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"Authentic/Ex-Centric" at the Venice Biennale: African Conceptualism in Global Contexts

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"Authentic/Ex-Centric" at the Venice Biennale

African Conceptualism in Global Contexts

SALAH M. HASSAN • OLU OGUIBE

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We recently had the pleasure of co-curating the exhibition "Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa In and Out of Africa" (June 8–September 30, 2001) as part of the 49th Venice Biennale. This exhibition featured the work of seven prominent contemporary African and African Diaspora artists: Willem Boshoff (South Africa), Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons (Cuba/USA), Godfried Donkor (Ghana/UK), Rachid Koraïchi (Algeria/France), Berni Searle (South Africa), Zineb Sedira (Algeria/UK), and Yinka Shonibare (Nigeria/UK). All seven work within the conceptual mode in painting, sculpture, photography, video, and multimedia installations. All live and work between the continent and Western centers of artistic production, and their works speak directly to issues of representation, memory, diaspora, expatriation and other aspects of the African experience.

In the exhibition's title, the word *authentic* references the responses of some of these artists to the politics of representation as well as paradigms of discourse that objectify African and other cultures. It plays on cultural determinism and the demand for "authenticity" and the exotic that continues to frame the acknowledgment and reception of African contemporaneity outside the continent. Several of the works in the exhibition problematized such notions of originality and authenticity, and spoke back to them.

The term *ex-centric* addresses other realities of cultural politics as they affect African artists within and outside the continent. It also points to issues of cross-cultural and transnational aesthetics and consciousness within contemporary African art practice. The exhibition reflected the reciprocal traffic of ideas and influences between Africa and other parts of the world, and offered a glimpse of the ways these artists have interpreted and translated the aesthetic and social experiences of both historical and postcolonial Africa as part of a global sensibility.

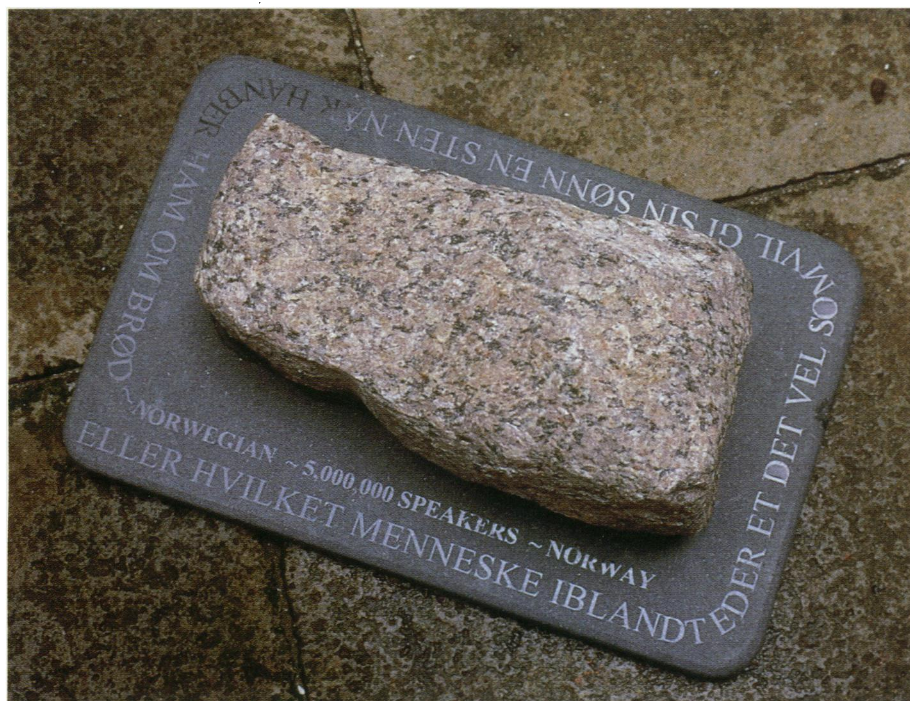
Why Venice? Why Exhibitions?

Questions may arise as to the location and strategy of the exhibition, especially in light of the considerable expense and bureaucracy involved. *Why Venice? Why exhibitions?* The answers to these questions are complex and multilayered, and range from straightforward facts of statistics and visibility vis-à-vis the Biennale's continued significance in contemporary art to much deeper issues of history and the realities of contemporary culture relations.

The African presence in the Venice Biennale has always been minimal and at best sporadic. Since its inception only one African country, Egypt, has maintained a national pavilion; yet the fact that Egypt was one of the first non-European nations to establish a pavilion (beginning with the 2nd Biennale) indicates longstanding awareness of the Biennale's significance as an international cultural forum.[1] For a brief period South Africa presented its artists in Venice before being ostracized for its racial laws. Otherwise, only two traveling exhibitions of African art have ever made it to the Biennale—one in the 45th (1990) and the other in the 46th. Both exhibitions were organized by Western curators, and in many ways they were marginal to the primary events, although the Africans won the First Exhibitor's Medal at the 45th Biennale. It is equally noteworthy that as recently as the 48th Biennale, of the more than 107 artists invited to *d'apertutto*, the main exhibition organized by artistic director Harald Szeemann, only three were Africans. On a certain level, therefore, "Authentic/Ex-Centric" was part of an effort to remedy the virtual absence of Africa in the long history of the Venice Biennale and in other significant international cultural forums of its kind.

Why are such forums, and exhibitions in general, so important, as opposed to texts or other means of presenting African art? One may put the answer rather simplistically: *If you do not exhibit, you do not exist!* Exhibitions are the building blocks of art history and therefore crucial in moving art from the private to the public domain. In the cultural politics of the past two centuries, exhibitions and the curatorial practices behind them constitute the most enduring and perhaps most powerful means of selecting, staging, and, ultimately, canonizing art. As Walter Grasskamp has observed: "[H]istoriography, including art historiography, is only possible if a few events are selected from the chaos and peddled. Historiography pretends to go by the worth of events, as contemporaries supposedly saw it, but uses its own evaluation" (Grasskamp 1996:68).

Forums for showcasing artistic creativity are part of art history's strategy to transform this "chaos"—to use Grasskamp's term—into more manageable units, out of which it creates the semblance of a coherent historical narrative. Of course, this strategy involves not only art historians and critics but an entire culture machine comprising an array of culture managers and brokers including curators, patrons, museums, art galleries, art dealers, agents, and collectors. As one of the most well-



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1, 2. Willem Boshoff (b. 1951, Transvaal, South Africa). *Panifice*, 2001. Engraved granite; 25cm x 43cm x 17cm (9.8" x 16.9" x 6.7"). Courtesy of the artist.

Granite loaves of bread are arranged on granite breadboards inscribed in different languages with the biblical quote "Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?"

The exhibition "Authentic/Ex-Centric," part of the 49th Venice Biennale, featured the work of seven African and African Diaspora artists. This piece was installed in the yard of the Conservatorio Marcello; all others were installed in the Palazzo Fondazione Levi.

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attended showcases of contemporary art, the Venice Biennale provides this increasingly global machine with a readymade package of what are considered the latest trends. Curators, museum directors, gallery owners, art critics, and other specialists from virtually every corner of the planet descend on Venice for a glimpse of this official currency, with significant consequences for artists and cultural constituencies with any interest in the global contemporary art scene.

Given this fact, the absence of African artists becomes particularly interesting. While economic reasons or the lack of consistent national policies that prioritize culture may explain the paucity of African national pavilions in Venice, they do not account for the absence of Africans from the Biennale's invitational exhibition, for which the artistic director is responsible. The latter state of affairs, it seems to us, speaks to reluctance, even unwillingness, on the part of curators to acknowledge African artists and their provenance as part of contemporary art and our moment in history.

The excuse that little was known in the West about these artists no longer holds, since many of them now practice internationally alongside their contemporaries from elsewhere, producing work that speaks to similar issues. It is difficult to name or qualify this unwillingness, yet it fits into a pattern that appears to change very little even as these artists become more visible on the international scene and new bodies of knowledge are generated around their practice.

The 1997 Venice Biennale strikingly illustrated this fact. Its director, Germano Celant, may not have voiced the same illogic that his predecessor, Jean Clair, used to exclude African artists from the Biennale's main exhibition, but his actions did not evince a different conviction. Celant organized that show as a survey of contemporary art in the late twentieth century under the banner "Future, Present, Past." Effectively, his position was that African artists have no place in any narratives of contemporary art in the late twentieth century, despite their contributions to contemporary culture even in the West (Celant 1997). It echoed the opinion expressed almost a decade earlier by a much less knowledgeable art critic, Brian Sewell of the London *Evening Standard*, who wrote that non-Western artists did not deserve any more than a footnote in the history of modern art in the twentieth century.

This rejection is not peculiar to the Venice Biennale. The last Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, widely acknowledged as perhaps second only to the Venice Biennale as a showcase of significant contemporary art production, provides another example. Although Catherine David, its director, made last-minute efforts to invite African artists, their presence was nonetheless almost nonexistent and came across as an afterthought in an exhibition supposedly devoted to issues of globalization and internationalism in the visual arts.

The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa (1997) offered a graphic contrast. Artistic director Okwui Enwezor and his team of international curators presented an inclusive, comprehensive narrative of contemporary art with sufficient evidence of the strength of African artists in a global culture. The disparity with the Venice and Kassel events points to a persistent shortcoming in the political will of culture brokers and managers in the West to locate African artists alongside those from other parts of the world.

The 2001 Venice Biennale provided even more evidence of such shortcomings. Sarah Milroy makes an eloquent argument in her review for the Canadian daily *Globe and Mail* (June 26, 2001):

> This is [Harald] Szeemann's third Biennale, and while he is still waving his arms in gestures of wild global inclusiveness, it would seem that, conceptually, the wheels have fallen off....Szeemann's woolliness shows up most glaringly in two areas: race and gender. It seems that the "authentic" Third World artist, in Szeemann's view, either likes to whittle at blocks of wood to make faux-naive sculptures of African chieftains (like Nigeria's Sunday Jack Akpan or Kenya's Sarenco l'Africano), or string up the odd dead goat and call it installation art (Marko Lehanka). And when we are not reveling in the quaint primitivism of our dark-skinned brethren, Szeemann seems to say, we also enjoy watching them disport themselves, buns up on the muddy riverbank, flashing those famously incandescent smiles, as in the photographs of semi-clad Haitians by Spaniard Christina Garcia Rodero, which grace the [Biennale] catalogue's back cover.

It is against this background that "Authentic/Ex-Centric" was presented in Venice as the first exhibition of African conceptual art conceived and organized by African curators outside the Egyptian pavilion. It was both an intervention in the patterns of narration of contemporary culture—a reinsertion of passages otherwise likely to be left out—and an effort to assume responsibility in telling one's own story. This statement is not meant to privilege any argument that only Africans are capable of presenting their story. One must understand, however, that forming a clear perspective of Africa's place in contemporary culture requires a level of self-definition and self-representation, and even more so when others are unwilling to take that reality as a given.

Toward this end, we presented "Authentic/Ex-Centric" as one of a series of like projects under the auspices of the Forum for African Arts, an organization formed by African and other concerned curators, art critics, artists, and scholars.[2] The Forum aims to support and promote the work of African artists and produce the knowledge to ensure that they take their deserved place within the spaces and narratives of international contemporary art. This organization mounted a deliberate and tireless effort to inaugurate this exhibition at the 49th Venice Biennale.

The Exhibition's Theme: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art

Before mapping the terrain of conceptualism in contemporary African art, we should clarify what we mean by the term. Conceptual art emerged in the last century from a long series of often unconnected and not altogether intentional acts and interventions in which artists elected or rejected certain forms or strategies in art making, and in the process revised received understanding of the nature and essence of art. Because these interventions occurred in several different locations and precede the term itself, most recent historiographers of conceptual art admit that attempts to designate a firm genealogy or lineage can only be futile, or at best viewed with skepticism (see Godfrey 1998; Alberro 1999:xvi). It is perhaps more helpful, therefore, to look at the different characteristics associated with conceptual art, at least in the West.

The first of these is self-reflexivity, by which the work of art is turned on itself and ultimately on the very notion of art. Different scholars trace the emergence of this tendency to various moments and protagonists preceding the advent of conceptual art as a recognizable strategy by several centuries. Tony Godfrey (1998:19) mentions Pliny's story of a painting competition in the fourth century B.C. between the artists Zeuxis and Parrhasios in which both were required to make the most mimetically faithful still life; the latter won by painting a curtain so realistic that his competitor tried to pull it back to reveal the nonexistent still life behind it. An Arab version of the myth speaks of the winning painter who polished the wall opposite his competitor's mural until it shone like a mirror, thus reflecting the other painter's work on his wall. In both cases the artwork plays with received notions, even convictions held sacred, and raises the question "What is real about art, and what is its true nature?" Despite the limited frames within which society embeds it, is art a reflection of reality or a part of reality, or both, or neither? In Velasquez's *Las Meninas* the painter takes the liberty—quite unusual for his time—of inserting himself and his

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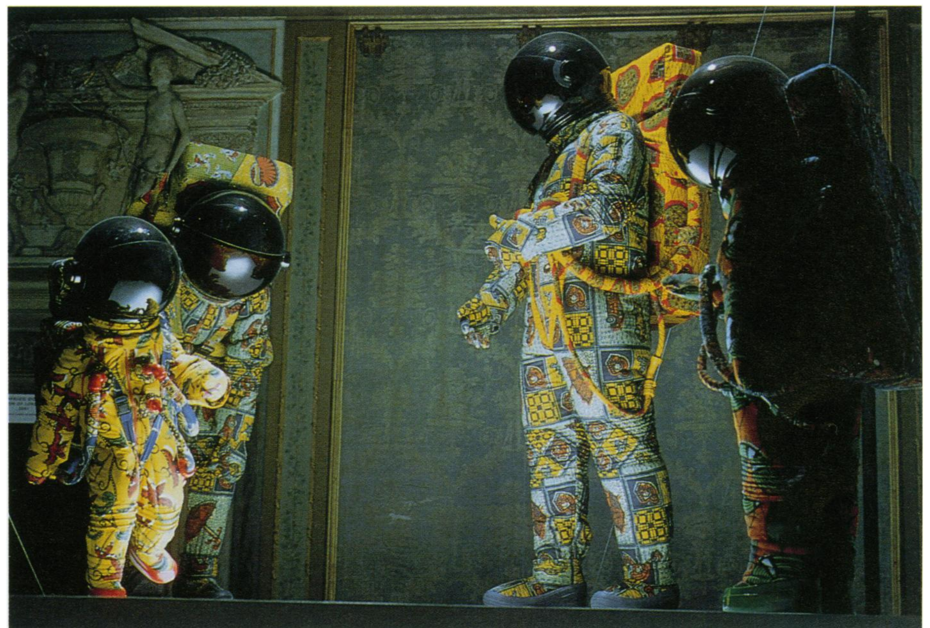
canvas in the family portrait he is commissioned to paint. Thus the canvas is made to mirror itself, to write itself into the painting and thus reveal itself as no more than canvas.

In our own time many trace the most celebrated return of this element in the Western tradition to Marcel Duchamp and his *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, in which he foregrounds the Cubists by integrating a "real" object into a work of art, or better still, converts a "real" object into an "art" object, thus pushing the limits of the acceptable and leading the viewer to question what is art in the work and what is real. Duchamp of course superseded this four years later, when he pseudonymously presented an overturned porcelain urinal to the Society of Independent Artists in New York as a work of art. In a letter to his sister, Duchamp intimated that the work was made not by himself but by a female friend, whom many suspect to be his promoter, the journalist Louise Norton (see Godfrey 1998:28–29). Whatever its true authorship, *Fountain* was significant for its relevance, namely that it questioned not only the general social definition of art accepted in the West since the Greeks, by which art was restricted to varying degrees of mimesis, but also the convictions even of artists who considered themselves radical and opposed to the staid aesthetics of the Academy. *Fountain* was also presented as a critique of Western painting at the turn of the twentieth century, and it should be



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3, 4. Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962, London). *Vacation*, 2001. Wax-printed cotton textile, fiberglass. Courtesy of Hans Bogatzke Collection and Stephen Friedman Gallery.

Shonibare has outfitted his family of moonwalkers in spacesuits made of the imported printed fabric worn all over Africa.

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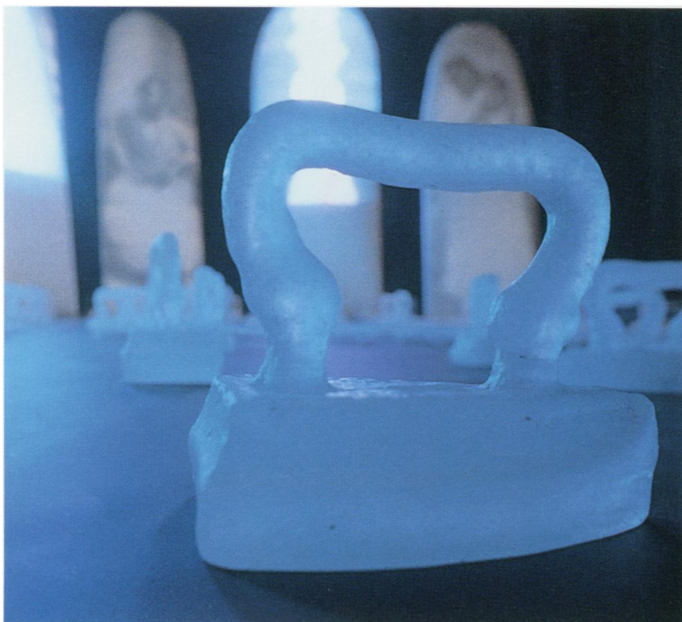
recalled that another decade would pass before Georges Braque (and then Picasso) made what some would consider the radical shift that Duchamp anticipated and sought with his critique.

In other words, one could say that the roots of conceptual art lie somewhat in these efforts to make art that questions its own nature and stature, rejects the cult of the artist's hand and the uniqueness of the art object, and problematizes the desire for coherence and narrative consistency. The practice would continue with the Dadaists and proliferate in the late twentieth century, eventually becoming a cornerstone of conceptual art. These instances of evident self-reflexivity in art are worth recalling only for the reason that they went against the grain of the traditions within which they were produced. As Duchamp's own writings indicate (e.g., Duchamp 1969,



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5–7. María Magdalena Campos-Pons (b. 1959, Matanzas, Cuba). *Spoken Softly with Mama,* 1997. Mixed-media installation. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Part of the series "History of People Who Were Not Heroes," a chronicle of life in the province of Matanzas, where slave barracks are still visible. The artist considers this installation to be a portrait of her Afro-Cuban family, revealed through their imprint on household objects and told through the women's voices and songs. It includes ironing boards with photo transfers or projected video images, cast-glass irons and trivets, and stacks of bedsheets, their surfaces used as video screens.

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8, 9. Godfried Donkor (b. 1964, Ghana). A section in *Lord Byron's Room,* 2001. Ink-jet prints on canvas.

The artist has manipulated period prints to create scenes of Africans in 18th-century London.

1997), it is debatable whether the element of self-reflexivity in these instances was a matter of intention and therefore a prerequisite to the work's own existence, or whether it was merely a matter of reading and ascription after the fact. One may question whether this intention must be present in order for a work to qualify as conceptual art.

Another element that has come to be associated with conceptual art is the dis-

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dain for "objectness" as a *sine qua non*, and the move toward what Lucy Lippard (1973) notoriously termed the "dematerialization of the art object." In this regard, art ceases to be defined merely along the predictable lines of the tangible and categorizable, as either painting or sculpture. Forms and enactments outside these traditional Western categories become acceptable as art, and the notion of the object becomes redundant. Again, it is difficult to trace the emergence of this element to any particular moment or figure, but in the West the Dada group could be credited with initiating the process of its institutionalization. In the 1960s and 1970s the preeminence of text over image, pioneered by artists like Francis Picabia and other members of the Dada group at the turn of the century, became pronounced especially in the United States, and other forms such as performance (again, in many cases drawing on the examples of Dada) gained legitimacy. In England, language rather than image became the preeminent locus of activity and meaning.

A third crucial element or tendency in conceptual art is the preeminence of framing, whereby the placement of a work of art and the consequent context become more important to its meaning and significance than its form or its "aesthetic" qualities. Whereas within tradition, meaning was dependent on narrative evident in the image, and on the manipulation of elements of design to achieve this narrative or coherent image, in conceptual art these become secondary to the careful location of the work in relation to its surroundings and their relevant associations. Elaborate allegory gives way to metaphor, and the window on the wall is subjugated and redefined.[3]

Ultimately conceptualism becomes an umbrella term for myriad art practices and forms that go beyond painting and sculpture. Performance, video art, and assemblage and installation are strategies of multimedia spectacle in which temporal and spatial dimensions as well as issues of the self and the body can be explored simultaneously. As Alexander Alberro observes: "The conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness towards definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution" (in Lippard 1973:xvii).

In more ways than one, conceptual art has never been a monolithic practice or unified artistic discourse but a contested field of multiple theoretical and practical positions.[4] Also, as Godfrey notes in the introduction to his history of conceptual art, "Conceptual art was, and is, a truly international phenomenon" (1998:7). Yet, attempts to map its terrain outside the West have been rare, the one example being the exhibition "Global Conceptualism," held in 1999 at the Queens Museum of Art in New York (Farver 1999). Neither has there been any effort to explore possible sources or origins outside the West.

Yet the influence of the non-Western world on conceptualism must be explored, in light of two considerations, among many. First, it is obvious that certain approaches adopted by Western conceptualists—performance art, installation, text-based art, use of the found object and the ephemeral—were already evident in non-Western artistic, philosophical, and spiritual practices, whether African, Asian, or Middle Eastern. Here one can simply cite the evocation of Eastern philosophy and spiritualism in the

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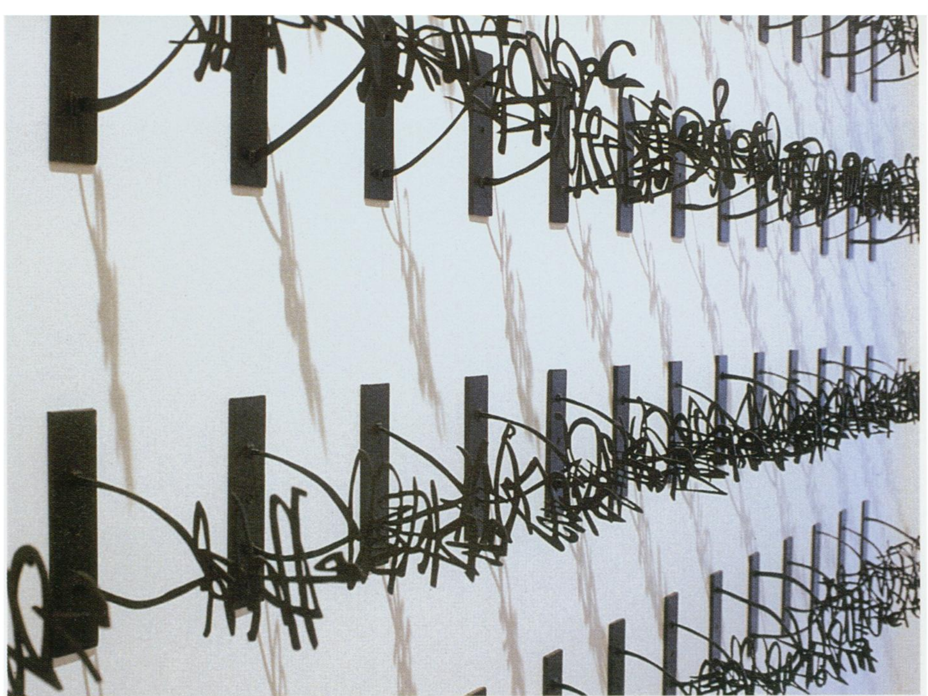

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10–13. Rachid Koraïchi (b. 1947, Aïn Beïda, Algeria). *Le Chemin de roses*, 2001. Mixed-media installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Using gold-embroidered silk banners, steel sculptures, and Turkish ablution basins, Koraïchi recalls the journey of the Sufi mystic al-Rumi across the Mediterranean to Turkey.

performance work of Yoko Ono and the installations of Judy Chicago. Also, in general the performance-based and installation works of many conceptual artists evince striking familiarity with display strategies in African and Oceanian art, knowledge of which has been readily available in anthropological texts, ethnographic museum displays, photography, mass media, and many other sources since the turn of the twentieth century.

The break with the past in Western art at the turn of the century was informed by familiarity with these cultures, whose influence was far more than formal and was not limited to painting and sculpture. Indeed, their strongest influence was on the fundamental notion of art, for in coming into contact with African and Oceanian cultures, the pioneers of twentieth-century European art learned—despite the protests and disdain of their contemporaries—that art could be defined beyond the limits stipulated within Western tradition. They were inspired to suggest that the idea of art may be irrelevant as long as certain objects or situations—designated as art or not—are able to fulfill certain social, aesthetic, or spiritual functions. It is important to place Picasso's declarations of affinity with African artists against the background of postulations such as those of Roger Fry, one of Europe's leading art critics at the turn of the century, who held that the sculptures and other artifacts from Africa that filled museum collections in Europe at the time were not "art." In other words, these encounters with non-Western culture already had a context of disagreement in Europe on the definition of art, within which Duchamp's critique of the notion of art may be located.

The use of the readymade, which rests on the idea that context is the preeminent determinant of difference between art and reality, was in no little measure inspired by three conclusions based on the evidence of art from Africa and Oceania. First was the conclusion that mimesis is inessential to art. Until Malevich painted his black square in 1914, the farthest, most radical reaches of Western art remained within the frame of mimesis. Up to that point, the wildest efforts of the Impressionists, Expressionists, and Post-Impressionists still maintained a direct visual relationship between real life and its translation into art. Art from Africa and Oceania seemed to transcend this limitation.

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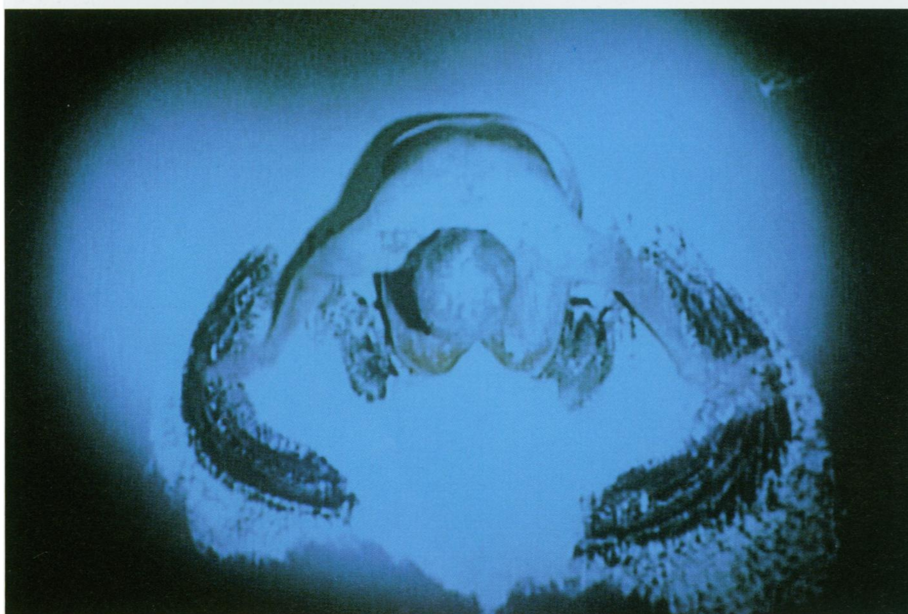

14–16. Berni Searle (b. 1964, South Africa). *Snow White*, 2001. Stills from two-projector video installation, 9 min. Courtesy of the artist.

The video shows a naked black woman (the artist herself) kneeling on the ground as her skin is first dusted with white flour poured from above and then washed clean with a stream of water. She kneads the flour and water into dough for bread.

Second was the formal evidence, namely that these cultures integrated real-life objects into art, whereas the Western artist was required to reproduce such objects, not appropriate them. Third was the fact that the status of these objects as art was radically thrown into oscillation by their translocation from the cultures and contexts of their provenance. For perhaps the first time in the West, it became glaringly evident that such status is not inherent or *a priori* but unstable at best, and may be lost or regained depending on the context. It was this revelation that Duchamp tested with *Fountain* in April 1917. As noted, the Dada group further explored and eventually gave currency to the idea, and these would form precedence for conceptual art throughout the century to the present.

Also, as Joseph Kosuth has noted, conceptual art, at least in the United States, "is impossible to understand without understanding the sixties, and appreciate conceptual art for what it was: *the art of the Vietnam war era*" (in Stimson 1999:xxviii). One may mention, also, that this was the time of student uprisings in France and of the annexation of Czechoslovakia, and it would eventually yield to the Peace and New Age movements. Conceptual art also emerged from the activism of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, which had far-reaching influence on many such movements and their choices of strategy. In this climate the "non-West" was readily available as a model and source of alternatives to the moral bankruptcy of Western capitalism. The heroism of Ché Guevara, Frantz Fanon's anticolonial texts, and the numerous Third World liberation movements, among other examples, inspired radical thought and activism.

Cultures outside Europe and the United States also became sources for new ideas about life and the body, about fashion and music and spirituality. The use of the body in conceptual art drew considerably from these sources, as did the hippie movement in the 1960s and later on the gay and feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time that Western youth were rejecting dominant ideological ideas, they were adopting non-Western body norms, from pierced body parts to tattoos and hairstyles, and incorporating them into the visual culture of the era of the Vietnam war, to use Kosuth's words. Eventually the use of the body, ritualism, masquerade, and the shrine-like aura in non-Western religious and art practices found their way into

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conceptual art. Conceptual art was therefore "a truly international phenomenon"—one whose shades and trajectories we are unable to explore here—and it fed off different cultures and circumstances beyond the borders of the West.

Conceptualism in Africa

If any creative or critical strategy establishes a firm link between contemporary and classical African art, that strategy is conceptualism: both emphasize the preeminence of idea over form. Although many contemporary African artists are aware of this link and have drawn considerably from classical sources independent of whatever precedents were set by modernism, we must emphasize that conceptual art by contemporary African artists is inseparable from the global conceptual art movement. The artists have always been well versed in the languages and texts of conceptualism, postmodernism, and related contemporary cultural discourses. For many, conceptual practice had the same meaning and relevance as a departure from "tradition," given that colonialism had created a rift between the past and the present within which new languages of art making developed in Africa that were more akin to the old tradition in Europe, or to early modernism. The (re)turn to concept, therefore, was as radical and controversial as it was in the West, and even today, in places like Egypt, a gulf of mistrust still exists between an older generation of artists who remain adherents of modernism and younger artists who are interested in conceptualist strategies.

As with global conceptualism, it is difficult to trace a definite and accurate chronological account of conceptualism in Africa. Besides, the enterprise of accounting for this development in contemporary African art is still in its infancy, the earliest attempt perhaps being Oguibe's brief discussion of the subject in his *African Art: An Introduction* (1995). The most recent and comprehensive effort is Okwui Enwezor's 1999 survey, which is republished in the catalogue for "Authentic/Ex-Centric." It is sufficient for our purposes, therefore, to mention a few instances and significant moments besides those covered in Enwezor's survey and the examples of the artists discussed in greater detail in the catalogue.

By 1971 conceptualism had emerged in Sudan especially through the work of Muhammad Shaddad, co-founder of the Crystalist Group in Khartoum, who also co-authored the group's manifesto. A student at the College of Fine Arts in Khartoum, Shaddad staged a performance or "happening," as he described it, titled "The Exhibition of the Seated Human Being," in which a male drawing-class model was seated in the middle of a classroom between a human skeleton and a raw leg of lamb. On the walls Shaddad hung several of his paintings, all marked with price tags in which kisses were the currency of exchange. He then challenged anyone in the audience who wished to acquire his works to simply kiss the artist, thus radically agitating the art-value dialectic. Shaddad's performance reposed the question of the "true value" of art with a choice of tactic that was particularly problematic within the context of his location. Is art merely translatable in material value or is it worth more? Could it have a social, even intimate, emotional value?

To get his points across, Shaddad employed shock tactics and other strategies that had become part of the conceptualist vocabulary elsewhere.[5] In 1978 Shaddad, his teacher Kamala Ishaq, and colleague Naila El Tayib issued the Crystalist Manifesto in which they outlined a new aesthetic that was also intended as a critique of the older generation of the Khartoum school. According to the manifesto, the universe is like a crystal cube, transparent and changing according to the viewer's position. Within this crystal cube, human beings are prisoners of an absurd destiny. The nature of the crystal is constantly being altered by degrees of light and other physical conditions. As a demonstration of the Crystalists' project, Shaddad held an exhibition in 1978, in which he exhibited piles of melting ice cubes surrounded by transparent plastic bags filled with colored water. The immediate response to the Crystalists was mostly negative, especially by the older generation of Sudanese artists. They were dismissed as bohemian and not to be taken seriously.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Moroccan painter Zine Abdel Latif made performance paintings in which he danced over spread canvases to the accompaniment of religious music by Sufi mystics and Genawa musicians. After dancing himself into a trance, he would splash and drip paint all over his canvas and his body. Abdel Latif considered the result as registered on canvas an embodiment of the spiritual energy associated with Sufi dance as a form of worship. His images were a record of an intangible and otherwise ephemeral process. There was an obvious connection between these works and the action painting of the late modernists, yet their essence was, in the association with a spiritual enactment and experience, more akin to the most engaged of performance and religious art.

In Nigeria and Sudan in the 1970s and 1980s, a few art students challenged dominant notions of art, especially as produced in the academy.[6] They denounced traditional institutions of art display as well as the distance between art and public which had become established in the postcolonial period. To put their ideas into practice they staged outdoor exhibitions in which makeshift barriers were used as hanging walls, or showed their work in cafes, restaurants, and rural areas. In some cases, these efforts proved to be problematic, but their message was successfully communicated, which was that art must be considered not as a rarefied entity to be hung in the white cube or adulated, but as a weapon to be employed in the social and political space.[7]

In South Africa conceptualism was already evident in the 1970s in the work of artists like Willem Boshoff and Andries Botha. Although Botha's chosen medium in his earlier work was sculpture, he nevertheless employed it in an ideological engagement with the difficult sociopolitical atmosphere of his country, producing work that paid more attention to notions of freedom and bondage, both physical and mental, than to form or material value. In the late 1980s and the 1990s younger artists like Kendell Geers and the Flat Group took experimentation, performance, the integration of life elements, and the use of sound further in projects that were as unique as they were reminiscent of conceptual strategies elsewhere.

These and many other instances, some of which are outlined in Enwezor's contribution to the catalogue, provide a background for the artists whose works are included in the exhibition. Together they point to the reality of conceptual practice in Africa, and argue for the proper location of contemporary African artists in the broad narratives of global conceptualism.

"Authentic/Ex-Centric"

The works of the artists included in the Biennale exhibition "Authentic/Ex-Centric" highlight most recent conceptual interventions in contemporary African art. We brought together a diverse body of work that demonstrated the variety of conceptualist trajectories evident in the work from the continent and its Diaspora. Several of the artists problematize notions of originality and authenticity. In their work they methodically speak up—even speak back—to subvert stereotypes of the African experience.

A good example is the British-based Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, an installation artist and painter recognized for his use of the bright, intricately patterned wax-print fabrics worn throughout Africa. These fabrics can be purchased in Europe as "traditional African" handwork, but they are in fact made in Indonesia; the finest of them are imported from Britain. Shonibare takes these ostensibly authentic African fabrics and makes Victorian period costume and furniture out of them, as in his work *How Does a Girl Like You, Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995) and *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996). The artist, whose work displays a strong aesthetic sense and a sharp wit, casts light on colonial values and lifestyles while also poking fun at fetishists who believe the fabrics to be of African origin. Meanwhile, he

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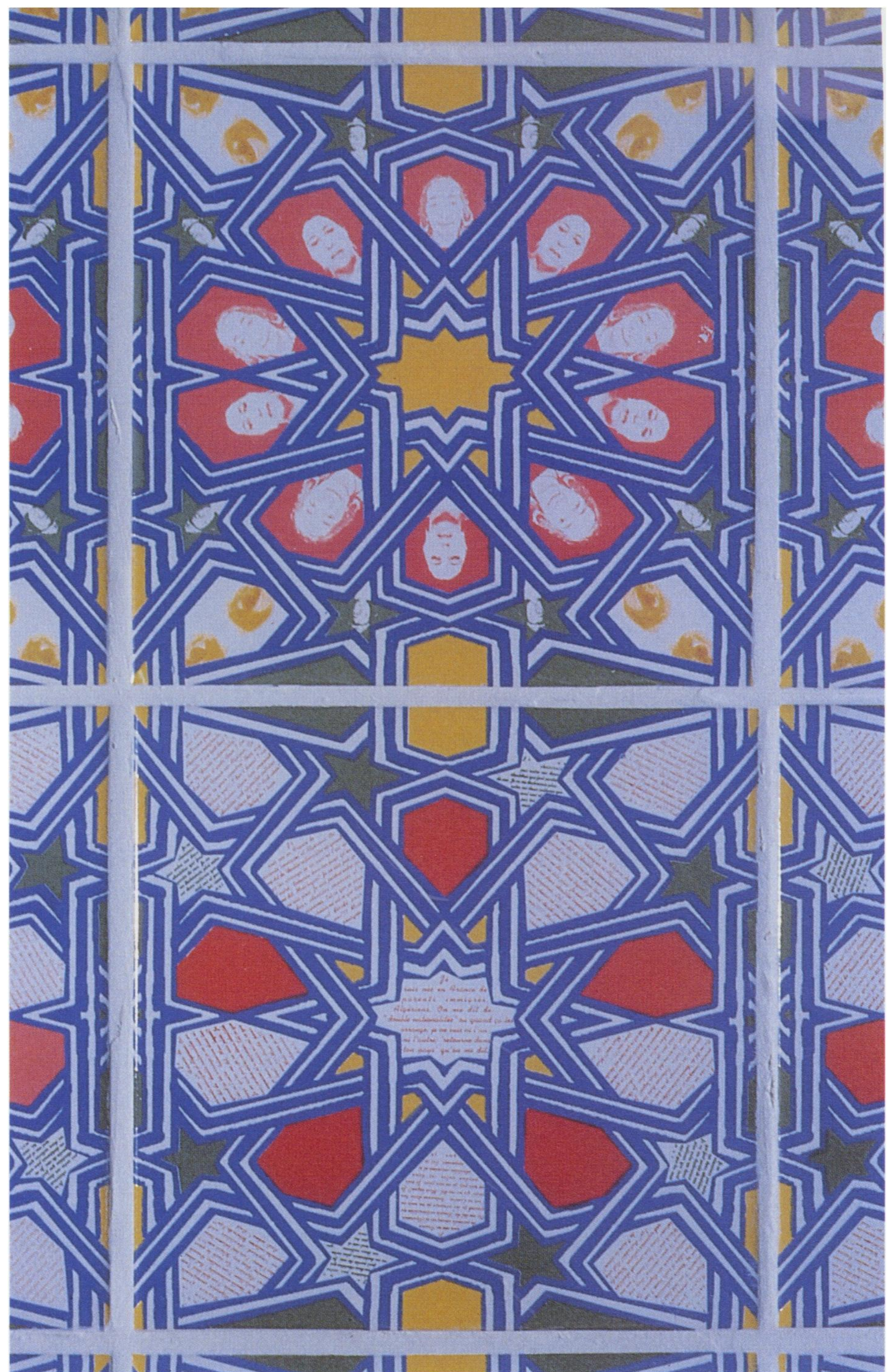
raises serious questions about the authenticity of "traditional" craftsmanship and about the collective memory of the African Diaspora. In his later work such as *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), a series of large-scale photographs, Shonibare caricatures Victorian society. The aristocracy are made to look like buffoons; the women swoon, the maids are oversexed, and the artist himself—the center of everyone's fawning attention—plays the dandy. This element is the centerpiece: an African man living so high in the Victorian hierarchy that all of white society prostrates itself before him. The photographs effectively problematize the idea of Africans as a more "primitive other" within British history and society. The new sensibility and aesthetics generated by the work of many African artists such as Shonibare prove their links to the larger global spaces of contemporary practice.

On first inspection, Yinka Shonibare's *Vacation* (Figs 3, 4), another piece included in the exhibition, seems an innocuous play on space exploration and its implications for science and human progress. However, Shonibare's astronauts are dressed in space suits made of so-called African wax-printed cotton. The astronauts' attire evokes the notion of "going native," while speaking to the possibilities of a dominant "other." Shonibare's suggestion that one can embody the paradox of alien/other and colonialist/explorer demonstrates the complexity of power dynamics between groups.

In his installation *Panifice* (Figs. 1, 2), South African artist Willem Boshoff continues his exploration of language and text. Drawing from Christ's question "Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?" (Matthew 7:9), Boshoff has inscribed this question in numerous languages onto stone loaves. The artist uses the idea of communion or "breaking bread" *(panifice)* to address the universality of human experience across divides of language, culture, and race. The vagaries of place and tongue, Boshoff indicates, are secondary to the fact of our common humanity.

Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons's *Spoken Softly with Mama* (Figs. 5–7), part of a series of works titled *History of People Who Were Not Heroes*, addresses a plethora of issues relating to the Diaspora, expatriation, gender, and race. In this multimedia installation she uses a personal narrative to explore how history and tradition are passed from generation to generation and how collective memory is preserved in everyday objects.

In *Lord Byron's Room* (Figs. 8, 9), the London-based Ghanaian artist Godfried Donkor continues his exhumation of repressed histories of the black presence in Europe. Using archival sources and references to popular culture, he reconstructs



and reinserts key occasions and moments in the circulation of African personalities within the elite circles of Europe. Building on the Victorian nobleman's reputation as a boxing enthusiast at a time when blacks had already established supremacy in the sport, Donkor suggests an inevitable close relationship between Byron and his circle and prominent black pugilists of the time, a reference that hardly survives in narratives of the Victorian age. The idea is to restore complexity to the history of cross-cultural relations and human interaction where such appears to have systemically evaporated.

Paris-based Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi's mastery of calligraphy is unparalleled. It can be seen in *Le Chemin de roses* (Figs. 10–13), in which he evokes the idea of safari or travel and transcendence in Islamic Sufi thought by recalling the trip of the thirteenth-century Persian traveler and scholar Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi across the Mediterranean to Qonya, Turkey. Legend has it that there he met Ibn Arabi, the great Sufi mystic and poet. Koraïchi's installation iconizes al-Rumi's journey across continents through Turkish ceramic ablution basins, Moroccan gold-embroidered silk, and metal. It highlights the rich encounter between two Sufi masters and three continents, as well as al-Rumi's idea of the inseparability of aesthetics and metaphysics, where art unites with the Divine.

South African artist Berni Searle continues her exploration of what one might call the incredible weightiness of color. In *Snow*

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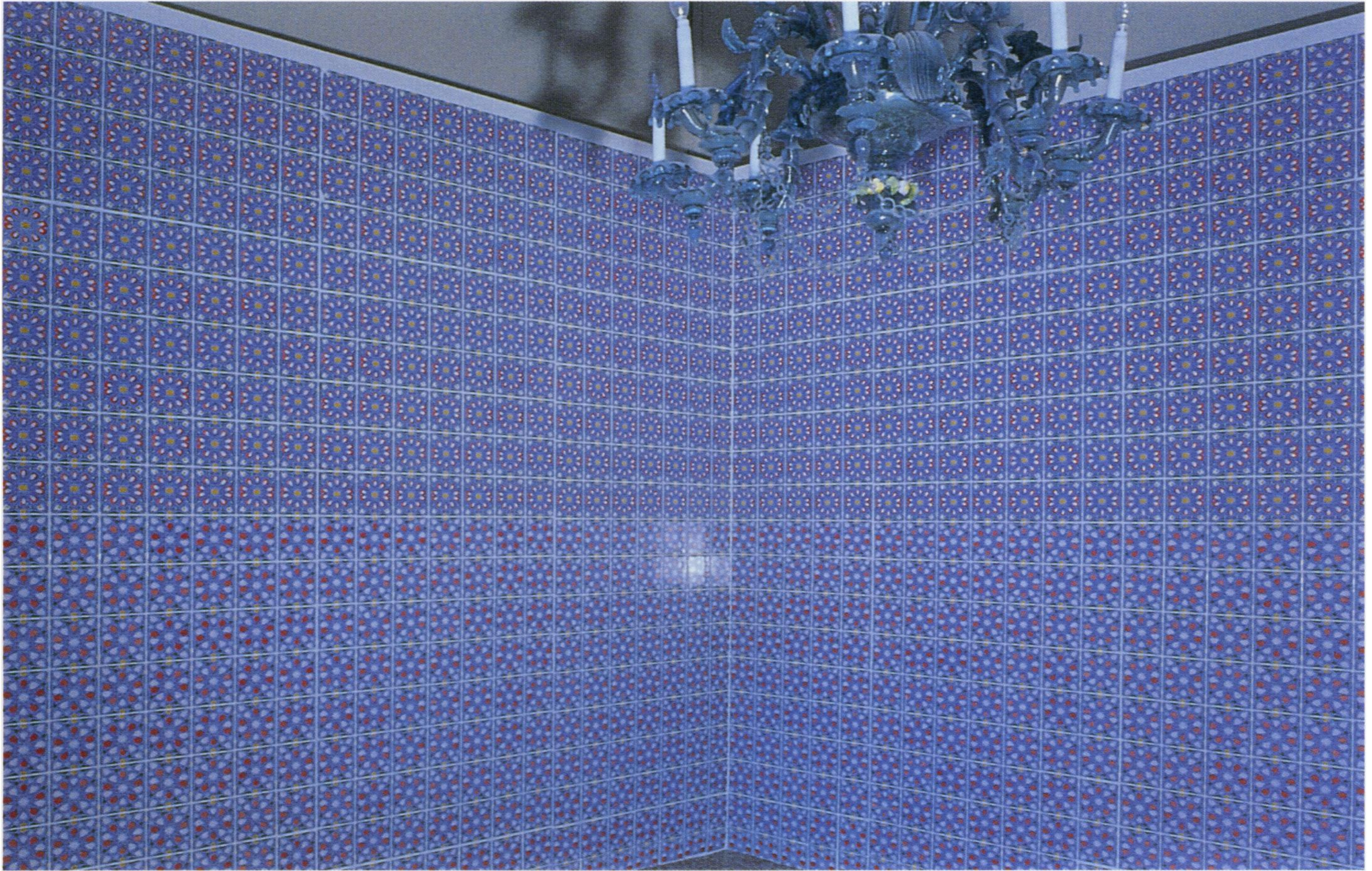

White (Figs 14–16), a video installation that ironically evokes the fairy tale of the same name, Searle, whose ancestry spans three continents, metaphorically takes the audience through a cycle of visibility and erasure reminiscent of experiences under the ideological constructs of apartheid. In same vein, by appropriating the traditionally male art form of Arabesque ceramic tiles in her installation *Quatre générations de femmes* (Figs. 17, 18), London-based Algerian artist Zineb Sedira addresses the ways her identity is informed by religion, culture, and gender. In the video *Don't Do to Her What You Did to Me* (Fig. 19), she represents the way social forces affect identity in the Diaspora.

Each one of these artists articulates, in his or her own way, the reality of contemporary African art practice as an internationalist project that is part of a global currency and yet embodies a specificity to African history and experiences. The book published in conjunction with the exhibition, *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*,[8] offers a glimpse of the ways African and African Diaspora artists have interpreted and translated the aesthetic and social experiences of postcolonial Africa into new idioms of artistic expression. It is our hope that both the exhibition and book have helped bring to the fore the contributions of African artists in this understudied area. □

Notes, page 96

Opposite page and this page top:

17, 18. Zineb Sedira (b. 1963, Gennevilliers, Paris). *Quatre générations de femmes*, 1997. Silkscreened ceramic tiles. Commissioned by the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow Museums.

By silkscreening computer-generated designs onto tiles, this London-based Algerian artist appropriates what is traditionally a male genre in Islamic art tradition.

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19. Zineb Sedira. *Don't Do to Her What You Did to Me*, 1998/2000. Single-channel video, 6-minute loop. Funded by the Arts Council of England.

Zedira reinterprets the tradition of Islamic healing charms, using black ink, water, and passport photos of a woman's face (the artist herself). The title of the work is a phrase used to exorcise the conflicts between Western and Muslim cultures. In France, it is uttered by North African immigrant women on the verge of death and by Muslim mothers who wish to protect their daughters from becoming "too French."

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BINKLEY: Notes, from page 63

1. Nkanu works may be seen in the collections of the Africa Museum, Tervuren (Belgium); the Jesuit Fathers of Heverlee, Belgium (now on permanent loan to the Africa Museum); the Broeders van Lourdes (Oostakker, Belgium); the Sociedade de Geographia, Lisbon; the Musée de l'Homme, Paris; the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal (Netherlands); and the Institut für Ethnologie der Universität Göttingen, Abteilung Völkerkunde Sammlung (Göttingen, Germany).
2. Van Damme conducted this field research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for her doctoral dissertation, "Beelden, maskers en initiatiepanelen bij de Nkanu en hun buren, de Mbeko en Lula. Socio-culturele context en stilistische analyse (Zone Kimvula, Congo)," Universiteit Gent, Belgium, 1998. Also see the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: *Spectacular Display: The Art of Nkanu Initiation Rituals.*
3. The Nkanu reside in the eastern part of the Lower Kongo district of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Angola. Approximately half of the Nkanu population lives in the Madimba and Kimvula zones of the Lower Kongo district, and the other half lives in Angola's Uige province. Their neighbors include the Lula and Dikidiki peoples to the north, the Mbeko peoples to the northwest, the Ntandu peoples to the west, the Yaka peoples to the east and southeast, the Zombo peoples to the southwest, and the Sosso peoples to the south.
2. Van Gennep (1873–1957) first used the term "rites of passage" (*Les rites de passage.* Paris: Nourry, 1909; English ed., University of Chicago Press, 1960).

HASSAN & OGUIBE: Notes, from page 75

[This article was accepted for publication in September 2001.]

1. The Venice Biennale was initiated at a time when most African countries were under European colonial rule. Since the 1960s, the acquisition of a pavilion in Venice has become too expensive for most African countries to pursue. Egypt is an exception because of the close relations between the Egyptian monarchy and Italy prior to the revolution led by Jamal Abdul Nasser in 1953, especially during the reign of King Fouad and King Farouk, who died in exile in Rome. Nasser's regime paid attention to the importance of culture in the international arena and continued its support for Egyptian representation in Venice through its Department of Culture, a policy upheld by the regimes of Sadat and Mubarak.
2. The Forum presently includes among its members: El Anatsui, Ghanaian artist and professor at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Ibrahim El Salahi, Sudanese artist; Koyo Kouoh, independent art consultant and cultural activist, Goree Institute, Senegal; Marilyn Martin, Director of the South African National Gallery; Tumelo Mosaka, South African curator; Florence Alexis, Director of Visual Arts, Afrique en Créations in Paris; Obiora Udechukwu, Nigerian artist and Distinguished Professor at St. Lawrence University, Canton; Okwui Enwezor, Nigerian art critic, curator, and Director of Documenta XI; Gilane Tawadros, Director of the Institute for International Visual Art, London; as well as the present authors.
3. In his *One and Three Chairs* (1965), American artist Joseph Kosuth combined many of these elements, integrating a "real chair" in the manner of Duchamp's readymades, and employing text and language through which the work was made to reflect not only on the question of the nature and meaning of art but also on the indeterminacy of the "real" within its own components.
4. In this regard the recent anthology edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (1999) provides a glimpse of these diverse positions.
5. For more discussion of Shaddad's work see Musa 1989: 770–49.
6. In Sudan: Hassan Musa, Muhammad Shaddad, Hashim Muhammad Salih, Abdalla Bola, Usama Abdul Rahim. In Nigeria: Olu Oguibe, Greg Odo, and Ola Odu.
7. In the early 1970s, several students at Khartoum's College of Fine and Applied Art established "Cultural Caravans," which traveled to rural areas and poor neighborhoods bringing art exhibitions, mobile cinema, and theatrical performance to the "people." In 1988 at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, an outdoor exhibition was staged on the main thoroughfare of the university, but was ultimately vandalized (see Oguibe & Odu 1988).
8. *Authentic/Ex-Centric* includes twelve essays by prominent authors, eight of which were commissioned specifically for the book. They offer a fresh look at conceptualism from an African standpoint, and at issues of cross-cultural and transnational aesthetics. All the essays emphasize the importance of examining the reciprocal traffic of influences between Africa and the rest of the world.

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BRINCARD: Notes, from page 78

1. Alisa LaGamma, "New Direction for the Arts of Equatorial Africa," in *East of the Atlantic, West of the Congo: Art from Equatorial Africa: The Dwight and Blossom Strong Collection* by Leon Siroto, ed. Kathleen Berrin (The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995), p. 54.
2. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 20; cited by Wastiau in the catalogue, p. 80.
3. Toma Muteba Luntumbue was the first Congolese artist to have been asked by the Tervuren museum not only to participate but also to take on an active role as a guest curator for the contemporary section. In *Le Musée de Gilberte,* Luntumbue asked Gilberte, a museum guard who had just retired, to choose the contents. Tellingly, none of the selected pieces were related to her experience of discovering the objects and history of the Congo.

ALLARA: Notes, from page 82

I thank Elsbeth Court at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London for reading this essay and providing helpful suggestions.
1. This struggle was charted in a monumental exhibition organized for the Museum Villa Stuck in Munich: "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994." Like "Africas," it demonstrated the internationalism of modern African art.
2. In *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994,* ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2000), p. 24.
3. In *Art in South Africa: The Future Present,* eds. Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), p. 136.

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