

From the Editor

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This issue marks a milestone in our journal's history, for with it *Nka* joins the family of Duke University Press journals. This is a triumphant moment in *Nka*'s trajectory and a vindication of its contribution to the discourse on African and African diaspora art history as well as to contemporary art criticism in the global arena. As many in the field of contemporary art would acknowledge, *Nka* has contributed a great deal to raising the profile of contemporary African art worldwide and to advancing the life and career of contemporary artists in Africa and its diasporas. *Nka* has indeed come a long way since its inaugural issue in 1994.

To mark the move to Duke University Press, we convened a roundtable of leading art historians and critics to discuss "contemporary African art history and the state of the scholarship." A panel of fifteen influential scholars debated crucial issues confronting the field and surveyed the gains, challenges, and prospects of contemporary African art within the discipline of art history. One exciting aspect of this discussion is that readers did not have to wait for

the print version of *Nka* to follow it; the roundtable entries were posted, and could be responded to, on the Duke University Press blog as they were received.

This roundtable, the second of three such discussions on issues in contemporary African art, was moderated and edited by our colleague and coeditor of *Nka*, Chika Okeke-Agulu. The first roundtable, in issue 22/23, focused on large-scale exhibitions that have been instrumental in bringing the work of African artists to global attention, and the third will examine the politics of contemporary African art and the art museum. Among the questions considered in this issue's roundtable are the place of contemporary African art in art history programs and the relationship of that body of art with contemporary Western art as a subfield of art history, including the challenges of training graduate students. In addition, perpetual questions such as the relationship between contemporary and traditional or classical African art history are addressed.

The field of contemporary African art is witnessing remarkable energy and richness of work in a variety of media, including photography, video, sculpture, architecture, painting, and site-specific installations. Yet such vigor and range of creativity are terribly at odds with the political and economic crises in postcolonial Africa: this burgeoning creativity exists in the face of abysmal health condi-



tions, disastrous wars, genocidal conflicts, increasing dependency on aid, and systemic economic failure. However, the ways in which art could shed light on or even ameliorate such crises remain to be critically analyzed or properly explicated.

Today the overall picture in Africa points toward a serious intellectual decline since the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by the optimism of independence and decolonization movements and the rise of a generation of modernists, such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Wole Soyinka, who combined artistic and literary production with serious critical writings. The issues published during those decades by journals such as *Transition*, *Black Orpheus*, and *Présence africaine* offered a considerable corpus of criticism associated with the decolonization of knowledge. With few exceptions, the current burgeoning of artistic and literary production has not been matched by a comparable flourishing of critical and discursive writings intended to elucidate the new work. Of course, the news is not all bad, and the picture is much more complex if not uneven. There have been positive developments in places such as Egypt and South Africa, where galleries, art workshops, and traditions of art collecting and criticism have started to emerge. The critical historical role of African-based biennales, such as those in Dakar, Cairo, Cape Town, and, most recently,

Algiers and Marrakech, should be acknowledged. The serious lack of publications on the visual arts of the continent and its diasporas and the equally serious crisis in art criticism, research, and art education have been partly addressed by a number of uneven initiatives, among them *Gallery* (discontinued), *Revue noire* (discontinued), *African Arts*, *Black Renaissance/Renaissance noire*, *Nka*, the new *Art South Africa*, and the Internet-based *Artthrob*, which is pivotal in its appeal to the rich potentials of cyberspace.

Perhaps what we now need is a more innovative framework that can facilitate a critical unpacking. Like any roundtable, ours raises more questions than it answers. But as Okeke-Agulu emphasizes in his closing remarks, "We have indeed achieved something significant in this month-long discussion." The roundtable reaffirms, as he states, "the importance of channels and platforms for active exchange of ideas, information, and materials between (visual and textual) knowledge producers and mediators inside and outside Africa. The relative dearth of intercontinental discursive transactions is responsible for the often radically different states of contemporary African art studies inside and outside Africa. How to ameliorate this problem remains . . . one of the biggest challenges facing the scholarship."

SCRIBE

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