

Special issue: African Modernisms

Deadline: Jan 20, 2019

Katharina Greven

Call for Papers for Special Issue:

African Modernisms and its Methodologies and Terminologies – A Critical Mapping of the Field

edited by Katharina Greven (BIGSAS), Katrin Peters-Klaphake (BIGSAS) and Nadine Siebert (Iwalewaha, University of Bayreuth) as part of the research project “African Art History and the Formation of a Modernist Aesthetics”.

Please send a 300-word abstract for your paper proposal from now until January 20, 2019 to katharina.greven@uni-bayreuth.de; petersklaphake@gmail.com or nadine.siebert@uni-bayreuth.de.

The deadline for your 5,000-9,000 word paper would be April 30, 2019.

In African art history, a variety of methodologies from different disciplines like classical art history, cultural and social anthropology, social sciences, museology, postcolonial theories, and visual culture, among others, are applied. They are all related to their respective ontology and epistemology and affirm or contest certain paradigms. For a long time, African art studies fell under the domain of the anthropology of art, with methodologies such as fieldwork and interviews derived from ethnography. Another approach is rooted in museology with an emphasis on objects and their provenances, trajectories and displays. A major debate is related to the question of whether object- or actor-centred approaches are more appropriate to study art from the African continent and its diasporas. World art history has asked for a relativism approach that takes the notions of art and its concepts into consideration – arguing for local specificities and relative aesthetics. The influx of contemporary artistic practises such as performance art and new media art into the field has further complexified the methodological canon. Recently, the discourse on decolonizing the discipline has brought in a new urgency to rethink not only terminologies and concepts but also methodologies.

Publications such as the special issue of African Arts on “African Art Histories' Futures” (Vol. 50, No 4, 2017) have reacted to these questions and tried to conceptualize the future of African art studies. What remains missing is a critical reevaluation of methodology in regard to African Modernism, a period which is defined roughly from the 1910s to the 1980s. In the field, monographs, special issues and edited volumes have been produced that either focus on specific case studies or give overviews on recent debates, also trying to define the canon of African Modernism. They range from the first surveys of the field during the time of emerging Modernisms (e.g. Trowell 1947; Beier 1968; McEwen 1968) to later retrospective overviews on this period in the form of

local art histories or surveys of genres or styles (e.g. Déliiss 1995; Hug 1997; Grabski-Ochsner 1997; Enwezor 2001; Ogbechie 2008; Hassan 2010; Glassie 2010; Lawal 2011; Probst 2011; Salami & Blackmun Visonà 2013; Hassan 2013; Okeke-Agulu 2016; Harney and Phillips 2018). Another subject of discussion is the position of African Modernisms in relation to Western or Global Northern Modernism that produced concepts such as “alternative”, “multiple”, “global”, “other” or “post-colonial” Modernisms. These reflections were of great importance because they brought Modernism back to studies of African art after a period of neglect since the 1970s, when the interest moved to museology as well as to “contemporary art”.

The aforementioned publications hardly deal with critical reflections on methodologies and terminologies that provide tools to analyse and interpret African Modernisms, yet we are convinced that it is crucial to rethink these and ask for a very specific approach and perspective towards art, artists, collections and discourses in the field of African Modernism – knowing that the term itself and its periodization are already complicated and problematic. Therefore we propose a plural concept of “modernisms” as a starting point.

Additionally, the source situation in regard to modern art in Africa is particularly difficult and scattered. Many archives were lost, destroyed or never compiled: very little of the art historical writing at universities in the Global South has been published; artworks were sold and taken outside of the continent; and many of the artists have passed away or are now very old. The material that exists is fragmented and spread throughout private collections and sometimes museums, many of them in Europe and the US, which requires creativity, persistence and possibly different methods of research.

African Modernisms’ entanglement with the art history of the Modernisms of the Global North is unavoidable, but its historiography must continuously analyse (and challenge) this entanglement and position itself critically. Terminologies such as the various “-isms” within that period have to be questioned, especially if and how they are applicable to African Modernisms which are shaped by colonial encroachments and decolonisation – the search for national cultural identities and an ongoing flux between the Global North, West, East and South through education and cultural contact.

For this Special Issue we invite papers that reflect particularly on the questions of methodologies and terminologies and how to apply them in the study of African Modernisms. We ask: which methods have proven as successful in your own research and why? Also, which methodological approaches failed because they were not appropriate for the subject? Do we have to combine different methods, and if so, how? How can we find appropriate sources and what is their relevance for the research?

A number of methodological approaches have been tested. In the following, we list a number of these and how they relate to their respective disciplinary background. We also list some of the relevant sources that were central for either the formation of the respective methodology or its application. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather it is intended as a starting point for your reflections.

Methods Deriving from Art History and Museology

Formal Analysis:

Strict formal analysis gathers information exclusively from what one sees, i.e. the focus is strongly placed on the visual elements of a work. To have some knowledge of the subject matter may help. A formal analysis focuses on aspects like line, colour, composition, perspective and style, and describes the effects of these artistic decisions on the viewer. In regard to Modernism and African art, most of the formal analytical descriptions thus far have dealt with the influence of African art on European modernists. However, as one of the key methods in art history, its applicability to questions of style and aesthetics in the various appearances of Modern African art has to be critically reflected. (Adams 1989; Murell 2008; Meier 2010; Araeen 2010)

Iconography and Iconology

An iconographic analysis focuses on the representative iconography of a work, considering the symbolic role of images, the historical or mythological identity of figures, and any other elements that may have visual significance. Based on the work of early 20th century art historians Warburg and Panofsky, the iconological analysis includes three steps: (1) a formal description focusing on the primary subject matter, (2) an iconographic analysis looking at the conventional subject matter and classification of the work in the historical context and (3) the interpretation of the work and its intrinsic meaning, the iconological interpretation. A detailed analysis can provide insight into works of African Modernisms and can offer new readings of the artworks. Nevertheless, it is questionable how the second and third step can be applied on artworks that contain very specific local iconographies. (Panofsky 1974; Warburg 1976; Kaemmerling 1979; Mitchell 1994; Soppelsa 1988; Didi-Hubermann 2002; Schulz 2005; Odiboh 2009)

Comparative Analysis

Comparisons of several artworks provide an opportunity to combine formal analysis with knowledge of the artists, the subjects and the relevant background information, allowing conclusions to be made about relations between the works. A comparison typically starts with recognising similarities of the works, for example whether the artists have lived and worked during the same time or in the same region, have a common stylistic background or depict the same subject. The commonality functions as grounds for establishing a comparison. Then the focus shifts to the ways in which the two works differ, beginning with the obvious and moving on to the subtler and more specific, and eventually analysing what this difference might reveal. Given the numerous links and entanglements in the realm of the different modern art practices on the African continent and within the Black Atlantic and Indian Ocean, a comparative approach can be very fruitful. (Malaquais/Vincent 2018; Elsner 2017)

Provenance / Patronage Study / Object Biographies

This perspective focuses on the examination of the life of the object itself, the circumstances surrounding its production and/or where and why the object has changed hands throughout its history. Investigations into how, when, where and why it was commissioned, traded, bought, looted or stolen are part of this. While issues of provenance and the research of object biographies have become very important in the context of museological work with ethnographic objects from Africa, this approach can also be adapted to modernist artworks, not least because many modern and contemporary art collections in the Global North are kept in ethnographic museums. (Appadurai 1986; Pearce 1994; Hoskins 1998; Röschenhaler 1999; Ogbachie 2005)

Aesthetics of Reception / Reader-Response Criticism / Reception History

The aesthetics of reception focuses on the reception process, asking how the receiver reacts to certain notions/forms/hints within an artwork. It includes parts of the work's production, distribution, social reactions, technical form, presentation and semiotics. The reception or reader-response criticism stresses the audience, the viewer or reader as an active agent who contributes to the meaning of the work by its own interpretation and debate. The emphasis does not tend to be on the artist and the artwork, but on the "life" of the artwork after completion and being exposed to a wider audience. (Kemp 1985; Warning 1994; Simon 2003; Funke 2004; Crewett 2006; Classen 2017)

Archive Research / Archivology / 'Archivhandeln'

The term archive is interdisciplinary and can be used to mean any kind of storage; it encompasses everything from the storage of museum collections to general knowledge productions. Thus, an archive lies between institutions and concepts. Archives enable and condition the writing of history and are therefore under constant change and connected to their power structures. Archivology emphasises the significance of the archives using various approaches (e.g. postcolonial strategies, new technologies as well as the ongoing process of preservation in the digital age). The archive as such is also an important resource for art studies research, as both object- and actor centred research makes use of archival documents. In this way, questioning the role of archives in relation to African Modernisms is relevant: What kind of archives are available and under which conditions? What can we say about archival practises related to African Modernisms both on the continent and abroad? (Foucault 1973; Derrida 1995; Stoler 2002; Didi-Hubermann and Ebeling 2007; Ebeling and Günzel 2009; Weitin and Wolf 2012; Horstmann and Kopp 2010)

Semiotics and Image Studies

Semiotics

Semiotics is concerned with meaning: how representation, in the broad sense (language, images, objects), generates meaning and the processes by which we comprehend or attribute meaning. For visual images, or visual and material culture more generally, semiotics is an inquiry that is wider than the study of symbolism and the use of semiotic analysis challenges concepts such as naturalism, realism (the notion that images or objects can objectively depict something), and intentionality (the notion that the meaning of images or objects is produced by the person who created it). Furthermore, semiotics can offer a useful perspective on formal analysis (the notion that meaning is of secondary importance to the relationships of the individual elements of an image or object). Semiotic analysis, in effect, acknowledges the variable relationship(s) we may have to representation and therefore images or objects are understood as dynamic; that is, the significance of images or objects is not understood as a one-way process from image or object to the individual but the result of complex interrelationships between the individual, the image or object, and other factors such as culture and society. (Curtin 2006; Bal/Bryson 1991; Schapiro 1972/1973; Peirce 1931-1958; de Saussure 1979; Mitchell 1994; Thürlemann 1990). In African art theory semiotics has been explored in the context of Tourist Art (Jules- Rosette 1984) and the question of art and craft (Blair 1988) and more broadly in relation to issues of identity (Battistini 1991). Very recently, for example, the University of Texas hosted a conference on "Semiotics and African Art: Victor Ekpuk in Context".

Pictorial Science / Image Semiotics / Bildwissenschaft

The science of images is an interdisciplinary approach, which focuses on the “image” in any form, i.e. from photography, paintings, moving images and mental images to everything we, as humans, have altered (Bredekamp 2010). In general, this discipline stresses the importance of the image and how it is formed and used in daily life. This was introduced under the names “pictorial turn” (Mitchell 1994) and “iconic turn” (Boehm 1994). Particularly in sciences, in which images play a rather functional role, the turns redirected the focus from images as illustration to images as historical documents, which also highlights the importance of the works of African Modernisms. Not only were material images part of the considerations, but so were mental images (Belting 2001), together keeping the scope of possible methods very open and able to analyse the relation of everything from images and media to images and the body, images and their signs, affective images, the Bildakt – the list goes on. The question is, if focusing on modernist artwork as an image can support the research on African Modernisms, how can the focus on the agency of an artwork offer insights that other methodologies do not allow? (Boehm 1994; Mitchell 1994; Belting 2001; Sachs-Hombach 2003; Schulz 2005; Bredekamp 2010)

Ethnographical and Sociological Methods

Sociological Methods / Mapping / Institutional Perspective

This approach explains an artwork from within an art historical or more general historical era. Here, the social and historical influences that have shaped the work are considered alongside how they are manifested in a given artistic movement. Interpretation is based on the social context of the artwork or the values it embodies; in other words, art is no longer seen as neutral object (application of social and critical theory). More recently, the Actor Network Theory (ANT) has been used to take a closer look at the networks and actors around objects such as artworks, offering a new perspective on the agencies of artists and artworks within African Modernisms. ANT focuses on multidimensional and constantly shifting relations between different actors, which can include people and other non-human actors. In other words, all artworks have (an) agency, and agency is therefore assigned equally to all of them. When actors enter a new network with their own networks, a process of translation is initiated, which may lead to the negotiation of their own role(s). Therefore, the ANT allows for a closer look at all actors involved and may show how existing networks were formed as well as how they can fall apart (Law 1997; Latour 2000, 2005; Bellinger and Krieger 2006; Callon 2006). So far, ANT has been applied to collection and museum research primarily in the context of scientific and historical museums. In art history it is a relatively new method that has the potential to unlock new perspectives and readings (Byrne et al. 2011; Zell 2011).

Biographical Method

This method is based on the assumption that the artist as a historical person matters. It requires an analysis of the artwork that considers information from the artist’s personal life. The artist’s life, such as his or her religious convictions, childhood, education, etc., shapes his or her style, the subject matter and the art-making process. The synthesis of these aspects is a key to a comprehensive understanding of the artwork. This method usually includes the collection and analysis of an intensive account of an artist’s whole life or a portion of their life, often obtained through an in-depth, unstructured interview. The account may be reinforced by semi-structured interviews and/or personal documents. Historiographic and anthropologic methodologies come into play,

such as an attempt to understand art through archival research related to the artist's life as well as interviews and extended conversations if the artist is still alive. The artist's personal contacts are also relevant for this approach, thus family members, friends and colleagues become important sources. This method is often applied in relation to African Modernism, as many of the protagonists and/or their extended relatives, friends and colleagues are still alive. Nevertheless, we have to question if this actor-centred approach is sufficient to give credit to both the aesthetic components of the work as well as its wider contextual relevance. (Vansina 1984; Eisler 1987; Hughes 2018)

Ethnographic Methods

The anthropology of art was originally engaged mainly with the analysis of styles related to specific regions and ethnic groups (Fagg 1965; Kjersmeier 1967; Sieber and Rubin 1968; Trowell 1970). Later, fieldwork, participant observation and other methods – derived from ethnography and anthropology with an actor-focused approach – aiming to understand the artwork in its social context entered the field. For many years, this has been the main methodological approach to study aesthetic practises on the African continent, including practises beyond the realm of classical fine arts such as performances, rituals and crafts (Förster 1988; Layton 2009; Morphy & Perkins 2006; Schneider & Wright 2010). In researching African Modernism, it may be helpful to relate modern artworks with former stylistic or regional categories since modern artists often draw from cultural and social traditions. We can also ask how ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork as well as a cultural contextualisation of the works, may be useful in the research, particularly in regard to the scarcity of other sources such as archival documents or comparative literature.

Cultural History / Local Contexts / Global Art History

Global art history is a heavily discussed and contested area, and so far, the smallest common denominator seems to be that it is an open question rather than a defined discipline. Accordingly, the methodical approaches and cultural perspectives are very diverse and informed by various other disciplines and critical theory. One of the central questions is what it means to have a global and local or a transcultural experience of art. The global and the local are social and psychological phenomena serving as explanations and views of the world that exist everywhere. In relation to African Modernism, we can question if modernism can be regarded as a global phenomenon and if we can apply terminologies and methodologies from Western art history to the African context. What are the advantages and disadvantages of approaching African Modernisms with the conceptual frameworks of the various –isms of modernism? Should we develop a specific terminology and methodology, and if so, what would that look like? (Adams 1989; Elkins 2013; Jeffery & Minissale 2007; Salami & Blackmun Visonà 2013; Harney & Phillips 2018)

Methods Derived from Cultural Theories

Postcolonial Theory / Decolonising / Microhistories

Both postcolonial and decolonial approaches are based on critical theories and examine and question power relations and diversity along the categories of race, gender and class in artistic and curatorial practices. A postcolonial perspective in art history traces the development of postcolonial thought in relation to art, culture and modernism(s) worldwide, including the critique of colonial power structures, the aftermath of colonialism on global Indigenous peoples and the ongoing

processes of decolonisation and neocolonialism in the present. One of the methods applied in this analysis are microhistories – a term that has been used to describe the way in which certain historians and writers bring attention to marginalised phenomena and stories and use them as a lens to gain an understanding of larger contexts. In writing the history of African Modernisms, these approaches also challenge our methodologies. For example, how far is African Modernisms embedded in colonial and postcolonial power structures, especially regarding the relationships between the artist and patron or collector? How have educational systems enforced colonial power structures or how did they enable artists' agencies and the formation of modern subjectivities? But we also have to ask: how is the research on African Modernisms re-inscribing the very same structures? After all, most of the research is financed and conducted by institutions in the northern hemisphere while the research from the Global South stays highly invisible and has less reception in the North. (Fanon 1962 & 1968; Said 1978 & 1993; Hall 1990; 1992 & 1996; Bhabha 1994; Mudimbe 1988 & 1994; Spivak 1998, 1994 & 1999; Mbembe 2001; Mignolo 2013)

Affect Theory

Affect Theory is an interdisciplinary approach towards the functions of the affect as the bodily or embodied experience had, for example, through an artwork. It is a way of understanding experiences and the bodily capacities to affect and to be affected (Deleuze 1992). The affect, in addition to the conscious experience or reaction, is therefore crucial for social dynamics as well as for the art experience. But not only the human body and its mind are subject of the affective studies; so are technologies that can produce affective bodily capacities. The affective turn therefore expresses new configurations of bodies, technology and matter, and can offer new readings of artworks within the African Modernisms and how they affected artists, collectors, viewers and researchers. (Clough and Halley 2007; Greg and Seighworth 2010; Brown and Phu 2014)

Kontakt

Katharina Greven

Iwalewahauss

Wölfelstr. 2, 95444 Bayreuth

katharina.greven@uni-bayreuth.de

Reference:

CFP: Special issue: African Modernisms. In: ArtHist.net, Jan 16, 2019 (accessed Dec 16, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/19925>>.