

A Plea for a History of Black Atlantic Visual Arts

Christoph Singler

I do not view myself through a predominantly African lens. For me, there is no African art, there is no Senegalese art. My challenge is not to try to be African – I am African.

Viyé Diba

Thus, it might be discovered that the species Black may have a face as part of its essence, whereas its colour is merely an accident. Colour does not in any way define black.

Frank Bowling

The time is propitious: major exhibition spaces around the world have finally opened their doors to Afro-descendant artists and the number of art institutions run by Africans or Afro-descendants is rising. Yet – a sign of the times - Dak'art 2020 set its theme as the return to the forge, as the symbol of African ancestral creativity. Malick Ndiaye, the event's artistic director for that year, was intent to bring to an end to the discontinuities present in the history of African art and identify those common threads that run through it which can be seen as independent to the disruptive impact of colonialism on art in the African continent.¹ A few years earlier, the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale highlighted the diaspora's capacity for critique and opposition to all forms of nationalism.²

Is the 'Black Atlantic' nothing but an imaginary entity? The term was first coined by Paul Gilroy and hailed as a substantial contribution to how the African diaspora, or at least a large part of it, could be considered. Critics pointed to the need to move beyond the narrow conceptual and geographical framework in which Africa remained a fantasy and South America appeared almost totally absent. But despite these objections, the concept established a new relationship between Africa and its Atlantic diaspora. Diaspora art was no longer perceived merely as an appendage of African art. Efforts in the early 20th century focused on African retentions in the Americas;³ this archaeological concept is no longer a major priority for artists, in spite of the significant development of the archival turn in the Black Atlantic regions.⁴ Meanwhile, in Africa, Achille Mbembe's *Afropolitanism* (2006) evokes the cosmopolitan nature of African cultures in which ideas and objects had circulated freely long before colonialism.⁵

1 [www.dakart2020](http://www.dakart2020.com)

2 The publication in three languages of this issue of *Africanidades* entails a very high cost for translations. I regret that I cannot provide examples in what follows, due to space limitations. Also not included are the different philosophies of African art, for the same reason. That said, I hope the online format facilitates the exchange with our readers.

3 Farris Thompson, Ortiz, Rodrigues, Herskovits, etc.

4 This does not detract from the importance of the archaeological research currently being conducted in the Americas. For contemporary artists working around the archive it is not so much a question of finding works of art as of finding various traces of slavery and post-slavery.

5 See Eyo Ekpo (1977), among the first African scholars to challenge the overly narrow perspectives of European ethnography.

To date, no global research into Black Atlantic visual arts has been published.⁶ To adopt such an angle would perhaps lend greater consistency to the Black Atlantic, bringing together different local practices under a single focus of study. Contacts between the two sides of the Atlantic have proliferated ever since African independence, giving rise to wider knowledge of the continent's art and allowing the diaspora to influence contemporary African art. Everlyn Nicodemus (2009) argues that the Black Atlantic also brought about a change in 20th-century African art. She identifies the starting point of modernity in Aina Onabolu's revolt against the colonial prejudices that considered African artists to be unsuitable for inclusion in Western contemporary art.⁷ Meanwhile, in a conversation with Huey Copeland at the Afro Modern exhibition in Liverpool in 2010, Glenn Ligon highlighted the appeal of the concept as a means to open up new horizons for Black artists in the United States (Copeland 2009).

Twenty years after Jan Vansina, John Pepper rightly observed that no work has been produced in art history that is comparable to what has been published on African history (Pepper 2005: 95-96), let alone work addressing both shores of the Atlantic (in musical studies the situation is far better). Furthermore, according to Bennetta Jules-Rosette, mixing African art with African diaspora art can only lead to "chaos": it is important to "identify traces of homogeneity and difference in the metamorphoses of globalised art" by exploring art and its representations "layer by layer" (Jules-Rosette 2008). A number of attempts have been made to write partial histories of this blurred space: important contributions include Visoná-Blackmun's work on Africa (2000), Sharon Patton (1998) and Richard Powell (2003) on the United States and Emanoel Araújo (1988) and Nelson Aguilar (2000) on Brazil. In the field of so-called 'traditional' arts, seminal texts have been authored by Farris Thompson (1983, 2008), Isabel and Jorge Castellanos on Cuba (1994) and Sally and Richard Price on the Maroons in Guyana (2000). Several major exhibitions have also focused on the subject: *Histórias afro-atlânticas* (2019), produced in Brazil, remains the most comprehensive to date, followed by the more modest *Africa Modern* (2010). With no history of African or African diaspora art currently available, how could we write a history combining the two? This might be not so much a challenge than a presumptuous extravagance. Would a history of this kind contribute anything new?

I will attempt to present some perspectives such an enterprise might open along with its multiple obstacles, not least of which are the different frameworks seeking to 'fix' their often elusive objects. What follows will resemble a hotchpotch of elements well known thanks to the work of experts. The Black Atlantic is a vast echo chamber, where any attempt to differentiate between retention, analogy, parallelism, connection and appropriation appears doomed to failure. Yet we can focus on contrasting and comparing existing research. The aim here is to identify common threads in different parts of the globe, which are not necessarily to be found everywhere or at the same time. It is not the "traces of homogeneity" evoked by Jules-Rosette that support the case for a history of the Black Atlantic, even in a virtual state. The

6 Singler (2020). Eddie Chambers (2020) calls for comparative studies between Black British Art and African American Art, saluting Celeste Marie Bernier, *Stick to the Skin: African American and Black British Art, 1965-2015*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. Actually, it is a series of portraits of some 50 artists around the sole themes of memory and resistance, which greatly reduces the breadth of subjects addressed by Black Atlantic art. Chambers' remark points to a gaping hole, one that is larger than he realizes.

7 On Aina Onabolu see Chika Okeke Agulu (2016).

question is: "homogeneity" of what and at which level (cultural, formal, racial or political)? To adopt this focus would be to deny the cultural diversity present within the Black Atlantic. A history written on these grounds would focus on the circulation between African and diaspora art and its fluctuations in both directions depending on the period. Yet it is also a history of interruption and attempts to fill in the gaps with synecdoche, whereby individual artists are assumed to represent continuity. In a film by Manthia Diawara (2008), Édouard Glissant restates the stance adopted by many visual artists from the diaspora: "On the slave ship, we lost our languages, our gods, all familiar objects, songs, everything. We lost everything. All we had left was traces."⁸ Regardless of the fact that traces are elusive or clearly visible, they should certainly be explored extensively. Each trace is an invitation to continue the search, to bridge the space between one and the other, but it also invites us to construct (imagine) an itinerary. To take the quintessential Caribbean image, the ocean – that opaque space, abyss or cemetery – is history. The slave ship envisaged by Gilroy provides the Black Atlantic with an unstable, intangible anchor, evoking the simultaneous fracture and re-composition of the being, as Wilson Harris imagined in his text on Limbo dance (Harris 1999: 156-160).

For Africa, European colonisation represented another kind of rupture. Here, the debate concerns the nature and effects of Europe's definition of modernity as opposed to a *sui generis* African modernity (Chika Okeke Agulu 2017). This is a misleading controversy, in which change continues to be associated with "modernity". One recent example is that of Olowé d'Isé (Abiodun 2014), an artist who has made considerable changes to the formal language of sculpture in the Yoruba region. It is important to note, however, that what is referred to as "modernism" in art covers only one aspect of Western visual arts in the 20th century. Many Western artists were rather sceptical of modernity.

On one hand we have Senghor defending the continuity of African traditions, and on the other, there is Glissant, and many Caribbean artists and writers, opposing just that. Nevertheless, this rupture does not imply that the only solution for the respective national cultures was "assimilation". On the contrary, a basic premise is that Afro-descendant cultures have contributed or are contributing to their own formation, if we can define these nations as being still in a state of nation building. Moreover, they, in turn, have been able to influence contemporary African culture.

Deframing

Manthia Diawara (2018) remarks that Édouard Glissant takes a particular interest in what is outside of the frame. For Glissant, difference is not synonymous with opposition between the self and the other: "it knows no frontiers of language, territory or power". Would it be possible for us to take this philosophy of *Relation*, which contrasts with the "linear, discriminatory monolingual nature of the Eurocentric vision", as a starting point? Diawara emphasises the importance of disaffiliation, perhaps the least glossed of the central themes in Glissant's philosophy: creolisation, *Relation* and opacity.

8 Cité par Diawara (2018).

In this essay, I propose that frames and notions such as radicalism, resistance, subversion, centre/periphery, hegemonic discourse versus subaltern studies, exclusion, decentring, hybridisation, transformation, recovery, etc. be side-lined, at least temporarily. They rest on narratives that are as binary as the discourse they seek to critique. They project in advance what the outcome should be which often leads to tautology- Not only do we have no idea as to when these ideas apply, it also remains unclear why we must rid ourselves of any Western input and ideas that may turn out to be useful. Where does alienation or appropriation begin? Both the ideas of Édouard Glissant and Achille Mbembe emerged from dialogue. Instead of trying to impose a new non-hegemonic framing, let us see how far we come writing this story as if that change were a given. As it develops, the (currently hegemonic) frame will lose its shine. (Speaking of a single history of the Black Atlantic assumes that these notions are never absent, shifting back and forth between the background and the foreground.)

The idea that European colonialism in Africa stamped out the multiple local traditions found there should also be set aside, along with the notion that slavery brought about a rupture (more or less marked, but never complete) with African visual culture. Traces remain due to the conservation of religions, especially in a number of specific regions (spirituality, philosophical principles, "secret societies" and other, more or less phantasmatic entities to Western eyes).

Theoretical frameworks are based on ideas a priori. Frames fix their objects while pretending to remain outside. In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida rightly asks what a frame does to the object it surrounds. He warns that, "whoever has produced and manipulated the frame does everything possible to erase the effect of the frame, most often by naturalizing it *ad infinitum*". The frame thus seems to be a part of the construction of the object that we then perceive as independent of this construction. The least that one can say, with Derrida, is that by selecting, the frame excludes. If deconstruction "must neither reframe nor dream the pure and simple absence of frame" (Derrida: 85), let us at least pay attention to what our own framings do. Some authors suggest a "flexible" frame to allow for a larger scope, but an elastic frame is no longer a frame at all. The painters who have tried to modify its contours abandoned it altogether.

The Black Atlantic is a space of multiple realities, rather than inviting us to create still more frames it questions the categories and concepts that we attempt to apply. It is precisely here that essential doubts, questions and controversies should be allowed. With regard to terminology, none of the past or current "-isms", generally supposed to serve as theoretical frameworks, can pilot the agenda: their real significance for the visual arts is up for debate.⁹

The same applies for the identity issue, highly complex, which must be contrasted with diasporic discourses. To follow the ideas of Stuart Hall, the diaspora may be viewed as having an energising effect on identity. Yet the expediency of this idea is not a given. The multiple belongings advocated by Hall not only endan-

9 Panafricanism, Negritude, Afrocentrism, Afropolitanism, Liquid Blackness, Post-Black, Post-Soul, Afrofuturism, Afropessimism. What interests art history is the cultural politics that these theories have implemented or attempted to implement.

ger citizenship, they also obscure the contribution made by Afro-descendants to their respective national cultures. Nevertheless, they remain useful as a response to aesthetics that tend to stifle art in the name of a stable cultural identity. In the United States, there was a debate in the 1930s between ancestralism, as supported by Alain Locke, and "modernist" art, defended by James Porter. Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff rejected any formal language that would reaffirm racial segregation (Gibson 1991). The same debate took place in other regions of the Black Atlantic at a later date. Emanuel Araújo, founder of the Museu Afro-Brasil, defines ancestry as: "a halo hanging over the collective subconscious, both a receiver and the main performer of principles that can be traced back to Paleo-African art or perceived in Neo-African art from the diaspora" (Araújo 2000: 43). It is all the more important to grasp the scope of its application.¹⁰ In Brazil, Kabengele Munanga (2000) questioned whether "Afro-Brazilian" art was not simply a branch of Brazilian art. In Brazil, the approach has so far been guided by anthropology and the question of heritage (beyond the traces left by Glissant). The catalogue for the *Body and Soul* exhibition (2000) centres around artists that emerged from the 1930s onward, when Afro-Brazilian art began to be more visible and to form part of Brazilian modernism; these artists continued to link their work with religions of African origin.¹¹ Munanga's reasoning, as continued by Roberto Condrú, is based on the formal language adopted by the artist regardless of the colour of his skin. He deems the presence of one or more traits of this heritage to be adequate to consider an artwork to belong to this corpus. This "formalist" stance collecting "African signs" contrasts with a history that focuses on the art produced by Afro-descendant artists, without formal restrictions. Are the two mutually exclusive? The former stance permits the observation of the distribution of aesthetic languages beyond ethnic boundaries, while the latter is more open to evolving practices, echoing Darby English's (2007) call for attention to be paid to what artists are actually doing.

The concept of Jürgen Osterhammel's book on the 19th century, which aimed to set out a history of globalisation, appears to me to be a useful alternative model. Although the results are not particularly convincing, it confirms the traditional axis between East and West, with the Global South getting the raw end of the deal; however, the approach used points to the possibility of history multi-site.¹² The narrative is reduced to fragments or summaries, with the aim of "sketching a portrait of an era" that would emphasise the constants without sacrificing particularities and differences as part of an "elusive totality". Osterhammel concludes by quoting Fernand Braudel:

10 I avoid, however, "cartography" that claims to frame the "totality" of the places and circulations of agents, institutions and works. It is useful as a first step, but it becomes problematic, not to say dubious, when it claims that positionality defines a work. The artist in diaspora carries a lot of things from his childhood and culture of origin.

11 See Aguilar (2000).

12 It is divided into three main sections: approaches, panoramas, and themes; each one is in turn divided into chapters. In the opening, which corresponds to "approaches," Osterhammel establishes anything but a theoretical framework. He begins with the notions of "memory and self-observation" (Europe invented organized collective memory - public libraries, museums, national archives - and technologies of visual recording - photography and film. The thesis seems to me attractive but questionable: they are probably even more technologies of production and control of others). Life after time: chronology, notion of epoch, calendar, and periodization; caesuras and transitions; intermediate time (of transition); acceleration). Finally, the notion of space: space-time; mental cartographies - the relativity of visions of space; spaces of interaction; power and space; territoriality, diaspora, border. The second part ("Panoramas") is more devoted to events, while the third contains eight themes: energy and industry; work; networks; hierarchies; knowledge: increase, densification, distribution; "civilization" and marginalization; religion.

The historian first opens the past [the door] with which he is most familiar. But if he seeks to see as far as possible, he must necessarily find himself knocking at another door, and then another. Each time a new or slightly different landscape will be under examination and no historian, worthy of being referred to as such, could fail to juxtapose some of these landscapes. But history gathers them all together; it is the sum total of all these neighbours, meeting points and endless interactions.¹³

There is no longer a master narrative based on abstractions refined to such an extent that they end up eroding the contrasts between perfectly contradictory phenomena. Rather, several common threads are possible and must remain visible.

A Shortlist of the Challenges

The first question is: who will be the focus of this history? Afro-descendant is a term predominantly used in Latin American countries today, it concentrates on a non-matrix racial relationship as it refers to a history that repeats itself; the return of diaspora aesthetics to the continent also requires clarification. The one-drop rule here, a yardstick for social practice that automatically places any person with dark-skin in *apartheid*, should be applied. The concept of Afro-descendants obeys this rule, whilst simultaneously blurring the boundaries between black and white, paving the way for multiple identities. But does this only apply to Afro-descendants? Bachir Diagne (2007: 46-48) suggests that the grammar of African art – if such a thing exists – must be (re)learned by both contemporary African and diaspora artists. But could it also be accessible to non-Afro-descendants? South Africa, Cuba and Brazil come to mind, where initiated white artists may create Afrodescendant art. Precisely the opposite could also be argued: not all Afro-descendant artists necessarily produce "Afro-descendant art".¹⁴ Roberto Condrú (2013) insists on the need to consider Afro-Brazilian art in terms of African cultural values (mixed with values from other sources), thus going beyond the artist's skin colour. This applies equally to European art. Picasso's work was exhibited in Senegal in 1972; he was portrayed as an artist in keeping with classical African art. Indeed, the concept of the Black Atlantic also encompasses the influence exerted in both past and present by African and Afro-descendant art on the majority culture in question. It is important to take these two approaches into consideration, one formal and the other based on ethnic or cultural origin. There is no need to choose between them: we must simply recount the choices made in such a place on such a date by whichever individual being a part of whichever school of thought.

It will undoubtedly also be necessary to consider visual culture in a broader sense, even if the aim is not to produce a cultural history, as this would presuppose a continuum between "traditional" art and "globalised", individual art. By contrast, cross-disciplinarity, in dialogue with cultural anthropology, appears unavoidable to me. Dance and music in particular have repeatedly inspired the visual arts; as well

¹³ Fernand Braudel, "Sur une conception de l'Histoire sociale", *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, vol. 14, n° 2 (1959) : 318-19.

¹⁴ In any case, the question has been raised on several occasions around the abstraction practiced in the United States by black artists. See Anne Gibson (1991).

as providing motifs; they also influence the structure of visual discourse. This is about circulation between the religious sphere and artistic practice, without this necessarily being a constant. At the individual level, we must establish the degree to which a social group's ethical values shape its art, whether this is art produced by different communities or "profane" art. In any case simply drawing up lists of the visual signifiers of "Africanness" will not be enough.¹⁵

The multiple sites and timescales involved render the situation still more complex. How can the Black Atlantic be preserved as a whole and on what grounds if we maintain respect for the particularities of each place? In the Americas, where mass enslavement created a large African diaspora, the Black population is scattered across many different regions and nations: the Caribbean, the United States, Brazil as well as communities in Peru, Ecuador and Colombia (not to forget Argentina and Uruguay, where the Black population was decimated during the 19th century). Rather like the different cultural regions in Africa, and the postcolonial states of the present day, each of these territories merits its own history. Incidentally, it appears to me that Afro-Latin studies, a field recently introduced into the United States academy, seem ill equipped for our endeavour. They take for granted a given geopolitical framework which until further notice will not but limit the transatlantic dimension of Afrodiasporic culture.¹⁶ What about the relationship between North and South America (starting with the Haitian Revolution)? What we are trying to avoid in Africa should also be applied to its diaspora.

The periodization of (American) colonial spaces should be examined in conjunction with the history of African art and the history of art in the colonising countries. In Europe, there was a smaller African presence during the colonial era but it left a significant mark on the majority culture, not least in the form of the artworks amassed to fill European museums with trophies providing evidence of the continent's "civilising mission". The presence of Afro-descendants in the history of countries with a large African diaspora serves as an example. This should be explored, as well as the representation of Afro-descendant subjects by Western artists, which would allow the history of art in the West to be linked to the history of art in its colonies. The 2018 exhibition *The Black Model* offered a glimpse of this history, but we are more familiar with Afro-descendant artists in colonial Christian art (see Conduru 2007 on Brazil, among others). The art of African religions, which was produced amid a situation of slavery and is therefore little-known, remains in the shadows but archaeology will no doubt be able to provide us with new evidence.

I am arriving at the threshold of my proposals, which revolve around the idea that the common denominator linking both sides of the Atlantic is the outreach of African art, the crossovers it underwent and the art it has inspired.

15 This is what Kimberley Cleveland proposes to do in *Black Art in Brazil. Expressions of Identity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013.

16 There is no reason why Afro-Latin Studies should not be interested in transatlantic circulation. Nevertheless, I do not see what they can contribute other than the studies that have been done in this field or that are to be done. One finds here the fact outlined by Derrida: the framer places himself outside while "naturalizing" his construction.

Common Threads of Visual Practices

So far, my emphasis has been on the diaspora's complexity. If continuity has been threatened on both sides of the Atlantic (albeit at different times), in Africa the rupture introduced by European colonialism has not been the "end of tradition": it is part of its history and our efforts must focus on ascertaining how it has been dealt with, what attempts have been made to pick up the pieces and what new paths have been taken.

Given this rupture in Africa, how can we assert a possible lineage based solely on "ancestral" visual characteristics? The question here is: what were enslaved people actually able to take with them to the Americas. In some regions, so-called "nations" were able to survive but different populations were often mixed to avoid uprisings. Glissant's observation, cited above, comes into play here but the matter goes beyond mere material objects. No matter how fragmented they may be, there has certainly been "retention" and this has undoubtedly concerned intangible cultural forms that have influenced Afro-American art.

First, the idea that visual form is inhabited by a spiritual force, producing a unique relationship between the visible and the invisible. Historically, this was a necessity in the diaspora, where religious practices of African origin were often criminalised and subject to persecution.¹⁷ This idea was frequently echoed by historians of African art and puts in jeopardy any approach based on Western formal vocabulary. This could be backed by contributions from anthropology, but greater nuance is required for contemporary art.

A frequently cited trait is the theorem according to which there exists an intimate relationship between the artist and his society. We know that certain ethnic groups or broader political entities ordered artworks from outside the community and that certain districts could be reserved for foreign artists. This suggests that objects and practices are likely to have circulated across quite large distances well before the modern era in the West; and this also implies that artworks were not necessarily the expression of a collective spirit, but could also have been the product of individual artistic personalities or specific studios.

Another topic is the distinction made by Jean Laude, amongst others, between the arts practised in royal courts and those of village communities. This difference has also been observed in the 20th century, when urbanisation led to the emergence of urban folk art (Kasfir 1999) and the circulation between these three spheres should be observed. And any interaction between these spheres and the outside world would represent the heart of this project.

Finally, the rejection of art for art's sake and Western "formalism" appears indisputable. Black Atlantic art is said to be based on social commitment, which is advocated across all Black artistic disciplines. What is at stake is the relationship between the collective and the subjective, and this merits more in-depth study.

¹⁷ Cuba, Haiti, Brazil... The last official Haitian "anti-superstition" campaign was conducted in 1941, today the religious war is being revived by Pentecostal churches in the Caribbean and Brazil.

Research into the African continent has revealed the complexity of relations between artist and patron (a private individual or institution, sometimes belonging to a different ethnic group). In the 20th century, there was the development of an urban art establishing less “organic” relationships between the artist and their environment. On the American side of the Atlantic, and in the United States in particular, artists not only came up against an artistic *apartheid* but also felt isolated at times from “their” own (Black) audience; or found themselves vehemently taken to task when they employed abstraction or non-narrative visual languages.¹⁸ An aesthetic that aims to reflect a particular community’s cultural identity can prove to be a straitjacket for artists when it dictates the formal path to be taken in the name of the fusion between artist and community.

When it comes to the last few decades of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century, it will be necessary to explore the extent to which Black Atlantic arts coincide with mainstream formal languages. Black Atlantic art is no longer necessarily on the margins of this system. Ideally, Black Atlantic artists should aim to reach a broader public outside “their” community.

A Tentative Timescale

1. 1600-1880

Broadly speaking, the first period began in the 15th century with the first European sea voyages to Africa, the colonisation of the Americas and African slavery. The end of the period may be situated between the Haitian Revolution in 1791 and the final abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888. On the African side of the Atlantic, histories of sub-Saharan African empires are generally available but knowledge of stateless regions remains lacking. What is of particular interest is non-Islamic art during the period of sub-Saharan classical art (to explore this, oral history must be sought in addition to any existing sources provided by travellers); following European colonisation, the influence of Christian art can be seen in Benin and the Congo from the 16th century onwards.

The start of this period is defined by the proliferation of contact between Africa, Europe and the Americas: as the Black Atlantic emerged, the arts began to evolve in different directions. Production was slow but it is worth noting the investment of Afro-descendant artists in Christian religious art (in regions under Catholic domination), while practices associated with African religions in the period preceding the 19th century are less well-known. There is a lot still to be done in this area, but gaps will inevitably remain.¹⁹ It is interesting to note how fragmentation leads to recomposition, which is a common motif in literature (Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, Glissant) but has received inadequate attention in the visual arts. There is certainly a dreamed Africa, but there is also research into its vestiges and memory.

¹⁸ Gibson (1991) on abstract expressionism. See also texts by Romare Bearden, Frank Bowling or, for the Caribbean, Aubrey Williams, a reflection discussed by Leon Wainwright in this dossier. His reading differs from mine: Williams defends abstraction as a way to free himself from the narrative character of figuration. The debate was revived around post-Black, launched by Thelma Golden in 2001 in the exhibition *Freestyle*. For a critical position on English, see in this publication “Necessary Abstractions” by Huey Copeland.

¹⁹ What we know more are the representations of Afrodescendant characters by white artists in painting, sculpture, and engraving (see the exhibition in Paris in 2018)

Prior to the 19th century, the artworks known to us today were made from metal or terracotta, while the first works in wood or fabric date back to the 19th century and are now scattered throughout Western museums. It remains unclear whether they were produced for the European market. We will address the subjects explored by African artists during this period to identify the oldest stylistic and intellectual elements that may have crossed the Atlantic.

2. 1880-1920

The colonisation of the African continent marks the start of the second period; at the same time, the post-emancipation era of the American countries led to social and ideological changes. The principle of miscegenation as a cornerstone to nation-hood in Latin America, contrasts severely with racial segregation in the United States. In practice, the status of Afro-descendant populations did not substantially vary. The first returns to Africa by the diaspora took place during this period even if they were somewhat sporadic (returns occurred from the 18th century onwards, with the Agudas in Benin and Nigeria, the creation of Liberia, etc.).

At the same time, artworks came to be systematically gathered in Africa, mostly for collections in Europe and the United States, through pillage, theft, confiscation and coercion as well as purchase or donation. A variety of ground-level individuals were involved in this, including dealers, soldiers and administrators, who sometimes transformed themselves into impromptu ethnologists claiming a "scientific" interest. At this time, the fledgling discipline of ethnology was almost the only academic movement that sought to study these works; they were viewed as artefacts from religious or magical contexts and thus far removed from art as defined by Europe. Art from Africa's royal courts soon came to be differentiated from art produced in non-state regions, notably with the pillage of Benin City; whilst in the Americas Afro-American art was viewed as folklore at best. The battle to free it from this ghetto is still being waged to this day; the change in the terminology used by referring to it as "tribal art" (Musée Branly) was largely inadequate, much like the contemporary name changes now being applied to ethnological museums.

Attitudes changed at the start of the 20th century. Following the avant-garde artists, a number of critical studies sought to free it from the grip of ethnology (especially Einstein). However, the predominant view was that it was a "primitive" form of art (an adjective shared with Oceanic and Native American art) that lacked any history or evolution and was therefore collective and to be filed alongside artworks by children and "lunatics".

During this period, African and Afro-American artists took their first steps in Western "modernism" (from the Global North). Black artists began to be included in the Western art world as a result of their adoption of its formal languages. The degree of tolerance to their presence and the level of advancement of their participation varied.

3. 1920-1960

The third period may be situated between the end of World War I, as the struggles for independence began, and the end of *apartheid* in South Africa, echoing Okwui Enwezor's *short century*. Meanwhile, the United States was witnessing the Great Migration and the dawn of the civil rights movement, which continues to this day with Black Lives Matter. In Cuba, the century began with the massacre of

around 3,000 people in 1912. "Racial democracy" was being slowly eroded in Latin America, while significant emigration began to take place from the Caribbean to France and Great Britain in the 1940s. The two World Wars played a major role in undermining the European hegemony.

Access to Western academic training and to the practice of Western art remained difficult. Alternative practices, labelled outsider art, naïve art or folk art, were developed outside the art market and addressed in ethnological studies as art forms excluded from modernity or contemporaneity. European art-teachers opened art schools in Nigeria, Congo and Uganda, as well as Haiti, where many of the painters who trained at Port-au-Prince Art Centre were classed as "primitive". Teaching was limited to an introduction to the different techniques used in European painting, largely overlooking the history of European art. Was this intended to avoid westernising students, or did it serve only to infantilise local artists, leading to the development of a specific market limited to exotic arts enthusiasts? It is not our place to judge. In the case of Haiti, Carlo Célius (2007) has shown that this division is a product of modernity itself. In the United States, lack of access to the institutions frequented by white students prompted the Black population to introduce its own parallel education system, which produced its first results with the Harlem Renaissance. In the Caribbean, the national infrastructure was open to Afro-descendants. Wifredo Lam was able to receive a more or less traditional education in Spain, 1923. He began to adopt a more African style in his painting towards the end of the 1930s, as the first Afro-Brazilian works began to appear. It needs to be pointed out that many of the Black artists who became known in the 1950s and 60s were self-taught.²⁰

Should a history of this period focus on the emancipation from Western normativity and a shift towards a greater "Africanness"? This is an ideological stance raising questions that will need to be answered before any history can be written. If Western "modernism" was influenced by African art, how can we disentangle the various threads? If African art is cross-cultural, why shouldn't it appropriate traits from Western art? For a very long time, the aim was integration, although this left a system established and managed by the white elite which remained entirely intact. From the early 20th century, the question has been raised for artists opting for Western art (so-called traditional art, for which the question has not been raised, should be studied alongside this); recently Olu Oguibe advocated legitimate appropriation (Oguibe 2002). Is "integration" possible without assimilation? To what extent is a clear separation between African and Western art worlds possible (and desirable)? This also applies to the diaspora: the Trojan horse that Wifredo Lam aimed to embody no longer seems to apply.

Towards the end of the 1940s, a few artists joined the avant-garde movements: Ernest Mancoba with CoBrA, Norman Lewis with New York expressionist abstraction and Afro-Cuban artists in Paris with surrealism.

Contact between the diaspora and the continent intensified from the 1950s onwards, with movement in both directions. The Pan-African congresses and literature and arts festivals organised between the 1950s and 1970s were quickly

²⁰ See the symposium on art education in the Caribbean, University of West Indies St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago 2005. Leon Wainwright, in *Timed Out. Art and the transnational Caribbean*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 2011, pointed out that black Caribbean artists were long considered "anachronistic" in relation to the avant-gardes of the European metropolises.

supplemented by sometimes lengthy trips and stays on the continent by prominent diaspora figures (DuBois, Stokely Carmichael, Maryse Condé, Manuel Zapata Olivella, numerous musicians... the list goes on).

4. 1960 – Present

African independence marked a turning point, ushering in the contemporary period, with in-depth research into the new relationships between African tradition and European modernity. From around 1960 to 1980, the debate took place on both sides of the Atlantic: examples include Uche Okeke's "Natural Synthesis" and the Dakar School with its Senghorian aesthetic on this side of the Atlantic, and the Black Arts Movement in the United States (nothing of this magnitude in Latin America). Later, the contemporary diaspora of African artists and curators and the growing artistic infrastructure on the continent will be discussed, but above all the shared themes - decolonization, racism, the discriminatory Western art world - that bring the two shores closer together in the search for new ways of living together.

This period witnesses the arrival of performance, installation, video, collage techniques amongst others. Contemporary production on both sides of the Atlantic is characterised using forms, media and practices from Western art, while breaking away from the academy. Similar strategies are developing to compensate for the absence of state support, including the creation of artists' collectives and institutions by artists themselves. One of the forerunners was Abdias do Nascimento, who founded the Museu de Arte Negra in Brazil in the 1970s.

Among the contemporary discourses and artistic practices, I would like to highlight some of them here:

1. Regarding identities (the question, not the result), subjectivities and their malleability, depictions of bodies in portraits (often collective, sometimes "antiportraits") often featured bodies against a "decorative", punctuated, textile backdrop. The mask, hair and clothes appear amid the setting, either photographed or using other media.

2. The identity issue lends itself to collage in what could be considered a metaphor for contemporary identity. This aspect could be addressed in a chapter discussing the cross-cultural dimension of the arts of the Black Atlantic, where collage is a relatively recent practice which emerged in association with a range of contemporary issues such as migration, violence, erosion of utopias. Collage plays in this context a double role. On the one hand, it highlights the de(con-)struction of belief and knowledge systems. On the other hand, it reunites what has been broken, threatened to break or has never been united. In this sense, it is also a repair kit, an offer of reconciliation, without denying the wounds and boundaries of identity. Starting from the ambivalence between destruction and construction, it can be a metaphor for a heterogeneous global world, but also for the interaction of cultures.

3. In the broader sense, understood as a sign system, writing would be another topic to study, ranging from the texts produced in Islamic regions to the sub-Saharan African ideograms studied by Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji (1996). Signs appear on masks and other sculpted surfaces, bodies, textiles and walls, but they also include Western text and distortions, extending to textures or just the trace that remains.

4. The battle between figuration and abstraction, which covers a vast area ranging from African writing to geometric abstraction, has become obsolete since the arrival of post-minimalism and conceptual art. Nevertheless, this period merits further exploration as it is the last example of controversy surrounding the appropriation of Western languages; installation – which has African precedents – and video have not given rise to any such issues. At the 'Reshaping the Field: Arts of the African Diaspora on Display' conference, organised in November 2021 by Nana Adusei-Poku, participants rejected essentialist approaches to African diaspora visual arts.

5. Does contemporary art represent a rupture with earlier periods or can we identify "constants" running through Black Atlantic visual arts (not necessarily simultaneously)? An iconographic approach would show that these "constants" are exactly where innovation and creativity occur (contemporary masks, representation of bodies, etc.). I would like to mention several motifs linked to diaspora memory in particular: Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson grouped together a series of these motifs under the concept of afrotropes, which are more common in the diaspora but have only begun to be cited in Africa more recently. They link closely to memory and are primarily associated with slavery: the slave ship crossing, a central motif from Gilroy's work, torture instruments, hunts for runaway slaves, etc. Afrotropes, which are not necessarily figurative, postulate a cultural (memory-based) subconscious and lend it a tangible form. They emerge "in particular social and political constellations of the Black experience" and at times of extreme crisis, they are always on the brink of emerging, to highlight what is latent in stories, fantasies and fictions from the 18th to the 21st century. Thompson and Copeland do not describe the forms of this (re)emergence, but afrotropes erase the line between past and present, constituting an "anti-archive" beyond the constraints of the oral according to Foucault. Beyond the iconographic dimension, this state of constant latency could also take the form of layering, allowing a play with the background and the foreground, with the emergence and disappearance, visibility and invisibility, between the thickness and transparency of the layers (this connects with the importance of the text or sign, always understood as palimpsest).²¹

The Spirit of the Approach

This history would begin by focusing on intra-African dynamics, including the dialogue with foreign influences. Since no living culture is self-sufficient, the forms of appropriation and transformation that these influences bring to local production are what interests us here. It would then naturally move on to the relationships established with the culture of the colonial powers and the conquering religions (Islam and Christianity). On the other side of the Atlantic, it would consider the fragmentation, retention and change experienced by African heritage, as well as the forms that emerge when these fragments are put back together. It would address divergence, controversy and rupture (some of these are the constants in this history).

Usually, a project of this kind is entrusted to regional experts. However, a regional structure would muddy the waters, producing little more than an agglomeration of fragments we have already. Local histories, which have received too little scholarly

21 Dickerson, Joselit, Nixon (2017: 17). Cheryl Finley (2018) studies the slave ship motif in particular.

attention to date, must take into consideration the circulation of styles, techniques and ideas. In Latin America in particular, there are *sui generis* voices and reflections that the transnational perspective of the Black Atlantic must bring out of the shadows, provincializing the national context that has been suffocating them for too long. The different temporalities, as well as the contrasts and disjunctures present within the diaspora, may serve to render contacts and parallels still more significant.

The idea is to create chapters based on the themes suggested above, several of which could serve as a common thread running through this long history. A history of this kind would allow certain hypotheses, too often taken for granted, to be tested. My own personal ambition would be a history that would hold up before artist monographs, which are still lacking at the moment; in other words, a history that would put theories to the test rather than using them as a framework. It would be haunted by the fear of stifling exceptions that do not confirm the rule.

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