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Africa is a state of mind that defies definition

by Anny Shaw

Eurocentric views of the continent's contemporary art overlook its diversity in an increasingly migratory art world.

Just over a decade ago Africa Remix—the largest exhibition of African art ever seen in Europe—opened at the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf before travelling to London's Hayward Gallery. Its intentions were clear: to de-exoticise African artists, more than 60 of whom had work in the show, and to help pave the way for many to enter the global contemporary art market. For some artists, including El Anatsui, Chéri Samba and Gonçalo Mabunda, the exhibition helped underline their position on the global stage.

But, as critics noted at the time, Africa Remix attempted to survey contemporary African art in one fell swoop—an audacious if not impossible task given the size and diversity of the continent, and one that seemed to emphasise a Eurocentric view of Africa. For this reason, the Beninese artist Georges Adéagbo, who has a solo show at Galerie Wien Lukatsch at Art Basel (T8), refused to participate. The independent curator Stephan Köhler, who often works with Adéagbo to help realise his projects, says: "He didn't want to be in one of these comprehensive shows [on Africa]. It's presumptuous to say that one show can cover it all."

Clichés of Africa

The question of what constitutes contemporary African art is further complicated by the increasingly globalised nature of the art world. Artists from Africa have always moved around—some forced into exile, others by choice. Today many divide their time between two or more countries.

Adéagbo's site-specific installations bear witness to the migration of objects and culture. The artist, who was born in Benin in 1942, spends several weeks in the place where he is exhibiting, collecting objects, images and newspaper cuttings. Adéagbo then commissions craftsmen in Benin to create paintings and sculptures from the pictures he finds before shipping the works back to their city of origin. He is due to travel to Jerusalem for the first time this autumn in preparation for a show at the Israel Museum in early 2016.

Les artistes et l'écriture (2014) was first created for a show at Galerie Wien Lukatsch in Berlin; part of the installation is now on show at Art Basel. It consists of tribal sculptures, handwritten texts, books and newspaper clippings sourced in Germany and Benin. Among the histories recounted is the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Biafran War, which was waged in south-eastern Nigeria between 1967 and 1970.

"Georges is very much aware of not falling into the pitfall of being called a contemporary African artist," Köhler says. "He includes typical folkloristic African objects—clichés of Africa—in his installations as bait, but then he puts them next to European items so he constantly reverses the roles of the explorer and the explored. It's a tightrope walk not to be exoticised."

Since the installation was first shown across four rooms at Galerie Wien Lukatsch, a private collector from Aachen and the German state collection of contemporary art in Bonn have acquired parts of the work. The remaining installation at Art Basel is priced at €96,000.

Another artist whose works straddles Western and non-Western cultures is Ibrahim El-Salahi, who established a new visual vocabulary in Sudan that interweaves Islamic, African, Arab and Western artistic traditions.

The Art Newspaper, June 17, 2015

El-Salahi was born in Omdurman in 1930, but left in the 1950s to study at the Slade in London, returning to Sudan in 1957. In 1975, he went into exile from his homeland after being falsely accused of anti-governmental activities and imprisoned without trial. He divided his time between Qatar and the UK before settling in Oxford in the 1990s.

El-Salahi's itinerant life has shaped his career—and the various phases of his practice. Between the late 1950s



Ibrahim El-Salahi with *They Always Appear*, 1961. Photo: courtesy Vigo Gallery © Beth Rudin DeWoody

and early 1970s, the artist limited himself to painting in sombre tones: blacks, greys and browns, “the colours of the Sudan”, as he calls them.

During the 1970s El-Salahi embraced a brighter palette before going on to devote the third phase of his career to working in black and white. Here he was influenced by the social realism of the Mexican muralists whom he had met while travelling in the 1960s. “I prefer to work in black and white because it’s direct. It leaves a sense of drama,” he says. “Flamenco” (2011-12), a series of large canvases in black and white and several in burnt orange, that were first shown in El-Salahi’s 2013 retrospective at Tate Modern are on show at Vigo Gallery in London (until 31 July).

The myriad cultural influences on El-Salahi’s work present a challenge to a Eurocentric view of modernity, instead suggesting a universal concept. As the artist says: “I prefer it if people just think about it as art. To be linked to a continent or town lessens the message. The most important thing is the individual—a place has an effect on an individual.”

Equally peripatetic is Belgium-based Pascale Marthine Tayou, who is exhibiting in the Unlimited section at Art Basel. Tayou, who was born in Cameroon in 1967, describes himself as an explorer, and his nomadic lifestyle is reflected in his art, which often references global trade and export culture.

The artist has been using plastic bags in his work for the past ten years. They are a symbol, he says, of human relationships, as well as our relationship with the environment: “It’s all about how to live and how to care about where you live.”

At Art Basel, Tayou is showing *Plastic Tree* (2014, Galleria Continua, U29, priced between €50,000 and €200,000 depending on dimensions), a sculpture made from dry branches and colourful plastic bags. Despite its universal

The Art Newspaper, June 17, 2015

references to nature, humanity and globalisation, the installation recalls a particularly African practice of recycling manufactured objects, as well as the Western concept of the ready-made in art.

Artists stay at home

El Anatsui, who moved from his native Ghana to Nigeria in 1975 when he was 31, also uses found materials in his sculptures, including cassava graters, railway sleepers, driftwood, iron nails and obituary printing plates. But the artist, who is best known for his vast shimmering wall tapestries made out of flattened aluminium bottle tops, is often quick to point out that his work is not about recycling.

"In fact, I object to people using the word recycle in connection with the way I use my materials because my materials are not recycled. They are given a new life—they are transformed," Anatsui told the BBC in May, soon after receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale (his work is on show there until 22 November). "The bottle caps are no longer going back as bottle caps. They are part of an artwork and, being part of an artwork, they have a higher status ... a higher dimension."

The bottle tops, which are discarded by distilleries in Nigeria, represent a link between Africa, Europe and North America. Alcohol was one of the first commodities Europeans brought to Africa to trade, while rum and other spirits played a significant role in the transatlantic slave trade.

While the art world becomes increasingly transient, the emergence of new art markets in Africa also means that more artists are able to make a living at home. Anatsui is represented by October Gallery in London and Jack Shainman Gallery in New York (T6); in his Kinderhook space, Shainman is currently showing a survey of Anatsui's paintings, ceramics and metal works spanning 50 years (until 26 September). As Anatsui himself says: "With a growing interest in art from 'all over', and an enhanced capacity to reach global audiences, it is easier for artists not only in Nigeria but also other locations previously thought 'distant' to access information and pursue their careers by living in their home country.

"It gives one the advantage of being in touch with your own culture, yet still able to reach the rest of the world."

- *Art Basel's programme includes three talks on Africa: Africa, Works in Progress—Building New Art Institutions in Africa, Thursday 18 June, 10am-11.30am; Collecting Africa, Friday 19 June, 5pm-6pm; and Cultural Producers Africa, Saturday 20 June, 5pm-6pm*