

UNDP - UNCTAD

CREATIVE ECONOMY REPORT 2010

Creative Economy: a Feasible Development Option

Box 2.3 Africa Remix: Africa speaking loudly, brightly and colourfully

“Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent” is the first exhibition to provide a comprehensive overview of present-day artistic activities on the African continent and in the diaspora. It features artists from countries across the African continent, from Algeria to South Africa, as well as from African artists now living in Europe and North America. All the work has been created within the last 10 years and includes painting, sculpture, installation, photography, film, drawing, design and video. The exhibition provides an entry point into modern African creativity, dispelling oft-held perceptions of a continent focused on the past, stuck in ritual and tradition, and engulfed by poverty, disease and war.

Curated by Cameroon-born, Paris-based curator, writer and critic Simon Njami, the exhibition was launched in 2004 at the museum kunst palast in Dusseldorf, Germany, where it was considered to be the largest exhibition of contemporary African visual art ever held in Europe. It subsequently travelled to the Hayward Gallery in London, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and, more recently, the Johannesburg Art Gallery in Gauteng, South Africa.

Njami’s intention with the exhibition is to address the historical imbalances and inaccurate portrayal of the image of Africa that have been so prevalent in the past and to present an exhibition focusing exclusively on Africa by an African curator and now, most recently, to present it to African audiences. The artists represent themselves rather than their countries.

Africa Remix explores important contemporary themes relevant to Africa’s heritage and cultural diversity: of city and land (the contrasting experiences of urban and rural life), identity and history (including issues of tradition and modernity and the relationship of the individual to the community) and body and soul (encompassing religion, spirituality, emotion and sexuality). It powerfully acknowledges the vastness and diversity that are Africa and the wealth of her stories. Current global relationships, however, dictate that many of the interactions of each African country with the continent are brokered by Northern centres of global influence.

The current showing of the exhibition in the economic engine room of South Africa is set against the backdrop of a changing reality as the population of continental Africans in Gauteng grows rapidly. New connections are being made as communications and banking

groups set up intercontinental partnerships and students move between academic institutions for research and study purposes. Foodstuffs are imported daily from West Africa into our urban markets.

The exhibition is not without its critics, however, particularly its emphasis on contemporary art rather than heritage and folk art. As Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian*¹ says, Africa Remix “uses ‘contemporary art’ in the way it is generally used, to mean art aware of modernism and its aftermath. But who defines ‘contemporary art’, and why should it matter more than, say, ‘tribal’ or popular art from Africa? And why should African art have to fit a sterile and middle-class western idea of the culturally pertinent?”

Perhaps this is precisely the point. Africa Remix represents an Africa that is vibrant, urban and modern, not only rural, voiceless and technologically backward. It is indeed a groundbreaking exhibition offering audiences not only a visual explosion of African imagery but also an opportunity to engage with its meanings and theory through sponsored seminars, guided walkabouts and a catalogue showcasing festivals, journals, institutions and movements that have shaped culture on the continent.

¹ Jonathan Jones, “Africa Calling”, *The Guardian*, Wednesday, 9 February 2005. Available at: <http://remixtheory.net/?p=116>.

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