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Untitled (mixed media, wood, silicone rubber, metal) | 2019 | John K. Cobra (courtesy of the artist)

WORKS OF ART AND THE CONDITION OF POST-MEMORY (CONCLUSION)

António Pinto Ribeiro



In *In Darkest Africa* (1890) the explorer Henri Morton Stanley relates an encounter with King Roumanika. The king makes him visit one of the rooms in his palace. The room is, in fact, a museum. Its description reveals it to be an important archive of objects from various parts of Roumanika's nation, organized in a very methodical way.

This is just one of many examples that the identification of artistic objects, and the relationship with them, was reflected on in Africa long before those objects were presented in European and North American museums. If, like all European disciplines of classification and ordering, Western museology has claimed to offer the status of works of art to artistic, religious and functional objects, it has done so as part of a claim to hegemony over a universal narrative of what is allowed to be a work of art (1).

A new narrative has emerged that recognizes both the artistic production and appreciation of African communities. In this context, how do secular African cultural traditions interact today with the artistic work and training of Afro-descendant artists who have been born and educated in European countries? How do they combine the history of Africa and Africans with the artistic languages of "European schools" and with contemporary themes?

We can assert that memories of ancestral artistic culture have had an impact on contemporary artistic production. This impact can be reconciled with the memories second and third generation artists inherit from their parents and grandparents' territories of origin.

Perhaps it is in this way that we can understand the work of many contemporary artists: Bouchra Quizguen, the Moroccan choreographer and creator of *Elephant* (2019), a dance that evokes Moroccan "passeurs" (smugglers) from all periods and of all ages; Yto Barrada, a French-Moroccan photographer and plastic artist living in New York, who has long worked with the paleontological past of Morocco, such as in "Salon Géologique" (2016); or Faustin Linyekula, who presented the performance *Banataba* in 2018 in the park of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium, which questioned the expropriation of the objects and artworks of his ancestors, now on display in American and European museums; or even the artist Aimé Mpane, who has taken on the role of inheritor of the sculptural artists of his region of origin, Katanga, in Congo / Democratic Republic of Congo.

One of the most important parts of this process is the political nature of this art. These works and these artists confront not only the amnesia over the consequences of slavery and colonialism, but also



histories of concealment and devalorization of narratives about, and histories of, colonized territories. Evocations of historical pasts do not hinder these artists. Their work is imbued with the critical spirit of the decolonizing project, often seeking reparations for the violence exercised upon their ancestors. They take on a proactive attitude, setting out on processes of production that synthesize the deconstruction of colonial narratives with each individual's own innovative language. Their context is not exclusively African, but also European. The works of the Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia on the traumatic violence of the First World War are an example of this. At another level, but along the same lines, we could point to the digital fictions of the multidisciplinary artist Sara Sadik, which appropriate the insistent language of clips, embodied in platforms like Youtube. The work of this third generation artist returns to the perspectives of Afrotopia. This concept contains within it the possibility of constructing an African diaspora that refuses the pessimistic and negative visions of Africa produced in the media.

Another noteworthy feature on this horizon of artistic production can be found in the work of the Franco-Algerian artists Djammel Kokene and Katia Kameli, the Portuguese photographer Pauliana Valente Pimentel, and the Cameroonian Barthélémy Togo. They all raise the question of immigration. Why do people migrate, where to, and with what consequences? They interrogate the disregard accorded to the vast majority of immigrants as a consequence of their condition of being “black” (2). These questions have acquired significance in the work of these artists, who do not limit themselves to a critique, but who demand citizenship and the right to this global movement.

Because their identities are multiple, and because Europe is not a homogenous entity, but a space of diverse identities, we should be cautious about classifying these artists as a homogenous group within a socially, politically and culturally unified Europe (3). The problematic of identity takes us to the new concepts of *afropolitan* and *afropolitanism*. The latter term – created in 2005 by Taye Selasi in the article “Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)” (4), endowed the afropolitan with an African, urban identity and sensibility, that had nothing to do with a self-referential panafricanism. The term, disseminated first in the major African capitals, and afterwards in European centres, has come to be recognized and used in various studies and contexts (5).

Almost simultaneously, the philosopher Achille Mbembe has defined afropolitanism as an operative concept that produces a rupture with the traditional history of African Studies, in terms of the question of emancipation (6). Refusing afrocentrism and an insistence on African identity based on



essentialisms, the author uses the term to define African diasporas in the USA and Europe as well as the literary production, fashion, visual arts and cinema produced by them. Afropolitanism names a demand for transcultural cosmopolitanism and a determined and affirmative mobility between Africa and Europe, and vice-versa, of Africans, their ideas and their cultural products.

In the abstract, these terms could name an artist such as John K. Cobra, a Flemish-Congolese multidisciplinary artist. Indeed, he adopts the term for himself. Yet, afropolitanism can only emerge in the context of freedom, and within the ongoing process of the decolonisation of European countries.

We can be bold enough to declare that a European renaissance has begun through the presence of these artists on the European and North American scene. And it has had a significant impact. Yet the contemporary conjuncture is an obstacle. In the context of the pandemic, both decolonization and the visibility of artistic productions by the “children of immigrants” is limited. They may become absorbed into the limitations on circulation of people and artworks, in which rising nationalisms thrive. This has reached into the artistic sphere, into museums and theatres and into corporate movements “against outsiders”. The consequences are felt by the artists and works of post-memory. We must not be complacent: the threat of a new amnesia about recent history is real.

It is in this context that we reflect on the works that have emerged in the last two decades. We need not only to understand their recognition in the contemporary artistic scene, but to establish a theoretical interpretation built on adequate narratives and a critical corpus on these artistic productions in their historical context. Doing this work has been one of the principal objectives of the MEMOIRS project.

Translated by Archie Davies



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- (1) See: António Pinto Ribeiro, *Memoirs Newsletter*, "[Works of art and the condition of post-memory \(1\)](#)", 9.05.2020 and "[Works of art and the condition of post-memory: some attributes \(2\)](#)", 20.07.2020.
- (2) On this see Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Duke University Press, 2017.
- (3) For a detailed study of this subject, and the difference between African diasporas in various European countries, see the work of Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: an Untold Story*. C. Hurst & Co, London, 2020.
- (4) Bye-Bye Babar, *The LIP Magazine*. 03/03/2005, Selasi, Taiye. "Bye-Bye Babar." *Callaloo*, vol. 36 no. 3, 2013, p. 528-530. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/cal.2013.0163.
- (5) See the article "Esconjura da Memória", by Paulo de Medeiros, about a book that deals with various European cities and their African diasporas, *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* by Johnny Pitts, in the journal *Memoirs-Público*, 2.2019, p.16.
- (6) Cf. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis", Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004) pp. 347-372, and Sarah Balakrishnan, "[The Afropolitan Idea: New Perspectives on Cosmopolitanism in African Studies](#)" *History Compass* 15/2, 2017, pp. 2-11.
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