



## Cahiers d'études africaines

181 | 2006  
Varia

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#### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/5890>

ISSN : 1777-5353

#### Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

#### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 31 mars 2006

Pagination : 199-203

ISBN : 978-2-7132-2089-0

ISSN : 0008-0055

#### Référence électronique

Tobias Wendl, « Amselle, Jean-Loup. – *L'art de la friche. Essai sur l'art africain contemporain* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 181 | 2006, mis en ligne le 13 avril 2006, consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/5890>

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- 1 There has been a remarkable increase in exhibitions and scholarly publications on African contemporary art in recent years. Although the concept and term had been introduced in the 1960<sup>1</sup>, it was not until the “famous-infamous” blockbuster show *Magiciens de la terre* 1989 in Paris, that we saw the emergence of a true discourse with an expanding textual network slowly being moulded. Two major journals, *Nka-Contemporary African Art* and *Revue noire*, came into being as a direct response to the critical debates sparked by the *Magiciens* project. And the subsequent creation of new international art biennales in Africa (Dakar, Johannesburg, Bamako) and other mega-shows in Europe (such as *The Short Century* 2001, *Documenta 11* 2002 and *Africa Remix* 2004) contributed to the increasing visibility and recognition of contemporary African and African-Diasporic artists within the international art-world.
- 2 Jean-Loup Amselle's new book *L'art de la friche* takes these developments as a starting point. Yet the author does not tackle the issues of aesthetics or art history, he rather treats the production of discourses and practices of exhibiting African art (“tribal” as well as contemporary) as a mirror in which he explores and maps the somewhat paradoxical place of Africa in Western (and particularly French) imagination. The book thus takes up a Cliffordian perspective and probes a critical and, at times, ironical ethnography of the West in its rather slowly changing relations to Africa. Drawing on Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime (as the antidote of the beautiful) with its power to compel and overwhelm, Jean-Loup Amselle identifies Africa as an ongoing and privileged object for arousing “delicious fright” in Westerners: “Si l'Afrique n'intéresse personne, elle fascine tout le monde”-he states (p. 21) and goes on to identify two basic layers in the perception of Africa: “Africa as a degenerate continent”, doomed by corruption, tribalism, poverty and Aids on the one hand, and “Africa as a source of regeneration and artistic refreshment”

on the other. Both layers are like flip sides of the same coin and both dispose of long trajectories in history. The emotional and libidinal (over-)investment in the idea of regeneration results from a European self-imagination as a sterilized, anaemic, disembodied, aging and spiritually weakened continent in need of rejuvenation or “fresh blood”. The idea can be retraced to colonial administrators such as Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889) who was among the first to consider “métissage” as a means of racial improvement. The regeneration aspect was a leitmotif in the rise of all sorts of avant-garde primitivisms and subsequent neo-primitivisms during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (from Picasso, Bataille and Artaud to Jean-Hubert Martin and André Magnin) and it continues to play a crucial role in contemporary cultural politics and artistic joint-ventures. In order to depict the contradictory, yet intermingling projections at work in the Western “Africa concept”, Jean-Loup Amselle introduces as his key metaphor that of a fallow (*friche*). The French word “friche” has etymological connotations of freshness (*fraîcheur*), but also refers to “abandon” and “lack of culture and cultivation”. Although of agricultural ancestry, the fallow metaphor is today often transferred to former industrial sites, temporarily occupied by artists and other creative people (e.g. the *Frigos* in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris). Industrial fallows or waste lands have become striking morphological features of European post-industrial cities and are often associated with alternative and artistic innovation as well. In order to highlight the European (re-)appropriation of Africa as a fallow and reservoir of alterity, Jean-Loup Amselle coins the pun “l’Afrique/l’Afriche” and dedicates the whole last chapter of his book to the growing French cultural and artistic engagement in Africa, from which has emerged an ever more connected, intercontinental “cultural landscape”, eloquently labelled with the neologism “*Françafriche*”. Quotes from a variety of players perfectly illustrate the author’s argument: Mathilde Monnier, director of the Centre of Choreography in Montpellier travels in 1992 to Africa “to recharge her batteries” (p. 52); writer Henri Lopès conceives of the future francophone literature as “the language of Sévigné with negro balls” (p. 51), and Michel Le Bris, organizer of the festival *Surprising Travellers* in Bamako declares: “French literature will regenerate itself from the peripheries and the margins” (p. 52). Yet exoticisms keep changing and they rather seem to complement than to exclude each other. While the Dogon of the remote Bandiagara mountains in Mali have served for decades as an icon of noble otherness and potential source of intellectual and artistic refreshment, new places such as the sprawling and dilapidating mega-cities of Lagos and Kinshasa have started to cast their spell on architects, artists and writers such as Rem Koolhaas, Titouan Lamazou & André Magnin, Filip de Boeck & Marie-Françoise Plissard <sup>2</sup>. For the enthusiasts of “gore-trash-grunge”, these and other “generic” cities in Africa have emerged as new icons of destruction and decline, of improvisation, infernality and informality, and seem to provide ideal adventure playgrounds for a new wave of Western artistic and intellectual exoticism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century—reminiscent of the Baudelairian *Flowers of Evil*.

- 3 *L’art de la friche* is a book divided into seven chapters with prologue and conclusion. In the first chapter, the author explores Western practices of appropriation and recycling of African art: from “tribal art” and its recent revaluation as “art premier” to “popular and contemporary art”. He shows how the canon of “tribal art” has been established during the colonial period by extracting artefacts—mostly masks and sculptures—from their choreographic and religious contexts and by obscuring their individual authorship in order to attribute them to the tribe. This anonymisation went together with the construction of timelessness and alterity: “one tribe”—“one style”! Yet while the

recycling of the “tribal” and “primal” locates the appropriated artefacts in a primordial time category of imagined savagery outside of our own historical time, there are other, more recent forms of recycling where the appropriated works—especially studio photographs—are located in the past of our own historical time. The author takes as examples the French fashion designers Agnès B. and Jean-Paul Gaultier who, in the 1990s, extensively made use of the works of the now worldwide famous Malian photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé in order to promote their own clothing and retro-chic off-the-peg. One could easily add the example of Ghanaian photographer Philip Kwame Apagya who had been hired for very similar purposes by the Italian fashion house Etro. The theme of primitivism and its derivatives comes up throughout the whole book and bestows coherence to the different chapters which originally had been written as essays for scholarly journals and text books.

- 4 Chapter three explores the profound conceptual dilemmas of the new musée du Quai-Branly in Paris (formerly known as “musée des Arts premiers”). The prestigious project seems to have been trapped from the very beginning: Who will be able to claim the authority to perpetuate the heavily contested demarcation lines between “legitimate art” and “non-art”? Will the concept of the museum not restore and enhance the old dichotomy of the “West” and the “Rest”? Is Egyptian art less “primal” than Yoruba or Dogon art? And what it is to be gained, if non-western “secondary” (e.g. Muslim) and contemporary art are excluded again?
- 5 Chapter four “Primitivism and Postcolonialism” starts with a discussion of the changing semantics of the term “primitivism” within the discourse of postcolonial theory. In the 1980s, comparisons of African and Oceanic artefacts with Western modernist art—as highlighted in the famous mona show *Primitivism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*<sup>3</sup>—was quite unsuspecting and based on good intentions by stressing aesthetic equality. However, as *Third Text* editor Rasheed Araeen and others have argued, the practice of focusing on the “primitive” has had two fatal consequences: first, Africa, Asia, Oceania (the famous “rest”) have remained de-historicized and lumped together into the past—thus justifying their colonial conquest. And second: their contemporary art forms are systematically obscured and denigrated. Amselle takes up some of Araeen arguments and lucidly demonstrates, that “primitivisms” have been a recurrent theme in art history—most obviously during Renaissance—when artists were attracted and mesmerized by Greek antiquity. Classicisms and primitivisms can often be conceived as subsequently alternating phases within art cycles. And in addition, they are by no means restricted to colonial power situations, as J.-L. Amselle vividly demonstrates with the 2002 Bruges exhibit *Le siècle de Van Eyck, le monde méditerranéen et les primitifs flammands 1430-1530*. However, if the notion of “primitivism” is detached from its historical context in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century European modernist avant-garde movement and the accompanying colonial expansion, it is considerably weakened as an analytical tool and loses much of its explicative power.
- 6 A central theme in the debates on postcolonialism, globalisation and primitivism is the question of alterity and otherness. To approach African contemporary art only through the prism of the Western gaze and discourse would provide a rather incomplete picture; the artists' strategies of self-assertion and ethnic marketing in the jungle of Western stereotypes and expectations form another promising field of inquiry. Some artists deliberately insist on their African identity and origin (read: African sensibility and spirituality) and successfully convert the otherness attributed to them into a resource,

while others violently contest all sorts of ethnic discriminations and present themselves as artists “tout court” (Olu Oguibe, Hassan Musa, Iké Udé). Others again switch between a global and an African identity and—consciously or unconsciously— lay on the guilt of their public. In a chapter titled “écritures en friches”, the author takes up the trope of Africa as a continent without writing and surveys the works of a wide range of artists (from Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Nsukka artists to Frédéric Bruly-Bouabré) who have responded to this stigmatization by exhuming and recycling all sorts of local graphic and pictorial systems in order to present a different image of Africa: an Africa rich in signs and symbols.

- 7 *L'art de la friche* is a unique and timely study of African art, “tribal” as well as popular and contemporary, in all its entanglements with European primitivism, patronage and culture politics. It is a well documented book and not only provides a number of detailed and critical reviews of some of the major recent mega-shows, such as *The Short Century* (2001), *Unpacking Europe* (2002), *Documenta 11* (2002) and *Dak'Art* (2004), but also explores favourite themes addressed and raised by the artists themselves. While the author repeatedly links the developments in the arts with the globalization discourse in the social sciences, he keeps throughout the whole book a rather critical distance to postcolonial theory. Taking Okwui Enwezor's rhetoric of *Documenta 11* as his example, he convincingly argues that, contrary to the widely acclaimed political presentation, quoting all the politically correct tropes (from “multiculturalism”, “subalternism” and “hybridity”), there remains a strong American bias, since the new hegemonic role of the us in our globalizing, post-colonial world is systematically obscured and ignored (pp. 125-127). J.-L. Amselle identifies as a major weakness and deficit of the postcolonial (and postmodern) posture the implicit philosophy of an end of history. Another paradox in the current debate is the very notion of difference. Postcolonial authors have emphasized and even “fetishized” differences and particularisms while they have, at the same time, claimed a new globalism or universalism which levels out differences as well as the fractures of old colonial hegemonies. “If one tries to chase culturalism through the door”, Jean-Loup Amselle writes, “it re-enters through the window” (p. 76).
- 8 The last chapter of *L'art de la friche* is dedicated to an analysis of the French involvement in the field of African art (“Vers la Françafriche”). This part of the book is perhaps the most provocative and surprising—at least for readers who are not very familiar with French cultural politics. Again, J.-L. Amselle tackles his theme not with the tools of an art historian who would focus on major artistic currents and ideas and examine the social conditions of art production. He rather explores the field as one having been shaped and re-shaped by an ongoing encounter between cultural brokers and their networks. The author writes: “La genèse de l'art africain contemporain n'est en rien un processus spontané: elle est au contraire le produit de la rencontre entre un certain type de personnage et d'institutions et un milieu qu'on peut assimiler à une terre vierge” (p. 130). The French policy of “cultural action in Africa” is retraced to André Malraux, who, in 1959, at the dawn of Independence, had appointed Émile Biasini, ex-Governor of Dahomey (Benin), to create the first French Cultural Centre in Tchad. In the 1960s, the Cultural Centres had to assure the presence of French culture in the former colonies and to offer programs for Africans willing to assimilate. Later, the network of cultural and artistic initiatives was extended and expanded and, in 1972, Fespaco was inaugurated. The festival had a tremendous impact on the emergence of what became later known as the “Francophone African Cinema”. Another milestone in the process of the making of

“Françafrique” was the establishment of Afrique en créations in 1990. Jean-Loup Amselle writes: “On passe à un modèle du franco-africain comme instrument de régénération de la culture française par l’Afrique ou de la cogénération d’une culture franco-africaine comme substitut d’une culture française qui se délite et d’une langue française qui subit une perte d’influence à l’échelle mondiale” (p. 137). Today Afrique en créations is the financially most powerful institution of “Françafrique”, organizing and subsidising myriads of cultural and artistic joint ventures in Africa and in France, among them the Rencontres de la photographie africaine in Bamako since 1994 and the Rencontres de la chorégraphie africaine in Luanda and Madagascar. In identifying the major players of “Françafrique”, their institutional backgrounds and media networks, Jean-Loup Amselle outlines a unique and highly illuminating sketch of an art world in action and significantly enlarges the discursive and historical borders of an “anthropology of the arts”. There is no book on African art, in which the connections to the West have been analyzed with a similar theoretical rigour and wit.

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## NOTES

- 1.. See U. BEIER, *Contemporary Art in Africa*, London, Pall Mall Press, 1968.
- 2.. See R. KOLHAAS (dir.), *Mutations*, Bordeaux, ACTAR, 2000; T. LAMAZOU, *Congo Kinshasa*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001 ; F. DE BOECK & M.-F. PLISSARD, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*, Amsterdam, Ludion ; Tervuren, Musée royal d’Afrique centrale, 2004.
- 3.. W. RUBIN (ed.), *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1984.