



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Abstracts for American Art in Dialogue with Africa and its Diaspora

“Feedback: Between American Art and African Art History”

Tobias Wofford

African art has played a role in the practices of studio-trained African American artists since the Harlem Renaissance. As knowledge about African art has grown and changed, so too have the ways in which artists have appropriated such art and imagined their relationship to the continent. This essay will explore the meeting of African American art and the knowledge about Africa spread through African art history. Certainly, art criticism and art history have always collaborated with art production in creating new artistic movements. Yet African art history’s role in African American art is a complicated one because it highlights contentious debates about authenticity, identity, artistic freedom, and innovation that underlie discourses of modern and postmodern art.

This essay will focus on the art of David Hammons and the collaborations of artists Houston and Kinshasha Conwill. The Conwills, Hammons, and other African American artists working in the 1980s and 1990s (including Alison Saar, Renee Stout, and Fred Wilson) drew upon art historical writings about African art in order to explore new possibilities in their own artistic practices. Such writings not only allowed artists to explore (and re-create) new structures of meaning for their works, but African art history also provided viewers and intellectuals in the arts community with a guide for reading these complex works.

I propose that this collusion between African art history and American art can be conceived of as feedback: a resonant discursive loop that connects American art and African art; diasporic art production and its interpretation; and identity production and recognition. Feedback is a process in which information about the past influences the same phenomenon in the present or future. It proposes a concept of time set slightly off-kilter and working in a circular logic.

This logic of past, present, and future can be seen in many diasporic relationships to time. Occasionally, the feedback created between African art history and African American art can resonate productively to create new art forms through images of Africa circulating in art-historical discourse. In such instances, these appropriated African forms are read as authentic and unproblematic expressions of African American identity and cultural difference. But this feedback can also create a dissonance where cultural imperatives for identifying with Africa are resisted by African American artists and the notions of authenticity and identity engrained in American cultural discourse become exposed. By exploring the work of contemporary African American artists and their relationship to African art history, I hope to show the ways that resonance and dissonance in diasporic feedback may help one to understand the controversies around the appropriation of African art in the diaspora. Feedback may help to frame the processes of making and interpreting art by diasporic communities and, ultimately, expose the complicated nature of expressing and recognizing racial difference in American identity.

“The Americanist Quandary: Of the History of African Art in the Work of the American Artist”
Ikem Stanley Okoye

American artists as diverse as Lois Mailou Jones, Romare Bearden, Robert Rauschenberg, Houston Conwill, Keith Haring, and Victor Ekpuk (Nigerian-born American) have invested resources in understanding some aspect of historic or modern African history on the one hand, and/or cultural practice on the other, with varying degrees of commitment. These artists found ways to incorporate these interests, in some instances indexically, in others metonymically, in yet others metaphorically. In at least one instance (Rauschenberg) I will even note a deceptive frivolity masking seriousness. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, Houston Conwill produced a large number of works across media that incorporated the art and religious practices of historical and/or traditional West and Central African cultures (Kongo, Yoruba, and Igbo especially). Conwill was one of the best-known African American artists in this period, yet extended critical evaluation of his output during these years does not exist. This may be an outcome of the shift in the American consideration of ancestry that cyclically moves from locating this memory in Africa to locating it in the American South; however, it more likely reveals a difficulty within Americanist art history itself—where scholars acquire little or no expertise in African art, and so are at a loss to grapple with work by American artists who have been invested for years in the study of African cultural production. In other words, Conwill’s trajectory reveals a problematic of American art-historical pedagogy: the art-historical geography in which fields and their borders separate the spaces of the study of Africa from that of America (and Europe) produces scholars relatively uninformed about the Africa engaged by the artists themselves.

This paper will critically examine the lay of the art-historical land, highlighting most Americanists’ limited competency in African art studies—how but for a few rare curricular instances, the historical knowledge acquired by Americanist scholars (not to mention the nature of institutional support in their subsequent career trajectories) little prepares them for encounters with work by a range of artists who have engaged Africa in a sustained manner. We have, in other words, been left with a significant legacy of artworks by American artists that were products of long-term investments in understanding African art and culture, but that too few scholars, especially in the contemporary generation, can grapple with adequately.

I will conclude by suggesting that this pedagogical lacuna has impacted subsequent engagements with, and practices of, American artists. It is not to say that American artists have responded to a sense of where the curatorial, scholarly, and art critical worlds are headed, but rather to say that there has been a cultural shift away from knowledge of Africa on its own terms, to a more superficial, perhaps postmodern, and certainly re-imagined Africa that ironically coincides with the change from the designation “Black American” to the designation “African American.”

“Reframing American Art: An African Diasporic Perspective”

Krista Thompson

This paper examines processes of inclusion and occlusion in American art that affect artists in the African diaspora. The essay begins by analyzing the work of Tom Lloyd, an African American artist who worked with light and electronic technologies in the mid-1960s. I track how Lloyd went from being central in the American art scene to being written out of its history. The paper will focus too on how Lloyd went from participating in many multiracial exhibitions in which he was never identified as black to being showcased exclusively in exhibitions featuring African American artists. Many of these black art exhibitions from the late 1960s and 1970s grappled with Africa as a defining site of blackness. This engagement with Africa was cemented in Lloyd’s participation in Festac 77 in Lagos and his travels to the Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Liberia, Tanzania, Kenya, and Egypt in the 1970s. The paper experiments with new methodologies of art history that take their cue from performance artist Lorraine O’Grady. Her Caribbean-inspired public performances as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire as well as her character’s curation of multiracial art shows in the 1980s model more expansive definitions of art and new modes of writing American art history.

“Paris-Philadelphia: African Figures around 1800, or Portrait of Yarrow as a Mameluke”
Anne Lafont

This paper takes as its starting point Charles Willson Peale’s *Portrait of Yarrow Mamout* (1819, Philadelphia Museum of Art) and investigates the image as a nexus for different issues related to the Atlantic circulation of ideas and artworks. At the same time, Peale’s painting turns out to be the iconic trace of French negrophile networks of 1800; of intermediality, as its formal pattern seems to be the one used in Mameluke portraits of the First French Empire (Girodet, Paillot de Montabert, Gros, Vernet, etc.); and finally of the dynamics of the Peale family’s art production, as Rembrandt Peale (Charles Willson Peale’s son) sojourned in France in 1808 and 1809.

I will dedicate this paper to Africanophile networks in Paris in the beginning of the nineteenth century, and consider the ways in which several American artists, politicians, and intellectuals who sojourned in France or had strong relationships with France around 1800 were involved in shaping the image of the African Muslim, whatever this identity covered, at this time. The main agents for this new African American image included Charles Willson Peale, Rembrandt Peale, Thomas Jefferson, and, finally, David Bailie Warden, a notable figure who held United States diplomatic appointments in Paris between 1804 and 1813, published the first narrative of Yarrow Mamout’s life (*A Chorographical and Statistical Description of the District of Columbia: Seat of the General Government of the United States*, Paris, 1816, pg. 49–50), and served as the English translator of *De la littérature des Nègres*, written in 1808 by the Abbé Grégoire (1750–1831), the most eminent French intellectual involved in the defense of African descendants’ rights during the French Revolution and the first half of the nineteenth century.

This paper will help to connect these negrophile French American milieus with the visual arts and especially with representations of African and/or Muslim people (Roustam Raza, Katchef Dahouth, Yarrow Mamout, etc.) at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

“Augustus Washington’s Liberian Daguerreotypes and the Civil Contract of Photography”
Shawn Michelle Smith

In 1853, the African American daguerreotypist Augustus Washington left his home in Hartford, Connecticut, to begin a new life in Monrovia, Liberia. Renouncing the nation of his birth, he and his wife, Cordelia, along with their two children, joined thousands of other free African Americans in a quest to found a new black nation. Washington began his career in Liberia as a daguerreotypist, and continued to work as a photographer during the first decade of his life in Africa.

This paper explores the assumptions about colonization, race, and nation that inform Washington’s daguerrean practice in Liberia. Washington understood that his Liberian daguerreotypes were image-objects made for dual audiences—the Americo-Liberians themselves, as well as Americans debating the merits and success of colonization in the United States. Washington’s daguerreotype portraits therefore perform citizenship for a doubled gaze, participating in what Ariella Azoulay has called the “civil contract” of photography. The portraits create a space for the mutual recognition of subjects who see themselves as equal citizens, performing and projecting an imagined nation.

“‘Aglow in the Darkest Vistas’:

Africa, Racial Fantasy, and the Modernist Self-Fashioning of F. Holland Day”

Camara Dia Holloway

An 1897 portrait of the photographer F. Holland Day (1864–1933) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art shows him posed with a black male nude. The juxtaposition between the blackness and nudity of the model, who is virtually indistinguishable from the black background, and the sartorial elegance and whiteness of Day, who is spotlighted in the foreground, reflects how the centrality of race in American identity formation extended to its construction of modernism. Day’s modernity, masculinity, whiteness, and refined aesthetic sensibility were accentuated by the comparison with the black figure’s presence. This model was featured in Day’s highly acclaimed *Nubian Series* (1896–97), whose technical and aesthetic virtuosity cemented his reputation. This emphasis on racial difference was a recurrent theme in Day’s oeuvre. He routinely photographed a wide variety of ethnic subjects (Lebanese, Italian, Chinese), employing models drawn from the exploding immigrant population of his native Boston. As with the African-inspired *Nubian Series*, these models were posed in classical or Orientalist garb that alluded to exotic locales, fantasies, and myths.

Racialism, Orientalism, imperialism, and colonialism had wide currency in fin-de-siècle culture, so Day’s taste for the exotic would have been understood as a sign of cosmopolitan sophistication. And yet, while some interest in foreign cultures was deemed appropriate given America’s recent ascension to global power status, Day’s preoccupation with difference exceeded that justifiable as an endorsement of the nation’s imperialist ambitions. While Day always maintained racial distinctions, an embrace of Otherness became central to his self-fashioning and lifestyle, including his adoption of Orientalist attire, uncommonly long hair, and smoking habit and in the decoration of his home. The *Nubian Series* was redolent with stereotypical ideas about Africa and blackness, but it also betrayed an admiration and erotic investment that was incongruent with America’s customary separation of races and ethnic groups. Day risked censure gratifying his fascination with Africa and Otherness to the extent that he did, suggesting how crucial racial difference and blackness were to his sense of self. The fact that the only instance where he posed with one of his models was this sitting with one of the models from the *Nubian Series* further attests to the significance that Africanism held for his subjectivity. Day’s uncommon and paradoxical response to Africa deepens our understanding of the role that race played in the construction of modernist identity.

“Féral Benga: African Muse of Modernism”

James Smalls

In 1925, a young man from Dakar, Senegal, named François (Féral) Benga arrived in Paris and auditioned for a spot as a dancer at the Folies-Bergère. He was instantly hired. One year later, joined by a coterie of other African dancers, he appeared onstage with Josephine Baker as she danced in her infamous banana skirt amidst a jungle décor in a musical revue called *La Folie du Jour*. Over the course of a decade, Féral Benga’s career blossomed not only as a dancer (he became a popular vedette of the music hall and was dubbed *the* male counterpart to Baker), but also as a sought-after artist’s model. He performed internationally and became a major creative inspiration for the works of many American and European artists and intellectuals who included, among others, Richmond Barthé, James A. Porter, George Platt Lynes, Carl Van Vechten, Pavel Tchelitchev, Michel Leiris, Eli Lotar, and Jean Cocteau.

This talk is part of my continuously evolving research into the life, legacy, visual significance, and critical discourses generated by Féral Benga on twentieth-century American, European, and black diasporic art and culture. It seeks to lay bare, contextualize, and critique the myriad visual representations of the African dancer (many of which remain unpublished) by the above-mentioned artists and to interrogate the cultural/aesthetic/ideological discourses fostered by his physical presence and status as transnational icon of black agency within American and European modernist practice and experience from the mid-1920s into the early 1950s. Benga’s appearance in the work of these artists constitutes an important parallel and underground dialogue with conventional histories of modern American and African American art, as well as with the critical contours of black diasporic cultures in general. Among other areas of interest, such as the importance of homoeroticism and the impact of European and African dance on American and African American visual culture, this talk will take a cue from the critical voice of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain L. Locke, in considering black (American and African) engagement in and embrace of primitivism as an empowering rather than denigrating form of racial and cultural affirmation.

“Fighting the Fetish for *Fétiches*: Africa in the Work of Palmer Hayden”

Mia Bagneris

I never had a desire to paint anything about Africa. I painted what Negroes, colored people, us Americans do...we're a brand new race, raised and manufactured in the U.S.

--Palmer Hayden

In his watershed 1925 essay, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” Alain Locke encouraged African American artists to look to the traditional arts of Africa as a rich archive of visual material, fine examples “of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery” that could serve as a “profound and galvanizing influence” in developing a distinctly African American modern art. Locke’s essay is fraught with tensions; for example, it recognizes the mediated nature of black Americans’ encounters with African art while simultaneously constructing this art as an “ancestral legacy” to which they are the logical heirs. Despite its internal contradictions, New Negro artists largely interpreted the text as a mandate that posited a “direct cultural kinship” to Africa as the force unifying black artists and saw the “ancestral legacy” of African art as a potential foundation for the “school of Negro art” for which Locke advocated.¹ Heeding Locke’s call, artists like Hale Woodruff, Aaron Douglas, Sargent Johnson, and Lois Mailou Jones studied African art and incorporated the influence of African sculpture, motifs, and themes into their modern compositions.

Palmer Hayden stands as an exceptional outlier among the accomplished black artists of the New Negro period in his resistance to this Afrocentric stance. In what amounted to an irreverent repudiation of Locke’s mandate, Hayden boldly declared: “I never had a desire to paint anything about Africa. I painted what Negroes, colored people, us Americans do...we’re a brand new race, raised and manufactured in the U.S.” Hayden’s divergence from his peers in this regard may account, at least in part, for the dearth of serious scholarship on his work, despite the fact that he moved in New Negro artistic and intellectual circles in New York and Paris and won accolades from individuals and institutions that supported Harlem Renaissance artists. While Hayden clearly would have disagreed with writer and cultural critic George Schuyler about the impossibility of “Negro art ‘made in America,’” he would have concurred that this art’s basis in Africa or African art was complete “hokum.”²

This does not mean that Hayden’s work did not engage with Africa or African art or with the New Negro intelligentsia’s ideas about its importance. Indeed, perhaps his most well-known work, *Fétiche et Fleurs* (ca. 1932), incorporates both a Fang reliquary and a *bakuba* cloth in what can be understood as a critique of the superficial nature of black Americans’ appreciation of African art and the mediated mechanisms through which they come to value it (hence the French “*fétiche*”). Where Locke hoped black artists would employ the inspiration of African art to produce art that was fresh, vital, and modern, Hayden composes a decidedly academic picture in which the reliquary and the cloth simply replace a neoclassical figurine and a doily in a traditional parlor picture. While other scholars have given passing attention to the jab at Locke and his followers in *Fétiche et Fleurs*, little consideration has been given to Hayden’s three watercolor sketches of African dancers (ca.1932) that were likely completed in Paris and influenced by the hugely popular *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* that took place there that same year. Considering these works within the context of the International Colonial Exposition and setting Hayden’s view against those of his fellow New Negro artists, this paper examines the complicated place of Africa in Hayden’s understudied and frequently misunderstood oeuvre.

¹ Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” (1925).

² George Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum” (1926).

“To Paint His Own People”:

William H. Johnson’s Avant-Garde Gambits and the Orientalized Black Female Body”

Nicholas Miller

Compared to the cultural efflorescence that was the New Negro movement of the 1920s, the 1930s presented a drastically altered cultural and political landscape for African Americans. Throughout the Great Depression, waves of black migrants travelled to the industrialized North to flee the racial violence and economic conditions of the rural South. Artistically, African art seemed to lose its prominent position as muse for American artists, ceding to a new source of originality in vernacular and self-taught artistic practices. In 1938, after traveling for twelve years throughout Europe and briefly visiting North Africa, African American painter William H. Johnson returned to New York amidst this scene and developed a highly idiosyncratic mode of figuration that registered the cultural and political changes of the late 1930s as well as his own conception of African diasporic identity.

Upon his return, Johnson encountered a variety of framings of African diasporic art. He viewed everything from photographs of the 1935 MoMA exhibition “African Negro Art,” to the same institution’s exhibitions of so-called “primitive” or self-trained African American artists William Edmondson and Horace Pippin, and finally had recollections of the Southern quilting practices from his childhood in Florence, South Carolina. Viewing such a multifarious set of aesthetic configurations, Johnson attempted to synthesize these different traditions and construct continuities between African and African American visual expression. Shuttling between divergent geographic locations, in works such as *Street Life, Harlem* (1939–40) Johnson borrowed the figural delineations of African sculpture and the crude figurations of the folk to model a couple in a pastel-hued New York cityscape, while in *Early Morning Work* (1940), he used African art and quilting patterns to document rural labor in the American South, a region emphatically associated with African authenticity in the 1930s and 1940s.

Yet, alongside these American locales, Johnson also painted a handful of Orientalist depictions of the black male and female body—perhaps loose interpretations of his own sojourn to North Africa—in a similarly amalgamated style. In a discrepant fashion inconsistent with his scenes documenting the urban North or rural South, paintings such as *Three Dancers* (1940) and *Breakfast for Madam* (1942) as well as *Seated Male Model with Turban* (1939–40) advanced eroticized scenes of the black body costumed with Orientalist signifiers. This paper, then, is an attempt to grapple with Johnson’s own particular avant-garde gambits and their manifestations in his depictions of the partially clothed or nude black body. In generating his own innovative modernistic idiom, Johnson could be seen to be constructing a theory of African cultural continuity predicated on form; however, his Orientalist images of the black nude expose the often ambivalent workings of African American painterly practices that attempt to channel an African ancestral heritage. I argue that by revivifying and expanding well-worn modernist tropes that center on the sexualization of the black male and female body, Johnson advanced an uneven set of relations between African American and North African identities. In doing so, his work reveals the misapprehensions that occur within the process of generating intradiasporic relations through modernist artistic practice.

“From Transnational to Trans-African:
The Circulation of Culture in the Work of Winold Reiss and Romare Bearden”
Jeffrey C. Stewart

In a talk entitled “Looking Backward to Look Forward: Winold Reiss in Context,” at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2011, I outlined a cultural ethics of transnationalism in art by looking at the career of Winold Reiss, a German immigrant artist who came to the United States in 1913 and made the bodies and cultures of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and immigrant Americans the centerpieces of his uniquely American art practice. There I explored how Reiss, as a transnational artist, made the conscious effort to embed himself in communities of people of color in early twentieth-century America, becoming one of the few transnational artists from Europe to embrace non-whites as quintessentially American. In this paper, I want to build on those insights to consider what effect being in conversation with several spatially segregated racial and ethnic communities had on Reiss’s aesthetic, and how this resulting aesthetic circulated among different paintings, illustrations, and designs that he created from 1919 to 1940.

Utilizing the African principles of design that Robert Farris Thompson outlined in his book, *African Art in Motion*, we can see the motifs, figures, visual tropes, and “attitudes” in Reiss’s portraits as a kind of transnational and transcultural performativity whereby dance, music, and architectural design structure his visual representations of racial subjects. I want to suggest that Reiss’s work dialogues with design and representational strategies in the work of Romare Bearden, who, in the 1930s and 1940s, exposed himself to various art traditions, including the Mexican muralist movement, ancient Greek art, and especially African art. In a sense, both are transnational artists. Ideas from various traditions circulated in Bearden’s art and came to shape his collages of the 1960s—works that embodied the culture and distinct spatial imaginary of Black people in New York and Pittsburgh at the time. I want to put these artists’ oeuvres in conversation with one another to suggest how they used aesthetic traditions to create a kind of performance of culture that might be called “trans-African.”

“Routes to Roots:

Loïs Mailou Jones’s Engagement with Africa and the African Diaspora, 1938–70”

Rebecca Keegan VanDiver

At the start of the 1980s, African American artist and Howard University art professor Loïs Mailou Jones (1905–1998) sat down and wrote a list of her African-themed paintings. She titled the list *Africa Series*. Her 1938 work, *Les Fétiches*, completed during a Parisian sabbatical, was first on the list. This painting, now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, has arguably become her signature work. After *Les Fétiches*, the *Africa Series* list then jumped forward thirty years to Jones’s 1971 mixed media piece, *Homage to Oshogbo*, which was inspired by her tour of the African continent in 1970. This paper considers Jones’s engagements with Africa and the African diaspora in the thirty-year period (roughly 1938–70) that is absent from her *African Series* list. It was during this time that Jones married Haitian graphic designer Verginaud Pierre-Noël; established a studio in Haiti; began a research project on the black visual artist that included an investigation of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African artists; and travelled throughout the United States and Europe. Using Jones as a case study, I ask, what form did Africa take for African American artists like Jones before they set foot on the continent? How did diasporic experiences and encounters influence her artistic production? Ultimately riffing off of James Clifford, I ask, what were Jones’s routes to her roots?

An analysis of the paintings Loïs Mailou Jones produced in the 1938–70 period reveals not only the marriage of African and African diasporic themes on her canvases, but also her preoccupation with picturing the various faces of the African diaspora. Further, an investigation into her pedagogy and research agenda underscores how one can view Loïs Mailou Jones as a visual interlocutor who was committed to the visualization of the black diaspora—its objects, its peoples, and its traditions. Lastly, I suggest that Jones’s turn to the medium of collage during this period speaks to larger cultural debates concerning the multi-faceted nature of blackness and Africa’s role within its construction at mid-century.

“Toward a Language of Material: Cy Twombly’s North African Sketchbooks”
Anne-Grit Becker

In 1952, after Cy Twombly (1928–2011) had won a travel grant to study abroad, the young American artist, in company with his friend and colleague Robert Rauschenberg, readjusted and widened the focus of his European Grand Tour by making a side trip to North Africa. “I can’t begin to say how Africa has affected my work (for the better I hope),” Twombly wrote in an undated letter, which well documents the excitement and “awakening” he experienced in Morocco.¹ During his three-month stay there, he engaged in diverse activities such as assisting archeological excavations, making tapestries out of native textiles, and producing hundreds of sketches that he deemed crucial for his later paintings. Most significantly though, the outcome of his stay materialized only after Twombly had returned to Rome, and, more precisely, while investigating African art and culture more systematically and in retrospect in the Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography. The resulting four sketchbooks, which are comprised of rough drawings in crayon or pencil on typewriter paper, constitute a peculiar mixture of impressions gained first on-site and subsequently through the institutional lens of the Western museum.²

Despite of the often noted importance of these sketchbooks—scholars like Kirk Varnedoe have referred to them as a basis for the artist’s future development—the role of the source material, i.e. the African art that attracted Twombly’s attention, has up to now been left largely unexamined.³ In order to shed light on this neglected aspect of his work, I would like to specifically discuss how Twombly studied these objects while transforming them within the medium of drawing. What kind of dialog did he develop with the art and culture on display, and how did his encounter differ from earlier ones like those of Paul Klee or Henri Matisse? By analyzing in detail the aesthetic and material characteristics of exemplary parts of the sketchbooks and by relating the drawings to select elements of the African exhibits at the Pigorini, this paper addresses how Twombly not only modified his visual language but also incorporated a new material vocabulary with which to work.

Setting the drawings within this perspective, this paper then aims to make evident that Twombly’s questioning of African visual culture cannot be understood to function on a structural level alone. Instead, I will argue that Twombly’s concrete interest in objects like power figures (*nkisi nkondi*) and raw materials like fur, rope, and burlap indicates a specific approach toward exploring the materialities of things as process generating in and of themselves.

¹ Quotations from Twombly’s letters to Leslie Cheek Jr., director of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, published by Kirk Varnedoe, “Inscriptions in Arcadia,” in *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 57n56, and 58n61.

² The sketchbooks have been published in their entirety by Nicola Del Roscio, ed., *Cy Twombly. Drawings. Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 1951–55 (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2011), 34–75.

³ Cp. Martina Dobbe: *Querelle des anciens, des modernes et des postmodernes. Exemplarische Untersuchungen zur Medienästhetik der Malerei im Anschluß an die Positionen von Nicolas Poussin und Cy Twombly* (Munich: Fink 1999), 225n186, and Achim Hochdörfer: *Cy Twombly. Das skulpturale Werk* (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 2001), 34–38.

“Living in Color: Jacob Lawrence and the Osogbo Experience in the Early 1960s”
Chika Okeke-Agulu

In 1962 and 1964 Jacob Lawrence visited Nigeria, spending many months during his second visit at the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan and the Mbari-Mbayo Club in Osogbo. This experience led to a series of works he made in 1964, which I propose produced a new sensibility in his painting. I argue that unlike other African American artists of the period who travelled to Africa in search of inspiration (a late, if unacknowledged, response to Alain Locke’s call in the 1920s for “Negro” artists to look to African art for inspiration), Lawrence’s Ibadan and Osogbo encounters radically transformed his approach to color and painting. But it was not the esteemed traditions of Yoruba sculpture or plastic arts that impacted Lawrence’s work; rather, it was the visual character of contemporary life in Osogbo that provided him with an unprecedented palette and a greater confidence in handling intensely complicated pictorial compositions. The paper will examine the extent to which his participation in the activities of the Mbari-Mbayo established by the Yoruba dramatist Duro Ladipo and the German critic Ulli Beier catalyzed the intense sensory experience Lawrence translated into his “Mbari” paintings.

“Transcultural Conversations: American and Nigerian Art in Dialogue”

Peju Layiwola

Alain Locke’s call for African American artists to draw creative inspiration from the traditional arts of Africa had a great impact on the works of several African American artists who sought to satisfy an urge to reconnect to their homelands. A number of African American artists, including Melvin Edwards, John Biggers, and David Driskell, made trips to Africa and began to use African elements in their works. This cultural referencing enriched African American art and considerably impacted its iconology. One of the first African American artists to travel to Africa, Biggers visited Nigeria and Ghana in 1957 on a UNESCO grant. He remarked that this opportunity was the most significant of his life’s experiences. The drawings that Biggers made on his trip provided a repository of images from Africa that he drew from throughout his illustrious career. Ever since, other American artists have visited Africa and have continued to draw on their African cultural heritage in myriad ways. Some of these visits have been facilitated by grants and fellowships offered by museums such as the Guggenheim and also the Fulbright Program, while a more recent art initiative aimed at cultural diplomacy, smARTpower, was instituted by the U.S. Department of State in 2011. All these visits have provided platforms for transcultural dialogues between U.S.-based artists and their counterparts in Nigeria.

This paper explores the recent creative engagements and projects of two contemporary African American artists, Brett Cook and Wura-Natasia Ogunji. From Berkeley, California, to Ibadan and Lagos, Nigeria, Brett Cook’s 2012 project “Sharing Culture” led to a series of workshops with students and artists culminating in the creation of a collaboratively produced outdoor mural. Ogunji, a performance artist from Austin, Texas, explores the contemporary art practice of performance art in Lagos, Nigeria. Although the Yoruba society has a strongly performative culture, there is a near absence of performance art in Nigeria. This paper further reflects on the impact these artists’ projects have had on the receiving culture and also how this experience in Africa impinges on their own trajectories.

“Imaging the ‘Face of the Fugitive Slave’ Artist in Black Diasporic Self-Portraiture”
Celeste-Marie Bernier

As bodies and souls circulating within the living death of transatlantic slavery over the centuries, the psychological and physical realities of Black women, men, and children have been all but annihilated if we consider their existence solely within white mainstream imagery and text. Simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible, Black subjectivities have been bought and sold not only upon the auction block and the antislavery podium, but also within white European and American racist visual and literary schemas. The right to represent the “face of the fugitive slave” (Frederick Douglass, “A Tribute for the Negro,” *The North Star*, April 7, 1849), let alone his or her mind, has remained paradoxically well-worn but under-researched territory; it is both *tabula rasa* and *terra incognita*. As Frederick Douglass theorized, enslaved and emancipated men and women bore the burden not only of having to “talk like a slave” but of having to “look like a slave” (Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855). Working to reverse this perception, Douglass was joined by Black writers as well as painters, printmakers, daguerreotypists, and sculptors in an attempt both to write and to visualize Black lives into being. The act and art of self-portraiture has assumed fundamental importance for African American and Black British activists and artists by functioning as the visual counterpart to the groundbreaking formulation of an autobiographical selfhood in the vast outpouring of diverse literatures of slavery and emancipation.

This talk will trace the hyper-visualized and hyper-textualized politics and poetics of self-portraiture as a transatlantic touchstone not only of Black radical resistance but of Black aesthetic experimentation. In powerful ways, the self-portrait has emerged as a site of dissidence and resistance no less than of self-revelation and reimagining over the centuries. Working to address the ways in which historical self-portraits are recycled, revisited, and reinvented in a contemporary period, I adopt a comparative perspective to examine mixed-media installations by contemporary African American artists Carrie Mae Weems, Hank Willis Thomas, and Sanford Biggers in relation to those produced by Black British artists Donald Rodney, Lubaina Himid, and Hew Locke. Black diasporic artists, like their historical predecessors, have developed self-reflexive practices that encourage audiences to read against the grain in order to extrapolate the psychological, philosophical, and even existential realities of Black lives that have otherwise remained off-limits. Actively inscribing lacunae, loss, fragmentation, and rupture into their experimental bodies of work, Black artists borrow from an eclectic array of visual and textual materials in order to create multifaceted works of art. Enlisting viewers in their semantic construction, the resulting works demand an active and imaginative engagement with their discordant and contradictory parts as they defy the parameters of white dominant schemas that have sought to reduce Black women and men to objects of sale, voyeuristic entertainment, scientific enquiry, anthropological investigation, pornographic display, criminalized vilification, and even polemical propaganda.

“African Textiles in Dialogue with Contemporary Fiber Art”

Venny Nakazibwe

Whether created for clothing or enhancing the spaces in which we live, textiles represent the iconographic and ornamental expressions of their respective civilizations and the geographic and historical paths by which the techniques and motifs employed in their creation have travelled from one civilization to another. Aesthetically charged with pattern and color and an enticing array of textures to engage our senses, African textiles have long captured the imagination of American folk artists, designers, and researchers. Through their visual explorations, American artists have continually negotiated the aesthetics and functionality of African textiles to create new forms of artistic expression. Design elements, materials, and methods of production are appropriated, synthesized, and altered as they are assimilated by contemporary fiber artists. In this presentation, I seek to demonstrate the enduring relevance of African textiles and textile traditions to the field of contemporary American art. I propose to examine how the meanings culturally associated with various African textiles (*adire eleko*, *bogolan*, *kente* cloth, and *kuba* cloth) have been interrogated, negotiated, and refashioned by certain American artists (Sonie Ruffin, Nedra Bonds, Willis “Bing” Davis, Maria Creyts, and Kehinde Wiley) to address a diverse array of subjects and to evoke specific aspects of their American experience.

My paper engages with a recent discourse on contemporary fiber art that considers its global historical context, connecting it with the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the contemporary sustainability movement, and a return to the handmade. Questions to be considered include how textiles influence or facilitate artists’ rendering of African American historical visual experiences and cultural memory, and how African textiles have been used to facilitate a dialogue in American art.

“In the Spirit of Négritude, or, Kehinde Wiley Goes to Africa”

Daniel Haxall

In 1997, Kehinde Wiley made his first trip to Africa to meet his father, a Nigerian man Wiley would not know until adulthood. This journey resonated deeply with the artist, who subsequently returned to his ancestral home on several occasions. Each time, he documented his travels through portraiture, first painting his father and, later, local youths for his *World Stage* series of 2008. He revisited African subjects a third time when sportswear manufacturer PUMA commissioned him to create portraits of African soccer stars for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the first time the event was staged on African soil. This paper traces the impact these experiences had on the art of Kehinde Wiley, in particular his aesthetic sensibility and conceptual mindset. Wiley embraced the art of Africa throughout his career, appropriating poses from sculpture and incorporating colors and patterns from textiles into elaborate backgrounds. He applied these sources to clothing designs as well, producing a line of t-shirts, soccer cleats, and other attire for PUMA that relied heavily on African decorative arts.

However, Wiley's response to Africa extended beyond formal considerations. In the spirit of *Négritude*, he mined a collective African identity to contest former colonial hegemonies, critiquing the representation of race, status, and power in the process. Akin to the pan-African advocates of the twentieth century, the artist employed a realist style and located a shared heritage among the African diaspora. Much like the literary movements of the 1930s that attempted to reimagine notions of “blackness,” Wiley reclaimed the African subject in portraits that reference traditional, colonial, and contemporary histories. For example, he based one painting (*On Top of the World*, 2008) on a public monument to Chief Jeremiah Obafemi Awolowo, considered one of Nigeria's founding fathers for his role in delivering Nigeria from foreign rule. Similarly, Wiley depicted three youths as Yoruba wise men, and borrowed from Senegalese nationalist statuary and genre images native to Benin and Mali in the *World Stage* paintings. Patterned backdrops derive from textiles purchased in African markets, and one (*Dogon Couple*, 2008) resembles the *sankofa* symbol, an image of a bird turning its head backwards that appears frequently in West Africa to express the importance of learning from the past. The monumental painting *Unity* (2010), a portrait of three soccer players, most clearly articulates pan-African ideals. Athletes from different countries interlock arms and wear the same jersey, a symbol of African solidarity while facing international competition at the World Cup. The multi-layered iconographic scheme reflects Wiley's stated belief that “unity does exist in Africa...there is a type of unity that goes beyond nation, that goes beyond tribe.” In this way, the artist revives the aesthetics and strategies of *Négritude*, amending “blackness” by assimilating traditional African forms with Western cultural practice. Ultimately, Kehinde Wiley's dialogue with Africa complicates identity and representation, repositioning the African subject within the history of art to challenge the normalizing power of figuration.