
Preface

In the decade since I began research for this study of Senegalese modernism and Negritude philosophy, the exhibition of and scholarship addressing contemporary African arts have proliferated and matured. Since the 1990s, a number of significant publications, exhibitions, journals, and doctoral dissertations have emerged to help shape an exciting, vibrant critical discourse. I write these words as the first curator of contemporary arts in the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution—a position that is clear evidence of the expansion and growing acceptance of this field.

These developments have served not simply to challenge archaic definitions of authenticity, artistry, and identity within the field of African arts history but also notably to affect considerable shifts within the mainstream art world, opening up new spaces and possibilities for contemporary African artists. Most scholars would agree, however, that the avenues through which these artists enter the global art world remain limited, inconsistent, and, at times, highly politicized and contentious.

While I cannot possibly address all the changes that have occurred since the early 1990s in this book, I believe that there has been a certain coalescence of events in the first years of this new millennium making this study quite timely. On 20 December 2001, Léopold Sédar Senghor died in Normandy, at the age of ninety-six, after years of quiet retirement from public life. Not surprisingly, his passing led many to reflect on his intellectual, artistic, and political accomplishments. As a poet, statesman, and philosopher who lived through and contributed to the changes of a century, Senghor

left a rather complicated, checkered history. While many praised the profundity of his thought, clarity of his vision, and depth of his commitment to “black civilization,” others regarded his legacy more skeptically, arguing that his approach to black subjectivity was both reactionary and naive. In his remembrances of Senghor, writer, curator, and critic Simon Njami wrote, “Let me come right out with it—I loathe the man. I have done for years. Why? Mainly because of his *reason from the Greeks, rhythm from the Blacks*. To people of my generation it was like an abdication. In that utterance he condemned the Black to an essentially hedonistic role, cutting him off from the area of intellectual investigations.”¹ Njami quickly acknowledged that Senghor’s remarks had to be understood within the historical context of the early to mid-twentieth century. And yet this criticism of Senghor’s theories persists.

Writing in the autumn following Senghor’s death, one Senegalese scholar called for a reassessment of his works in order “to do justice to the way in which he authentically challenged French colonial claims; to pay attention to the open character of a thought that has been petrified into formulas; and to understand the ethics embedded in the notion of a ‘dialogue of cultures.’”² This study will engage deeply with Senghor’s thoughts on artistry, identity, and modernism, focusing attention on the complex relationship between theory and practice as the president-poet helped shape the contours of modern art in Senegal through his patronage.

In the same year of Senghor’s death, curator Okwui Enwezor focused the art world’s attention on the pioneering arts and philosophical debates that accompanied the years of anticolonial struggle, liberation movements, and independence in Africa. With his exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, Enwezor sought nothing less than to “construct a ‘critical biography’ of Africa.”³ In his introduction to the catalogue and anthology that accompanied this groundbreaking exhibition, Enwezor described the aim of the project as follows:

To explore and elaborate on the critical paradigms and ideas related to concepts of modernity, the political and ideological formations of independence and liberation struggles, their impact in the production of self-awareness, new models of cultural expression, dialogues with processes of modernization, and what lies at the heart of modernity itself out of the ruins of colonialism.⁴

While much broader than visual arts, the scope of this exhibition encompassed the history of the École de Dakar, Negritude writings, and processes of modernization and modernism that are central concerns of this detailed

study of Senegalese art history. My study, like Enwezor's, engages broadly with current scholarly interest in the histories and workings of multiple, plural modernisms outside the metropolitan West and with the legacies of the era of decolonization. Enwezor's exhibition was equally important for the venues that it inhabited—P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Space in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago. It would seem, then, that with the dawn of a new millennium, the contemporary art world was ready to give greater and more nuanced thought to the modern and contemporary arts of Africa.

In April 2001, *ARTnews* published an article declaring Africa the source of “the newest Avant-Garde” from which contemporary art “has suddenly burst onto the international art world’s radar screen,” noting that “in the past five years, artists from Benin, Senegal, Zaire, Mali, Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, and especially, South Africa have been receiving high-profile exposure in museums, galleries, and biennials.”⁵

Ironically, *ARTnews* “discovered” contemporary African artists at a moment when many art insiders were questioning the relevancy of identity-based exhibitions. In the same year, Studio Museum curator Thelma Golden coined the term *postblack* to refer to a new generation of young African American artists who approached notions of racial and ethnic identity with skepticism, and *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter wrote of a paradigm shift ushering in a new freedom for art “beyond multiculturalism”—a kind of “postethnicity.” He explained: “Multiculturalism ended up being as much a hindrance as a help. It made ethno-racial identity a source for gaining culture power, but it also turned it into a trap.”⁶ Cotter rightly recognized and warned of the pitfalls of quickly adopting these new labels and assuming that a change in semantics would effect a change in the systemic racism of the art world:

The labels postblack and postethnic sound cool. But what they actually describe is a precarious balancing act. Ideally, they imply a condition of diversity in the widest sense, with minority artists right at the center of the art world—all the time, no badge of identity required—where they belong, side by side with everyone else. But, like many social ideals, postethnicity could easily end up being yet another exercise in control from above, a marketing label of greatest benefit to the privileged.⁷

Certainly the national and international exhibition offerings of the last several years by the brightest curators and scholars have tended to support and further develop this notion of freeing the art and the artist from the confines of ethnic, racial, or national parochialism to celebrate transnational

and global contemporary experience and artistry. The year 2001 also marked a major turning point in the history of the Venice biennale, when Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan created the first African Pavilion for contemporary artists, producing an exhibition, *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, which argued for a clearer understanding of the importance of African artists in the realm of conceptual arts. Its agenda, coupled with its venue, epitomized the ironies of this age in which curators and artists alike strive to move beyond identity-based affiliations but tend to reinforce them at the same time. While *Authentic/Ex-centric* valued the contributions of Africa and diaspora-based artists to global conceptualism, it did so with the express intent of inserting an African pavilion into the traditional, Euro-centric, and nationalist structure of the Venice biennale.⁸

The common thread that ties together remembrances of Senghor, increased interest in the history of modernisms in Africa and in contemporary African arts, lively debates over identity-based exhibitions, and the now common curatorial agendas that advance global, non-identity-based interpretations and exhibitions is the ongoing tension and uneasy marriage between particularism and universalism. In the “First Word” of *African Arts* in 2002, Bennetta Jules-Rosette said of Senghor and his colleagues that “their visions of Négritude became not only the foundation of an African cultural philosophy and aesthetics but also a pathway to the redefinition of the universal in its valorization of African identity through the canons of the West.”⁹ This confluence of events suggests that we would do well to revisit Senghor’s attempts to define a broader humanism in light of continuing particularisms and local inflections of modernism. While Senghor’s thoughts about civilization of the universal (*civilisation de l’universel*) envisioned an instrumentalist role for the artist and an essentialist vision of identity, they nonetheless provide important links for today’s scholars to an intellectual history with direct relevance to many current debates on identity and artistry.

The most successful of the recent set of international art biennales to emerge in the age of globalism is held in Dakar. Fittingly, Dak’Art successfully celebrated its tenth anniversary at the turn of the new millennium. Some forty years after Senghor envisioned a new place for modern art in the development of an independent nation and supported ambitious patronage programs to fulfill these dreams, Dakar finds itself again the site of debates over contemporary art and identity. In the catalogue accompanying the tenth biennale, two critics expressed the opposing poles of thought regarding the best way to approach, interpret, display, and market the arts of contemporary Africa. One contributor argued, “No artist wants to be judged through the distorting lens of identity,”¹⁰ while the other warned that the

label “contemporary could be an avatar of assimilation; a metamorphosis of this key word of the colonial period that has survived the so-called post-colonial time.”¹¹ This case study of modern arts history in Senegal aims to further these fascinating, timely, and important discussions on the place of Africa’s contemporary artists within a global context.

