of gender, power and identity. Theory often seems to prevail over the actual analysis of the artworks in question, and it is as though the author wanted to rehabilitate Black nationalism on a contemporary art scene that often seems void of the critical strength that pervaded it in the 1960s.

- 8 Kobena Mercer, who criticizes the post-black category that was coined to describe the attitude of artists like Kara Walker or Chris Ofili who participated in the post-essentialist turn, also feels that dissident voices have dissolved in spectacular capitalist production. According to him, the concept of “post-black” overlooks the subversive charge of these artists’ works, while only retaining their ethnical dimension. However, a question arises from the current situation of contemporary art: if artists no longer identify with ethnic or racial categories, is the field of study that was developed around these subjects invalidated? Do our times sound the death knell for the paradigm of the Diaspora? Stuart Hall (as quoted by Kobena Mercer), answering the marxist vision of a present marked by the victory of the society of spectacle (the “Black” element is one of its components), reminds us of the temporary nature of all historical moments. “Raising the stakes by providing an interpretive model addressing every period in modernity, the dialogical framework shows us what is new to our present is primarily our changed disposition toward the past.”⁹ In these times of cynicism, confusion and rejection, Kobena Mercer’s optimistic spirit encourages the reader to dare to travel in space and time in order to see better.

NOTES

1. Mercer, Kobena. “Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness”, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 195
2. *Ibid.*, p. 192
3. Mercer, Kobena. “Introduction”, *Op. cit.*, p. 2
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3
5. Orlando, Sophie. *British Black Art : l’histoire de l’art occidental en débat*, Paris: Dis Voir, 2016, p. 9
6. See Sophie Orlando’s analysis (p.47) of the First National Black Art Convention (1982). On this occasion, the exhibiting female artists supported Claudette Johnson’s piece questioning the work of Pablo Picasso, which was challenged by many exhibiting male artists.
7. See: Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

8. Avilez, GerShun. "Conclusion: Queering Representation", *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016, p. 167-168
9. Mercer, Kobena. "Introduction", *Op. cit.*, p. 29