

Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe

Before any attempt to map the terrain of conceptualism in contemporary African art, a clarification of what we mean by 'conceptualism' or 'conceptual art' would be helpful. Conceptual art emerged in the last century from a long series of often unconnected and not altogether intentional acts and interventions in which artists elected or rejected certain forms or strategies in art making and in the process revised received understanding of the nature and essence of art. Because these interventions in several different locations and precede the term itself, most recent historiographers of conceptual art admit that attempts to designate a firm genealogy or lineage can only be futile, or at best viewed with skepticism.¹ It is perhaps more helpful, therefore, to look instead at the different traits and characteristics that have come to be associated with conceptual art, at least in the West.

The first of these is self-reflexivity, by which the work of art is turned on itself and ultimately on the very notion of art. Different scholars trace the emergence of this tendency in art to different moments and protagonists even several centuries before the advent of conceptual art as a recognizable strategy. Godfrey makes mention of the classical writer Pliny's story of a 4th century ac painting competition between the artists Zeuxis and Parrhasios in which both were required to make the most mimetically faithful still life, and the later won by painting a curtain so realistic that his competitor tried to pull it back to reveal the non-existent still life behind it. An Arab version of the myth of an innkeeper painting polishing the wall opposite his competitor's mural till it shown like a mirror, thus reflecting the other painter's work on his wall rather than executing another mural. In both cases the artwork plays with received notions, even convictions held sacred, and raising the question; what is real about art and what is its true nature? Despite the limited frames within which society embeds it, is art a reflection of reality, or a part of reality, or both, or neither? In Velasquez's Las Meninas the painter takes the liberty - quite unusual for its time - to insert himself and his canvas in the family portrait he is commissioned to paint. Thus the canvas is made to mirror itself, to write itself into the painting, thus revealing itself as no more than canvas.

In our own time many trace the most celebrated return of this element in the Western tradition to Marcel Duchamp and his Bicycle Wheel of 1913 in which he foregrounds the cubists by integrating a 'real' object into a work of art, or better still, converts a 'real' object into an 'art' object, thus pushing the limits of the acceptable and raising the question as to what is art in the work and what is real. Duchamp would of course supersede this four years later in 1917 when he pseudonymously presented an overturned porcelain urinal to the Society of Independent Artists in New York as a work of art. In a letter to his sister, Duchamp intimated that the work was made not by himself but by a female friend whom many suspect to be his promoter, the journalist Louise Norton. Whatever its true authorship, Fountain was significant for its relevance, namely that it questioned not only the general social definition of art in the West since the Greeks, by which art was restricted to varying degrees of mimesis, but also the convictions of even artists who considered themselves radical and opposed to the staid aesthetics of the Academy. Fountain was also presented as a critique of Western painting at the turn of the 20th century, and it should be recalled that it would be another decade before Georges Braque (and then, Picasso) made what some would consider the radical shift that Duchamp anticipated and sought with his critique.

In other words it could be said that the roots of conceptual art lie somewhat in these efforts to make art that questions its own nature and stature, rejects the cult of the artist's hand and uniqueness of the

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art object as fetishized In the West, as well as problematizing the desire for coherence and narrative consistency. The practice would continue with the Dadaists, and proliferate in the late 20th century, eventually becoming a foundation stone of conceptual art. These instances of evident self-reflexivity in art are worth recalling only for the reason that they went against the grain of the traditions within which they were produced. As Duchamp's own writings indicate, it is debatable whether the element of self-reflexivity in these instances was a priori, that is to say a matter of intention and therefore a prerequisite to the work's own existence, or whether on the contrary it is merely a matter of reading and ascription after the fact. In other words it is questionable whether a work of art must be intended to reflect or meditate on the subject of art in order to qualify as conceptual art, as opposed to merely incorporating this element or tendency even without clear intention, or as an inherent nature of art.

Another element that has come to be associated with conceptual art is the disdain for objectness as *sine qua non*, and the move towards what Lucy Lippard notoriously termed the 'dematerialization of art object'.² In this regard, art ceases to be defined merely along the predictable lines of the tangible and categorizable, as either painting or sculpture. Forms and enactments outside these traditional Western categories become acceptable as art and the notion of the object becomes redundant. Again, it is difficult to trace the emergence of this element to any particular moment or figure, but in the West the Dada group could be credited with initiating the process of its institutionalization. In the 1960s and 1970s, the preeminence of text over image which artists like Francis Picabia and other members of the Dada group pioneered at the turn of the century became pronounced especially in America, and other forms such as performance, again in many cases drawing on the examples of Dada, gained legitimacy. In England language became the preeminent locus of activity and meaning as opposed to image.

A third crucial element or tendency in conceptual art is the preeminence of framing, whereby the placement of a work of art and the consequent context become more important to its meaning and significance than its form or its 'aesthetic' qualities. In other words, whereas within tradition meaning was dependent on narrative evident in the image, and on the manipulation of elements of design to achieve this narrative or coherent image, in conceptual art these become secondary to the careful location of the work in relation to its surroundings and their relevant associations. Elaborate allegory gives way to metaphor, and the window on the wall is subjugated and redefined. In his *One and Three Chairs* in 1965, American artist Joseph Kosuth combined many of these elements, integrating a 'real chair' in the manner of Duchamp's ready-mades, and employing text and language through which the work was made to reflect not only on the question of the nature and meaning of art, but also on the indeterminacy of the 'real' within its own components.

Ultimately conceptualism becomes an umbrella term for a myriad of art practices and forms that go beyond painting and sculpture, including performance, video art, and assemblage and installation as strategies of multi media spectacle in which temporal and spatial dimensions as well as issues of the self and the body can be explored simultaneously. As Alexander Alberro observes:

The conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness towards definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution.³

In more ways than one, conceptual art has never been a monolithic practice or unified artistic discourse, but a contested field of multiple theoretical and practical positions.⁴ Also, as Godfrey notes in the introduction to his history of conceptual art, 'Conceptual art was, and is, a truly international phenomenon!'⁵

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Shaddad
(ance), 1975
Ministry of Culture, Khartoum, Sudan
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Yet, rarely any discussion of conceptualism and conceptual art practices has tried to map its terrain outside the West, with the exception of the recent exhibition Global Conceptualism at the Queens Museum in New York in which such an attempt was made. Neither has there been any effort to explore possible sources or origins of conceptualism outside the West. That the influence of the non-Western world on conceptualism be explored strongly recommends itself in light of two considerations, among many First, it is obvious that certain strategies adopted by Western conceptualists be it in performance art, in stallation, text-based art, use of the found object and the ephemeral, were already evident in non-western artistic, philosophical and spiritual practices, be they African, Asian, or Middle Eastern. Here, one can simply cite the evocation of eastern philosophy and spiritualism in the performance work of Yoko Ono and the installations of Judy Chicago. Also, in general the performance-based and installation works of many conceptual artists evince striking familiarity with display strategies in African and Oceanian art, knowledge of which has been readily available in anthropological texts, ethnographic museum displays, photography, mass media, and the hosts of other sources since the turn of the 20th century.

No doubt, it was not only in painting and sculpture that familiarity with these cultures informed a break with the past in Western art at the turn of the century, and their influence was far more than formal. Indeed, their strongest influence on the Western tradition was on the fundamental principles of the notion of art, for in coming into contact with them, the pioneers of 20th century Western art learnt - against the protests and disdain of their contemporaries - that art could be defined beyond the limits hitherto stipulated within that tradition. They were also inspired to question the very notion itself, beyond definitions, and to suggest that the idea of art may be irrelevant after all, as long as certain objects or situations are able to fulfill certain social, aesthetic or spiritual functions whether those objects or situations are designated as art or not. It is important to place Picasso's declarations of affinity with African artists against the background of postulations such as those of Roger Fry, one of Europe's leading art critics at the turn of the century, that the Africans produced no art, that is to say, that the sculptures and other artifacts from Africa that filled museum collections in Europe at the time, were not 'art'. In other words, there was already a context of disagreement in Europe on the question of what is art, precipitated by these encounters, within which Duchamp's critique of the notion of art may be located.

The use of the ready-made, which rests on the idea that context is the preeminent determinant of difference between art and reality, was in no little measure inspired by three conclusions on the evidence of art from Africa and Oceania. First was the conclusion that mimesis was inessential to art. It would be noted that until Malevich painted his black square in 1914, the farthest, most radical reaches of Western art remained within the frame of mimesis. The wildest efforts of the impressionists, expressionists, and post-impressionists up to that point, still maintained a direct visual relationship between real life and its translation into art. Art from Africa and Oceania seemed to transcend this limitation.

Second was the formal evidence, namely that these cultures integrated real life objects in art, contrary to the practice in the West where the artist was required to reproduce such objects, and not appropriate them. Second was the fact that the status of these objects as art was radically thrown into oscillation by their translocation from the cultures and contexts of their provenance. So, for perhaps the first time in the West, it became glaringly evident that the status of an object or form is not inherent or a priori, but instead that it is unstable at best, and may be lost or regained depending on the context. It was this revelation that Duchamp tested with Fountain in April 1917. As noted, the Dada group further explored and eventually gave currency to the idea, and these would form precedence for conceptual art throughout the century to the present.

Also, as Joseph Kosuth has noted conceptual art, at least in America, 'is impossible to understand without understanding the sixties, and appreciate conceptual art for what it was: the art of the Vietnam

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war era.⁶ One may mention, also, that this was also the era of the annexation of Czechoslovakia, of student uprisings in France, and would eventually yield to the Peace and New Age movements. It also emerged from the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements which prepared the way and had far-reaching influence on many such movements and their choices of strategy. In questioning the authority of the state and other oppressive or dominant social and political institutions and roles during this era, the 'non-West' was readily available as a model and source for alternatives to the moral bankruptcy of Western capitalism. The heroism of Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial texts, and the numerous Third World liberation movements among other examples, inspired radical thought as well as youth activism in the West. Beside intellectual and ideological influence, however, cultures outside the West also became sources for new ideas about life and the body, about fashion and music and spirituality. The use of the body in conceptual art drew considerably from these sources as did the Hippie movement in the 1960s, and later on the Gay and Feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Western attitudes towards the body were brought under crisis at the same time that dominant ideological ideas were rejected. All these fed into conceptual art. Non-western body norms, from the piercing of body parts to tattoos and hairstyles were adopted and incorporated into the visual culture of the era of the Vietnam war, to use Kosuth's words. Eventually the use of the body, ritualism, masquerade and shrine-like aura in conceptual art practices found their way into conceptual art. So, not only was conceptual art 'a truly international phenomenon' the different shades and trajectories of which we are unable to explore here, it also fed off different cultures and circumstances beyond the borders of the West.

Conceptualism in Africa

With the foregoing in mind, we can state that if any creative or critical strategy establishes a firm link between contemporary and classical African art, that strategy is conceptualism, with both emphasizing the preeminence of idea over form. Although many contemporary African artists are aware of this link and have drawn considerably from classical African art independent of whatever precedents were set by modernism, it must be emphasized, nevertheless, that conceptual art by contemporary African artists is inseparable from the global conceptual art movement. Not only were the artists conversant at every stage with trends and currents in conceptualism especially in the West, they have always been well versed in the languages and texts of conceptualism, post-modernism, and related contemporary cultural discourses. For many, also, conceptual practice had the same meaning and relevance as a departure from tradition, given that colonialism had created a rift between the past and the present within which new languages of art making developed in Africa that were more akin to the old tradition in Europe, or to early modernism. The (re)turn to concept, therefore, was as radical and controversial as it was in the West, and even today, in places like Egypt a gulf of mistrust still exists between an older generation of artists who remain adherents of modernism, and younger artists who are interested in conceptualist strategies.

As with global conceptualism, it is difficult to trace a definite and accurate chronological account of conceptualism in Africa. Besides, the enterprise of accounting for conceptualism in contemporary African art is still very much in its infancy, the most recent and comprehensive being Okwui Enwezor's 1999 survey, which is republished here.⁷ It is sufficient for our purposes, therefore, to make mention of a few instances and significant moments beside those covered in Enwezor's survey and the examples of the artists discussed in greater detail in this book.

By 1971 conceptualism had emerged in Sudan especially through the work of Muhammad Shaddad, co-founder of the Crystalist Group in Khartoum, who also co-authored the group's manifesto. A student at the College of Fine Arts in Khartoum, Shaddad staged a performance or Happening as he described it, titled *The Exhibition of the Seated Human being*, in which he seated a male drawing class model in the

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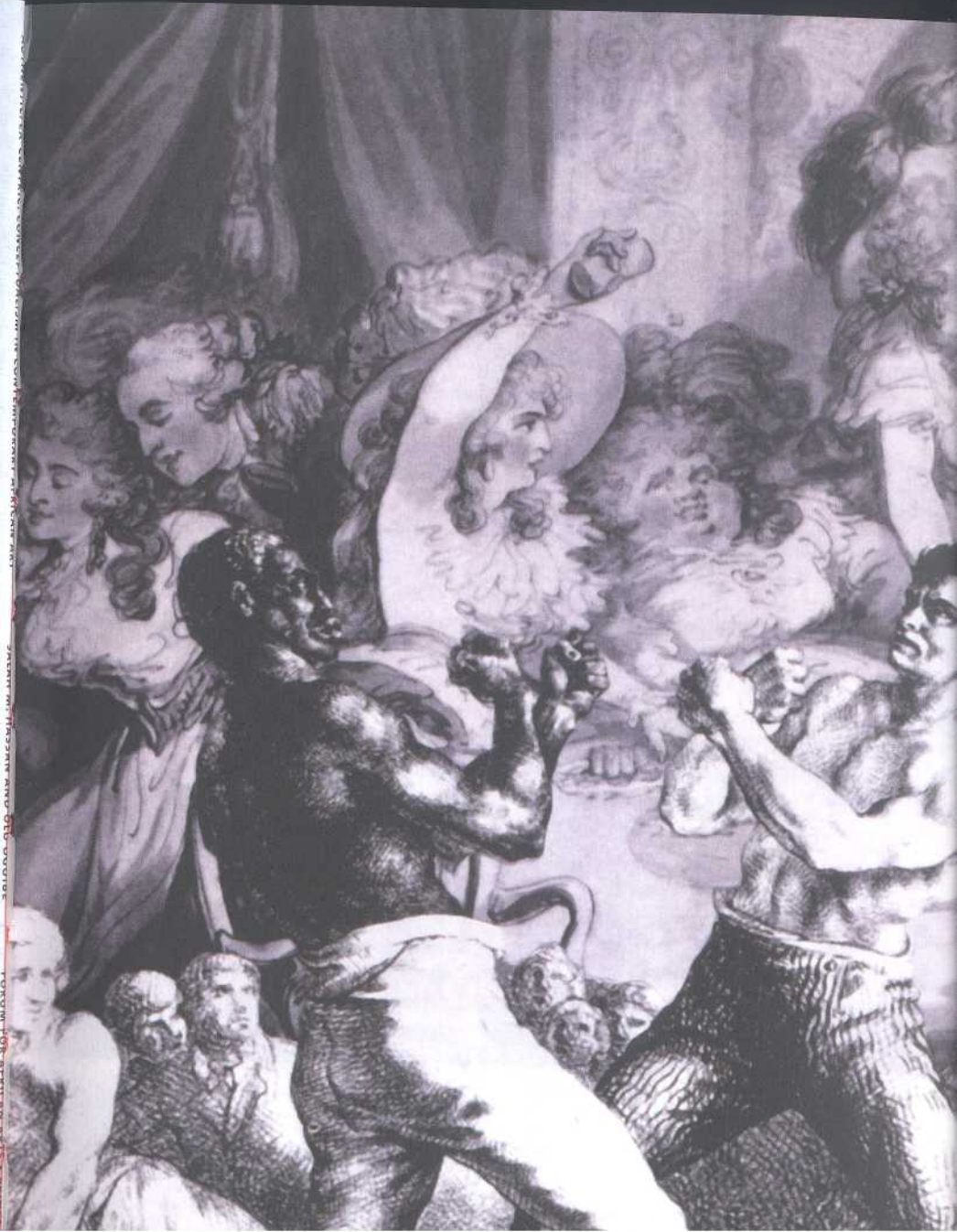
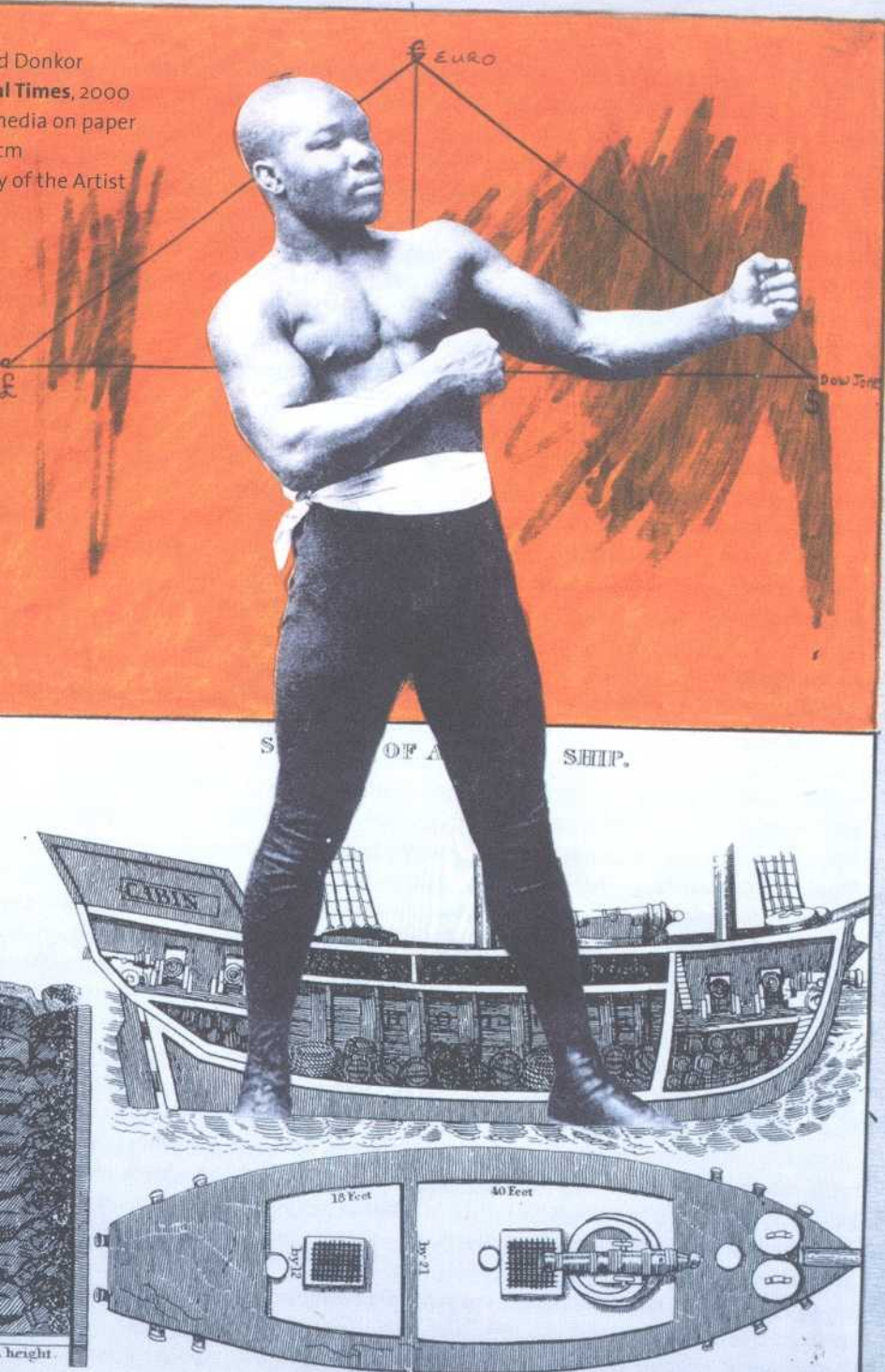


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES HAMILTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

middle of the class room between a human skeleton, and a raw leg of lamb. On the walls Shaddad hung several of his paintings, all marked with price tags with kisses being the currency of exchange. He then challenged anyone in the audience who wished to acquire his works to simply kiss the artist, thus radically agitating the art-value dialectic that his audience was used to. Shaddad's performance reposed the question of the 'true value' of art with a choice of tactic that was particularly problematic within the context of his location. Is art merely translatable in material value or is it worth more? Could it have a social, even intimate emotional value, or is it merely worth its wealth in gold?

To get his points across, Shaddad employed shock tactics and other strategies that had become part of the conceptualist vocabulary elsewhere.⁸ In 1978 Shaddad, his teacher Kamala Ishaq, and colleague Naila El Tayib issued the Crysta list Manifesto in which they outlined -a new aesthetic that was also intended as a critique of the older generation of the Khartoum school. According to the manifesto, the universe is like a crystal cube, transparent and changing according to the viewer's position. Within these crystal cubes human beings are prisoners of an absurd destiny. The nature of the crystal is constantly changing according to degrees of light and other physical conditions. As a demonstration of the Crystalist's project, Shaddad held an exhibition in 1978, in which he exhibited piles of melting ice cubes surrounded by transparent plastic bags filled with colored water. The immediate response to the Crystalists was mostly negative, especially by the older generation old Sudanese artists. They were dismissed as bohemian and not to be taken seriously.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Moroccan painter Zine Abdel Latif made performance paintings in which he danced over spread canvases to accompaniment of religious music by Sufi mystics and Genawa musicians. He would dance himself into a trance and in this state he would splash and drip paint all over his canvas and his body. Abdel Latif considered the result as registered on canvas an embodiment of the spiritual energy associated with Sufi dance as a form of worship. His images were as such a register of an intangible and otherwise ephemeral process, captured not as illustration but as process. There was an obvious connection between his performances and the action painting of the late modernists, yet its essence was in the association with a spiritual enactment and experience more akin to the most engaged in performance and religious art.

In Nigeria and Sudan in the 1970s and 1980s, a few art students challenged dominant notions of art especially as produced in the academy. They denounced traditional institutions of art display as well as the distance between art and public which had become established in the post-colonial period. To put their ideas into practice they staged outdoor exhibitions in which makeshift barriers were used as hanging walls, or in cafes, restaurants and rural areas. In some cases, these efforts proved to be problematic, but their message was successfully communicated, which was that art must not be considered a rarefied entity to be hung in the white cube or adulated, but as a weapon to be employed in the social and political space.⁹

In South Africa conceptualism was already evident in the 1970s in the work of artists like Willem Boshoff, who is discussed in greater detail in this book, and others such as Andries Botha. Although Botha's chosen medium earlier in his work was sculpture, he nevertheless employed it in an ideological engagement with the difficult socio-political atmosphere of, his country, producing work that paid more attention to notions of freedom and bondage both physical and mental, than to form or material value. In the late 1980s and the 1990s younger artists like Kendell Geers and the Block Group, also discussed here, took experimentation, performance, the integration of life elements, and the use of sound further in projects that were as unique as they were reminiscent of conceptual strategies elsewhere.

These and many other instances some of which are outlined in Enwezor's contribution to this book, provide a background for the artists whose works are discussed in the following chapters. Together they

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point to the reality of conceptual practice in Africa, and argue for the proper location of contemporary African artists in the broad narratives of global conceptualism.

Authentic/Ex-Centric

The works and artists discussed in the following chapters highlight most recent conceptual interventions in contemporary African art. In the exhibition we have brought together a diverse body of work that demonstrate the variety of, concept trajectories evident in the work from the continent and its Diaspora. Several of the artists included here problematize notions of originality and authenticity. In their work they methodically speak up - even to speak back - to subvert stereotypes of the African experience. A good example is the work of the British-based Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, an installation artist and painter recognized for his style of painting on the bright, intricately patterned wax print fabrics worn throughout Africa. These wax print fabrics can be purchased in Europe as 'traditional African' handwork, but they are in fact made in Indonesia and the finest of them are imported from Britain. Shonibare takes these ostensibly authentic African fabric and makes Victorian period costume and furniture out of them, as in his work *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995) and *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996). Shonibare, whose work shows a strong aesthetic sense and a sharp wit, casts light on colonial values and lifestyle, while also poking fun at fetishists who believe the fabrics to be of African origin. Meanwhile, he raises serious questions about the authenticity of 'traditional' craftsmanship and about the collective memory of the African Diaspora. In his later work such as *Diary of a Victorian Dandy (1998)*, a series of large-scale photographs, Shonibare caricatures Victorian society. The aristocracy are made to look like buffoons, the women swoon, the maids are over-sexed, and the artist himself-the center of everyone's fawning attention - plays the dandy. This element of the work is the centerpiece: an African man living so high in the Victorian hierarchy that all of white society prostrates itself before him. The photographs effectively problematize the idea of Africans as a more 'primitive other' within British history and society. The new sensibility and aesthetics generated by the work of many African artists-such as Son'rbwec prove their links to the larger global spaces of contemporary practice.

On first inspection, Yinka Shonibare's *Vacation*, another piece included in this exhibition, seems an innocuous; play space exploration and its implications for science and human progress. However, Shonibare's astronauts are dressed in space suits of so-called African wax-printed cotton textile, certainly not the attire normally associated with space travel. The astronauts' attire evokes the notion of 'going native', while speaking to the possibilities of a dominant 'Other'. Shonibare's suggestion that one can embody tie paradox of alien/other and colonialist/explorer demonstrates the complexity of power dynamics between groups.

In his installation *Panifice*, South African artist Willem Boshoff continues his exploration of language and text. Drawing from Christ's question in St. Mathew's Gospel, chapter 7, verse 9, ('Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?') which Boshoff has translated into numerous languages and inscribed on stone-loaves, the artist uses the idea of communion or 'breaking bread' (panifice) to address the universality of human experience across divides of language, culture or race. The vagaries of place and tongue, Boshoff indicates, are secondary to the fact of our common humanity.

Afro-Cuban artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons' *Spoken Softly with Mama*, part of a series of works entitled *History of People Who Were Not Heroes*, explores a plethora of issues to Diaspora, expatriation, gender, and race. In this multi-media installation, she uses a personal narrative to explore ways in which history and tradition are passed from generation to generation and collective memory is preserved in everyday objects.

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w White, 2001

from the video
courtesy of the Artist



In Lord Byron's Room, Godfried Donkor continues his exhumation of repressed histories of black presence in Europe using archival sources and references to popular culture to reconstruct and **reinsert key** occasions and moments in the circulation of African personalities within the elite circles of Europe. Building on the Victorian nobleman's reputation as a boxing enthusiast at a time when blacks had already established supremacy in the sport, Donkor suggests an inevitable close relationship between Byron and his circle, and prominent black pugilists of the time, a reference that hardly survives in narratives of the Victorian age. The idea is to restore complexity to the history of cross-cultural relations and human interaction where such appears to have systemically evaporated.

Paris-based Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi's nonpareil mastery of calligraphy can be seen in *Le Chemin de Roses*, in which he evokes the idea of safar **or travel and transcendence in Islamic** Sufi thought by recalling the trip of the traveller and scholar Jalal al-Din al-Rumi across the Mediterranean to Qonya, Turkey, where legend has it that he met Ibn Arabi, the great Sufi mystic and poet. Koraichi's installation iconizes al-Rumi's journey across continents through Turkish ceramic ablution basins, Moroccan gold-embroidered linen, and metal, highlighting the rich encounter between two Sufi masters and three continents, as well as al-Rumi's idea of the inseparability of aesthetics and metaphysics, where art unites with the Divine.

South African artist Berni Searle continues her exploration of what one might call the incredible weightiness of color. In *Snow White*, a video installation that ironically evokes the fairy tale of the same name, Searle whose ancestry spans three continents, metaphorically takes the audience through a cycle of visibility ~~ing~~ erasure reminiscent of experiences under the ideological constructs of Apartheid. In same vein, London-based Algerian artist Zineb Sedira addresses the ways in which her identity is informed by religion, culture and gender by appropriating the traditionally male art form of Arabesque ceramic tiles in her installation, *Quatre generations de femmes*. In the Video *Don't Do to Her What You Did to Me*, she represents the manner in which social forces impact identity in Diaspora.

Each one of these artists articulates, in his or her own way, the reality of contemporary African art, practice as an Internationalist project which is part of a global currency yet embodies a specificity to African history and experiences.

The essays in this book offer a fresh look at conceptualism from an African standpoint, and at issues of cross-cultural and trans-national aesthetics. All emphasize the importance of examining the reciprocal traffic of Influences between Africa and the rest of the world. They offer a glimpse of the ways in which African and African Diaspora artists have interpreted and translated the aesthetic and social experiences of post-colonial Africa into new idioms of artistic expression and it is our hope that both exhibition and book will help bring the contributions of African artists in this understudied area to the fore.

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Ursula Kuczynski, *Astronauts*, 2000
Ursula Kuczynski and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London