



African Marketplace

Introduction

Much African visual culture confounds western distinctions between 'high art' and popular art and craft forms. This exhibition traces a complex set of relationships between art and the market, looking at a range of images and objects that either have communal or mercantile origins – or that respond in some way to the theme of the market. It incorporates a range of Barber's (shop) boards advertising popular hairstyles from the 1970s to the present day – and a number of medicine boards selling cures for common ailments. Originally made to order for proprietors of market stalls and shops, these colourful signs have found their way onto the international art market and a number of artisan board painters – such as the Congolese artists Moke and Botalatala Bolofe Bwailenge - have managed to establish reputations in the Europe and the US. One of the latest variations on the 'hairstyle board' in the show is the large painted cloth by the Congolese artist Bruno, depicting soccer star Siyabonga Nomvete and Bafana Bafana, the South African national team. Bruno trained at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Kinshasa, works in Durban but now sells work through shops in New York.

Alongside the 'commercial' signs hang works by major African artists including Cyprien Tokoudagba (whose work deals with the magic and medicine of *Voudon*) and Romuald Hazoume, both from Benin, coffin-maker Kane Kwei from Ghana, and South Africans Freddy Ramabulana and William Kentridge, whose etchings after Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness* address Africa's relation to the global economic market. Meschac Gaba (born in Benin) whose *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, complete with (fully commercial) *Museum Shop*, featured in *Documenta 11*, exhibits work that treats cash as commodity and explores the global reach of the market.

Beadwork, textiles and telephone-wire bowls trace the transformation of objects developed initially for local use that have increasingly evolved for both the tourist ('Afrokitsch') market and for Western art and design markets. Such objects embody processes of cultural exchange and globalisation, but they also reveal some of the ways in which market culture in Africa presents a vibrant alternative to the 'free market' of western economic rationalism.

David McNeill and Jill Bennett

Right from top:

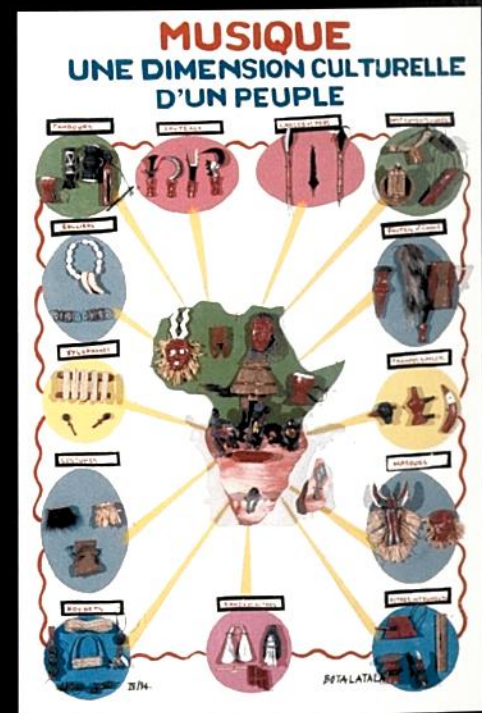
Cyprien Tokoudagba *Untitled*, Benin
 Football supporter's hat, South Africa
 Botalatala Bolofe Bwailenge *Musique (Music)*, Congo
 Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery

Page 2:

Moke *Petit marché (Little market)*, Congo
 Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery

Page 3:

"Zen-Zulu" telephone wire place mat, South Africa



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The traditional markets are the only places where Africans of all ethnic origins and classes, from the country and the city, meet and assert their humanity and historicity through consumption. People find unity in their lives through the consumer culture of the market. If their existences are denied daily by currency devaluation and other structural adjustments, at least in the market they can buy, sell, exchange news about the crisis, help each other out, and, in the process, find themselves. When state functionaries are discharged because of budget cuts, they have the market to turn to for self-renewal; when peasants leave their village for the city, they get 'modernised' in the marketplace; women increase their self-worth in the market, as their entrepreneurial skills raise them to the rank of rich male merchants. Markets thus become a meeting place for the employed and the unemployed, the young and the old, women and men, the intellectual and the peasant. They are a site for new generative forces, for the transfiguration of old concepts, and for revitalization...

By producing disorder through pricing, pirating, smuggling, and counterfeiting, African markets participate in the resistance to multinational control of the national economy and culture. In this sense, it is possible to argue that they are engaged in a struggle to keep life in Africa from being recolonised by multinational systems which have an eye only for cheap labour, cheap natural resources, and devalued cultures.

Manthia Diawara¹

Manthia Diawara's writing, and his video work *In Search of Africa*, evoke an African marketplace that serves as far more than a convenient location for trade in local produce. According to Diawara, the market is a gathering place for the exchange of news and gossip, for rich and diverse forms of entertainment, as well as for the sale of artefacts from all over the world. Markets have always served as the economic and cultural epicentres of town and village life and with the massive postwar urbanisation of central and southern Africa, their importance has increased manifold.

In the 'western world' we have become used to the proliferation of large atrium shopping plazas – places that make shopping easier, quicker and more comfortable, but at the same time regulate, and perhaps diminish, the social aspects of shopping. As social places, western shopping malls remain very poor relatives of the African market. Shopping plazas are not meeting places; they merely facilitate connections between people and things, with the consequence that they tend function as relatively anonymous and deterritorialised "non-places" in the sense proposed by the French anthropologist Marc Augé.²

The African market is an immensely more complex social space in which, among other things, a variety of inter-personal relationships are structured and orchestrated. In fact, the large markets of central Africa have always been effervescent cauldrons of cultural and economic negotiation. Nomadic groups, Islamic and Christian traders, sedentary pastoralists and animists met and exchanged goods, gold, stories, news, cultural practices - and even slaves - in the great market cities

such as Timbuctoo for many hundreds of years prior to the introduction of a European money economy. Extending well beyond the geographical boundaries of the African continent, the commercial vortex of the market drew in guns and beads from Europe, cloth and spices from India and Indonesia, iron and ceramic wares from the Middle East and as far afield as China. This trading network was as extensive as any on the planet and it has remained so to this day. In the four decades following the triumphant anti-colonial struggles of the 'fifties and early 'sixties, the range of trade goods has expanded to include designer label clothing, computer software, contemporary music CD's and movie videos, both authentic and pirated.

This long and rich history of interconnection and global exchange was, of course, suppressed in the Nineteenth Century European characterisation of Africa as the 'dark continent'. This is an image that evokes the region not as a vibrant, active trading partner but as a static community to which intrepid westerners might profitably venture. The myth that world trade

and cultural exchange is the prerogative of the cosmopolitan westerner who traverses the globe goes hand in hand with the assumption that Africans are "natives" fixed in a particular location.³ Accordingly, African cultural artefacts are not themselves viewed as part of a complex history of exchange, but become simply the objects of western market interest (much as African people were reduced, by slavery, to objects of international trade).

The African marketplace is a site in which the competing pressures for cultural maintenance, on the one hand, and for cultural transformation, on the other, do battle. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Central Business District of Johannesburg.

In the wake of the 1994 elections, white-run businesses abandoned Downtown Johannesburg for the rich, 'fortress' suburb of Sandton which boasts an enormous plaza that absolves one of the need to walk the streets to work or to shop. Meanwhile in the Downtown area large skyscrapers were sealed up and abandoned and property values plummeted. For most white residents of Johannesburg the city centre has become a no-go zone in which the unwary visitor risks mugging, car jacking or worse. It is a symbol of western efficiency and reason that has slipped back into a kind of entropic state of chaos. But in the wake of this exodus, the shops lining the famous Diagonal Street are crowded and bustling and a transformation has occurred in the CBD zone. As businesses moved out, the market moved back (the photographer Santu Mofokeng has documented and described this as a process of 'reappropriation'). In short, Downtown Johannesburg is in the process of becoming a new postmodern, postcolonial African city, and this transformation is being fuelled by small-scale entrepreneurial activity conducted by Senegalese, Nigerians, Zimbabweans, and Congolese, as well as by locals, selling all manner of goods and services.



Given that African markets offer so many things to so many people, it would be surprising if they did not also play host to a diverse range of vernacular visual practices. Indeed, the centrality of market culture has meant that many forms of modern artistic practice cannot be properly understood in isolation from their commercial origins.

The ubiquitous African 'barber's boards' are probably the best-known examples. They were probably produced first in the Igbo markets of southern Nigeria. However, by the 1960s they had spread throughout central Africa, where their bright colours and simple silhouettes were ideally suited to advertise the market haircutter's familiarity with the latest hairstyles sported by Hollywood stars, pop celebrities and local 'sapeurs'. The boards allowed barbers and other marketeers to compete in a highly saturated field of colour, sound and smell. The best board painters managed to make a good living in a context that demanded ever new and more fashionable hairstyles. The majority of these artists were neither western trained nor adept in 'traditional' practices such as carving. They were, in short, a new kind of African artist, spawned by the marketplace, and decidedly beyond the aesthetic grasp of a western appreciation, determined by distinctions between art and craft, art and design, high and 'folk art', and so on.

As western 'tourist' taste started to embrace contemporary, hybrid styles in the 1980s, many of the board painters discovered a new clientele and these works began to turn up in designer stores in the capital cities of the west. Finally, and belatedly, board painting was discovered by the artworld and a number of the artists moved on to become significant global art stars. The Congolese painter Cheri Samba is undoubtedly the best known of these but there are others, such as Cheik Ledy, Richard Onyango (Kenya), Antony 'Almighty God' Akoto (Ghana) and Moke, whose work is included in this exhibition.

Not all board painting deals with hairstyling. Market apothecaries and naturopaths commission boards to advertise the virtues of potions and talismans offered as cures for all sorts of ailments, from impotence to constipation. Many professional painters also manufacture works dealing with contemporary social themes for a market comprised largely of the local middle classes. There is also a healthy demand for religious and cult images of, for example, the beautiful but dangerous mermaid *Mami Wata* who is often represented in the form of such currently fashionable celebrities as Naomi Campbell or Madonna.

Such work is allied to the more spiritual work produced by the *voudon* adept Cyprien Tokoudagba, two examples of which are also included in this show. Cyprien lives in Abomey, Benin, which is more or less the epicentre for a cosmology best known in the west for its hybrid manifestations in the Americas and in Haiti, in particular. Cyprien's work shares with many of the *Mami Wata* painters a mediated indebtedness to colourful Indian *Mahabharata* prints that are sold in markets throughout West Africa. This influence is particularly

discernible in the simple but emphatic tonal modelling of figures and again it points to the diverse and eclectic sources from which vernacular African visual art is contrived.⁴

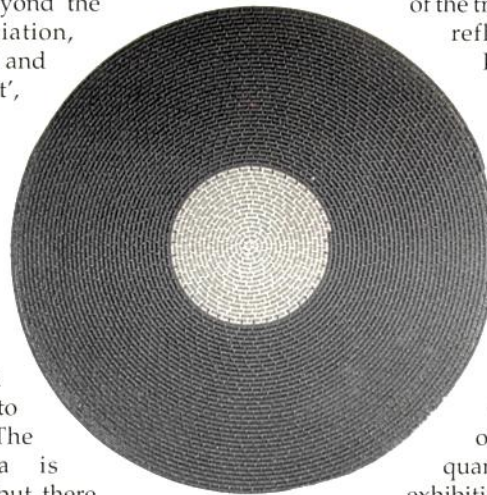
This eclecticism is nowhere more apparent than in the production and marketing of textiles. In a typical market, traditional fabrics are sold alongside cheap printed European cloths made specifically for African trade. These imported cloths frequently 'rip-off' local patterns and in many cases displace local weaving and dyeing industries. Some of these English and Dutch cloths are included in the show for the sake of comparison. The copies of the famous Ashanti *Kente* cloth have an interesting history. In 1957 Ghana became one of the first central African states to win its independence. When the President, Kwame Nkruma, formally accepted a seat in the United Nations he was photographed wearing a *Kente* jacket. The cloth was widely adopted by Africans, and also by many African Americans, as a symbol of African and diasporic pride. *Kente* production is an exacting and time-consuming practice and, as demand quickly overtook supply, European manufacturers filled the breach with cheap imitations. Some

of the trade cloths include imitation Batik patterns, reflecting the longstanding popularity of Indonesian textiles originally introduced to west Africa by Dutch and Portuguese traders. More recent imported cloths reproduce rather bad versions of Ndebele patterns derived from women's beadwork and mural painting.

African cotton industries have developed in Eastern and Southern Africa to compete with imports from Europe and also from India. *Khanga* clothes, which are worn on special occasions, are manufactured in large quantities in both Kenya and South Africa. The exhibition includes 'commemorative' *khangas* with portraits of Nelson Mandela and other South African leaders, and a cloth by made in South Africa by Nkosi, destined for markets in Angola, depicting the hazards of of land mines. We have also included a T-shirt designed by the Philani Flagship Printing Project, a skills-training project for unemployed mothers that operates from the Sobambisana Community Centre in the Crossroads Township of Cape Town.⁵ The T-shirt itself depicts the *shebeens* and *spaza* shops – businesses developed within the townships.

The trajectory from village or city marketplace to 'airport' or souvenir art, and thence finally to international artworld recognition, was pretty much institutionalised in the influential *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, held in Paris in 1989.

The carpenter Kane Kwei, from Ghana, originally produced his spectacular thematic coffins in response to an expression of regret by his elderly grandmother that she had never flown in an aeroplane! During the Second World War her small village had been transformed into a large American airforce staging base, and she had liked both the informality of the visiting personnel, and the fact that so many of them were of African descent. He responded by designing an aeroplane coffin for her funeral and his contemporaries were so impressed that they began to order all sorts of variously shaped coffins for



themselves and their relatives. Thus these marvellous objects that were originally produced as a localised and hybridised response to the austere funeral rites imposed by Methodist missionaries have, as it were, an entire history of modern Africa inscribed within them. His aeroplane, motor car, animal and vegetable coffins, such as the one included in this exhibition, later attracted the attention of the up-market American interior design industry and were subsequently shown to much acclaim in *Magiciens*.

This story is merely one of so many that richly demonstrates just how heterogeneous contemporary African art is, in its very essence. The point that cannot be stressed too strongly is the manner in which global influences are made over and transformed in order to satisfy a range of quite specific local requirements.

The telephone wire *imbenge* woven by Zulu women in Kwazulu-Natal are a case in point. In the early 1970s some 'experimental' bowls were made in which fine polychrome wire off-cuts were substituted for traditional grasses. These proved so popular that a lucrative tourist market soon developed. In order to satisfy this market, local women started to dig up underground telephone lines in search of cheap raw materials. More recently the brightly patterned bowls have been augmented with austere black and grey wire tablemats that are marketed in designer stores in New York as 'Zen Zulu'! This process of spontaneous local innovation, followed by success in the marketplace, can lead in a number of directions. It can result in the debased and repetitive production of what is sometimes called 'Afrokitsch' - witness the global proliferation of Giraffe statues, some Shona sculpture and certain species of wire toys. Equally it may offer select practitioners an *entree* into a global art economy in which they can produce larger, more elaborate and ambitious variations on the works that attract initial attention.⁶

This pattern, in all of its stages, can be found throughout Africa. For example, Johannesburg is a city founded on gold mining. The mining industry serves as prime example of the dislocation and dehumanisation imposed for so long by the apartheid government. However, it also offered a rallying point for resistance and struggle. This exhibition contains a number of plastic miner's helmets painted and sculpted by football supporters to advertise their allegiance to teams like the Orlando Pirates or the Kaiser Chiefs. A typical football stadium is awash with thousands of these cheap, eloquent

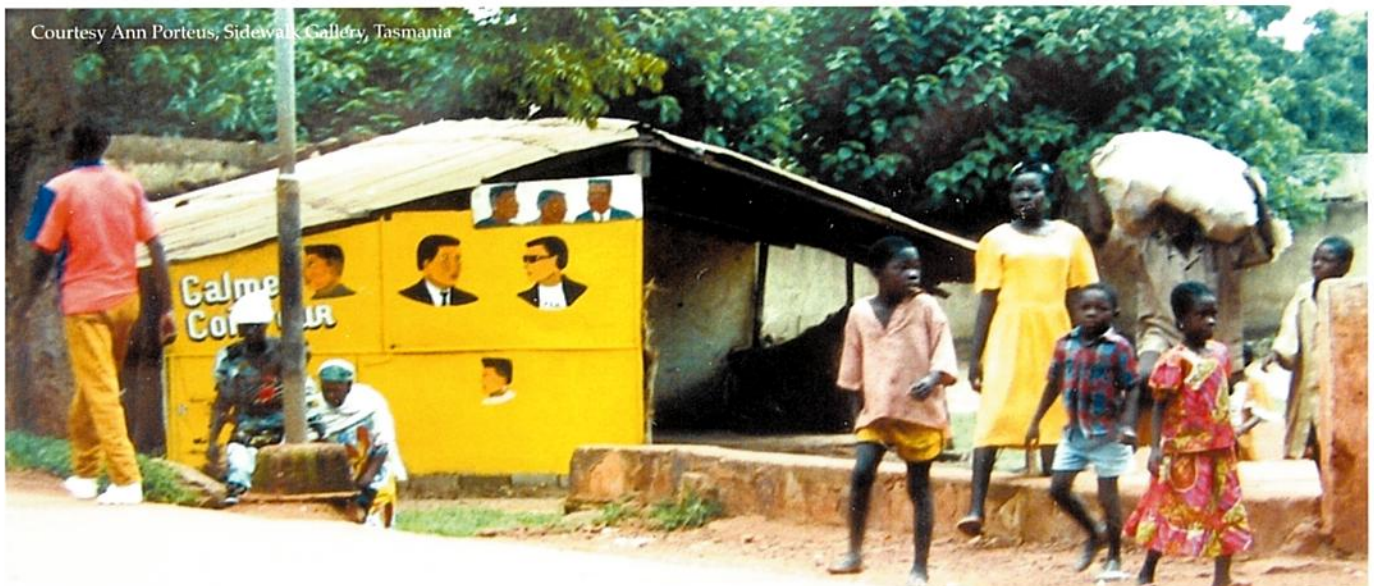
and inventive hats. No doubt these hats will soon make the transition to craft and souvenir shops just as the telephone wire bowls did before them.

One sometimes gets the impression that Western cultures would prefer to reserve the term 'cosmopolitan' to describe their own commerce and interaction with the rest of the world. However, Africa is now, and has always been, profoundly cosmopolitan. It has always served as an intersection through which products and practices from all corners of the globe travel, collide and merge. That is to say, Africa has always promoted and experienced a form of globalisation far more varied and rich than any World Bank or World Trade Organisation functionary could possibly imagine. Furthermore, this globalisation is of a kind of that abhors uniformity and standardisation and instead promotes constant renewal and variety. The places where these processes are transacted, in all their complexity, are the noisy, dusty and colourful marketplaces of central and southern Africa. These are places far removed from the austere and secretive boardrooms of those multi-national corporations and agencies that work on behalf of a different vision of a globalisation - one predicated on late capitalism's insatiable appetite for cheap resources and labour. As Diawara succinctly puts it:

*'The markets have an order that is one of inclusion, regardless of one's class and origin, regardless of whether one is a buyer or a flaneur. Markets...are the places where Africa meets Europe, Asia and America. As they say in West Africa, 'Visit the market and see the world''*⁷

David McNeill

- ¹ M. Diawara. *In Search of Africa*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 2000, 150-151.
- ² M. Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* London, 1995
- ³ This usage of the term "native" is analysed in detail by Arjun Appadurai in A. Appadurai, "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place", *Cultural Anthropology*, 3: 1986, 36-49.
- ⁴ See D. Rush. 'The Idea of India in West African Art and Thought' in *Art Asia Pacific* 34: April/ May/ June, 2002
- ⁵ R. Sugarman, *Commemorative Cloths*, exhibition catalogue, University of the Witwatersrand and Standard Bank Collections, Johannesburg, 1997.
- ⁶ See D. McNeill. 'Toys, Tourism and Hybridity' in Beier, U and McNeill, D. *Making Do. An Exhibition About Childhood, Toys and Play in Africa*. (Ivan Dougherty Gallery) Sydney, 1999.
- ⁷ M. Diawara. *op cit*, 152.





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Above: Barber's board (Ghana)

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