
THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE:

CONTEMPORARY ART IN AFRICA AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of "An/Sichten. Malerei aus dem Kongo 1990-2000",¹ an exhibition at Vienna's museum of ethnography in the spring of 2001, the debate of an anthropological gaze upon contemporary art in Africa was once again launched by a representative of a local NGO, who declared in an open letter that such a perception is inadmissible and that museums of ethnography are inappropriate venues for exhibiting such art.

In that exhibition, the two curators, Bogumil Jewsiewicki - who has been working on popular painting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for several decades now - and Barbara Plankensteiner, curator at the museum in Vienna, had spotlighted two frames of this art-form. Firstly, they emphasize the function of these paintings in the *salon* of the local purchasers. In such an environment they serve as means for reflecting and debating about aspects of social relationships, such as traditional life in a village, aspects of history (colonialism, early independence) etc. Johannes Fabian had defined this kind of art as art of memory (Fabian 1998: 13). Secondly, because of this narrow connection to local social relations, the curators had arranged the exhibits according to the major centres where these artworks had been created: Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Bunia. What had been labelled as the anthropological gaze actually concerned these two fundamental ways of binding this popular art in one case to specific social localities, in the other to its function in the *salon*. Consequently it seems as if this art-form could not be perceived outside these contexts.

The question raised is not a new one. This has to do, on the one hand, with the treatment of art by anthropology and, on the other, with disputes in the fields of art history and art criticism - with the advocates of the visual qualities of individual works of art, battling against cultural and societal contextualization, which over the last two decades has been championed above all by postmodern authors.² At the exhibition level those disputes are echoed in as far as contextual showings are preferably assigned to ethnographic museums, while shows in white cubes take place in museums and galleries of fine art. As the French art critic Joëlle Busca puts it, ethnographic museums tend towards exhaustive and didactic explanation, while the art museum valorises the artefact as product of individual creativity (Busca 2000: 189). It should be remembered, however, that a German art historian and director of a museum of fine arts, Alexander Dorner, proposed the principle of atmospheric space for

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¹ "View/Points. Paintings from the Congo 1990-2000".

² For the first group one could name e.g. Susan Sontag, for the second group e.g. Gill Perry, Griselda Pollock or Thomas McEvilley.

the new art museum already in the 1940s. Starting from the assumption that, in the history of mankind, individual works of art and their styles represent only a part of a very narrowly defined reality and that the important thing is the relation of art to industrial life, Dorner maintained that art styles are to be understood only in their historical context and/or in relation to the changes in man's visions and ideas (Dorner 1949).³

Be that as it may, the question of the anthropological gaze should be discussed anew among anthropologists if only because such accusations tend to crop up wherever contemporary art is being discussed. In the late 1990s e.g. this sort of criticism flared up over the new museum on Quai Branly in Paris; it has not yet come to an end (Busca 2000). What has been understood as the anthropological gaze so far may be characterised as a process of sense-making of the artwork by envisioning it as being originally connected to a given culture, and to specific social relations. Working with contemporary artists in Ivory Coast and Benin I, too, was confronted with this subject matter more than once.

In the first part, some examples of the anthropological gaze will be discussed – as directed upon the personality of the artist, upon the work of art, and upon exhibiting and collecting. In the second part I shall deal with context as a problem, which has to be critically scrutinized. Furthermore, I suggest that the pejorative notion of the anthropological gaze is partly due to an old Malinowskian tradition of contextualizing artworks. It nevertheless has first of all to be considered as a reproach to some discourses of the European-American art world. In the third part, context will be viewed as a structuring element that unfailingly affects specific discourses on art. In the conclusion, a differentiating approach will be argued for and a critical discourse between art criticism, the history of art, and anthropology advocated – a discourse about how multifarious artworks may be seen, considering that the European-American art world monopolizes the power to decide on exhibitions and thereby on names in the world of art.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE

For the artwork “questions d'identité” (1997), Dominique Zinkpe got his inspiration from a Vodoun-altar. For this work the artist turned the inner sanctum of a magus or divinator, which as such is invisible to outsiders, into the open. In this process, the artist included the many objects which fill such a space, as well as the symbols employed, the liquids made use of, and visual impressions as caused, among others, by light and darkness. An essential aspect of artistic representation is the composition of the installation, the tension created between shapes, colours, and materials, while what Vodoun is or what the symbols mean is important in as far as the artist dealt with it.

When the artist showed me this work he mentioned that it contained a trap or fallacy – for those who think that it is an African work because the artist comes from Benin and is therefore confronted with Vodoun in his everyday life. “That’s a trap! Why? If it is a question of Vodoun, then it is African, since Vodoun comes from Africa. But it’s the other side which is upsetting” (Zinkpe 29/09/97). Undoubtedly, Vodoun is a cultural feature of this region, but: must an artist necessarily be African (from Benin) in order to become involved with the subject? Indeed, Dominique Zinkpe insists that, above all, a person viewing the art-

³ See also Cauman 1958.

work "questions d'identité" should see the contemporary artist, who just happens to have become involved with this particular subject in this particular locality. This difference matters: As soon as the notion "the subject is Vodoun; therefore the artist must be African (from Benin)" comes to mind, one is off to culture-specific considerations and thus tends to disregard the artist's act involving complexity of his own experience, of reflections on the subject and its formal potential, and last but not least of his specific manner of representation.

When Romuald Hazoumé showed a few pictures relating to the Oracle *Fa* at the exhibition *Inklusion/Exklusion*, at the festival *Steirischer Herbst* in Graz/Austria (1996), the curator suggested to him that somebody (an anthropologist?) should write something about the system of oracles for the catalogue: "Peter Weibel nearly fell into the trap. He told me: 'We should find someone who can write a text on *Fa*, someone who explains it.' I just laughed" (Hazoumé 08/10/97). Instead, the artist wrote a fictitious story about how he had painted a picture with the title "00" in Vienna⁴ and waited to see what would happen then and there and what would happen to the very same picture in Port Moresby, Beijing, Phoenix, New York, and again at home in Porto Novo (Hazoumé 1996). To Romuald Hazoumé a text explaining *Fa* would have diverted attention away from the concerns of the artist, from the artwork as such. "Any artist, whether European, African, American or Chinese, has the problems that surround him, problems confronting him every moment. One can only find out how he solves them by trying to come a little closer to him" (Hazoumé 08/10/97).

Calixte Dakpogan told me that he had been asked to exhibit his iron sculptures at the cultural event of an African market being set up in Bordeaux. He refused, pointing out that his works were being acquired and exhibited by art collectors, galleries and art museums, and that an imitation market was not the proper venue for his oeuvre. The surprised reply was that surely he could do some good business there! (Dakpogan 26/09/97)

At an exhibition on the subject of recycling, "Ingénieuse Afrique. Artisans de la récupération et du recyclage", organized by the Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec (1994), works by artists of *récupération*⁵ were shown side by side with utensils made from recycled materials like oil lamps, *cot-cot* briefcases, plastic sandals, children's toys etc. In a similar vein, the director of the Musée National d'Abidjan, Yaya Savane, and the philosopher-cum-curator Yacouba Konaté in their contribution to the catalogue on artists of *récupération* deal with the *masques bidons* by Romuald Hazoumé and the *Vohou Vohou* artist Youssouf Bath, among others (Konaté/Savane 1994). There are three irritating points here. One: Why should works of contemporary artists be shown in an exhibition whose very (sub)title refers to artisans, i.e. persons who work with their hands and may be helped by their family, in other words: persons who are to be denoted as independent craftsmen or decorative artists? Two: The artists of *Vohou Vohou*⁶ definitely cannot be labelled as *récupération* in the sense of recycling. This movement emerged in Ivory Coast in late 1970s/ early 1980s and was concerned with connecting forms of modern art with regional African forms of expressions. Three: The *masques bidons* of Hazoumé deal with *récupération*, but definitely within other contexts than those defined by the overall topic.⁷ These artists and their works are simply out of place in this exhibition.

⁴ In *Fa*, the sign 00 is the first and most powerful one, symbolizing life and death. One may find the sign in Vienna on remote doors in old restaurants. The symbol indicates toilets.

⁵ The French term denotes recycling proper as well as the act of appropriating cultural concepts and re-defining them.

⁶ As to *Vohou Vohou* see Fillitz 2002a.

⁷ See Fillitz 2002b.

While this list could easily be extended, the few examples given will suffice to make us understand how and why contemporary artists in Africa are touchy about the so-called anthropological gaze in the European-American art world. They are either originally connected to a local social phenomenon, as a citizen from Benin one of course has to do with Vodoun, or specific artworks are related to an original context which has to be explained/translated, or there is no discrimination between artworks and other objects, all are considered either as material culture or as artworks from Africa. For one thing these artists are seen as Africans who happen to be in art and not as contemporary artists expressing themselves by means of contemporary art forms on specific cultural, political and social topics. Thus, their works are denied perception of their respective formal characteristics. Much rather, an implicit assumption of cultural difference is turned into a reason for asserting that such artworks require a culture-specific (i.e. contextualized), original explanation. Not that with works of contemporary art in Africa one is given a choice between their reception via an act of seeing and a reception via an act of cultural contextualization. Such works are refused their being sensually experienced by being looked at; in other words: They are refused an equal footing with contemporary works of European or American artists. "Are Western artists treated like that? We are always looked at with an anthropological gaze. We have to be like this! We are not accepted as artists; that's bad" (Hazoum  08/10/97).

SENSE-MAKING AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE

What is being referred to with the notion of the anthropological gaze is a particular way of sense-making, which is identified with the practice of anthropology. Firstly, an original social and cultural context is assumed for any artefact; secondly, this artefact has to be translated within this context to a European or American public; and thirdly, it is believed that the overall meaning of the artefact is rooted within these original relationships. The critique of this approach opts on the one hand for a sensuous perception of the artwork within a so-called white cube, relying therefore on its formal aspects for apprehension. On the other, it argues against the idea of an original context and rather emphasises the multiplicity of contexts within which the artwork may be meaningful. This latter aspect actually would constitute a major quality of the artwork.

Regarding the characteristics of the presumed practice of anthropology, it is obvious that they refer to the classic concept of context as developed by Malinowski. The context of any phenomenon is society as a delimited entity in relative isolation, and as constituted by a functional holism. As Roy Dillely remarks, "it is a process that has been seen as unproblematic" (Dillely 1999: 1). Roger Keesing was one of the first who problematised this practice, and stated that contexts are "in our heads, not out there" (Keesing 1972: 28). Many critiques and reflections have been expressed on the anthropological endeavour of constructing these cultural wholes by remarking the difference between the work of representation of the anthropologist and the former narrative of the interlocutors, or by questioning the dominant authority of the anthropologist etc. Solutions are sought in re-centring the construction of context on our interlocutors. For instance: George Marcus (1989) negates any master-narrative to the advantage of the discursive dimension. Marilyn Strathern suggests scrutinizing "the manner in which our subjects dismantle their own constructs" (Strathern 1992: 76). We should wonder how our interlocutors construct the relationship between part and wholes. And Ladislav

Holy suggests a shift of our interests towards contextualization as an interactive process, “a socially and culturally situated practice” (Holy 1999: 58).

All these reflections however also articulate a critique of the European-American mode of producing sense by contextualizing and re-contextualizing, i.e. of combining parts and wholes in different manners as to constitute the knowledge of the object (Strathern 1992). Thereafter the critiques argue on the one hand against a Malinowskian consideration of context for a phenomenon, as well as against an endless multiplicity of contexts in the scramble for meaning of the object (Schlecker/Hirsch 2001). Regarding the object of the anthropology of art, the first aspect concerns the relationship of the artwork to the presumed original socio-cultural context. Speaking somewhat generally, I would state that until far into the 20th century the artistic nature of the object was either ignored, or considered from a technical viewpoint. Artworks were analysed as to their function in the social framework, or the analysis focused on their cultural and political meanings within clearly definable local societies. While occasionally the formal aspects of works of art were altogether neglected, they seem to be of at least secondary importance to anthropology’s approach to art, as means for understanding cultural structuring and visual perception.⁸

Although the anthropology of art does not differentiate between high and low art forms, and has no restricted concept of art (Benzing 1978), it nevertheless was limited in the types of artworks it dealt with, because of this specific practice of contextualization. The postulates of the cultural otherness and of the socially bounded artefacts require the socio-cultural contexts for their sense-making, and this was until recently the proper field of the anthropology of art. Besides traditional art, airport or tourist art⁹ is a theme because of the semiotic dimensions within local contexts, and its stereotypical inventions of Africa for tourists from Europe, while popular art¹⁰ is closely connected to features of the colonial-historical and especially the postcolonial-urban background. Typically, therefore, only the topic of popular art was entrusted to anthropologists in the volume of the periodical of contemporary art *Kunstforum*, which was dedicated to contemporary art by artists from African states (Bender/Ströter-Bender 1993).

Thus, two mechanisms from within anthropology contributed to the production of the pejorative meaning of the anthropological gaze – the production of the otherness of the artwork, which ended up in claiming the need for the socio-cultural contextualization. This is one side of the theme. The anthropology of art however has until recently neglected to deal with those contemporary artists in Africa who have had an academic training, or those living in Europe and America. Likewise, it has largely ignored many of those who, without an academic background, have been integrated into the European-American art world. Why should anthropologists then be critiqued for a practice, which they did not apply upon these contemporary artists? In this scope, the anthropological gaze criticized by contemporary artists in African states has to be seen, first of all, as a product of European-American art discourses in which exclusion, or specific types of circulation of contemporary art from non-Western centres are monitored and controlled.

Such discourse may well be traced back to the concept of art world as offered in 1964 by Arthur Danto. He interpreted it at first as a style matrix by means of which works

⁸ See Coote/Shelton 1992.

⁹ See e.g. Graburn 1976, Jules-Rosette 1984, Phillips/Steiner 1999.

¹⁰ See Szombati-Fabian/Fabian 1978, Fabian 1996.

of art are turned into "an organic community and by their very existence release energies latent in other works" (Danto 2000: 213). But of course, Danto's art world comprised only art from the Occident, and was not considering art of artists from other regions of the world. However, since the late 1980s more and more contemporary artists from African states demand, in various ways, their right as members of such an organic, global community. In this connection the art historian Hans Belting speaks of a world art, which could become the symbol of a new unity of the world (Belting 1995: 72). Right away, however, he qualifies this statement and stresses that the Western art world could not integrate unlimited numbers of artists (Belting 1998: 53): art-historical reflections make him point out power relations in this world art.

With respect to the exhibition "Kunstwelten im Dialog. Von Gauguin zur globalen Gegenwart", Museum Ludwig in Cologne (1999/2000),¹¹ Belting asserts that what is involved is "our own concept of art, which, in the long run, cannot remain unharmed by such pluralism ... Possibly, non-Western art will introduce an altogether foreign and incomprehensible idea of art to institutions representing our own culture" (Belting 1999: 325). And Marc Scheps, former director of this very museum and one of the exhibition curators,¹² agrees with Belting that culture, though a unifying element in a human group, represents "also a barrier that is to protect it against anything foreign" (Scheps 1999: 16, my translation).

From the viewpoint of anthropology the premises of this argumentation have to be emphasised. One has to wonder why, within an intellectual space, culture is dealt with as being homogeneous, characteristic for a specific society, and is moreover considered as constituting a boundary by its own right. Such an essentialist discourse on culture is opposed to the processual one, which is precisely referred to in the title of the show. Speaking of Gauguin, rather than thinking of "barriers" (!), one should recollect his journey to Polynesia and the artistic expression of his interaction with local people and cultural forms, which is defined as "romantic" Primitivism by Robert Goldwater (1986). From the same viewpoint one should recall the whole phenomenon of Primitivism of around 1900, especially "intellectual" Primitivism (Goldwater 1986), i.e. the reception of traditional African art by the Cubists in Paris. The European-American art world was quite eager to take over (discover) those art forms from Africa. As Belting fittingly notes, Occidental art history quickly heralded this as an event and appropriated them right away, although classifying them with its own period before the advent of history (Belting 1995: 73).

Contemporary art in Africa harks back to multifarious traditions, with new ones having been and still being developed occasionally; yet it has to be pointed out that not all of these art traditions have been or are foreign to art history of the Occident. Thus, upon an invitation from the artist Aina Onobolu in the early 1920s, the British painter Kenneth Murray moved to Nigeria in order to teach portrait and landscape painting there. And ever since 1936, when the Art Department was founded in Accra (it later was moved to the University of Science and Technology at Kumasi/Ghana), curricula of European art academies were taken over by the colonial states and subsequently by the postcolonial ones.

I contend that there may be an art historical problem of how these arts of the world may be connected; specifically how Occidental art history fits within this network. The con-

¹¹ "Art Worlds in Dialogue. From Gauguin to Present-Day Globalism."

¹² The two others were Yilmaz Dziewior and Barbara M. Thiemann.

struction of difference, as with the above mentioned concept of culture as a barrier, is however a reaction to nowadays usual interactions. Such an anthropological gaze on the work of artists of African countries is not merely a result of anthropological approaches. In this discourse, a presumably widely accepted practice of anthropological contextualization is adopted by agents from the European-American art world for producing difference and distance.

WORK OF ART, CONTEXT, AND ART DISCOURSE

It would be too easy to reduce the perception and reception of contemporary art from Africa to the simple dichotomy: formal perception by art history and art criticism or contextualization of a work of art by anthropology. For one thing, modern anthropology in no way proposes to interpret a work of art exclusively within its presumably original context as the only one in which it could be understood. George Marcus and Fred Myers (1995), for instance, formulate a program for their critical anthropology of art, in which they draw our attention on mechanisms of how the contemporary European-American art world deals with art, and how transfers between contexts change the relative importance and meaning of the artwork. "In this regard, the very specific anthropological critique would concern the world's *manner* of assimilating, incorporating, or making its own cross-cultural difference" (Marcus/Myers 1995: 33; authors' stress).¹³

As mentioned at the outset, contextualization of art is not the exclusive monopoly of anthropology. As an argument against plain perception (seeing in the abstract), postmodern art critics like the American Griselda Pollock (1993) stress the value (not the quality) of the work of art, in order to gain insights into cultural and social relations. And in the perspective of global flows of artworks, Thomas McEvelley envisages that the only point of art criticism from now on will be its sharpening of our critical faculties and applying them to all aspects of culture (McEvelley 1991: 177).

It must be admitted, however, that the question of this cultural and/or social context is much more of a problem than it seems. To give an example: In 1966, at the "Premier Festival des Arts Nègres" in Dakar, Michel Leiris, misjudging both the development of art forms in urban Africa in the 20th century and the pluralist social framework in the young postcolonial states, called this modern art a "*peinture bâtarde*", a mongrel form, with the artists no longer being truly African, "*plus vraiment africains*", as they had been trained in a Western system or were in frequent contact with the West (Lebeer 1994: 90). The above-mentioned, New-York-based Thomas McEvelley (1993) slid into a kind of primitivisation of the artist Ouattara whom he interviewed at the Venice Biennale of 1993, when he asked the artist first about Abidjan, his family, language, healing/divination, ritual and initiation before turning to the subject proper, which was the work of Ouattara.¹⁴

One should also note that many of those exhibitions of contemporary art forms by artists from Africa that take place in the white cubes of galleries or museums of modern art tend to offer side-programmes, including workshops, music groups from Africa, food cooked to recipes of various African cuisines, as e.g. at "Flash Afrique! Fotografie aus Westafrika"

¹³ The movement of artworks actually had been dealt with in respect to traditional art by authors like Price (1989), Errington (1998), and including airport art by Phillips/Steiner (1999).

¹⁴ See the criticism of Olu Oguibe 1995.

in Vienna's Kunsthalle (autumn 2001). As that is not done in group exhibitions of artists from European or American regions, we have here classical (though unintended) cases of contextualization by means of a form of anthropological gaze. In this respect it should also be noted that quite often such exhibitions are co-sponsored by development organisations, either governmental or non-governmental. For Bernhard Fibicher, director of Kunsthalle Bern, such joint ventures indicate that it is not only artistic interests that are at stake here (Fibicher 2000: 20).

All too readily context is regarded as a frame of reference naturally given in social reality. In fact, however, contextualization is nothing other than the construction of a matrix for ordering and classificatory purposes. The wording of the paradigm of postmodern art criticism by Thomas McEvilley makes this quite clear: "The critic will come to see art as culture and culture as anthropology" (McEvilley 1991: 177). Nonetheless, anthropology has to counter with the slogan "to see arts as *part of culture*" (my italics). The plural of arts points to manifold art forms which are being created side by side today: they adhere to diverse formal canons, they express diverse attitudes *vis-à-vis* various aspects of reality, and they are the subjects of diverse reception discourses and systems of circulation. In addition, these art forms constitute only parts of culture, if culture is considered as a larger concept. And last but not least, instead of conceiving culture as a closed-off homogeneous whole, and shared by all members of a society, rather, we may consider that its specific character is depending on its distributive character and on the ways and means of its unboundedness.

Context as the relation between an artwork and its cultural context is much more complex than the mere equation art = culture, even with culture very widely defined. With reference to paintings, Belting points to one problem of seeing them in a socio-cultural context. He speaks of "an *ex post facto* revenge on the artist" that takes place once the work of art "is taken to be an illustration of a historical situation" (Belting 1985: 223, my translation). Indeed, context for him denotes first of all the pictorial archive of Occidental art history (Belting 1995, 1999).

No doubt, context also refers to the formal qualities among artworks. But even these formal aspects and interconnections at a global dimension raise further areas and problems. Paul Faber (1992) warns of the danger of seeing artworks in the abstract, in view of the fact that this process implicitly draws on certain ordering criteria, mostly of Occidental art historical origin. By seeing in the abstract one misses information about the position of certain works within their local frames of art creation. Within a transnational frame, what an European or American observer may take to be a repetition of art forms already existing in Europe or America, need be nothing of the sort in its local context. The artwork of the *Vohou Vohou* in Ivory Coast is such a case. As to its formal characteristics it may be briefly described as the composition of artworks from diverse materials to be found in one's everyday local surroundings (sand, cardboard, wood, bark cloth, tin, newspapers etc.) from the perspective of a modern art training. Stumbling upon the catalogue of an exhibition of works by Antoni Tàpies in 1975, those local artists were struck by the indisputable formal likeness between their works and his. One of the students of the group even wondered at the time how Tàpies could have copied them (N'Guessan 26/07/1997).

As a matter of fact, neither did they know about Tàpies, nor did he know about them. If the *Vohou Vohou* would have been directly connected to the narrative of Western modern art, the relationship to Tàpies might have been considered in another perspective. Above all, the local and regional impact of the *Vohou Vohou* art creations would be deeply neglected. As documenting the problem of these formal narratives, works by Tàpies are to be found in all

major collections of international museums of modern art, while those of *Vohou* artists have rarely been exhibited in Europe and Northern America so far.

Making sense of artworks entails a multiplicity of contexts. Basically there are the formal and the socio-cultural ones. However these two contexts are within themselves highly diversified, corresponding to connections of the artist's reflections as well as to the tracks artwork may move along. In this perspective, one can no longer speak of an original context and one of reception. Rather, it is to scrutinize how an artwork is connected to larger entities in specific situations. Earlier I mentioned an exhibition on recycled artefacts that had been combined with artworks, which in one way or another were relying on the concept of *récupération*.¹⁵ By connecting the artworks of contemporary artists such as Romuald Hazoumé and Youssouf Bath to artefacts from a special area of economic activity, the artistic processes of *récupération* were assimilated to the one of the transformation of waste. Constituting the relationship between part (the artwork) and whole – recycled artefacts as documents of creativity in African societies – in this case relates precisely to the practice of making sense in an exhibition which has been designed for a North American public.

Actually, the question of the otherness of an artwork of an artist from Africa (or elsewhere) is a matter of how this otherness is postulated by this same artist. Let me turn to the adjective African in the notion of "contemporary African art". The artist Moustapha Dimé, who died in 1998, rejected the designation; Ousmane Sow refuses to participate in those group exhibitions where the title contains the word Africa. Their rejection of this overall classification thought up by European and Northern American art specialists corresponds to a construction of otherness, and produces hierarchies. At the outset, the notion African raises the question of when an artwork may be characterised as such, and whether this implies an othering, in which such an artwork would no longer belong to the overall category art as defined by modern Western narratives.

All artists, however, do not reject the adjective African. From numerous personal conversations with artists in Ivory Coast and in Benin, I came away with a much more differentiated idea of what the African dimension in this contemporary art could be (see Fillitz 2002 a). For all these artists it is quite self-evident to figure themselves as parts of the organic community of artists and their works, to use Arthur Danto's expression (Danto 2000: 213). But the question of how exactly each one of them fits within this community as a truly global concept, has to be answered according to individual strategies. Romuald Hazoumé for instance insists on the adjective African; for him it signals unmistakably that an artist will no longer subject his work to the patronizing of European-American reasoning and formal canons. At the other end of the scale there is Yacouba Touré.¹⁶ Around 1996 he rejected the adjective as fervently as Hazoumé pleads for it; but he reminded one that the term African was highly significant for the *Négritude* movement in Senegal in the 1960s and 1970s, and for the *Vohou Vohou* movement in Ivory Coast from the late 1970s till the late 1980s. At that time it was a matter of emancipation from the tutelage of European canons, and of a search for autonomous ways of representation, based on world art discourses, and not on the interaction with any regional, traditional ones. By now, however, Touré called for contemporary art

¹⁵ See "Ingénieuse Afrique", Quebec 1994.

¹⁶ He unfortunately died in July 2002.

in general to permit the artist to pick up whatever artistic tradition in the world he cares to – without any outside determination.

Many other artists, while rejecting the epithet African, point out particularities of artistic interaction either with the environment or with expressive forms from wherever. As the notion of contemporary African art meanwhile became an established designation in European-American art discourses, Georges Adéagbo thinks that all that matters is to understand what it is being used for: he relates it to present-day discourses of power in Europe and Northern America, which deal with including, defining, and circulating the works of artists of African origin.

Whether African is acknowledged or refused, the connection is less to a local tradition but to world art (world community of artists). In any of these comprehensions, what matters is the way how the otherness is constructed in relationship to an envisaged community of the artists and their artworks of the world. The production of difference here does not imply a boundary tracing, but, rather, refers to how each of these artists intends to participate in the transnational discourses of representing the recent, postcolonial world.

A PLEA FOR DISCURSIVE RELATIONS

In the foregoing discussion I have tried to show that the reproach of an anthropological gaze on contemporary arts has, from an anthropological perspective, historical roots. The notion had been linked to otherness, and the need for translating such a differently positioned artwork within an original context.

However, the context of a phenomenon is anything but naturally given. Critiques in anthropology itself have emphasised the constructivist dimension of context, which we ourselves are producing in order to analyse the phenomenon, which is to be explained. Turning things around, scholars suggested that context should be studied as the activity of our interlocutors, in how they are relating part and wholes (Strathern 1992). Actually, the anthropological gaze on contemporary artists of Africa concerned at least as much a specific practice of European-American discourses about their art. As the latter is deeply embedded within an Occidental art historical narrative, the process of othering produces difference by postulating cultural distance. Instead of using a processual concept of culture, an essentialist one is adopted.

In order to overcome the mutual reproaches of negative anthropological gazes which harm the perspective on contemporary art, I argue for approaching art via a multiplicity of contexts. This is proposed not in the conviction that more contexts entail more or a better knowledge. Such an assumption is critiqued by Schlecker and Hirsch (2001). Multiplicity of contexts refers foremost to the fundamental aspects of form and content which inform any artwork. Instead of advocating a dichotomy between either formal reception, or socio-cultural contextualization, both should be considered as two discourses which are complementary to each other, and are constitutive of the artwork.

Nigel Whiteley, for instance, proposes the concept of critical looking, the act of relating visual sensation and cognitive experience, “which makes one see the artwork” (Whiteley 1999: 118). By means of this concept, Whiteley wants to express the relationship between visual perception as the experience of a moment, and contextualization as an experience within a wider time horizon, “a return in criticism to the artwork as a material and experien-

tial presence, but, for the most part, this scrutiny will be part of a dialogue between form and meaning” (Whiteley 1999: 120).

Moreover, the multiplicity of contexts must be seen in relation to the networks within which artworks are circulating. The notion of multiplicity therefore is understood as how, in each case, an artefact is being considered as art, and what these processes entail (see Marcus/Myers 1995). This is no more a reference to an original context and one of reception, nor is it a claim for multiplying contexts. It is a scrutiny of how, in each specific setting, meaning is being produced.

In this scope, the mentioning of the anthropological gaze revealed, above all, that even the strictly visual perception of an artwork (in the abstract) is tied up in power discourses. Such a pre-selection determines in advance whether a work can or cannot be seen by beholders of specific art worlds. European-American dominance in the world of art could be countered by unceasing differentiation among the multifarious contemporary manifestations of art, in other words by discursive rather than disjunctive relations between art criticism, art history, and anthropology of art as to their common topic, in this case as to contemporary art by artists hailing from Africa.

POVZETEK

Pojem antropološkega pogleda/strmenja zaobjema specifičen način ustvarjanja smisla, ki je značilen za antropološko prakso. V povezavi z antropologijo umetnosti se nanaša na: prvič, zahtevo po izvirnem družbenem in kulturnem kontekstu kateregakoli ročnega izdelka; drugič, prevajanje tega izdelka, znotraj tovrstnega konteksta, evropski in ameriški publikii; in tretjič, prepričanje, da je celosten pomen tega izdelka zakoreninjen v njegovih izvirnih odnosih. V pričujočem članku avtor predlaga, da je slabšalni pomen pojma antropološkega pogleda/strmenja deloma nastal zaradi klasičnega pojmovanja konteksta, kot ga je razvil Malinowski. Mnoge kritike in refleksije so obravnavale antropološko kontekstualiziranje in poudarile razliko med predstavitvijo in opisovanjem antropologov ter predhodno zgodbo udeležencev v pogovoru. Namesto, da se ukvarjamo z dihotomijo med izvirnem kontekstom in kontekstom dojemanja umetniškega dela, se avtor zavzema za tisti pristop k umetnosti, ki bi upošteval mnogoterost kontekstov. Mnogoterost kontekstov se najprej nanaša na temeljne vidike oblike in vsebine, ki zaznamujejo katerokoli umetniško delo. Mnogoterost kontekstov se nadalje nanaša na mreže znotraj katerih umetniško delo kroži. Avtor v članku poziva k odmiku od zgoraj omenjene dihotomije, hkrati pa ne zagovarja potrebe po pomnoževanju kontekstov zgolj zaradi prepričanja, da bi se na ta način ustvarilo ustrezno znanje. Zagovarja skrbno preučevanje načinov, kako ljudje ustvarjajo pomene znotraj posameznih specifičnih okolij.

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