

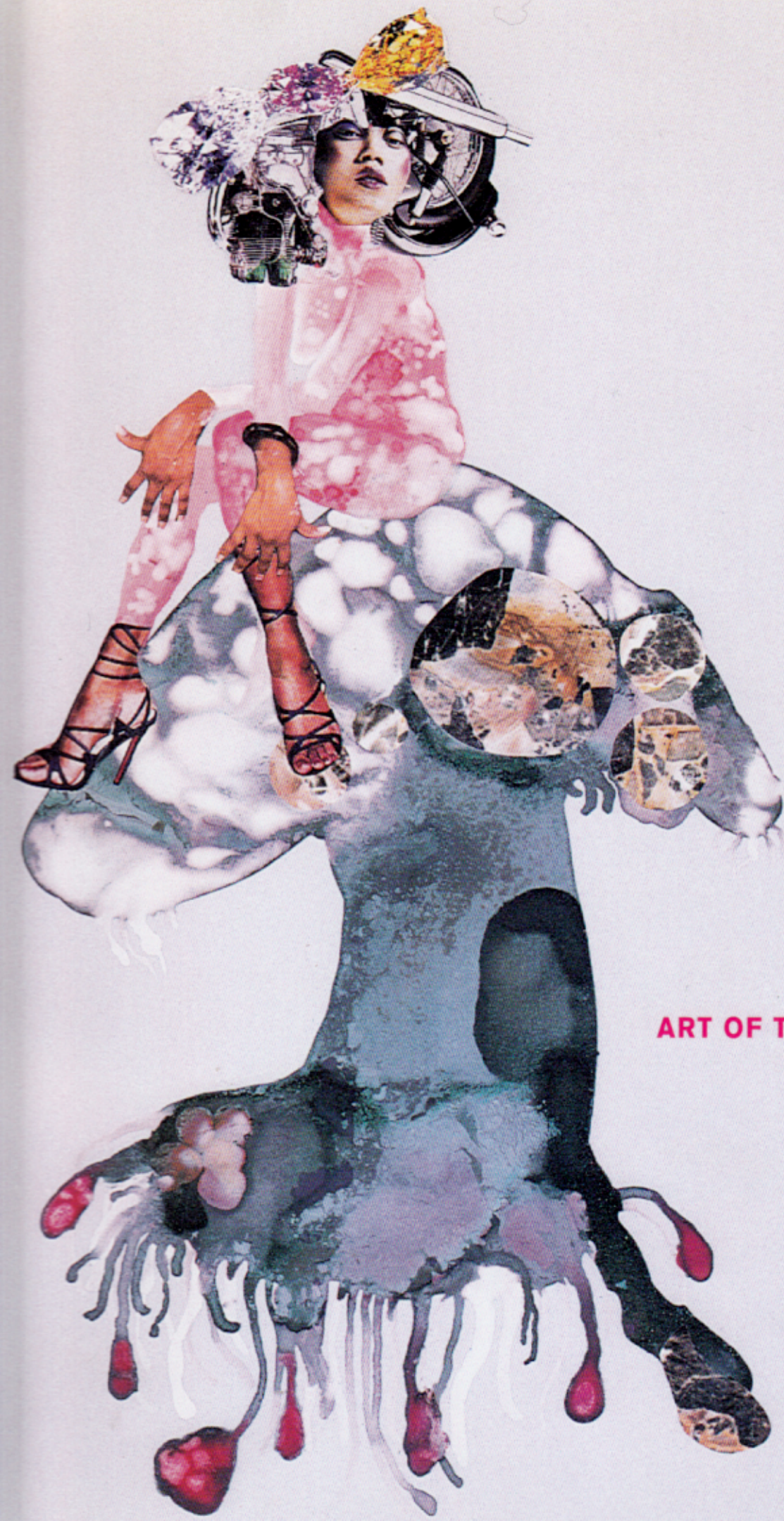
Looking Both Ways

ART OF THE CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN DIASPORA

Laurie Ann Farrell

MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART
New York

SNOECK
Gent



Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora

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This book is dedicated to my parents.

LOOKING BOTH WAYS

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Front cover: *Machinehead* from the *Fungus* series, by Wangechi Mutu. Ink, acrylic and collage on mylar, 43 x 28 cm. Commissioned by the Museum for African Art, Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.



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The diaspora as object

John Pepper

This essay is dedicated to Skunder Boghossian, 1936-2003.

Barthélémy Toguo's remarkable entry at the 1998 Dak'art Biennale of Contemporary African Art bore the stamp of an approach to both the materiality and the concept of Africa that has been breathing new life into the international art scene. A modest sculpture about the size of a chair, it was portable and made of wood, in the manner of those kinds of marvelous objects that were easily included in a visitor's baggage during the colonial era and after, and that corresponded in size and technique to what Europeans could comprehend as art. But Toguo's object made fun of that history (Fig. 1). At the opening he sat on the object and petted a smaller version cradled in his arms: his portable African art looked more like a big French Champagne cork than a Dogon shrine figure.

What was he celebrating (or fetishizing)? It was in fact a humorous transformation of a rubber stamp used to certify a temporary residence permit for France, the sort of permit that is highly desired by (and often refused to) residents of Europe's former colonies. Through art, Toguo was reimagining the *carte de séjour* as an unwieldy thing—the official yet arbitrary bar between the homeland in the neocolonial world and the phantasmatic promised land of economic self-sufficiency, fame, and intellectual fulfillment in the West.¹

One method for understanding the significance of art like this, which is characteristic of a growing number of contemporary African artists who live abroad, is to consider the history of the discursive uses and aesthetic valuation of the idea of an African diaspora in art. This is important because what has been called "contemporary African art" has often in fact been diasporan. As a result of this history of conflation, African artists in Europe and America today, subject to novel forms of diaspora, are both privileged and burdened by their increasing visibility in elite international art venues. Much of the new art seeks to shift diaspora from a *subject*-speaking position into an *object*-in-question. It thus holds the potential to offer a crucial insight into the current global condition. Still, this insight has its own international borders.

The Subject of Diaspora

James Clifford has argued that to articulate diaspora has meant becoming a specific kind of subject of history, one not fully contained by the political discourses of the nation-state.² The word "diaspora" derives from the early Greeks, for whom 'διασπορά' (dispersion, or sowing through) was linked to ideas of migration and colonization in

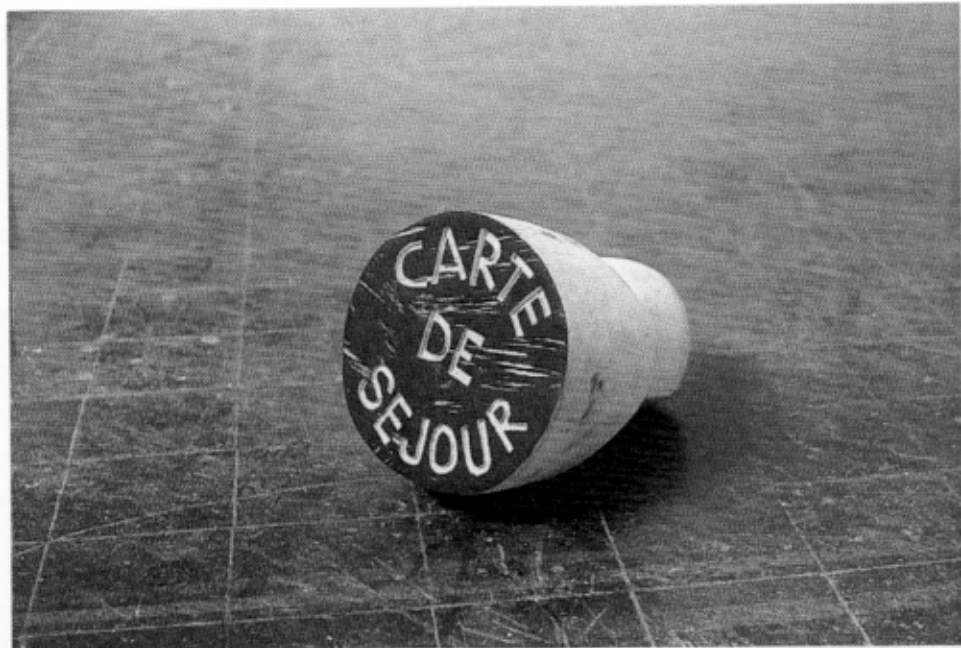


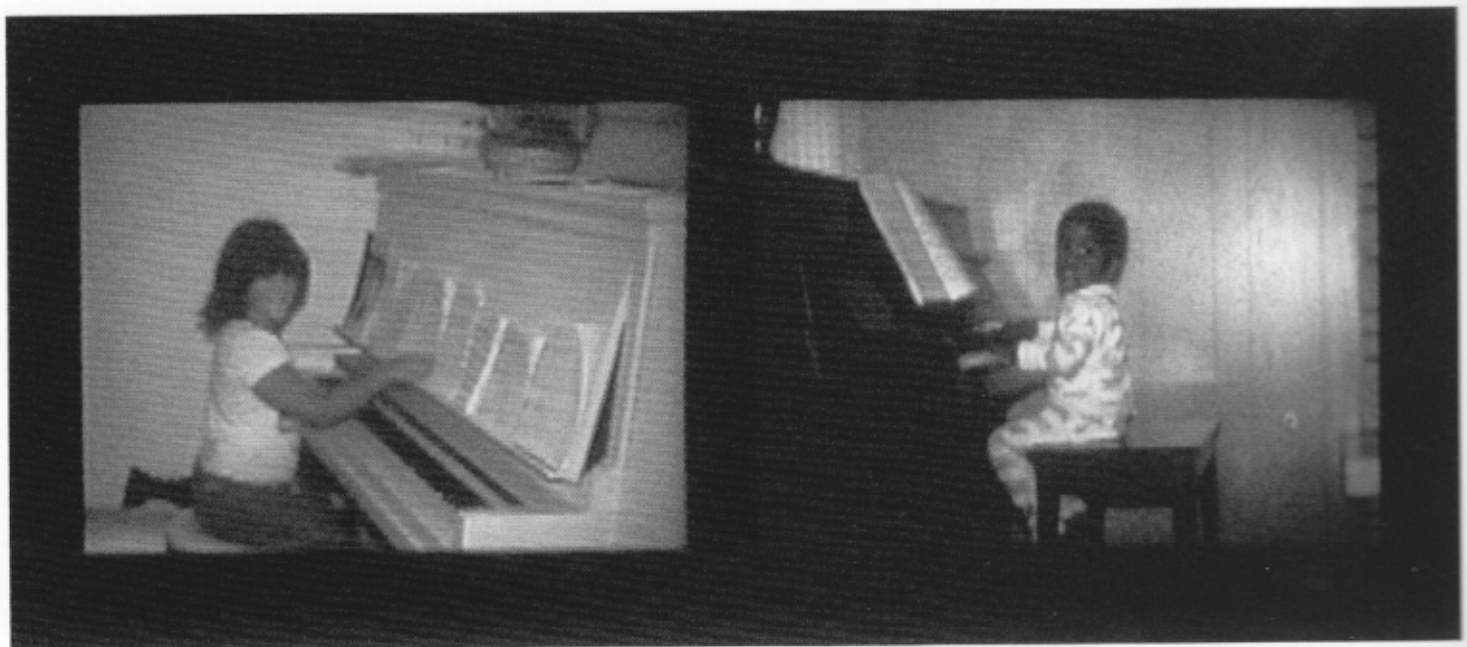
Fig. 1 *Carte de séjour*, 1997, by Barthélémy Toguo. Wood, 40 x 40 x 70 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Collection Francis Mary, Bruxelles.

Asia Minor and the Mediterranean in the Archaic period, 800–600 B.C. In the Alexandrian Greek translation of the Septuagint (Deuteronomy 28:25), it' described the displacement of Jews exiled from Palestine after the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C. as a curse: "Thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth."³ Thus the formerly positive connotation of societies spread across and within different political and cultural geographies was turned into a term of oppression and victimhood, where the self is confined within the realm of the other. In the modern era the term has been used as self-descriptive by communities of Armenians, South Asians, Palestinians, Irish, and others. Most notable are the African communities in the New World after the era of the Atlantic slave trade. These too have powerfully embraced the biblical invocation of Babylon, slipping its meaning into a code word for the West or America, the new home of captivity, moral corruption, and alienation.⁴ Characteristic of many, but not all, diaspora communities are a shared history of violent removal from a home territory, a historical projection of purity and timelessness onto the homeland, dreams of reconnection and return to the homeland, collective efforts to assimilate within hostile host cultures, and marginalization, often continuing for generations, on the basis of perceived ethnic, religious, or racial difference in their present home.

For many, the shared experience of marginalization in the new home subordinates any experience of attachment to the homeland. For some, the history of being treated as others from within is perhaps the strongest point of common identification from which to construct an idea of community. As Clifford observes, "Diasporas are caught up with and defined against the norms of nation-states."⁵ Following Paul Gilroy, he claims that diaspora discourse constructs "alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference."⁶ In the particular context of what Gilroy calls the "black Atlantic," connecting Africa to North America, the Caribbean, and Britain, the term "diaspora" is a sign of "political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement."⁷

Identification with the land of origin may be a site of ambivalence for many in diasporan communities, for whom literal return may in reality be undesirable.⁸ With Marcus

Fig. 2 *A small world...*, 1996-2000, by Sanford Biggers and Jennifer Zachin. DVD video projection, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Photo: Sanford Biggers and Jennifer Zachin.



Garvey's back-to-Africa movement and the American colony of Liberia as perhaps the two greatest historical exceptions, the development of a collective myth about the nature of Africa and, especially since the 1960s, the re-creation of an Afrocentric culture in the diaspora have not led to any large-scale migrations of people (except as tourists) back to the continent. Of course African-Americans' ambivalence about Africa as their home, as opposed to the site of their collective rootedness, need not preclude a heightened and active interest in continental African affairs. Even so, after several generations of residence, even citizenship, and despite the ongoing and painful experience of structural racism, Africans in the New World for the most part aspire to the same values as the general American cultural mainstream. This largely shared aspect of an in-common American upbringing and world view is eloquently evoked in Sanford Biggers's collaborative video with Jennifer Zackin, *a small world...* (2000), which juxtaposes middle-class Jewish and black families' silent super-8 home movies in a 5 1/2-minute loop (Fig. 2). The images of piano lessons, trips to Disneyland, and vacations at the beach look mundanely similar, and occasionally switch sides on the screen. What is edited from view, and lies outside this domestic framing of the American quotidian as a commonly middle-class aspiration, is the *political* history of marginalization of the subjects' communities.⁹

One could also read this situation in reverse since, as a long genealogy of commentators as diverse as W. E. B. Du Bois and Robert Farris Thompson have convincingly asserted, American culture en masse is itself in many ways defined by the African-American experience and has been created in large part by African-American cultural contributions. The extent to which this debt is repressed in mainstream culture may also be definitional of the American experience.

Africa in America

Another kind of ambivalence about the site of origin is caught up in primitivizing and anachronistic ideas more reflective of the hegemonic prejudices of the new home than of any real historical experience of the projected homeland. Especially when historical migration has been the result of a conquest of the native land by a foreign power, it is a common conceit of diasporans to feel the impulse to improve the lot of their supposedly backward compatriots in the homeland. They feel that their tragic passage from old world to new, into the center of the oppressor's culture, has resulted in a net gain in worldly advancement and moral righteousness, and that it is their mission to help civilize both their provincial brethren and their fellow citizens.¹⁰ In the American context, Alain Locke, the principal theoretician of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, was interested in the new forms of creativity made possible through the cosmopolitan matrix of Africans, West Indians, and black Americans from North and South who were converging in New York's Harlem and other centers after World War I. He recognized that growing class differentiation and cultural differences made it more difficult to regard the Negro en masse, and that the greatest in-common experience of these different groups was the finding of one another in the metropolis. It was through "proscription and prejudice . . . [that] these dissimilar elements [were thrown] into a common area of contact and interaction."¹¹

This coming together of disparate elements of the black world was not a phenomenon whose effects were kept insular. On the contrary, "As with the Jew," Locke claimed, "persecution is making the Negro international."¹² One product of this new diasporan cosmopolitanism was a growing consciousness "of acting as the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with Twentieth Century civilization."¹³ In Locke's view, the moral position gained by Africans in the diaspora was a vantage

from which to oversee future affairs in the New World, the Old World, and Africa.

For the black diaspora in America, Locke especially stressed the role of art as a kind of creative enactment of a coming-to-greater-self-awareness within the double consciousness previously proposed by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This Janus view was the product of seeing and living in two worlds simultaneously: the African and the American, the mainstream (white) world and the generalized, marginalized, and stigmatized world of a (black) minority. Art, for Locke, needed to compose the complex values of a marginalized people while paradoxically operating from within the mainstream. Critical too was Locke's characterization of 1920s Harlem as *already* comprising a sort of doubled diaspora formation with other diasporas within it, including Africans, Caribbeans, and rural Southerners. At the penultimate moment before the current formulation of the idea of a modern black diaspora, its birth site, Harlem, was already hybrid terrain.

Contemporary African Art and Diaspora

The great irony of the African modernists of an earlier generation may be that it was the experience of living in the diaspora, outside Africa, that enabled many of them to engage so thoughtfully with images and ideas from Africa's history. This was the result, among

other things, of access to colonial-era art collections outside Africa, the meeting of other African diasporans in a cosmopolitan setting, and the experience of collective marginalization outside the continent. Perhaps the best-known African modernist, who lived in the diaspora from the 1960s until his passing earlier this year, was Alexander "Skunder" Boghossian (Fig. 3). In 1955, Boghossian, who was raised in Ethiopia and whose father was an Armenian expatriate, traveled to London to study at the Slade School of Fine Art. He later moved to Paris and studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and at La Grande Chaumière, remaining in the city for the next ten years to teach, make art, and absorb the cultural and political life of 1960s France. There Boghossian knew artists and thinkers of the Negritude and Surrealist movements, and commenced a life-long interest in Ethiopian Christian and vernacular art after viewing the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale. He returned to Ethiopia in the mid-1960s, then moved at the time of the revolution to the United States, where he taught several generations of young artists at Howard University in Washington, D.C.¹⁴ Yet despite living abroad for almost forty years, Boghossian is seldom referred to as a diasporan or American artist.¹⁵ Instead, like other expatriates of his generation such as Ernest Mancoba, Uzo Egonu, Gerard Sekoto, Ibrahim el Salahi, and Iba Ndiyaie, his work has more commonly been described as "contemporary African art."

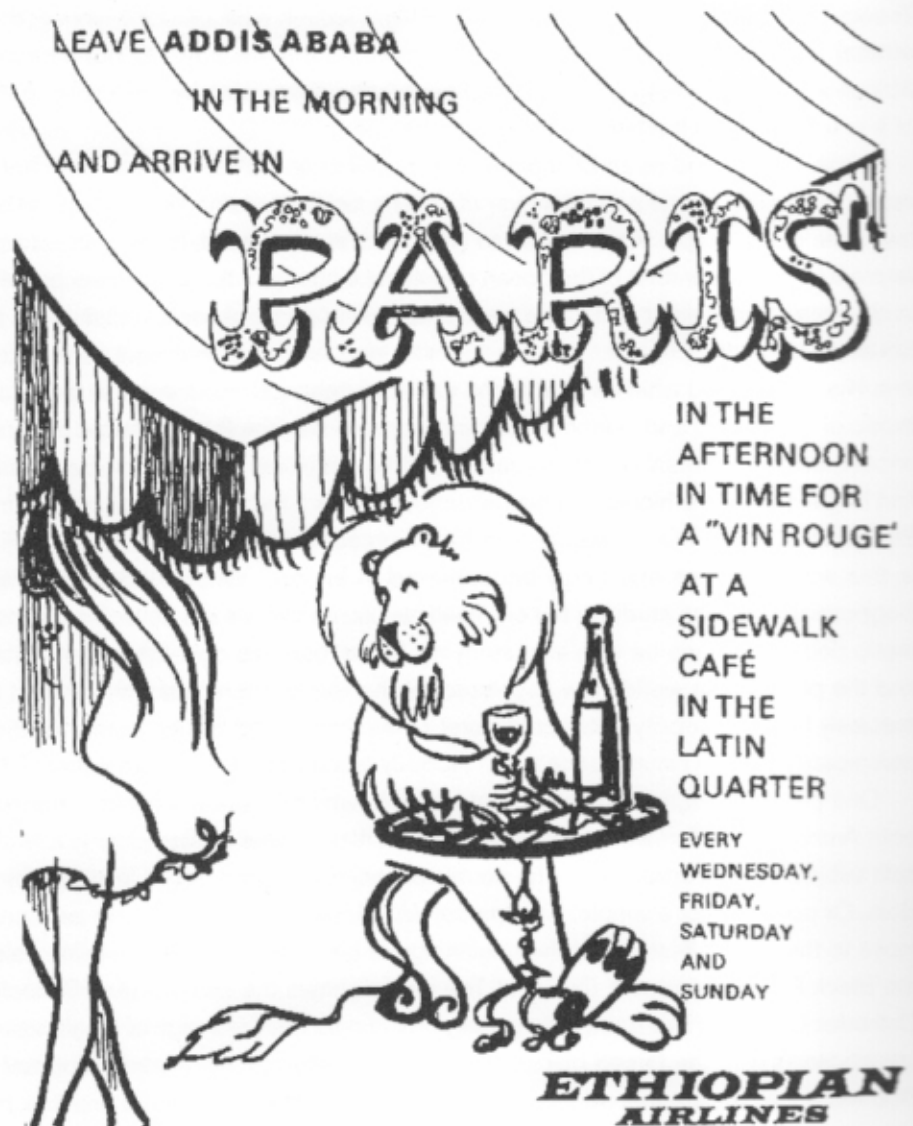


Fig. 3 1970's poster advertising Ethiopian Airlines. Courtesy of Ethiopian Airlines, New York.

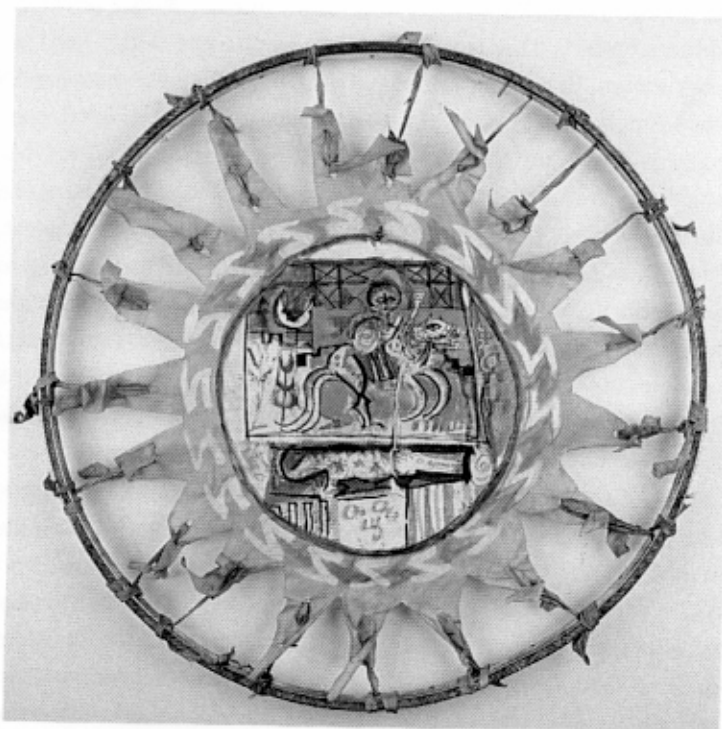
Though I think it can be valuable to include Boghossian's work (and the work of these others) in this category, and thereby to complexify the meaning of "contemporary African art" as something without a fixed geography, it may also be rewarding to think of it in terms of how it relates to the idea of diaspora.

When categorized as an Ethiopian artist, Boghossian may be seen to have been a vessel, a passive *bearer* and preserver of culture, one who carried within him the past traditions of his people. As a diasporan artist, on the other hand, he was an active *interpreter* and reassembler of the ocean of cultural signs from the past as encountered in his travels, for present and future generations. Though Boghossian relished his status as an influential Ethiopian artist, his artistic aims were the antithesis of provincialism. His art stressed what he saw as the essential connection between all the art and music of the African and diasporan cultural worlds within the flux of a larger and more encompassing universal world civilization.¹⁶ Although it was in Paris that Boghossian first began to study Ethiopian art history seriously, was it because he was himself from Ethiopia that, while this art was new to him, it presented itself as somewhat familiar? Is this why it was so exactly encountered in his art? While studying *in* Paris, Boghossian was also studying the city itself, its life, its climate of intellectual and aesthetic debate. In Paris he was also studying Africa, both his own Ethiopian heritage and the pan-African world view espoused by the Negritude movement.¹⁷ Was it not precisely his own mobility between cultural zones that piqued Boghossian's aesthetic perspicacity? As he himself once said, "Nobody is a prophet in his own country."¹⁸

One place to begin is the artist's autograph, which Boghossian often signed in both Amharic and Roman letters—surely a mark that he was contemplating a kind of split subjectivity not unrelated to the double consciousness proposed long ago by Du Bois. Or consider, for example, his *Cowboy U.S.A.* (1972), made after his permanent move to the United States and the beginnings of his involvement with intellectuals in the Black Power movement (Fig. 4).¹⁹ The image shows the Eastern (and Ethiopian) Orthodox Christian hero Saint George slaying a dragon. Is this a sign of Boghossian's identification with the famed black cowboys and buffalo soldiers later eulogized by Bob Marley as a historical reference for black revolutionaries? Here the dragon, an ecclesiastical sign of uncivilized and ungodly evil, is Americanized with flaglike stars and stripes instead of scales. After the manner of traditional Ethiopian painting on vellum, the image is painted on a leather drum skin, which has been removed from its instrument, spread wide as if flayed, and turned into a standard or shield also reminiscent of a Native American artifact. The overall theme is menacing but the drum has been attached to a new rim, a metal bicycle wheel, which adds an air of whimsy to the composition. *Cowboy U.S.A.* combines the roles of symbolic warrior, native healer, shaman, mythic hero, and crusader against injustice in the new Babylon into a reassembly of what is most potent in the diffusion of the world's cultures.

A number of diasporan artists, like Boghossian, have been inclined to reiterate the space of Africa as it is dispersed within the universal civilization of mankind, thus rerouting the universalist presumptions of Western high modernism. One might take an even more radical position, especially in reference to émigré artists like Boghossian, and agree with Rasheed Araeen's assertion that for this earlier generation, "The move-

Fig. 4 *Cowboy, USA*, 1972, by Skunder Boghossian. Oil paint on drum skin with metal rim. 187 x 125 cm. Collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem, Gift of the artist. Photo: Courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem.



ment of artists from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean to the west was also not between different cultures but a movement *within the same culture defined and constructed by modernity*.²⁰

Araeen claims further that, as with their European modernist peers like Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondrian, who were also émigrés to the cultural capitals of their day, "It was essential for them to transgress not only the cultures they left behind but also their experiences of exile."²¹ Thus an art that keeps two worlds in view need not merely represent two distinct experiences of two different geographic or cultural locales, placing them side-by-side and not saying much else. It can also be critical of both sides of the spinning coin of identity, by suggesting their intimate (and often painful) fusion. The diasporan predicament of seeing double can be a disorienting subject position from which to make civilizational demands upon both the old homeland and the new home. In this regard Araeen is quite close to the political spirit of Du Bois.

Identity? Get Lost

*It is all very well to go traveling, but one of the inescapable consequences of letting go or getting lost is that you can never really go home as the same "someone" that you were before. During the history of Modernity, most people thought the loss of "home" was a tragedy: today, art suggests it may sometimes be one of life's little necessities.*²²

The art of the pioneering twentieth-century artists of African descent created a visual space for subjective enunciation from within the double view of diaspora. In fact it gave plastic form to such a double consciousness. Theirs was an art of the place-marking gesture, like the spot on the empty canvas that enables the painter to begin a composition. Over the past decade a younger generation of African diasporan artists, who have come to artistic maturity in the post-Cold War era, have been reaping what was sown by their predecessors—whether they are aware of it or not—and are questioning the very ground of subjectivity itself. What has changed? Among other things, the old dichotomous thinking about us and them, self and other, Africa and the West, has become harder to justify in simple terms. Also, as Laura Bigman has shown, the social composition of African diasporans newly arrived in the United States after the 1970s was different in character from earlier forms of migration, whether forced or voluntary.²³

In relative terms this new African diaspora is much smaller than that formed by the Atlantic slave trade, yet it has been highly visible in the public arena. Bigman argues that its members "tended to be from the more affluent, educated sectors of their own societies, in part because U.S. law functioned as a net filtering in those most likely to assimilate to American society."²⁴ She cites Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Egypt as countries where the United States had strategic interests and where English was one of the official languages—thus facilitating greater mobility between countries.²⁵ These migrants were, at first, following in the footsteps of the many first presidents of postindependence Africa who had attended colleges in the United States, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah. Often intending only a temporary stay, in order to attend an educational institution in the United States and to use that degree as leverage for elite employment back home, many found themselves stranded with few prospects in Africa when major foreign aid to the continent was withdrawn after the Cold War officially ended in 1989. These new diasporans are often quite critical of a political scene back in Africa that has become progressively more draconian and has made returning to their families difficult.²⁶ It is not just coincidence that the four main

emigrant-producing countries highlighted by Bigman are the same ones whose expatriates are currently being promoted as the next wave in contemporary African art.

Why enumerate these dry sociological details? Because, having suggested an ironic history of relations between modernist diasporans and their use of African images, it is important also to tease apart the social context of production in which the current group of contemporary African artists in the diaspora are enmeshed. As a parallel phenomenon, how has the idea of diaspora itself changed? Currently, the concept of diaspora may be seen to be positioned among an array of such buzzwords as border, creolization, transculturation, hybridity, and so on, all attempting to describe intercultural contact zones and transnational cultures. As an example of the dispersal of this terminology within popular and academic discourse, Clifford cites the mobile definition proposed in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora*: "The term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community. . . ." ²⁷ Because of increased access to air travel and telecommunications, separate geographic places can now, more thoroughly than before, encompass a single vital community: sections of New York City, for instance, can be said to be continuous with the transnational culture of the Caribbean. ²⁸ The idea of what a diaspora is has correspondingly become more diffuse, and has cross-pollinated in other discourses.

As much as older and more distant geographic connections are being secured, multiple connections to multiple cultural histories are being combined in novel ways within the mobile sites of diasporas today. Among younger members of diasporan communities, cultural practices and forms of self-identification are more cosmopolitan and more globally inflected than ever before, especially for those "whose initial socialization has taken place within the cross-currents of more than one cultural field, and whose ongoing forms of cultural expression and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretized and elaborated from more than one cultural heritage." ²⁹ This has in part been possible, according to Robin Cohen, because, where previously one's citizenship in the modern nation state took official precedence over other forms of affiliation, diasporic allegiances are more open and more acceptable in this "age of globalization." ³⁰ It should be noted, though, that as participants in a Western-centered international culture, diasporan artists often relate to their own historical culture as if it were the other, primitivizing and tribalizing it in terms that make "common sense" in the new home. These artists are *here now*, and *nowhere*. They are temporally present and thus contemporary, but they are spatially always in transit, unsettled, and doubly alienated. ³¹

The diasporan condition, it ought to be noted, is not solely characteristic of marginalized groups or so-called communities of color residing in the heart of the West. It is crucial to be clear about this point, since the vast majority of international population movements during the entire modern period, despite popular perceptions to the contrary, have been of Europeans. Cohen notes,

In the period from 1500 to 1914 somewhere between 60 and 65 million Europeans participated in international migration, compared with a combined total of about 15 million African and Asian intercontinental migrants [including the forced migration of Africans through the slave trade]. Even in the period 1945 to 1975, when Europe became a major destination zone, the numbers leaving Europe for other continents probably constituted about half the global total of intercontinental migrants. This centrality is, of course, somewhat ironic as the nativist and racist movements that have mushroomed in European countries during the past decade seek to represent

Europe as a timeless, stable, undisturbed continent threatened by hordes of restless foreign immigrants, particularly those with black, brown, or yellow skins.³²

It is not just "somewhat ironic," of course, that those whose perceived cultural difference, and whose social status as economic competition, is signaled so readily by the color of their skin are singled out by neotraditionalists and nativists as scapegoats for their own sense of disillusionment with the modern world. Was it not the sowing through of European peoples and cultural ideals during the modern imperial and colonial spread of the West that blazed the trail for the later blowback of Africans, Caribbeans, and others from the ex-colonies into the West? Unlike the colonial presence in Africa, which attempted to remake the world by *imposing* Western political domination and rewriting local customs,³³ the reply and return of ex-colonial subjects to the West has been characterized more by the *insinuation* of other people and other ideas from within.³⁴ Iain Chambers has described this situation as a destabilization of the colonial dichotomy of us and them: "From elsewhere arrive the 'them' who refuse to remain 'them,' but who at the same time refuse simply to become 'us'; that is, who refuse to negate either the 'roots' or the 'routes' that render a 'there' also a 'here.'"³⁵

Just as the journey of Western visual and verbal languages beyond Europe's geographic borders historically deprovincialized Europe,³⁶ the semantic alteration of Western codes has permanently altered both the ex-colonies and the former colonizers, for better or worse. In this regard Salman Rushdie once remarked provocatively that English, "no longer an English language, now grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language for themselves."³⁷

If one wished to stretch diaspora to its theoretical limits, the condition can even be read as a visible reminder of the universal human condition itself. From that perspective, the social phenomenon of diaspora, and the experience of marginality, are universal metaphors for the individual's psychological makeup, especially in the increasingly dramatic intersection of the world's cultures today. The approach is based on an adaptation to postcolonial studies of Lacanian psychoanalytic ideas about the split nature of human subjectivity, which is perpetually lost in a journey of self-discovery and self-invention. As Chambers writes,

The migrant's sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a nonintegrated present, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of this (post) modern condition. This underlines the theme of diaspora, not only black, also Jewish, Indian, Islamic, Palestinian, and draws us into the process whereby the previous margins now fold into the centre.³⁸

Elsewhere Chambers elaborates the idea that art is a potentially privileged site for a diasporalike opening up of political and social representations, especially because of its role in destabilizing and then remaking the meaning of everyday images. It is through art, he claims, that:

*ideas about ourselves, about our democracy, our citizenship, our identity, are historically radicalized and transmuted into temporal processes. Here they are rendered open-ended and vulnerable to the journey of interpretation, to the interruption of an ongoing, worldly interrogation. . . . Any narrative . . . renders the universal story many of us think we are living, more localized, limited, unsettled.*³⁹

Double Privilege and Double Burden

Although it is valuable to keep in mind this highly metaphoric view of the diasporan condition as a kind of privileged critical agency, I would argue that in day-to-day prac-

tice it is precisely because of their visible racial difference that certain diasporan communities continue to be held accountable for a social uprootedness that is in fact widely shared. Within the West, members of the African diaspora are a constant visible reminder of the current global condition (as are others from the Third World), and as such are in a tenuously privileged position to represent it, in artistic and political discourse. One could go farther and say that *they are expected* by the general public, including members of their own communities, to *represent*—to paint the picture of, to enact bodily, and to politically stand in for—the current condition of globalization and postmodernity. It is because of this onerous racial burden to self-represent that Kobena Mercer and Paul Gilroy have suggested, in the context of black British art, that the long history of expectation with regard to “the social responsibility of the (black) artist” needs to be questioned. Where for Locke this traditional burden carried by black artists was a demand, even an honor, for Mercer and Gilroy this representational weight is seen as more of a curse: continually to begin from scratch, and to represent the black (diasporan) world as monolithic, in its entirety, every time.⁴⁰

In 1999 a select group of young African artists, all under forty, were invited to participate in a series of exhibitions and symposia titled “Cry of My Birth” at the Art Institute of Chicago.⁴¹ The organizers intended the events to break open new ways of thinking about Africa and its art in what they termed this “postgeographic age.”⁴² Interestingly, none of the artists included—Siemon Allen, Ghada Amer, Moshekwa Langa, Julie Mehretu, and Fatimah Tuggar—had lived in Africa for years. Uncannily affirming Bigman’s study, cited above, of the four countries whose émigrés have better Western access, the artists in “Cry of My Birth” were billed as “South African, Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Nigerian,” but not as diasporan, which in fact all of them were. These are some of the finest artists working today, and the premise for the show was a potentially challenging one, and yet . . . it was indicative of a larger trend in exhibitions of contemporary African art, which has increasingly been reproduced since the mid-1990s. These shows frame the artists, sometimes despite the overt content of their work, within the confines of identity discourse.⁴³ And they privilege diasporans as representatives of Africa.

I would adapt Mercer’s and Gilroy’s critiques of black representation to the practice of the current group of contemporary African artists. Their art is *doubly privileged* and *doubly burdened*. Their condition as transnationals gives them improved access to international structures for education and exhibition, and they also see in two worlds in the manner proposed long ago by Du Bois. Their vision of the world is thus privileged because it is more circumspect. Their visibility is also greater than that of most artists residing in Africa, since they have better access to the platforms for exposure afforded by the (mostly Western-oriented) circuit of international biennials and exhibitions.⁴⁴ Still, they are burdened by the fact that their entry into the art world is largely on the condition that they enunciate some version of their African identity manifestly, and literally, in their art. As a result, they are also burdened by the audience expectation that they act through their work as interlocutors for all of Africa, even if they themselves hold a critical view of particular states of affairs on the continent.

The Diaspora Objects

“What is going on now politically is like a mirror of what has always gone on in myself, because I am a hybrid of the West and the East,” says Ghada Amer, a 38-year-old Egyptian-born artist who lived in France from the age of 11 and moved to Manhattan four years ago. “It’s a clash of civilizations that of course don’t understand each other. I’ve lived with these contradictions all my life.” . . . “I don’t want viewers



Fig. 5 *Private Rooms*, 2001, by Ghada Amer.
Embroidered sculpture, installation view at Rhona Hoffman
Gallery. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and
Deitch Projects, New York.



Fig. 6 *Private Rooms*, 2001, by Ghada Amer.
Embroidered sculpture, installation detail at Rhona
Hoffman Gallery. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and
Deitch Projects, New York.

to see my work as the work of 'the other,'" she says. "That's the most insulting thing that could happen."⁴⁵

One thing shared by many of the latest generation of African artists in the diaspora—those who have been successful on the art circuit—is that their work critiques the very burden of representation that is also the condition of their visibility. Diaspora is the *object* of these artists' art, the thing in question and the construction material, more than it is a stable subject position from which to speak about their perspective. The space cleared through this new diasporan art is a questioning space, a space where one may *object* to reductive concepts of identity.

Ghada Amer, an artist whose paintings and installations are in the forefront of this trend, potently challenges both the modern fundamentalist version of Islam in her birthplace (Egypt) and the more global essentialist notion of "women's work" (Fig. 5, 6). Amer refuses to play the other for her audience, while not questioning whether the other exists beyond Eurocentric projections like Samuel Huntington's notorious formulation of a so-called "clash of civilizations."⁴⁶ Instead she declares herself a "hybrid," the only possible interlocutor between worlds, and thus has it both ways. Amer is well aware of how the stereotype "Muslim woman artist" has helped her "command an audience," but is also aware that such a platform is ultimately a trap—a dangerous game.⁴⁷ Thus she claims a strategic position, by provisionally staking out the in-between ground of subjectivity, and this has allowed her art to be critical of popular constructions of Western and Islamic/African gender and sexuality. After living in Paris for over twenty years, Amer ought to be considered a French artist more than anything else, even if she has yet to be granted citizenship in France.⁴⁸ But her art, like her public persona, is hybrid and brings together multiple histories of art, including Minimalism, Conceptual art, Abstract Expressionism, 1960s feminist art, bad-girl feminist art of the 1980s, and the sensibility for the text-as-image in Islamic art.⁴⁹

A seemingly inexhaustible number of variations and critical tangents have been proposed by African artists who have taken the diaspora as object in their art: Yinka Shonibare's celebration and mischievous recontextualization of Dutch wax prints from the Africa trade; Meshac Gaba's whimsical *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, which pokes conceptual fun at the "*Magiciens de la terre*" idea of the naive African artist, and at those artists who pander to it; Rotimi Fani-Kayode's sensual embrace of the male-loving gaze, in the context of a photographic practice aimed at intellectually reconfiguring sacred Yoruba ritual; and other poignant examples illustrated in this catalogue.

To what extent is art like this also "clinging to marginality," as Gayatri Spivak has described the phenomenon in which upwardly mobile students of color are taught to speak (only) for and about oneself in a manner that empowers but ultimately constrains those supposedly representing themselves? (A common example: an African-American student is expected to give the perspective of "the community" in any round-table discussion, but is not to be heard from otherwise.) Too often (no matter what side of the table we are on) we unthinkingly internalize this as a duty, as much as it is imposed on us.⁵⁰ In a similar light, is hybridity or diaspora the new essentialism for identity, and is the postcolonial artist the new other? Has that which only a decade ago heated up the contemporary scene, and scrambled the old and fixed ideas of self and other, now begun to cool off into a new lingua franca for art, as Gerardo Mosquera has recently suggested?⁵¹ Audiences now expect artists to enunciate their borderness in much the same manner that an earlier generation was expected to perform an Africanness in order to validate their work for an international public.⁵² And, as I have argued, this conundrum may seem to be such an urgent one today because the West itself is such a crisscrossed border zone.

Art Marks the Border

If we return to where we began, to the *carte de séjour*, we see that Togo is critically aware of both the illusoriness of the dream of fulfillment in the European center, and the very real rewards that await those African citizens who successfully navigate the system and find a place for themselves there.⁵³ Togo's rubber visa stamp, turned into a crafty piece of African wood sculpture, registers on several levels at once. It decries the prejudicial international system of border controls, which perpetually casts the (black) African as suspicious and potentially criminal, as opposed to the hard-working idealistic émigré he or she is likely to be. It also plays both sides of a popular (and itself quite naive) Eurocentric cultural bias according to which what is real and authentic in Africa and its diaspora is always going to be visionary, primitive, made by hand, and easily portable.

Togo's art is also mindful of another Eurocentric bias, one operating at the level of the elite international commodity world of contemporary art practice, whose *carte de séjour* for entry into the mainstream is a circumspect aesthetic method that takes after the fashion for installation art and proposes a critique of the construction of identity. Togo's sculpture is the mark of the political and economic border between Europe and Africa, which is all too often (and for purely ideological reasons) mistaken for a border between mutually untranslatable cultural worlds. His art object smartly situates itself literally and safely in the middle—but it is a cannon shooting dangerous symbolic volleys two ways. Is art itself not a sort of visa for temporary residence between supposedly distinct political, geographic, and temporal worlds?

A novel emphasis on the *mobility* of the locale for enunciation, as much as the *object* of enunciation, may be the key here. Ten years ago I remember being struck by an interview between Thomas McEville and Tamessir Dia in which the artist spoke of paintings he could not exhibit in the Ivory Coast (where he lived), because of fears of official censorship, but would show in Venice and New York.⁵⁴ Rotimi Fani-Kayode too once said that his photographs, because of their perceived decadent Western content, would probably not go over well if exhibited in Nigeria.⁵⁵ The international platform from which this latest generation of African artists are able to display their work has enabled them to be critical of how Africa is framed both at home and abroad (whichever is which). Although the historical landscape has changed, and the rhetoric of civilizing our African brothers and sisters has been clipped, these artists are on a diasporan continuum with the ideas proposed in the 1920s by Locke, and earlier by Du Bois.

The crucial question today is: Is art like the *carte de séjour* symbolic of a radical opening, or is it a certificate of dependency on the border? Those artists who have taken diaspora as an object, and an objection, in their work are in a position to comment on the world today in ways that can be quite illuminating—for all of us. As for those still working on the African continent, but not yet part of the critical transnational elite, and for those whose art looks into other objects besides Africanness or diasporanness, the struggle for an image continues.

1. This was the case in apartheid-era South Africa. Those who could move about, who were relatively free from an ethnic geography and the prison-house of race, who could get in their cars or onto a plane and go anywhere outside or inside the country without fear of losing their identity or having their passbook/identity book questioned, were also more free to speak their minds than the majority of the population. Perhaps the most stifling aspect of the apartheid state was that, for the majority, the freedom to *be* was considered a contradiction of the freedom to *move*.

2. See James Clifford, "Diasporas," in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997). It is noteworthy that the thesis for the second Johannesburg Biennale was developed in part from Clifford's text. See Okwui Enwezor, "Introduction. Travel Notes: Living, Working, and Traveling in a Restless World," in

Negotiating the Taxonomy of Contemporary African Art – Production, Exhibition, Commodification

Lauri Firstenberg

Kwame Anthony Appiah has suggested that an artist enters the contemporary art world in the space of culture and the place of the market.¹ In the context of contemporary African art, Appiah's proposition points to a decidedly charged network. The category "contemporary African art" is itself a highly contested territory—a question of Western reception rather than of artistic intention. And the classification is problematic given the impossibility of conclusively defining the diverse artistic production, exhibition, and commodification of an entire continent in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century. A progeny of the modern practice of cataloguing objects—objects synecdochic for cultures—the taxonomy "contemporary African art" reflects the design of Eurocentric modern institutions to serve national agendas. This young field of art is largely a construct defined by Western institutions. As such, it is framed by the binaries "traditional/modern" and "non-Western/Western." Museums and markets, pursuing their own vested interests, have focused on the Anglophone and Francophone artists of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly West Africa. In following this bias, the scholarship on contemporary African art has largely ignored the visual culture being produced in North, South, and East Africa themselves, although there is at the same time a new concern for itinerant or diaspora artists exhibiting internationally.

Traditional or indigenous African art has been compounded into a monolithic "African aesthetic" that at the same time subsumes a variety of "signature" styles assigned to particular social groups. The material cultures of communal or regionally based cultures have been received as collective "ethnic" aesthetics. (The concept "contemporary artist" as defined in the West, on the other hand, is rooted in the cult of the individual, in the production of "master" artists, and in the assignment of value to originality, authenticity, and invention.) This African aesthetic has been further defined in Western terms as the product of an indigenous culture unmarked by Western intervention, and in fact by any cultural dialogue—as predating, then, both colonial contact and Islamization. Collectors similarly have limited their tastes to objects they feel has the aura of "African authenticity."² This notion of a homogenous African aesthetic, which disregards the continent's distinct and dynamic regional, linguistic, religious, political, and cultural practices, often features in the discursive platform for artistic production from Africa. The Western understanding of the traditional arts of Africa as representing collective cultural identities is similarly restated in the reception of the work now called "contemporary African art."

Conflicting typologies govern the circulation and consumption of contemporary African art. The construct's authors have been hard-pressed to produce a concrete genre—the kind of label so useful to the academy, the museum, and the market. Artists, critics, and curators invested in reworking such homogenizing projects consistently resist this lexicon. Gesturing toward the dismantling of the dominant approach, a younger generation of scholars has begun to map a critical dialogue among contemporary practitioners living and working in the African, European, and American metropolises. The demonstration of a network of formal and conceptual exchanges serves to create context rather than categories, historicizing individual practices in

terms of a dynamic series of mobile experiences and dialogues based on a logic of migratory diasporic travel and global or rather transnational exchange. This essay is not intended simply to expose the obsolescence of current taxonomies of African artistic production. Instead, it will reflect upon the historical, dwelling on ethnic or national particularities of artists' identities in an effort to open up discussion of the growing corpus of scholarship and exhibition of contemporary African art.

The Western definition "contemporary African art" has historically been set against the backdrop of apparently more familiar territory: indigenous or traditional arts. In the notorious exhibition "*Magiciens de la terre*," organized in 1989 by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, works by "traditional and urban" artists included the fantasy coffins of the Ghanaian Kane Kwei, the Kongolesse popular painting of Cheri Samba, and the whimsical architectural models of the Kinshasa artist Bodys Isek Kingelez. The artists Martin chose, then, represented cross-cultural aesthetics between the Western and non-Western worlds. In mapping traditional values onto contemporary practices, the show maintained a hierarchy of African and Western modernities, rather than showing them as coterminous. European and American modernisms were defined by and against African art, as evidenced by a history of primitivism. It is in ways like this that the notion of contemporary African art has functioned purely as a problematic.

"*Magiciens de la terre*" inherited a legacy of primitivist discourse glaringly animated in the 1984 exhibition "'Primitivism' in Twentieth Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern," at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Together these exhibitions established a canonical and essentializing discourse around African art for the late twentieth century, a discourse based on relationships among Western modernist brands of appropriating non-Western cultural objects as emblems of the "primitive." This perpetuation of ethnographic and colonialist models as frames for contemporary African art engendered a series of exhibitions in response. In 1990, the Studio Museum in Harlem organized the show "Contemporary African Art: Changing Traditions," distinguishing its agenda from that of "*Magiciens de la terre*" by structuring the exhibition according to the following criteria: African artists who refuse outside influences; African artists who adopt modes of Western art; African artists who fuse both strategies. Exhibitions in Europe and America, from "*Magiciens de la terre*" to "Global Conceptualism," at the Queens Museum, New York, in 1999, have attempted to define Africa's contemporary visual culture for over a half a century, yet only recently have debates around that culture begun to examine the critical contributions of contemporary African art within modernist and postmodernist discourses.

Subsequent responses to "*Magiciens de la terre*" included "Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art," at the Center for African Art, New York, in 1991. This large exhibition was influential in the construction of the genre "contemporary African art" in the West. Again setting out to counter the argument of "*Magiciens de la terre*," curator Susan Vogel framed the visual material by way of a series of categories—"traditional art," "new functional art," "urban art," "international art," and "extinct art"—glossing the evolution of indigenous practices, the co-option of Western material culture by Africans, the contemporary adoption of traditional forms, and the assimilation of Western concepts and mediums. Later exhibitions and publications have attempted to disrupt such fixed categories, which do not represent the diffusion of work by African practitioners within Africa and in the West.

"Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa," an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in 1995, answered "Africa Explores" by featuring a group of elite, Western-trained artists. The exhibition's co-curator, Salah Hassan, has discussed the

complexities in the terminology of "contemporary African art" as it was defined in the 1960s by Ulli Beier, the Western founder of the Mbari Club in Oshogbo, Nigeria.³ For Hassan, "contemporary African art" is established according to the following parameters: where traditional art is religious, contemporary art is secular; where traditional art is communal, contemporary art is individual; and so on with the binaries rural/urban, popular/high, and conventional/inventive. Hassan's criticisms of these dichotomies elucidate the roots of the conflict in the discourse on contemporary African art, and account for the heterogeneity of the work's style, techniques, and concepts. Tradition and invention, for example, are not contradictory terms but can occur simultaneously. Artists may retain tradition, break from tradition, take up Western techniques, and combine all of these tactics. Hassan distinguishes "modern" from "contemporary" in that "modern" is a critical category entailing style, linguistic innovation, and a break with the past while "contemporary" is a temporal term. Begging the critical question "modern or contemporary?" the Africanist art historian Sidney Kasfir examines the parallel ascents of modernism and colonialism. Extending her inquiry, and using notions of geography, the artist as individual, artistic process, and patronage as a framework, she asks whether the contemporary is based on innovation or continuity. Kasfir's book *Contemporary African Art* (1999) asks "How 'postmodern' is contemporary African art?" and suggests, "Contemporary African art is quintessentially postcolonial in terms of its dates."⁴

In a 1990 issue of *African Arts* magazine the editors ask, "What are we going to do about African art? . . . the issue of contemporary art will not go away."⁵ In *Contemporary African Art*, Kasfir writes, "One can say that African artists are not so much fighting for the freedom to be 'African' (whatever that may mean) but to be fully accepted as artists, though this can only be articulated through their Africanness, since that is the site of their categorical exclusion from a global art discourse in the first place."⁶ A new generation of scholars and curators is attempting to account for dispersion in genre, geography, market, and artistic influence. Africanist approaches to scholarship have been superseded by an internationalist bent, pointing to the multivalent cultural postures of artists and artworks within global artistic production and amid transnational polemics. Renegotiations of existing taxonomies reveal the demands and discontinuities of the art market, the museum, and the academy, the institutions for which the category "contemporary African art" was generated. Often the artists' work attempts to elude the static cultural sphere to which artists from Africa are commonly relegated against the backdrop of institutional narratives and market demands. The field has recently expanded somewhat to become more inclusive of white artists and African artists of Asian descent, and to attempt to open up geographically hermetic zones. The younger model of scholarship weighs notions of migration, diaspora, and the complexities of targeting aesthetic citizenship.

These shifts in the lexicons of contemporary art and African art have moved the discourse toward what has been called a "new internationalism." In 1994, in fact, the Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVA), London, organized the conference "Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism," implicitly calling for this development. Influenced by black British cultural theory of the 1980s, the American discourse around the conception of contemporary African art dramatically shifted in turn. The British cultural theorist Stuart Hall maintains, "National identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation. . . . [A] nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings, a system of cultural representations."⁷ He continues, "Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as constituting a discursive device which represents difference as unity or identity."⁸

Okwui Enwezor's and Octavio Zaya's essay "Moving In: Eight Contemporary African Artists," published in the international art journal *Flash Art* in 1996, was another impetus for younger scholarship to resignify the field of contemporary African art.⁹ The artists whose work was presented in the article included Ike Ude, Bili Bidjocka, and Oladélé Bamgboyé. Enwezor and Zaya used the term "Contemporary African Artists" as a strategy for entrée into the international art world. Their essay was instrumental in moving these artists into a trajectory of solo exhibitions, monographs, and the Biennale circuit. The placement of the text in *Flash Art* was timely in that it coincided with the run of the exhibition "In/sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present," curated at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, by Enwezor and Zaya in collaboration with in-house curator Clare Bell. Exhibition and article served as a point of departure for one of the most influential international art exhibitions of the 1990s: the second Johannesburg Biennale, titled "Trade Routes: History and Geography" and framed around discourses of cultural transmigration and translation in the context of South Africa.

The exhibition "Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists," at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, in 1997, attempted to negotiate the complex typologies underlying such identity-politics-centered projects. The term "Africana," co-opted from diasporal studies, served as an alternative to taxonomic categorization of the work of contemporary artists from Africa living and working in Western metropolises. The category "Africana" is posited as flexible rather than fixed, and rehearses familiar tensions between the individual and the universal, the specific and the collective. But while the characterization of different artists' work around the framework "Africana" reflects an allegiance to the project of accounting for the multiple histories and diasporas represented by these artists and their work, it also seems to create yet another collectivizing museological paradigm. It is up for debate whether "Africana" is a successful substitute for the indeterminacy of "diaspora"; artists disparate in origin, chosen medium, and source of influence are often collapsed within the genre "contemporary African art," and are linked under the auspices of a like positionality—of "common . . . destinies of Diaspora, migration, and dislocation."¹⁰

Examination of the field's most recent history reveals debates around its growth, maintenance, perpetuation, and stabilization. "Looking Both Ways" is one of many exhibitions mounted in the wake of the exhibition "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa," curated by Enwezor and others and mounted at the Villa Stuck, Munich, in 2001, before traveling to a series of venues that ended in 2002 at P.S. 1, New York, an affiliate of The Museum of Modern Art. Rethinking the Western museological approach to the cultural production of Africa, "The Short Century" was positioned theoretically as a postcolonial project, functioning as an anthology of African culture rather than an art exhibition. Staging this exhibition at P.S. 1 marked a critical gesture, positioning art from Africa at MoMA/PS1 on a large scale for the first time since the "Young Negro Art" exhibition of 1943 and the "Primitivism" exhibition of 1984.

Similarly, "Looking Both Ways" bears the weight of the Center for African Art's "Africa Explores" exhibition, mounted over a decade before it. The years between can be characterized as a period of group exhibitions broaching the wide-reaching noncategory of "contemporary African art," both continental and diasporic. Those working in the field believed that the group-exhibition context was merely a point of departure, a strategy in an effort to supply language and context while introducing artists to audiences in America, Europe, and elsewhere. This introductory phase was meant to lead to monographic exhibitions and publications, and has for a select few, including William Kentridge, Yinka Shonibare, Santu Mofokeng, Touhami Ennadre, Kendell Geers, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Bodys Isek Kingelez, and Zarina Bhimji. But the

group-show model (an institutional obligation and popular favorite) will not go away. The question therefore becomes how to make the group exhibition relevant. Can it put forth new work and new artists? Can it interrupt archaic approaches, engaging and reinventing the terms offered by the legacy of the exhibitions within the field? What is the reason for featuring work by diasporal artists in a group exhibition?

The first time I installed an exhibition in New York was as a summer intern at the Museum for African Art in 1993. It was the New York debut of Kingelez, who was featured a decade later in Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany—a show that marked a major break in the efforts of curators and critics to bring work of artists from Africa to the mainstream. This type of exhibition genealogy signals the need for a cultural institution like the Museum for African Art to introduce the work of artists from Africa to New York audiences, or to commission new work in this context. In light of recent historical and contemporary exhibitions including “The Short Century” and Documenta 11, and of the deghettoizing of the African Pavilion in the 2001 Venice Biennale into the Arsenale at the Biennale of 2003, it has become more urgent to examine the ways in which work has been circulated, translated, and marketed under the rubric “contemporary African art.” A new model needs to be put in place outside this esoteric and disputed category; a step has to be made toward a more transnational discursive platform. Documenta 11 provided such a context; perhaps the question to ask is, What is the future of contemporary African art after Documenta 11?

In examining the institutional strategy of categorization, scholars vacillate between clinging to this obsolescent model and negotiating new paragons for the field, questioning modes of translation, resignification, and resistance. Curators working in the group-show mode have no choice at this time but to attempt to be complex, self-conscious in their approach, critical, and questioning, and to focus on specific works, their commodification, and their embeddedness in the terrain of Western and African categorization. Recent efforts along these lines are split in approach, either adhering to a neocolonial model or relying on the discourse of postcolonialism. In exposing the work of contemporary artists from Africa, it is imperative to interrogate matters of geography, the market, and artistic influence in order to account for the migratory status of both the artists and the artworks, and to attend to the multivalent cultural postures of artist, viewer, curator, and consumer. In an era fraught with exhibitions based on various conceptions of internationalism, globalism, and transnationalism, it is also important to remember those artists who refuse to participate in exhibitions framed by geographical or national imperatives.

1. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: African Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: at the University Press, 1993).
2. Sidney Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).
3. Salah Hassan, “The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Spring/Summer 1995, pp. 30–33.
4. Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, p.9.
5. John F. Povey, “First word” *African Arts* 23, no. 4, pp. 1–10.
6. Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, p. 213.
7. Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, eds., *Modernity and Its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 292.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 297. Hall's colleague Homi Bhabha writes, “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.” Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.
9. Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, “Moving In: Eight Contemporary African Artists,” *Flash Art* no. 186 (January/February 1996).
10. Salah Hassan, *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary African Women Artists* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1997), p. 1.