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Positioning Africa: the limits of perpetuation: an investigation of postcolonial Eurocentrism and its impact on the display of African art in Britain between 1995 and 2005

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Positioning Africa: The Limits of Perpetuation

An Investigation of Postcolonial Eurocentrism and Its Impact on the Display of African Art in Britain Between 1995 and 2005

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (History of Art) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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Declaration:

I declare that this research is my own unaided work and that I have given full acknowledgement to the sources that I have used. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (History of Art) at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other institution, college or university.

Kresta Tyler Johnson

_____ Date: 20 February 2009

Abstract:

This research report analyses the extent to which Britain maintained a neo-colonial, Eurocentric mentality towards the arts of Africa over the course of the decade 1995 to 2005. Two exhibitions that focused on the arts of Africa were mounted in Britain during this period. Both of these exhibitions, used as case studies in this research report, clearly demonstrated that entrenched stereotypes persist regarding Africa's artistic output. The *africa95* and *Africa 05* programmes highlighted the fact that African artists are valued in Western centres primarily for their 'difference', continually being marginalised through omnibus narratives that single out African artists as producing the work of the Other. 'Traditional' African art is equated with 'authentic' African art and the work of contemporary African artists is either compared with the 'traditional', or negated for being too influenced by Western aesthetics. Discourses around identity and representation of African artists in the West have been impacted by numerous factors such as the growth and increased profile of the African diaspora. While entrenched mindsets in the West towards African art are beginning to shift, ultimately the identity of contemporary African artists is framed within very narrow parameters that have been created by Western art centres and imposed upon African artists. In this context, the insular British cultural establishment has proven particularly resistant to change. The centre/periphery paradigm serves as a protective measure for British cultural identity. However, even as subtle shifts away from this perspective begin and the initial stages of an acceptance of contemporary African art is revealed, it is nonetheless a very limited advancement that still revolves around a small number of British institutions and curators who set the parameters of the discourse. In summary, this analysis of the decade under review reveals that very little has changed regarding the positioning of African art in Britain.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

Constructing exhibitions and programmes that aim to present the art of another culture, particularly a living culture, is a difficult endeavour. It requires an innate sensitivity to the historical legacy of previous efforts, an aptitude for negotiating the cultural production of a country, and an awareness of the implications of any asserted claims or inferred realities that are constructed. The countries of Africa, like many developing world nations, often find themselves the subject of Western[1] exhibitions that seek to elucidate the arts of Africa yet fail to establish a perspective that positions the cultural products of Africa as more than ethnographic artefacts. Former colonisers often struggle the most to allow a semblance of objectivity when exhibiting and viewing the art of former colonies. The art on display is frequently subject to an anthropological reading, positioned as the work of the Other. The works themselves become evidence of the exotic, fetishised objects to be gazed upon. As Okwui Enwezor (1999:245) articulates, "This misapprehension and misrecognition is exacerbated by a gaze that perpetually fixes the cultural production of contemporary African artists, if not in the sites of invisibility and non-existence, then on the periphery of encounters between the public and contemporary representation."

Contemporary[2] African art is exhibited in the West with labels that position and describe it and provide the narrative for Western institutions' engagements with contemporary African art. The repercussions of the West's adherence to particular labels have resulted in what Gerardo Mosquera (2001:29) describes as an "[e]xclusivist and teleological legitimisation of the 'international language' of art [that]

[1] Using the term 'Western' is often problematic and draws criticism because it can be viewed as patronising. I am not attempting to convey this meaning. I ask the reader to see this term as descriptive and used solely because of the lack of a suitable substitute that concisely describes the developed countries of the Northern Hemisphere.

[2] An artistic lexicon has evolved as a useful specialist 'meta-language' for practioners in the field. However, the vocabulary utilised often reflects entire conceptual ideas encased in a singular term that is devoid of clear parameters and specific definitions. In order to facilitate a fluid reading of my report, I will elaborate on specific terminology when I deem it necessary so the reader can be assured of my particular intent and avoid possible confusion. To begin with, I am using the word 'contemporary' to indicate art being made in the present time (now or the past two decades). I agree with the academic John Picton's (2006) comments on the word contemporary when he states, "The correct use of the word is of the same time and that's the literal meaning of the word "contemporary." So to put everything including photography, which develops in Africa from 1850 onwards [under the rubric of contemporary]. . .it makes nonsense of the whole word." However, I am also cognisant that by including the past two decades in my premise for 'contemporary' I am potentially falling into the quagmire of undelineated timelines for what constitutes 'modern' and 'contemporary' African art. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (2006:in lit.) succinctly states that 'contemporary' pertains to art of this time, "...which by the nature of time itself, is already historical by the time we focus on it. All cultures and practices are modern and contemporary until they are superseded by future developments. The attempt to subsist in the present is a very peculiarly Western yearning..."

acts as a mechanism of exclusion towards other languages and discourses." Labels are an inevitable component to the compositional framework of an exhibition. However, problems arise in regard to a curatorial reliance on a Western devised international art language that segregates the art of developing countries.

Often contemporary African art does not adhere to preconceived Western ideas of 'tribal' or 'primitive' imagery, key descriptors that the West assumed during colonial times as critical criteria for a 'pure' and 'authentic' African product. The appearance of 'primitive' or 'tribal' imagery facilitates a validation of African art for Western audiences and makes the work easily identifiable as being produced from the periphery. One issue for instance, is how to engage with contemporary African art that does not visually conform to preconceived stereotypes. Clémentine Deliss (1992:unnumbered page) states:

> The vocabulary of 20th century African art is largely unfamiliar terrain to a Western audience, and so to speak of 'African art' is still in many respects to refer to the West's understanding of 'traditional art' from Africa. Increasingly the term is being recognised as a discursive construct not unlike 'Orientalism', implying an imaginary realm with very real political consequences, a field of knowledge deeply entwined with the histories of colonialism, anthropology, museums of ethnography and the lucrative trade in 'tribal' art.

Two examples of work by contemporary African artists that do not immediately render themselves as African through 'primitive' or 'traditional' imagery are the video installations of the South African artist Tracey Rose and the multimedia canvases of the Ethiopian artist Julie Mehretu. Rose uses video to address highly personal questions of identity and feminism, while Mehretu creates an organised chaos through vibrant, gestural paintings. Both artists depict socio-political concerns of the moment without including visual elements such as sculptural or figurative forms that reflect 'traditional' African art and indicate the artists are Africans. The fact that a dichotomy exists where the work is clearly contemporary but not distinctly African, may generate an uncertainty in Western cultural institutions over how to present and market these works.

Compounded with this uncertainty is an international art world that emanates from the West, and which struggles to relinquish a European colonial belief that values the 'primitive' characteristics of pre-colonial African art over the 'modern' attributes of postcolonial African art. European colonialists saw their endeavours in Africa as bringing modernising influences to previously untrained African artists. This belief has

filtered through to the present and resulted in contemporary African art in the West often critiqued for being overly influenced by Western art practices. This criticism is especially evident towards the work of African artists in the diaspora. Enwezor (1996) uses the legacy of the South African poet Arthur Nortje and the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera to describe the difficulty for African diaspora artists in the 20th century. He notes that "[b]ecause they both lived in the West and practised in a manner that defied the 'authenticity' test, their work gets deliberately lost in the shuffle. In other words they are tainted material, insufficiently native, contaminated by that virus known as 'contact with the West'" (Enwezor, 1996:unnumbered page). The postcolonial 'impurities' that entered African art through formal academic training are brought to the forefront in the discourses around the idea of authenticity that dominates definitions and categorisations of African art in the West. Sydney Littlefield Kasfir (1992:41) acknowledges the reality when:

> ...art produced within a colonial or postcolonial context is relegated to an awkward binary opposition: it is inauthentic because it was created after the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage from missionaries, colonial administrators, and more recently, tourists and the new African elite. This view of authenticity, though now questioned by many scholars, is still held firmly by major art museums and the most prominent dealers and collectors.

Questions of authenticity pertaining to African art are inevitably linked to issues surrounding its representation, validation and translation to Western audiences and within Western aesthetics. Amir Ameri (2004) has written about the reasoning behind leading museums' and other institutions' insistence on authenticity and its display. He notes:

> The question of authenticity in art appears historically and directly linked to the question of art's place and the modalities of its placement. The protracted practice of removal and collection of authentic works of art in a sequestered place, of which the art museum is the modern manifestation, is directly linked, in turn, to Western ideational trepidations about art and representation (Ameri, 2004:61).[3]

[3] Ameri's (2004) discussion continues by referencing the historical creation of "cabinets of curiosities" as a construct to metaphorically represent the engagement of centres and peripheries. He notes that "[n]o seat of power in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...could be without a cabinet, and no claim to power could go without opening room [sic] and instigating a realm from which the inauthentic and the ordinary were to be carefully and meticulously excluded" (Ameri, 2004:65). The implication of Ameri's reasoning is significant because he believes that it is the fusion of these 'cabinet' rooms and the gallery space that resulted in the museum space. Following on this it is in the museum where authenticity is interpreted by a formula that is heavily laden with the precept of housing and displaying "curiosities." He describes this when he suggests that "The gallery, conceived more or less as a *path* for viewing, housed aesthetics; the Cabinet, conceived as a *place* predicated on the spatial dialectics of center and edge, housed authenticity. In time, the two practices would coalesce into the museum, though the logic of the cabinet would prevail over the gallery" (Ameri, 2004:66). Using Ameri's theory as a foundation, I believe it becomes easier to understand the complexity and historical

Kasfir (1992:46) describes that "[a]uthenticity as an ideology of collection and display creates an aura of cultural truth around certain types of African art (mainly precolonial and sculptural)." Notions of truth about the African art are being constructed for the audiences by Western cultural institutions.

Solidifying objects within a carefully constructed timeline and relegating relationships to a Western devised aesthetic system allows the art to be transcribed for Western audiences, but simultaneously delegitimises the reality of a separate but equally valid art history and identities for African art and artists. [4] There is a predominance within both museums and the field of art history, as Donald Preziosi (2003:23) describes, to fix "...individual objects within the (ideal) horizons of a (potentially) universal history of artistic form – in short, the assignment of an 'address' to the work within a nexus of synchronic and diachronic relationships."[5]

The issue of addressing contemporary African art's legitimacy in the eyes of the West is made more difficult through the lack of inclusion of African artists and historians in the debate. Deliss (1992) describes the absence of African artists and historians in constructing their artistic past. She emphasises how the result is a Western interpretation of African art. Deliss (1992:unnumbered page) writes:

> The sudden interest of European and American museums and private collectors in purchasing contemporary art from Africa, which in a period of recession is considerably cheaper than its Euro-American counterpart, has aggravated this situation. Dealers and curators are placed in the immediate position of having to find a more compatible means of framing the works and ultimately commodifying the new aesthetic which doesn't always fit neatly into its 'tribal' antecedent. It is clear from the current curatorial dilemma which has characterised recent exhibitions...

The West's nebulous engagement with contemporary African art has resulted in a modernist perpetuation of difference as the key factor for African artists. Modernism as it pertains to African art in the West is regarded as a separate development from

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foundations attached to the idea of 'authenticity' as imposed upon art and artists by major Western art institutions.

[4]The arts of Africa are frequently subjected to being positioned against a singular timeline that is uniquely Western and does not accommodate an African history. Salah Hassan (1999) and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1984) both describe how the theory that dominates African art studies, which relies upon a consecutive timeline where objects are referenced in an ethnographic context, is at the core of the problem of African art always being prized for a its 'traditional' and precolonial attributes.

[5] Donald Preziosi (2003) explains his concerns with museums' reliance upon a universal art history that provides an "ideal" history for objects, which mandates that the objects must have an exact location in history to have relevant relationships. He acknowledges that even in light of "...multiplicities of aesthetic tendencies frequently demonstrated in various periods..." there remains a reliance on acceptance of a "...singular and uniform notion of identity" (Preziosi, 2003:25).

Western modernism and isolates the African artists. Olu Oguibe (1999:19) refers to the "confines of perception" in the West that relegate the work of African artists to their peripheral position under the umbrella of difference. Oguibe (1999:19) states:

> It speaks to a discourse of power and confinement in current Western appreciation of modern African art; a discourse of speech and regulation of utterance, which by denying African artists the right to language and self-articulation, incarcerates them in the policed colonies of Western desire.

The paradigm of difference has been evident throughout Western Europe, ever since colonialism. Homi Bhabha (1994:48) describes how it was during the colonial period when "the question of cultural difference emerged...thus the political and theoretical genealogy of modernity lies not only in the origins of the *idea* of civility, but in this history of the colonial moment."[6]

Britain, like other Western European countries, has created an environment in which African artists have to highlight their 'Africanness' in order to validate themselves and their art. Kasfir (1999:213) writes:

> ...one can say that African artists are not so much fighting for the freedom to be 'African' (whatever that may mean), but to be fully accepted as artists, though this can only be articulated *through* their Africanness, since that is the site of their categorical exclusion from a global art discourse in the first place.

A prime example is the British artist Yinka Shonibare. Born in Britain of Nigerian decent, Shonibare is generally identified as an African artist, even while he possesses an MBE, an honorific title bestowed usually upon British or Commonwealth citizens by the Queen of England. The irony is perfectly suited to Shonibare's provocative art that endlessly questions the tropes of Western art history. Shonibare is acutely aware of the unique position he holds being a British citizen of Nigerian ancestry who is valued for being African even though he has as much claim to being British as the popular British artist Damien Hirst. Oguibe

[6] Both the American academic Thomas McEvilley and the African-born curator Simon Njami agree that the concept of an African modernity is a misnomer. McEvilley (1991:266) deems Modernism "Euro-Modernism", contending that "at the heart of Modernism was a myth of history that was designed to justify colonialism through an idea of progress." In his perspective, the notion of 'modern,' if it has a place at all in an African art history, holds a tenuous position at best. McEvilley negates the idea that a distinctly African modernism exists irrespective of colonialism. Simon Njami (2005b:unnumbered page) references the very specific European creation of canonical modernism when he writes, "Since the history of art has been the unique point of reference we must not forget that it refers to styles and schools resulting from the internal upheavals within the system [Europe] that produces them. Africa cannot offer such a history." Njami's view echoes McEvilley's basic contention, which is that the idea of modernism is a concept relevant only to the confines of where it originated from, North America and Europe, as a result of their particular socio-political histories, and that these experiences and histories cannot be duplicated in an African context. Western aesthetics that equate the arrival of an African modernism with the arrival of colonialism rely upon a mandate of 'difference'.

(2004:34) notes that “Shonibare first came to attention in the mid-1990s by devoting himself to a thorough understanding of the language of the metropolis, or, perhaps more accurately, the devices and strategies of its culture game, and especially the peculiar rules of the game with regard to the place and destiny of the postcolonial outsider.”

Shonibare has chosen to capitalise on his Anglo-Nigerian identity to gain recognition. He depicts this in his work through the use of the fabrics he incorporates into his staged realities that are represented either through photography or manipulated mannequins. Figures and inanimate objects are covered with cloth that appears ‘African’ to a Western eye, but actually originated in Holland and was purchased in England.[7] This subtle subversion is more pronounced as Shonibare inserts himself into his photographs in positions of ‘authority’ that would historically never have been held by a black individual. Kobena Mercer (1994) focuses on the crisis of identity for many African diaspora artists attempting to ‘operate’ in a globalised, Western oriented, international art arena. Mercer (1994:4-5) contends, “In a world in which everyone’s identity has been thrown into question, the mixing and fusion of disparate elements to create new, hybridized identities point to ways of surviving, and thriving, in conditions of crisis and transition.” Shonibare embraces a hybridized identity, one that Oguibe (2004:34) describes when he comments how “Shonibare understood that to break into the culture game he had but few cards, few choices, few avenues, or few guises, all of which inevitably required him to submit to a test of difference, and to pass that test.” Reflecting on this particular dilemma for many non-Western and diaspora artists, Mosquera (2001:29) states:

> In a sort of catch-22, [the Western art world] tends to regard – with suspicions of illegitimacy – art from the peripheries that endeavours to speak the ‘international language.’ When it speaks properly it is usually accused of being derivative, when it speaks with an accent it is disqualified for its lack of propriety toward the canon.

Shonibare has developed an ability to operate in the gray area between Mosquera’s two stated contentions and develop a form of ‘acceptable’ contemporary African art. Shonibare finds himself on the borderline, one where Bhabha (1993:27-28)

[7] The cloth Shonibare uses is the Vlisco cloth that originated in Holland 160 years ago (Vlisco.com, n.d.:unnumbered page). Ironically this Western European cloth has become integrated into many Western and Central African countries and is seen as a clothing staple. Tourists have assumed the cloth originated in Africa and thus it now serves as an iconic example for many Westerners of African cloth. Vlisco (Vlisco.com, n.d.:unnumbered page) cloth writes on their website, “From the beginning, Vlisco has created exciting and expressive textiles, which never use ‘cliché African’ imagery. This has ensured that Vlisco has no equal in this market. In a constantly changing world of consumer preference, Vlisco is committed to remaining at the forefront of African fashion.” Shonibare is clearly aware of the ironies and misperceptions regarding the Vlisco cloth and uses this to his advantage throughout his work.

describes, “The borderline work of art demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present; nor is it a ‘newness’ that can be contained in the mimesis of ‘original and copy.’”

The reality for many African artists engaging in the international art arena of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a necessity to negotiate an identity that allows validation of their work in the West. African artists have to establish a praxis that provides a Western audience with remnants of their ‘Africanness’ but allows the African artists to create in the contemporary without being saddled with the critique of mimesis. As Deliss (1992:unnumbered page) acknowledges, “Primitivism now extends beyond the specific period associated with cubism and l’Art Negre [sic] and re-emerges in the 90s as a search for the neo-exotic: the authentic African artist still working in the isolation of the African bush and without influence from Europe.” Within the West, the African artist must continually struggle with the identity of the Other. Oguibe (2004) utilising the metaphor of, “the culture game”, describes the loaded environment into which those from outside Europe must contend. In reference to individual African artists hoping to engage with the West, Oguibe (2004:33) notes:

> ...such aspirants have a limited chance of success because it is predetermined they should fail. Though they may know the rules - ...the game is nevertheless inherently stacked against them because their presence, and worse still their success, causes a fault through an outwardly stolid wall of history that ought to bar them as serious contenders. Of course, the understanding is that they belong in a different space, should create work of a particular flavour, deal with a certain set of themes, exhibit in particular avenues in particular locations outside the mainstream, or be prepared to offer work of a particular nature to earn momentary mainstream acknowledgment, after which they are quietly returned to obscurity.

While this reality is slowly evolving for African artists in the West, the African artists’ identities are still inherently intertwined with a Western–devised cultural designation that is directly linked to an ethnographic and anthropological reading.[8] African artists often find themselves idealised in a colonial context as a way to provide an identity that is distinguishable and digestible to Western audiences. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) discusses the identity that is imposed on those from outside the West. Spivak (1999:6) investigates through a variety of non-ethnographic texts and the philosophical theories of Kant, Hegel and Marx, the absence of a native informant

[8] Salah Hassan (1999:215) describes the fault of Western art history to rely upon an “ethnographic context” to position African art. Hassan (1999:215) writes that the detriment has resulted in the “...written texts, often presented in the mode of the ‘ethnographic present’, have expressed no concern for history, time-scale or change in African art.”

and a reliance on “European” as “the human norm”. Yet there simultaneously exists the need for the creation and existence of a native informant. The result according to Spivak (1999:6) is that:

> ...the native informant, although denied autobiography as it is understood in the Northwestern European tradition (codename “West”), is taken with utmost seriousness. He (and occasionally she) *is* a blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline) could inscribe.[9]

The result for individuals from outside the West, for example African artists in Britain, is a reliance on an anthropological perspective for the construct of their core identity and the perpetuation of an identity of Otherness. Spivak (1999:8) further discusses the evolution of cultural self-representation within Europe that was directed by Germany and resulted in a European understanding of difference where “‘Africa’ remained a place apart on this network of possible identity, a place that provoked bafflement or hysteria.” For its part “Germany produced authoritative ‘universal’ narratives where the subject remained unmistakably European”, which relegated those especially from developing countries to a periphery (Spivak, 1999:8).

In Britain, the legacy of colonialism framed not only the collections of African art in British museums, but also the efforts of British institutions and galleries to mount exhibitions of African art. The reliance by Western cultural institutions and curators on the attributes of African artists’ difference and their identity as the Other are only part of the complex problems that exist for contemporary African artists. Contemporary African art’s translation in the West is further obscured as the physical art is overshadowed by debate not on an individual work’s artistic merit, but on the geographic origins of the artists themselves and their racial and ethnic identification. Mosquera (2001:29-30) describes the problem when, “Frequently works of art are not looked at: they are asked to present their passports, which tend not to be in order, for these works are responding to processes of hybridisation, appropriation, resignification, neologism and invention as a response to today’s world.” The art is rarely considered for its individual merit but is instead clouded by Western aesthetic demands for meeting a preconceived notion of ‘African authenticity’. Mosquera (2001:30) states:

> The art is asked to present an originality related to traditional cultures, which is to say, oriented toward the past, or to show an abstract, pure

[9] For a more in-depth discussion of the ethnographic term ‘Native Informant’ and its role in postcolonial and neo-colonial societies, particularly in regard to theoretical perspectives, read Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

> originality toward the present. In both cases, such art is required to state its context rather than to participate in general artistic practice which on occasion could only refer to art itself.

1.1 *The Case Studies*

From 1995 to 2005, two pertinent programmes were held that oriented British attention towards the continent of Africa while highlighting the curatorial lens through which Britain and the West often viewed the continent's artistic output. These programmes, *africa95* and *Africa 05* were cultural initiatives structured around exhibitions, workshops, lectures and symposia that aimed to create a deeper understanding of African arts. a*frica95* was a four month long programme initially conceived to use multiple exhibitions of contemporary African art to counter the conservative structure of a historically focused exhibition mounted by the Royal Academy of Arts (RAA). While the RAA intended their exhibition to be "...a sampling of the art of the entire continent" excluding the 20th century, *africa95* saw its role as "an artist-led season of events [that promoted] exchange and collaboration between artists" (Phillips, 1995:11; Caine quoted in Geers & Ross, 1995:1). In comparison, *Africa 05* was a nine month programme that aimed to offer an expansive range of exhibitions that hoped to depict the breadth of contemporary African art. The Director Augustus Casely-Hayford described the programme's desire for "...*Africa 05* to create changes across the arts sector that will draw African culture into the mainstream...and deliver an infrastructure to make those changes permanent" (Arts Council England, 2005:2). Central to each programme was a pillar exhibition in a major British institution. During *africa95* the Royal Academy of Arts held the exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, while for *Africa 05*, the Hayward Gallery showed the exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. A thorough examination of *africa95* and *Africa 05,* along with a handful of other exhibitions, will highlight how contemporary African art and artists continued to be defined by their perceived difference from the Western art mainstream and as a result viewed as part of the art world's periphery.

This paper will utilise the case studies of the *africa95* and *Africa 05* programmes to examine Britain's neo-colonial stance towards contemporary African art. This position is driven by postcolonial theory, in which the African art is valued for its recognisability as an authentic product, clearly identifiable as the work of the Other. Enwezor (1999:246-247) succinctly summarises the scenario when he writes:

> Nowhere is the ethnographic trope of the 'other' more transparent, resilient, and stalwart than in the seemingly plural environment of the

> Western metropolis. And nowhere have we been called upon to mediate on the uses of marginality as a weapon of enclosure and exclusion, and as a critical/structural construct, more than in the site of the Western metropolis. For it is there that the cultures of the so-called margins are more visible, and dangerously more transgressive by the sheer force of their articulation of a difference that the centre does not already own.

1.2 *Organisational Construct of the Research*

My critical analysis of this time period will begin with a historical review that focuses on significant exhibitions of African art from the late 1980s through 2005 in the West. This assessment will contextualise the West's portrayal of African art and set the scope for my examination of the two British case studies. Next I will investigate the *africa95* programme and the focal exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* that was held at the Royal Academy of Arts. While the larger programme was built in conjunction with the RAA's exhibition it was also meant to counter the conventional aims of the RAA's *Africa* exhibition. However, the intended aspirations of the programme organisers to integrate African art into the cultural fabric of Britain failed to materialise. The contemporary artists were ultimately valued for their difference and the traditional African art included in the RAA's exhibition ascribed to a Eurocentric, neo-colonial ideal of what constituted authentic African art for Western audiences. The following section will leap forward a decade in order to investigate the next significant programme dedicated to the arts of Africa in Britain, *Africa 05*. *Africa 05* was an attempt to rectify the inability of *africa95* to create a sustainable role for African arts in Britain. This effort was launched by the focal travelling exhibition, *Africa Remix*, which had a fairly different conceptual premise than that of the overall *Africa 05* programme. This resulted in a disjointed narrative that hampered the ability of the *Africa 05* programme to alter the ingrained neo-colonial stereotypes that predominated in British cultural institutions and the British media. Ultimately, neither programme succeeded in affecting entrenched mindsets that prevail in Britain, which adhere to an idea of African art as something created by an Other.

1.3 *Theoretical Underpinnings*

This paper relies upon postcolonial theory. I will draw from the work of contemporary theorists and critics such as Homi Bhabha (1993, 1994), Okwui Enwezor (1996, 1999), Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1992, 1999), Salah Hassan (1999, 2001), John Picton (1996, 1999, 2006), Gerardo Mosquera (2001), Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (2005, 2006) and Olu Oguibe (1999, 2004). These writers focus on issues pertaining to developing countries and artists operating on the periphery of or attempting to be

included into core Western aesthetics. They engage directly with the issues of this paper, while analysing key theories of art history and criticism in a contemporary manner as they relate to African art.

Homi Bhabha is a postcolonial literary theorist whose book, *The Location of Culture,* (1994) investigates issues surrounding identity and culture within the context of his theory of cultural hybridity. This theory explores his belief in the complex fluidity that naturally exists within cultures, which stands opposed to the homogenous idea of hybridity built upon Western notions of classical binary oppositions such as centre versus margins. With reference to Bhabha's work, I will attempt to show that people in a multicultural society such as Britain still subscribe to conventional cultural norms that necessitate binary oppositions in order to provide a certainty of what it means to be British – or self – in relation to Others.

Both Enwezor and Oguibe analyse the importance placed by Western centres on the maintenance of difference and the marginalisation of African artists. Additionally, both comment on the ensuing internalisation that happens for many African artists who accept this marginalisation as the necessary condition for obtaining legitimisation in the Western art world. The use of difference as a key feature in the validation of artists is an entrenched postcolonial stereotype that has been adopted into a neo-colonial perspective in Britain and maintains African artists on the periphery of the Western art world.

Enwezor, much like Bhabha utilises key postcolonial theoretical components that were laid out by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1979). Much like the Orient, Africa has often become a fictive space for Western cultural institutions and curators who view the continent's artistic output as material culture that can be suitably manipulated to meet the particular objectives of an institution or individual. Each of the case studies I analyse provides a clear example of these tendencies both in the focal exhibitions, the additional supporting exhibitions and the broader programmes that were constructed. In each instance, *africa95* and *Africa 05* work with Africa and African artists as marginalised cultures that as a result of the continent's relatively grim socio-political conditions, which seemingly require the guidance of Western curators and institutions to transcribe, elevate and explain the cultural product of its artists.

The assumption of ‘authority’ that has been a long-standing position adopted by the West in regard to the cultural product of non-Western artists is also discussed in Oguibe’s book *The Culture Game* (2004). Oguibe describes the cultural manipulation of African art and artists that occurs in the West through a metaphorical reference to a ‘game’. This “culture game” is biased from the beginning and displays many of the same conditions I encountered in my research of Britain’s display of African art (Oguibe, 2004). This is evident in both the inherent ‘authority’ that is assumed by the British cultural institutions and curators through to the reliance on difference as a validating criteria for African artists.

There seems to be not only an ingrained reliance upon binary oppositions in the presentation of African art, but also a sense of an assumed superiority on the part of British curators and cultural institutions. African art is positioned as the work of the Other and through the oppositional paradigms of centre versus periphery and traditional versus contemporary. Kasfir describes in two key texts, *African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow* (1992), and *Contemporary African Art* (1999) the postcolonial mindset that prevails in the West that values traditional African artefacts (the pre-colonial) over the ‘tainted’ postcolonial and contemporary African art that is not clearly African and often shows the influence of Western art practices. Both Kasfir (1992,1999) and Hassan (1999) investigate the emphasis on pre-colonial African art as the perceived more ‘legitimate’ form of African artistic expression, and invoke the metaphor of ‘decay’ to describe the Western perception of postcolonial and contemporary African art.

John Picton, a British academic, is very aware of the difficulties facing African artists in terms of penetrating the British arts community and the West. His work provides critical assessments of this problem, particularly during the *africa95* programme. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie has done research not only on the continued marginalisation of African artists but also the rise of African diaspora artists and their growing impact on the artistic communities in Western metropolises. Enwezor and Oguibe also provide commentaries on African diaspora artists and their role in the subtle subversion of the historical position of African arts in the West. While African diaspora artists have increased in number during the decade under consideration in this paper, ultimately they have been largely disregarded, at least in terms of in-depth scholarly studies in Britain. Nonetheless, Ogbechie critiques Western curators for relying too heavily on diaspora artists to depict the state of contemporary African art, claiming that this reliance actually creates a multi-tiered system of marginalisation for

African artists, with those practicing on the continent pushed to the furthest spectrum of the art world periphery.

I refer to the work of Gerardo Mosquera (2001), who along with Salah Hassan (1999) has analysed the affects of globalisation on non-Western artists. Mosquera provides poignant descriptions of how in the globalised world that exists today, non-Western artists are expected to provide their "credentials" in order to be allowed to operate in the Western art world. Hassan (1999) discusses the Western aesthetic trope that is the determinate for African art's legitimacy in the West and the problems associated with this reality.

As will be evidenced throughout this paper a historical framework is continually maintained within Western Europe that valorises an ingrained European cultural authority in relation to the art of developing countries. These biases are maintained and evidenced in the manner in which contemporary African art is both exhibited and received in the West. The reasons for this expand beyond a historical reality and evolve from a Western European mentality that values the idea of African artists' difference. This predicament is even more complex in Britain, where as I will discuss, a volatile uncertainty of British identity and self has lead to excessive marginalising and isolation of African artists who must continually play the role of the Other. Preziosi (2003:40-41) acknowledges the depth of the issues when he writes:

> Art history has been a complex and internally unstable enterprise throughout its two-century-long history. Since its beginnings, it has been deeply invested in the fabrication and maintenance of a modernity that linked Europe to an ethically superior aesthetics grounded in eroticized object relations, thereby allaying the anxieties of cultural relativism, such that Europe (and Christendom), in their expanding encounter with alien cultures, might be saved from reduction to but one reality among many.

Examination of the various exhibitions described in the following pages will highlight how Britain, much like the rest of Western Europe, often falls into the trap outlined by Preziosi whereby Africa and its art cannot stand alone; instead, it must be viewed as the proverbial Other that is fetishised as material culture, objectified and observed rather than simply being appreciated as fine art.

CHAPTER II: An Overview of Exhibitions Held in Western Europe and the United States between 1989 and 2005

2.1 *Magiciens de la Terre: Beginning It All*

To contextualise appropriately the time frame under consideration in this paper, it is necessary to trace an overview of exhibitions in Western Europe and the United States. This will show the primary conceptual frameworks that underscore exhibitions of African art during this period. A logical starting point is the first major exhibition that introduced 'contemporary' African art to the West, namely the controversial 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*. Curated by Jean Martin-Hubert with the assistance of André Magnin, Aline Luque and Mark Francis, the exhibition was held in Paris at the Centre Pompidou. *Magiciens de la Terre* sought to delve into the unexplored territory of contemporary African art and to encourage the debates pertaining to contemporary African art in the West. It did so by introducing a select group of African artists and including them in an exhibition of international contemporary art. The curator Simon Njami (2005a:20) describes the impact of *Magiciens*, writing:

> ...African creativity had tried to break free from the exogenous and often Western gaze in which it was imprisoned. But not until the late 1980s did a structured debate on the nature of this creativity begin to emerge. In 1989, the *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris sparked things off by proposing a definition of contemporary creation that fuelled many years of debate. Since then, numerous other exhibitions have been held in the United States, Europe and Japan, displaying other visions. A split appeared between English-speaking, French-speaking and Arabic-speaking visions...that revealed ideological divides among young exhibition curators, a number of whom, notably, were African.

This paper will seek to engage with some of the exhibitions that were held in the English-speaking world – especially in Britain.

The reason *Magiciens* was revolutionary at the time is because it showed contemporary African art alongside the work of contemporary Western art and not partitioned into a separate ethnographic context. However, the manner in which the African art was exhibited in *Magiciens* revealed that African art can only be presented to and deciphered by Western audiences in small samples and when displayed in direct contrast to Western artists.

In their book, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to Marketplace*, Enwezor and Oguibe (1999) describe not only the significance of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, but the importance in general of the year 1989 in predicating the

issues that would structure the reception of contemporary African art in the West. The issues were globalisation, the development of the African diaspora, the demise of apartheid, and the increased visibility and "circulation" of African art in global markets (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). In a sense the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition was the emblematic marker that provided the notation for contemporary African art's arrival in the West. The exhibition per se was important, but it was the synthesis of multiple factors that ultimately ensured its lasting effects. These factors were the introduction of the idea of untrained African artists as representative of contemporary African art (Picton, 1999; Hassan, 1999); Western curators and collectors who under a banner of a 'neo-colonialism' act as 'voyagers' collecting African artists (Kasfir, 1999); and the reliance on 'traditional' visual elements in the African art as necessary to relegate the work to the domain of fetishised objects (Enwezor, 1996).

The reviews of *Magiciens de la Terre* also began to reveal the neo-colonial preconceptions that prevail in the minds of Western museum curators toward contemporary African art. For example, Jeremy Lewison (1998:585), the Tate Gallery's Assistant Keeper, Modern Collection and Head of Modern Prints at the time, argued in a review:

> *Magiciens* sets out to show that contemporary art is also produced within less developed countries and that in the same way as western artists work within, develop and deviate from a tradition, so too do their 'third world' counterparts...The purpose of the exhibition, therefore, is to supply 'third world' art with a context and a framework in which it may be understood by the western visitor.

The language of Lewison's comments demonstrate a British curatorial perspective towards African artists, which implies that contemporary African art must be 'translated' for Western audiences to fully comprehend the work and view it as legitimate. In Lewison's opinion it was revealing that contemporary African artists were creating something similar to their Western counterparts. This captious tone dictates an immediate separation of the African artists from the Western artists. Lewison went on to write that "[w]here religion, sex, death and functionalism seem to be the basis for the creation of most forms of 'ethnic' art, art itself is often the only reason for the making of western art" (Lewison, 1998:585). I read this statement to be Lewison's admission that Western artists are privileged, able to create art for art's sake, while "ethnic art", implying African art, does not have such a luxury. Lewison's (1998:586) review concluded with a litany of rhetorical questions that focused on whether the African art presented in the exhibition was "...typical of 'third world' art producers...[and] to what extent are the 'third world' exhibitors artists and what

differentiates them from craftsmen or even high priests?" The patronising nature of these remarks reveal that Western curators find themselves uncertain how to engage with contemporary African art and ameliorate their concerns through the use of a subjectively dominant form of language to marginalise African artists. Oguibe (1999) describes the necessity of the West to dominate through a discourse of power realised through language. As we shall see, the sentiment that African art needs translation for Western audiences; and the belief that contemporary African art is secondary to its Western counterpart will often be repeated throughout the next two decades in reference to exhibitions of contemporary African art in British institutions.

The exhibition *Magiciens* revealed the divides in the perceptions of African art among Western curators, critics and academics, and between them and their African counterparts. British Africanists such as the academic John Picton took a more critical position towards the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition than other Western academics, yet one sympathetic to the African artists involved. Picton (1999:120) writes:

> ...the selection [of artists] was bizarre, juxtaposing artists such as Francesco Clemente, Anslem Kiefer and Richard Long with Sossou Amidou, Kane Kwei and Chéri Samba. These are, of course all interesting artists, the Europeans no less than the Africans,...[but] there was a categorisation operating in the selection of, for example, a mask carver, a coffin maker and a sign painter as representative of Africa. In effect there was a wholesale writing-off of the achievements of artists in every country in Africa. . .the effect is astonishing in serving to legitimate only one small part of contemporary visual culture in Africa.

One of the consequences of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition was that while it introduced contemporary African art to Western audiences it did so only on behalf of a small group of primarily untrained artists. Picton (1999:120) critiques *Magiciens*' curatorial emphasis on the "...self-taught artist as the paradigm of creative authenticity." While these self-taught artists are certainly talented individuals, selecting only them as representative of contemporary African art precipitates the stereotype of 'traditional' or 'primitive' imagery as defining features of contemporary African art. Included, for example, were the sign painter Chéri Samba, the sculptors Kane Kwei and Sunday Jack Akpan and the painter Cyprien Tokoudagba. These artists were repeatedly upheld as embodying contemporary African art by Western curators such as André Magnin and Johanna Agthe.

Theoretically *Magiciens de la Terre wa*s significant because it set a precedent, reflected in exhibitions throughout the West, which emphasised the isolating characteristics of modernism. African artists were shown in the exhibition with their Western counterparts but they remained segregated together and differentiated as Other. Enwezor and Oguibe (1999:9) believe:

> ...Martin's enterprise failed in its method, because it not only retained those impulses proper to modernism, it misinterpreted the most productive arguments of postmodernism via postcolonial discourse by playing into the hands of a form of postmodernism that Frederic Jameson would exasperatedly call sheer heterogeneity.

Looking at the range of receptions by Western and African curators, critics and historians to the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre,* the exhibition undeniably began significant debates regarding the idea and premise of contemporary African art in the West and paved the way for Western curators to begin engaging with contemporary African art. As Eleanor Heartney (2000:unnumbered page), put it in *Art in America*:

> *Magiciens*, organized by then Pompidou director Jean-Hubert Martin was a remarkably prescient exhibition, ushering in the new post-Cold War era with the first truly international presentation of visual art. Martin and his associates had scoured the globe and selected artists from such usually overlooked countries as Nepal, Nigeria, Madagascar and New Guinea, and then displayed these artists' works alongside paintings and sculptures by some of the most respected figures in Western art. While this strategy sounds unremarkable today, 11 years ago it was a radical departure from the tradition of deeming an exhibition "international" if it contained a mix of European, American and Japanese artists. Furthermore, many of the works selected...were the kind of things that, hitherto, would have more likely been found in ethnographic museums than in a show of contemporary art.

She further notes that "[t]he critical response to "Magiciens de la Terre," especially in France, was extremely negative...Today, however, the show is generally acknowledged as a landmark event that cracked the West's monopoly on contemporary art" (Heartney, 2000:unnumbered page). These statements summarise the impact that the exhibition had. Enwezor and Oguibe (1999) consider the long-term impact of *Magiciens de la Terre,* seeing it as the West's first real effort to showcase contemporary African artists. They write, "'Magiciens de la Terre's' success, though flawed in many areas, was in its ability to make a strong case for a dialogue between artists of various cultures. Another distinction that many still claim for the exhibition was that it was the place in which 'contemporary African art' made its first real appearance in Europe" (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999:9).

2.2 *The Pigozzi Collection: Neo 'Primitivists' Defined by Neo-Colonial 'Voyagers'*

An interesting subtext to the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition was the involvement of the curator André Magnin. While working on the exhibition, Magnin met the venture capitalist Jean Pigozzi, who then hired Magnin to build and oversee a personal contemporary art collection (Magnin & Pigozzi, n.d.). The *Pigozzi Collection* has become a premier private collection of contemporary African art, which continues to be exhibited extensively in public institutions (a portion of the collection would, for example be featured in one of the main contemporary exhibitions during *africa95*). The *Pigozzi Collection*, known as the *Contemporary African Art Collection* (CAAC), according to its own press release, "...is the largest private collection in the world of contemporary African art. It includes works of artists who live or lived in sub-Saharan Africa" (Magnin & Pigozzi, n.d.:unnumbered page). *Magiciens* opened the world of contemporary African art for the West, but the art was then vulnerable to a neo-colonial form of voyeurism, one that exploited the art through globalised, Western dominated capital markets.

Numerous problems abound with the *Pigozzi Collection*. These include its reliance on mainly self-taught, sub-Saharan artists and the fact that the CAAC acts as an 'authoritative' collection of what constitutes contemporary African art, but is actually the vision of a Western curator. Kasfir (1999:135) describes this predicament when:

> ...the tastes and preferences of a handful of private collectors and the curators who work closely with them have had a great influence on the way in which contemporary African art is being defined for its various publics... As the Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera has noted, instead of colonizing the Third World, the West now sends curators as postcolonial explorers on voyages of discovery.

The Pigozzi collection was constructed with primarily untrained artists who Magnin and Pigozzi believe embody the ideal of a 'pure' and 'authentic' African art. The collection continues a story begun by *Magiciens* of purchasing and supporting and thus validating only this small group of artists. The support of Magnin and Pigozzi for specific artists is to the detriment of formally trained artists; and promotes only a select few artists such as Georges Adeagbo from Benin, Johannes Segogela from South Africa, John Goba from Sierra Leone and Barthelemy Toguo from Cameroon. The drive to attain the work of African artists who reflect 'tribal' and 'primitive' visual qualities or characteristics in their art fetishises the Other, the African artist, and maintains a skewed perspective of contemporary African art. This perspective demands an image that is rooted in visually apparent, traditional imagery. Oguibe

(1999:21) acknowledges Magnin's affinity for the "...presentation of the neo-native African artist," and he describes the divide that occurs between the artists and their work, which is a contemporary manifestation of classical African art being attributed to "...the tribe, rather than to the individual artist, thus effectively erasing the latter from the narrative spaces of art history."

African-born academic Salah Hassan (1999) describes the results of efforts by individual curators such as Magnin on exhibitions in the mid 1990s that essentialises 'difference'. He writes:

> The majority of the exhibitions have failed to escape Western demand for difference and exoticism...This is a model of recent European curatorial practice driven by an alliance of mostly European curators/collectors who specialise in marketing the art of a group of untrained Francophone African artists. Their taste for and attitudes to contemporary African art is marked by a preference for the exotic, the naïve, the unusual and the crude, resulting in the creation of what they call a 'new primitivism' (Hassan, 1999:218).

Hassan mentions the artists Twins Seven-Seven, Chéri Samba and Cyprien Tokoudagba as examples of the 'new primitives', and he criticises Magnin for perpetuating a desire for untrained artists as the only examples of authentic African art. John Picton (1999) takes issue with Magnin's role in constructing the *Pigozzi Collection* and its effect of indoctrinating a broader Western public with the notion that untrained African artists are superior to those who are formally trained. Picton (1999:120) believes that Magnin fails to acknowledge that:

> ...there is a patronage, an evaluation and criticism within the countries of Africa that is not predetermined by an expatriate presence. It hardly needs saying that the continued rejection of the art academy as a legitimate institution in the making of art is, in effect, the legitimation of a re-invented Primitivism.

Magiciens de la Terre set the parameters for the West's commercial and cultural reception of contemporary African art. The media coverage the exhibition generated, as well as the creation of a major, private collection that focused on contemporary African art, all help to explain Western curators, museums and other cultural institutions desire to capitalise on the notion of a contemporary Africa. There were commercial motives as well as academic ones behind this new-found attention. Suddenly with the interest and profile of Jean Pigozzi's collection, for example, contemporary African art was seen as marketable and profitable. This coincided with an emergence of a corps of African academics operating in the West such as Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Salah Hassan to name a few,

and the resurgence of South Africa as a newly liberated country. Oguibe (1999:32) acknowledges the shifting centres of gravity:

> In the 1980s and 1990s, also, segregationist positions in the centres of contemporary cultural practice came under increasing scrutiny, for which an entire contingent of non-Western scholars, artists, and critics must be partly credited. Consequently, a more international awareness has begun to emerge among certain curators, critics, and administrators, with the result that platforms that for long remained bastions of Western exclusivity are beginning to open up, albeit ever so cautiously, to artists from the non-Western world.

All of these factors contribute to African art's role as a *cause célèbre* in the early 1990s.

2.3 *Three Exhibitions in Britain: Changing Expectations*

Coinciding with *Magiciens de la Terre's* 1989 opening in Paris, the Hayward Gallery in London mounted the exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*. The timing was significant because much like *Magiciens*, the exhibition relied upon a paradigm of 'difference' as purported through an oppositional construct of the Other. However, *The Other Story* framed the idea of the Other in a British socio-political context for a specifically British audience. In *The Other Story*, an effort was made by a prominent cultural institution to offer a review of the ignored and unseen work of black British artists from the past forty-five years (Young, 2000).

British museums and galleries were shifting towards exhibitions of previously marginalised artists; however, this was occurring through carefully constructed exhibition spaces that provided a literal and figurative containment of this Other. While a single display that summarised the work of black British artists was flawed, it did serve as evidence of this larger trend occurring within British cultural institutions. Enwezor (1999) discusses the societal constructed space that is created in Western metropolis where individuals from the margins are more visible and as a result more confrontational for the centre. For example, when an exhibition is created in the West that carefully constructs a space where individuals who originate from outside the centre are singled out. Enwezor (1999:247) describes, "Such transgressiveness, often commodified and reduced to spectacle, to the carnivalesque, makes the marginalised culture more nakedly vulnerable to structures that incessantly sanction its marginality, its co-option, displacement and dispersement into the centre." Such was the reality for artists categorised under the umbrella of African artists, or Black British artists who must embrace a label that simultaneously created their isolation as producing fetishised objects to be observed.

The Other Story provided a carefully devised spectacle of 'difference' where British audiences could observe the show and consider the idea, but they did not have to engage with the discourses and reality of Otherness beyond the exhibition. Oguibe (2004) describes the essentialisation of the idea of difference that reigns in Britain. He writes:

> A culture that dwells on difference also distinguishes between forms and categories of difference because it operates on an economy of difference. It demarcates between what one might call tolerable difference and intolerable difference, between benign and profitable differences, as it were, and dangerous Otherness (Oguibe, 2004:24).

An exhibition such as *The Other Story*, contained the difference of the Black British artists and presented a neatly packaged display that was sanitised through the exhibition in the 'authoritative' sanctuary of a museum space.

The focus on the singular body of Black British artists is similar to how African artists would be exhibited, collapsed into one body of individuals, exhibitions of African art. Enwezor (1999:245-246) discusses the labels that evolve (i.e. 'Black British,' 'African') as a "hegemonic imperative," which is reliant on a hierarchy that offers a "...sovereign narrator [in this case the Western curator] unprecedented power either to contextualise or dismiss, to dissolve all edges and turn variety into an atrophied body of sameness, until the subject dissolves and vanishes." The artists lose their individuality as they are ascribed a label that assigns them to a whole. Enwezor (1999:246) contends "[t]he collapse of entire 'minority' populations into one body known as 'Black British' is but one example of this taxonomic game-playing that reductively homogenises identities while obliterating their disparate and composite social realities."

The exhibition *The Other Story* offered a British perspective on Otherness and the necessity of 'difference'. Young (2000:52) described the reality that existed in Britain where "[i]t is not possible to have differentiation without a polarisation between binary opposites..." This binary opposition is based upon the self versus the Other and is a societal construct in Britain that provides an epistemological underpinning that directs British engagement with and positioning of African artists. *The Other Story* was significant because it offered a British cultural institution's foray into publically acknowledging this opposition and the distance that was created to maintain an Other.

In the early 1990s, the number of contemporary African art shows in Britain and the United States escalated rapidly after *Magiciens de la Terre*. Curators and museums were propelled to define a contemporary African art through the synthesis of an African exoticism into aesthetically appealing exhibitions. What was also evident in the Western critical responses to the initial contemporary African art exhibitions in the West were modernist critiques that relied upon the essentialising factor of 'difference'. Picton (1991) comments on the trend in Britain where the paradigm of insider/outsider frequently prevails without an acknowledgment of the overarching role of the subjective British curator. He argues:

> Whatever we may think about the capacity of works of art to represent a view of things from the "inside" of a given configuration of social and historical circumstances, the fact is that any representation is mediated by an art world; and when works of art are exhibited in London, that mediating art world is the art world of London...the obvious needs to be stated again and again, particularly when we realize that in London there is more than one art world – at least as far as Africa is concerned – and that each mediates a radically different representation of Africa (Picton,1991:83).

Two exhibitions in particular highlighted these different representations for Picton. One was the canonical *Van Gogh to Picasso* at the National Gallery in 1991, which included a few cursory pieces of 'traditional' African art by deceased, anonymous artists. The second was the exhibition *Art from South Africa* held at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1990, and subsequently at the South Bank Centre in London in 1991, which showed British audiences the recent work of a diverse range of living South African artists who use multiple mediums to depict narratives of resistance (Picton, 1991). This exhibition marked the beginning of Britain's engagement with contemporary African art and the more extensive and positive reception South African art would begin receiving compared to the work of African artists from other countries.

The increased exposure of South African artists in Britain was due to numerous factors. The rise of contemporary African art's presence in the West as a result of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition coincided with the demise of apartheid in South Africa. With the increased political stabilisation in South Africa, a stronger connection between its artists and the international art arena began to emerge. Artists such as William Kentridge entered the core of African artists in the West who were heralded post-*Magiciens* as the purveyors of a 'pure,' contemporary African art practice. With more formal training than most of the artists introduced through *Magiciens*,

Kentridge's work still provided – and indeed continues to provide – a specific version of what Western audiences envision contemporary African art to be. In Kentridge's case, this is art that reflects the socio-political turmoil of apartheid. The exhibition *Art from South Africa* and the accompanying catalogue introduced a new cadre of South African artists along with African cultural critics and historians. Picton (1991:85) noted in his review, "'Art from South Africa' is among the most significant exhibitions of African art I have seen in a decade or more, and the catalogue stands as an essential statement and survey of the current state of art in South Africa." The importance of this recognition was that as the 'dialogue' between Britain and African art evolved, South African art took on a prominent role within this designation. This was apparent in *africa95* and *Africa 05*, which both feature more South African artists than those from other African countries.

2.4 *Contemporary African Artists: Acknowledging American Stereotypes*

During this same time period, the focus on Africa in the United States began with the 1990 exhibition *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition*, held in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem and curated by Grace Stanislaus. The exhibition was meant to "...challenge [Western] stereotypes" through the work of nine artists using multiple mediums and "bring the American audience up-to-date with Africa as the locus of a rich and varied art scene and, consequently, enrich existing perceptions about Africa's cultural life" (Stanislaus quoted in Ezra, 1990:79). Unfortunately, based upon reviews and critiques of the show, the extent to which the exhibition succeeded in educating an American audience on the current state of African art was negligible. In a review Hassan (1992) noted the importance of Stanislaus including African art that exhibits assimilated Western techniques, in direct contradiction to the West's perception that such art is 'tainted' and impure. However, he simultaneously critiqued Stanislaus' reliance on sub-Saharan artists and the omission of artists in the diaspora. Hassan (1992:97) felt that ultimately the exhibition failed to raise an awareness of African arts for Western audiences by the very fact that "...most of the exhibited artists studied, lived, and practiced for several years in Europe and North America."

The interest the exhibition generated stood in contrast to some critics' disappointment with the lack of political themes. As Kate Ezra (1990:80) argued in her review, "...none of these artists dealt explicitly with the political and social issues that concern Africans today, thus diminishing some of the bite the exhibition might otherwise have had." Ezra's opinion seemed to be that contemporary African art can

only have an impact and be influential if it clearly depicts socio-political concerns. Enwezor (1999:251) describes this attitude when he contends, “Essentially, the mark of difference, as has been repeatedly proposed, becomes quite literally undifferentiated from this ‘narrative of crisis’.” African art is not allowed to be a purely aesthetic experience; it needs the force of visible trauma.

The exhibition included work by the Nigerian Bruce Onobrakpeya, the Ghanaian El Anatsui and the Senegalese artist Souleymane Keita. Each of these artists were to become part of the expanding core of ‘validated’ African artists who consistently appeared in shows of contemporary African art. Interestingly, I believe the visual appearance of mythical, possibly ‘tribal’ imagery in Onobrakpeya’s work, the use of recycled materials in Anatsui’s pieces, and the mystical collaged paintings of Keita all offer some potential ‘African’ connotation to the artists’ work, thus providing specific visual references, which allocate the work to the specific domain of Other.

Although at first uncertain of the merits of the artists in the exhibition, critics and journalists were assuaged by the sense of humanity in the art. However, critically they were not prepared to position it next to the contemporary art of the West. In concluding his review of the exhibition, Brenson (1990:unnumbered page) wrote:

> What is important now is not that the contemporary art of Africa be measured against the contemporary art of another continent, but rather that the public think about the works and give itself the opportunity to enjoy them. Some of the art in this show is first rate, some isn't, but much of it gives real pleasure and all of it has something to say. And the humanity in this show is special.

The African art was still viewed through a Western gaze that relegated the work to the category of pleasurable objects to be enjoyed. This succinctly demonstrated one of the many problems that persisted in regard to the reception by Western critics, journalists and audiences to contemporary African art. While the art entered the international art arena, contemporary African art’s position was on the periphery, not yet ‘strong’ enough to be compared with that of Western artists. The language Brenson used harkens to images of an ideal, historical past that relegated his reading of the art to a more anthropological context, one in which the African art was connoted with humanity.

2.5 *Africa Explores: Range without Depth*

Subsequent to the exhibitions mentioned above, in 1991, three exhibitions were held in the United States and Britain that continued to focus on African art. These were

Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art, curated by Susan Vogel at The Center for African Art in New York; *Interrogating Identity*, curated by Kellie Jones at New York University's Grey Art Gallery in New York, which then travelled throughout the United States; and *Africa Today*, curated by André Magnin, which drew from the Pigozzi Collection and was exhibited in London. The most significant of the three exhibitions was *Africa Explores*, which was described as "[t]he first major exhibition of contemporary African art in New York" (Ezra, 1990:79), even though Grace Stanislaus had curated *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition*, at the Studio Museum in Harlem a year earlier. Susan Vogel's (1991:11) aims to create an exhibition that "...seeks to focus on Africa, its concerns, and its art and artists in their own contexts and in their own voices. Western perceptions of Africa, and Western uses of African art are entirely secondary here, as are isolated African uses of Western ideologies and artifacts." The exhibition comprised a diverse range of 133 pieces from 15 different countries, and it incited a myriad of responses. John Picton (1999) commented on the vociferous reactions to *Africa Explores*. He writes, "The New York art press almost unanimously condemned it; a group of visiting curators from Africa were said not to like it much either; it was confused, did not address any obvious issues, and it juxtaposed in an uncritical manner self-taught sign painters and professionally trained artists to the detriment of the latter" (Picton, 1999:121). Yet Picton simultaneously applauds Vogel for the range of material she exhibits regardless of the conceptual faults and public criticisms.

Oguibe found faults with Vogel playing guide to the world of African art. In Oguibe's (1993:16) review of the exhibition and accompanying catalogue for *African Arts*, he wrote:

> 'Africa Explores' encapsulates the aims and operative paradigms of the exhibition and the volume it designates, and thus assumes primacy of significance. It denotes a specific audience which it then addresses, and this audience is exclusionist. The language is that of the interpreter, introducing one world to another.

Oguibe (1993) critiques the title of the exhibition as signage of a "route designation," a place to explore by those travelling on this journey. This was Africa repackaged for an experience by an elite, Western-based art audience who relied upon a Western curator's translation for understanding the art. *Africa Explores* was important primarily for continuing the growing focus on Africa's contemporary artistic output and a trend of Western curators who acted as arbiters of what defined contemporary African art. In regard to my paper, *Africa Explores* was particularly relevant because Susan

Vogel's role in its creation lead Norman Rosenthal, the Exhibitions Secretary of the Royal Academy of Arts' (RAA) initially to ask her to curate *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, the focal exhibition of *africa95*.

2.6 *Commercialism and African Art*

Contemporary African art as a commercial commodity was more evident through the continual exhibition of portions of Jean Pigozzi's collection. In 1991, the exhibition *Africa Today: Jean Pigozzi Contemporary African Art Collection* was held at the Charles Saatchi Gallery in London.[10] The exhibition continued Pigozzi and Magnin's commitment to showing untrained artists and a small group of particular names such as Frédéric Bruly Bouabré from the Ivory Coast; John Goba from Sierra Leone; Romuald Hazoumé and Cyprien Tokoudagba, both from Benin; and Esther Mahlangu from South Africa. These artists became the exemplars of contemporary African art in the West. Many of the same artists were again exhibited in *Out of Africa*, another exhibition held the following year, again selected from a portion of Pigozzi's collection. In a commentary on the exhibition Deliss (1992:unnumbered page) argued:

> The show has no discernable curatorial concept other than Africa now, which places it in a very vulnerable position...*Out of Africa* with its unfortunate title evoking scenes of Meryl Streep running into the arms of Robert Redford, may be part of the largest collection of its kind in the world, and does include some great pieces, but ultimately represents the imaginary Africa of its collector, an exotic safari into a world he has never personally experienced and probably never will.[11]

[10] The decision to have Pigozzi's exhibition at the Charles Saatchi's gallery was an interesting choice of exhibition locations. Both Pigozzi and Saatchi revealed a nature of collecting largely for commercial gains rather than personal satisfaction. Saatchi, for example came to embody the contested terrain when art and commerce overlap to the commercial benefit of the collector. This was seen in the 1997 exhibition *Sensation*, which was held at the typically conservative venue of the Royal Academy of Arts. There was extensive media coverage of the event, partially as a result of the controversial art included such as Marcus Harvey's portrait of the child killer Myra Hindley rendered in children's handprints. The other controversial aspect was Saatchi funding a large portion of the exhibition, which lead to the belief that he did so to increase the value of the art in his collection through the promotion of particular artists, and in turn to possibly then resell the art. The Royal Academy of Arts also benefited greatly from the exhibition, which saw attendance in excess of half a million. "The Royal Academy's coffers were enriched and curator Norman 'Zeitgeist' Rosenthal had once again skilfully ridden inside the curl of the wave of artistic fashion" (Anderson-Spivy, 1996:89). The drastic change in the general curatorial programming of the RAA was notable for the promotion of a cutting-edge contemporary art exhibition, something typically outside their comfort zone. It is difficult to surmise that this was not monetarily driven, especially because of the heavy losses they experienced as a result of their 1995 exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*.

[11] While Deliss accurately captures some of the faults of Magnin's exhibitions and the ambiguous nature of the language surrounding African art in the West, I believe that when it came to the creation of *africa95* and its subsequent exhibitions, she fell into many of the exact predicaments for which she criticised others. Nonetheless her comments seem appropriate and accurate in a number of contexts.

The exploratory nature of a Western curator collecting 'trophies' in the form of the artistic product of African artists for a wealthy client is highlighted through the continued exhibition of Pigozzi's collection. The commercial viability that develops around African art is also evident by the popular nature of Pigozzi's collection and the desire for Western venues to continue exhibiting portions.

2.7 africa95 *and Africa in New York: The West Defines Africa*

The growth in exhibitions of African art in the West reached a pinnacle in Britain in 1995 with the four-month long programme *africa95*. A comprehensive series of exhibitions, lectures, workshops and conferences, the *africa95* programme meant to create a more inclusive project than the historical exhibition simultaneously held at the Royal Academy of Arts, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. John Picton (1996:23) one of the organisers of *africa95*, writes, "The exclusion of twentieth-century development from the Academy's exhibition was the crucial factor leading to *africa95*; yet it had the effect of reinforcing a kind of traditional/contemporary categorization..." The programme as a whole was plagued by a Eurocentric, neo-colonial depiction of Africa. The exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* maintained an ethnographic reading of African objects that continued the dialogue of 'authenticity' as the critical factor for 'legitimating' African art in the West. The contemporary component was an exclusionary narration of contemporary African art that saw Western curators 'speaking for' the African artists. In this regard Preziosi (2003:3) notes:

> Art history and museology are the heirs to an ancient European tradition of using things to think with, to reckon with (in both senses of the term), and of using them to fabricate and factualize the individual and collective realities that in our modernity they so coyly and convincingly present themselves as merely re-presenting.

The *africa95* programme will be considered in more detail as a case study in chapter three.

The following year, 1996, New York City launched a similar programme to *africa95*, *Africa in New York.* This coincided with the RAA's moving *Africa: The Art of a Continent* to New York's Guggenheim Museum. The Guggenheim's press release failed to acknowledge the omission of 20th Century art in the *Africa: The Art of a Continent* exhibition and simply proclaimed that the *Africa* exhibition is "...the first major art exhibition to present Africa as a single entity, unbroken by the Sahara" (1996:unnumbered page). The press release (Guggenheim Museum, 1996) described the programme stating:

> *Africa in New York* includes the visual arts, film, music, dance, symposia, and lectures, bringing to the public the many traditional and contemporary representations of Africa and the African diaspora. The programs also investigate the syncretic qualities of the African diaspora as illuminated through the arts of the Caribbean, African American, and Latin American communities (Guggenheim Museum, 1996:unnumbered page).

A more conscious effort was made in the overall *Africa in New York* programme to be inclusive of the diaspora than in the British *africa95* programme, but Africa was still regulated to a singular body that only warranted exhibition when the countries' artists were grouped as a whole and separated from their Western counterparts. Isolation invariably occurred when the African artists were exhibited, either through the maintenance of specific criteria as to what constituted contemporary African art, or by the artists being exhibited only in isolation.

The RAA exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, presented in the same format as it was in London, offered a historical, 'traditional' African art packaged in reference to 'tribal' and 'primitive' qualifiers. The critical commentary of American academic John Peffer-Engels (1997) highlighted the paternalistic nature of the Guggenheim's translation of the *Africa* show. He writes that during the exhibition:

> Musicians played drums and thumb pianos in the lobby below, [of the Guggenheim Museum] and demonstrated how to make rudimentary instruments. Octavio Zaya [a co-curator of the *In/sight* exhibition discussed below] pointed out to me, it is unlikely that the Guggenheim would have a pianist playing Erik Satie and painters demonstrating the Cubist style of painting in the lobby during a Picasso show (Peffer-Engels, 1997:74).

The ethnographic characteristics of the *Africa* show were contrasted with the Guggenheim's smaller exhibition of modern and contemporary African photography co-curated by Okwui Enwezor. This exhibition, *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* was "...the first United States museum exhibit to look critically at the work of African-born photographers..." (Peffer-Engels, 1997:73). The crux of the exhibition was the work of photographers from the 1950s originally published in the South African magazine *Drum* (Peffer-Engels, 1997). The importance of this exhibition was that it countered the traditionalist perspectives of the *Africa* exhibition and was curated by an African-born curator.

In/sight was also significant in that it introduced Western audiences to the work of *Drum* magazine, one of the Africa's first magazines focused on black life and culture (chiefly in South Africa) and home to some of Africa's most famed journalists and

photographers. Photographs from *Drum* were again shown during the *Africa 05* programme in Britain. The display of African photographers in *In/sight* served conceptually to reposition one form of contemporary African art in Western cultural institutions, away from a solely anthropological context. However, this was still in relation to a traditional/contemporary paradigm. Peffer-Engels (1997:75) remarks that "[t]he recontextualisation of photographic practice in Africa as high art, through the placement of photographs on the walls of the Guggenheim Museum, nudged the discussion of the visual aesthetics of identity construction in Africa into exciting new territory." While the Guggenheim may have been inclined to include trite peripheral displays such as musical tutorials to heighten the reception and impact of the *Africa* exhibition, the museum did realise the importance of including an exhibition of contemporary African art to provide a more comprehensive image of African art.

2.8 *Authentic/ex-centric and Short Century: Africa Defines Authenticity*

The articulation by an African curator on the state of contemporary African art through an exhibition seemed to have a validating currency not available to Western curators. This was evidenced both by the first exhibition of solely contemporary African art in Venice in 2001, curated by the African-born curators Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe; and in New York, the Museum of Modern Art's allocation of its adjunct exhibition space P.S.1 to the exhibition *Short Century* curated by another African-born curator, Okwui Enwezor. Despite the Western art world's fascination with African art throughout much of the 1990s, enthusiasm began to dissipate by the end of the decade. Public 'curiosity' for the novelty was temporarily satiated and discussions of contemporary African art found themselves largely restricted to the academic and curatorial worlds. Yet in 2001, at the prestigious Venice Biennale, contemporary African art made a re-appearance in the exhibition *Authentic/ex-centric*, curated by Hassan and Oguibe. The inclusion of an exhibition of solely contemporary African art at this monumental Western Biennale was testament that contemporary African art deserved a more prominent role in the international art world. However, although contemporary African art was included in Venice, it was still not given its own pavilion. [12] Besides the lone Egyptian pavilion, Africa had never

[12] Africa would have to wait until 2007 before finally being allocated its own pavilion. Even then Africa was expected to have a single pavilion as sufficient to represent the artists of 54 different countries. The pavilion for the 2007 biennale was based upon a pre-existing private collection, the Sindika Dokolo collection in Luanda, Angola (Malcomess, 2007). Curated by Fernando Alvim, Simon Njami, N'gone Fall and Olu Oguibe, the exhibition was critiqued for not being representative of the entire continent due to the fact it was created for a private collector and adhered to Dokolo's specific tastes (Malcomess, 2007).

been properly represented at the Biennale.[13] Hassan and Oguibe (2001:65) offer their explanation for the under representation of African artists until now at the Venice Biennale:

> 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...speaks to reluctance, even unwillingness, on the part of curators to acknowledge African artists and their provenance as part of contemporary art...

Their exhibition, *Authentic/ex-centric* includes seven contemporary African artists, both those practicing on the continent and in the diaspora, who seek to engage with a variety of issues through conceptual art (Hassan & Oguibe, 2001).

The title of the exhibition, *Authentic/ex-centric* indicated a willingness to confront one of the most dubious trends surfacing in the engagement of Western centres with African art, namely the notion of 'authenticity'. In effect, the idea of 'authentic' has become a postcolonial expression for 'primitive'. In the words of the curators, works in the exhibition "...problematized such notions of originality and authenticity, and spoke back to them" (Hassan & Oguibe, 2001:64). As one of the first major exhibitions in a Western venue to contend with the subject of authenticity and to have these issues brought forward by African-born curators, *Authentic/ex-centric* offered a critical reconsideration of the way contemporary African art was being positioned in the West. The articulate vision of the curators ensured their purpose was clearly conveyed both through the art and the accompanying catalogue. This continued what Enwezor began with *In/sight*: Africans speaking for themselves about contemporary African art. This had the effect of adding a crucial dimension to the way contemporary African art was disseminated, one that derived not only from the construct of Western curators. The exhibition also began a trend of more public recognition of the importance of artists in the diaspora as active participants in what constituted contemporary African art.

[13]The one exception to this statement is Egypt, which established a pavilion in 1897 the second year of the Venice biennale and largely due to political and economic support by the country has been the one African country to maintain a pavilion ever since. South Africa has also been represented sporadically starting in the mid 1950s by artists such as Irma Stern and Cecil Skotnes. In 1956 the *First Quadrennial Exhibition of South African Art*, was held with subsequent ones in 1960 and 1964 (iziko, Museums of Cape Town, n.d:unnumbered page). However, even though there were South African artists represented, those selected were clearly chosen for the primitive characteristics evident in their paintings.

The following year a seminal exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor, *Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994,* arrived in the United States from Western Europe. The exhibition "...brought together art, photography, theatre, literature, film, music, textiles, and political propaganda spanning the continent and its diasporas to present what he [Enwezor] has referred to as an 'archive' of the independence period" (Van Dyke, 2002:unnumbered page). This exhibition was important for the variety of mediums it explored and the breadth of artists it displayed, as well as the angle from which the story was constructed. The venue for the exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art's adjunct exhibition space P.S. 1, was also a strong sign of support by a major American museum for Enwezor's curatorial vision and recognition of the legitimacy and relevance an African-born curator could offer. Regarding the conceptual framework of the exhibition, American journalist Kristina Van Dyke (2002:unnumbered page) writes:

> By examining the period of independence from the vantage point of African cultural processes as opposed to simply framing the exhibition around a neatly punctuated timeline of political history, Enwezor disrupted the notion that independence was a once-and-for-all status change uniformly experienced by all Africans.

Enwezor's success with *Short Century* along with that of Hassan and Oguibe's *Authentic/ex-centric* exhibition were signals to the Western art world of the possibilities that exist for future exhibitions of African art defined by African curatorial visions.

2.9 *Fiction of Authenticity: Authenticity and the Diaspora*

Following the *Short Century* exhibition in the United States, the city of St. Louis capitalised on the excitement generated by African art and inaugurated their new Contemporary Art Museum with the exhibition *Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad.* Curated by Shannon Fitzgerald from the Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis and Tumelo Mosaka from the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the travelling exhibition showcased the work of 11 African diaspora artists who through a variety of mediums depicted ideas surrounding "...identity, authenticity, home and displacement, in sometimes humorous, often devastating ways" (Cooper, 2003:unnumbered page). The American arts organisation, Fresh Arts Coalition (2006:unnumbered page), noted:

> The exhibition analyzes the construction of criteria surrounding the formulation of ideas about authenticity — within the African continent and abroad. It considers how such fictions have skewed the understanding and meaning of Africa in a global contemporary culture. All the artists in the exhibition have chosen to practice abroad, calling

> into question their Africanness as a fixed notion of identity. Instead they produce new histories composed of fractured geographies that embody ideas of multiplicity and hybridity. Their migration involves complex choices, forging relationships with places and cultures, and requiring a perpetual reassessment of self and practice within constantly fluctuating parameters.

What was recognised was that what constituted African art was not limited by the continent's borders, but necessitated the inclusion of artists who utilised the transparent, international space available. The *Fiction of Authenticity* exhibition was another step forward by Western curators and museums to address the difficulties associated with the appropriate display of contemporary African art and the ambiguous ideas surrounding Western demands for 'authenticity'. Institutions also realised the pivotal role artists in the diaspora play in formulating an image of contemporary African art in an evolving globalised space. This multifaceted, global terrain was characteristic of the international environment that existed pertaining to contemporary African art when Britain decided to launch its next foray into African arts.

2.10 Africa 05*: Politics and Culture Converge*

The year 2005 in Britain was both politically and culturally significant. First, the country hosted the G8 chairmanship and held the European Union presidency. The Blair government used these highly visible platforms to draw attention to Africa's aid and trade needs through the publication of the Africa Commission's report on ways to tackle poverty alleviation, boost public health, and make African trade more globally competitive.[14] Capitalising on Africa's unusually prominent place in the nation's consciousness, Britain's cultural establishment decided to hold another programme dedicated to the arts of the continent, entitled *Africa 05*. Like its predecessor *africa95, Africa 05* consisted of a series of exhibitions, conferences, workshops, and symposia that aimed to create a reconsideration of African arts and the diaspora by making permanent alterations in the British cultural fabric. At best, the programme hoped to facilitate the inclusion of African arts into the mainstream. As the programme's Director, Augustus Casely-Hayford states in the press release (Arts Council England, 2005:2):

> *Africa 05* is not just a series of exhibitions and events, it's a watershed moment in the development and promotion of African arts and culture in the UK. We are confident that the year [2005] will challenge many

[14] See http://www.commissionforafrica.org for more information on the Africa Commission, the full report and in-depth details.

> people's preconceptions about Africa and will place many African artists firmly within the UK and international arts scene.

The focal exhibition of the programme was *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, held at the Hayward Gallery, while numerous additional venues had accompanying exhibitions of mainly contemporary African art. While positive strides were made toward reorienting perspectives on contemporary African art in a less patronising manner than its predecessor, ultimately, *Africa 05* failed to break away from a focus on African artists' 'difference' and largely reinforced long-standing notions of Otherness. Oguibe (2004:xiv) notes, "At the turn of the twenty-first century, the truth remains that exoticism of the most pristine kind shadows Western perspectives on non-Western contemporanity.*"* Further investigation of this programme will comprise the second case study of this paper.

All of the aforementioned exhibitions serve to contextualise the time frame under investigation in this paper. They should not be viewed as a comprehensive list of every Western exhibition of African art that occurred between 1989 and 2005. Instead they are a selection of some of the more prominent shows that either focused on issues relevant to this paper or involved Britain. Ultimately, I believe that the importance of these exhibitions can be measured by the manner in which they frame African art practice and display in a Western centre and contributed to the discourses of the time period I investigate in the two case studies.

CHAPTER III: The *africa95* Programme

3.1 *Introduction*

In 1995, after three years of planning and organisation, Britain hosted an unprecedented programme, *africa95*. The hope was to create a more permanent and integrated role for African art in the cultural fabric of Britain. The *africa95* programme was built on a desire both to capitalise on the attention being directed towards the Royal Academy of Arts (RAA) exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* and to counter its historically driven conceptual premise. The initial idea was devised by Clémentine Deliss, Robert Loder and John Picton, who sought to orchestrate a programme of contemporary African art exhibitions that would serve as a response to the traditional exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* at the RAA. Through a series of exhibitions, conferences, workshops, and educational programmes, the organisers hoped to showcase and legitimate contemporary African art within Britain. While the broader programme had a contemporary focus, the traditional exhibition at the RAA was the impetus for the *africa95* programme. The British journalist Alan Riding (1995:unnumbered page) writes, "In the end, of course, it was the Royal Academy's avoidance of modern art that spawned Africa 95." From its inception, the *africa95* programme's structure was based on an oppositional framework, one that contradicted the historical exhibition at the RAA, which was based on 'traditional' and 'authentic' African art, with a larger programme, which aspired to be an "artist-led" interpretation of contemporary African arts. John Picton (1996:22) notes, "...*africa95* was unprecedented in the cultural life of Great Britain, in drawing attention to the contemporary visual and performance arts of Africa, and it had its origins in the need to contextualize the exhibition proposed by the Royal Academy of Arts." In a review of the *africa95* programme Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) described the context:

> Aimed at the professionals that make up the cadres of the academy, popular journalists and a general public largely ignorant of the 'true' story of Africa, the festival saw its role as helping to shape debate on issues of artistic practice coming out of Africa and to examine the wide dimensions and dynamism of the African experience, particularly in the 20th century.

The *africa95* programme was based upon the idea of altering the position of African art in contemporary British culture through showcasing the art and educating previously unaware Western audiences. While admirable the programme unfortunately had a negligible long-term impact on shaping the debates around contemporary African art, or in fostering a lasting repositioning of African art in Britain.

The creators of *africa95* envisioned a programme that would remedy the lack of contemporary African art in the RAA's exhibition and increase the profile of contemporary African art through exhibitions in mainstream British cultural institutions. Riding (1995:unnumbered page) summarised the aim of *africa95* as "...both simple and ambitious: to find a permanent place for African creativity in the traditionally closed worlds of British and European culture." The President of the Royal Academy of Arts, Sir Philip Dowson (1995:8) noted that the intent of the RAA exhibition was to educate a Western public largely unfamiliar with African art with "...a bold, synoptic survey of the visual culture of Africa stretching back in time to the very beginnings of artistic endeavour and geographically over the entire continent." This highly ambitious effort was combined with additional exhibitions, which aimed to be the venues where African artists would act as educators and translators of their own work, and offer the contemporary component to the programme. Co-founder and artistic director of *africa95*, Deliss (1995:16), describes these sites as offering an, "...'artist-led' approach, which became...the lead characteristic of *africa95*..." [15]

Exhibitions of contemporary African arts were essential because through the RAA's omission of contemporary African art, the Museum was claiming that nothing of relevance had been created by contemporary African artists. While the RAA exhibition stated it was showcasing the breadth of African arts, it did so only through the early Twentieth Century. This left audiences with an inevitable sense that only by looking to the past was it possible to experience 'true' African art.
The greater problem that then arose through the broader *africa95* programme, was that it was unable to reposition either contemporary or traditional African arts in Britain. Ultimately, the programme as a whole perpetuated stereotypes and a

[15] In her doctoral thesis, Rachel Lucy Bardhan (2000) gives some insight into elements of the *africa95* programme. She investigated firsthand *africa95*, and how it evolved. While her primary focus was the Pamoja International Sculpture Workshop that was a component of *africa95*, she did extensive research into the actual planning behind the entire programme. Unable to have seen or participated in this programme myself, Bardhan's work provides an invaluable look at the machinations that occurred during *africa95*'s organisation. Bardhan contended that instead of *africa95* being a promotion of cross-cultural awareness of contemporary African art that utilised contemporary theory, it was instead a case where artists were left feeling misunderstood and misrepresented as outsiders. According to Bardhan, artists were 'spoken for' by curators and academics who attempted to theoretically position and justify the art, which resulted in interpretations that differed from those of the artists themselves. This was in direct conflict with one of the stated goals of *africa95*, which was that artists should be involved in the presentation of and speak about their own work The result was that many artists left the programme disenchanted and feeling that they were once again being homogenised into a Western dominated international art world. For further reading consult: Bardhan, Rachel Lucy. 2000. *"It's rude to interrupt when someone is speaking" africa95 and the Pamoja International Sculpture Workshop*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, London, England.

Eurocentric, neo-colonial view of Africa and its artists, as artists were segregated, isolated by their difference, which was simultaneously their most valued asset. Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) describes the limited ability of *africa95* to shape debates or accurately portray the dynamics of 20th century African art, arguing, "The grand selling point of the season foreshadowed the relative scarcity of any sustained interest in Africa that does not privilege its marginality." Marginalisation and isolation of the African artists were the result of a variety of circumstances both in the RAA's exhibition and the greater *africa95* programme. One factor was the use of an authoritative language by curators and organisers to effectively 'dominate' the African art and separate it from its Western counterparts. Another factor was the perpetuation of an ingrained British sociological psyche that operated on the creation of a binary opposition of a self versus an Other. This resulted in an essentialisation of the African artists' difference. Enwezor (1996), in his article on *africa95,* discusses the necessity of difference for the West and references the work of Edward Said who described the fictive space created by the West in order to create the relationship of self versus Other. Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) writes:

> Said argues in his book *Orientalism* that the Orient is not only a career but an invention and locality of western desire, and to be effective, such a conceptualisation of Africa has to be projected onto the binary logic of the 'self' made more potent through the emphasis of the 'other's' limitations.

This philosophy was more evident in the traditional display of African arts exhibited in the RAA show *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, but was also visible in the greater *africa95* programme.

3.2 *The British Psyche: Keys to Neo-Colonial Mentality*

Relevant to any discussion of the implications of *africa95* and its related exhibitions is a consideration of manifestations of a neo-colonial mentality towards Africa that predominates in Britain, particularly amongst some curators, gallerists, critics and journalists. The quest for a self-identity has long characterised British thinking and has resulted in the binary logic of a mentality of self versus Other. Current attitudes stem from British idealism of the late 19th century, which was built upon aspects of Kantian and Hegelian idealism and which ultimately developed into analytic philosophy. The British Idealists of the late 19th century, led by a group of Oxford educated individuals, Thomas Hill Green, Edward Caird and Bernard Bosanquet, took a critical approach to the restrictive parameters of the dogma of the Church of England, and influenced heavily by the work of Kant and Hegel, introduced the

philosophical elements that evolved into analytic philosophy (Sweet, [1997] 2008; Tyler, [2003] 2006). Today analytic philosophy dictates much of the way Western centres transcribe culture and underpins the epistemological constructs of Britain. The basic concept of analytic philosophy is the deconstruction of an idea in order to thoroughly analyse its tenets and render a truer understanding. In describing English philosophers of the early twentieth century, William Ritchie Sorley (1920:301) writes:

> Comprehensiveness rather than system marked the attitude...They did not easily unite into schools of thought; they were too careless sometimes of logical technique; each was apt to look from his own angle of vision; but all were intent upon arriving at some understanding of the position of the individual self in the universe.

This comprehension of a quest for an understanding of self is crucial when attempting to chart the relationship of the British with their Others, those outside themselves who serve to formulate their sense of self. The search for a definition of self is at the core of constructed relationships between the British and outsiders, for example, the African artists involved with *africa95*.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) discusses the necessity of Otherness and the implications in terms of Western critical theory of the creative product of Others. While Bhabha's description relates to novels and the West's engagement with the Other, his articulation of the phenomenon is equally relevant to the visual arts. He discusses how, when knowledge has "...opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness must be found to contain the effects of difference" (Bhabha, 1994:45). Difference must exist for a security of self, but difference must also be contained within strict parameters. In regard to *africa95*, the museums and galleries acted as the formal sites that contained and displayed difference in a secure, bound environment. Bhabha (1994:45-46) iterates further on difference when he writes, "In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to foreclose on the Other; difference and otherness thus become the fantasy of a certain cultural space..." The museum environment offered an ideal space to create this fantasised reality.

This lack of a cohesive national identity originating from an uncertainty of self was a primary reason for Britain's default to a hegemonic, neo-colonial stance when referring to individuals from outside themselves. Mercer (1994) describes how beginning with world events of the 1980s and early 1990s such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Britain

discovered 'hidden' endemics of British society that focused on questions of ethnicity and British identity. He argues:

> ...it is in relation to such global forces of dislocation in the world system as a whole, that Britain too has been massively reconfigured as a local, even parochial, site in which questions of "race," nation and ethnicity have brought us to the point where "the possibility and necessity of creating a new culture" (Gramsci, 1971:276) – that is, new identities – is slowly being recognised as *the* democratic task of our time (Mercer, 1994:3).

Gavin Jantjes (2000:267) argues that in Britain global circumstances have "...institutionalised a binary system of oppositional or antagonized representation which inevitably accepted the dominant Western/Eurocentric position dictating the nature and terms of its relationship with otherness." The hegemonic character of Britain is a historical creation that Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall refer to with regard to political events of the early 1980s. They contend, "...the work of hegemony is itself the process of iteration and differentiation. It depends on the production of alternative or antagonistic images that are always produced side by side and in competition with each other..." (Bhabha, 1994:43). The dissolution of boundaries as a result of globalisation and the expansion of the European Union additionally contributed to the British struggle to determine a specific definition of self (Jantjes, 2000). "The aphorism that any definition of the self must include a definition of the 'other' is an explosive subtext to Europe's concerns with its newness" (Jantjes, 2000:265).

The social anthropologist Anthony Cohen (1994) has done extensive work on the historical struggles that Britain has had with the idea of self and self as independent from political constructs. Cohen (1994:175) describes the issue in the late 20th century when he refers to the work of Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul*, (1990) writing:

> Rose argued that the celebration of the self in the late twentieth century masked the extent to which selfhood was shaped by the dominant political and economic institutions of contemporary society. The vested interests of corporate power masqueraded as the interests of the self. The loss of real personal autonomy was hidden by the indulgence of subjectivity. As indicated by the rash of personal therapies, self-ness was fetishised in an apparent obsession with personal identity.[16]

[16] For further reading consult Anthony P. Cohen's *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), particularly chapter 7 '*I*ndividualism, individuality, selfhood: Conservatism and English individualism: a polemic', pages 171-176.

These engrained theoretical contexts are fundamental to the construct of Britain's engagement in the 20th and 21st centuries with Africa and African art as a result of how the British approach the concepts and ideas of an Other and Otherness.

3.3 *British Socio-Political Landscape: Politics and Persuasion*

Major ideological shifts in British politics have also been a predominant feature in the nation's sociological landscape over the past three decades. During the 1980s Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party government presided over a significant change in public attitudes. This was away from the pessimism that had gripped the nation during much of the 1970s, when the nation's economy was faltering and living standards remained static. The change was towards a more muscular sense of Britishness fostered by Thatcher's hawkish foreign policy and a controversial, yet largely successful recovery in the country's economic fortunes. However, the Conservative Party's hold on power teetered in the early 1990s as the country battled renewed recession and a string of scandals involving senior Conservative politicians, which destroyed public confidence in the John Major government that replaced Thatcher's in 1990. The decline of Thatcherite conservativism was sealed in 1997 with the election as Prime Minster of Labour leader Tony Blair, who, under the banner of 'new Labour' led a party that had little in common with the last Labour government of the late 1970s. The socially conservative foundations of Thatcherite conservatism gave way to the Blair-championed concept of 'Cool Britannia', which was personified by music groups like Oasis and Blur and artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. These British musicians and artists received their designation as 'cool' based upon their commercial success and a visibility and profile that were largely self-generated. They were their own best champions and yet they found a receptive British public who embraced the artists' flamboyance and egos. A transition occurred from a Thatcherite population, where *"*...divisive rather than solidary forms of identification are the rule, resulting in undecidabilities and aporia of political judgement" (Bhabha, 1994:42), into a more liberal social and political environment.

Britain's changing political economy was presaged by cultural indicators such as the Young British Artists, (YBAs), which included Hirst and Emin, who personified a spirit of entrepreneurial creativity and a new level of freedom of expression. The result was a revitalised patriotism among young public personas distinct from flag-waving politicians and a reinvigorated sense of self-worth for the country. This cultural undercurrent quickly became mainstream with musicians and artists appearing at Labour party functions and the media promoting a perceived artistic and political

resurgence with hyperbolic coverage such as *Vanity Fair's* March 1997 cover story "London Swings! Again!", which included a cover photo of the British pop group Oasis front-man Liam Gallagher and his then wife Patsy Kensit in bed beneath a Union Jack duvet (Kamp, 1997:unnumbered page). However, this glossy reawakening to the nation's artistic strengths did not lead to a reconsideration of individuals and artistic practice from outside the Anglo-centric core.

3.4 *The Location of African Art in Britain: Literal and Figurative*

At the time of *africa95* the primary collection of African art and artefacts that were owned or held by Britain were displayed at the ethnographic Museum of Mankind.[17] An extension of the British Museum, this collection of African art was reincorporated into the Museum's newly created Sainsbury African Galleries in 1998. However, this would not impact the *africa95* programme. Following the opening of the Sainsbury African Galleries, African art experienced both a literal and figurative transition from being seen as ethnographic artefacts, many of which were gathered during Britain's long colonial involvement with Africa, into objects of fine art. This facilitated the beginning foundations for an alteration in the perception of African art's status in a key British institution. Three of the conceptual architects of the new Galleries, Chris Spring, Nigel Barley and Julie Hudson (2001:18), write in *African Arts*:

> The move is an important one for the whole British Museum community. It not only recontextualizes African material by moving it from a self-contained ethnographic institution into one that features major collections from the classical world, it also changes the museum into something notably less Western focused and more global both in scope and vision. It involves, then, a major shift in the way the institution sees itself and its role...we had made the decision to begin the exhibition in the present rather than the distant (Olduvai Gorge) or not so distant (iconic pieces from the canon) past.

However, even the foundations laid regarding a repositioning of African art struggled to find a solid foothold as recently as the *Africa 05* exhibition. As for the purposes of the *africa95* programme, African art was presented primarily as an extension of ethnographic documentation and colonial history rather than as a thriving body of work from a continent with a variety of styles, influences and individuals.

[17] Another interesting peculiarity regarding the *Africa* exhibition was the fact that despite choosing to host the first significant show of African art in Britain, the RAA did not maintain a collection of African art in its own repository. The exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, was the brainchild of the Royal Academy's Exhibitions Secretary Norman Rosenthal, and it was a result of his relationship with the RAA that the institution chose to hold the show.

3.5 Africa: The Art of a Continent*: Fiction and Fantasy*

It was during the period of Cool Britannia, and a renewed self-assuredness in Britain that *africa95* was staged. *Africa: The Art of a Continent* was a pinnacle exhibition for the Royal Academy of Arts, and due to the timing of its display, by default, it also became the focal exhibition of the broader *africa95* programme. Following in the footsteps of other grand Western narratives of African art, such as Jean-Hubert Martin's *Magiciens de la Terre*, or Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores*, the Royal Academy of Arts attempted to again exhibit in an omnibus format the highly contested subject of African art. This follows a cycle of large scale exhibitions of African art where despite previous criticisms, curators engage with a subject hoping to make their mark on the cultural scene while being immune to criticisms because an exhibition is not meant to be the final say on a subject. As Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (1997:10) puts it, "This cycle produces curators who use exhibition assignments as a base for disseminating questionable ideas and yet are unwilling to take responsibility for their intellectual positions." The RAA's exhibition was created by the Exhibitions Secretary Norman Rosenthal, and the curator Tom Phillips, who followed in this path and devised an anthropological picture of African art predicated on the intrinsic 'authority' of a Western cultural institution and curator, who subjectively focused only on traditional African art. By discounting contemporary African art, the Museum emphasised the traditional or primitive as key factors for what constitutes 'authentic' African art. This was coupled with an authoritative language utilised in both the exhibition and accompanying catalogue and by the media.

The exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, as demonstrated in its title and the works displayed, presented a notably colonially-devised, anthropological rendering of Africa as a voyeuristic space to be explored. The title alone positioned the entire continent as a singular entity that could be accurately displayed through one exhibition, a highly ambitious proposition considering the breadth of African artists. The African art displayed relied primarily on the sculptural form and some jewellery to suffice for what constituted African art. 'Iconic' examples in the form of Kenyan shields, masks from Tanzania and Mali, and Nigerian Yoruba sculptures were relied upon to demonstrate the 'purity' of a Western perceived form of 'authentic' African art. The consequence was a continued positioning of a primitive and traditional version of Africa as the only legitimate and authentic view. The premise for the conceptualisation of an exhibition limited in this calibre is described by Hassan (1999:215) who faults the predominance in African art studies of the late 20th century for relying upon a "one tribe/one style paradigm." Hassan (1999:215) reflects:

> It is due to this approach that African art, mostly presented as traditional masks and wooden sculpted figures, has been perceived as a product of a universal, unchanging 'tribal' essence and communal sensibility within which the creative individual remains largely anonymous and unimportant.

The idea of an exhibition based upon traditional work is not surprising when reflecting on Norman Rosenthal's original idea for the show. As the Exhibitions Secretary at the RAA, he had initially hoped to compile a body of work from international public and private collections that was 'tribal' and 'primitive' (Bardhan, 2000). It was only after a conversation with John Picton, who expressed concerns over an exhibition premised on tribal art, when Rosenthal re-evaluated the exhibition's objectives and restructured his concept (Bardhan, 2000). However, the exhibition maintained to a considerable degree Rosenthal's originally narrow focus, even while the promotional material promised a broad look at Africa's artistic output. In the catalogue Cornel West (1995:9) writes:

> Never before has there been gathered such a rich and vast array of African art-objects and artefacts from such a broad timespan...Gone are the old intellectual frameworks predicated on crude white supremacy and subtle Eurocentrism. The once popular categories of 'barbarism', primitivism' and 'exoticism' have been cast by academic wayside. The homogeneous definitions and monolithic formulations of 'African art' has been shattered. The Whiggish historiographical paradigms of cultural 'evolution' and political 'modernisation' have been discredited.

Despite West's praise for the objectives of the *Africa* exhibition, in reality the show struggled to escape the "monolithic, Eurocentric" presentation of African art that Cornel West critiqued. David Richards (1996:141) describes this problem with the RAA exhibition:

> The 'monumental' and 'unprecedented' nature of the exhibition was not only its singular glory but also its significant problem: the geographical arrangement cut across historical time and there was...little sense of how two adjacent artefacts from different cultures, perhaps from different millennia, could be made to correspond.

It is difficult to accept that the adjectives of primitive and tribal were not guiding principles when a conscious decision was made by the organisers to omit twentieth century art. The contemporary was invalidated through its absence as the Western notion of authenticity being equated with pre-colonial art was enforced. Curator Tom Phillips (1995:11) wrote in the catalogue, "In terms of space and time and largeness of imagination the Royal Academy' s present exhibition tries to live in the grace of that idea of a new era for Africa and a new unity for the continent", yet the work displayed did little to pay homage to this objective. John Picton (1996:22)

acknowledges this fact when he comments, “Neither the development of new traditions of art nor the sometimes radical transformation of inherited traditions found a place in ‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’.” By avoiding the contentious area of contemporary African art, the RAA was instructing viewers that little of relevance existed in the present. The RAA’s survey of significant African art from the beginning of time actually had a very specific end, which appeared to be the early twentieth century.

A few works included in the exhibition were labelled as created in the early 20th century; however, the work was clearly selected only if it appeared to originate in a ‘traditional’ African context. Two examples from the Southern African portion of the exhibition were the Engraved ostrich eggshell flask from the early 20th century and the Zimbabwean head rests from the 19th-20th century. These pieces maintained a historical, thus ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’, appearance for the RAA’s curator and audiences. John Picton (1996:22) writes, “...the Academy was willing to show twentieth-century material only if it was representative of traditions inherited from the past.” Ironically though, these precise examples continue to be popular forms of African art, commodified curios readily available as souvenirs of Africa and produced by contemporary artists. I assume the RAA did not intend for audiences to connect these images with the contemporary but to see them in an historical, anthropological light. The irony is that when an object is rendered as ‘tourist art’, it becomes a form of art quite readily dismissed by the Western art establishment. The form of a mass produced object devoid of a distinct creator or artist, is contradictory to the purity of an ‘original’ piece of art. Kasfir (1992:47) argues, “Of all the varieties of African art that trigger the distaste of connoisseurs and subvert the issue of authenticity, surely so-called tourist art is the worst-case scenario.” While the inclusion of the ostrich eggshell flasks and the headrests may have been meant to reflect the past, the works actually partook of the present and in that process partially subverted the intent of the curators. These particular works negated the RAA’s intention to show work that was reflective of an ‘authentic’ and ‘original’ African art, and were actually examples of works that became popularised, commercial products in contemporary markets.

Western curators must contend with many issues when displaying African art that confounds standard Western expectations. From the issues of traditional work that has become reconfigured into popularised and commercial tourist art, to the issue of repetitive imagery, which may occur throughout the work of multiple artists work,

leaving the art of various artists indistinguishable. While Western artists pride themselves on originality and discovering unique and distinct styles, in many African cultures repetitive imagery is considered a strength and is necessary in the creation of respectable work. The American curator Susan Vogel (1991:20) notes, “An African work of art is never seen as a culminating statement, is never definitive; the model is never exhausted or perfected, and therefore does not have to be discarded.” This principal only reinforces the oxymoronic Western ideal of African art, where originality is prized over imitation, but only as long as the original adheres to the expected and accepted notions of African imagery. The uncertainty of how to engage with repetitive imagery, which often includes the assimilation of Western techniques, and in turn invalidates the authentic nature of African art for Western curators, may have been part of the reason for omitting contemporary African art from the RAA’s exhibition. Hassan (1999:216) writes that neglect of the contemporary “...has been primarily caused by the widespread misconception that contemporary African culture is a distorted copy, a mere imitation, of Western culture, and therefore lacks authenticity. Contact with Western culture is seen as a source of the decay and, indeed, the extinction, of Africa’s great traditional arts.” The idea that a contemporary artist is consciously repeating historical images, but embedded with a new set of codes, leaves the work in an untranslatable space for Western curators. By ceasing to negotiate beyond the twentieth century, the RAA could thus remain in a comfortable domain of postcolonial authority. In a scenario similar to that described by the German theorists and philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the RAA has utilised enlightenment as a mode of domination, where culture became an industry and democracy a form of manipulation that resulted in social domination (Kellner, [2005] 2007).

The social domination of another culture through the translation of that culture’s creative output – even when that translation was inaccurate as in the example of the ostrich eggshell flasks and the headrests – returns us to the concept of cultural difference and its relation to domination. Bhabha (1994:51) writes, “The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation.” Through a domination of the African art displayed in the *Africa* exhibition, difference was assured as the overarching logic. The RAA provides a clear example of the West’s insistence on difference as the defining feature for African art, as Oguibe (2004) describes.

With the exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, the RAA found itself playing "the culture game", a common practice within museums as Oguibe (2004:xii) describes:

> There is the systemic, structural level where it [the culture game] is methodically implemented and perpetuated by contemporary art institutions through acquisitions, programming, criticism, and general discourse. On this level the game may take the form of minimal exhibition allocations for art that comes from a particular provenance or constituency. Such slots, it appears, are rationed over ten-year periods, and because the opportunity to display is so rare, it becomes the tendency to seek to remedy the situation by consigning all such work to humongous, inchoate, and badly conceived group or period exhibitions, after which heroic gestures institutions return to their regular, clinical programming, satisfied that they have paid their dues.

Thus choosing to mount *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, may not have been reflective of a dramatic shift in the perception of a Western institution. More likely it was merely an example of what Hassan (1999:217) notes was a characteristic occurrence of the mid 1990s, namely "...a return of Western grand narratives in the guise of asserting 'cultural difference', evidenced in the ideology of neo-conservatism and reactionary Western practices."

From the outset, the title of the exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, presented Africa as a singularly digestible entity devoid of individuality for its countries or artists. The idea of Africa as a unified community is a Western notion. The Director of the Royal African Society in London, Richard Dowden (quoted in Bardhan, 2000:91) writes:

> African is not a colour or race, and certainly not a culture...It would never have occurred to most Africans in their long history to think that they belonged to a larger human group defined by a shared relationship to the African continent. Africa...is an invention of outsiders.

If Africans themselves rarely feel a part of a continental whole, it is difficult to imagine how *Africa: The Art of a Continent* could expect to showcase the myriad forms of art that exist on the continent without ignoring the many differences in Africa's artistic styles and influences and perpetuating cultural stereotypes of the continent. David Richards(1996:142) comments:

> 'Africa: The Art of a Continent' conforms to that modernist view of African art. It is emptied of autonomous content, and Africans themselves are excised from the picture – or reduced in significance to anonymous, 'primal', primary and unknowing contributors of source materials. In this scenario, the notion of a self-conscious African artist is excised: the African artist lacks that self-consciousness which the European modernist has in abundance. Without this kind of self-consciousness, Africans are bereft of the possibility to represent

> themselves to themselves, or to others. They exist only as past, pagan and primitive: the anonymous and unaware commodity of modernism but who themselves lack modernity.

The fault of positioning the cultural product of Africa under one umbrella extended beyond the Africa exhibition through to the entire *africa95* programme. In Enwezor's (1996:unnumbered page) critique, "The organisers'...mistake, symptomatic of most approaches to Africa, was to treat a complex land mass such as Africa as a monolithic structure – in other words like a country."

When considering the art included in the exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, the focus was upon the object to represent the practice of African artists. While this may have introduced an aesthetic element to the fetishised domain of African art it still failed to shift the work from being seen as possessing an exotic quality and providing material evidence of an exploratory nature into purely a work of art. Geeta Kapur (1994:43) describes how "[i]ndeed, today's curators may act a little like old-style amateur ethnographers foraging around the world for trophies." The exhibition became a collection of 'curiosities' attributed to an Other that originated far beyond European shores. After preliminary discussions and planning sessions with the American curator Susan Vogel did not materialise, the project was given to the artist and RAA employee Tom Phillips (Phillips, 1996). This is significant because it reflects how entirely insular the exhibition was without a mediating influence of a curator from outside the museum. From this point onwards every aspect of the exhibition was contained within the institutional space of the RAA. In his planning of the exhibition, Phillips did rely on the guidance of Africanists John Picton, Clémentine Deliss and Robert Loder. However, independently Phillips accepted the subjective right to create a survey of the artistic history of Africa while negating the legitimacy of the contemporary. The problem was a failure on a critical level to acknowledge and provide an explanation for the omission of contemporary African art. African art was again bound by an attempt to represent its 'timeless past', which implied that work of any significance was only created prior to colonialism, and that anything after that point was tainted matter, influenced by the West and not representative of a pure and truthful African artistic practice (Kasfir, 1992). Under Rosenthal, Phillips was in a position of power to act as "*author* –ity*"* (Oguibe, 2004:13). The academics Spencer Crew and James Sims (1991:163) best describe the relationship between the curator and the objects in the exhibition when they state that "[a]uthenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do. It is people on the exhibition team who must make a judgement[...]."

Those in positions of power such as Phillips needed to wield their strength with even greater caution when working with artefacts and artists who are either unknown or unacknowledged. The objects exist in an ambiguous space where they are manipulated to suit the objectives of museum curators and exhibition architects. In the exhibition *Africa,* the identities and interpretations of the objects were established by the curatorial staff, outsiders who were able to speak for and translate the work. Kasfir (1992:42) describes the predicament:

> Canonical African art – that which is collected and displayed and hence authenticated and valorized as "African art" – was and is only produced under conditions that ought to preclude the very act of collecting. Seen from an anticolonial ideological perspective, collecting African art is a hegemonic activity, an act of appropriation; seen historically, it is a largely colonial enterprise; and seen anthropologically, it is the logical outcome of a social-evolutionary view of Other: the collecting of specimens as a corollary of 'discovery'.

Artefacts became ethnographic material, malleable for the purposes of this exhibition, created by a single institution where the artists were largely unknown.

Compounded with the reliance on anonymous artists, was a focus on the sculptural form to represent the 'art' of Africa. The work displayed in *Africa: The Art of a Continent* was a selection of 800 or so objects divided into seven areas defined by lines of latitude and longitude (Phillips, 1995). Hoping to avoid the inevitable controversy that comes when discussing Africa's administrative boundaries as set by colonial authorities, the continent was instead positioned as a ride, something to be experienced in a particular direction (clockwise actually) as though through this abbreviated journey audiences would receive a succinct version of the entirety of African art – at least up to the twentieth century. In a review of the exhibition, the American academic Roy Sieber (1996:72) noted how the objects became decontextualised as they were "...shown without addressing their historical, cultural, or, indeed, aesthetic connections." The writer and curator Olabisi Silva (1998:16) notes that "[a]n exhibition of this nature and scale cannot divert the debates around ownership and the return of patrimony, issues of provenance and accusations of cultural colonialism." Most of the work included was three dimensional sculpture, perpetuating the stereotype that African art is primarily the sculpted form. As Hassan (1994:215) believes:

> "...students of African art have focused primarily on the sculpted form and its aesthetic appeal, neglecting other forms...In other words, not only have scholars of African art primarily focused on the sculpted

> forms of limited regions, but they have egregiously neglected the contemporary experience in African art."

There were a few textiles and mosaics included in the exhibition, but with the exception of some illuminated manuscripts from northern Africa, two dimensional works were entirely absent. Oguibe (1996) critiques Phillips' failure to include more two dimensional pieces and his translation of African art. He writes:

> Phillips's definition of art also proved to be quite primitive, equating it as it does with objects, which is why there are Paleolithic stone tools and hardly any painting...Incidentally, this skewed frame is in place not so much for its validity as for its efficacy in that other scheme of reiterating, as Picton quite aptly puts it, slipshod notions of an "authentic" African art, outside of which then fall all visual production in the modern idiom (Oguibe, 1996:15).

A skewed perspective was partially created through the lack of loans directly from Africa. The organisers of the *Africa* exhibition seemed to find little utility in turning to private collections and museums in Africa when it came to selecting the content of the exhibition. The work was largely comprised of loans from private and public collections in the West where pieces may have resided since the colonial era. To his credit, Phillips himself acknowledged that the art on display often came to Europe decades before. The art certainly arrived in Europe long before the increased creative output that accompanied the anti-colonial struggle, the heady days of post-liberation, or the more recent creations by African artists focused on their disappointment with the continent's socio-economic malaise. Phillips (1995:25) notes that "[m]any of these objects come from European collections, and were assembled as curiosities or as puzzles or as scientific data[...][b]ut they have rarely lived at the heart of our aesthetic consciousness; and when they have, it has often been with astonishing condescension."

Phillips described the predicament for African art, but then the exhibition he created only continued the condescension. The art displayed was little more than ethnographic evidence of colonialism and the expropriation of art from the continent. Oguibe (1996:14) comments on the oversight of loans from Africa when he states that "...private collections become the predominant source of objects. War 'trophies' and pieces of questionable source and circumstance begin to make their appearance." This comment also alluded to the fact that not only did the work exhibited originate from Western collections, but there were also concerns regarding the provenance of particular pieces. John Picton (1996:23) refers to this issue and the fact that "[t]here was a particular problem concerning illegally excavated material

from Mali and Nigeria." While Oguibe and Picton were critical of the suspect provenance of particular pieces in the show, these uncertainties and scepticisms did not translate to works being removed from the exhibition by the RAA or acknowledgment of the potential suspect works by the museum.

The history being reconstructed in the *Africa* exhibition, through the reliance on loans from outside Africa, resulted in a blanket assumption that nothing had been left in Africa to merit inclusion in the exhibition. For the audiences, it would be difficult to avoid coming to the conclusion that everything of value in the canon of African art resided in the West, regardless if it was initially acquired in an unscrupulous fashion, and that Western curators were those best placed to comment on the aesthetic and historical relevance of Africa's artistic output. Under these circumstances the works on display became Marxian "commodities of fetishism," articulating an epitomised exoticism (Zuidervaart, 2003:unnumbered page). Phillips and others involved in this project asserted a certainty of judgement in both the art selected and how it was interpreted, which reflected their self-assured 'authority'. Thomas McEvilley (1991) has researched the postcolonial scenario that is a result of colonisers who assumed a hegemonic position towards the cultural product of a colony. McEvilley (1991) utilises Kant's espousal of the three faculties of the cognitive, the ethical and the aesthetic as a form of the senses, to explicate the authority to which colonial suppressors were made to believe their value judgements were irrefutable. He describes the manner of thinking that prevailed. "In order to assure that European culture was superior to those it conquered, and that it thus had not only the right but the responsibility of conquering them, it was necessary to argue that European judgments were superior to those of other cultures" (McEvilley, 1991:272). Phillips seems to engage with a similarly proprietary attitude with regard to African art that was selected and the manner in which it was displayed in the exhibition. As McEvilley (1991:272) notes, "A part of the epistemology that sustained economic imperialism was the assumption that Western modes of representing, both visual and other, were superior, that is, more objective or true to nature, than those of non-Western cultures." This assumption was replicated in the spatial domain of the museum, in this case the Royal Academy of Arts, and it relegated the African art to a historical reading that ensured the 'power' of the Western, cultural 'authorities.' The particularities of the *Africa* exhibition's organisation gave further credence to the concept established by Mosquera (2001) of Africa as a "curated culture."

3.6 *'Contemporary'* africa95: *Contradicting the Traditional*

Contrasted with the Royal Academy of Arts' *Africa: The Art of a Continent* exhibition during *africa95* were exhibitions of contemporary African art largely concentrated around London. There were two primary contemporary exhibitions: the Whitechapel Art Gallery's *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*, and the Serpentine Gallery's *Big City*. Both of these exhibitions attempted to correct what they perceived to be the RAA's glaring omission of contemporary African art. Yet they did so while continuing a narrative of essentialising the binary relationship of self versus Other. A prime example of this necessary relationship was offered by the authoritative language used to describe the criteria for the key exhibition of contemporary African art, *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Deliss (1995:13), who had the dual position of artistic director of *africa95* and the principal organiser of the Whitechapel exhibition, explained that *Seven Stories* intended "...to provide a series of personal interpretations, by artists and historians from Africa, or specific movements or connections which have significantly qualified twentieth-century modern art in Africa..." (1995:13). Ogbechie (1997:10) takes issue with Deliss' comments because they "[postulate] 'personal interpretation' as a viable approach to questions of art and cultural history while resituating contemporary African art in a third-worldly, primitivist context where 'stories' (as oral traditions) become the basis of knowledge about its tendencies and contexts of practice." Deliss' comments reflected a belief that by allowing African artists to speak for themselves (because African artists had to be given the right), their narrations would have to explain why they warranted exhibition (i.e. the art or artists must show how they affected or personified 20th century African art). From the beginning of the project, the artists included were asked to present their "credentials" (Mosquera, 2001) and the logic of an oppositional idea of difference was instituted.

The other main contemporary exhibition was *Big City*, curated by André Magnin, which was another example of Magnin and the private collector Jean Pigozzi claiming that contemporary African art was best represented by a small group of untrained artists from the sub-continent. The exhibition showcased the power and influence of Western curators and private collectors in defining contemporary African art. This process began with earlier exhibitions held in London titled *Africa Today* (1993) and *Out of Africa* (1992), both of which were drawn from Pigozzi's collection. As Kasfir (1999:136) notes, a situation prevailed all too frequently in exhibitions of African art in the late twentieth century where publics were being instructed by exhibitions in which"...'autodidacts' are privileged over formally trained artists, women

artists are nearly invisible, and with the exception of South Africa (which has its own corps of curators and critics), the Anglophone countries are severely underrepresented relative to their artistic importance." In a comparison between *Big City* and *Seven Stories*, the Whitechapel's exhibition can at least be applauded for its more concerted effort to have a wide variety of artists that included formally trained, self-taught, and women artists, originating from countries as diverse as Sudan, South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Senegal, Kenya and Uganda. However, both exhibitions struggled to provide an exhibition or display of contemporary African art that was not structured either on Western curatorial preconceptions for what constitutes legitimate artistic practice, as in the Whitechapel case, or be driven by a singular, voyeuristic vision, which relied on a mould of untrained artists, as in the *Big City* exhibition.

The additional exhibitions in *africa95* equally struggled to engage with contemporary African art without appropriating the work. As Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) notes:

> Implicit in [*africa95*'s] mission is the musty aura of egalitarianism, of equal partnership between the organisers and African artists, curators and scholars. But the evidence revealed otherwise. What seemed lost in all the euphoria was the fact that the encounter between Africa and the West often revolves around the discourse of power – the fraught relations between the dominator and the dominated. And nowhere is this made more glaringly valid than in the historicisation of, and debate around, the contemporary cultural production of Africa.

As soon as some of *africa95*'s key organisers such as Clémentine Deliss, John Picton and Robert Loder realised the necessity for a contemporary component to "contextualise," as Picton put it the RAA exhibition; the Whitechapel Art Gallery became involved as the primary contemporary institution guiding the construction of a response to the omission of contemporary art in the RAA exhibition. Rachel Lucy Bardhan (2000:61) quotes the Whitechapel's Exhibition Officer Felicity Lunn as saying, "The Royal Academy of arts [sic] is the historical exhibition and the Whitechapel's exhibition is the major contemporary exhibition. Which exhibition is the most important is a matter of opinion. The Royal Academy would probably say theirs is" (2000:61). Bardhan indicates a sarcastic tone to Lunn's comments and describes the animosity that seemed to exist from the initial stages of the *africa95* programme between the RAA and the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Indeed Bardhan encountered a very secretive and elusive attitude of the *africa95* organisers when she sought information on the planning stages of the programme. She (2000:50) attributes this partially to a "...burden of representation in the sense that this single event would

have to stand for the totality of everything that would conceivably fall within the category of art produced by 'African artists and artists of African descent.'" Furthermore there was great anxiety on the editorial level of *africa95* regarding the presentation of African culture by a disproportionately large group of Westerners. Bardhan (2000:49) contends:

> ...despite its aim to represent African artists' point of view the project was being created by non-Africans, particularly within a climate where the prevailing view was that westerners should not be determining how non-westerners are presented. For this reason, there was an attempt to enrol into the project, people who were living and working in Britain and who were of African origin.

Ironically though, one of the primary critiques of the *africa95* programme in general was the lack of artists from the diaspora. Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) writes, "...the fatal mistake of the organisers of africa95 was to assume that the history of 20th century Africa could be sufficiently represented only by those living in the continent today."

On closer scrutiny it becomes evident how the organisers of *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery were unable to avoid speaking for the artists even while they attempted to portray an egalitarian 'artist-led' approach to the programme. The exhibition was comprised of the work of sixty African artists from seven geographical areas and co-curated by artists (Everly Nicodemus, El Hadji Sy, David Koloane and Chika Okeke), academics (Wanjiku Nyachae, Salah Hassan and Clémentine Deliss) and institutional representatives (Felicity Lunn). Deliss' (1995:20) desire to have the exhibition be different through the involvement of "…artists from Africa as curators and intellectual observers…" became more a reality of her carefully selecting co-curators to ensure the manifestation of a conceptual framework that was created a year earlier during seminars at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (Ogbechie, 1997). Ogbechie (1997:10) notes:

> ...this exhibition [*Seven Stories*] was organized around a predetermined framework which was subsequently applied to her [Deliss'] choice of "insiders" as curators...By *appointing* African artists and critics as co-curators, *Seven Stories* professes to show more respect for contemporary African artists and curators even as it perpetuates paternalism.

Hoping to avoid the discursive area of speaking for others that plagued the RAA exhibition, the Whitechapel exhibition sought to include African artists and academics in the telling of the seven stories. The Whitechapel's exhibition presented artists who were formally trained, self-taught and workshop based. According to Kasfir

(1999:136), “The overall effectiveness of *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (some of the ‘stories’ more compelling than others) restored both French-and English-speaking artist-intellectuals to the contemporary art discourse.” However, the exhibition’s ability to portray the breadth of contemporary African art was hampered by multiple issues. Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) believes the exhibition:

> was doomed to fail from the moment of its conceptualisation. Firstly, there were too many artists. Secondly,...Deliss, the chief architect of the exhibition, could not decide whether what she wanted to tell was one story, her story, five stories or seven [and]...the perpetually changing press releases charted the progress of the project’s descent into indecisiveness and confusion.

The installation of the exhibition was problematic because pieces were hung *en masse* without being allocated sufficient space to distinguish themselves from each other. This diffused the impact of individual pieces and resulted in an environment where contemporary African art was grouped as a singular entity. While the exhibition was meant to be the centrepiece for viewing contemporary African art during *africa95*, the result was entirely something else. Olabisi Silva (1998:18) describes how an “invisibilising” effect occurred where “…the distinctive development of each artist is denied, as is any proper debate about contemporary African art within the context of wider international art practices” (Silva, 1998:18). The countries whose submissions were able to withstand the congested nature of the installation and develop strong narratives were ironically those largely comprised of either artists who had formally trained in the West, or members of the diaspora. In this context the American academic Jean Fisher (1996:unknown page) opines:

> A more self-conscious attention to crosscultural esthetics could be found in the sections devoted to the Sudan and Ethiopia, in part because so many of these artists are expatriates who trained in art schools in Europe or the U.S. By far the most disappointing sections were the self-indulgent installation from Senegal, and the work from Nigeria, where political instability over the past three decades has driven many of the finest artists and intellectuals into exile.

This exodus of Africa’s intelligentsia as a result of political turmoil has depleted many African countries of talented artists. The burgeoning diaspora was partially a repercussion of these circumstances. Enwezor (1996) elaborates on this predicament in his article about the *africa95* programme. He contextualises the problem, describing the “…pioneering work undertaken in the 50s and 60s” that led to successful “broad-based festivals” in the 60s and 70s, which reflect a:

> ...matrix of idealism and hope, signifying the unfettering of the African imagination from the clutches of the colonial project. But much has changed in the continent. Major artists, intellectuals, and writers

> pressurised by totalitarian regimes have either fled into exile or have been silenced by censorship. Younger artists, in a climate of apathy and dire economic and political conditions, are no longer indebted to a vision of pan-Africanism which was supposed to be a binder of African consciousness and identity, and have joined the exodus. The unfortunate outcome of this flow of talent has meant that a great many African artists who either once contributed or would have contributed immensely to the debate of Africa's 20th century are no longer resident in the continent (Enwezor, 1996:unnumbered page).

One subtext to the *africa95* programme was the amount of attention given to South Africa compared to other African countries. "***africa'95*** was among many things something of a coming-out party for South Africa. Its artists were probably better and more frequently represented than those of any other country" (Geers and Ross, 1996:11). The attention given to South Africa can be attributed to a number of factors, not the least of which were South Africa's high-profile democratic elections only a year before and the familiarity most Britons had with the black majority's long struggle against apartheid. British activists were at the forefront of the global anti-apartheid movement from at least the 1960s onward and British civil society actively protested against the policies of apartheid. Britain's long colonial ties to South Africa and generations of established migration between the two countries give it a unique place in Britain's national consciousness unlike that of any other African nation.

This strong link between South Africa and Britain was evident in the generally positive attention given by critics and journalists to South Africa's role in *africa95* and the number of exhibitions focused on South Africa. In the Whitechapel exhibition, the South African portion curated by the artist David Koloane received extensive attention and praise for its depth and lucidity. Silva (1998:17) writes, "...sanity, depth, coherence and visual pleasure was found in the South African section." In his review, Philip Ravenhill (1996:18) noted that Koloane's "...personal narrative and his art historical story are skilfully woven together in an artful composition that almost seems a maquette for a larger project." In regard to the RAA exhibition, Tom Phillips (1996:24) remarks that southern Africa was given "...deliberate prominence." South African artists were also the focus of one of the few exhibitions held outside London titled, *Siyawela: Love, Loss and Liberation in Art from South Africa*, at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The exhibition was co-curated by South Africans Colin Richards and Pitika N'tuli and was selected by a focus group from three potential exhibition options, two of which pertained to South Africa (Bardhan, 2000). The Delfina Studios in London invited five South African artists to have solo residencies during this time. The artists selected were Penny Siopis, Willie Bester,

Kagiso Patrick Mautloa, Norman Catherine and William Kentridge. These artists then participated with Keston Beaton, Berry Bickle, Kendell Geers, António Ole and Reinata Sadimba Passema in the resulting exhibition *On the Road: Works by Ten Southern African Artists* (Geers and Ross, 1996). Concurrently, the Bernard Jacobson Gallery showed *Mayibuye i Africa*, which exhibited six of the same artists, and both exhibitions involved the active participation of the South African gallerist Linda Givon of Johannesburg's Goodman Gallery and showcased many of the artists she represented (Geers and Ross, 1996). Art First Gallery held two exhibitions, *Found in South Africa,* and a solo show of the London-based South African painter Louis Maqhebela (Geers and Ross, 1996). All of these exhibitions were indicative of the more favourable reception South African artists were receiving in Britain. This receptive environment would also be a characteristic of the *Africa 05* programme.

Another trait that emerged in the exhibitions of contemporary African art during the *africa95* programme was a continued reliance on particular African artists as representative of the artistic practice of the entire continent. As previously mentioned, these included but were not limited to William Kentridge, Chéri Samba, El Anatsui, Cyprien Tokoudagba and Yinka Shonibare. The ubiquity of a handful of artists in Western exhibitions occurred because the artists had been legitimated through continued exhibition in the West as representative of contemporary African art. Ogbechie (2005:unnumbered page) argues, "Western museums will never agree to show contemporary African art which is not produced by an artist already validated by Western discourses." This validation resulted from the artists continued exhibition, which ensured their inclusion in the discourses.

The result of the *africa95* programme was that it was unable to negotiate the existing cultural and political climate in Britain and create something that did not perpetuate a Eurocentric, neo-colonial framework. John Picton (1996:23) aptly describes how "[i]n a sense, "Africa" was constituted in the relationship between the Royal Academy and *africa95*, and in the categorizations implied by the various institutional frameworks involved." Africa was an idea more than a reality or place. It was a fictive space, constructed by the Western institutions and individuals involved with the *africa95* programme, not arising as a result of the African artists involved and exhibited. Olabisi Silva (1998:19) notes:

> The premise of 'africa'95' was its aim to focus primarily on artists practising on the continent. This reactionary attitude seemed somehow misplaced, resulting in further alienating African artists practising in England. Presenting Africa in isolation, especially in the

> late 20th century, avoids taking into consideration a shared history that has resulted in one of the world's biggest diasporic communities.

The absence of diaspora artists in *africa95* was remedied in *Africa 05*, when the diaspora would become a defining feature of that programme.

The British journalist Alan Riding (1995:unnumbered page) articulates precisely the expectations of British audiences regarding contemporary African artists during *africa95* when he writes about two artists included in the *Big City* exhibition. Riding applauds the Benin artist George Adegbo and the Ivorian artist Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, because in their art they found, "...a way of speaking a universal cultural language without losing their African accent." Regardless of the success of an African artist in the international art arena the most crucial factor was a continued adherence to the identifying label of African and his/her difference. Oguibe (2004:13) concludes that "[w]ithin the scheme of their relationship with the West, it is forbidden that African artists should possess the power of self-definition, the right to *author*-ity." *africa95* attempted to enlighten British audiences on African art, but ultimately explicated the necessity for an Other and the imperative construct of this binary relationship in order to ensure a picture of self. As Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) concludes:

> Objectivity, here, is only simulated, hiding a prejudiced institutional subjectivity that suppresses any parity in the distribution of resources, space, and access...Westerners instead adopt a strategy of isolation that loses contemporary African culture in the peripheral discourses of power, eventually regarding it as inconsequential.

The absence of contemporary African art in the Royal Academy of Arts' exhibition and the way in which the African art and artists were subjugated in the larger programme did little to dispel the myths of the irrelevance of contemporary African art. Richards (1996:144) reflects that, "The Royal Academy exhibition, then, as the showcase for *africa95*, determines the nature of the 'tradition' and of the 'Africa' it represents. Africa becomes again what it has always been: parenthesised, a simulacrum of itself, historyless, ideally primitive and determined from without." In the final analysis, *africa95* failed to create lasting changes in Britain's relationship with African art. The result would be that a decade later a cadre of individuals decided to make another attempt to see if they could solve the persistent dilemma of finding a permanent place for African, particularly contemporary African art within Britain.

CHAPTER IV: The *Africa 05* Programme

4.1 *Introduction*

The year 2005 proved a watershed moment when Africa became the focus of both politics and culture in Britain. Following the dissolution of the Labour government's close relationship with the arts in Britain that coincided with the end of 'Cool Britannia', 2005 witnessed a reorientation towards the continent of Africa. The year was politically significant for Britain because the country held the European Union presidency and the G8 Chairmanship. Occurring simultaneously was the publication of the Africa Commission report on alleviating poverty in Africa, and the hosting of a politically charged concert to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the original Live Aid concert.[18] Following the direction of the Prime Minister Tony Blair, the cultural establishment capitalised on the increased attention given to Africa by the nation's political leaders and decided to mount another programme focused on the arts of Africa. Ten years after *africa95*, *Africa 05* was launched. The *Africa 05* press release proclaimed, "The time is ripe for such a major programme of African culture and arts...Against the backdrop of these momentous political changes, Africa 05 will showcase the rich diversity of African culture and create a number of sustainable changes across the arts sector" (2004:unnumbered page).

In an interview, the Director of *Africa 05*, Augustus Casely-Hayford (2006), noted that at the time he considered 2005 an opportune moment to focus on the arts of Africa because he saw a more receptive environment to the subject within Britain. Casely-Hayford believed that to alter the reception of contemporary African art it was necessary to create a herd mentality where everyone felt confident to embrace the subject through abundant programming in museums and galleries. He thought that if a comprehensive effort was made through a variety of venues exhibiting contemporary African art, then:

> It would demonstrate the diversity of this practice and that…it's something that can be embedded into everyone's lives just in the way that European practices [are]…That's what I was determined to do and it may not be something that we succeeded in but we wanted to make it ubiquitous enough so that people wouldn't be able to ignore it (Casely-Hayford, 2006).

[18] The original Live Aid concert was the idea of Bob Geldof, the Irish Rock artist who sought a means to raise substantial amounts of money for famine stricken Africa. Held in 1985, the concert was a simultaneous event in both London and Philadelphia, with numerous well known musicians performing for free. The event was guaranteed by Geldof to be a once-off event so artists did not have to worry about contracts or other legal obligations.

Capitalising on the increased attention that was given to Britain by the global media, the *Africa 05* organisers intended to create a prolific cultural programme that would permeate the consciousness of British audiences, and permanently alter British perceptions of contemporary African art. After the sporadic exhibitions of African art in the West during the late 20th and early 21st centuries an extended programme in a Western capital highlighting contemporary African art was a welcome change. Hassan (1999:217) describes the xenophobia of Western Europe in the late 1990s:

> ...bent on combining its new consolidation of economic power through the EEC, with the protection of what it assumes to be 'pure' European traditions. The acceptance of a group of experienced and highly trained African artists into the arena of international art is seen as disruptive to the narrative of a superior Western art history.

It was into this closely guarded cultural climate that the *Africa 05* organisers hoped to mount a pervasive programme of African art in Britain. However, this precise goal was also cited as one of the weaknesses of the programme. The American academic Lisa Binder (2006:unnumbered page) in a review of the programme wrote:

> Unfortunately, the admirable goal of the organizers to challenge preconceptions and place Africa within an international scene fell short as a result of the inundation of Africa-related programming. Instead of celebrating African art and culture, 'Africa 05' seemed to force-feed an idea of the continent to the weary public.

The good intentions of the *Africa 05* organisers were ultimately undermined by a programme that was unable to avoid the idea of a constructed Africa, a fictive space encapsulated in a curatorial project aimed at educating Western audiences. In his review of *africa95*, Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) described how:

> ...many African intellectuals have taken up the challenge and entered the conversation that seeks to deny the legislative authority which values Africa only as an idea, a free-for-all zone to be liberally conjured up through a given narrator's imagination, an affective but nonetheless false memory.

This fictionalised idea of Africa had not subsided in Britain over the course of the decade since *africa95*, and it was only given new meaning through the *Africa 05* programme. The idea of Africa as a "...figment of other people's imaginations..." that V.Y. Mudimbe discusses and Enwezor (1996:unnumbered page) references in his article, was reliant upon the binary logic of self versus Other. This construct of Africa predominated in *Africa 05* and led to the maintenance of difference that resulted from an oppositional relationship.

4.2 *The African Diaspora and Globalisation in Britain*

Throughout the early 21st century, the burgeoning African diaspora in Western Europe, and Britain in particular, brought to the forefront questions of self and Other. This was in a more pronounced manner than was experienced a decade earlier. Difference was more transparent as immigration affected the British sense of self. Multiculturalism was a defining feature of the British 21st century socio-landscape. The continued exodus of artists and other individuals from the African continent as a result of political turmoil, civil strife and endemic poverty, along with the increasing ease of international migration through globalisation, saw a significant rise in the number of African artists relocating to Western Europe. In particular, the end of apartheid in 1994 allowed many South African artists the opportunity to work and study in Europe. These emergent migratory trends all helped reorient the centres from which African artistic production was emanating.

Compounded with the movement of individuals through globalisation, in Britain, political and social demographics were also evolving. The popular culture movement of 'Cool Britannia' proved a short-lived phenomenon that saw the British artists who embraced politics in the mid-1990s later recoil from what came to be seen as a perverse relationship. By the end of the decade, the Blair Labour government began to find its previously friendly relationship with artists and rock stars a political liability. *The Economist* described in 2000 how the government moved away from the idea of "Cool Britannia" under political pressure, noting that "Tony Blair entertained pop stars and designers at Downing Street. But the government has become uneasy about all the derision this attracted and has dropped the phrase 'Cool Britannia' from the official vocabulary" (unnumbered page). While the public celebration of Britishness became passé, the nation's quest for a British sense of identity remained apparent as the country faced ever increasing numbers of migrants from the expanding European Union and other non-Western countries, especially Africa. The government, in an effort to draw attention to the need to define what it meant to be British and counter social unease, created a plan to assimilate the immigrants. The academic Sir Bernard Crick, a political theorist and advisor to the Labour Party, was asked to orchestrate a test of 'Britishness' for potential immigrants that was largely constructed around social integration and knowledge of British social norms (BBC News, 2002). Crick's test was the most pronounced example of the British nation's need to structure a definition of what it meant to be British and provide a reassurance that there were in fact indicators that could be used to measure one's 'Britishness'.

4.3 *African Diaspora: Opportunities through Location*

Just as the socio-political landscape was altering within Britain, the African diaspora was changing. As Ola Uduku (2004:114) notes:

> ...the cultural spread of the Diaspora has increased phenomenally in the last decades of the 20th century, with cheap travel and telecommunications being widely accessible. Thus the penetration of global culture has left few parts of Africa untouched by its influence on a daily level...

A reconfigured image of Africa in the West was being created through the ever growing diaspora. In the art world this involved the increased profile of African curators, writers and critics operating in Western centres such as the previously mentioned Olu Oguibe, Salah Hassan, and Okwui Enwezor among others. In describing the diaspora as it pertained to contemporary Nigerian artists Oguibe (1999:31) writes that while the artists were born on the continent many "...live in expatriation as part of the culture of itinerancy which marks the end of the twentieth century." By physically relocating African artists were finding themselves more suited to become involved with the Western oriented international art world where the opportunities for professional achievement far exceeded those available on the continent. Oguibe (1999:31) goes on to explain this phenomenon in the context of the Nigerian diaspora when he argues:

> Whatever the circumstances of their relocation to the West, expatriation has accorded these artists greater opportunities to penetrate and navigate the insular world of the international contemporary mainstream. The fact that some of them have studied in the dominant centres of contemporary art, especially New York and London, for example, has accorded them access to specific conventions, spaces, curators, and critics. They also understand and have increasingly mastered strategies of alignment and positioning without which their presence in the West would have no significant positive effect on their careers...Last but not least is their determination to achieve visibility – to forge a career in the centre rather than accept the limitations of the periphery.

Over the course of the decade from 1995 to 2005, the profile of the diaspora artist had been increasingly elevated in the West. Kobena Mercer (1994) has analysed this phenomenon. He describes how in Britain the vocal, younger generation of Black Britons who emerged in the 1980s, were products of the migrations of the 1940s, '50s and '60s, and were not only contributing but transforming the cultural fabric of Britain. The increased role of the African diaspora in the West was also evidenced through the variety of exhibitions created between the early 1990s to 2005 dedicated to investigating diaspora artists, and the creation of an entire museum devoted

exclusively to the African diaspora. Particularly relevant examples are the aforementioned exhibitions *Authentic/ ex-centric* at the Venice Biennale in 2001, *Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* in 2003 at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis and the opening of the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco in 2005. The influence of the continually fluctuating African diaspora was becoming more pronounced throughout Western Europe and North America. As the American academics Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley (2000:20) remark, the

> ...diaspora is both a process and a condition. As a process it is constantly being remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle. Yet as a condition, it is directly tied to the process by which it is being made and remade.

The fluidity of the diaspora was impacting the socio-political landscape in Britain and the process was increasing the presence of the diaspora, but not necessarily affecting levels of acceptance among the British.

Despite the increase of diaspora artists in Western Europe, there still existed a failure within British academia to contend with the African diaspora in general. The British academic Hakim Adi (2002) has done extensive research on the African diaspora and in an article on the subject describes the contrast in the late 20th century between the United States, where scholars largely embraced the subject of the African diaspora, and the United Kingdom. He writes:

> In Britain, on the other hand, although a few conferences have been held, apart from the well-known work of Gilroy (1993) and some more recent texts, (Ackah, 1999; Bush, 1999; Walvin, 2000) there appears to be little academic interest in the concept in general and the history and characteristics of the African diaspora in Britain in particular...Such an absence of academic interest is perhaps a little strange, bearing in mind the leading role that Britain played in creating the modern African diaspora and the role that the African diaspora has played in the making of modern Britain (Adi, 2002:237).

According to Adi the lack of scholarly attention to both the African diaspora and its relationship with Britain was symptomatic of a deeper sociological disinterest in the subject. The absence of British academic interest in the African diaspora may have been part of the reason why a programme that focused largely on diaspora artists was destined to have limited resonance within British cultural institutions.

4.4 *Shifting Centres*

The increased presence of African diaspora artists in the West has gone some way towards subverting these same artists' position on the international art world's periphery. Partially as a result of the physical relocation of many African artists to the West, the decade between 1995 and 2005 witnessed both Africans and Westerners who began working against the maintenance of Western centres as the sole location of legitimate aesthetic practice and instead arguing for an art history that takes into consideration multiple centres of artistic thought and production. Ogbechie (2006: in lit.) writes that "[a] true art history will write the development of the modern world as a collaborative effort in which ideas and conventions combined to create unique local developments." The Director of *Africa 05* Augustus Casely-Hayford had the idea of multiple centres in mind when he designed the programme. He describes the need to engage with this concept:

> Art history isn't just one narrative, it's multiple overlapping narratives...literally it's like dropping stones in the lake and the ripples come out and they cross each other and...[there is not] just one centre of gravity,...and it must at some point [be] that the West can't be the only centre of gravity and there must be times that we make a narrative that has Africa at its centre" (Casely-Hayford, 2006).

Adding to the shifting perceptions of an African art history in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, was the reassessment of African art by the Western art world in the context of moving from an anthropological reading that saw the work as ethnographic artefacts, into an art historical reading that viewed the work as objects of fine art. Uduku (2004:222) writes that "[t]he viewing of African art culture since the last century has transformed from curio to contemporary legitimate 'art.'" Fractures had begun to occur in the postcolonial perspective that valued and legitimated 'authentic' African art, art that demonstrated its historical, traditional and primitive characteristics. However, as will be evidenced in the *Africa 05* programme in Britain, these fractures were only subtle cracks that while reflective of a slowly altering cultural shift, still proved there are great strides to be taken before significant breaks are made.

The initial effort that demonstrated this cultural repositioning of African art in Britain began within the British Museum. When the Sainsbury African Galleries opened at the British Museum in 1998, it was the first time in Britain that a major cultural institution exhibited African art not from the standpoint of ethnographic objects, but instead as works of fine art that included the contemporary as a valid form of African art. In an article about the new galleries, the conceptual architects Christopher

Spring, Nigel Barley and Julie Hudson (2001:18) describe their deliberate inclusion of contemporary work by artists such as Sokari Douglas Camp, Kane Kwei and John Muafangejo:

> Through this handful of striking works the exhibition immediately declares its intention. These are not familiar objects from the canon of African art. Some were created in parts of the continent which are still not thought of as Africa by some scholars; others were not created in Africa at all. All of them, however, question what we understand to be Africa and African art in the globalizing world of the twenty-first century.

The Museum continued to demonstrate its commitment to contemporary African art with the purchase in 2003 of works by the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui. While British audiences were beginning to be exposed to the importance of contemporary African art, Africa was still separated into a singular entity in the form of the "African Galleries" that combined the contemporary with the traditional. While the British Museum's commitment to African art is commendable, particularly its display of contemporary African art, its exhibit was a narrative designed by a Western institution whose construct, by default, became the authoritative version of African art in Britain due to the reluctance of other mainstream institutions to offer alternative narratives.

4.5 Africa 05: *Lost in Abundance*

It was into this reconfiguring reality that *Africa 05* was planned. Much like its predecessor *africa95*, *Africa 05* was a series of events showcasing the contemporary arts of Africa through exhibitions, lectures, workshops, symposia and conferences. However, one immediately recognisable difference from *africa95* was the prominence of artists in the diaspora. Some of these included the artists Yinka Shonibare, Allan deSouza, Ingrid Mwangi, Hassan Musa, Marlene Dumas, Cheick Diallo, Franck Lundangi and Robin Rhode. As the press release stated, "Africa 05 is a series of major cultural events taking place in London that celebrates contemporary and past cultures from across the continent and the diaspora" (2004:unnumbered page). The recognition of the role of the diaspora in constructing a comprehensive picture of contemporary African art was a significant shift from the noticeable omission of diaspora artists in the *africa95* programme.

The issue of African art's place in Britain precipitated the creation of *Africa 05,* which was intended to leave a legacy of attention on African arts, a legacy that *africa95* had failed to create. *Africa 05* hoped to create this through its expansive programme. Augustus Casely-Hayford and the Arts Council England were the driving forces,

along with assistance from the British Museum in the creation of *Africa 05*. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) agreed to become a partner in the *Africa 05* programme and hosted the website, which was the primary source for information on the programme. The website has since become *Africa Beyond*, a site for the dissemination of information on African arts in Britain. The nine-month *Africa 05* programme was divided into four sections shown sequentially, which included the visual arts, film, craft and design and literature (Rafferty, 2005).

From the outset, *Africa 05* and its central exhibition *Africa Remix* presented a recontextualised version of Africa from that exhibited in *africa95* and the Royal Academy of Arts' staid historical exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. However, this new interpretation of the arts of Africa that upheld the importance of contemporary African art, remained a Western idea that aimed through abundant programming to ensure a lasting viability for African arts in the insular British cultural establishment. The stated aspirations of *Africa 05* "...to create changes across the arts sector that will draw African culture into the mainstream where it belongs and make those changes permanent" were laudable, but in the end the programme faded from Britain's cultural consciousness and a status quo resumed in which African art was again relegated to the art world's periphery (Arts Council England, 2005:2).

The organisers of *Africa 05*, while working in coordination with the British Museum, sought to expand the limited interpretations of contemporary African art on display in Britain. In the words of British journalist Mark Grimmer (2005:unnumbered page), "The legacy of Africa 05 is intended to be a permanent improvement in the diversity of the museums and galleries sector, both in creating new fellowships for curators of African origin, and developing new audiences amongst the ethnic minority communities of London. The programme could also change the way things are collected and interpreted." While a positive assessment of the role of *Africa 05*, Grimmer's comments are indicative of the almost non-existent legacy of *africa95*. In an interview by the same journalist with the Director of *Africa 05*, Augustus Casely-Hayford, Grimmer asked why African art had been neglected in Britain. Casely-Hayford's (quoted in Grimmer, 2005:unnumbered page) responded:

> ...there has been an unfortunate history of collecting African material culture and placing it in an ethnographic context. This has meant that most of the African material in the National collection has been collected by museums who are interested in material culture. The recent move by the galleries to begin to collect African work will begin to change how and where African art is seen. Hopefully if the Nationals take a lead the commercial sector will follow.

Combined with the historical tradition of African culture being collected and viewed through an ethnographic lens, was a neo-colonial mentality that coloured British perceptions. Casely-Hayford described to me the neo-colonial mentality that prevails in Britain regarding contemporary African art and its lack of display. He believes:

> ...for the main part there has been a reluctance to really challenge the frames through which Africa has been perceived and...what is incredibly indicative of that at the moment [is that] within the National collection the only space that makes a concerted effort to collect Africa practice…is the British Museum. [There it is] within the material culture context. I know the Tate now have an ambition to begin an Africa collection but at the moment the British Museum is the sole repository for African contemporary practice (Casely-Hayford, 2006).

Casely-Hayford's idea for focusing attention on African art in Britain through the promotion of the continent's art in the National collections is problematic because the leading National museum, the British Museum, has proven that even with its commitment to showing contemporary African art, it remains wedded to the concept of African material culture as being the essence of 'true' African art. The contemporary and traditional are conflated in the British Museum's segregated display of African art. Casely-Hayford (2006) remarks on the seeming importance attached by the British Museum to connecting the contemporary to the past when he describes the significance of the inclusion of the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui in the permanent collection stating, "...El Anatsui is so important as well for the British Museum because it draws a connection between material culture, contemporary practice and art history..." The Museum for example, finds it necessary for contemporary African art to be translated and validated through its connection to historical work. The curators of the new Sainsbury African Galleries, where El Anatsui's work is displayed, describe how the contemporary artists included in the permanent collection were legitimated through their connection or reference to the past. Spring, Barley and Hudson (2001:24) write:

> Progression from the Contemporary section is eased, on one side, by Sokari Douglas Camp's *Big Masquerade with Boat and Household on His Head*, which points the way to the thought-provoking presentation of Kalabari masquerade prefacing a more general display of masks. As in the highly successful American Museum of Natural History's Kalabari show, we are able to feature the very same hippo mask in an ethnographic installation, a contemporary artwork interpretation, and an actual multimedia performance.

The African Galleries' attempt to promote contemporary art are only legitimated when the contemporary work is compared to historical pieces. This practice essentially

negates the ability of the contemporary art to stand on its own merits. Hassan (1999:216) writes:

> Most Western museums still refuse to acquire or exhibit contemporary African work because it does not measure up to stereotyped standards of African art. Even after some Western museums changed their collection and acquisition strategies, making room for contemporary African or other Third-World art, the policy became: 'only as long as the contemporary art of a region bears some relation to the 'traditional' art.'

Contemporary African art's inability to establish a viable role in a major British institution is indicative of a broader lack of interest in the practice in Britain. Trying to remedy this state of affairs with a single programme such as *Africa 05* was an almost quixotic attempt. Eddie Chambers (2005:unnumbered page) reflects:

> 'Africa 05' provides a useful barometer of the commitment (or lack thereof) of major London galleries towards the art of Africa...'Africa 05' reminds us that it has been a full decade since many of London's major galleries exhibited any art from Africa. If London's biggest galleries are only prepared to take art from Africa seriously once every ten years, and if the 'africa95' / 'Africa 05' model is to be the one with which we are saddled, then there can presumably be little genuine hope of African art gaining lasting acceptance and prominence..Once-a-decade festivals are guaranteed to ensure the continued marginalisation of art from Africa, assuming that we accept as a certainty the debatable premise that contemporary African art has indeed yet to take up a prominent place in the so-called mainstream.

Further discord in the reception of *Africa 05* was the result of the commercial aspirations of sponsors of the programme. Unfortunately, the heightened political profile of Britain in 2005 that facilitated the involvement of mainstream commercial sponsors and partners for *Africa 05*, including Starbucks, was more a calculated attempt to capitalise commercially on the increased attention on Britain and Africa and not evidence of a deeper commitment to the continent and its arts. While the stature of African art may have evolved from artefacts to "legitimate art," as Uduku (2004:224) comments this occurred largely as a result of an increased appreciation in Britain for the commercial viability of African art. Uduku (2004:224) describes this change as one where African art, music and architecture "...which were viewed originally as 'primitive' or 'other' cultural forms of artistic expression but now are considered to have contemporary merit and often commercial value." However, this commercial appeal still rarely translated to an appreciation of contemporary work. In an article for *The Times* newspaper (2005) the Director of the Royal African Society, Richard Dowden, comments on why he believes the BBC had become involved with *Africa 05*. He writes:

> [The BBC] has chosen Africa because Africa is the main topic at the G8 summit in Scotland next month. Tony Blair has pushed Africa up the agenda with the Commission for Africa. It is also the 20th anniversary of Live Aid. This is Africa as the continent of wars, death and poverty. Aid agency Africa. In the words of the Prime Minister: "a scar on the conscience of the world". But the *Africa Lives in the BBC* season says it is "to explore and celebrate African life and culture… to provide a broader representation of life across Africa… a fresh look at the continent." That should mean letting Africa tell its own stories. (Dowden, 2005:unnumbered page).

Even a committed partner such as the BBC was criticised for an unwillingness to allow African artists to speak for themselves. The British cultural establishment, which initially was a more receptive environment for African issues, ultimately returned to its long held scepticism toward the merits of contemporary African art. Hassan (1999:218) describes the attitude:

> It is true that the Western art world has learned to soften and regulate the offensive language and objectifying methodology of its ethnographic and anthropological discourses in relation to African and other non-Western cultures. However, racial determinism, the demand for the display of authenticity and spectacle, remain essential Western criteria of validation and acceptance. The search for the unusual, the exotic, the naïve and the untrained has spurred on those art historians, critics and curators who would not otherwise express interest in African art. This is a reminder of the Africa that has always attracted Western explorers, adventurers and thrill seekers – the great white hunters of knowledge and wealth.

The absence of exhibitions of contemporary African art and the fact that contemporary African art that was held in a pre-eminent permanent collection such as the British Museum had to be presented in a singular body with both traditional and contemporary work combined showed how Britain was not ready for the *Africa 05* programme. Even more complex would be the use of the exhibition *Africa Remix*, as the focal point of the entire programme. The exhibition aimed to challenge or even negate the word ‘contemporary’ in relation to African art, moving well beyond British comfort levels with the subject.

4.6 Africa Remix: *Incongruous Intents*

At the core of *Africa 05* was the travelling exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. The exhibition was curated by the Paris-based Cameroonian-born Simon Njami with the assistance of curators Marie-Laure Bernadac, David Elliott, Roger Malbert and Jean-Martin Hubert. The exhibition was meant to be a provocative challenge to the notion of what constituted ‘contemporary African art’ and included a range of artists from the continent and those in the diaspora who exhibited a variety

of multimedia works (Njami, 2004). Combined with the central exhibition *Africa Remix*, *Africa 05* included exhibitions at the British Museum, the South London Gallery, the Photographers' Gallery and numerous additional venues. Photography was more prominent in *Africa 05* than it had been in *africa95* and South African artists again seemed to receive a disproportionate amount of exhibition space compared to artists from other countries.

Considering the uncertain position of contemporary African art in Britain, the central exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* was an even more challenging selection as the focal exhibition of *Africa 05*. *Africa Remix* sought to redefine the very premise of 'contemporary African art', a quite controversial objective in light of Britain's continuing unease with the basic concept of contemporary African art. Casely-Hayford acknowledges this intentionally agitational component of *Africa Remix* when he describes the differences between the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* and *Africa Remix*. He notes that, "One [the RAA exhibition] is very much a particular time, historical and they are actually trying to say Africa has an art history and the other one is just saying we don't give a f*** about all that, let's move on..." (Casely-Hayford, 2006).

A primary weakness of the overall *Africa 05* programme was that the core exhibition, *Africa Remix*, a travelling exhibition, was not designed to complement the larger programme. The idea for *Africa 05* began in 2001 when British Museum curator Chris Spring and *Africa 05* Director Augustus Casely-Hayford came up with the idea of a programme that measured the extent that African art had permeated Britain since *africa95* (Binder, 2006). Separately, *Africa Remix* was first exhibited in 2004 when it opened at the museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, Germany. According to the official exhibition press release, *Africa Remix* as a travelling exhibition was intended to launch an "interrogation" of the definition of contemporary African art. In the words of the head curator Simon Njami, who was quoted in the press release (Universes in Universe, 2004:unnumbered page) asking:

> What is contemporary African art and what can we say and show about it today, after all the experiences that took place in Europe. Is there any viable definition? Is it near or far from the western approach? In what sense? We don't pretend to bring answers but to raise questions that were never raised before, and to focus on the magic of a work of art, presented within a curatorial concept that gives an overview of what Africa might be today. What its art might become tomor-row and what are the [sic] missing between ancient Africa and actual Africa. We don't have a clear idea of the results. What we know

> is that we've been trying to escape the numerous traps related to the general vision of Africa.

Njami's objective was dramatically different from the one envisioned as the goal of *Africa 05*. While the *Africa 05* programme hoped to increase the profile of contemporary African art and make more mainstream British institutions receptive to it, the exhibition *Africa Remix* hoped to undermine the very definition of contemporary African art. *Africa 05* aimed to promote the acceptance of contemporary African art and assist in building an understanding of what comprises contemporary African art. *Africa Remix* on the other hand was designed to challenge the concept of contemporary African art and provoke questioning and uncertainty about its very existence. The contradictory goals of the programme and the focal exhibition were a fundamental weakness in the overall structure of the *Africa 05* programme and contributed to a failure of both to achieve their (arguably mutually exclusive) goals.

A critical look at the *Africa Remix* exhibition as it was shown in London reveals why the intended subversion of contemporary African art the curators sought was not possible with the reconfigured exhibition that was presented. As a travelling exhibition, *Africa Remix* was recontextualised at each of the four venues where it was originally slated to be displayed.[19] These locations included the Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, the Hayward Gallery in London, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo (Africa Remix catalogue, 2005). Each museum had a curator who was a member of the curatorial team under Njami's direction and was involved in the display of the exhibition at their particular venues. This meant that the overall content was susceptible to being reformulated by the particular curators and institutions involved at each site, something that is an inevitable consequence of a travelling exhibition. However, in the case of the exhibition in London at the Hayward Gallery, this resulted in numerous works from the exhibition not being included because of a lack of space. Portions of the exhibition were also exhibited separately.[20] As the Senior Curator of the Hayward Gallery Roger Malbert

[19] When the exhibition *Africa Remix* was initially created in 2004, the exhibition sites of Stockholm, Sweden and Johannesburg, South Africa were not yet planned. These venues were added after the exhibition opened. The most significant of the additional exhibition sites was the one in South Africa. It was the result of extensive planning led by the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) to bring the *Africa Remix* exhibition to the continent and ensure Africans were able to see this pivotal exhibition regarding the state of contemporary African art that was originally only slated to be shown in the West. As occurs far too frequently with exhibitions of African art, they are constructed in the West and only shown to Westerners perpetuating another form of marginalisation as Africans are not even able to see, let alone contemplate or contest the conceptual ideas being depicted abroad regarding their art.

[20] Unable to have seen the exhibition myself in London I had to rely upon the catalogue to serve as documentation. The catalogue for the London exhibition made a conscious effort to illustrate all of the

(2005:9) notes, “Because of space limitations, the London showing has been reduced, and we apologise to the artists who have been omitted for this inescapable reason.” For example, a selection of photography from the *Africa Remix* exhibition was shown as an entirely new exhibition entitled *Africa in Focus* at the Hackney Museum in East London. If, as was stated in the *Africa Remix* press release (Universes in Universe 2004: unnumbered page) from the opening venue in Düsseldorf, that the exhibition hoped to be the first exhibition “...to provide a comprehensive overview of present-day artistic activities on the African continent...” through the spectrum of the multiple works displayed in a variety of mediums, than it was critical that the entire body of work be shown together to achieve this ambitious goal. Breaking apart the exhibition and excluding certain pieces for a lack of exhibition space fundamentally altered the original intent of the exhibition.

The original construct of an exhibition is critical and choosing to omit artists at particular venues or create separate exhibitions with portions of the original exhibition reconfigured the aims set forth by curator Simon Njami. Malbert (2005:9) describes in the exhibition catalogue for the Hayward Gallery that the guiding principles behind the selection of artists for the *Africa Remix* exhibition were based upon presenting the breadth of African creativity by contrasting the largely untrained artists that were championed in the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition with “…urban sophisticated art produced by Africans who are connected to the discourse of the contemporary international culture.” To ensure this dialectic was accurately rendered it would seem essential to exhibit all of the artists originally selected. Also it should be noted that the reason many of the artists included are connected to the discourse of contemporary international culture is because they are in the diaspora and by living in the West have easier access to the debates. This, combined with a strong reliance on South African artists to represent artists from the continent, created a limited perspective on contemporary African art for the exhibition. Arguably many African artists are not in positions to easily engage with the international discourses on contemporary culture. This is due either to a lack of personal resources, living in rural locations or political instability in the countries where they reside.

By allowing London to be a venue where artists were omitted or placed into an adjunct exhibition, the African art and artists became vulnerable, pliable objects whose worth was rendered by the Western institutions and curators where they were

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artists originally included in the *Africa Remix* exhibition so I am unable to cite exactly which artists were omitted from the London venue.

exhibited. The original ideas were malleable and the cultural product of African art was again 'material' that was able to be reconstructed by Western institutions and curators for their own intent, devoid of the African artists' input. This was especially problematic for contemporary African art because the translation and display of the art was already a contentious subject, but at least if the exhibition maintained the original intent of the curator by being exhibited in its entirety, a questioning of the validity of particular African art and artists as judged by British 'authorities' would not have arisen. Instead, the London showing of *Africa Remix*, as Malbert (2005:9) describes, was an "...abridgement of the German, French and Japanese editions" leaving one to question how it can be considered as legitimate an exhibition as when *Africa Remix* was shown in its entirety at the other venues.

Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent as shown in London comprised works of 75 artists, a decrease from the 88 artists exhibited in the other venues. The exhibition catalogue asserted that it was "...the largest exhibition of contemporary African art ever seen in Europe" (Malbert, 2005:9). This quote is reminiscent of the hyperbolic language used by the RAA for their exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. In effect *Africa Remix* was a monumental survey that attempted to remedy the inattention to contemporary African art in the West with a single exhibition. The ability of a grand narrative to highlight previously omitted or insufficiently represented African art and artists only served to perpetuate African artists' marginalisation, as was evident with the Royal Academy of Arts' exhibition *Africa*. In her review of *Africa 05* and the exhibition *Africa Remix*, Lisa Binder (2006:unnumbered page) wrote, "...the question remains: When will the need for these all-inclusive exhibitions of the 'art of the continent' cease to be necessary?" Ogbechie (1997:84) argues that "[w]e need to denounce totalizing exhibitions as exercises in unbridled ambition, especially in the practice of curators who arrogate to themselves the right to define contemporary African art, impose preconceived criteria of evaluation on its presentation, and select its spokespersons." Ogbechie was describing the contemporary exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* shown during africa95, but his sentiments are again applicable to *Africa Remix*. While it is crucial to show the work of contemporary African artists in Western centres, omnibus exhibitions are not the appropriate format to move beyond a marginalisation of the artists and allow true engagement with the art displayed.

Many of the artists included in the *Africa Remix* exhibition were part of the core of African artists whose work had been previously validated by western audiences as a

result of being displayed in multiple exhibitions in the West. These included familiar names such as Chéri Samba, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, William Kentridge, El Anatsui, and Yinka Shonibare. Thus the selection of a set group of artists to speak for contemporary African art in the West continued. The curator Njami (2005a:20) contends that the artists in *Africa Remix* were expressing "...aesthetic and intellectual shifts of identity..." that showed and defined what represented contemporanity in Africa. Yet this definition was created primarily by the small cadre of artists legitimated in the West and often practicing in the West. It appears that Njami fell into the predicament of relying on familiar African artists in order to offer strength and validity to the exhibition. Ogbechie (2005:unnumbered page) provides a trenchant critique of this issue when he argues:

> These proliferating exhibitions of Western based African artists (which repeatedly shows the same limited number of artists) fails miserably..., for they efface Africa from their purview and instead focus attention on artists who meet very narrowly defined Western criteria of what contemporary African art should look like...

The problem with African curators hailing these artists as the sole purveyors of contemporary African art was two-fold. Beyond adhering to a limited, Western created image of contemporary African art, artists practicing on the continent who are often not involved in the international arena due to a lack of resources, are neglected. Mario Pissarra (quoted in Gurney, 2005) describes the effect when African curators, (particularly those in the diaspora that emerged in the 1990s) overlook contemporary artists practicing on the continent that most need their support through their ardent opposition to the image of a 'primitive' and 'traditional' Africa. Pissarra (quoted in Gurney, 2005:14-15) argues:

> [the African curators'] desire to show a more sophisticated Africa with access to technology and to break the mould of expectations in turn threatens to sideline artists who do not have the access to finances and resources to intersect with these ideas, or familiarity with the discourse.

The implications of the marginalisation of this group of artists was that it limited the breadth of most Western attempts to showcase a complete picture of contemporary African art.

The reliance of the curators in *Africa Remix* to exhibit a disproportionate number of artists in the diaspora compared to those practicing on the continent further weakened its comprehensive strength. Over the past decade the initial absence of diaspora artists in exhibitions such as those seen in the *africa95* programme receded

as diaspora artists instead became the most prevalent artists included in exhibitions of contemporary African art in the West. This was partially a result of their immediate accessibility by residing in the West and their validation through continued Western exhibitions. These diaspora artists often became the standard for what constituted contemporary African art for many Western curators and institutions. In this regard Ogbechie (2005:unnumbered page) laments that "Western museums have pointedly refused to engage the works of Africa-based African artists and continue to investigate 'African contemporary art' in Paris, New York, Osaka, while refusing to look at what is happening in Lagos, Accra and Kinshasa." In response to a contentious review of *Africa Remix* by the British journalist and critic Brian Sewell, Ogbechie (2005:unnumbered page) stated his desire to work "...against the tendency to define contemporary African art solely in relation to African Diaspora practices, which works well for lazy Western curators who are thereby saved the rigors of travelling to Darkest Africa, where, who knows, they run the risk of being eaten by cannibals in Lagos." Ogbechie's sardonic comments exemplify the animosity felt by many in the African art community toward the acceptance of a small group of artists as representative of the entire practice of contemporary African art. It is indisputable that the diaspora is a fundamental part of any comprehensive picture of contemporary African art, but it is only one portion of the image and the diaspora cannot be relied upon or expected to speak for artists working on the continent.

British critics were fairly dismissive of the *Africa Remix* exhibition and this reflected a deeper misunderstanding of contemporary African art and the precarious position it held in the British cultural mainstream. For example, these included reviews by the critics Brian Sewell (2005), and Jonathan Jones (2005). The most notorious review of the exhibition was by the prominent British art critic Brian Sewell (2005). It appears that in order to assuage his discomfort with contemporary African art Sewell sought to discredit the practice and purport the value of traditional work that appeared historical or authentic and could as a result be legitimated as the work of the Other. Sewell (2005:unnumbered page) described the art in *Africa Remix* writing, "...not much of it qualifies as art in any contemporary European sense, and that what little does is so European in its sad inadequacy that it hardly qualifies as African." Sewell immediately invalidated the art either because it was not reflective enough of its Africanness or it had been too tainted by European practices and was no longer reflective of a pure African art. He went on to write, "The contemporary art in this exhibition is so feeble precisely because it is so little rooted in any native tradition; it adopts Western forms, techniques and devices because it has no models of its own

and Western models are so readily available..." (Sewell, 2005:unnumbered page). He reflects back to the Royal Academy of Arts' exhibition *Africa* and claims that at least the art shown there was "...genuinely African in that it was largely pre-colonial and pre-Christian...the Hayward's is not and in its postcolonialism illustrates a vain scramble by African artists to be seen as part of a Western world, for that way lies esteem and the wealth that accompanies it" (Sewell, 2005:unnumbered page). Sewell's review was one of the most distinct examples of the postcolonial sentiment in the West that validated only pre-colonial work as authentic African art.

Kasfir, Picton and Hassan among others, have analysed the pervasive nature of this perspective in Western art criticism discourses. Kasfir (1992:43) notes that the selection of "... the eve of European colonialism as the unbridgeable chasm between traditional, authentic art and an aftermath polluted by foreign contact is arbitrary in the extreme." Sewell's perpetuation of these stereotypes demonstrated that even among established art critics in Britain these ingrained expectations and limited mindsets prevail. This is best expressed by Ogbechie's (2005:unnumbered page) succinct retort:

> Sewell is noted for his provocative opinions but at some point we must call his kind of diatribe by its real name - prejudice...In his opinion, nothing produced by Africans then or now could rise to the definition of art as known in the Western world. This was the claim of Ernst Gombrich and his cohorts and it still forms the subtext of Western perception of African realities today.

While Sewell made his reputation by being controversial, he was still respected in British art world and thus his opinions became authoritative statements that potentially tainted British audiences' perception of the exhibition.

While less vitriolic, but equally critical, additional journalists found difficulty relating to the exhibition from a Western perspective. British journalist and critic, Jonathan Jones (2005a:unnumbered page) was more receptive to contemporary African art, yet felt *Africa Remix* lacked "quality control" and that the exhibition "...flails around to find an Africa that can claim its place in the world of biennales, glossy art magazines and proliferating theory. That it ends up discovering the same old realities of injustice and poverty probably says more for the honesty of African artists than for the thinking behind the show." Jones (2005a:unnumbered page) felt that "[t]he exhibition's preference for that which asserts its right to be called truly contemporary and sophisticated means that it includes lots of photographs and lots of video" and that the inclusion of artists such as South African Jane Alexander was more because her

work looked "...like an African answer to the Chapman brothers...And the emphasis on modernity inevitably favours the most western population in Africa – who are white South Africans." Echoing the sentiments expressed by the South African writer and critic Mario Pissarra, Jones (2005a:unnumbered page) believes that "[b]y insisting on the urban and the technological, Africa Remix misdescribes the continent." Jones' critique contended that the exhibition was unable to demonstrate the validity of contemporary African art or why the art merited inclusion in international biennales and other institutionalised Western aesthetic conventions. However, while Jones may be receptive to contemporary African art, his insistence that African art needed to legitimate itself through Western conventions and not reflect the unique concerns and subject matter of African artists showed his Western biases towards what constitutes contemporary African art.

Another review of *Africa Remix* by the German critic Nikilas Zimmer was sympathetic to the exhibition, but he ultimately felt that *Africa Remix* used the artists' difference as their credentials for warranting special treatment through an exhibition that sampled Africa for Western audiences. Zimmer (2004:59) wrote:

> To a European visitor such as myself, *Africa Remix* dangerously confirms rather than debunks standard misconceptions of 'Africa' as an unintelligible mix of multicoloured surfaces and heavy textures that hint at fantastic constructions of reality. The show exteriorises difference to the degree that it becomes a given, and tends to read as an amassment of unsophisticated trophies for random sampling. It involuntarily evokes associations with the *Wunderkammer*, an environment created by and for European gentry to gaze at the sensational creative output of primitive cultures.

Ultimately, the exhibition faltered in London both because of a reliance on largely familiar diaspora artists that were already known in Western Europe, and the inability of British audiences to understand the subversive intent of the curator. These issues, combined with the negative reception of the exhibition by the British media and the contradictory purpose of *Africa Remix* and *Africa 05* sufficiently weakened the exhibition and distorted its challenging narrative to the point where it became diffused.

4.7 *Additional Exhibitions: Dissipating Purposes through Proliferation*

Aside from *Africa Remix*, numerous additional exhibitions displayed various forms of contemporary African art. *Africa 05* as previously mentioned was faulted for the prolific nature of its programming. However, as curator Casely-Hayford (Arts Council England, 2005:2) describes, he wanted Africa to be "everywhere" and "impossible to

ignore." He further comments that, "...the programme has attempted to be as inclusive as possible and not make any judgements that are not aesthetic" (quoted in Grimmer, 2005:unnumbered page). Even with the focus on contemporary African art, *Africa 05* paid tribute to the historical with portions of an exhibition at the partner institution, the British Museum. From the outset the two primary organisers, the Arts Council England and Casely-Hayford, along with the British Museum, highlighted the importance of the traditional by validating contemporary African art through a display of historical artefacts. Stone tools from the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania were exhibited at the British Museum. Contrasted with these emblematic ethnographic artefacts was *The Tree of Life*, a contemporary work by Mozambican artists created from pieces of weapons used in Mozambique's civil war. Casely-Hayford (quoted in Doney, 2005:unnumbered page) acknowledges that hopefully the display of historical artefacts like the stone tools would allow audiences to "...trace the trajectory through the Museum's Africa Galleries, into the present" and in turn legitimise the contemporary.

While *The Tree of Life* became an icon of the *Africa 05* programme and seemed to represent for Western audiences an ideal of peace and civility coming to Africa through the humanising effects of art, the work was in actuality the idea of the British Museum who commissioned the piece (Jones, 2005b). The image being constructed was a fictive version of contemporary African art that valued a vision of a tormented, war stricken Africa that could heal itself through art. Similar to the political rhetoric of Prime Minister Tony Blair who during the year continually referred to Africa, a "scar on the conscience of the world" the British Museum was sensitising audiences to contemporary African art through their vision of what constituted African contemporanity (Dowden, 2005:unnumbered page). As the critic Jonathan Jones (2005b:unnumbered page) writes in an article on *Africa 05* about *The Tree of Life*:

> The tree sprouting out of death and war is universally understandable as an image of hope. Yet that meaning did not originate with the artists. The tree was the British Museum's idea. The craftsmen who made it have been welding sculptures from guns for a few years – the British Museum possesses their earlier and more spontaneous *Throne of Guns*. . .It's a far more potent work of art than the Tree because it draws on traditional themes of African art – kingship and power – and, like the nail studded 19th-century Congo carvings in the Africa galleries, possesses a sinister authority.

Jones questions the need for African art to be sanitised and "reinvented" to be "accepted" by the West (Jones, 2005b:unnumbered page). This was an example of contemporary African art being appropriated in order to ensure that the image that

was portrayed was in alignment with Western ideals for the translation of African art. *The Tree of Life* was arguably a fetishised object, exacerbated by the Western gaze. As Enwezor (1999:245) describes, "[t]his gaze reduces their [African artists'] artistic expression to either the aberrant production of a denativised imagination or to an inferior mimetic exercise in futility." The African artists' voices were again dictated by a Western institution that was perpetuating a Western aesthetic gaze on the art of Africa.

Photography and the predominance of South African artists characterised the majority of *Africa 05's* additional visual arts exhibitions. The South African photographer Guy Tillim was shown at The Photographers' Gallery, while the Horniman Museum in London exhibited the *Kliptown Snappers*, an exhibition that documented everyday life in the South African township of Kliptown. The Whitechapel Gallery had a multimedia exhibition entitled *Back to Black* that focused on "…black artists working in America, Britain and Jamaica in the 1960s and 1970s" (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2005:unnumbered page). The Institute of International Visual Arts hosted an exhibition of the South African painter Clifford Charles, the Barbican showed the work of William Kentridge, the Art First Gallery had an exhibition of the South African artist Karel Nel and the Spitz Gallery showed South African photographer George Hallett (Arts Council England, 2005). Additionally, the South African artist Robin Rhode produced new work for the BBC's *Africa Lives* website (BBC Africa Lives, 2005). The reliance on a majority of South African artists to depict contemporary African art reflected the British public's relative openness to South Africa, a product of the two nations' long shared histories. Britain had also relied heavily on South African artists in the *africa95* programme. While it is also true that the relative stability of South Africa and its prosperity since apartheid ended, along with its existing artistic infrastructure made it considerably easier to use South African artists compared to other countries in Africa, this still does not seem sufficient justification for South African artists' predominance. Essentially, if one accepts these facts then it is also acceptable to have an uninspired curator who is either unwilling or unable due to a lack of resources to discover a more equitably represented version of contemporary African art, limiting the overall perspective.

Ultimately what resulted from *Africa 05,* partially as a result of such extensive programming, was a fractured narrative that neither fostered an understanding of contemporary African art nor allowed the art to penetrate British cultural institutions. This is expressed in Eddie Chambers (2005:unnumbered page) summary:

> ...it is probable that 'Africa 05' will, at best, do comparatively little or, at worst, nothing to facilitate or engender much in the way of debate and exhibition activity within the continent itself. Africa consistently finds itself being plundered for the gratification of those living and consuming art in the West...'Africa 05' might exist for our gratification, but London doesn't really need this festival of African art. But cities such as Lagos, Accra, Lusaka and Johannesburg surely could benefit from a regular flow of exhibitions by the continent's most important expatriate(d) artists.

The continued insistence by Britain on African artists' difference ensured a cyclical perpetuation of the binary opposition of self versus Other and maintained the African artists place on the periphery of Britain's cultural landscape. A fundamental repositioning of Africa and African artists in Britain's national consciousness is essential before African art is truly integrated into the mainstream British art world. In order for this to be realised, a change in the British psyche is necessary in regard to difference and an understanding of what it means to be British. This extends beyond the curatorial reach of cultural programmes. Uduku (2004:112) notes that "...the non-ethnic urbanite has become more aware of the cultural 'other's increased co-existence in the mainstream physical and cultural space...the post-modern world has become a cultural mix of nationalities and identities with both continental African and its widespread Diaspora contributing substantially to this." Only with a level of acceptance of African artists will entrenched British perspective and stereotypes be altered. Bhabha (1994:75) argues that "[i]t is only by understanding the ambivalence and the antagonism of the desire of the Other that we can avoid the increasingly facile adoption of the notion of a homogenized Other, for a celebratory, oppositional politics of the margins or minorities."

The journalist Margaret Busby (BBC Africa Lives, 2005:unnumbered page) meant it as a compliment when she wrote that, "...Africa 05 has made explorers of us all" but inadvertently this statement harkened to the notion of Africa as the voyeuristic space to be explored by the West. This conjures images that have plagued exhibitions of Africa and African art since colonialism, not as a space and continent unto itself, but unchartered territory that should not only be explored but conquered. The far reaching nature of the expansive *Africa 05* programme added to the exploratory nature that prevailed.

Much like its predecessor *africa95*, *Africa 05* subscribed to a Eurocentric, neo-colonial view of the African art on display. While the organisers had the best of intentions, the reality was that contemporary African art was again authenticated by

the traditional, while Western curators felt it necessary to translate the works for Western audiences. The African artists were marginalised as their difference and identity as Other was essentialised. The elevated political profile of Britain in 2005 that placed Africa as a central focus, portrayed a neglected, war torn continent that overshadowed the cultural aspirations of *Africa 05*. The provocative focal exhibition to the *Africa 05* programme *Africa Remix* presented a fragmented version of the curator's original vision that failed to impress British audiences and led some art critics to invalidate the entire practice of contemporary African art. The overarching focus on the diaspora and South African artists also created a limited perspective on the state of contemporary African art. Ultimately, the additional exhibitions presented disjointed narratives that did little to alter the place of African art in Britain's cultural fabric.

CHAPTER VI : Conclusion

Britain has proven over the course of the decade under investigation in this paper, 1995 to 2005, to be a country entrenched in a Eurocentric, neo-colonial mindset with regard to the cultural products of non-Western – and particularly contemporary African – artists. African art in Britain remains all too often an idealised cultural product that is only valid when it is represented by traditional, ethnographic artefacts, while contemporary art is seen as tainted and a form of mimicry. Harkening back to an imperialist history, material culture that is clearly 'African' is valorised, and when the contemporary is presented it is continually in relation to the past. While London has developed one of the world's most vibrant contemporary art scenes, arguably competing only with New York City as the global centre of contemporary art, Britain's art establishment has largely neglected the work of contemporary African artists. The bastions of British cultural power – institutions and curators who wield a unique sense of proprietary 'authority' – have chosen to exclude contemporary African art from a position of equality instead continually placing African artists on the periphery. From an enforced marginalised position the most valued attribute is the African artists' difference. In his book, *The Culture Game*, (2004) Oguibe references the concept of difference in British culture and investigates why the idea must not only exist, but identify and isolate individuals from the periphery. In discussing Britain he writes, "For such a culture, difference is tolerable when it satiates the society's appetite for amusement and entertainment, or even more especially when it serves that eternally crucial purpose of propping and sustaining the society's illusions of superiority and greatness" (Oguibe 2004:35).

African artists involved in both the *africa95* and *Africa05* programmes were subjected from the outset to a fictive construct of the idea of Africa as a singular, poverty-stricken continent that warranted special attention and necessitated specific programmes in order for its arts to be appropriately presented to Western audiences. While the intention of the organisers of both programmes was unarguably a desire to expose British audiences to previously unseen African art, the actual outcome ensured the marginalisation of the African artists and the maintenance of a division between contemporary African and contemporary Western art. African artists who participated in the British programmes discovered a cultural framework that is dominated by Western aesthetics, where the labels of 'authenticity', 'difference', and Otherness are the primary descriptors of African artists' enforced identities.

Describing the environment that Western metropolises presented at the end of the 20th century with regard to African artists, Enwezor (1999:245) writes, "In the rare cases of contact between what so far has been identified as the 'centre' and the subaltern, the zones of enunciation are so fraught with gross misreading and the most miserable translations of work by these artists, that it seems nothing could possibly mediate the gap that separates the two worlds."

The *africa95* and *Africa 05* programmes were intended to remedy this lack of awareness of African art in Britain and to find a permanent role for African art in British culture. However, the simple fact that a second programme was held a decade after the first demonstrated the difficulty in creating a permanent place for Africa's arts in Britain's national consciousness. Despite the markedly different cultural climates in Britain in 1995 and 2005, the one constant was the clear identification of the cultural Other.

africa95 was an attempt to expand the limited narrative of the Royal Academy of Art's exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* with a broader programme that focused on contemporary African art. The RAA's exhibition relied upon the display of traditional artefacts to depict its curator's notion of what constituted authentic African art. The British academic David Richards (1996:141) describes his reactions to the RAA exhibition:

> The exhibition should be viewed alongside the other exhibitions available during the run of *africa95* but this was *the* jewel in the crown of *africa95*, conceived of as a 'way in' to Africa and as such it confirms a well-established set of misunderstandings in that, in the end, the exhibition probably says more about how Europe views and uses African art than the art itself, that it removes all the works from any meaningful cultural contexts, and you could be forgiven for thinking that Africans stopped producing art in about 1900. African art is, on the evidence of this exhibition, past, pagan and primitive.

While the broader array of exhibitions brought the binary discourse of traditional versus contemporary to the forefront of public discussion, the contemporary exhibitions were ultimately unable to dispel the curators' reliance upon the African artists' difference as their most important quality. Enwezor (1999:248) argues:

> The fact remains, however, and is always implicitly stated, that recognition of difference does not in itself connote inclusion nor acceptance...'Difference'…is always located in the limited territory of the colonised 'other', whom when rehabilitated into the 'centre', which the West occupies, must remain thankful, until his/her usefulness expires like a transit visa. But as we travellers who wear our badges of difference with unremitting pride on the postmodern bandwagon have

> repeatedly learned, the expiration of one's visa means the termination of tolerance (and idea that the false premise of a visa naturally disallows).

A general malaise coloured the culmination of the *africa95* programme as many artists left feeling disgruntled and 'spoken for' by those in positions of 'authority'. The key contemporary exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* attempted to 'allow' African artists to act as the curators of their own work. However, this curatorial premise was carefully constructed by Deliss who applied a predetermined conceptual framework to "...her choice of 'insiders' as curators who become no more than field hands executing carefully choreographed intentions" (Ogbechie, 1997:10). In the larger programme, diaspora artists were almost completely ignored limiting the comprehensiveness allegedly sought to be portrayed of African contemporanity by the organisers Clémentine Deliss, John Picton and Robert Loder.

Africa 05 was created to correct the failure of the *africa95* programme to integrate African art more into the mainstream of British arts. Augustus Casely-Hayford and the Arts Council England, along with the British Museum devised an ambitious programme focusing on contemporary African art. The programme ended up being so expansive that it lacked coherence and presented a fractured image of what comprised contemporary African art. At the core of this effort was *Africa Remix*, a provocative exhibition that sought to question the very premise of the idea of contemporary. However, problems arose because *Africa Remix* was created independently as a travelling exhibition and had significantly different goals than the broader *Africa 05* programme. *Africa 05* sought an understanding of contemporary African art and harmony with the idea in Britain, not the subversion of contemporary African art. *Africa Remix* struggled to accomplish its curatorial objectives in London because the exhibition was altered due to a lack of exhibition space, a fact that changed the initial vision of the curator Simon Njami. The exhibition included largely diaspora artists portraying a version of contemporary African art that relied upon a core of artists who had been legitimated through continued Western exhibitions often as a result of the artists' physical relocation to the West. Besides *Africa Remix,* the additional exhibitions were unable to shift the essential binary relationship of self versus Other that was so ingrained in Britain, a relationship that relied upon difference and the artists' most essentialised feature, their 'Africanness'. Contemporary art was again validated through the traditional, continuing the discourse of this paradigm.

Britain's focus on a search for a national sense of self and a clearly defined identity as to what constitutes being British has continually characterised its engagement with those outside themselves – Others. This extends beyond social and political biases to a seeming unwillingness to fully integrate the cultural product of non-Western countries into the foundational framework of contemporary art in the West. African artists' distance is ensured through their subjection to an identity characterised by their difference, which thus maintains their place on the art world's periphery. While appropriated artefacts have found residences in mainstream museums, they also function as material reminders of the legacy of colonialism and a perpetuation of a Western constructed notion of authentic African art being that which is traditional and ethnographic. While the discourses may be evolving in the West to legitimate the work of African artists as objects of fine art and not solely artefacts viewed through an anthropological lens, this ingrained mindset has yet to fully erode in Britain. A single, key institution, the British Museum has begun to chip away at the foundational structure that holds the 'traditional' as the purest form of African art and purport the validity of contemporary African art in Britain. However, even the British Museum has been unwilling to display contemporary African art without qualifying the work through a comparison with traditional pieces. This was evident not only in the *Africa 05* programme where the historical stone tools from the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania were shown along with the contemporary piece *The Tree of Life* by Mozambican sculptors, but also in the permanent collection as work by the contemporary artists Ghanaian El Anatsui, Nigerian Sokari Douglas Camp and Kenyan Magdalene Odundo, for example, are shown alongside traditional woodworking, metal work and pottery.

African art's place in the discourses emanating from Western centres is slowly being re-evaluated as artists and academics from the continent play a more vocal role in the expanding diaspora. The artist and writer Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi (2007:unnumbered page) writes:

> The 1990s was a conflating era of definition and affirmation led by the diaspora intelligentsia. It was also a period of intense contestations informed by issues of identity and representivity. Interestingly as it were, ideas of labels and tags were fissures which considerably impacted on the debate of normativity and otherness, two constructs that framed the discourse of African contemporaniety at that point.

Some examples of artists playing this role are Yinka Shonibare in Britain, and the South Africans Candice Breitz and Moshekwa Langa who have chosen to reside in Germany and Holland respectively but continue to exhibit and participate in discourses both in the West and in Africa. Additionally, the academics Hassan,

Enwezor and Oguibe are adding through their writing and curating of pivotal exhibitions, significant contributions by Africans operating from the West to the discourses on African art. Combined with these factors is the growth and increased access to resources of African artists based on the continent and art biennales in Africa. For example, the South African artist William Kentridge has established himself as one of the most internationally recognised 'African' artists despite living and working in Johannesburg. Moreover African-based biennales such as the two Johannesburg Biennales of 1995 and 1997 and the ongoing Dakar biennale that began in 1992 have received not only accolades, but more importantly continued attention from the international art world.[21]

Alternative platforms have developed in non-Western venues, and they are establishing themselves as viable events in the international art scene in conjunction with their Western counterparts. As evidenced by the demise of the Johannesburg biennale it is still a precarious endeavour to secure a continued biennale in Africa, but the Dakar biennale is working to thwart this dilemma and to prove its resilience. The sites of enunciation, that is the places where the proclamations on the state of contemporary African art are being made, are shifting. Oguibe (1999:20) contends:

> ...enunciation is the code of legislation, it becomes clear that its essence is to define the rules of interaction and interrelation between people, to set the limits of intervention and dominatory incursion, of encroachment upon the sites of our individuality and subjectivity, to present ourselves and establish our authority over not only our creativity, but most importantly, over ourselves too. It is enunciation that subjectivises us, the ability to reiterate *our* power over *our* selves. It is this ability and freedom to enunciate, too that takes us beyond the dominance of others, takes us, as it were, beyond the bounds of power.

If one agrees with Oguibe, then the ability of African artists' to determine and discover their own identity, one which is no longer subjected solely to Western determinants, is key to finding a figurative space of liberation for their practice.

The combination of an enlarging diaspora and a more vocal grouping of African artists and academics are working to dismantle the West's concept of what encompasses contemporary African art. For example, as noted earlier, the 2007 Venice Biennale finally included an African pavilion. Although one can certainly

[21] Unfortunately the success of the first Johannesburg biennale was not experienced by the second one, which precipitated the end of the Johannesburg biennales shortly thereafter. A combination of a lack of public support and in the inability of the city of Johannesburg to secure funding for a future biennale ensured its demise.

question how a continent of dozens of countries can be adequately represented by one pavilion, it is nonetheless significant that Africa was no longer a fringe participant in the world's preeminent biennale. While Western centres still rely upon Western aesthetics to classify African art, African artists and academics are working to shift their role away from being subaltern to Western definitions of contemporary art. Finding this alternative 'voice' is crucial to maintaining a continued pressure on centres of creativity in the art world to accept a more distinct place for contemporary African artists. As Oguibe (2004:4) states, "The contest for History is central to the struggle for a redefinition and eventual decimation of centrism and its engendering discourses." However, simply shifting the centres will not provide an equitable pluralism. Enwezor (1999:248) agrees that "...experience having taught us that decentring does not necessarily correlate with equality." What alternative centres will create, much like Mario Pissarra (2006:unnumbered page) describes is a situation where more than a particular decentring "...Africa has to take responsibility for its own development, to take the lead in developing its own agenda based on its own priorities, in order to be able to engage with 'others' as equals." Much in the vein of Bhabha (1993:22) who believes:

> ...'difference' is not so much a reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the tablets of 'fixed' traditions as it is a complex on-going negotiation – amongst minorities, against assimilation. The 'right' to signify concerns not so much the celebration of the persistence of tradition as much as an acknowledgement of its powers of reinscription and iteration: its forms of displacement and relocation.

While the onus is on African artists to abolish their subservience to the label of 'difference,' Western cultural institutions and curators have a role to play as well.

John Picton (2006) believes that "[t]here is not one paradigm of African art." I agree with his contention and find it essential to recognise this reality when creating exhibitions of African art. When Britain engages Africa's cultural output through significant programmes there needs to be a shift away from a reliance on exhibitions that result from a staid, Eurocentric, postcolonial, or now neo-colonial mindset that positions the African art as Other celebrated only for its difference. Inroads are being made in some Western centres but Britain still has considerable work left to be done before its artistic mainstream finds it necessary to provide a permanent home for contemporary African art in British cultural institutions.

In the final analysis, what has become most apparent to me after extensive research on the decade 1995 to 2005 is the British art establishment's continued unwillingness

to engage with and display contemporary African art in a progressive manner that does not rely on the 'traditional' to validate the 'contemporary'. I am concerned that ingrained stereotypes that rely on difference and African art being the work of the Other continue to be accepted both by Western cultural institutions and curators and even the African artists themselves. My sincere hope is that more analysis is conducted regarding this phenomenon and those far more established in this field of study than myself work to ameliorate the historical legacy of Western superiority towards the arts of Africa. Contemporary African artists struggle to determine an identity in the West that is not solely dependent upon Western definitions of difference and the Other but nonetheless allows their work to be legitimated in a Western aesthetic context. Yinka Shonibare is but one example of an artist who has successfully negotiated the West's tendentious definition of identity as used in exhibitions of contemporary African art in the West over the past decade. Shonibare creates a unique form of art that satisfies – to a degree – Western ideals of African art, while simultaneously questioning the restrictive parameters that are imposed upon African artists' identities in the West. However, Shonibare is still categorically placed first and foremost as an African into exhibitions of African art, and all too infrequently exhibited without this qualifying label.

I hope to see more African artists either in the diaspora or practicing on the continent who are able to achieve international recognition without subscribing to preconditioned stereotypes as defined by the West regarding how their art should appear. Furthermore, African artists must receive their rightful place at international art biennales, international exhibitions and other art events, and not simply in ancillary exhibitions of the arts of non-Western countries. Only by moving away from a reliance on separation and the recognition of difference as the means by which African art is defined can the full breadth of the continent's artistic output be truly discovered and appreciated. It seems like a fairly uncontroversial proposition, but the international art world has yet to move toward an environment where an accurate depiction of 'international' contemporary art is reliant not upon neo-colonial conceptions of the Other, but rather a simple appreciation of art that is worthy of display and recognition regardless of an artist's ethnic background.

In an interview regarding his participation at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Oguibe (quoted in Malcomess, 2007:unnumbered page) proclaimed, "The age of non-Africans telling Africans what they are is over." I wish I could fully concur with Oguibe's statement, but the relative success of African art in Venice was only one

step of many that are necessary to overcome the cultural prejudices evidenced in exclusionary programmes like *africa95* and *Africa05* that marginalise the African artists through the singular narrative. Nonetheless, as Ogbechie (2006:in lit.) notes:

> Scholars should try different approaches rather than look for the "one" approach. The history of European art has been written from the macro- and micro- viewpoints, each regarded as crucial to enunciating the broad narrative of that history. Do the same for African art and do it with the same seriousness and dedication.

This paper is my attempt to answer his clarion call.

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