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The Dilemmas of African Diaspora in the Global Art Discourse

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how the notion of African diaspora has been used as a framework for the reassessment of essentialized identity approaches in the domain of art history and curatorship, between the 1980s and 2000s. For this, I examine the emergence of the concept in cultural studies and how it served as a tool for unsettling the narratives of belonging associated to nation and ethnicity. Such contextualization provides a ground for the analysis of the dilemmas introduced by a diasporic perspective in the field of African art and the local-global art discourse.

Resumen

En este artículo, exploro cómo la noción de diáspora africana ha sido utilizada como un marco para la reevaluación de las narrativas de identidad esencializadas en el campo de la historia del arte y la curaduría, entre los años 1980 y 2000. Para esto, examino el surgimiento del concepto en los estudios culturales y sus usos como herramienta para desestabilizar las narrativas de pertenencia asociadas a las ideas de nación y etnicidad. Dicha contextualización abre el terreno para el análisis de los dilemas introducidos por una perspectiva diaspórica en el campo del arte africano y en el discurso del arte local-global.

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In the field of exhibition making, the notion of “African diaspora” emerges between the 1990s and the 2000s as a framework for approaching works by artists of African origin or Africans living outside the continent. Some examples of its uses include the show *Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa in and out of Africa* (49th Venice Biennial, 2001) and *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (Museum for African Arts, New York, 2003), which was accompanied by a publication featuring interviews and critical essays on the theme that structured the curatorship. Among them, *The Diaspora as Object* (2003) by John Pepper. In this text, Pepper takes the work *Carte de Séjour* by Cameroonian artist Barthélemy Togo — presented in the context of Dakar Biennale (1998) —, as a motto to analyze the aesthetic and discursive repercussions of the “African diaspora” in the visual arts. From the outset, the author notes that “what is called contemporary African art” is largely the fruit of a production of artists living in diaspora today. “As a result of this history of conflation,” Pepper argues, “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.”¹

Some years later, Sidney Kasfir (2008) proposed in *African Arts* a debate on the growing role of African diaspora artists in the global arts scene — a phenomenon that occurred *pari passu* with the ascendancy of critics and curators “located within this diaspora and not operating from the African continent”². In her provocation, Kasfir questioned the gaze destined to the artistic expressions within the African continent and its positioning in the international axes of circulation of contemporary art. “For every transnational, there are dozens of artists with similar training and potential who stay in Africa, because they want or have to,” stated the author. Tied to economic and social constraints,

these artists would take residence in Africa as an inescapable locus of their creative practice.

Some of the responses addressed to Kasfir draw upon a sharp criticism to the oppositions between the national-transnational and local-global markers regarding African artistic production. For Steven Nelson, such a dichotomy subscribes to the blind spots inherent to the nationalist perspectives in understanding African art:

Left unexamined and as a framing of her text, the issues articulated by artists must be necessarily seen within the framework of the state. While there are numerous examples where such is the case for artists who live on the continent as well as for those who not, Kasfir’s text suggests that nation is a concern for all who stay and, furthermore, that nation is a concern for none who leave.³

David Bunn echoes this criticism by challenging the alleged divergences between diaspora artists and those on the continent. According to him, this view inscribes “those who stay” in a static temporality that ignores the whole spectrum of transnational exchanges in the formation of the African continent itself:

The question is not of “national” traditions betrayed by self-identified diasporic artists, but of the always-already hybrid nature of place-bound traditions in Africa. What is at the heart of the argument is the need to face the transnational influences on art-making within African cities, like Kinshasa, Johannesburg, and Lagos, where a shuttling between styles and influences and an oscillation between high gallery and low tourist form is the norm. This heterogeneity includes, of course, a comprehensive engagement with film, video, radio, and cellular phone use that is more ubiquitous than in Pittsburg or Prague.⁴

In his commentary, Bunn also draws attention to the role played by names such as Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan — to whom Kasfir refers to as influential critics and curators — in the mobilization of internationalist African expressions in the light of a postcolonial perspective. Implied with late 20th century

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are the author’s.

¹ John Pepper, “The Diaspora as Object,” *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, edited by Laurie Ann Farrell (New York: Museum for African Art et al., 2003), 22.

² Sidney Kasfir, David Bunn, Steven Nelson et. al., “The (Dis)placement of National Art in a Transnational Artworld,” *African Arts*. 41:3, (2008), 10-12.

³ Nelson quoted in *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Bunn quoted in *Ibid.*, 12.

migratory flows, these actors have fostered initiatives that expand the dimensions of the diasporic experiences traditionally associated with slavery in the Atlantic space. Their approaches to artistic practices, in and out of Africa, reexamined the notions of belonging associated to African art, taking the place of birth and residence as categories to be observed from a critical, rather than a naturalized, perspective.

Before delving into the curatorial strategies outlined by these practitioners, I would like to explore how the notion of diaspora has been used as a framework for the reassessment of essentialized identity discourses. Such contextualization⁵ will provide a ground for understating the critical and symbolic potential of a diasporic stance in the field of art history and curatorship. For this, I will briefly discuss the emergence of the concept in cultural studies and how it served as a tool for “unsettling taken for granted notions of nation, citizenship and belonging”.⁶ Next, I will analyze some exhibitions, between the late 1980s and 2000s, where a diasporic positioning was employed in order to challenge notions of ethnicity, inclusion, and authenticity, inscribing the field of African art in a modern/global perspective.

Diaspora and identities

"Diaspora is concerned with the ways in which nations, real yet imagined communities (Anderson), are fabulated, brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and politics, both on land people call their own and in exile", defines Khatchig Tölölyan in his introductory essay of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*.⁷ It was in this volume that political scientist William Safran published his seminal paper *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, in which he described a set of characteristics shared

by subjects in diaspora, while differentiating it from processes of expatriation or economic migration.⁸

Adopted as a starting point by several attempts to define the term, the characteristics enunciated by Safran present a point of inflection that has been broadly problematized.⁹ It refers to the idea that there would be an "ideal" diasporic typology ruled by Jewish dispersion. "We should be wary of constructing our working definition of a term like diaspora by recourse to an ideal type," points out James Clifford.¹⁰ For Clifford, it is necessary to start from a non-normative sense of the diasporic condition that asserts experiences and social insertions, suggesting other paths to the mythology of return to a homeland.

By emphasizing shifting and reconfigurable ties among diaspora subjects, Clifford echoes the debates held by intellectuals such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy from the 1970s onwards, in the United Kingdom. It was during this period that Gilroy situated the first uses of the notion of diaspora in his practice as a “political and cultural idea before it became a scholarly matter”.¹¹ In the following decade, the historian affirms to use the term as a conceptual tool for thinking about the notions of identity and belonging, based on race relations in the United Kingdom, as well as the “continuities and differences in black experience” from a transnational perspective. “Transcoded from its Jewish source,” explains Gilroy, “the term provided a model which the modern black thinkers of the Western hemisphere were eager to adapt to their particular post-slave circumstances.”¹² In an interview to Christine Eyene, Gilroy describes the moment when the notion of diaspora became a crucial tool in his critique on the ideologies of the nation-state:

⁵ William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1991), 83-99.

⁶ Please refer to James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 9, No. 3 (1994), 302-338; Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities*, reprinted ed. (London: Routledge, 2010); Brent Edwards, “The uses of diaspora,” *Social Text* 66, Vol. 19, No. 1, (Spring 2001): 45-73; Kim Butler, “Defining diaspora, defining a discourse,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Volume 10, Number 2 (Fall. 2001), 189-219; Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28:1 (2005), 1-19; et al.

⁷ Clifford, “Diasporas”, 306.

⁸ As quoted by Stephane Dufoix, *The Dispersion: A History of the Word Diaspora* (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2016), 322-323.

⁹ Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora,” *Paragraph* 17, no. 3 (1994), 208

⁵ For a detailed genealogy of the word diaspora, as well as its uses and perspectives in the social sciences, see *The Dispersion: A history of the word Diaspora* (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2016)

⁶ Claire Alexander, “Beyond the Diaspora Diaspora: A Response to Rogers Brubaker,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, no. 9 (2017), 1550.

⁷ Khachig Tölölyan, “The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1991), 3-7.

I became interested in the diaspora when I became aware of the relationship between racism and nationalism. [...] National solidarity is often at the heart of the discourse of resistance, and I have always criticized nationalism. Because, in my view, it is always linked to the idea of race and ethnicity in their absolute. Studying the diaspora allowed me to address this problem. [...]

Talking about diaspora requires a mental exercise of understanding that one can exist in many places at once. That the place of one's existence and residency may be different from the place of origin. In this sense, genealogy and geography are to be understood in their tensions.¹³

The notion of multiple belongings emerges in the biography and thought of Paul Gilroy through a similar path from where the concept of identity gains moving contours in Stuart Hall's work. In both authors, the dispersion of black peoples to the Americas offers an archetype for a new conception of diaspora. Although speaking from different perspectives, Hall and Gilroy are part of the Windrush generation (1948-1971), named in reference to the arrival of the Caribbean migrants to England after the war. Hall — who moved from Jamaica to Britain as a student in 1951 — used to tell in his interviews how he always felt a stranger on both sides of the Atlantic, neither "from here" or "there".¹⁴ Perhaps because of this, Hall has taken identity as a central axis of his social analysis. In many of his speeches and writings, Hall noted that identity would not be an inherent characteristic of an individual, but a becoming, a construction born in dialogue with the collective histories and political ideologies in progress.¹⁵

Hall distinguishes this conception of identity from another view based on the expression of cultural ties shared by individuals attached to a common "history" or "ancestry."¹⁶ It refers, in his terms, to the collective assertion of a "one true self" emerging from a "stable, immutable and

continuous" frame of reference. Under the circumstances of imposed dispersions, as in the case of the historical African diaspora, the image of the *homeland* inscribes the ties of ancestry in a spatial dimension. "Africa is the name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the center of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked," says Hall.¹⁷ Nevertheless, and despite the value of such images in the gestation of black movements, Hall calls attention to the impossibility of returning to a homeland. Transformed by the irreversible course of history, this "original," pre-colonial Africa can no longer contain the idealized expectations of ancient diasporas, at the risk of ratifying the Western narrative of a continent fixed to an immemorial past. "To this 'Africa,' which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again," Hall emphasizes.¹⁸

The predicament of inclusion

It is not surprising that the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, and their conceptions of diasporic identity, had a significant influence on the work of several artists who shared the same political context. Among them were members of the BLK Art Group (1979-1984) — formed by Keith Piper, Marlene Smith, Eddie Chambers, and Donald Rodney —, John Akomfrah — the precursor of the *Black Audio Film Collective* (1982) —, or Rasheed Araeen — founder of *Third Text* journal (1987). Many of them were migrants, or children of Asian and Caribbean immigrants, directly affected by the racial markers that contained the diffusion of their works in the visual arts scene. "In the absence of British art world support structures, [this] new generation, following the initiative of the BLK Art Group, sought to develop their own galleries, magazines, archives, and debates," explains Jean Fischer.¹⁹

¹³ Paul Gilroy and Christine Eyene, "Nouvelle topographie d'un Atlantique noir," *Africultures*, v. 72, n. 1, p. 82 (2008), 82-87.

¹⁴ See John Akomfrah and Lina Gopaul, *The Stuart Hall Project* (United Kingdom: Smoking Dogs Films, 2013).

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and the Diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams, and Laura. Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 222.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 223-225.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁹ Jean Fischer, "Stuart Hall and the Black Arts Movement," *Radical Philosophy* 185 (May/June 2014), 71-72.

The exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection: An Exhibition of Works by Young Black Artists* (Africa Center of Covent Garden, and other venues, 1982-1983) was among these initiatives. In the introductory text of the show, Eric Pemberton inscribed the participating artists in a genealogy of diasporic black communities formed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. From this perspective, *racial solidarity* was the mobilizing force of a common subjectivity, developed throughout the dispersions of enslaved Africans in the Atlantic. "We are trying to recreate and develop our humanity," said Pemberton.²⁰ Such statement guided his speech for the opening lecture of the conference *First National Black Art Convention* (Wolverhampton Polytechnic, October 28, 1982), organized in the context of the exhibition. Far from a consensus, the gathering raised debates around ethnic, political, and social markers associated with the notion of Black art. Arguments for a field restricted to Afro-Caribbean artists, formulated by some participants, countered the desire to include other so-called "minority" groups in the British migratory context.²¹

Two decades later, Stuart Hall reflected on the disputes of the 1980s considering that the concept of *Black Art* transcended, at that time, the racial question. In his words, it refers to a political positioning based on the migratory experience, beyond the phenotypic markers to which it is usually associated. In the spectrum of the British experience, Hall considers that the term "black" represented ...

... a signifier of difference: a difference which, being historical, is therefore always changing, always located, always articulated with other signifying elements: but which, nevertheless, continues – persistently – to register its disturbing effects.²²

At the heart of these negotiations were the different contours that the diasporic experiences

assumed in Great Britain. In this context, multiple forms of belonging were engendered (and dissipated) through the various generations of migrant communities, split between the colonial past and the new life in Europe. If the first generation demonstrated an "assimilationist tendency [...] consistent with the initial hopes and aspirations of the Windrush"²³, the children of the 1980s witnessed the end of this utopia, making "connections to the homeland of their ancestors, often surrounding imagined native culture with mythological symbolic references".²⁴

In this context, the notion of an "ethnic art" equally forged a common categorization to these artists, giving birth to a new set of cultural policies. In 1982, the London Arts Council carried out an agenda aimed at recognizing the "multiethnic" nature of British culture and created a subcommittee of *ethnic arts*.²⁵ A few years later, in a lecture presented at the Slade Arts School (University of London, 1985), Rasheed Araeen made a harsh critique of this nomenclature, inscribing it in a genealogy of modern "primitivism", and questioning the place of "race" and "ethnicity" in the representative discourses that emerged then.²⁶

A graduate of engineering in Karachi, Araeen migrated to the United Kingdom in the 1960s to start an artistic career after being introduced to modern art through "magazines and books imported from the West".²⁷ A decade after his arrival in London, Araeen remarks that his production was not being analyzed in terms of form or content, neither being read from its contribution to the field of visual arts itself. He fiercely notes that the critics of his work were particularly interested in his supposed affiliation with an Islamic tradition:

Somehow I began to feel that the context or history of Modernism was not available to me, as I was

²⁰ *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, exhibition pamphlet, 1.

²¹ See BLK Art Group, Audio Record. *The First National Black Art Convention*, October 28th, 1982; and Keith Piper, "Coming up in the Black Moment. A Personal Reflection on the BLK Art Group by Keith Piper," *BLK Art Group Research Project 2012*. URL: <http://www.blkartgroup.info> (accessed July 27, 2019).

²² Stuart Hall, "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-war History," *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 61, Issue 1, 1 (March 2006), 22.

²³ Jean Fischer, "The Other Story and the Past Imperfect," *Tate Papers*, no.12 (Autumn 2009).

²⁴ Pauline Souza, "Implications of Blackness in Contemporary Art" in Amelia Jones, *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2009).

²⁵ Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain* (exh. catalog) (London: Hayward Gallery, 1989), 138.

²⁶ Rasheed Araeen, "From primitivism to ethnic arts," *Third Text*, 1:1 (1987), 6-25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

often reminded by other people of the relationship of my work to my own Islamic tradition...Now I'm being told, both by the Right and the Left, that I belong to the 'Ethnic Minority' community and that my artistic responsibility lies within this categorization. It is my intention to show you [...] that this categorization is the function of a new Primitivism in Britain.²⁸

The misreadings of African, Caribbean or Asian artworks in the history of modernism were the subject of *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain* (Hayward Gallery), an exhibition idealized by Araeen between 1989 and 1990. "This is a story [...] of those men and women who defied their 'otherness' and entered the modern space that was forbidden to them," he states.²⁹ As with Araeen himself, many of the artists included in the show (Francis Newton Souza, Avinash Chandra, Gavin Jantjes) found in the axis of *alterity* a possible path for the critical and historical appreciation of their works — despite their role in the expansion of a modern visual language beyond the frame of the *other*.

There is, however, a blind spot in Araeen's critique of *otherness*, which can be identified in the very title of *The Other Story*. It refers to the "Afro-Asian" framework that ends up inscribing Araeen's curatorship in the paradigm of the ethnicity he sought to criticize. This problem is pointed out by Jean Fischer, in an article, retrospective to the exhibition: "I always found it difficult to accept 'Afro-Asian', Araeen's term for this artistic constituency, since it is too redolent of genetic marking, and the 'hyphenated' ethnic identities adopted by the USA."³⁰ Another ambivalent aspect in the show concerns the criticism of a "Eurocentrism" that ends up being legitimized through its own validation codes. Fischer considers that "Araeen's dilemma was that the demand for inclusion in any habitus [...] is a double-edged sword", which she illustrates via the

question of the foreigner's inclusion, elaborated by Derrida in *Of Hospitality* (2000):³¹

To accept inclusion is to submit to a subtle form of subjection and control, terms that those artists who later rejected Britain were perhaps not prepared to tolerate: hospitality and hostility are two faces of the same coin.³²

The impasse between inclusion and the subjection to a Western art history canon can be examined *vis-à-vis* the exclusionary nature of modernist narratives, as advanced by Salah Hassan:

As we well know, the dominant history of Western modernism leaves out the massive infusions of non-Western artists and cultures into the metropolitan heartland throughout the twentieth century. Such an omission renders invisible the important influences these artists have exerted on Western modernist art practice and on the very fabric of the societies they adopted as their new homes.³³

By the same token, the concept of "cultural difference", as discussed by Olu Oguibe points out the challenges faced by artists "who came to the global contemporary art arena from the backgrounds outside the West only to discover that the most valued attribute required of them is difference".³⁴ When reflecting upon the place of the *arts from Africa* in modern and contemporary visual culture, Oguibe argues that a quest for difference has excluded the contribution of African artists to modernity itself. "The figure of the individual genius," he affirms, "was reserved for Europe while the rest of humanity was identified with the collective, anonymous production pattern that inscribes primitivism".³⁵ Confined to an inescapable collective belonging, the contemporary artist finds herself incessantly framed within the narratives of origins or the cultural peculiarities, "rather than to [her] contributions to, and discursive place in, contemporary sculpture and installation art."³⁶

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Salah Hassan, "African Modernism: Beyond Alternative Modernities Discourse," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, 3, (2010), 452.

³⁴ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), XII.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁹ Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain* (exh. catalog) (London: Hayward Gallery, 1989), 9.

³⁰ Jean Fischer, "The Other Story and the Past Imperfect," *Tate Papers*, no.12 (Autumn 2009). URL <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect> (accessed July 27, 2019).

“Where do you come from?” is, in this context, the question that demarcates the fiction of alterity associated with the work of African artists, despite all their transits and global repertoires.³⁷ As the course of these mobilities expand the forms of belonging, it may be opportune to recall the Stuart Hall’s statement on the impossibility of locating the origin of an individual in one single place. “When I ask people where they come from, I expect to be told an extremely long story,” he points in an interview featured in *The Stuart Hall Project*.³⁸

“Is diaspora the new West?”

In 2001, Olu Oguibe organized with Salah Hassan the exhibition *Authentic/Ex-centric*, presented at the 49th Venice Biennial (2001). The show featured the work of seven African artists (or of African origin) living outside the continent.³⁹ From the outset, the title of the show synthesized the vision of African art enunciated by its curators. Here, the term “authentic” was used to challenge the demands for “authenticity and the exotic that continues to frame the acknowledgment and reception of African contemporaneity outside the continent,” while “ex-centric” focused on the transit of references between Africa and other parts of the world. From this line of thought, Oguibe and Hassan sought to illuminate “the ways in which African artists have interpreted and translated the aesthetic and social experiences of both historical and post-colonial Africa as part of a global sensibility.”⁴⁰

The problem of authenticity, however, was not new to the field of African art. Since the 1970s, a number of articles and symposia attest to the relevance of this matter.⁴¹ In *African Art and*

Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow (1992), Sidney Kasfir went back to these discussions in order to examine the paradigm of “cultural authenticity” in African art. Her purpose was to explicit how the construction of its canon takes the colonial period, and the contact with the West, as the macula in its supposed creative purity.

In that same year, Jean Fischer gave evidence that this issue was not specific to African artistic production. In order to expose the flaws in the conceptualization of works that escape the aesthetic parameters of a Euro-American matrix, Fischer cited an exhibition of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) at the contemporary art center Witte de With (Rotterdam) in 1992.⁴² The show was conceived about a decade after the artist’s death, and it featured an extensive survey of his work, including references to Piet Mondrian and the neo-concrete movement in Brazil. According to Fischer, many critics disqualified the artist’s conceptual contribution, considered as inauthentic insofar as it reflected “Euramerican tendencies,” and presented no evidence of a supposed “Brazilianness.” As a reflection of a universalizing rhetoric, such a view considered as *inauthentic*, and therefore impure, any work that incorporated artistic expressions beyond local references:

To be locked into the frame of ethnicity is also to be locked out of a rigorous philosophical and historical debate that risks crippling the work’s intellectual development and excluding it from the global circuit of ideas where it rightfully belongs.⁴³

It is against an analogous “frame of ethnicity” that the artists and curators positioned themselves in *Authentic/Ex-centric*. They referred to the establishment of a discursive field that challenged traditional art historical boundaries to encompass new perspectives for modern and contemporary African production. The fact that the works exhibited in the show were inscribed in a conceptual framework served as a strategic

³⁷ For a deeper comprehension on how this question is addressed to African artists see Oguibe’s essay “Art, identity, boundaries: The Rome lecture” in *Nka: journal of contemporary African art* (Brooklyn, NY) no. 3, 1995

³⁸ John Akomfrah and Lina Gopaul, *The Stuart Hall Project* (United Kingdom: Smoking Dogs Films, 2013).

³⁹ Willem Boshoff, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Godfried Donkor, Rachid Koraichi, Berni Searle, Zineb Sedira and Yinka Shonibare.

⁴⁰ Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, “Authentic/Ex-Centric” at the Venice Biennale:

African Conceptualism in Global Contexts,” *African Arts*, 34, 4 (2001), 65.

⁴¹ See Marie Denise Shelton “Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery: Authenticity in African Art”, *African Arts* 9(3) (1976): 20–92; Frank Willet, “True or False? The False Dichotomy.” *African Arts* 9(3) (1976): 8-14.

⁴² Jean Fischer, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” *New Histories: The Institute of Contemporary Arts*, edited by Steven Nelson and Lia Gangitano (Boston: The Institute, 1996), 32-39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

gesture, with theoretical and political repercussions. On the one hand, it represented the affirmation of the African intellectual artist, with a repertoire marked by global references, on the other, it rejected the signs of ethnicity as a currency of exchange and strategy of survival for this production:

If any creative or critical strategy establishes a firm link between contemporary and classical African art, that strategy is conceptualism: Both emphasize the pre-eminence of idea over form. Although many contemporary African artists are aware of this link and have drawn considerably from classical sources independent of whatever precedents were set by modernism, we must emphasize that conceptual art by contemporary African artists is inseparable from the global conceptual art movement.⁴⁴

In rethinking the place of African artists in this global circuit, Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe also exposed the politics of (in)visibility behind the institutional logics that governed the contemporary art system. In this respect, the curators envisioned the inclusion of the exhibition in the 49th Venice Biennial as "part of an effort to remedy the virtual absence of Africa in the Venice Biennale, and hopefully in other significant international cultural forums of its kind".⁴⁵

A few years later (2008), *Nka Journal* organized a debate on *Authentic/Ex-Centric* (2001) and a series of African art exhibits that took place between the 1990s and 2000s, including *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (1995), *The Short Century* (2001), *Looking Both Ways* (2003), *A Fiction of Authenticity* (2003), *Snap Judgments* (2006), and *Africa Remix* (2005). "By breaking down the artificial boundaries [...] between the so-called 'Arab Africa' and 'Black Africa,' [these shows] critiqued many of the essentializing tendencies that have plagued the field since its inception", stated Hassan.⁴⁶ Among the topics of the debate, were discussed the role of these platforms in the expansion of an anthropological vision of African

artistic production, the relevance of a continental framework, and the centrality of the curator in redefining a canon of contemporary African art — which, for Elizabeth Harney, needed to be "situated":

The scholarly writing of curators is much needed in a situation in which art-historical narratives are so slow to address the cosmopolitan richness of contemporary artistic expressions. One needs, however, to continue to be sensitive to the workings of canonization, which advance an elite class of carefully chosen artists and ignore an enormous set of visual practices upon the [African] continent.⁴⁷

As Harney and other discussants argued, most of these curators and artists were based in Europe and the United States, producing exhibitions that end up reaching a Western audience. For Clive Kellner, it was vital to address this issue, as the West was becoming the space *par excellence* for the categorization and reframing contemporary African art. Kellner was even more incisive in his criticism when he raises that most of the discussants in *Nka's* roundtable lived and worked outside Africa. "Is diaspora the new West?", asked Kellner to his peers.⁴⁸

Remarkably, *Nka's* forum was published in the same year as Kasfir's debate in *African Arts*, showing that the politics behind an emergent diasporic framework demanded urgent reexamination. Far from reaching a consensus, these issues have remained very much alive in current debates on African art history and curatorship. Evidence of this was the symposium *Art History in Africa*, organized by RAW Material Company (Dakar, September 2018). "Research challenges and best practices in the history of African art were fiercely debated on the pages of academic journals such as *African Arts*", stated Koyo Kouoh in the event's opening speech, "but the methodologies and epistemological structures of these studies have not yet been freed from their

⁴⁴ Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, "Authentic/Ex-Centric" at the Venice Biennale: African Conceptualism in Global Contexts," *African Arts*, 34, 4 (2001), 73

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

⁴⁶ Chika Okeke-Agulu and Salah Hassan, "The Twenty-First Century and the Mega Shows: A Curators' Roundtable," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Spring/Summer, 2008), 154.

⁴⁷ Harney as quoted by Okeke-Agulu, "The Twenty-First Century and the Mega Shows", 161

⁴⁸ Kellner, as quoted by Okeke-Agulu and Hassan, "The Twenty-First Century and the Mega Shows", 174

frames historically focused on the West".⁴⁹ In her closure, Kouoh emphasized the role of African-based research to foster more consistent art historical topics and subjects.

Conclusion

As it has been noted, the inscription of African artistic practices to a global diaspora perspective allowed a critical revision of unsettled notions associated to this production, while offering a fertile ground for the reassessment of paradigmatic narratives of modern and contemporary art in the West itself.⁵⁰ However, as Peffer argued, diaspora risks becoming a new essentialism for identity, "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".⁵¹

The essentialization of diasporic identities has been subject to criticism in Rogers Brubaker's *The 'diaspora' diaspora* (2005). According to Brubaker, although "diaspora can be seen as an alternative to the essentialization of belonging [...] it can also represent a non-territorial form of belonging".⁵² Instead of theorizing the diaspora in cohesive terms, Brubaker advocates its study as a category of practice and social positioning. "As a category of practice, diaspora is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties," he points.⁵³ Claire Alexander suggested, on the other hand, that the distinction between diaspora as an "entity" and "positioning" fails to confront the critique of race and ethnicity advanced by "scholars of color" operating from the West.⁵⁴ As we have seen with Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, the

idea of diaspora develops in their theories as a means to elaborate a comprehension on racial and migratory issues that arise from their own positioning in British society.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of these debates to the field of visual arts lies in the invitation to think artistic creation beyond naturalized aesthetic projects, be they inscribed in local or global axes of circulation. Under this light, the idea of a specific diasporic genre falls into a new kind of essentialism, and should be problematized. Alternatively, we could focus on the struggles and tensions arising from diasporic practices, according to specific contexts. While operating in dialogue (or friction) with the West, the poetics drawn by such consciousness subscribe to contradictory and complex forms of belonging. By the same token, the negotiations between diasporic and local artistic projects should not fall under binary readings, neither ignore the circulations that mark the trajectories of various artists living on the African continent. Many of them, at some point of their career, were part of the African diaspora. Others have exhibited outside Africa or, still, have held dialogues with sources, teachers, and colleagues whose trajectories were set in transit. Their works ultimately remind us that the circumscription of local artistic practices to exclusive axes of locality fails to acknowledge extrinsic exchanges that fall out the frame of internationalism.

⁴⁹ Kouoh's opening speech, *Art History in Africa*, organized by RAW Material Company (Dakar, September 2018).

⁵⁰ Salah Hassan, "The 'Darkest Africa Syndrome' and the Idea of Africa: Notes toward a global vision of Africa and its modernist practice," in *Diaspora Memory Place: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z*, edited by Salah Hassan and Cheryl Finley (Munich: Prince Claus Fund Library, 2008), 135.

⁵¹ John Peffer, "The Diaspora as Object," *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, edited by Laurie Ann Farell (New York: Museum for African Art et al., 2003), 23.

⁵² Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28:1 (2005), 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Claire Alexander, "Beyond the Diaspora Diaspora: A Response to Rogers Brubaker," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, no. 9 (2017), 1550.