Africa Remix at the Mori Art Museum

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The recent showing of Africa Remix: contemporary art of a continent at Tokyo’s high-rise Mori Museum sheds new light on how location and audience can impact on an exhibition of art seen elsewhere in different settings and aimed towards other audiences.

Africa Remix: contemporary art of a continent is the largest exhibition ever held of African art by artists of our time. Featuring around 140 works by 84 artists from 25 countries, the exhibition has an unprecedented range and scope and already claims an audience transcending many boundaries, cultures and continents. Africa Remix has been seen in Düsseldorf, London, Paris, Tokyo, Stockholm and currently is on at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The exhibition may well travel to several other countries. Of all its venues so far, Japan has been the only one that is neither Africa nor the West. This article is concerned with the exhibition’s reception at the Mori Art Museum, one of the newest modern art spaces in Tokyo.

The works in Africa Remix have been selected from the artists’ production over the past 10 years. An international curatorial team led by Simon Njami, co-founder of Revue noire, includes people who for long periods have been involved with contemporary African art. The team includes David Elliott, formerly of the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Moderna Museet, Stockholm and Modern Art, Oxford; Jean-Hubert Martin, of museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf; Marie-Laure Bernadac of Centre Pompidou and Roger Malbert of the Hayward Gallery.

The artists in the exhibition range in age from early 20s to 60s and are drawn from various parts of Africa, Europe and North America. They have one thing in common: they all have their roots in Africa. Their work, too, presents a wide range, from drawing, painting, photography, sculpture to video. The media applied to produce the paintings are varied as well, but mixed media dominates. Most mixed media works comprise found objects transformed — art created out of bottle bits, other commonplace, ready-made (but not new) items and materials, sundry detritus and decommissioned weapons, mostly guns. After its first showing at the museum kunst palast in July 2004, Africa Remix moved to Hayward Gallery, London (February~April 2005), and the Centre Pompidou, Paris (May~August 2005), before coming to the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (May~August 2006). Afterwards it transferred to Moderna Museet (September~December 2006) and Johannesburg Art Gallery (February~June 2007).

A reconstruction and reprise of the show as seen at the Mori Art Museum is in order for the purposes of this article. The art works first encountered upon entrance are mostly those fabricated from ‘junk’ — El Anatsui’s Sasa (2004, aluminium bottle bits and copper wire), Romuald Hazoumé’s Bidon Armé/Armed Can (2004, plastics, metal and sand) and Willie Bester’s For Those Left Behind (2003, metals). Other works made with found materials greet the visitor inside the gallery. In front of Antonio Ole’s Township Wall.
No 10 (2004, assemblage and found materials), there is Dilomprizulike’s Waiting for a Bus (2003, metals, textiles, wood, et al), above which is Titos’s Plane (2001, wood, bamboo and found objects). The scale of these works, their uniqueness and the artists’ informing ideas in contrast with popular Japanese perceptions of ‘junk’ became the focus of attention and reportage by the media in Japan.

Comparisons with London

Having seen Africa Remix earlier at the Hayward Gallery in London, it was possible for me to discern differences in the way the exhibition was presented at the two venues — in terms of the installation and presentation, accompanying publicity and the public programme. It was remarkable how the same exhibition could appear to be so different when relocated from one venue to another. The fact that a space, its location and its use impact significantly on how an exhibition looks and is received by its audience become relevant in the context of this showing of Africa Remix.

A new art space, the Mori Art Museum is located in Roppongi on the 53rd floor of the Mori Tower, a skyscraper which is part of a building complex. The gallery space affords a panoramic view of Tokyo and opened in 2003 under the direction of David Elliott, who was previously the director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm and before that of the Museum of Modern Art (now Modern Art) in Oxford, where he curated Art from South Africa in 1991.

In Tokyo, as in Düsseldorf but in a departure from London and Paris, the poster used to publicise the exhibition (pictured right) is of the same design as the front cover of the exhibition catalogue, which works very well. The motif is rendered in lozenges of green, black, red, yellow and white. These are also the basic colours of the walls, ceilings and floors in various sections of the exhibition. The title and related information is presented in the central lozenges of the poster while artworks by Julie Mehretu, Samuel Fosso, Jane Alexander, Cheri Cherin, Cheri Samba and Wangechi Mutu fill up the other lozenges.

During the exhibition the poster was conspicuous on the walls of Metro stations in Tokyo and elsewhere in Roppongi Hills. In the museum it was distinctly visible in the corridor on the ground level leading to the ticket office. The sequence of the poster along the ceiling of the corridor (pictured left) created an impression of African woven and wax-print textiles.
Lifts stop at the 52nd-floor entrance, where works by Anatsui, Bester and Hazoumé greet the visitor before an escalator brings the viewer to the 53rd-floor galleries. The escalator handrails are covered with motifs from the poster design and Aimé Ntakiyica’s photographs, WIR (2003). Gonçalo Mabunda’s Eiffel Tower (2002) occupies the space between the escalator and the first gallery, which presents a splendid vista of Tokyo. The skyscrapers thus present the backdrop for the sculpture, made from recycled firearms. The installation works well with the skyline and recalls an actual collaboration between Mozambique and Japan. Some of the weapons used to create Eiffel Tower were acquired by the Mozambican artist in exchange for bicycles and textiles from Japan through Transforming Arms into Tools – a programme supported by Christian Aid.

The exhibition rooms are not unified by one colour but rather by the range of vivid colours from the poster design. Thus, while one room is black from floor, wall to ceiling another is all white. The bold use of the colours makes the atmosphere of each room distinctive. The visitor is helped along further by visual aids, which inform about Africa and African artists.

Maps of the African continent, its 54 countries outlined, herald each of the three themed sections: Identity & History, Body & Soul, City & Land. In Cheick Diallo’s Reading Room for Africa Remix (2004), an interactive computer screen responds to touch and allows the visitor to view information about artists and their works.

The public programme included a symposium, lectures and talks. In the symposium Jane Alexander and El Anatsui spoke about their work and teaching and participated in a discussion on the current state of African art. Both Alexander and Anatsui are university lecturers, but from different parts of the continent and with different educational and cultural backgrounds. Both have degrees in tertiary-level art.

In Alexander’s native South Africa, under apartheid, the vast majority of Africans had no access to formal art education while in Anatsui’s native Ghana, students have had the opportunity to study art since 1924. In Nigeria, where Anatsui has lived since 1976, formal art education at the school level started in 1927 under colonial rule and the tertiary level was instituted by 1960.

African Curatorship
In the lecture series, Yukiya Kawaguchi, currently Associate Professor at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, summarised the history of exhibitions of African art in the West, Africa and Japan. He advocated the importance of exhibitions that are produced by African professionals and concluded by asking how the Japanese could collaborate with Africans to make this possible. He noted the slow but positive approaches to African art in Japan. Although he criticised the lack of knowledge and interest in Japan on world issues, including African art, he emphasised that the gap between Africa and Japan was narrowing — a trend that must continue.

Kawaguchi has contributed to the Japanese edition of the catalogue, which contains 12 essays by curators and academics (compared with the six in the London edition), artists’ biographies, a list of African art exhibitions in Japan and a bibliography. Furthermore, the book comes with a CD-Rom. The substantial catalogue provides a Japanese point of view which is helpful for a Japanese audience.

Africa Remix in Tokyo, for its Japanese audience, was a thought-provoking event and an introduction to the diversity of African art.

Location and Audience Response
That an exhibition changes in appearance and triggers different audience responses as it travels is well known and recognised. Each new space potentially has a different ambience, which makes an exhibition particular to each place. For instance, the Hayward Gallery in London is on three levels whereas the Mori Art Museum has only one floor for the galleries. The former has no window in the exhibition space while the latter has one which offers the background of Tokyo – itself an artwork. Africa Remix in Tokyo, for its Japanese audience, was a thought-provoking event and an introduction to the diversity of African art.

There is still much to learn from the London version which was part of the AfricArt05 festival, a year-long celebration of Africa. Since there had been many exhibitions and events throughout London from Hackney to Peckham, viewers had more opportunities to experience African art. In contrast, besides the Mori Art Museum exhibition, there were only two events in Tokyo, a film programme produced by the French-Japanese Institute of Tokyo and an exhibition of three African photographers, Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé and J D Ojeikere.

As one returns to the ground level of the Mori Art Museum building, it is hard to escape the notion that Africa Remix in this venue was but a fleeting or temporary experience of Africa for the Japanese. As Kawaguchi points out, Japan is still physically and psychologically distant from Africa but the two are certainly nearing each other. Africa Remix in Tokyo, for the Japanese, was a visual experience of aspects of a reality and part of a long-term process to understand the rich diversity of Africa.

Notes
1 David Elliott served as the first director of the Mori Art Museum and left his post on 31 October, 2006, upon conclusion of his five-year tenure. The museum’s former deputy director, Fumio Nanjo, is the new director. Elliott will be taking up the position of the Director of the Istanbul Modern in Turkey and is also due to become a member of the Museum’s International Advisory Committee. http://www.mori.art.museum/contents/press/director_060927e.pdf [Accessed 25 November 2006]
3 Kawaguchi specialises in contemporary African art and cultural representation through display. Having worked at the Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, he is now Associate Professor at the Research Centre for Cultural Resources, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. He curated the exhibition, An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time, at the Setagaya Art Museum in 1995. He was also the commissioner of Biennale de Dakar in 1996 and curated Pascale Marthine Tayou; Ni Primitif Ni Sauvage (Goethe Institut).
4 The London edition is rich in visual information (photographic description of artworks) but some texts seem to have been omitted and shortened (About 15 paragraphs of John Picton’s essay are omitted from that edition!).
5 Works of J D Ojeikere and Malick Sidibé, Joy of Life – Two Photographers from Africa, were exhibited at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, in 2004.

Bibliography

WEBSITES
• Conference Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane’s presentation on the ‘Transforming Arms into Tools’ project in Mozambique. 11-12 February 2005, ‘In and out of Africa: Art and Identities,’ British Museum
• Eastern Art Report Online

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