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The Landscape of African Art: Transformations at the Venice Biennale

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“Although I try and put things into perspective, I believe that the reason I have become so spiritually foreign to my native country, while remaining preoccupied by it – while it remains a preoccupation –, is for a great part its refusal to acknowledge the existence of this skull.”¹

- 1 The Venice Biennale, to a greater extent than any other international event, offers a summary of the current global art scene, which could opportunely be re-questioned regarding the visibility of contemporary African art. Throughout the 1990s, the scant participation of African artists in the ritual art gathering was interpreted as the sign of the Western scene's lack of open-mindedness. At the beginning of the 2000s, however, African artists gradually became more established and the prizes some of them were awarded contributed to pacifying the situation.² However, the specialised press has continuously questioned African representation, particularly because of the very low number of permanent national pavilions, limited to Egypt and South Africa.
- 2 On March 15th, 2019, the death of Okwui Enwezor³, the artistic director of the 2015 Venice Biennale, was an indicator of the development of art created by artists from Africa. The same was true of Bisi Silva, a Nigerian curator who also died this year. Acknowledging their role, along with the success of the first Ghanaian pavilion in 2019, is an incentive to revisit the history of the fluctuating presence of African artists and attempt to list the reasons of this phenomenon, in order to bring to light what it hides or reveals.
- 3 Sean O'Toole argues Africa was present at the Biennale starting in the 1920s⁴, but always in very moderate proportions. However, during this period, the continent's decolonisation process had not yet begun. The construction of the Egyptian pavilion in the *Giardini* in 1952 – the year of the fall of King Farouk – was a turning point, making Egypt the only African country to own a permanent structure among the 29 national pavilions. In the 1960s and 70s, the issue of independence was the main preoccupation of African countries. This was also an elaboration period for artistic practices

throughout the continent. *The Suns of Independence*⁵ did not blind artists on the need for self-defining and questioning their Africanness, which had been severely shaken up by the colonial period. Therefore, it was unsurprising that African artists should have been practically non-existent in great international events until the end of the 1980s. It was not until 1989 and the watershed exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*⁶ that the international scene opened up to African artists.

- 4 In the 1990s, the first exhibitions entirely devoted to contemporary African art were held, in line with the aim of integrating African art to the global art market. At the same time, critics and theoreticians were attempting to define the concept of “African contemporary art”⁷. This was also the time when the question of the lack of African artists at the Venice Biennale started recurring. The event’s reputation and its influence on the market mean it is indispensable for all the members of the art scene. Various methods were experimented with in order to compensate for the underrepresentation of African artists. In 1999, the creation of the *African Art in Venice Forum* led to the implementation of exhibitions entirely devoted to contemporary African art. The 2001 exhibition, *Authentic / Ex-Centric: Africa In and Out of Africa*, curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe (49th Venice Biennale) and *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* curated by Gilane Tawadros for the 50th issue in 2003, are both particularly noteworthy. In the same perspective, the director of the 2007 Biennale, Robert Storr, suggested the creation of an African pavilion. The proposal sparked outrage, which underscored how absurd it was to want to represent a whole continent with a single pavilion, while other countries each had national pavilions. The Angolan art collector Sindika Dokolo, however, validated the project and funded the exhibition *Check List Luanda Pop* curated by Simon Njami and Fernando Alvim. The exhibition actually displayed his personal collection, which could do nothing but fuel more controversy, as Christine Eyene subtly noted.⁸ The year 2015, when a Nigerian curator, Okwui Enwezor, was nominated as artistic director of the Biennale, was a turning point in this history. Under his management, the number of African artists invited to take part in the main exhibition, *All the World’s Futures*, was higher than usual, sparking enthusiasm among the actors of the African art scene.⁹ But it was all in vain: after the sensation created by the 56th Biennale, the enthusiasm deflated. *Viva Arte Viva*, in 2017, did not live up to the expectations Okwui Enwezor had created, as suggested by Liese Van der Watt in the article she published that year: “With the exception of the 2015 Venice Biennale curated by Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor, who included a record number of African artists in his themed exhibition, Africa’s presence at the Venice Biennale has mostly been a tale of absence and underrepresentation [...]”¹⁰ Under the direction of Christine Macel, it only included nine countries out of the fifty-four the continent boasts. The reason for the fluctuation in the representation of African countries at the Biennale is connected to the fact most states do not invest enough in art. When states refuse to get involved, the private sector sometimes takes over, as illustrated in 2019 by the Madagascar Pavilion, prompted by the collaboration between the exhibiting artist, Joël Andrianomearisoa, his gallerists, and private investors – with very minimal financial input from the Madagascan government. Given the individual nature of the project, which was initiated by the artist, there is no guarantee that the Madagascan Pavilion will be present in two years’ time. These limits betray the almost total absence of an African art market, despite the recent proliferation of contemporary African art fairs, such as *1-54* in London, New York and Marrakesh; *Also Known As Africa* (AKAA) in Paris, *Kenya Art Fair* in Nairobi, and *FNB Jobourg Art Fair* in

Johannesburg. In a recent article, the Senegalese art critic Babacar Mbaye Diop relies on the *Global Africa Art Market* report from 2016¹¹ to state that: “The art market is non-existent in Africa, if one refers to the economic meaning of the word: a system of exchanges where supply and demand meet, and which pursues the main objective of marketing works of art. A market implies a legal regime, trends, expertise and the valorisation of artworks. Yet these are lacking virtually everywhere in Africa. [...] Artwork sales are still very informal in Africa. Many artists, because they are in need, sell their works themselves at low prices. As for professions connected to art and the artworld, they are sorely lacking on the continent. [...] The real African art market is in the West. Its heart beats in London, Paris and New York.”¹²

- 5 One of the characteristics of what is called “African contemporary art” or “contemporary African art” remains the externalization of its economy. It is therefore unsurprising to notice that most of the African artists that took part in the main exhibition, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, live in Europe and the United States, or are descendants of the African diaspora, like Julie Mehretu, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Otobong Nkanga. On this subject the art historian Valerie Kabov declares: “When celebrating African participation in Venice, we cannot be blind to the fact that fifty percent of all artists in the main curated exhibition, regardless of descent, come from just four cities, Berlin, New York, London and Paris with 80% coming from the Global North. And more than 80 % of all artists are represented by galleries taking part in Art Basel and Frieze Art Fairs. Every African artist in the curator’s exhibition is in one or both of these categories. There is not a single African artist in Ralph Rugoff’s exhibition, who is not represented by a participating gallery at Art Basel.”¹³
- 6 Exhibiting artists at the Venice Biennale falls under the category of investment as soon as representation issues have been dealt with, as demonstrated by the unprecedented Ghanaian Pavilion. The artists that were included in the exhibition were for the most part well-established: the sculptor El Anatsui, the video artist John Akomfrah, the painter and portraitist Lynett Yiadom-Boakye. The architect David Adjaye was in charge of the scenography. The Ghanaian Pavilion’s success was not due to chance but to the quality of the selection – famous artists and a wide range of disciplines: painting, sculpture, video and photography. Felicia Abban, a studio photographer in the 1950-60s equivalent to the Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, embodied the historical component of the exhibition.
- 7 The critical crystallisation around the presence of African artists at the Venice Biennale was essentially due to magazines devoted to contemporary African art, which came with a few disadvantages. On the one hand, while it emphasised calling into question the principle of national pavilions, it has in fact tended to reinforce that very principle, for instance by questioning giving the status of African artist to descendants of the diaspora. By acting this way, these critics overlook the current globalisation context from which Africa is not exempt, cancelling out arguments justifying the relativity of national borders. Moreover, this tendency conceals less exposed initiatives: one could almost forget that many African artists travel the world, take part in exhibition projects and residencies, whereas their absence from Venice could lead us to believe they are excluded from the art world. In this regard, the series of projects initiated by the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji is noteworthy. He was part of the selection of artists representing Belgium in 2015 at the Venice Biennale and he organised, in collaboration with Bambi Ceuppens, the exhibition *Congo Art Works* at the Brussels Palais des beaux-

arts BOZAR (7 October 2016–22 January 2017); and more recently *Congo Stars* at the Graz Kunsthaus (22 September 2018–21 January 2019) and the Tübingen Kunsthalle (9 March–30 June 2019), curated in collaboration with Bambi Ceuppens, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Günther Holler-Schuster and Barbara Steiner. The advantage of this approach is that it reckons less on market value than on an historic process that unfolds the acknowledgement of African art over the long term. The value of its productions thus builds up slowly but surely. Let us wager that this historical approach will benefit artists and visitors alike on the long term, including African visitors, for whom Venice is still one of the mirages where migrant ships wash up, when they are not simply driven back to the open sea.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Mbembe, Achille. *Sortir de la grande nuit : essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée*, Paris: La Découverte, 2010, p. 39 (NDLT)
2. In 1990, the pavilions of Nigeria and Zimbabwe were granted special mention; Golden Lions for lifetime achievement were awarded to Malick Sidibé (1936–2016) in 2007 and to El Anatsui in 2015.
3. Cf. Zabunyan, Elvan. “Okwui Enwezor”, *Critique d'art*, no. 51, Autumn/Winter 2018, p. 84–87
4. O'Toole, Sean. “Afrique-Venise : un décompte des années et des artistes”, *Contemporary And*, 28 May 2013. Accessible online: <https://www.contemporaryand.com/fr/magazines/counting-the-years-numbering-the-artists/>
5. A reference to the title of the Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma's first novel *Les Soleils des indépendances*, [The Suns of Independence] first published by the Montréal University Press in 1968.
6. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, the exhibition, which aspired to “exhibit the whole world”, was held in Paris at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle at la Villette.
7. Cf. Vincent, Cédric. Wecker, Frédéric. “Art africain contemporain : un concept en sursis”, *art21*, no. 3, 2005, p. 10: “Each exhibition-proposal, by offering a response to the one before it regarding the definition of contemporary African art, revived debates, creating new segmentations, new integrations and new exclusions. This dynamic was implemented early on, and it is interesting to examine the way in which Susan Vogel, in *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1991) reacted to *Magiciens de la Terre*'s neo-primitivist vision by elaborating a rather precise typology that distinguished between ‘traditional art’, ‘new functional art’, ‘urban art’, ‘international art’ and ‘extinct art’.”
8. Eyene, Christine. “L'Afrique à Venise et après ?”, *Africultures*, no.71, 20 November 2007, p. 218–223
Accessible online : <http://africultures.com/lafrique-a-venise-et-apres-7121/>
9. As evidenced by Valerie Kabov's introduction to her article published on 25 October 2017 on the website *Art Africa* and entitled “Economics of National Liberation in Venice and Basel”: “Okwui Enwezor's *All the World's Futures* appeared to herald a new era for African artists on the global stage. Unprecedented numbers of African and diasporan artists included in the main exhibition, unparalleled press, with headlines like ‘Why Africa is the buzz at this year's Venice Biennale’ and comments like: ‘After this exhibition, any supposedly international contemporary

art exhibition that does not include a reasonable number of African and black artists will look so small, and utterly narrow-minded.”

10. Van der Watt, Liese. “Viva Africa Viva?”, *Contemporary And*, 8 May 2017. Accessible online: <https://www.contemporaryand.com/fr/magazines/viva-africa-viva/>

11. This annual report, created in 2015 by an art dealer, Jean-Philippe Aka, deals with African and diasporan modern and contemporary art. It covers all the transactions and data in Africa and globally.

12. Mbaye Diop, Babacar. “Le vrai marché de l’art contemporain africain se trouve en Occident”, *Le Monde Afrique*, 24 November 2018. Accessible online: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/11/24/le-vrai-marche-de-l-art-contemporain-africain-se-trouve-en-occident_5387950_3212.html

13. Kabov, Valerie. “When can we talk about the art?: A case for Venice”, *Art Africa*, 2019. Accessible online: <https://artafricamagazine.org/when-can-we-talk-about-the-art>

14. As was the case for the boat that sank in the Mediterranean, whose hulk was exhibited in Venice in 2019 by the artist Christoph Büchel on one of the Arsenal docks under the title *Barca Nostra*. In the style of a Duchampian ready-made, the border between art and truth proved to be as fine as between fiction and reality. (Cf. the website of *Le Monde*: https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2019/05/10/arts-a-la-biennale-de-venise-barca-nostra-en-hommage-aux-migrants-morts-en-mer_5460650_3246.html)

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