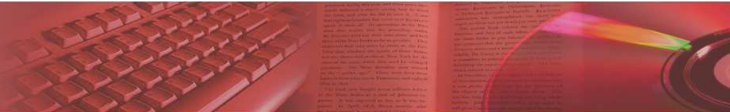

Elizabeth Harney. *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. xxv + 316 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3395-1; $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3385-2.

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Art in Senegal, Beyond the Shadow of Modernism

"[Kan-Si] does not want to be forced to choose between the poles of provincialism and homogeneity so often presented as the options for admission to an international art market" (pp. 202-203).

In Senghor's Shadow is a first of its kind: a book-length academic study of the institutional aspects of the elite modernist art world in Dakar, Senegal, based on dissertation-level research and published by a prestigious American university press. Elizabeth Harney's book joins the company other academic books on African modernism produced over the past decade by authors like Sidney Kasfir, Olu Oguibe, Elizabeth Rankin, and Simon Ottenberg, as well as Okwui Enwezor's *Short Century* exhibition and anthology (2001) and an ever growing number of essays and exhibition catalogues published in Africa, Europe and the U.S.[1] One of the great strengths of these books is that they do not concern themselves entirely with the most recent manifestations of international art produced by Africans residing in the West, but they are cognizant of the historical aspects and the political implications of the modern artistic encounter in Africa itself. Harney's book extends this sort of inquiry by taking a good hard look at the aesthetic pressures that modernist artists in Senegal have borne at home since independence in 1960. These pressures, at their most basic, may be read as a false choice between global modernist homogeneity and isolated provincialism, as the artist Kan-Si claims above. But the story of how these options have been imposed and how they have been negotiated is quite complicated. What sets *In Senghor's Shadow* apart from most other earlier texts on modernist art in Senegal is its sustained analysis of the institutional constraints faced by artists (260 pages worth) that establishes their intellectual milieu in a manner that both references and critiques key aspects of postcolonial theory. As such, this book digs down to the very roots of the idea of a modernist art practice in Africa. It is an important first text for a future library of in-depth critical studies on African art's modernity. It is valuable as a reference text for educators, and is suitable for graduate and advanced undergraduate studies on African art, Modernist primitivism, and post-1945 art.

According to the author, *In Senghor's Shadow* seeks to uncover the "complexities and contradictions of the local circumstances," and to document how artists "have engaged with the histories and practices of modernism and have participated in attempts to link a new aesthetic to the project of nation building" in post-independence Senegal (p. 4). She promises a study that is not dependent on either "postcolonial jargon or universalist aestheticism" and that challenges the older anthropological methods and categories in which much of the study of African art is still embedded (p. 4). Harney's excavation of the "local" is not concerned with ethno-aesthetics so much as it is attentive to the ways that artists and intellectuals from Senegal have reacted to, critiqued, and attempted to negotiate a place for themselves vis-à-vis Western-oriented assumptions about the char-

acter of high modernist painting and sculpture.

The primary vehicle for this engagement with the idea of culture on an international scale, and the topic that is repeatedly shuffled and re-examined throughout Harney's text, is the theorization (and commoditization) of the essence of blackness as "Negritude." Negritude was the official cultural ideology of the Senegalese state under its first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, from 1960 to 1980. Senghor's Negritude was an evolving idea of "the sum total of black values," inspired by ideas coming out of the Harlem Renaissance and adapted by African and Caribbean expatriate intellectuals in Paris between the World Wars as a means to create a positive pan-African sense of identity in resistance to the dominant view of Africans and Diasporans. For Senghor, black civilization was characterized by an essential emotionality, vitality, communalism, earthiness, and, most of all, rhythm. In his view these were aspects found lacking in much of white and European civilization and were thus the contribution that black culture could make toward a more fully integrated human civilization. Senghor, who was a poet before he was a politician, made this Negritude idea the criterion of state patronage of the arts during his tenure, and all modernist artists who either trained or worked in Senegal during those years had to situate their work in relationship to this official idea of Africanity if they expected to get commissions and survive.

Senghorian Negritude was, at its core, an inversion of ideas of "the primitive" as formulated by European philosophers like Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and by visual artists following the Cubists and Fauves. Negritude philosophy turned ideas about the savage other on their head and held them up as a challenge to create a fundamentally new kind of humanism. Senegalese artists under Senghor's patronage likewise claimed the look of the European post-cubist painters to be "African," and developed unique forms inspired partly by modernist primitivism's earlier mistranslation of the idea of Africa onto the two dimensions of the canvas. Senegal (like South Africa, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe) was, for reasons of political and economic contingency, one of the few African countries to produce a fully-fledged (though small) modernist art scene complete with schools, dealers, critics, and galleries. Since this efflorescence of modern art in the new nation was brought into being under the direct financial and ideological input of Senghor's government, it also entailed a curtailing of the range of options for possible artistic production. This "Negro-African aesthetic" was a gilded cage for a decade or two in Senegal.

Harney keeps her eye on the big picture surrounding the Senegalese art world, and thus quite ably negotiates the contradictory discourses of influence and containment characteristic of this "other" history of modern art: the history of what happens when modernism is taken up by artists beyond the European and American centers of the international art world. The author is clear that essentialist ideas of "identity" and extravagant fears that African artists will succumb to "assimilation" have created a false dichotomy in the global art world, a dichotomy that artists have had to struggle with (p. xxiv). In Harney's account, Senegalese artists during and after Senghor's dominance attempted to engage with ideas of Africanity in four successive ways. First, in the post-independence spirit of Negritude, there was an engagement with formal concepts and an iconographic repertoire of classical African art motifs evolved from modernist primitivism, as epitomized by the art of Papa Ibra Tall and his tapestry workshop at Thiès. Second was an exploration of ideas of performance, impermanence, and political critique through which artists like Issa Samb, El Sy, and the informal Laboratoire Agit-Art group meant to engage with African ideas of the social as "communality." Third, is the approach to African art as "conceptual," as seen in the works of Viyé Diba. Finally, there is the current generation's engagement with the African street, with the metropolitan and popular visual culture of African cities as a material for making artistic commentary on present circumstances.

In Senghor's Shadow contains five chapters and an introduction. The first four pages of the introduction discuss the rise to fame of the "African van Gogh," Mor Faye, a highly celebrated Dakarois painter who succumbed to cerebral malaria in 1984. The tragic tale of Faye's international fame and local struggle against the Senghorian patronage system are held up by Harney as a model for the rest of her study. In this context, it is striking that not a single work of art by Faye is pictured or discussed at length, and that the artist himself is never mentioned again in the book. Thus, this book hints early on, though claims to the contrary are made (p. 15), that in fact it is not going to be object- or artist-centered, but will be mostly a historicizing critique of the official institutions of art in Senegal. Harney's text is most successful where it examines modern art in Senegal through its history of what the author calls "arts governance" and uses the model of an "art world" or a "field of cultural production" following writers like Walter Becker, Arthur Danto and Pierre Bourdieu. Harney also claims to show how Senegalese artists "manipulated primitivist images

of Africa to produce 'deformations of mastery,' [a term borrowed from Houston Baker's study of the Harlem Renaissance]," in a postcolonial context (p. 17). At this she is less successful, and not because the Senegalese artists did not continually seek to challenge the false association of modernism with Westernism (they did), but because this study rarely engages with the visual content of images produced.

Chapter 1, "Rhythm as the Architecture of Being: Reflections on un Âme Nègre," discusses the philosophy of Negritude from its birth among expatriate African and Caribbean intellectuals in Paris between the World Wars, to its promotion as a state ideology and a model for official patronage in the independent Senegal of the 1960s and 1970s. It links up W.E.B. du Bois' ideas of pan-Africanism, with Alain Locke's theory of the New Negro from the Harlem Renaissance, and the literature and political philosophy developed in the pages of journals like *Presence Africaine* and *Legitime Defense*. The chapter jumps back in time about halfway through, in order to discuss the important antecedent of French colonial West Africa and the policy of assimilation in the Four Communes of Senegal (p.34). Then the author describes the development of Senghor's aesthetic philosophy into a fully fledged political philosophy and a powerful nationalist program meant to contest the colonial order of assimilation to exclusively French cultural values. For Senghor, Africans (and all black peoples) should assimilate Western culture on their own terms, or else be assimilated on European terms (p. 43). Negritude was thus envisioned as a cultural ideal rooted in traditional sources but was to be expressed in modernist terms. One problem with this formula, as pointed out by writers as diverse as the Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, and South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele, was that it romanticized Africa based on a reductive view of the past and that it ignored "the socioeconomic challenges" that faced Africa's newly independent states (p. 45). Nevertheless, Negritude became the ruling idea during the first twenty years of independent Senegal, and it was the founding philosophy supporting the artists who have collectively come to be known as the École de Dakar.

Chapter 2, "The École de Dakar: Pan-Africanism in Paint and Textile," addresses the history of Senghorian Negritude in relation to arts patronage during the 1960s and 1970s. Harney argues that while Senghor often referred to artists working under state patronage as his "dear children," the artists loosely grouped under the moniker École de Dakar in fact did not follow "a strictly prescribed artistic vision" but were themselves involved in helping shape "a highly syncretic post independence vision" for the arts (p. 52). This is perhaps the most valuable chapter in the book. It gives more detail than previously available on the history of internal aesthetic debates from the period as well as important particulars of Senghorian art education and art promotional structures, especially the École des Arts, the landmark First World Festival of Negro Art held in Dakar in 1966, and the traveling exhibition "Art sénégalais d'aujourd'hui" in 1974. The relation of these phenomena to art schools in Nigeria, Rhodesia, the Congo, Uganda and South Africa during the same years is briefly addressed (pp. 67-68). Harney also describes the establishment of a state-subsidized tapestry school founded by Papa Ibra Tall at Thiès. Under Tall's direction, "authentic" African themes were woven on looms imported from France, using wool imported from Holland and Belgium. This new monumental "peoples" art was meant to evoke traditional African weaving, and was produced mostly for the decoration of state offices and as state gifts for foreign visitors. The tapestries illustrated exotic flora and fauna, market scenes, and a generalized set of masks and decorative objects from around the continent, and they were understood to be the "ultimate embodiments" of a Negro-African aesthetic (p. 68).

Though it is not addressed in her text, the author includes a recent photograph of the tapestry production center (p. 72). In this image men are seen working over drafting tables in the background while women do the work of weaving in the foreground. One wonders what the relations of gender to production were at Thiès, or indeed for the École de Dakar as a whole.

The last half of this chapter is devoted to an intensive re-theorization of the relation of canonical forms of modernist primitivism to the modernist arts, like those of the École de Dakar, that have been produced outside the main centers of the art market in the West. Was the elite art of Senegal's 1960s simply a form of reductive mimicry–of both African "tradition" and of post-cubist plastic aesthetics? Harney argues otherwise by foregrounding an impressive array of postcolonial writers from James Clifford to Kobena Mercer. She claims that Senegalese artists "challenged the relations of representation" by among other things asserting the right of artists to create a new modern African aesthetic built upon European conceptions of Africa (pp. 99-100). Modernism, at least after Picasso, owed a debt to Africa, and that debt was called in by Senghor and the artists of the École. Harney somewhat overstates the case when she

claims this gesture was purposefully ironic, even subversive (p. 103). Nonetheless, her argument that the École posed challenges to the universal tenets of humanism and demanded recognition of Africa's contributions to global modernity is quite compelling.

Chapter 3, "Laboratories of Avant-Gardism" looks to the 1970s and 1980s and at a second generation of post-independence academy-trained artists who sought to challenge the aesthetics and ideology of the École de Dakar by creating experimental communities and producing parodic performance events. The chapter focuses on two informal art groups whose participants often intermeshed and on the art and ideas of two major proponents of these groups: the Laboratoire Agit-Art (1974-present) under Issa Samb, and the Village des Arts (1977-1983) under El Hadji Moussa Babacar Sy (El Sy). These artists were never far from the center of things, often criticizing "the status quo from within the institution of the status quo" (p. 117). The Laboratoire staged anti-Negritude plays and improvisational events at state-run cultural centers, and the Village was located in an abandoned army base adjacent to the state-run art academy, whose teachers and students often hung out with the anti-art crowd next door (p. 141). These informal art groups helped deconstruct the Senghorian art world from within. The Laboratoire was especially vocal in its opposition to the culture of the decorative, the nostalgic-African, and the beautiful promoted by Senghor (p. 106). It opted instead for an aesthetic of provocation, collectivity, and improvisation rooted as much in currents of international performance art as they were in a conception of the African artist's social role and the interactive nature of traditional African performance.

Toward the end of this chapter, the author inserts her own critique among those of writers who were disturbed by what they saw as an upstaging of the work of the Laboratoire in a performance and installation by El Sy at the "Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa" exhibit, held during the Africa '95 Festival in London. Harney claims critics like Okwui Enwezor (who has provided a glowing appraisal of this book on its back cover) and Everlyn Nicodemus were "disingenuous" in their assessment of the presentation of the history of Senegalese art as "inaccurate" at Africa '95. She states that these critics refused to engage with either the actual works displayed or their conceptual basis, in favor of *ad hominem* attacks on the general curator Clementine Deliss and rumors of her affair with El Sy (p. 140). Harney's interpretation here is unnecessarily defensive. It papers over the fact that El Sy's own paintings blocked the works of others from view and that the overall perception of mediocrity in the quality of work on display in part prevented the "Seven Stories" show from moving to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, as originally scheduled. In truth what was relevant as critique in the Senegalese context after Senghor did not easily translate into marketability in the international art world. Though the action took place in London, this short section of the book provides one of the more thorough descriptions of the actual art discussed up to that point, and it hints of a new kind of "scramble for Africa" that was beginning to take place in the "diasporas" of the contemporary art market.

Chapter 4, "After the Avant-Garde" describes the diversity, and the dire economic conditions, that have come to characterize the Senegalese art world since the demise of the Village des Arts in 1983. This chapter steps back from the institutional approach of the earlier sections and focuses on the biographies and works of individual contemporary artists, including Moustapha Dimé, Guibril André Diop, Germaine Anta Gaye, Djibril N'Diaye, Viyé Diba, Kan-Si, and Cheikh Nass. Despite its title, this chapter also discusses a number of aesthetic currents that actually took place before and during the more classically avant-garde years of the 1960s and 1970s, some of which might have been usefully included earlier on in the book. Here, the reader is introduced to the popular worlds of traditional caste-linked artists and ascetic Islamic Mouridism, which, along with intellectual discourses of hybridity, as well as the arts of recycling and "recuperation," have informed the art-making processes of artists like Dimé, Diop, and Diba. Recycling and recovery are the arts of necessity as practiced in the metropolitan settings of impoverished economies like Senegal's. They have been lionized as forms of contemporary popular African art by a number of more recent artists, many of whom had earlier connections to the Village des Arts.

The end of this chapter includes a long section on SET SETAL ("clean up"), a popular street art movement to clean up the streets of Dakar and get rid of corruption in the post-Senghor era (pp. 205-216). SET SETAL's visual sources were an organic amalgam of international and local pop cultural icons and revolutionary heroes, and as such the movement mirrored the rise of graffiti art in the United States and the "people's parks" phenomenon in South Africa around the same time. During the efflorescence of SET SETAL in 1988-1989, both politicians and established artists (including members of the Laboratoire) sought to align themselves with the movement so as to gain cultural capital, and to validate in a new way the Africanity of their enterprise.

Chapter 4 also includes a valuable section that gives the history of *sous verre* (under glass) painting in Senegal (p.180-189). This is a popular modern form of art with early connections to Western Asia and North Africa, and was likely brought to Senegal by returning Muslim pilgrims at the end of the nineteenth century. The introduction of *sous verre* was contemporaneous with the introduction of photography and was used early on as a surrogate form for portraiture, as well as for other typical genres of folkloric scenes and depictions of Muslim saints. Harney notes that Senegalese modernists like Germaine Anta Gaye have also experimented with the technique of painting under glass.

A bit of crucial information is buried in this section. The author notes the "interesting similarities between *sous verre* imagery and that developed by the tapestries at Thiès," namely, bright colors, flat forms, and highly delineated figures (p. 181). She states that glass painting and tapestry similarly delimit the range of subject matter and composition. Later, Harney informs the reader that from 1978 to 1990, the government actually supported a *sous verre* workshop as "an adjunct to the tapestry center" at Thiès (p. 185). This connection may be of critical importance to the understanding of the aesthetic developed under Papa Ibra Tall, and it merits further investigation.

The concluding chapter, "Passport to the Global Art World" sets the art and the local archive to one side and explores the constraints upon Senegalese artists desirous of entering the international market for contemporary art. Here Harney gives a trenchant analysis of the development of Dak'Art (the Dakar biennale) since 1990, of the shifting nature of elite arts patronage in Senegal after Senghor, and of the exponential interest in contemporary African art abroad since the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris in 1989. She notes that postmodernist discourses created a doorway through which nonwestern arts could pass into the international mainstream, but at the cost of increased uniformity and the exclusion of art that did not fit the fashion for a (post)conceptualist aesthetic (p. 235).

Some general criticisms: This reader was troubled by the consistent relegating of credit for cited comments and crucial supporting data into the footnotes, including the terms of the author's own research in Senegal (p. 247). Indeed, there is a whole small book displaced to the back of the volume. Moreover, we are too often informed that "one critic" or "an artist" said such and such, instead of being given the names of the cited speakers, leading to some confusion. In one instance Frantz Fanon's ideas about "cultural workers" are quoted as if spoken by Senghor (p. 46), despite the fact that Fanon argued with vehemence *against* Negritude. Finally, most of the figures are keyed to the text without an elaboration based on sustained looking at the specific iconography or forms of the images themselves. This has the unfortunate effect of diverting the attention of the reader from the real local circumstances that are the subject of the book, and placing undue emphasis on the more arcane debates about postcolonial theory that too often speak *in advance*, instead of *alongside* Africa's art and artists.

In Senghor's Shadow is an ambitious book, and though it does not significantly deviate from accounts of the historical trajectory of modernist art in Senegal by such previous authors as Ima Ebong and Sidney Kasfir, it covers a great deal more ground. As such it opens up new terrain for the study of African art and international modernism, and will be an invaluable resource for future scholarship. It is encouraging, given the present dire state of academic publishing, that a major press has hosted this book and thus helped move the state of the burgeoning discipline of modernist African art studies beyond the level of the essay and the exhibition catalogue. Many mainstream art historians still consider a section on "primitivism" and a brief mention of Yinka Shonibare to constitute a "global" view of modernism in the classroom. Now, armed with resources like Enwezor's *Short Century* anthology, Kasfir's survey text, and a number of emerging book-length academic studies like Elizabeth Harney's, that story might begin to change. Elizabeth Harney is correct in her claim that "The 'new,' post-Negritude Senegalese arts in this [global art world] context need to be understood in relation to a complex cultural and aesthetic history that is local in character but inflected with decades of engagement with international artistic discourses and forms" (p. 14). *In Senghor's Shadow* achieves this goal with great sensitivity and insight. It is the sort of study that is increasingly in demand among students of modern art, African art, and postcolonial cultural studies, and also by collectors and critics who are hungry for more of the real details on the art and art worlds of contemporary Africa.

Note

[1]. See Sidney Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*. World of Art Series (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999); Olu Oguibe, *Uzo Egonu: An African Artist in the West* (London: Kala Press, 1995); Elizabeth Rankin, *Images of Metal* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994); Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin, *Rorke's Drift*

Empowering Prints (Capetown: Double Storey Books, 2003);); Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the National Museum of African Art, 1997); and Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

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