

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Twitchin, Mischa. 2019. Concerning "the Eurocentric African Problem" (Meschac Gaba). *Open Cultural Studies*, 3(1), pp. 276-285. ISSN 2451-3474 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/26363/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

Research Article

Mischa Twitchin*

Concerning “the Eurocentric African Problem” (Meschac Gaba)

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0025>

Received July 30, 2018; accepted November 19, 2018

Abstract: Even as it is often eclipsed by reference to the “contemporary,” modernity is widely celebrated in European museums and galleries. When refracted through the commitments of an avowedly Black artistic agenda, how might these institutions reconceive their understanding of modernism in light of African, diasporic, or Afropean perspectives? How might concerns with African agency be enacted in these cultural spaces as they project historical narratives and produce a “public” memory in their own image? What are the implications of the fact that critical resistance to modes of cultural appropriation may, nonetheless, reproduce a discourse that attempts to immunise itself from the association of modernism with colonialism? In the formation of modernist canons, what role might an example of African conceptual art have to play, even when consigned to a museum’s storage space? This paper explores such questions through the paradoxes engaged by Mechac Gaba’s reflections on his 1997-2002 project, “Museum for Contemporary African Art,” now owned by Tate Modern. In particular, it considers the dichotomy between “modern” and “traditional” as this has been constitutive of twentieth-century art history, informing a sense of the African presence within European museums. How might reference to the “contemporary” here relate to the potentials of decolonial cultural politics within such spaces?

Keywords: modernity, hybridity, tradition, ethnography, art

Historically, the conflict over blackness has been inseparable from the question of our modernity.

(Mbembe 30)

While exhibitions of ethnographic artefacts and modern art in European museums have been intertwined during the twentieth century, they often seem to remain parallel worlds, even as these very categories have come under renewed scrutiny. Although a celebration of the “contemporary” has led to the transformation of erstwhile ethnographic museums (now museums of “world cultures”)—where today one is as likely to find work by, for example, Sokari Douglas-Camp or Romauld Hazoumé in the British Museum as in Tate Modern—this enduring curatorial parallelism has occluded a specifically African modernist art history in European museums. How does the difference of institutional context still affect the sense of this art’s presence in European—indeed, in Afropean—cultural memory? What continuities and discontinuities of research are entailed by these different histories of collection and exhibition? Although this has long been a concern of Rasheed Araeen, for example, and much developed in the journal, *Third Text*, that he founded in 1987, these questions will be addressed here by drawing on reflections by the Benin artist, Meschac Gaba.

Gaba’s comments in an interview (2001) about his project for a “Museum of Contemporary African Art,” a twelve-room installation developed over several years (1997-2002), offer a point of departure for considering what might be claimed by reference to “Africa” in European museums’ collections. After all, what is “African” may be supposed to name its own contribution to a changing sense of world perspectives,

*Corresponding author: Mischa Twitchin, Theatre and Performance Dept., Goldsmiths, University of London, E-mail: m.twitchin@gold.ac.uk

while also offering a disarticulation of the claimed universalism of inherited Eurocentric views. While Gaba’s “museum” project is situated by Okwui Enwezor, for example, in “the historical struggle between competing visions of contemporary African art in the ethnographic museum and in the museum of art” (139), its incorporation into the collection of Tate Modern in 2013 exposes various issues of institutional-historical location that reflect back on, precisely, those “competing visions.” The difference marked by reference to the contemporary between these different European museum settings—addressing the identification of and with the ethnographic or the modern—becomes itself a lens for refracting a discourse invoking the African art presence in Europe. It is with the discourse of what Gaba identifies as “the Eurocentric African problem” (15)—expressive of the particular role that museums and galleries play in mediating, or historicising, an African art presence in Europe—that this essay is concerned, particularly in the formation of canons and the curatorial knowledge that accompanies them.

That the reference to “African” art in Gaba’s “museum” project might itself be problematic—not least, from an Afrocentric viewpoint—offers, nonetheless, an important starting point for situating how the contemporary may be distinguished from the modern, as also the modern from the traditional. Olu Oguibe, for example, cautions that: “To employ the ‘problems’ paradigm in discussing modernity and modernism in Africa is simply to buy into existing structures of reference, which not only peculiarise modernity in Africa but also forebode crisis.” (8) Although ostensibly posing a question of African art, Gaba’s “museum” concept peculiarises, rather, modernity and modernism in the European institutions that it addresses. Indeed, regarding what is contemporary in these museums, Gaba can perhaps be seen to be following Oguibe’s recommendation that: “What needs to be done is to reject that peculiarisation [concerning modernity in Africa] and all those structures and ideational constructs that underlie it”—at least, in so far as this exposes the underlying paradoxes of, precisely, such an attempt to “reject” these same “ideational constructs.”

Rather than reviewing its actual installation, which is now purely virtual (as items in Tate Modern’s archive of collections, accessible through its website), it is the idea of Gaba’s work that will be referenced here. After all, in Gaba’s own terms, his museum is as much a conceptual work as a material one, where (according to the artist) the project is “a positive way of addressing Eurocentrism, as it’s Europeans who created museums.” (18) This is not to say that Europeans created the projection of power and prestige through collections and their display—but, rather, that institutional claims to universalism remain a problem of the Eurocentric even when museums associate themselves with the contemporary, not least where this association is made in the name of African art. Following Oguibe, this problem arises from the historical occlusion of the modern in relation to African art, which in Gaba’s case specifically means the occlusion of an Afrocentric conceptual art history. (It is this that his work aims to remedy in the name of its own “museum.”) The displacement of the modern by appeal to the contemporary reinforces the sense that these categories are corollaries of the traditional. As suggested by Salah Hassan: “This traditional versus contemporary distinction was created by the colonising structure in Africa, and is equally rooted in the epistemological roots of African art scholarship, which is basically Eurocentric. Any serious effort to define contemporary African art forms must start by examining this dichotomy and its validity.” (219)

On the Critical Judgment of What is “Modern”

Even when occluded by reference to the contemporary, the reproduction of such dichotomies is not the least of the paradoxes underlying Gaba’s claim to a position beyond them when refusing one of their terms, the traditional, in the name of an other, the modern. Gaba explicitly states, for instance, that the “Eurocentric . . . problem” is the object of his concern as a modern, rather than traditional, African artist: “I don’t come from traditional Africa, but from modern Africa: that’s why I ask questions about the education I had. If I create a museum for contemporary African art, it’s because I say that the people who gave me that education didn’t give us everything. They shut me up inside tradition” (18). Paradoxically, this distinction between the modern and the traditional (as if between Europe and Africa in the museum context) still informs the artist’s self-identification—or, rather, his relation to “universal” institutional identification—and might be

understood as expressive, as much as explanatory, of what this “Eurocentric African problem” might be.

Nothing is as traditionally modernist as the way that modernity distinguishes itself from tradition, whether that of (“provincial”) European art history or as identified by European museums—and many European artists—with African art. In this context, it is important to note that what was conceived as “pre-modern,” the so-called “savage” or “primitive,” was recognised as the very epitome of the modern in European avant-garde circles during the twentieth century. Modernity, as a Eurocentric universalism, constructs itself as if by a difference that has proved to be its own phantasm. This was succinctly expressed by the curators of the *Neolithic Childhood* exhibition, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2018, who note that for European modernists the “primitive,” as an avant-garde version of the “traditional,” “fulfilled the function of a self-constitutive, negative mirror, an arena for the relocation and projection of unsolved ontological riddles concerning the origin and ‘magical’ powers of sign-systems and collective symbolisations” (319). Indeed, this implication is already satirised by Gaba’s own suggestion that his museum involves an “improved ethnography” (14), referring to one pole of the Eurocentric curatorial episteme (as identified by Enwezor, for example); the other being the global art market. The point here is not simply what Gaba himself may or may not intend by his commentary; but also the way in which his appeal to an African cultural space (as a conceptual museum) in Europe today is pre-empted by a conceptual history that is reproduced even in his critical resistance to it.

For example, in the following, lengthy quotation from Hassan, the very question of the modern-traditional dichotomy, underlying a contrastive appeal to the contemporary, is finally answered in, precisely, the modernist terms that still frame the contested question of cultural recognition here:

The failure to recognise the above dialogue [between African artists concerning their own, diverse influences], despite the statements articulated by African artists, is due to the prevailing dichotomies of “modern/ traditional,” or “Western modern/ non-Western traditional,” and all their implications. It is the failure to recognise the fact that long ago Africans and other Third-World people entered the dialogue on modernism and have challenged it on their own soil. Hence, despite recent negative connotations associated with the term in Western intellectual circles, “modern” is more suitable for such new African artistic expressions, because it symbolises the experience and practices that the art forms embody. To call it “modern” distinguishes it from the merely contemporary; for where “contemporary” is a term of neutral reference, “modern” is a term of critical judgment. Moreover, modernism in the African context, as elsewhere, entails a self-conscious attempt to break with the past and a search for new forms of expression. (223)

While the key point concerns the situating of such “critical judgement,” as between the possibilities of old Eurocentric conceptions and new Afrocentric ones, this twofold interweaving—as if between the traditional and the modern—still precludes a sense of “multiple modernities” that are not limited to the terms of this inherited dichotomy.

The hermeneutic politics that precede questions of African cultural space in European museums is a corollary of the intrinsic relation between modernity and colonialism, manifest in such pervasive discriminations as those between the “developed” and “developing” worlds, the metropolitan and the peripheral, elite arts and popular crafts, the “authenticity” of communities and the “autonomy” of individuals, and so on. While the meaning of such supposedly comparative terms is continually changing, the sense of what is “authentic” often adheres still to the traditional within the denegation of modernity. This ascription is renewed when the authentic becomes re-aligned with the contemporary as if by-passing the fraught genealogy of the modern. Particularly in the desire to evade associations with ethnography, this offers another displacement of African modernities within the work of cultural appropriation, now made in the name of the global art market rather than “civilisation.” The latter is reconceived (or re-branded) as “world culture” in the museum context, as if this somehow made that context “post-colonial.”

On Modernism’s Disavowal of Its Own Traditions

While the hybrid aspect of much of Western modern art (the emblem of which is generally supposed to be Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*) is widely recognised, the sense of the hybrid modernity of African art—contemporary with the Eurocentric examples with which it is usually contrasted—is either overlooked

or, amongst those pursuing claims concerning the authentic, subjected to a denigratory judgment as being derivative. This situation is recounted, for example, by Gaba in describing André Magnin’s trips to Benin when he was researching for the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition: “He came looking for his little European market. For him, what Africans liked wasn’t art.” (14)

With respect to traditional arts too, especially in the transformation of “tribal arts” into “tourist arts,” a similar judgement—which was already proclaimed by the dealer Paul Guillaume in 1926, for example—is critically addressed in Christopher Steiner’s analysis of the West African art market (1994), presenting the views of its African suppliers in contrast to the Europeans’ nostalgia for what they deem “authentic” when judging contemporary “traditional” art to be “fake.” Europeans’ desire for art from pre-colonial or even pre-contact times offers a curious inversion of the very colonial conditions of and for collection in the early twentieth century. It also refuses to recognise that these works were already part of complex African cultural dialogues, especially with Islam, beyond the Eurocentric point of view.

Amongst many voices typically ignored in writing Eurocentric art histories, it is worth noting that a modern-traditional hybridity was explicitly advocated by Alain Locke in 1925. Albeit re-inscribing the traditional-modern framework—in the name of both the contemporary experience of the diaspora (in the 1920s) and of “ancestral arts”—Locke appealed to African-American artists to learn as much from African as from European examples, just as Picasso, Matisse, and others, had (261). Citing Roger Fry (1920), Locke celebrates the dynamic of “experiment” amongst African-inspired European artists, as a way to escape the “prejudice and caricature” (264) that informed the institutionalised conventions prescribed for Black subjects in painting and sculpture, even for Black artists of the time.

The judgment of the hybrid as derivative rather than experimental is founded on modernism’s disavowal of its own evaluation of the authentic—associated, for instance, with the “primitive,” as distinct from a sense of the traditional associated with kitsch. The celebration of “primitivism”—that is, a cultural movement of historical Eurocentric “discontents” (Freud); or “predicaments” (Clifford)—attests, paradoxically, to a possible European future in the name of African art, which can be seen emerging in its changing past. This idea was at the heart of the *Neolithic Childhood* exhibition (referred to previously), in which art historical examples of European sceptical—or even transgressive—responses to the narrative of modernity were explored. After all, a key aspect of the contemporaneity of the modern and traditional—as (if) between the European and the African—is that African art often already encodes an anti-colonial message within the European museum spaces from which such a politics was ostensibly excluded in the name of “traditional” art.

As Hein Vanhee observes, concerning perhaps the most challenging “African art” presence in European museums, the *nkonde* form of *minkisi* (that is, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures encrusted with nails): “The documentary value of *minkisi* lies perhaps herein: rather than illustrating a traditional past, they document by their dislocation the gradual establishment of colonial rule and African responses to these developments. They are not just discarded relics, but they actively participated in the transformation of Kongo society” (100). Furthermore, pre-colonial images of Europeans—and, indeed, images made for Europeans, in the luxury trade of ivory objects—are a significant part, for example, of the heritage of Benin art, also contributing to the African cultural presence in Europe already since the sixteenth century.

A famous testimony to the potentially transformative “presence” of African art at the heart of Europe, understood in a decolonising context, is Chris Marker and Alain Resnais’ 1953 film, *Les statues meurent aussi*, commissioned by the major cultural project whose anglicised name appears throughout this discussion, *Présence Africaine*. Despite its tendency to an affirmative essentialism, eschewing the hybrid modernity of much of the “traditional” African art being celebrated, *Présence Africaine* has played a vital “role as an agent for change” (Luce 5) concerning the inherited Eurocentric problem of cultural memory. In the museum context, the enduring interest of Marker and Resnais’ film, with its expressly anti-colonial poetics, can be seen in reverse in a more recent, fictionalised description of “Europe’s vision” of “clichés about Africa.” In her short story collection, *Coloured Lights*, Leila Aboulela offers a description of these, in the name of a Sudanese student visiting a Scottish museum, as “cold and old” (115). The sense of transformation that the film invokes, in its own imaginary museum, contrasts with this continuing sense of alienation evoked by Aboulela. It also offers a profound counter-point to the motives informing Gaba’s “alternative” museum.

As if it Were Post-Colonial

The institutional space of and for Gaba's intervention appears itself "problematic" in terms of the conceptual understanding of the "Eurocentric" relation to "African art" that it identifies. For the idea of the "museum" in this case cannot be isolated from the institutional investments which it seeks to address and by which it is itself addressed. Established framing distinctions continue to weave through the disciplinary conditions of knowledge in the "curatorial episteme," where Susan Vogel (citing Sidney Kasfir), in a survey article in 2005, could still distinguish between the institutional interests of exhibiting "traditional" and "contemporary" arts as between "Africanists" and "modernists" (15). Although, as Vogel suggests, the twentieth century association between the "modern" and the "primitive," in both private collections and public exhibitions, seems to be historically past (not least, following the controversies engaged by the *Magiciens de la Terre* show in Paris 1989, and New York's MoMA *Primitivism* show in 1984); nonetheless, this paradigm—implying a distinction between the regional ("Africanist") and the international ("modernist")—remains an enduring part of historicising modern art in (and for) the West. It is this history—as a "Eurocentric problem"—which Gaba's project is both inscribed in and which it seeks to interrupt in the name of "African art" by offering a conceptual model (or "question" [16]) of its own.

Contrasted with major exhibitions that seemed already "historical" in their curatorial ambitions in the last century, Gaba's "museum" exposes the simple fact that (as Wyatt MacGaffey notes, citing Arthur Danto): "Neither 'art' nor 'primitive art' is a class of objects existing in the world, to be identified and circumscribed. Both are categories of our thought and practice; they are related as subcategories as part of the history of the west" (218). Appropriately enough, MacGaffey's specific example of this is the changing status of Congolese *minkisi* in Western hands, transformed from their identification with the idea of "fetish" to that of "art," as if these were opposed terms rather than (at least, for Western collectors) correlates (223-24).

In recognition of the Eurocentric condition of, precisely, a "provincialism as universalism" (Quijano 177), the history of the "history" of modern art is undergoing a profound process of revision, now faced with a global marketization of the contemporary as if it were post-colonial. Indeed, the constitutive juxtaposition of African and European, as (if) between traditional and modern, continues to occlude the relational, or syncretic, reality of canonical art on *both* sides of that divide. If the formation of canons in terms of this division has produced an art history that can be viewed (in a critical sense) as itself historical, how might one now situate an appeal to African art such as that named, conceptually, by Gaba's museum?

Besides the contemporary conditions identified by Oguiibe in the "cultural game" for "those who come to it with a background from outside Europe" (33)—which Gaba clearly articulates—one might also consider the traditional conditions of this game with respect to the art accessioned (or appropriated) during the colonial past, not just in the neo-colonial present. Concerning enduring questions of provenance, for example, when addressing African art in Western collections (especially in erstwhile ethnographic museums), this could be viewed as another refraction of Ambalavaner Sivanandan's famous observation—concerning the basic reality (even as it is largely disavowed) of institutional racism in European societies—that "we are here because you were over there."

The Eurocentric question to which Sivanandan's "we" replies, "why are you here?"—invariably followed up by another question, making its premise more explicit, "why don't you go back to where you came from?"—is rarely applied to the presence of African artefacts in European museums. Here the modern culture game is veiled by the aggrandising sense of ownership that these collections represent (itself part of the "Eurocentric African problem") where, despite recent shifts in the politics of returns and reparations, the question of "going back to where you came from" has been more or less taboo, in so far as it strikes at the claims of and for these institutions' cultural legitimacy. That these concerns start to become fundamental to questions about the African art presence in European museums presents another sense of what is "contemporary" when addressing, precisely, the past and its possible futures—with respect to the Benin plaques, for example.

Although there has long been a debate about the conditions of artefacts' being spoken for—whether by curators, anthropologists, or representatives of "source" communities—artefacts are not usually supposed to speak for themselves. This version of the traditional-modern dichotomy—as between what is original

(or authentic) and what is derivative (or inauthentic); or between what is “animate” and “inanimate”—displaces reflection on such objects’ varied affordances, as these change in changing contexts. (As Mamadou Diawara astutely notes of these museums’ displays, “the object is more complex than what meets the eye” 179.) Here “traditional” collections contrast with the contemporary, where living artists—like Gaba—can, at least, speak for their art by themselves (despite the competing interests of dealers, curators, and collectors to define the “value” of the work). As is often noted, the African art that made its European presence felt during the (pre-independence) colonial-modern decades was collected in the absence of the oral testimony by which it was originally narrativised. This concerns what Diawara calls the Western museum’s “idolatry of the object” in denial of its “native context” (174), not least with respect to contrasting conceptions of authorship in the definition of art and of its comparative modernity.

Indeed, as Diawara observes, “all too often we forget the oral dimension of sculpture” (179), a concern echoed by Gaba, for whom: “In Africa, I think art and words always go together” (14). In his own case: “All the pieces I’ve made have had a story” (15); at least, as this accompanies their conceptual interests. Unrecognised by the formalist aesthetics that embraced African art in Europe (conceived of as sculpture) from at least the first decade of the twentieth century, many of the objects exhibited by museums (valued as traditional rather than as contemporary) were not necessarily intended for universal display but, on the contrary, were defined by degrees of “presence” through forms of initiation. The rituals of the Western museum, however, aim to make all objects comparable—even those that it elevates to the status of being “incomparable.”

Here, the initiation of Western connoisseurship, or art knowledge, is also reproduced by institutions with formal conditions of membership, such as a degree from the Courtauld or SOAS, not to mention the “value” of prices organised by the rituals of auction houses or dealers’ galleries. Objects are conserved in the cults of European museums without, however, participating in the originating knowledge systems necessary to address them—or, in the case of contemporary work, such as Gaba’s, without necessarily sharing the “propitiatory” knowledge that is related to the art market. As I discovered in researching this article, for instance, there may be restrictions placed on access to the Tate’s archive in order to protect “market confidentiality” concerning the acquisition of contemporary African art, even when that art is engaged in questioning the concept of the museum and its curatorial policies. Here market realities trump the post-colonial investigation of the Eurocentric, where the “problem” in question is identified with the art and not with the museum.

On the Formation of Canonical Art Histories

That Gaba’s work is now part of Tate Modern’s collections illustrates, paradoxically, the “Eurocentric problem” that it thematises concerning who speaks to—and, even, for—whom about the African art presence in European museums. Not the least aspect of this problem remains institutional racism, the legacies of which provide a register of demands for change within these spaces that have themselves been part of the legacies’ reproduction. How does the existing African art presence in Europe engage, then, with another of Sivanandan’s suggestions—that (as Stephen Small cites it) Black Europeans are conscious of “wear[ing] our passports on our faces; which, in turn, reflects our status in the eyes of non-Black people as permanent strangers”? (34) The museum’s role in creating (and not simply curating) the past in the present has first to dis-articulate the colonial-modern tradition, where the question of African art concerns not only the understanding of “strangers” but also of “permanence” within these privileged European cultural spaces.

By contrast to the traditionally valued African arts in European museums, it is a paradox of Gaba’s “museum” that it can be addressed without ostensible content, questioning in its very concept the supposition of a canon—in this case “of African art.” It is, as Gaba says, “an empty museum, but rich in philosophy” (17). Such a supposition is the paradigm of the change from the cabinet of curiosity to the modern museum of disciplinary knowledge, where the latter continues to provide a source of legitimacy even for museums of contemporary art. As Sylvester Ogbechie notes: “Canons arise precisely because of the structure of knowledge production in art history, in which museum collections are valued higher than

the cultural processes that bring them into being.” (62) This includes the concept of the museum itself, of course, as Gaba observes in the limiting function of a purely Africanist claim in regard to his own work, which he relates to the example of Marcel Broodthaers’ “museum” projects:

I use Broodthaers’ idea without adopting his approach. I hate people telling me that what I do is European art. It’s mainly Africans who tell me that, not Europeans. What I do is react to an African situation which is linked to a Eurocentric problem. I think that attentive African artists who don’t allow themselves to be limited by ethnography can identify with my work. (16)

The contemporary—to cite the title of Gaba’s project—has become a signifier by which even the exhibition space dedicated to a traditional African presence in Europe has attempted to transform the seemingly historical signifier “ethnography” by renaming collections as art. It is paradoxical that this change, already signalled in the early twentieth century, has only been institutionally realised as the sense of the contemporary has displaced that of the modern—nearly a century later. It was only in 2000, for instance, that the Louvre consecrated the Pavillon des Sessions to the display of non-Western “masterpieces,” realising a suggestion made by Apollinaire in 1909.

This manoeuvre is not, however, without its problems. We have already noted Hassan’s rejection of the displacement of the modern in favour of the contemporary, and it is, again, paradoxically the very reproduction of these distinctions that provide for their possible dis-articulation in Gaba’s example. In the institutional self-representation (or self-promotion) of museums of universal (that is, “modern”) art and world (that is, “traditional”) cultures, the contemporary becomes a term for dehistoricising the present, as if overcoming the distinction between the modernist work of decontextualisation (“art”) and the traditionalist work of (re-) contextualisation (“ethnography”). This recalls Vogel’s note about “modernists” and “Africanists” in museum culture, even as the latter occasionally succumb to the allure of the former’s concept of art (while still wanting to avoid conceptualising the “same” artefacts as examples of art history, rather than ethnography).

The resonance of the terms global vs world and art vs cultures in making claims for canons is deep and complex, albeit often subsumed in the new monotone of reference to the contemporary. The space of and for African art in Europe, associated with the formation of canonical art history (mediated especially by the publication of decontextualizing catalogue photographs of “masterpieces”), is framed and articulated, in large part, to the exclusion of reflexive interest in its own Eurocentric construction. As already indicated, such an interest would be most obviously demanded by consideration of modes of “indigenous knowledge systems about beliefs and behaviours related to their cultural history” (Ogbechie 65), addressing what the West knows as “art”; not least, in reconsidering ascriptions of the traditional and the modern in its examples. The cataloguing of works by indexes and inventories—and the familiar notes on “provenance, publication history, exhibition history” that inform any catalogue of “traditional” African art—are clearly not neutral with respect to the enduring epistemic violence of de- and re-contextualisation, which is hardly challenged in the move to the contemporary.

Here again, we confront the conditions of knowledge concerning the “we” and the “you,” the “here” and the “there” (*pace* Sivanadan), that the African presence has long attested to within the space of European museums, even when unacknowledged. Indeed, it has often been thought that this presence requires the supplement of “artists’ initiatives” to make it palpable—such as Fred Wilson’s famous “Other Museum” (not to mention, for instance, the series of interventions at the World Cultures Museum in Frankfurt, under Clémentine Deliss). It is as if a contemporary artist was needed to transform the traditional collection into art—if only, like a fairy tale, for the time of a temporary exhibition. The museum space thereby makes believe that the “problem” of African art can be separated from that of the Eurocentric, reinforcing the latter’s hegemonic power to deny even the paradoxes of its own history.

The use of the term contemporary, then, as if it were descriptive (a “neutral reference” [Hassan]) and not critical (which, for Hassan, the term modern remains), occludes the fact that the African art in these European museums’ collections was always already contemporary, even as it was cast as traditional in order to frame a canonical (Western) modern art. In a sense, its very exclusion—attested to by Gaba’s own

question as to what “role” he might have “if this museum existed” (15)—holds the promise of the African presence (or “problem”) in Eurocentric art history. After all, as noted previously, much of this presence was already engaged in the war of images in colonialism (Quijano 169; also Grudzinski 2001), even before this became politically articulated in the modern sense of institutions (such as museums) promoting “post-colonial” identities.

On the Museum as “No Longer a Euro-American Preserve”

It is a further paradox of Gaba’s project—addressing the museum as a privileged space of and for an African and diaspora art presence in Europe—that its original intention (echoing Malraux) was to be “without walls” (16). Now that the work has been recognised amongst the very institutions that it aimed to question (or at least to engage in dialogue with), it is enclosed, literally, within the walls of Tate Modern’s storage space. When Enwezor, for example, celebrates the project’s mode of assemblage “in the style of a West African market,” it is perhaps inevitable that it is precisely the contrasting “rationalist episteme of the museum, where the display of knowledge takes on an antiseptic, clinical pallor” (133) that comes to characterise the “museum’s” appearance under the aegis of Tate. When I began to write this article only one of its twelve rooms was on public display—the *Marriage Room*—and then in association with the Tate’s collection of performance art rather than of conceptual art. Since June 2018 even this one room has been consigned to the storage, demonstrating that the whole project is now the private property of the gallery rather than a public space of and for critical enquiry concerning the “Eurocentric” (in the name of “African art”), except in its conceptual articulation still.

Perhaps this was already indicated by the way that the project was re-oriented by its Tate context in 2018—not presenting the *Library Room* or the *Gift Shop Room*, for example, which might have invited more critical engagement by the visitor. Such engagement was, after all, the project’s explicit intention, articulated, for instance, with respect to the *Drafts Room*, where, in Gaba’s own account: “I take cut-up banknotes, Dutch ones among them [when the room was installed in Amsterdam], that people will buy as *objets d’art*. So, I revalue these cut-up banknotes and give them value as works of art. Devaluation destroys money. The cut-up notes I sell [for] more than their face value” (15). The paradox here is that the Tate Gallery has now usurped this formerly artistic operation and instrumentalised it in its own commercial positioning within the global art market. *The Marriage Room* represented the curator’s choice of “role” for Gaba’s work in its new institutional context—the effect of which was to recognise the “museum” in terms of the artist’s exposure to the interest of Western galleries, rather than his exposure of those galleries’ own institutional interests concerning “African art.”

Expanding the sense of the “contemporary” here, all this is curiously echoed in similar issues concerning “traditional” African art, as this distinction remains operative in popular (as well as curatorial) culture. In the parallel universe of Hollywood, for example, many of these concerns are enacted in a much discussed scene from the film *Black Panther* (2018). Between the space of the museum and that of the cinema, we find ourselves engaged with a whole new set of paradoxes concerning the “Eurocentric African problem.” That the film’s narrative does not really touch on questions of decolonisation is hardly a surprise, given that it is itself part of a triumphalist post-’89 American world view. Here, Black autonomy—the historical “Panthers” (nineteen of whom remain in American gaols in 2018)—can be celebrated when located in a fantasy world, for example, rather than a world in which “Black Lives Matter.”

Set within the African galleries of “The Museum of Great Britain,” the film shows an image of returns or restitution as direct action, as objects in the collection are violently re-appropriated. The value of the “liberated” object re-inscribes, however, precisely the extractive-capitalist conjunction between raw materials and cultural artefacts that—arguably—the film’s broader fiction of the African polity of Wakanda seeks to resist. This historical conjunction—between what Walter Mignolo notes as “the accumulation of money” and “the accumulation of meaning” (274)—underlies the global sense of “world” cultures, epitomised by Hollywood itself. Freed from the rituals of conservation in the museum, the object offers a traditional (indeed, as we hear in the film’s dialogue, “tribal”) surrogate image for the modern realities

of, for example, coltan in mobile phones and the all-too-real African polity of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Imagining this same scene, for instance, with a new iPhone being “liberated” from a display case of modern ethnographica (otherwise known as a shop window), we might find ourselves reflecting on a rather different kind of “contemporary” museum politics.

As the following citation from George Stocking reminds us, concerning the ethnographic museum, at least:

No longer is it possible for museum anthropologists to treat the objects of others without serious consideration of the matter of their rightful ownership or the circumstances of their acquisition—which in the colonial past were often questionable. It is not, however, simply a question of the ownership of “cultural property,” but also of who should control the representation of the meaning of the objects in the Western category, “material culture.” Although it may appropriately be regarded as an “invention” of modern Western culture, the museum is no longer exclusively a Euro-American preserve... (11-12)

This “no longer” (in 1988) indicates a future that already belongs to the past of the “Eurocentric African problem”; one that has, nonetheless, yet to engage with the implications of its transformation—at least, conceptually—into an Afrocentric European problem, whether within or without the museum walls. As Gaba’s work proposes, the museum offers an enduring, but changing, cultural space for the African presence in Europe—challenging what is “contemporary” within a Eurocentric problem concerning “African art.”

Works Cited

- Aboulela, Leila. “The Museum.” *Coloured Lights*. Polygon, 2001, pp. 99-120.
- Apollinaire, Guillaume. “On Museums.” Translated by Philip Beitchman. *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, edited by Jack Flamm and Miriam Deutch, University of California Press, 2003, pp. 36-37.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Danto, Arthur. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Diawara, Mamadou. “The Impossible Look: A View from Africa.” Translated by Liz Carey-Libbrecht. *Contemporary Art and the Museum*, edited by Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg. Hantje Cantz, 2007, pp. 174-83.
- Enwezor, Okwui. “The Death of the African Archive and the Birth of the Museum.” *Museum and Archive on the Move*, edited by Oliver Grau, de Gruyter, 2017, pp. 132-147.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Civilisation and its Discontents.” Translated by James Strachey. *The Standard Edition*, vol. 21, Hogarth Press, 1961, pp. 59-145.
- Fry, Roger. “Negro Sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club” (1920). *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, edited by Jack Flamm and Miriam Deutch. University of California Press, 2003, pp. 145-47.
- Gaba, Meschac. “Museum of Contemporary African Art,” <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gaba-museum-of-contemporary-african-art-129412> (accessed October 12, 2018).
- . “Interview with Chris Dercon.” *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, edited by Bert Steevensz and Gijs Stork, Artimo Foundation, 2001, pp. 12-18.
- Grudzinski, Serge. *Images at War*. Translated by Heather MacLean, Duke University Press, 2001.
- Hassan, Salah. “The Modernist Experience in African Art.” *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, edited by Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, M.I.T. Press, 1999.
- Kasfir, Sidney. “Teaching the Contemporary: Disjunctures and Accommodations.” *African Arts*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2001, p.10.
- Locke, Alain. “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts.” *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke (1925), Martino Publishing, 2015, pp.254-67.
- Luce, Louise. “Neo-Colonialism and Présence Africaine.” *African Studies Review*, vol.29, no.1, 1986, pp. 5-11.
- MacGaffey, Wyatt. “‘Magic, or as we usually say, Art’. A Framework for Comparing European and African Art.” *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, edited by Enid Schildkrout and Curtis Keim, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.217-35.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Mignolo, Walter. “Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity: Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* (1992).” *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, edited by Doro Globus, Ridinghouse, 2011, pp. 374-390.
- Neolithic Childhood: Art in a False Present, c. 1930*, edited by Anselm Franke and Tom Holert, Diaphanes, 2018.
- Ogbechie, Sylvester. “The Historical Life of Objects: African Art History and the Problem of Discursive Obsolescence.” *African Arts*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2005, pp. 62-69, 94-95.
- Oguibe, Olu. *The Culture Game*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

- Quijano, Anibal. "Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality." Translated by Sonia Therborn. *Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no.2-3, 2007, pp. 168-78.
- Small, Stephen. *Twenty Questions and Answers on Black Europe*. Amrit Publishers, 2018.
- Steiner, Christopher. *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Stocking, George. "Essays on Museums and Material Cultures." *Objects and Others*, edited by George Stocking, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 3-13.
- Vanhee, Hein. "Agents of Order and Disorder. Kongo *Minkisi*." *Re-Visions*, edited by Karel Arnaut, The Horniman Museum and Gardens, 2000, pp. 89-106.
- Vogel, Susan. "Whither African Art? Emerging Scholarship at the End of an Age." *African Arts*, vol.38, no.4, 2005, pp.12-17, 91.