

“THE SHORT CENTURY”

By Tom Holert ☒

SHARE



Georges Adéagbo, *Le Socialisme Africain*, 2001. Installation views, Museum Villa Stuck, 2001.

In 1959, standing before the assembled participants of the Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Rome, Frantz Fanon urged those in attendance to reach out to “the people” where it is hardest to do so: “We must join them in the fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape ... It is to the zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come.” The question raised by “The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994,” which opened in February at Munich’s Museum Villa Stuck, is exactly how to comprehend and represent this “zone of occult instability.” The goal demands a new cartography for a knotty complex of intellectual, political, and popular discourses, to demonstrate, for example, how cultural and political concerns converged to effectively rupture colonial hegemony. A rupture, furthermore, that could mean a (provisional) rejection of the democratic principles of European modernity, even if these principles provided the background legitimation for colonization itself.

Consciousness of the “dialectics of liberation” is at the heart of this impressive undertaking, presented by Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of next summer’s Documenta 11. In the book-length catalogue accompanying this traveling exhibition of painting, photography, pop-culture items, textiles, and more, Enwezor and his team of curators have produced a 496-page, large-format navigational tool to guide the viewer through the cultural developments and theoretical debates of the “short century.” The collaborative and in many respects collective intentions of the participating authors consisted of “reinvent[ing] another kind of historical perspective,” as Enwezor, in conversation, defines one of the project’s goals.

Enwezor, who has taken a lot of heat recently for his guest-curated Lagos section of “Century City,” the Tate Modern exhibition that examined a handful of “world cities” whose relationship to modernism is overdetermined at certain points throughout the past 100 years, makes his most convincing point at the level of the project’s ambitious design. This may be a function of the questions that immediately arise: How is it possible to represent the epoch of the “short century” (itself a paraphrase of “The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991,” the subtitle of British historian Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Extremes*)? How can this geographic-epochal entity be exhibited; how, indeed, can the accumulated knowledge represented by the catalogue be translated into an exhibition space without being stranded on the shores of metonymy?

One precondition was to limit the historical time span. Enwezor prefaces his introductory essay by quoting Ghanaian prime minister and leading theorist of decolonization Kwame Nkrumah’s keynote address to the All-African People’s Conference in 1958: “This mid-twentieth century is Africa’s. This decade is the decade of African independence.” But Enwezor doubts whether the theories of *négritude*, pan-Africanism, and pan-Arabism precipitated by concepts of liberation and independence can be considered finished, historical documents concerned solely with the “decade of African independence.” Thus he extends the “short century” to the present day. Artists such as Moshekwa Langa, Antonio Olé, Kay Hassan, Oladélé Ajiboyé Bamgboyé, Zarina Bhimji, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Yinka Shonibare, Bodys Isek Kingelez, William Kentridge, and Ghada Amer are called in as star witnesses to the ongoing effects (in many cases, to the survival) of the critical project associated with names like Nkrumah, Touré, Senghor, Césaire, Fanon, Lumumba, and Mandela. “One would have imagined that this period has passed by,” Enwezor told me in an interview. “But to my own surprise it has returned in such a strong way, and in ways that are much more conceptually layered than in the work of the previous generation.” But he also points out that the return to the “founding moments of decolonization” is problematic and painful. The achievement of today’s culture producers and of the exhibition itself is that they deal with the “moment of nostalgia,” which, he says, is necessary in the face of the “anxiety of the postcolonial” and the incipient reinscription of a “sense of alterity” in Africa’s relationship to the West and to modernity.

Wisely, the organizers make no attempt to conceal the fact that the presentation of a half century's worth of a whole continent's cultural production must remain a selection only. The approach to this exhibition is elliptical, not encyclopedic. In the limited space of the Museum Villa Stuck (Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau, the second venue, will provide twice as much working space), painting dominates. It's quite moving to encounter the works of old masters of African modernity like Ernest Mancoba, Gerard Sekoto, Ben Enwonwu, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Skunder Boghossian, Georgina Beier, Uche Okeke, Uzo Egonu, and Thomas Mukarobgwa, not least because the materiality of these works communicates some of the conditions under which they were created—without, of course, their being relegated to fulfilling a merely documentary function. The posters, magazines, books, and films fare less well, however. The usual vitrines and video monitors are only partially capable of doing justice to these media-specific forms of communication. They are, to say the least, a bit hard-pressed to open Fanon's "zone of occult instability."

More generally, there is a surprising lack of site-specificity to Enwezor's project, an absence of reflexive consideration to the particular "sitedness" of "The Short Century" that is all the more striking given the intellectual framework that informs the focus on localist-globalist relations attendant to the coming Documenta and similar exhibitions. At the press conference, Villa Stuck director Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker addressed the aptness of Munich (of all places) as an opening venue for "The Short Century," citing such historical reasons as the fascination with Africa among the Munich-based Blue Rider artists (Kandinsky, Münter, Macke, Marc, et al.) and the Bavarian city's more ominous involvement in National Socialist art politics and as host to the "*Entartete Kunst*" (Degenerate art) exhibition of 1937.

Now, it is undeniable that the tension between the Blue Rider and "Degenerate Art" represents a very specific frame of reference for an exhibition about African culture and politics after World War II. Nevertheless, the euphoric discovery of "primitive" art or of the play of colors in the Tunisian Casbah—not to mention the particular function that the image of the "Negro" and "Negro art" served in Nazi propaganda—could have been related, or rather, needed to be related to the background of German colonialism. Neither the exhibition nor its publications—nor for that matter discussions in the liberal press—consider the ideological function that "Afrika" has fulfilled (and continues to fulfill) in the national imagination of postwar Germany. This criticism is not a matter of artificially inflating Germany's significance as a colonial power but of working out the meaning of such an exhibition for the current cultural and political context.

The sole artistic contribution that concretely addresses the relation between the “Short Century” project and the geographical and historical site of “Munich, Germany” is Georges Adéagbo’s environment *Le Socialisme Africain*, 2001. The Beninese artist adorned the walls and floor of a room not only with paintings and photocopies of others’ texts but also with countless finds from Munich antique shops and thrift stores: books on Government High-Rises in the Federal Land of Bavaria, cheap classical LPs with Best of Mozart collections or “Ribald Songs from the Mountains with the Taufkirchner Musicians”; between them the poster for the exhibition, brochures for Munich hotels, an article on Rem Koolhaas clipped from a French magazine, LPs of Manu Dibango (Electric Africa) and Fela Kuti, and hand-painted bills with quotations, signed “The African Artist.” This crude mix of poetic utterances, African pop, and German-Bavarian trash culture aptly articulates a still-murky relationship. “Germany had little to contend with in the aftermath of the First World War,” said Enwezor, when asked about the specific “sitedness” of the exhibition. He noted that negotiation of Africa’s division under the umbrella of the Bismarck government at the Berlin Conference (aka Belgian Congo Conference) in 1884–85 is an indication of the initially active role of Germany in the continent’s colonization. But, he added, after the loss of the colonies (present-day Cameroon, Namibia, Tanzania, and Togo) in World War I, a strange amnesia seems to have taken hold. Enwezor: “The memory of the German incursion into Africa is largely, even for Africans, opaque. It’s not very much there. Germany presents a kind of invisible mental space.”

Of course, this “invisible mental space,” this blind spot, is not empty. Adéagbo’s installation suggests the kind of stuff it is filled with. For some time now, signs of an ideological recollection of the German presence in Africa have been accumulating. While the dully racist discourse about the continent was disciplined somewhat following the national consciousness-raising of 1968, the reserve appears to be loosening. In this vein, a leading sports politician, in his anguish over the weak showing of the German national soccer team in recent years, gave himself free rein to bemoan the early loss of the colonies—neighboring European countries like France and Belgium had significantly better access to African talents. And in 1999, when the German KFOR-contingent in Kosovo was assigned a territory in the southwest of the region, the soldiers designated it “Deutsch-Südwest,” the colonial name for present-day Namibia. The German cultural sphere too is embarking on its own African adventure. Christoph Schlingensiefel, filmmaker, talk-show host, theater director, and a specialist in the art of provocation, recently organized a “Wagner Rally 99—the Ring in Africa” in Namibia (Schlingensiefel’s pseudo-exorcistic attempt to “set the Nibelungen Ring down in the sand and save ourselves” was sympathetically covered by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*). It is against this background that “The Short Century,” precisely because of the thorough absence of the German factor, provokes an analysis of the current concept of the “postcolonial.” One

would have to consider the fact that the German colonial experience represents the “drawing-board on which the German bourgeois nation-state devised a form of rule based on a ‘modern’ biologicistic understanding of society,” as the historian Pascal Grosse puts it in a new study on the connection between colonialism and eugenics in the time leading up to the National Socialist period. West Germany’s political support of the French in the Algerian war and other strategic alliances in the fight against the independence movements since the ’50s also awaits appropriate investigation.

In conversation, Enwezor formulated the central questions of his project as: “What really constitutes this ‘Africa’ of the imagination? What were the texts which supported the basis for the construction of this field of study?”

Answering such questions today depends on bringing them to a national context, into which the academic terms “cultural” and “postcolonial studies” are imported, often enough, with subtle gestures of distancing—a context, moreover, that hardly seems to break with the racist attitude toward Africa in mainstream German culture. The German perspective on Africa as shaped by colonialism and the current neocolonial implicatedness of Germany should be illuminated as one indivisible problem. Against the backdrop of a “Berlin Republic” that touts its historical “normalcy,” such reflection seems rather urgent.

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