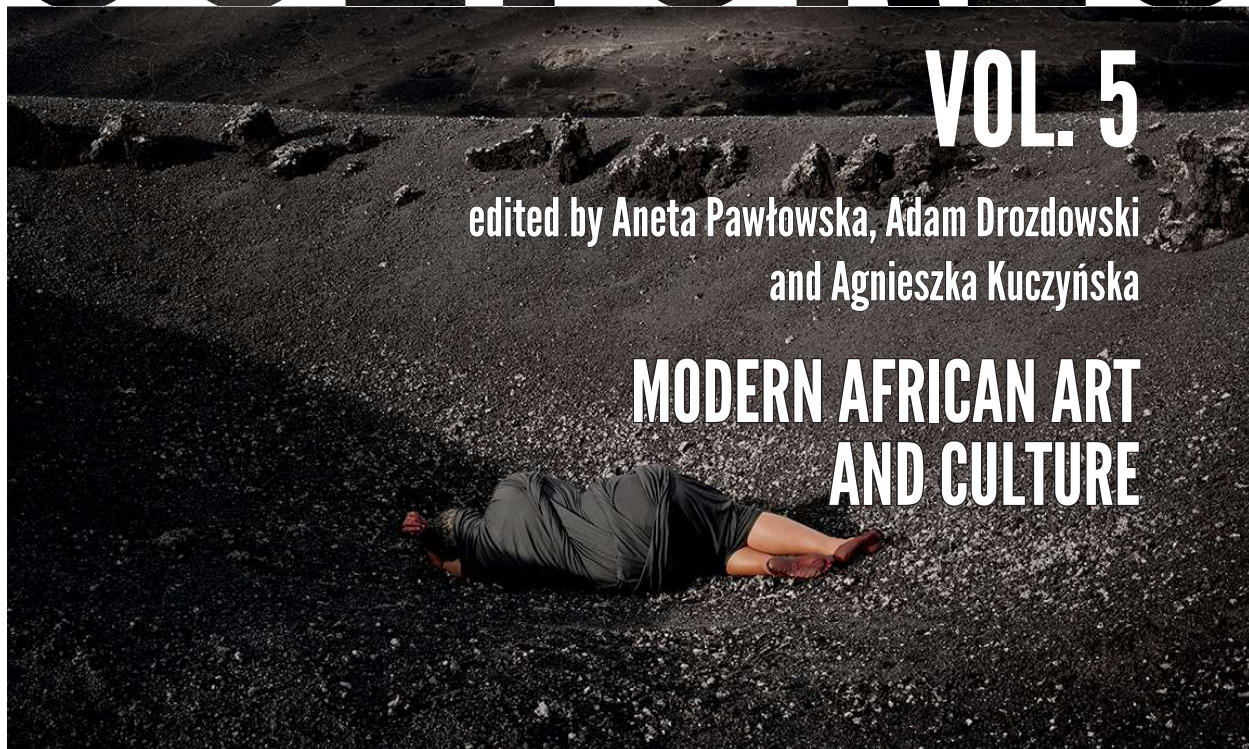


THE ARTISTIC TRADITIONS OF NON-EUROPEAN CULTURES

VOL. 5

edited by Aneta Pawłowska, Adam Drozdowski
and Agnieszka Kuczyńska

**MODERN AFRICAN ART
AND CULTURE**



THE ARTISTIC TRADITIONS OF NON-EUROPEAN CULTURES VOL. 5

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REVIEW

FASCINATING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART. EXHIBITION: ART/AFRIQUE, LE NOUVELATELIER

From April to September 2017 the spectacular building of the *Louis Vuitton Foundation* hosted a notable exhibition of contemporary African Art entitled: *Art/Afrique, le nouvel atelier*. The building, designed by *starchitect* Frank Gehry, and opened in October 2014, is itself a masterpiece. Although from a distance it looks like a loose set of huge glassy sails sitting in a pond, inside it is a very convenient and well thought out exhibition space.

In the entrance hall, we could see an impressive and huge black drawing created in 2016 by a South African artist William Kentridge, entitled "Procession of Migrants." In the same hall, there was a display of Pascale Marthine Tayou from Cameroun. Its first part comprised a three-dimensional structure composed of coloured stone cubes entitled "Colonisation". The colours referred to the word "coloured", associated with the local inhabitants. The second part of the display, entitled "Independences CHA-CHA", consisted of a projection of flags of African countries on the escalatorramp.

The entire exhibition consisted of three parts. One of them entitled *Les Initiés* contained a selection of contemporary African art, from the period of 1989–2009, from the collection of Jean Pigozzi, French businessman and philanthropist. Among them, large paintings of Chéri Samba pointing out social problems stemmed from African politics and wars. The artist was born in 1956 in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I also liked the imaginative masks linking traditional African art with current and, sometimes, very adventitious materials. They were authored by



Ill. 1. Pascale Marthine Tayou, *La Colonisation*, 2017



Ill. 2. William Kentridge, Paper silhouettes for *Triumphs and Laments (Procession of Migrants)*, 2016, torn and cut black paper, adhesive



Ill. 3. Chéri Samba, *Little Kadogo – I Am for Peace, That Is Why I Like Weapons*, 2004, acrylic and glitter on canvas

Calixte Dakpogan, born in 1958, and Romuald Hazoumè, born in 1962, both from Benin. Ceramic sculptures of Seni Awa Camara, a Senegalese artist born in 1945, were also amazing. They focused on a woman's body.

The second part of the exhibition was called *Etrèlâ. Afrique du Sud, une scène contemporaine*. And the entire exposition was supplemented by the third section containing works from the collection of the *Louis Vuitton Foundation*.

I was particularly impressed by an installation of Jane Alexander, born in 1959 and living in Cape Town, South Africa. The installation entitled "Infantry with Beast" consisted of a column of twenty seven individuals with lycaon's heads advancing along a red carpet. Lycaon, also known as African wild dog, is noted for its cruelty. The column was watched by an anxious dog-like animal.

Considerable exhibition space was covered with cardboard models of unreal buildings and complete cities made by Bodys Isek Kingelez, an artist from the Democratic Republic of Congo, born in 1948. The same country was represented by Moke, whose paintings were quite touching and clearly exemplified naïve art. The exhibition contained also some photographs. The "Hairstyle" series of a Nigerian artist J. D. Okhai Ojeikere, born in 1930, mainly contained photos of backs of heads, taken in the years 1968–1999. They constituted an intriguing



Ill. 4. Calixte Dakpogan, *Oba*, 2007, metal, plastic and ballpoint pens



Ill. 5. Seni Awa Camara, *Sans titre*, 2006, terracotta



Ill. 6. Romuald Hazoumè, *L'Inspireur*, 1992, plastic, metal and fabric

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Ill. 7. Jane Alexander, *Infantry with Beast*, 27 Figures: 2008–2010, Beast: 2003, fiberglass, oil paint, cast found shoes, pure wool carpet



Ill. 8. Bodys Isek Kingelez, *Papillon de mer*, 1990–1991, cardboard, wood, plastic, yarn and pins

documentation of his country's culture. The photographs of a South African artist, David Goldblatt, born in 1930¹, were of a particular importance. He had documented landscapes and history of his native land from the apartheid times until the student's revolt of 2015.

An interesting video presentation, shown simultaneously on three large screens, by another South African artist, born in 1955, William Kentridge, entitled "Notes Towards a Modern Opera," combined experiences from

¹ David Goldblatt died on June 25, 2018 (editorial note).



Ill. 9. Moke, *Skol Primus*, 1991, oil on canvas



Ill. 10. David Goldblatt, *On Freedom Square, Soweto*, 2003, digital print on 100% cotton rag paper

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Ill. 11. J. D. Okhai Ojeikere, *Hairstyle*, 1968–1999



Ill. 12. William Kentridge, *Notes Towards a Modern Opera*, 2015, three-channel video projection, colour, sound



Ill. 13. Nicholas Hlobo, *Ndize (Tail)*, 2010, ribbons, thread, rubber and leather



Ill. 14. Kemang Wa Lehulere, *Reddening of the Greens or Dog Sleep Manifesto*, 2015, suitcases, earth, blackboards, salvaged school desks (wood), ceramic dogs. On the wall: *Cutting Corners*, 2017, mixed technique, chalk on painted wall

“proletarian” operas shown during the Chinese Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao Zedong in 1966, Chinese shadow puppetry, as well as images of red flags, revolutionary slogans, maps covering revolution areas, letters, book pages, everything supplemented with strange choreographies. In the background, we could hear the soundtrack stemming from the communist anthem “The Internationale”. A series of pre-arranged photographs entitled “Revelations” was also worth noting. Its author, Kudzanai Chiurai, was born in Zimbabwe, in 1981. He was the first black student who received a bachelor’s degree in Fine Art from the University of Pretoria. He is a poet, activist and philosopher. After painting a portrait of the dictator Robert Mugabe, judged as defamatory, he had to escape his native Zimbabwe and settled in South Africa.

The installation of Nicholas Hlobo, born in 1975 in Cape Town, was quite tantalizing. The work entitled “Ndize (Tail)” was made mainly of coloured thread and ribbons. Some believed that the applied materials pointed to a transgender practice, as usually usage of such stuff was reserved for women. The middle of the large exhibition hall was occupied by an installation entitled “Reddening of



Ill. 15. Kudznanai Chiurai, *Revelations V*, 2011, inkjet print



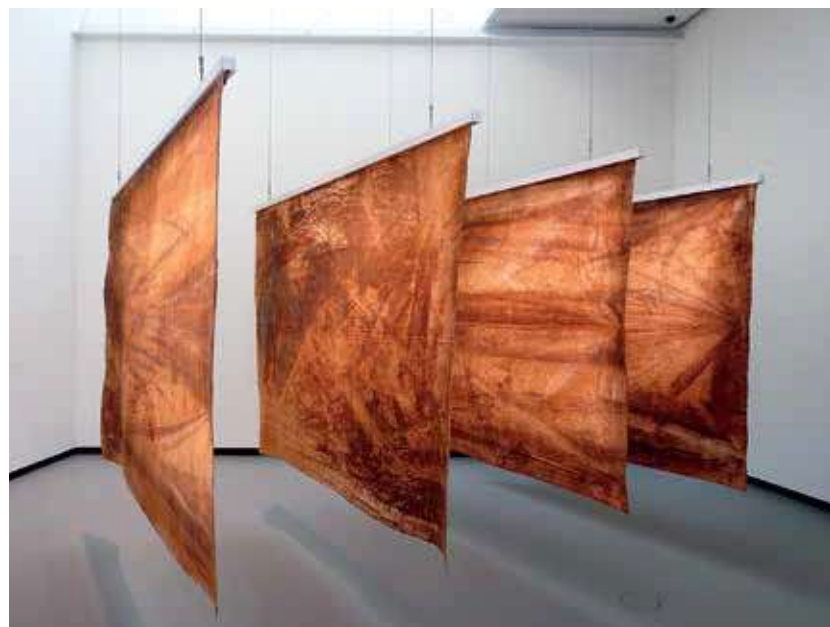
Ill. 16. Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, *Lorde (After Audre Lorde)*, 2017

the Greens or Dog Sleep Manifesto,” created by Kemanga Wa Lehulere, another artist from South Africa, born in 1984. This was a clear reference to the *Natives Land Act* of 1913 depriving the black inhabitants of Africa ownership of native lands and, quite often, forcing them to migrate. A mural of the same artist, entitled “Cutting Corners”, executed on a black wall resembling a blackboard was referring to the same issue.

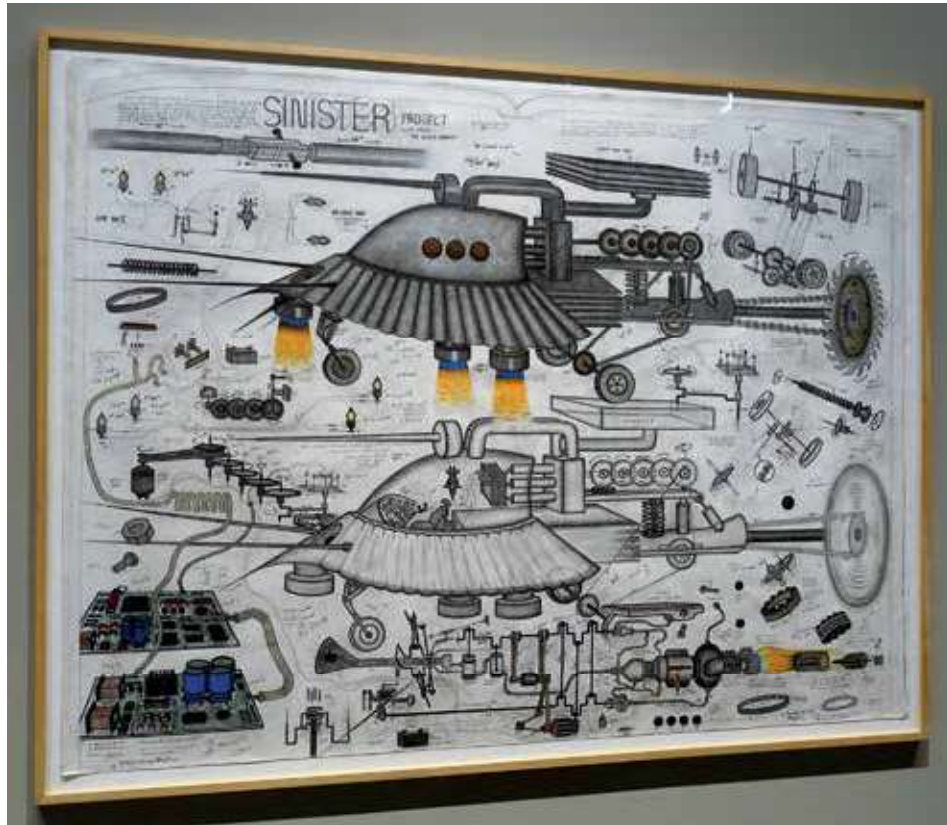
Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, living and working in Johannesburg, has painted a series of sixteen portraits of Africans, entitled “Heroes”. The portraits of identical formats were based on photographs found in the Internet. They included a portrait of Chris Hani, the leader of The South African



Ill. 17. Lawrence Lemaona, *Kanga*



Ill. 18. Moshckwa Langa, *Drag Paintings*, 2016, four cotton duck canvases, soil, varnish



Ill. 19. Abu Bakarr Mansaray, *Sinister Project*, 2006, graphite, coloured pencil and felt-tip pen

Communist Party, murdered by a Polish immigrant Janusz Waloś, who is now unfortunately, a “hero” of Polish nationalists. Another portrait depicted Audre Lorde, a writer, poet, feminist and lesbian born in New York City. Her name was attributed to an annual literary award presented by Publishing Triangle to honour works of lesbian poetry, first presented in 2001. Some of the portrayed were quite ordinary African people, intentionally included into the heroes category.

One wall of a hallway was covered with sixteen pieces of fabric called *kanga*, resembling the type of fabric commonly used in South Africa, but designed in the Netherlands, manufactured in Asia, and sold in Africa. It is not surprising that *kanga* is emblematic of globalization. The *kangas* shown here were authored by Lawrence Lemaana, born in 1982, in Johannesburg. The texts appearing on the fabrics looked like headlines in newspapers and were related to politics and life in South Africa. The *kangas* reminded me the style of folk-like wall hangings designed by Bettina Beres, a painter from Krakow, Poland.

Quite intriguing are four huge, thick canvases coloured with clayish soil of Africa, hanging down from the ceiling. They were authored by a South African Moshekwa Langa, born in 1975. The technique applied here was also quite original. The wet, thick cotton canvas was dragged behind a car along the dirt roads in the outskirts of Bakenberg, the natal town of the artist. This was his attempt to perpetuate public awareness of his homeland. The title of the work "Drag Paintings" made use of a double meaning of the word "drag". The entire body of work of Moshekwa Langa had been centred around the artist's homeland since he, as a child, discovered that his hometown was not marked in a world atlas. I can note that the canvases hanging down remind me the great "Draperies" series by Andrzej Okińczyc, a Polish artist from Poznan.

Abu Bakarr Mansaray, born in Sierra Leone, in 1969, was a self-taught man. In 1998 he fled his native country engulfed with a civil war and settled in the Netherlands. His large-format drawings picture imaginary machines often harking back to wars and military equipment, or looking like UFOs. Several such drawings were shown at the exhibition, but, as an engineer, I was not really impressed with them.

The described exhibition contained considerably more works created between 1989–2009 than those mentioned here. Although I would not call any of the exhibited works a masterpiece, I looked at the presented collection with real pleasure. What concerned me, however, was the fact that although most of the works invoked traditional African art, they were representing the globalized art market and most of them could have been created on any other continent. But this might simply mean that global contemporary art has so strong African roots, that we now have problems in recognizing its uniqueness.

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Photos: Authors' archives
Cover design: *Szymon Saliński*

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ISSN 2450-5692

The book can be ordered by mail:
Polish Institute of World Art Studies – warsaw@world-art.pl
Tako Publishing House – www.tusieczyta.pl

POLISH INSTITUTE OF WORLD ART STUDIES
UL. WARECKA 4/6–10, 00–040 WARSZAWA
WWW.WORLD-ART.PL
E-MAIL: BIURO@WORLD-ART.PL

TAKO PUBLISHING HOUSE
UL. SŁOWACKIEGO 71/5, 87–100 TORUŃ
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