

WITTEVEEN
VISUAL ART CENTRE
MAGAZINE

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WHAT ABOUT AFRICA?

14 CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ARTISTS

23 JAN – 27 FEB 2016

When I was in Johannesburg in 1996, I visited the Artist Proof Studio. Kim Bermann set up this graphic studio when she was starting a training center for selected students from the surrounding shantytowns such as Soweto. The studio still exists and functions as a thriving center for training. William Kentridge (a friend of Kim) supports the studio with the marvelous graphic publications he makes. The young people there produce fantastic work and there have been several exchanges with us, both of students and exhibitions.

When I was there in 1996, there was a big, old power station not far away in which the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale was held, curated by Okwui Enwezor. This was where his justly deserved international success began. Such as Documenta 11 and the 2015 Venice Biennale.

The art from all over Africa that I saw at the Johannesburg Biennale filled me with admiration. It was an overwhelming experience. I later visited the major galleries in Cape Town that were also exhibiting extremely good African artists.

In 2000 I met Rob Perrée who had also been affected by the originality and purity and directness of these images. Rob has several publications on African American art to his name. He now has Africanah.org, an online magazine for and about the African American and African visual arts. How widely read his magazine is soon became clear to us when we were visiting artists in London and Paris on behalf of this exhibition: laughter and then 'yes, that's him.' Rob's broad knowledge of the topic is certainly one of the reasons this wonderful exhibition is happening.

We have selected both older and younger artists, all of which are nevertheless highly reputed. Many are already with major galleries but also only recently graduated from the Rijksakademie. Many were surprised that attention was now coming from the Netherlands. They already have a presence in London, Paris, New York, China, South Korea.

You will have the opportunity to enjoy these major talents from January 23 up to and including February 27 and I hope that it will also open your eyes about Africa and the wonderful, imposing art that is being produced there.

Since this exhibition is so extraordinary, the entire magazine has been devoted to it and has been written in English because of the international participants.

I wish you all a very Happy New Year, and I am looking forward to yet more marvelous exhibitions in the future!

**Best wishes,
Oeke Witteveen**



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The first edition of Africanah.org was launched online just over two years ago. An online magazine that aims to provide insight and information about contemporary African, African American and Caribbean art. Five new pieces or interviews every month and daily news about exhibitions, events, lectures, books and about individual artists. In addition Africanah.org would organize activities that would promote interest in this particular field. Africanah.org became a foundation with a small board, an editor-in-chief – Rob Perrée – and a standby senior editor – Clewert Sylvester. With the aid of an occasional intern. Funding would have to come through donations.

Africanah.org now has a monthly total of between 10,000 and 15,000 international visitors. Most are from the US, followed by Europe and Africa. The Caribbean brings up the rear. In the meantime more than 20 international authors have made contributions and there are more than 1,250 archived items.

Last year Africanah.org organized three African Art Salons in collaboration with the Centrum voor Beeldende Kunst (Center for the Visual Arts) (CBK) Zuidooost in Amsterdam and the editor-in-chief gave lectures at the University of Birmingham and at New York University in Florence.

'What about Africa?' is organized by Africanah.org in collaboration with Witteveen visual art centre Amsterdam. ■

AFRICANAH.ORG
Arena for contemporary African,
African-American & Caribbean art

WHAT ABOUT AFRICA?

About twenty years ago I went to New York to write a book about socially engaged art. Fate, however, had other plans. There was Internet in those days, but no serious writer could place any trust in the search engines. Google was still a gleam in its creator's eye. I had therefore sent ahead two boxes of articles, books and photocopies.

Which never arrived.

After around ten days I received an envelope from the American Post Office. This contained a small plastic bag with a tiny piece of box. The exact piece on which my name was written. A cynical coincidence? It was all that was left of my package. Preparation gone, project gone.

Distraught I went to Broadway to see an exhibition in a not-for-profit gallery. I had to do something. A presentation of drawings and photographs by the African-American Adrian Piper was on. Shocking images on relevant pages of the New York Times and photo portraits of a beaming American mother with perfect child set against a pitiful black mother with a malnourished child. However much of a cliché this may seem now, the work came as a bombshell. Why didn't I know anything about the work of black artists? Why did I never see their work on the 'usual' gallery circuit?

My new project was born. The book about socially engaged art would have to become a book about African-American art and artists. Their engagement would be the cherry on top.

This book, 'Postcards from Black America', was published in 1998 together with a travelling exhibition. The Beyerd in Breda and the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem proved to be enthusiastic host museums.

In many cases immersing myself in the art of black Americans meant going back in time and back to African origins. As luck would have it I had been saddled with Africa, and I liked it. When I was asked in early 2000 to regularly write about African art, I had no hesitation. I had again found myself with a group of artists who were producing good work but for whom there was meager interest.

After a number of years I wanted to express my enthusiasm for this group with an exhibition and a book as well. It had been successful once and so should be again. There was one thing I had not reckoned with. I could not rouse any interest with the Dutch funds or sponsors. My interest was not matched by the attention for contemporary African art on 'the circuit'. The preconceptions were still standing in the way of any objective opinions being formed. The hoped-for knowledge of the new field left much to be desired. Africa did not yet exist.

Things are different now. African art is even threatening to become popular. Africans are represented, partly thanks to

the efforts of curators such as Okwui Enwezor, in many international exhibitions, biennales and documentas. Galleries are trying everything to entice them in, while they are still free. A cheering development, which nevertheless instills dread. It sometimes seems as if it is not the unique quality that counts, but rather the hard dollars forked out for works by African artists. The interest is green-backed.

The role played by the Netherlands in all this is remarkably small. Except for a very few galleries – Galerie 23 in Amsterdam for example and SANAA in Utrecht – there still seems to be hardly any interest for contemporary African art. Of course the Netherlands does not have a direct, colonial relationship with Africa, as is the case for England and France for instance. It makes a difference. Dutch museums that should have been acting as pioneers have been playing it safe for many years now. Another cause. Even ready-made African exhibitions, offered by leading exhibition makers, are being refused. Galleries, which are not able to capitalize on lots of generous art-buyers and willing collectors as it is, have not yet been ready to risk bringing in art "that doesn't sell anyway". Another possible explanation.

When Oeke Witteveen of Witteveen visual art centre invited me to jointly make an exhibition of contemporary African art, I did not need to be asked twice, as you can probably guess from the above. 'What about Africa?' was already nestled in my head. The exhibition was just waiting for its chance to be realized.

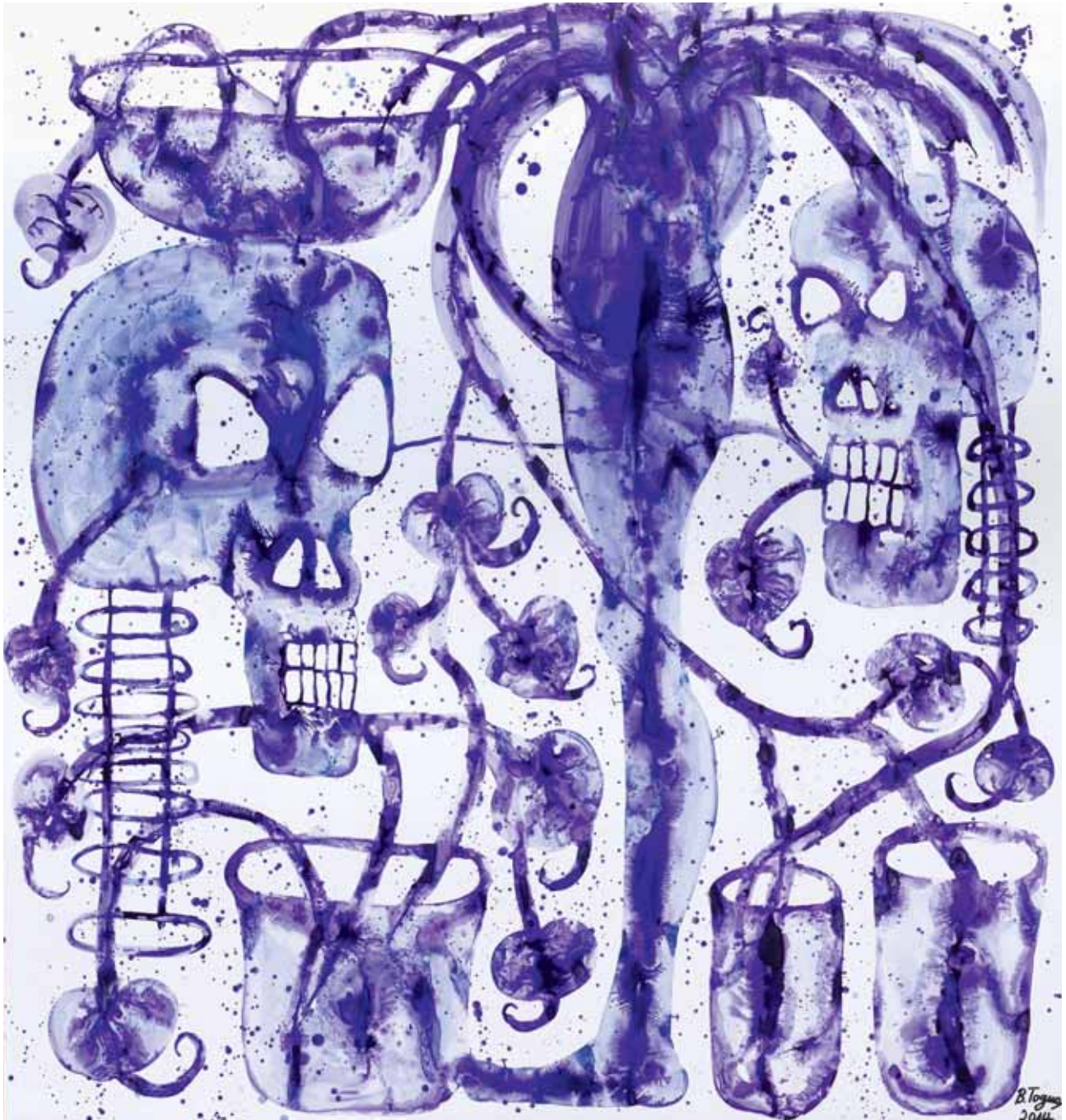
'What about Africa?' gives an impression of the quality of contemporary African art. We did not want to restrict the presentation by selecting works relating to a specific theme. We have deliberately based it on personal choice. Saying that, we have tried to cover as great a diversity of disciplines as possible, to have a variety of ages, to guarantee a wide range of subject matters, to make the distribution across Africa as broad as possible and to make no distinction between artists who live and work in Africa and artists in the Diaspora.

'What about Africa' has the potential to prepare the Netherlands for Africa.

'What about Africa' is above all an exhibition with surprising, inspirational, moving, intriguing art.

Rob Perrée

December 2015 ■



BARTHÉLÉMY TOGUO | The Perfect Wedding | 2014

BARTHÉLÉMY TOGUO

1967, Cameroon

„I have a role, and that is to create art, so that is what I do. I don't know if I'm well-known or not; it is not of interest to me. What is interesting is to have a career that you love, that inspires you, that pleases others and serves people. As an artist my role is to present a new reality, to make young people want to get involved in art and to open their minds. Also, I have a duty to Africa, I must give back what I gain from my artistic production to the continent.“

*From interview with AMA, Art Media Agency, September 2014.
Courtesy: Galerie Lelong, Paris*



BARTHÉLÉMY TOGUO | Don't Shoot I, 2015 | 2015



VITSHOIS MWILAMBWE BONDO | Untitled | 2015



VITSHOIS MWILAMBWE BONDO | Panic | 2011

VITSHOIS MWILAMBWE BONDO

1981, Democratic Republic of Congo

„My technique of using cuttings to compose figures, bodies, portraits and heads is a way for me to recreate the human body and construct a new society and to question the multiplicity of races and the various challenges arising from this multiplicity. The body is mutilated and chaotic, confronting us with the anarchic situation reflected in current political and socio-economic trends in Africa and worldwide.“

From website artist.

Courtesy: Gallery MOMO, Cape Town



KURA SHOMALI | Untitled | 2014



KURA SHOMALI | Les zazous de mon quartier | 2013

KURA SHOMALI

1979, Democratic Republic of Congo

„He creates works on paper in which he mixes with charcoal daring, ball pen, gouache, ink, marker and collage that give the texture and the unique aspect to his work. His first drawings, made in a kind of „emergency“ are inspired by the Kinshasa bubbling and magazines that will circulate from hand to hand. His work is a reflection of the chaotic megalopolis where he lives and that he ‘digests’ as he explains himself. In his most recent works, Kura Shomali appropriates images of well known African photographers and artists that he interprets with humor.“

From website Magnin-A/ Philippe Boutté, Paris.

Courtesy: Magnin-A, Paris

EPHREM SOLOMON

1985, Ethiopia

„My work portrays the distance between what the governed people need and want and what the response is from the governors. I have tried to picture, as precisely as possible, the actual and innocent feeling of the governed.

In a world where newness has become a value in and of itself, I am more moved by the compliment that what I am doing technically feels like something from the past, while embodying something that is currently relevant.“

From article of Lya Nuru on website EthioGrio, September 2013.

Courtesy: GuzoArtStudio

NOUR-EDDINE JARRAM

1956, Morocco

„From the beginning on pastels and paintings were his mediums. Perhaps as a consequence of his traditional but solid education at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Casablanca, Jarram is always experimenting with the possibilities of the materials he is using: the kind of paper; the kind of paint; the kind of linen; the effect of paint brushes, hair brushes, combs and spatulas; the size of his paintings and pastels; the mixing of paints; the tactility of the skin of a painting; the result of light in relation to space; the effect of stillness versus movement; the relation between color and content etc. These experiments lead to an oeuvre that, apart from the content, always knows how to surprise, how to trigger the viewer to pay attention.“

From article of Rob Perrée on Africanah.org, February 2015.

Courtesy: Maurits van de Laar, The Hague



EPHREM SOLOMON | Untitled | 2015



EPHREM SOLOMON | Untitled | 2015



NOUR-EDDINE JARRAM | Zonder Titel | 2015



NOUR-EDDINE JARRAM | Zonder Titel | 2015



ZARINA BHIMJI | *My Heart Was Beating Wildly* | 2001 – 2006

ZARINA BHIMJI

1963, Uganda

„I am interested in the spaces, micro-details, and the light of these distant interiors. The location of light is an element of my composition and becomes just as intricate and important as having a figure in my work. The still-ness has a suspension of everyday life, and yet narrative is deferred by mood and mystery and incompleteness. So that atmosphere is tactile, moist light. My work is not about actual fact, description. It is about abstraction. By having people, the work would become about description and facts. It is about light, texture, scale within the space, etc. I hope the work goes beyond historical specification.“

From interview with Chika Okeke Agulu on website Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, April 2014.

Courtesy: Lumen Travo, Amsterdam



ZARINA BHIMJI | *Da-Da* | 2001 – 2006



GOPAL DAGNOGO | *Dinner with poultries* | 2015

GOPAL DAGNOGO

1973, Ivory Coast

„For Andy Warhol and his associates the introduction of ‘mundane’ objects was the statement itself. For Dagnogo they stand for something, they are symbolic for a particular society (as the image elements in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat stand for something, are more than their representation). A society he knows from his youth and which can still – even if times have changed and the circumstances are different – reveal its bad side. They must refer to his homeland, Ivory Coast. The history of his country since independence (and for that matter, before) is a history characterized, branded even, by the chasm between the haves and the have-nots.“

From article of Rob Perrée on Africanah.org, October 2014.



GOPAL DAGNOGO | *Inner chaos n°5* | 2015

MESCHAC GABA

1961, Benin

„Meschac Gaba's oeuvre playfully occupies an independent, active and constructive position between oppositions. It renegotiates conditioned mental spaces, inviting new thoughts to replace old and outdated ones. Grand narratives of humanity are put forward, in symbolic languages. The viewer encounters a wide range of well chosen (re)presentations of human production and activities. And like in real life, there are people participating. The ultimate witness that reminds us that these phenomena are not reality is the art(ificial) context in which they are presented to the world. At least ... not counting his wedding and the 'Tresses' performances. The artist himself takes on a variety of roles, as we have seen: architect, peace messenger, cook, referee, curator, anthropologist, etc.“

From article of Daphne Pappers on Africanah.org, April 2014.

Courtesy: Lumen Travo, Amsterdam

Photography: Gert Jan van Rooij



MESCHAC GABA | detail Wisdom Lake/Lac de Sagesse | 2009



MESCHAC GABA | Wisdom Lake/Lac de Sagesse | 2009

OMAR VICTOR DIOP

1980, Senegal

„It started with me wanting to look at these historical black figures who did not fulfil the usual expectations of the African diaspora insofar as they were educated, stylish and confident, even if some of them were owned by white people and treated as the exotic other. Individuals such as Albert Badin, a Swedish court servant in the 18th century or Juan de Pareja, who was a member of Velázquez's household in the 17th century. I wanted to bring these rich historical characters into the current conversation about the African diaspora and contemporary issues around immigration, integration and acceptance.



OMAR VICTOR DIOP | Pedro Camejo | Diaspora Series | 2015

Soccer is an interesting global phenomenon that for me often reveals where society is in terms of race. When you look at the way that the African soccer royalty is perceived in Europe, there is a very interesting blend of glory, hero-worship and exclusion. Every so often, you get racist chants or banana skins thrown on the pitch and the whole illusion of integration is shattered in the most brutal way. It's that kind of paradox I am investigating in the work."

From interview of Sean O'Hagan with Diop in The Guardian, July 2015.

Courtesy: Magnin-A, Paris



OMAR VICTOR DIOP | Juan de Pareja | Diaspora Series | 2015

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

1955, South Africa

„There are certain objects which I have come to as someone making drawings, objects that meet the drawing half way. If you take an old Bakelite telephone, its blackness is already half way to being a charcoal drawing. But more than that, once you are drawing it, there is a set of associations that come from old, manual, mechanical switchboard telephones. If you think of a switchboard, there is a cord that would connect the caller and the receiver, and the representation of it looks like a black line drawn across the holes of the switchboard. In my case, of drawing and animation, something that is now perhaps invisible – connecting people across phone lines across continents – is rendered in a very visible way, and may even be a description of an obsolete process. It is not so much being fascinated with the ideas of the late nineteenth century, but that it was still such a „visible“ era, in a way in which an electronic era is not. Even if one is talking about contemporary phenomena, very often an older representation is a better way of drawing it.“

**WILLIAM KENTRIDGE**Act III, Scene 9, from the portfolio *Ubu Tells the Truth* | 1996

From article of Margaret K. Koerner on *The New York Review of Books Daily*, June 2012.

Courtesy: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg/Cape Town

**WILLIAM KENTRIDGE** | From Universal Archive, ref. 56 (David Krut Projects) | 2012



THIERRY OUSSOU | The Beautiful Dutch II | 2015



THIERRY OUSSOU | The Beautiful Dutch III | 2015

THIERRY OUSSOU

1988, Benin

„Thierry Oussou prefers paper over canvas. Canvas is stern and rigid. Paper is more humble, the most basic carrier of images, of messages. Moreover, it can be torn, pasted together with other pieces of paper, and thus grow almost indefinitely. That makes paper very suitable for Oussou's work. Oussou is like a social archeologist, observing the people around him, digging into their motivations and documenting their interaction. The composition of paper scraps indicates layers of history separating his protagonists, isolation because of social or economic station, the breakdown of communication, and the constant struggle between ego and community.“

From website Rijksakademie, 2015.

Courtesy: Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town



THIERRY OUSSOU | Contemporary Psalm I | 2015

DAWIT ABEBE

1978, Ethiopia

„These days we are represented by numbers – phone numbers, house numbers and license plates, to name a few. They have become a part of our identity. Unlike before, it is now impossible to live without these codes and numbers in modern societies.

I used newspapers (...) because they provide information about what is happening in our daily life, which relates to my artistic ideas and the focus on social commentary in my paintings. As an art form, I also like the texture of newspapers and the Amharic alphabet.“

From interview on Art Radar, June 2015.

Courtesy: Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London



DAWIT ABEBE | X PRIVACY 8 | 2015 (2008)



DAWIT ABEBE | X PRIVACY 7 | 2015 (2008)



HAMID EL KABOUHI | mal din dymak/ What the fuck is with the religion of your mother, detail installation Nest, The Hague | 2015



HAMID EL KABOUHI | mal din dymak/ What the fuck is with the religion of your mother, detail installation Nest, The Hague | 2015



HAMID EL KABOUHI | mal din dymak/ What the fuck is with the religion of your mother, detail installation Nest, The Hague | 2015

HAMID EL KABOUHI

1976, Morocco

„I have a problem. There's nowhere I feel at home and I don't want to feel at home anywhere because it's just an addiction and you can easily live without it, like all other addictions. I try to walk on water or on the air looking for an alternative to ...”

From a text that went with his performance, November 2015, Nest, The Hague.

Courtesy: Nouvelles Images, The Hague

PHOEBE BOSWELL

1982, Kenya

„I have always had a delicate understanding of the meaning of ‚home‘.

I think that the most personal things are usually the most universal. It is when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable in our communication, to be honest and generous, that we allow people in. And once they are allowed in, they start to see themselves through you. Communicating that with another person, a stranger, perhaps someone who doesn't have links to Kenya, and for them to feel it, and learn from it is for sure the ultimate bonus.“

From interview with Clelia Coussonnet in IAM, Intense Art Magazine, September 2015.

Courtesy: Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London ■



PHOEBE BOSWELL | Matatizo | 2015



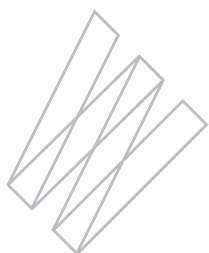
PHOEBE BOSWELL | Corporeal | 2015

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