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Andre Magnin, Jacques Soulillou, eds. *Contemporary Art of Africa.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996. 192 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8109-4032-1.

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Contemporary Art in Africa features sixty contemporary artists, (I counted sixty-three names), only three of whom are female, all of them from sub-Saharan Africa. A brief, one-page "Preface" is followed by an "Introduction," allowing Magnin and Soulillou, the co-authors and editors, to take us on an intellectual rendezvous in which the vision and idea that gave birth to the book are justified. This done, the editors proceed to divide the book into three segments: "Territory," "Frontier" and "World." As envisioned, these are provinces that are at once separate and interconnected. They are fluid, interchangeable and, allowing for attendant gradations, congruent. Unlike, say, the tribality theory of yore, the authors' categorizations recognize the difficulty of inelastic pigeonholing and the dangers of uncompromising prescriptiveness.

According to the authors, although "Territory" differs from "World," both are not located on oppositional poles. Because it is supported by the Earth, Territory is configured as being the source of power and authority. Indeed, both Territory and World replicates certain characteristics and attributes of the other. Territory pertains to retention of the salient essence of a cultural ideal even as this ideal is transferred temporally and spatially. Here, we have those cultural concepts and practices which originated in several parts of Africa–among them, Kongo, Yoruba, Fon, Ejagham–but which have survived the TransAtlantic Slave Trade and now thrive in such places as South Carolina, Haiti, Brazil and Cuba. Frontier as a field is credited with reifying the energy that is resident in Territory at the same time that it underlines apparent distinctions between Territory and Frontier. The authors define Frontier as "that area of pursuit between Territory and World, whose territory [written with a small 't'] seems to have a protracted advance, so hard is it to escape its force of attraction" (p. 13). An exemplar of the Frontier category is contemporary funerary art, like the spectacular coffins of Kane Kwei. These exemplify Territory because they are actually used in the context of burial, which includes commitment to earth and relevant ceremonies and rituals. At the same time, these coffins, which come in a wide array of forms (the Mercedes Benz, the airplane, the bus are some of these), are monuments to World because they represent man's quest for materialism. World, therefore, is necessarily present in Territory and Frontier. A look at the book's table of contents will give you an idea of how your favorite artists have been divided up and assigned into categories. There are seventeen under Territory and twenty under Frontier, with the rest belonging to World.

But Magnin and Soulillou concede that the work of one artist, Kane Kwei for example, may be accessioned under "Territory" as well as "Frontier." Indeed, works under these two categories are mobile, cohesive, resilient and organic in addition to having a line of descent. Not so with works under the "World" category, which are solitary and immobile although they encompass elements characteristic of "Territory." Those whose work exemplify attributes of "Frontier" include Sunday Akpan, Kane Kwei and Agbagli Kossi precisely because they constitute a clique of creative undertakers–the vigilantes of the twilight zone between the here and there of existence. "Frontier" is the gray area, the conjunction between "Territory" and "World."

Once the authors succeeded in figuring out this pretty cerebral stuff, they then invited a battery of experts–twenty-nine in all–from Europe, America and Africa, with specializations that range from art to history, art criticism to art history, architecture to art management, poetry to anthropology, to file entries for their assigned subjects. The format adopted by *Contemporary Art of Africa* is the same one that anthropologists and art historians have perfected since Carl Kjersmeier pioneered it in the early thirties. A broad general introduction is followed by entries which focus on the objects. Here, such entries are predictably brief, even snappy on occasions, given the panoramic nature of this enterprise and the understanding that such service constitutes some sort of provenance which in turn helps to validate certain ques-

tionable collections. The point that needs to be stated upfront is that this book is a public relations job for Jean Pigozzi, the collector who owns a substantial number of the works that are presented.

There is even a section on maps–a page of Africa and another on close-ups–of the West African sub-region and the Nigerian sub-section. Let me quickly get this out at this point: perhaps one of the most insidious signifiers in this book is the term "tribe," employed by the authors in identifying locales of interest on their maps. It is a shibboleth that reveals the authors' ignorance of a methodological approach appropriate for the field as well as a blatant disregard for the discourse that such an egregious labeling has attracted in recent history. Pray, since when has the anthropological model become the sole yardstick for critical analysis of contemporary art?

The entries which accompany the illustrations could have perhaps been given more space. As they are, they convey the impression that the "experts" were under tremendous pressure to condense the life and times, and sometimes the work, of their subjects into a narrative of a few paragraphs which are interspersed with beautifully reproduced (and mostly color) illustrations. What comes across is a book of high production quality, a work which amplifies both text and pictoriality, the latter oftentimes over the former. The reader is thus indirectly encouraged to savor the art works and perhaps come to an individual determination with regard to such subjective issues as aesthetics, text and context. While I would not quibble about such a minor error as printing the reverse side of Zwelethu Mthethwa's 1993 painting, *Sacrifice*, I am miffed at the leanness of the bibliography. Perhaps the authors have been too busy combing the inaccessible terrains and plateaus of Africa to realize that much more work has been done than they have bothered to acknowledge in their bibliography. Interestingly, a conspicuous (typographical?) error in this book pertains to a name that did not even make the bibliography, "selected" as this is. Could the Olu Oduigbe that the authors cite (pp. 16, 17) have anything to do with the Olu Oguibe that I know? Will the real Olu please stand up?

What are the benefits offered by *Contemporary Art of Africa*? First, it gives readers a digest of artists from sub-Saharan Africa. Second, it provides excellent illustrations of the work being done by African artists. Third, this book beautifully illustrates the impressive range of artistic engagements on the continent, thereby highlighting the depth of individuality at the same time that it underlines the creative continuum between tradition and modernity. Their work affirms that there's nothing new to African artists about postmodernism; they've "been there, done that." Their work reveals their capacity to operate at multilateral and multi-dimensional levels as well as an ability to draw from a seemingly infinite fountain of sources and resources. Fourth, *Contemporary Art of Africa* attempts to kill two birds with just one stone: it strives to satisfy the needs of a growing public that deserves to know about current art on the continent at the same time that it attempts to provide some intellectual framework within which the artworks may be appreciated. For students of contemporary African art, this book could be a useful tool. For the casual reader, the time invested in browsing may be worth the while.

A substantial portion of the book, more than eighty percent, is devoted to the artists and their work. More than two hundred color plates celebrate the art works which are rendered in a profusion of media, from terracotta to wood, oil to rope and metal wire. There are installations that glorify the environment even as they moralize or titillate (the Dakpogans, pp. 101-103; Guebehi, pp. 27-29; Damas, p. 30). There are those that are at once mnemonic and cathartic, serving as a public court for the adjudication of intensely personal disputations (Adeagbo, p. 169). Other installations come with didactic thrusts which span ecumenical and political expanses (Segogela, pp. 96-97; Konate, pp. 144-45). Belonging in the twilight zone where the fugitive meet the transcendental are those installations which memorialize the dead at the same time as they provide a bridge between the secular and the spiritual domains of interaction (the Efiaimbelos, pp. 25-26; the Kweis, pp. 77-78).

Since so much premium is placed on variety as demonstrated in the number of artists showcased, the remarkable differentiations in their educational and professional training and the plurality of forms in which their work is expressed, it is noteworthy that there is so little room given to the artists themselves to speak in their own voices. Some of the outstanding entries in this book are, incidentally, those in which the narrator has found a way to accommodate the artist in his own voice. Or, as in the example of David Koloane, those in which the artist is also the narrator. Koloane comes across with some freshness that is attributable, in part, to the employment of the first person singular, or the possessive pronoun: "When I started painting in 1974 ..."; "My work of the period has been largely nonobjective ..." (p. 146). In addition to allowing the reader a fleeting idea of the contextual variables which influence his work, he also provides an exegesis of those graphite pieces that are reproduced (pp. 147-48). The intensity of his rabid dog series looms large

after reading his digest in which Koloane expatiates upon the savagery that characterizes the pieces, pointing out the analogy between the predatory proclivity of the dogs and the terrorist sadism of the apartheid regime in South Africa of the early 90s.

Belonging in this category in which the narrative, employing a holistic method, amplifies the salient intersections which facilitate our appreciation of an artist's work is Gavin Younge's entry on Willie Bester. First, Younge provides us with a short story concerning the early childhood of Willie Bester in apartheid South Africa, and the extent to which this artist's art, *Homage to Steve Biko*, *Semekazi (Migrant Series)* and *Kakebeen* is the physical manifestation of deeply felt empathy. Then Younge attempts an analysis of the symbolic and interpretive significance of the artist's work. Read in conjunction with Bester's own script, our understanding of both text and context is enhanced. The star of the book, perhaps, is the septuagenarian Ivorien, FBB. Rounding up the whole array of artists, Frederic Bruly Bouabre occupies six pages, with a display of twenty-one of his potent inscriptions which, notwithstanding their individual descriptive or philosophical titles, come under the generic title *Knowledge of the World*. FBB is truly global, as can be seen in his 3 x 5" cardboard postcards which, executed in colored pencils and ball-points, span the continents of Asia, Europe and, of course, Africa.

While one cannot dismiss the efforts that gave birth to *Contemporary Art of Africa*, its omissions and commissions deserve some attention. In their ten-page introduction to this book, Andre Magnin and Jacques Soulillou declare: "In this *fin-de-siecle*, in a world whose direction seems more and more uncertain, a world that, contrary to all expectation, has not become a global village, it behooves us to speak less of a global art and more of a global recognition of the arts" (p. 17). This, it would appear, is a raison d'etre for this project. In relation to this book, however, this declaration presents a paradox: it reveals a chasm between lofty idealism and the pragmatics of actualization. For, desirable as the call for a decentering of the mechanics of art promotion may be (for that is what the universalization doctrine entails), this book perpetuates a disturbing trend in the literature of contemporary African art in that it adopts a continental (global) approach, one that allows us to raise questions about the genuineness of the authors' declaration. But pious and sanctimonious as the exhortation of Magnin and Soulillou may sound, it does have some merit in that it invites us to take yet another look at issues of definition, presentation and, of course, misrepresentation. The book resurrects nascent troubling concerns about the Western gaze, about voices and ventriloquy: who speaks for whom, with what authority and from what camp? Who appoints, indeed, anoints whom, particularly at this juncture when the notion seems to be gaining currency that contemporary African artists must of necessity pander to "native," primal instincts to be authentic. It is about time that scholars or latter-day explorers realized that there is enough art being done in every country in Africa that is deserving of rigorous scrutiny.

The engine house of the book is its "Preface." The theoretical postulates, the claims, disclaimers, the critical vision and the hidden or unexplained biases which undergird this project can be gleaned in this section. The authors/editors claim that their authority for this work derives from their prolonged stays in several countries in Africa. Furthermore, they claim that their book constitutes a departure from previous efforts in that it shuns stylistic or formalistic considerations to focus on artists and their work. Unfortunately, this book is held hostage by such claims as these. First, its structure, with its anti-formalism, shows that there is a vast difference between prolonged stay in a particular location and prolonged study of, and familiarization with, trends and issues in the field; one is never a substitute for the other. Were this to be so, all foreign diplomats, all foreign construction workers, corporate operatives and oil gurus in Africa would be "experts" on the arts of the continent. Second is the falsity of the claim that, by focusing on the artists and their work, this book has broken new grounds. A familiarization with the relatively short bibliography of contemporary African art from Beier to Kennedy will easily show there is nothing new in this concept. A contextualist approach, we hasten to point out, is not successful where it neglects and, indeed, lambasts, formalistic considerations. There is validity in the study and appreciation of aesthetics; there is an immeasurable joy that comes from the contemplation of pure abstract or cerebral forms. Magnin and Soulillou's demonstrated insistence that contemporary African art has little to do with the creation of pure forms, and more with ascriptive genealogies and ritualized rationalizations without which the art is seen as derivative, adulterated, banal and unimaginative, is mere gobbledygook.

How about coverage? The focus is on so-called sub-Saharan Africa. The Maghreb, we are told, does not fit into the agenda not only because its culture is partly Mediterranean, but also because the area enjoys a cultural unity which is facilitated by Islam. Herein lies one of the major problems of this book: it is out of touch, conceptually, with the cultural and political reality on the ground. The affirmation, simply, is that Africa re-

mains partitioned. The vision that a part of the African continent deserves to be excluded on account of religious of cultural inclinations is, to put it mildly, a disservice to the continent. It masks prejudices and assumptions about race and religion that are as parochial as they are untenable where what is called for is the simple exercise of studying the arts of a continent. Magnin and Soulillou present us, in 192 pages of beautifully produced text and illustrations, their own vision of recent art in Africa. But in doing so, they also present us a picture of the outsider looking in; a voyeuristic, privileged outsider, we hasten to add, the familiar pith helmet and telescope now supplemented with a lap top and an attitude. *Contemporary Art of Africa*, in scope and format, affirms the methodology that anthropologists and ethnographers have found so useful in regard to traditional African art, but which is hopelessly inadequate in accommodating the plethora of visions and the creative exuberance which are a part of the artistic landscape in contemporary Africa.

What is called for today is less of a global approach and more of particularistic focus on the study of the art of the continent. Scholars and magicians of African art need be reminded that Africa is a continent of fifty-three countries, a population of about 700 million and artists that probably run into tens of hundreds. For how long must we wallow in the antiquated notion that we can accommodate in one fell sweep all the major doctrinal, stylistic and idiosyncratic strands of the continent? Clearly, what is missing here is a rigorous classificatory apparatus that will demonstrate a sensitivity to the profusion of forms that this continent spawns without confusing issues. A selective approach that focuses on the prurient and the mythological at the expense of aesthetics and form is helpful only to the extent that it helps to legitimize the dubious collection of certain individuals.

The scope of the work, notwithstanding its exclusion of the Maghreb, poses yet another problem. In an attempt to be all-encompassing, functional effigies and folk art, especially those with a bent for salacious naivete, are mixed with illustrative and popular totems. With a few exceptions like Vohou-Vohou, any art that springs from a rigorous intellectual premise is dismissed: it is too Western and, inferentially, contaminated. That is the purist apologia. It has not occurred to the writers that good art gets better with education; that while the Western paradigm may be useful in the teaching of techniques, it does not claim monopoly of insight. African writers, musicians and performing artists routinely employ Western techniques in expressing individual visions. Yet, contemporary African artists are expected to behave to type; they are thus circumscribed by the likes of Magnin and Soulillou who, in spreading a protective cocoon around those they perceive as having raw and intuitive vision, perpetuate the myth of the Noble Savage.

Undoubtedly, Magnin and Soulillou harbor a consuming suspicion–indeed, aversion–for any art that draws inspiration from an academic tradition. Their mission is the promotion of "an art that prefers to ignore its possible claim as 'contemporary,' an art often practiced by artists without any formal schooling many of whom have no ambition beyond satisfying a local community" (p. 10). It is instructive to note, in this connection, that more than half of the art works showcased in this book are drawn from the Jean Pigozzi collection which is advertised in the blurb as "unquestionably the most important, the most varied of all the ones in Europe or in the U.S.A." Yes, it is the same Pigozzi that was so enamored of the works on display at the 1989 Paris show, Magiciens de la Terre, that he offered to buy all of them. In his pursuit of exotica, he found a willing ally in Andre Magnin who then went on an African Safari, combing not the art schools or established studios (presumably because they are bland and boring) but the poor alleys and impossible terrains where "real artists lived and worked in often unbelievably difficult conditions ..."[1] The search for the ultra-primitive was well underway. Whatever illusions that anyone may harbor about the paternalistic arrogance which informs this scheme would disappear once it is realized that Magnin does not believe that contemporary African art belongs to the same stratum as contemporary Western art; the latter is superior to the former: "the phrase 'contemporary African art' doesn't make much sense in terms of comparing it with our contemporary art. I have often thought that there is a world between them and us."[2]

Contemporary Art in Africa is an edifice to conceptual myopia, the morbid type that demonstrates a patronizing peevishness for any art produced by Africans who are versed in techniques that are believed to be the prerogatives of the West. This explains why many of the major names in contemporary African art–on the continent, in Europe or in the US such as Skunder Boghossian, Magdalene Odundo, Sokari Douglas Camp, El Anatsui–never made the Magnin list. The authors showed little sensitivity to gender balance either. Or are we to assume that there is no sexist motive behind the elision of women from this work? What is it that qualifies Esther Mahlangu, Francina Ndimande, producers of beautiful murals that distinguish Ndebele homesteads (pp. 47-49), but disqualifies hundreds of women muralists across the continent? And if what is called for are terra-cotta pieces of impressive vitality, there are several Seni Awa

Camaras (p. 54) deserving of attention. We would not even bother to note that art colleges are also known to have produced notable women artists. In summary, *Contemporary Art in Africa* deserves to be added to your library stacks because, while one may not agree with its premise, one must concede that it does have some merit; it presents information that could be rewarding once stripped of the doctrinal constrictions.

Notes:

[1]. Jean Pigozzi. "Jean Pigozzi," in *Africa Now*. Jean Pigozzi Collection. Novib: Groninger Museum, 1991, p. 13.

[2]. Andre Magnin, "Art in Black Africa," in *Africa Now*, p. 17.

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