Africa95. A Critical Assessment of the Exhibition at the Royal Academy
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Résumé
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Abstract
This article is a critical examination of the recent festival of African arts held in Britain from August to December 1995. It focuses on one exhibition in particular, the Royal Academy's 'Africa: The Art of a Continent'. It raises questions about the exhibition's stereotypical representations of Africa and its art, and draws comparisons with other exhibitions in the season which were more challenging but received less attention from British critical establishment.

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Africa95 was a presentation of African arts in Britain on an unprecedented scale. This massive festival—a multi-arts, multi-venue celebration of the entire continent—comprised over sixty events spread out across the country. The immensely varied programme encompassed all of the major art forms: visual and performance arts, literature, film and music. Also included were several important conferences and workshops, dedicated to promoting cooperation and creative exchange between African artists, both in Africa and overseas. In a spirit of genuine enthusiasm and eclecticism the organizers aimed to cut across perceived boundaries and to challenge received perception of art, of history, of Africa, and even perhaps of Britain itself.

The aim of the festival was to stir up debate about African art, and one exhibition which certainly proved controversial—although not necessarily for the reasons it may have hoped—was the Royal Academy’s much touted centrepiece of the season, ‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’ (4 October 1995 - 21 January 1996, Royal Academy of Arts, London ). This was an exhibition on an epic scale; containing over 800 works, it was conceived as a geographical and historical journey around the continent, a journey spanning millions of square kilometres and some 1.5 million years. Its aim was no less than to ‘celebrate the art of an entire continent in all its diversity’, and it proudly proclaimed itself the biggest and most comprehensive exhibition of its kind ever held in Britain.

The biggest ever it may have been, but the exhibition was riddled with contradictions. Despite the high-flown claims of the organizers to be breaking the mould and showing Africa and its art in a new light, it served instead in almost every aspect to simply reinforce or reinterpret a great many old and damaging stereotypes.

The wisdom of taking a geographical approach and attempting to exhibit the works of an entire continent in a single exhibition was highly dubious for a start. Surely ‘Africa’ as a unified and homogeneous entity is a stereotype that should have been despatched long ago. The organizers justified themselves by claiming to have dispensed with the arbitrary boundaries drawn up and imposed by colonization in favour of presenting cultures together in terms of more natural regional ‘affinities’. Their own divisions of the continent into broad ‘regions’ led just as inevitably to distortion. Their inclusion of Egypt and North Africa in the exhibition was certainly a welcome break from tradition, but their ham-fisted attempt at justifying that inclusion was nothing short of mystifying. In a bid no doubt to

stress the ‘authenticity’ of Egypt’s ‘Africanness’, the organizers saw fit to dig up a rather dubious link between pre-dynastic Egyptians in the far north and the reassuringly ‘African’ San in the far south. The brochure observes the use by both groups of ostrich eggs as containers to store water and concludes—with breath-taking facetiousness but not a hint of irony—that ‘it needed no hot foot messenger from the Nile to tell a Bushman [sic] that an ostrich egg can be a ready-made pot or that it could be individualized with engraved lines.’ What is perhaps most offensive and indeed baffling about the observation—as well as the undisguised condescension—is its utter irrelevance to the matter at hand. It is hard to see how an exhibition which espouses that statement as a reasonable attitude could possibly hope to challenge stereotypes.

The historical slant of the exhibition was no less problematic. The organizers’ interest in the ‘unparalleled length’ of Africa’s ‘cultural history’ seems little more than a thinly-veiled synonym for ‘tradition’. ‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’ was itself—quite literally—a traditional exhibition of African art. Notions of the tribal and the exotic were hardly far beneath the surface, but were manifest in the organizers’ choice of masks and textiles from West Africa, pots and baskets from the central region of the continent and sculpture and jewellery from Egypt. In many ways the exhibition was more reminiscent of an ethnographic museum than an art gallery. This is no reflection on the works themselves, but is rather a comment on the tenacity of an old cliché, and one which the Royal Academy should have been debunking.

The inclusion of ‘objects of everyday use (pots, baskets, jewellery, textiles, etc.) as well as ritual sculpture and masks’ among the exhibits was the one aspect of the exhibition that drew the most attention from the British art establishment. Across the broadsheets the critics debated the validity of calling such things ‘art’. Some argued that ‘art’ was an inadequate and misleading term for items which had been designed for ritual and daily use rather than to be mounted in glass cases. They tended to stress a difference between ‘art’ and ‘artefact’, and to see the two as irreconcilable. Others on the other hand were interested in the exhibition primarily as some sort of ‘background information’ to enhance their understanding of the works of Picasso and other European painters of his ilk. Most critics conceded at least the artistry of the works on display, although some more enthusiastically than others. As such, however, they still felt a need to ‘validate’ or ‘contextualize’ them in terms of European art, hence the comparison between Donatello’s work and the Ife bronzes ad nauseam. Simon Jenkins of The Times though, would not concede even this. As he saw it, these African works were simply ‘not in the same class as the “art” of Europe or Asia’ (7 Oct. 1995).

Of course, such debates often tell us more about British assumptions and preoccupations than they do about African art. Unfortunately, this could be said to have been symptomatic of the festival as a whole. The fact that the critics said anything at all about African art must, of course, be counted as some sort of success. However the real issues surrounding African artists and their work remained unvoiced by all save a small minority, made up mainly of black British intellectuals. Their contributions to the debate were almost entirely marginalized by the white establishment.

‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’ was put together by one man, Tom Phillips, whose main recommendation was his enthusiasm. His passion for African art is unquestionable, but almost every other aspect of his vision is highly so.

Ultimate-
ly what he served up was a sumptuous but reassuringly familiar package to a mainstream audience with a yen for the ‘authentic’ Africa. Staging any presentation of precolonial African art is bound to be a minefield of difficulties considering the immensely distorted image as ‘primitive’ and ‘exotic’ under which African people and their art have laboured for so long a time. The exhibition did recognize this to a certain extent, and so constantly stressed the ‘high levels of achievement’ clearly visible in the works on display. What was meant to be a compliment served instead to imply that ‘high achievement’ by Africans was somehow exceptional, and the compliment, if any, was a severe back-hander. Phillip’s lack of sensitivity on such matters was nothing if not baffling.

Perhaps one of the greatest paradoxes of all however, had to do with the Royal Academy holding the exhibition at all, and was pointed out, once again by black British critics. For something seeking ostensibly to right some of the wrongs of colonial misrepresentation to attempt to do so using the very spoils of that conquest is deeply ironic. The vast majority of the works were on loan to the Academy, not from African countries themselves, but from the vaults of British and American museums and individual collectors. The paradox is that the exhibition could not have been staged at all if it wasn’t for Britain’s role as conqueror a century ago.

‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’ was, despite all of its problems, still the chosen centrepiece of africa95. This was not accidental, but due to the fact that it was big, bold and very sellable to a mainstream audience. Sponsored by the likes of DeBeers and Anglo-American, it had the money for intensive marketing and advertising. To judge the entire season on the basis of one event in a programme of over sixty would be to distort the achievements the season did make, which were certainly worthy of comment. In fact, ‘The Art of a Continent’ was probably one of the least representative and certainly least challenging of all of the events on the visual arts programme.

The Voices of the Silenced

Many of the smaller exhibitions showcased either contemporary or very recent work by African artists. Not only that, but a great many of them were curated by Africans themselves. The differences in both approach and results were startling. African artists themselves drew out genuine comparisons between works with, for example, a Pan-African theme, and avoided the trap of drawing comparisons where there were none, simply on the basis that two artists are of the same skin colour.

An example of the celebration, innovation and eclecticism on display in some of the exhibitions was ‘Siyawela: Love, Loss and Liberation in Art from South Africa’ held in Birmingham’s Gas Street Museum (21 October - 14 January, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery). Curated by two South African artists, one black and one white, it was a space for the voices of the silenced in South Africa to be heard. The works were produced within the last twenty years mainly by Blacks, women and children. The vast majority of the artists were black and self-taught. Some referred to traditional sources for inspiration, others to religion, others looked at South Africa, while still others looked within themselves. The collection was courageous, moving, and sometimes disturbing—it was immediate and intensely challenging.

Accompanying it was another extraordinary exhibition by white South African artist Willem Boshoff. Called ‘Blind Alphabet B’ it was designed entirely for the
blind and partially sighted—a collection of ninety pieces of wooden sculpture, each housed in a wooden box. On top of each box was a Braille description of the sculpture inside, and the ‘viewers’ were invited to open each box and ‘see’ the sculpture inside. The sighted were allowed to look only with the help of a blind or partially-sighted guide. Boshoff’s challenge—to both the ‘norms’ of society and to the conventions of visual art—was breathtakingly profound. Yet nowhere was his brilliant vision discussed with any seriousness by any critic and nowhere were its implications registered, except perhaps in the minds of the few who actually came into contact with it.

There were many other examples of equally interesting and innovative work by African artists, writers and musicians amongst the offerings of Africa95. Most, unfortunately, were overshadowed by the big events like ‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’ due to the machinations of Africa95’s own publicity itself, and to money interests which could not be ignored. The resulting distortion was detrimental to the festival as a whole. The true strength of the festival—and there were some positive aspects to it—lay in its variety. Its eclecticism was reflected in many of the events themselves, and a kind of unity emerged from the diversity—a unity of purpose, of vision, and of undisputed individuality.

The one aspect of the festival which seems to have most consistently been ignored was the impact it had on the artists themselves. While critics and organizers alike argued in the most acquisitional of terms about the quality or meaning of African art, Africans were given hardly a mention. Yet for many Africa95 provided important opportunities; as an international outlet for their work, and as a space in which to meet and work with other artists, to broaden their individual and collective horizons. To dismiss the festival out of hand would be to dismiss the time, the effort and the talent of the people who made it work at all, and whom it was all about.

Africa95 was a bold endeavour. For a few months it brought Africa and its arts to prominence in Britain, and the generosity of its vision cannot be faulted. By treating Africans once again as silent participants in their own story, however, Africa95 seriously undermined its own intentions. If it is to create a lasting legacy and become something more than just another tool of the British establishment, it can only be hoped that the momentum which it generated will be enough to further debates about the more profound issues affecting African artists and people. The festival was certainly a first step in the right direction. Africa95 was a symptom of a changing view of Africa. The hope now is that it goes on to become a cause of change in its own right.

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