

A Way of Life

Considering and Curating the Sainsbury African Galleries

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Abstract

This context statement uses the critical and reflexive methodology of auto-ethnography to analyse my professional career as artist and curator in the Africa section of the British Museum from 1987 to 2015. This was a time of intense critical scrutiny of the ways in which the arts of other cultures were being displayed in museums. It was also a period of global socio-political upheaval that witnessed the fall of the Soviet Union, bitter conflict and genocide in southern and central Africa, the attack on the World Trade Centre and the subsequent 'war on terror', the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab Spring and the rise of the so-called Islamic State. The Sainsbury African Galleries opened at the British Museum in 2001, approximately half way through the period discussed, offering a positive view of African arts and cultures as an antidote to the relentless tide of negative depictions of Africa and the Middle East in the world press.

This statement examines the decisions I made as a curator and my growing understanding of the responsibility I had taken on in presenting a positive, nuanced and reflexive vision of Africa, a vision introduced to the public by contemporary African art. This statement is also intended to offer an overview of my legacy as a curator in the hope that it will suggest ways in which successive curators may continue to celebrate African arts and cultures at the same time as addressing traumatic events of the past, present and future. The Sainsbury African Galleries, while continually evolving, nonetheless offer a template for how contemporary art can mediate older and long-established traditions in Africa in order to present a dynamic vision for the future – and an acknowledgement of Africa as the cradle of global artistic production and the birthplace of all humankind.

Summary and Introduction

This statement attempts to present a critical examination of my work and achievements as a curator and artist over a period of almost thirty years from 1987, when I joined the Africa section of what was then the Ethnography Department of the British Museum (BM), to the present day. In so doing I hope to convey my evolving understanding of my role as a curator - and the theoretical contexts that underpin the choices I was faced with during this period, played out against the backdrop of the momentous socio-political events taking place in the world. The Sainsbury African Galleries, which are the hub and focus of this statement, opened to the public at the BM in March 2001, almost exactly in the middle of the period I describe. In September that year I put on a major one man show of my work as an artist in the Jersey Galleries, London, shortly before the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, the first of a number of cataclysmic events early in the new millennium which changed

the lives¹ of billions of people around the world, adding a particular significance to what I and my colleagues were trying to achieve in displaying and celebrating the arts of Africa.



Two Towers 2008

The Middle East and Africa are so often portrayed in the media as places of violence, and Islam as a religion bent on cultivating extremism and terror². These perceptions have changed little in that respect since the African galleries first opened to the public fifteen years ago; in fact they have intensified over the past year with the rise of Isis, the massacres in Paris, at the Bardo Museum and Sousse in Tunisia, at Garissa in Kenya and in northern Nigeria, the deaths of thousands of African refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean and the seemingly insoluble wars in D.R.Congo and in South Sudan. Now, more than ever, the African Galleries have a heavy responsibility to show the other side of the story, the extraordinary genius, creativity, humour and humanity of the peoples of Africa.

I have approached the research leading to this context statement using the methodological framework of autoethnography³, a way of thinking and writing which grew out of the tectonic shift which took place during the post-colonial period in the

¹ Ellis, Carolyn, 'Shattered Lives: Making sense of September 11th and its aftermath.', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31(4), 375-410

² Marvasti, Amir, 'Being Middle Eastern American: Identity negotiation in the context of the war on terror'. *Symbolic Interaction*, 28 (4), 525-547

³ Ellis, Carolyn, Adams, Tony E. & Bochner, Arthur P. 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol 12, No. 1, January 2011

social sciences. In the late twentieth century the tenets of modernism began to be questioned, in the case of ethnography dissolving the old polarities between 'art' and 'cultural anthropology'⁴ and allowing a much more fluid and inclusive approach to research. On the one hand this statement is 'my' story, but using the theoretical and methodological tools of autoethnography, 'my' experience can be understood in terms of the much wider 'cultural' experience of a large and diverse audience to whom the key events of the story have a profound significance. It is a story which does not claim to have discovered any 'truths' other than those I feel to be valid; at the same time it asks its readers to find it believable and valid, precisely because it acknowledges the changes in my understanding of the world which have taken place as a result of a range of experiences and contingencies to which I have adapted⁵, some of which may be communicated through subjectivity and emotionality. Without the post-colonial, post-modern transformation⁶ which has taken place from 'description' to 'communication' in ethnography, I would not have been able to construct this context statement, much less curate the African Galleries at the BM in the way I have. It is a transformation which was described by Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis⁷ as the new millennium approached: "One important change for the future of ethnography is the transformation from description to communication. Interactive ethnography *privileges* the way in which investigators are part of the world they investigate and the ways in which they make it and change it, thus breaking away from the epistemology of depiction that *privileges* modes for inscribing a pre-existing and stable social world. For writers whose work departs from canonical forms of narrating ethnography, there is a desire to be more author centered and, at the same time, more engaging to readers. Forms and modes of writing become part and parcel of ethnographic

⁴ Clifford, James *The Predicament of Culture*, 1988, Harvard UP, p.200

⁵ Spring, Chris 'Notes from the field: Contingency', *The Art Bulletin*, New York, September 2012, Volume XCIV Number 3, 359 -361.

⁶ Conquergood, Dwight, 'Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs*, 58, 1991, pp 179-194

⁷ Ellis, Carolyn and Bochner, Arthur P (Eds.) 'Taking Ethnography into the Twenty-First Century', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Special Issue, Volume 25, Number 1 April 1996, p.4

“method”. The goal is not only to know but to feel ethnographic “truth” and thus to become more fully immersed – morally, aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually.”⁷

Before the opening of the African galleries at Bloomsbury, my work as a curator took place at the Museum of Mankind (MoM) in Piccadilly, the home of the Ethnography Department of the BM from 1970 to 1997, directly behind the Royal Academy. There I learned my trade as an assistant on exhibitions such as *Images of Africa* (1990) and developed research interests in North Africa, a region which has its own very distinctive arts and cultural practices, but which is often perceived as being separate from the rest of ‘sub-Saharan’ Africa, and at worst described as ‘not really Africa’, a description applied to other parts of the continent which do not conform to a certain idea of Africa, an idea usually drawn from news media and, as Sarah Palin famously demonstrated in her campaign against Barack Obama when she described Africa as a single country (November 5th 2008), it may result in a perception of Africa as somewhere either beset by war, famine and illness, or at the other extreme a land of colourful market places, drumming, dancing and masquerade. ‘This kind of revisionism’, as the curator Simon Njami observed in the introduction to the catalogue accompanying the touring exhibition *Africa Remix* ‘...is pathological, for it seeks to negate the multiple influences fuelled by exchanges between the large Sahelian cities and their North African neighbours since the Middle Ages...In short, it seeks to negate the common history that united the destinies of nations colonized by the same powers and their ensuing struggles for liberation.’⁸

I also developed a deep research interest in African arms and armour and in textiles, the former being very unfashionable in scholarly circles, perhaps because these objects carried too much ‘baggage’ in curators’ eyes, representing as they once did the ‘savagery’ of Africa in the Victorian imagination. I curated major exhibitions and wrote important articles and monographs on both subjects in the early 1990s. I also began to collaborate with - and to acquire the work of - contemporary artists of African

⁸ Njami, Simon *Africa Remix*, London, Hayward Gallery, 2005, pp. 23,13.

heritage, both those based in Africa and those practicing outside the continent, particularly after the *Africa '95* festival in London.

I use the terms 'contemporary African art' and 'African heritage' throughout this statement, so I should define what I mean by them here, particularly as they both lead to a third term 'global Africa' which I also use on several occasions in the text, though not specifically in the context of contemporary art.⁹ Scholars such as V.Y.Mudimbe¹⁰ and Kwame Anthony Appiah¹¹ have noted that 'Africa' and 'African art' are in many ways constructs, and that in reality there are many 'Africas', just as there are innumerable artistic traditions practiced by the diverse peoples of the African continent. In the public imagination, however, 'African art' still suggests primarily West and Central African masks and wood sculpture collected by Europeans during the colonial period – and which were once the staple of all displays of African arts and cultures in museums around the world, including African museums. Part of my role as curator has been to expand these public perceptions by promoting an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of artistic traditions across the continent.

The term 'contemporary African art' should express an even greater diversity of practice because, in common with contemporary art elsewhere in the world, it is constantly changing, reinventing and reimagining itself. It is practiced by a rapidly increasing number of artists of African heritage working within the continent and around the world, artists who may or may not be working in or inspired by traditions which are broadly described as 'African art'. The definition used by Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu to define the field gives a good idea of this diversity and complexity:

'In our approach, however, Africa is a multiplicity of cultural spaces, shaped by social forces and political and economic conditions that do not privilege one way of conceptualizing an African identity. And in this framework, contemporary African art

⁹ Sanyal, Sunanda K. "Global": A View from the Margin, *African Arts*, UCLA, Vol 48, no.1 Spring 2015, pp1-4.

¹⁰ Mudimbe, V.Y. 'The Invention of Africa' and 'The Idea of Africa', Indiana University Press, 1988 and 1994

¹¹ In Phillips, Tom (ed.), *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, London, Royal Academy, 1995, pp. 26

includes a tissue of fascinating and productive contradictions which enliven debates on what it affirms and what it contests. More concretely, contemporary African art denotes a field of complex artistic production, research, interpretation, and a repository of rich intellectual discovery at the inter-section of the shifting models of cultural, political, social and epistemological analyses in which Africa is meaningfully interpellated. Here the connection to Africa not only informs the understanding of the diverse types of artistic practices reflected in this book, it also applies to the very complex models of identity and ambivalent identifications of the artists who reside both inside and outside Africa; or who move easily between both.¹²

I use the term 'African heritage' as opposed to 'African descent' (we are all, literally, of African descent) because it is not primarily about ethnicity. I feel that it not only incorporates an extraordinary spectrum of people who regionally might be described as 'White South African', 'Amazigh' (Berber), 'Black British', 'African Caribbean' or 'African American', but also people who have 'inherited' something which is culturally immensely powerful and manifests itself in every conceivable art form around the world, in politics, philosophy, science, religion and in every walk of life. I see this phenomenon as an extraordinary force for good in the world, something which many people may have lost touch with but which ultimately will bring peace and prosperity to all. It is what I call 'global Africa.'

My early achievements at the MoM made me determined that contemporary art, metal work (particularly weaponry) and textiles should be essential elements in the Sainsbury African Galleries when we began to plan their content after the MoM closed to the public in 1997. I was similarly determined that all parts of the African continent should be represented, but also that the galleries should present our public with an idea of Africa as a global phenomenon which transcends geographical and material boundaries. A very positive set of reviews (see the appendix to this statement) followed the opening of the African Galleries, many of them singling out for special praise the elements to which I had given special emphasis. More importantly, a smaller number of critical reviews (see pages 43-4), always the ones which any curator should treat with respect and deference, no matter how misguided they may

¹² Enwezor, Okwui and Okeke-Agulu, Chika 'Contemporary African Art since 1980', Bologna, 2009, p.11

seem, forced me to revise some of my ideas and approaches to the business of curating the galleries. They also encouraged me to develop my research interests and to follow my creative intuition with a more critical eye in acquiring and commissioning works by contemporary artists which I felt would illuminate – and be illuminated by – the long-standing traditions of artistry which were displayed in the galleries. Periods of fieldwork undertaken in northern, eastern and southern Africa were reflected by films and displays which appeared in the African Galleries and in other galleries of the BM - and also in national and international touring exhibitions. Two award-winning books, one on contemporary art¹³, the other on textiles¹⁴, together with performances, numerous educational projects as well as national and international festivals in which the galleries played an important part, helped to give the Sainsbury African Galleries a sense of being a hub and a forum for debate within which ideas would germinate and from which projects would flow. Even their physical position – built underground by Lord Foster as part of his millennium development of the BM – continues to be a source of lively debate, by turns perceived as an insulting slight on the continent and a place of profound spirituality, literally and figuratively the foundations of the BM.

This statement is therefore divided into three distinct parts linked by my work as an artist. The first describes my time at the MoM where the exhibitions I curated, the fieldwork I undertook, the books and articles I wrote and the personal and professional relationships I established would profoundly influence the choices I made in curating the Sainsbury African Galleries at Bloomsbury. The second part of my statement critically examines the reactions to the galleries as revealed through the large number of reviews which were written after they opened to the public, many of them drawing interesting comparisons with the ways in which African arts and

¹³ ‘Angaza Afrika: African Art Now’, 2008, London, Laurence King, Cape Town, Franklin.

¹⁴ African Textiles Today’, 2012, London, British Museum Publications, and Washin’gton, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press

cultures were displayed at the MoM. The final part of my statement looks at the ways in which the galleries themselves have developed since 2001, the curatorial decisions which have shaped them, the projects they have inspired, and the success or failure of the approach I have taken, all of which have impacted on the continuing purpose and significance of the galleries today.



Kester sitting on the *Throne of Weapons* , Maputo, Mozambique, 2000

To take just one example to illustrate my curatorial approach, shortly after the African Galleries opened to the public I purchased a sculpture (*The Throne of Weapons*) by the artist Kester which led me to research the recent civil war in his country, Mozambique, and to commission from him and three other artists a much larger sculpture made of decommissioned weapons, *The Tree of Life*. Both were created as part of the Swords into Ploughshares project founded in Maputo by the Anglican Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane in 1995. This was one of the 'key events' in my story, and in turn led me to read one of the most powerful ethnographies written in the style which Ellis and Bochner described. It was 'A Different Kind of War Story' by the anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom, and it cemented in my mind the methodological approach which I had begun to adopt, both in the curatorial decisions I made in my fieldwork and in my published writing:

"To me, the days of salvage research, where scholars documented other cultures for a kind of textual zoo to be kept in libraries, has been put to rest. When I travel to Mozambique I am not interested in documenting an "Other". I am interested in looking

for solutions to the very pressing problems facing the world as a whole. Political violence, to me, is among the most pressing. If Mozambique provides solutions to these lethal matters, then that is where research should lead.”¹⁵

The ‘solutions’ which Nordstrom refers to are there for all to see in the *Throne of Weapons* and the *Tree of Life*, works of art which have travelled the world and have inspired countless projects by academics, artists, prisoners, poets, community groups and musicians – all of them stemming from Bishop Sengulane’s founding of his project, but later, in classic autoethnography terms, from the moment at which I as a curator persuaded the then head of the Department to ignore other requests and devote the remaining purchase grant to acquiring the *Throne of Weapons* for the BM.

These sculptures are war memorials with a difference, telling the stories which are not in the history books but which show how the wars in Mozambique were not ended by soldiers or politicians but by people who were brave enough to stand up, unarmed, and reject the culture of violence and the addiction to the gun which had afflicted their country for so many years. There is a story which people around the world have been inspired by and have learned from – and they are now rightly amongst the most popular works which people expect to see, not just when they visit the African Galleries, but when they visit the British Museum.

‘For both scholars and practitioners, it is useful to reflect critically on communicative practices which may incite violence and those which may contribute to the development of sustainable and peaceable communicative environments. Both the *Tree of Life* and the *Throne of Weapons* highlight how violence does not need to be the end of the story, and more peaceful and just futures can be imagined and created’¹⁶.



Tree of Life in Peace Park, 2004

¹⁵ Nordstrom, Carolyn, ‘Another Kind of War Story’, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, p.233.

- ¹⁶ Mitchell, Jolyon, *Promoting Peace, Inciting Violence*, Routledge, 2012, p.8

If at times my context statement may seem author-centred, emotional or even mystical, these are in some ways the pillars of my methodological approach to curating – and the source of my inspiration as an artist. I would also suggest that it has been a combination of these elements in my approach to curating which has persuaded numerous artists, writers, musicians, academics, film makers and people from other walks of life, both from the continent of Africa and from global Africa, to entrust their work to my curatorial care in developing the African Galleries at the BM. I have cherry-picked the best and most accessible information from disciplines including anthropology, art history and archaeology to help our public to appreciate more fully the work on display. As a result I hope I have helped to create a living, breathing, deeply emotional yet intellectually satisfying tribute to Africa. It is a tribute which has reverberated far beyond the walls of the African galleries and has transformed the wider BM community, helping to make the Museum a more welcoming, inclusive and accessible place for the diverse communities which always should have been its public but for various reasons, which will be explored in this statement, may have felt excluded until Africa returned to the Museum in the form of the Sainsbury African Galleries. I will end this context statement with some thoughts on the continuously evolving role and purpose of the African Galleries today, not only in the wider context of their impact on the British Museum after fifteen years, but also how the numerous projects generated by the galleries have shown them to be a creative hub and focus for promoting and celebrating Africa.

Part 1: Laying the Foundations

In this first section of the context statement I will attempt to trace my personal and professional development through the various events, relationships, exhibitions, publications and decisions which shaped my approach to realising one major, seminal project which will form the main subject of this statement and which had a huge impact on the rest of my career as a museum curator – and as an artist – and, as I suggested in the introduction, an extraordinary impact on the wider BM community. The Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum (BM) opened to the public in March 2001 and became both a focus for ideas and a forum for debate within which many other projects germinated, including publications, touring exhibitions, fieldwork, conferences and seminars. That same year an exhibition entitled *Green and Dying*, which included over one hundred and fifty of my own paintings and drawings, was hung in seven rooms at the Jersey Galleries London.

No doubt numerologists – and certainly my friend the artist and Sufi master Rachid Koraïchi – would be interested that both the Jersey galleries show and the African Galleries were arranged over seven rooms or spaces, each one dealing with a different aspect or ‘subject’, in the case of the Jersey Galleries what might loosely be termed my ‘world view’; in the African Galleries seven aspects of the kind of ‘culture’ which Eilean Hooper–Greenhill (2000) memorably describes:

“Culture is not an autonomous realm of words, things, beliefs and values. It is not an objective body of facts to be transmitted to passive receivers. It is lived and experienced; it is about producing representations, creating versions, taking a position, and arguing a point of view. As such, emotions and feelings are involved. The present is deeply influenced by the past, thus the interpretation of objects and collections in the past affects how they are deployed today. Knowledge is both cultural and historical, involving history and tradition. Reclaiming and rewriting history are central issues in cultural politics, and especially in the museum. Exhibitions can open up ideas that have long been suppressed, and can make formerly invisible histories visible.”¹⁷

I did not read this clarion call until years later, but I drew great inspiration from it and felt that in many ways it vindicated the approach I had taken in the African Galleries, although at the time (late 1990s) I was by no means sure if the approach would work. However, after ten years as a curator (I started in 1987), I was beginning to understand that I wanted to be emotional about curating, just as those who are the subjects of the curating must - and do - express their emotions. I was also beginning to understand that the past, the present and the

¹⁷ ‘Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture’, Routledge, 2000, p.19

future could be described in a dynamic way through liberating the ideas and the histories concealed within almost all of the 'objects' in the BM's collections. I also felt that much of that 'liberating' could and should be done through the work of contemporary artists, who could mediate the subject and the works displayed (or written about) in ways which would go far beyond the curatorial voice. Finally, I had become convinced that the discipline of social anthropology could play a part in this process, but also that it should not be the only voice, academic or otherwise, through which African arts and cultures might be discussed – certainly not in the way the subject had been approached in some of the exhibitions at the Museum of Mankind (MoM). The ways in which I began to develop these ideas following the opening of the African Galleries early in 2001 will be the subject of later sections of this statement, but for the time being I think it would be useful to reflect on how these ideas had germinated.

Beginnings

In the mid-1970s I got a part-time job at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) library, which was housed at the MoM. I remember one of the first books I pulled off the shelf was *Sailing from Lamu* (1965) by the anthropologist A.H.J. Prins; it was all about the dhow trade in the Indian Ocean, the story of those majestic sailing vessels driven to and from the eastern African coast by the monsoon 'trade winds' since time immemorial – it was the beginning of my own journey in many ways.

In 1977 the RAI library was given on trust to the BM and became the MoM library – I and most of my colleagues in the library went along as part of the package and suddenly I was an employee of the BM. All the while I had been accumulating knowledge of the books and the treasures they contained, and of course I had also spent time wandering around the exhibitions which my curatorial colleagues had been putting on for what was now 'my' public, exhibitions for which the MoM had become famous: *Yoruba Religious Cults*(1974), *Nomad and City* (1976), *Cook's Voyages* (1979), *African Textiles*(1979), *Asante Kingdom of Gold* (1981), *Madagascar Island of the Ancestors*(1986) and many others, including Eduardo Paolozzi's *Lost Magic Kingdoms* (1985), an early collaboration between artist and curators which in many ways foreshadowed Grayson Perry's recent exhibition at the BM *Tomb of the Unknown artist* (2011).

There was a strong emphasis on Africa in the Department – Malcolm McLeod, who is an expert on the arts and cultures of the Asante of Ghana, had succeeded the renowned scholar in the arts of Nigeria, William Fagg, as Keeper (head) of the Department; other Africanists included John Picton, who had curated the pioneering *African Textiles* exhibition with its accompanying book co-written by the eastern Africanist John Mack, who in turn would succeed McLeod as Keeper. Picton left to take up a post at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where he developed his great expertise in African textiles as well as in the emerging field of contemporary African art; his place was taken by Nigel Barley who had done fieldwork among the Dowayo in Cameroon, experiences he would later recount in the bestselling *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut* (1983). Perhaps most significant of all for the direction in which my career and personal life would develop was the arrival of Yvonne Neverson (née Ayo – her father was Nigerian) as assistant to the senior Africanists. Yvonne would later become my wife.

East End and Hampshire Days

All the while I continued to draw and paint (walls and windows as well as canvases) as I moved from one flat to another in east London – first Hackney, then Clapton, then across the Hackney Marshes to Leyton. My subjects came partially from my dreams, partially from the extraordinary urban landscape of East London, the canals, warehouses and the docks; the pubs with their great character and music; sing-alongs, street parties, particularly for the Silver Jubilee in 1977. In certain respects this whole region of London had hardly changed since Dickensian times and was holding its breath before much of it was swept away with the advent of Docklands, Canary Wharf and the armies of ‘yuppies’ which would follow. It was at this time that I became intensely interested in the people who occupied this landscape, the clothes they wore, the music they liked, the pubs they frequented. I was fascinated with the variety of sub-cultures which thrived at that time: Punks, Rastafarians, Rude Boys and particularly the Teds, with their uniform of ‘crepes and drapes’, who rode a wave of Rock ‘n Roll revival which swept through London in the 70s. I got to know a particular group quite well and their pub, the *Adam and Eve* in Homerton, which I would later write about in an unpublished novel *Ted and Ptery*. ‘Teddy Boys’ in general acquired a reputation for being amongst the most racist antagonists of the wave of immigrants to come from the Caribbean in the late 1940s, but this was twenty five years later and it was interesting to see how this micro-community in the *Adam and Eve*

had changed, To start with, quite a number of Teds came from different ethnic backgrounds, including African Caribbean and Asian – I remember one guy who had recently come to London from Malaysia and who had the best ‘bow-wave’ of all the Teds in the pub! I think part of what might be described as quite a liberal ethos of this little community was down to one Ted called ‘Sunglasses Ron’. He was an ‘original’ from the 50s, but the music he had accumulated on the juke box and the bands he invited to play there bore witness to his respect and understanding of the roots of rock ‘n roll, particularly in black rhythm and blues music of the forties and early fifties in the USA. I mention this because I think it sowed the seeds for my serious interest in popular culture in Africa which would later develop into my research of factory printed and woven cloth from eastern Africa, and groups such as the Tingatinga artists from Dar Es Salaam.

In the early 1980s my relationship with Yvonne began to deepen and at the same time I began to run up against the extent of my ignorance of what prejudices people of African/Caribbean heritage had to deal with at this time, as well as the sensitivities which inevitably had become part of the Black experience in the Britain of the early Thatcher years when the National Front was on the move, with their *‘Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’* slogan, later used as the title for Paul Gilroy’s (1987) classic in which he proposed his theory of “race” as a historical agent of change and mobilisation.¹⁸ It was the time of the Brixton riots, with shops boarded up even where we were now living in Leyton; the Specials’ *Ghost Town* summed up what was an uncomfortable and fearful time for black people, particularly in urban Britain. Black British photographers such as Armet Francis, Neil Kenlock and Syd Shelton documented those years with memorable images, many of which were drawn together in the exhibition ‘Staying Power’, brilliantly curated at the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton by Dr. Kimberley F. Keith (15.01.2015 – 30.06.2015). Although Yvonne’s father was Nigerian, she was brought up in Manchester by her Trinidadian stepfather and her white working class mother. Yvonne had studied fine art at Newcastle and anthropology at Birmingham and she brought with her a set of friends, relations and acquaintances who were not only ethnically different from my white middle class experience, but also opened a window on a northern urban milieu which was completely alien to me – and I loved it all, despite the hard knocks, embarrassments and occasional stand up rows which my ignorance inevitably set off. It was an education which, in

¹⁸ See in particular pp 20-35 in Routledge Classic edition, 2002, ‘Race, Class and Agency’.

time, would give a particular edge and perhaps depth to my writing about Africa, as well as to my painting and drawing.

Yvonne had moved to the Commonwealth Institute (CI) in 1984, then a thriving enterprise with interesting exhibitions, a contemporary art gallery¹⁹ and a very good theatre which hosted a lively programme of performing arts from around the world. She was on the board of black theatre and dance companies which meant that I got to meet a number of people who would later prove to be inspirational friends and colleagues – it also opened a window onto another world of 'African art' beyond any of the 'ethnographic' exhibitions I had seen in the galleries of the MoM. It was about this time that I sold my first painting, and this helped to give me the confidence to continue with this strand of my creative life, which in turn would guide the approach I took to writing about and curating the arts of Africa.

Curator: North Africa

The opportunity to do this finally came my way early in 1987. By then we had moved back to London and our first child was almost one year old. Yvonne's move to the CI, combined with the departure of other colleagues from the MoM meant that a post could be created to assist the senior Africanists in the Department, a post which I was offered and eagerly accepted, moving seamlessly from the Reading Room (bibliographical enquiries) to the Students Room (curatorial enquiries and object identification). I had met and talked with a number of writers, artists and cultural theorists of African heritage (among others the sociologist and cultural theorist Chris Mullard, the theatre director Albi James and the artist Magdalene Odundo) as a direct result of my relationship with Yvonne, and I think this made me more attuned to some of the racial and cultural sensitivities surrounding the subject of African 'ethnography' – and this perhaps led me to question some of the approaches to displaying African arts and cultures which I had witnessed in museums around the world. Curiously, my first fieldwork experience was not in Africa at all, but in the Pacific where my wife Yvonne was collecting for an exhibition entitled *Pacific Eye* (1988) at the CI. I hitched a lift as the official photographer as we travelled in New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga - and we got the last plane out of Fiji before the first coup by ethnic Fijians that year. This short trip gave me a real taste of how enjoyable field work might be – and what possibilities it might offer.

¹⁹ Chambers, Eddie, 'Black Artists in British Art: A history from 1950 to the Present', International Library of Visual culture, 2014

Back at the BM I came down to earth with a bump. Not unnaturally, my senior Africanist colleagues gave me the jobs they weren't keen on doing themselves, and although it didn't seem so at the time, this worked in my favour and laid the foundations for some of the distinctive elements of my approach to the job. Firstly, in addition to working for my colleagues, I was given North Africa as an area of curatorial responsibility because no one else was particularly interested in this region of Africa; secondly, I had to register the objects which my colleagues collected or acquired from other sources, and thirdly I was passed requests to write and publish work which my colleagues were not interested in undertaking themselves.

All my other colleagues worked in either western (Fagg, Picton, McLeod and Barley) or eastern (Mack) Africa. In those days so much scholarly attention was paid to Yoruba (Nigeria/Republic of Benin) art that it had become almost synonymous with 'African art', to the extent that every other part of Africa seemed to fade from view. Although I felt I was being side-lined at the time, working in North Africa gave me a sense of the whole continent and of the age-old connections not only between one region and another (in this instance the caravan routes criss-crossing the Sahara and the artery of the Nile running deep into the heart of Africa) but also with the rest of the world. I was working in a part of the continent which many people still consider to be 'not really Africa' with a material culture which is 'not really African art'. As mentioned in the introduction, scholars such as V.Y.Mudimbe had suggested that terms such as 'Africa' and 'African art' are fluid ideas rather than concrete realities, while Kwame Anthony Appiah stated that there is 'not one Africa, but many'²⁰ in his introduction to *Africa: the Art of a Continent* (1995) an idea he would go on to elaborate upon in his book *Cosmopolitanism* (2006), particularly with regard to the 'ownership' of cultural artefacts and how this might relate to claims for restitution in the museum world. However, at this early stage in my career I was still formulating ideas on the subject, though artists such as Hassan Musa²¹ would later remind me that there is really no such thing as 'African Art', and that for most people the idea of African art – masks, wood sculpture, Benin bronzes etc. – was simply a European construct which fitted with existing notions of what constitutes 'art' in the European tradition. However, in the late 1980s a certain kind of 'connoisseurship' involving the ability to

²⁰ In Phillips, Tom (ed.), *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, London, Royal Academy, 1995, pp. 26

²¹ Musa, Hassan, 'Comment expliquer "l'art africainisme" a vos filles?', *Art*, no.3, July/August 2005, p.20

distinguish 'tribal' styles of carving – and the quality of different creations within those styles – was still the holy grail to which Africanist curators aspired in the museum world. In reality, of course, we were simply aping the dealers who depended on this approach for their livelihood. Interestingly, when the BM's African galleries opened in 2001, the dealers and social anthropologists criticised their content, while people of African heritage, together with academics from other disciplines, were generally happy with this aspect, though their main criticism, understandably, lay in the positioning of the galleries in the basement with no natural light.

Back in 1987 we still registered objects by hand, entering the details in large ledgers, together with a thumb nail sketch drawn with pen and ink. So for three glorious years I registered each object by describing its appearance, the materials from which it was made and by measuring and drawing each one by hand. I also filled several private sketch books with the objects in the collections from North Africa, drawings which I still refer to today. John Picton even encouraged me to use colour, particularly in my registration of textiles, something which definitely did not appear in the coaching manual! Although the digital age would rapidly replace this long-established method, nothing could replace the powers of observation needed to register well in this way, or the skill of keeping the descriptions short yet concise.



I also learned to draw with a *rapidograph* pen, a skill I would employ in some of the illustrations to my early publications.

Early Publications

By 1989, only two years after taking up the post, I had published two substantial pieces of work, both of them initially passed on to me by my colleagues as commissions which they were not interested in undertaking themselves. One was a chapter on Africa in a collection of essays titled *Swords and Hilt Weapons* (1989) which, to my amazement, has been reprinted numerous times, including an edition published in 2013. The research I undertook in the collections made me realise that virtually no scholarly attention had been paid to this very unfashionable area of African creativity – everyone was writing about masks and wood

sculpture – and that I found the objects deeply appealing from many points of view, not least the artistry which had gone into their production. I made drawings of a number of the objects from the collections which I included in this chapter and it represented the basis for what would become my first major published monograph *African Arms and Armour* (1993), followed by the exhibition *Power of the Hand* (1994-6) and ultimately the 'Forged Metal' section in the African Galleries at the BM (2001). My original research in this book included analysis of the *flissa*, a sword of the Kabyle people of Algeria, the wooden weapons worn by men of the Kuba people of the southern Congo basin, and of the funerary guardian figures, *mbulu ngulu* 'images of the spirits of the dead' made by the Kota people of Gabon to protect reliquary baskets containing the remains of chiefs. Much had been written about these figures ever since the artist Juan Gris made a cardboard cut-out of one which influenced the Cubists.²² However, no scholars had ever talked about them in terms of the weaponry of the Kota and neighbouring Fang people. I demonstrated that the forms of at least two types of weapon had been incorporated into the sculptural features of these works of art to create a figure which was half man, half weapon – most appropriate for a figure which was entrusted with protecting the remains of important men. But perhaps my most important contribution to the field in this book, certainly in terms of re-assessing what Gus Casely-Hayford would later term 'orphaned African weaponry'²³ was my analysis of a large group of objects collectively described as 'throwing knives' in the literature, ever since Pitt-Rivers referred to them as 'African Boomerangs' in 1868.²⁴ It is a classic example of how a large and important group of works, many created with great skill and artistry, are still described using nineteenth century European terminology, simply because they could not be identified under familiar terms such as sword, axe, knife or club. The people who created these extraordinary objects described them in terms of male human beings, whereas the Victorian imagination saw them as missiles and as exotic ways of killing, even though many of them were never designed to be thrown, much less to be used in warfare. I remember when the Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi saw the display in the African Galleries in 2004 he gasped in amazement and admiration – and we agreed that his small metal anthropomorphic figures from his work *The Path of Roses* should walk along below the 'throwing knives' to emphasise their humanity and artistry. It remains one

²² Tim Teuten, (Christie's) personal correspondence, 28.07.1993.

²³ Casely-Hayford, A., 'A Way of Being: Some Reflections on the Sainsbury African Galleries.' *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, No.14, March 2002, pp 115

²⁴ A.H.L.F. Pitt Rivers, 'Primitive Warfare', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, Vol xiii, 1868, plate xv

of the most successful collaborations between contemporary artist and 'traditional' artefact in the galleries.

The second piece of work was a modest publication from a scholarly point of view, but *African Textiles* (1989) was also re-published many times and again allowed me to research the collections and to include traditions, particularly from North Africa, which I felt had been neglected. In that book I published remarkable silk textiles from urban Tunisia which I had not seen in any of the standard works on African textiles available at the time. Most of the scholarly writing on the textiles of North Africa have concentrated on the rural Amazigh (Berber) traditions, but it was an interest in the urban traditions which would drive my fieldwork in Tunisia in 1997/8 with my friend and colleague Julie Hudson, and in the shorter term lay the groundwork for my second monograph *North African Textiles* (1995) and the associated exhibition *Display and Modesty* (1995), in which I stretched the term 'North African' to include Sudan and Ethiopia. The vast majority of African ethnographies had focused on traditions taking place outside large towns and cities, almost as if 'the Other' was not to be found in an urban environment – and of course ignoring the fact that Cairo, Lagos, Johannesburg and many other African cities are among the largest and most rapidly expanding urban environments in the world. Once again, both book and exhibition would find mature expression in the African Galleries at Bloomsbury.

First Fieldwork: Egypt

Through studying and drawing the collections from North Africa, and reading extensively in the library, I had become very interested in the material culture of the Western Desert of Egypt. I was lucky enough to hitch a ride with a woman from the FCO who had heard of my interest and invited me to join her on a tour of the oases in September 1991. It was a memorable trip, giving me an insight into these extraordinary communities and geographical phenomena, each one spectacularly different and as far away from the oasis stereotype of a bunch of palm trees on the horizon as it is possible to imagine. The road linking the oases of Bahriya, Farafra, Dakhla and Kharga had only just been built, and although tourists had begun to arrive, the vast majority would of course visit the Nile Valley sites without ever being aware of the modern communities which surround them, and that is probably pretty much the same today. The

modern communities of the oases, on the other hand, did not live among the magnificent archaeological sites of the Nile Valley, and yet they did occupy some of the most extraordinary geographical and cultural environments I have ever encountered.



House with Hajj paintings, Farafra Oasis, 1991

In tandem with my work in the Western Desert I also spent time researching the urban textile traditions of Egypt, most notably the work of the tent-makers *khiyamayiin* of Cairo.

Africa '95

An important milestone in the way the arts of Africa have become appreciated by a wider audience took place in London with the *Africa '95* festival and its vast flagship show at the RA – *Africa: the Art of a Continent* curated by the British artist Tom Phillips, an exhibition which, although highly successful from the point of view of bringing new audiences, I found profoundly disturbing from other perspectives, not least because its contents were entirely chosen by a single white artist and collector/connoisseur. As Sally Price would later point out in her critique of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the RA's exhibition would provide the prototype for the curatorial approach adopted by Jacques Kerchache as he sought to create a lasting memorial for President Chirac on the banks of the Seine.²⁵ Many critics felt that the Musée du Quai Branly – and to a lesser extent its predecessor at the RA – helped to reinforce the idea of Africa and African art as frozen in time, both through the types of object selected (a preponderance of masks and wood sculpture) and the lack of any feeling for dynamic contemporary examples of these traditions or any sense of the distant past from which they may have originated. The phenomenon had become known in anthropological circles as 'the ethnographic present'²⁶. However, The BM's contribution to Africa '95 was considerable and significant, not least because the MoM was directly behind the RA, and many of the people who came to the RA show also visited us. In the exhibition *Play and Display*, Nigel Barley

²⁵ Price, Sally. *Paris Primitive*. University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp.37

²⁶ For example: Sanjek, Roger. 'The Ethnographic Present', *Man*, N.S. vol 26, no.4, Dec 1991, pp 609-628

worked closely with the Nigerian-born, London-based artist Sokari Douglas Camp and commissioned a number of steel sculptures by her as a way of adding a new and dynamic perspective to the established tradition of water spirit masquerades in Sokari's native Kalabari in southern Nigeria. It was a pioneering exhibition and demonstrated the enormous potential of working with contemporary artists as, amongst other things, a means of illuminating the continuing significance of objects in the BM's existing collections, as well as of breaking down the stubborn myth of the 'ethnographic present' in which the entire continent is perceived as going about the 'traditional' life and customs it had pursued, unchanged, for millennia. In another part of the museum we also put on a small display of the artist Magdalene Odundo's ceramics – both Magdalene and Sokari have been ever present in the Sainsbury African Galleries which opened to the public at the main BM site in 2001.



'Big Masquerade' by Sokari Douglas Camp, 1995

The *Africa '95* festival gave a real impetus to my own work, not least because North Africa featured in the block buster at the RA (though no 'contemporary art') and that a number of the other exhibitions in the festival did include contemporary art from North Africa and Sudan, notably Rose Issa's show at the Barbican *Signs, Traces, Calligraphy* and Clémentine Deliss's *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* at the Whitechapel, a couple of exhibitions at Leighton House Museum, also curated by Issa, and the splendid *Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex* at the Barbican, curated by John Picton. All these exhibitions were accompanied by extensive catalogues which profoundly influenced the ways in which I was beginning to understand and approach the subject of 'African art'. I was deeply moved and excited by the work of Nja Mahdaoui and Khaled Ben Slimane (Tunisia) and of Rachid Koraïchi (Algeria) and I would go on to work with all three in North Africa and acquire substantial collections of each artist's work for the BM and for the African Galleries.

Picton's exhibition, as well as including the work of contemporary artists such as Chant Avedissian (Egypt) working in a long-established tradition, featured machine-printed cloth from West (wax and 'fancy' print) and eastern Africa (*kanga*). This exhibition sowed the seeds for what would become a particular research interest of mine and would feature both in the African galleries (2006), in Gallery 91 at the BM (2013) and as a separate touring exhibition *Social Fabric: Textiles of Eastern and Southern Africa* to four UK regional museums in 2015/6.

In the catalogue to the Whitechapel exhibition I drew inspiration from some statements by Hassan Musa, a Sudanese artist based in France, under the heading 'About 'Art-african-ism' and about Art':

"There is no more African art except in the Western museums. There is no more Africa except in tourism, and no more Africans except in International Aids! What Africans are producing now in Africa is not 'African art'. It is just art produced by people who consider themselves as partners in a world that they invent every instant."²⁷

This chimed with what Kwame Anthony Appiah had said in the introduction to the RA catalogue about many different 'Africas' in the world today, and I began to see Africa not so much as a continent but more a global phenomenon, a phenomenon in which I, my wife and children formed different but connected parts.

Drawing Inspiration

Just as 1995 had provided a new impetus to my work as a curator so, in a curious way, it also did for my work as an artist. I had worked with Magdalene Odundo on her small exhibition at the MoM - and Yvonne had known her for some time through her teaching work at the CI. Consequently she invited us all down to her house in 1995 and I showed her photographs of some of my work as an artist. Her response was to invite us both down again, though this time to attend a weekend life drawing workshop run by the remarkable teacher Meriel Hoare, who had herself been taught by a number of celebrated artists, including Kokoschka, but had been particularly empowered by life drawing 'events' run by the British artist Cecil Collins.

²⁷ In: Deliss, Clementine, *Seven Stories about Art in Africa*, London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995, pp 241



Meriel, 1998

Meriel hired the hall in the small Hampshire village of Bentley for the weekend where a diverse group of people assembled – some professional artists, others who had never drawn at all. Meriel worked with a group of young models, some of them trained dancers, and used inspirational music to set the tone. She persuaded us all to experiment with a variety of materials, pigments and utensils, and asked us to bring with us rolls of wallpaper lining paper on which we were to draw – and which helped to ensure we were not too precious about the results. Like some artistic ‘typing pool’ we sat at desks and drew dozens of sketches of the models, and as each one was completed, regardless of what materials we were using, we would push it off the end of the desk so that reams of paper grew on the floor in front of each person. One of the very simple techniques Meriel taught was that of ‘resist’ – take a household candle and draw with it on the blank paper, then apply washes of different intensities. Something about this struck a strong chord with me: oil and water, attracting and repelling, embracing and ignoring – in that interaction lay a metaphor for all human experience and would become the guiding principle for much of my work from that moment on.

In addition to simple candle wax, I began to use a wide variety of media that would ‘resist’ water-based pigments: oils of various sorts, often in combination with crushed charcoal or other pigments, varnishes, waterproof inks, starch and so forth. Equally, I experimented with a variety of water-based dyes, inks and paints, testing the brilliance of their colours against their capacity for light fastness – many of the most luminous colours manufactured by ‘Doc Martin’s’, for example, will be nothing more than a shadow on the paper within a few weeks of bright sunlight. So before I even began to manipulate these materials as an artist, they already held within them a spectrum of metaphors for human relationships. It is a very exciting process, bringing delight and occasional disappointment as an initial explosion of colour drifts into too damp or too porous a gauge of paper. Years later at the re-developed Whitworth Gallery in Manchester I saw the work of the Chinese-born artist Cai Guo-Qiang, whose

daylight multiple-burst fireworks containing different patterns, colours and densities of smoke over a variety of landscapes reminded me of the thrill of this process.

I hired a tiny studio at the Small Mansion Arts Centre (SMAC) in Gunnersbury Park, where I had been coming for life drawing classes for some time, and began to work at two series of paintings, one inspired by the extraordinary views, large and small, which the park provided, the other looking at the photographs I had taken of our young family and translating them into symbolic imagery, with the wider human family as its subject.

Exhibitions and Fieldwork at the MoM

Five years earlier I had really cut my curatorial teeth on the exhibition *Images of Africa* (1990) and its accompanying book *Emil Torday and the Art of the Congo*. John Mack was the principal curator, but he was content to leave much of the writing of labels, arrangement of the display cases etc. to me and the designer of the exhibition, Geoff Pickup, who would go on to work with me on my own exhibitions at the Museum of Mankind, and finally on the design of the Sainsbury African Galleries at the BM. This was an extremely important working relationship for me because I think our 'vision' as curator and designer developed in tandem and came to fruition at the same time with the African Galleries. Another important working relationship which was established through this exhibition was with my friend and colleague Julie Hudson who had recently joined the African section as a Museum Assistant based in our reserve stores. We would go on to curate exhibitions, write books and conduct fieldwork together. We didn't always see eye to eye by any means, but we worked to our different strengths to very good effect, again culminating in the vital work we did together and the support she gave me in curating the African Galleries at the BM.

Images of Africa was a historical exhibition, so there was no call for the kind of cultural context exhibition with its built 'African' environment, including manikins, which had been so popular in museums for almost twenty years. In many ways this allowed the objects to be displayed as 'art' rather than 'ethnography' for the first time. Torday had collected a wide range of objects including textiles, weapons, ceramics, basketry, boxes, enemas etc., as well as masks and wood sculpture, and for the first time something approaching equal weight was accorded to these different traditions. This gave me the confidence to pursue my interests in areas of the collections which had not had much attention – and persuaded my senior colleagues that I

was ready to curate exhibitions of my own. Between 1994 and 1996 I curated three exhibitions at the MoM: *Power of the Hand: African Arms and Armour* (1993-5) (which had been featured on Sky News and favourably reviewed in the Caribbean Times); *Secular and Sacred: Textiles from Ethiopia* (1995-6); *Display and Modesty: North African Textiles* (1995-6), the latter with Julie Hudson, which covered much of the ground not featured in Picton and Mack's earlier book and exhibition on African textiles and sparked some debate in journals such as *African Arts* published by UCLA. I wrote substantial monographs, co-published by the Smithsonian Institution in the States, to accompany all three exhibitions. While curating *Display and Modesty* Julie and I had become interested in the textiles in our existing collections from urban Tunisia, and in the *Africa '95* festival we had seen textile-related work created by three artists based in Tunisia – Nja Mahdaoui, Khaled ben Slimane and Rachid Koraïchi. So when money became available from BP to do fieldwork in Africa, make a collection and curate a small exhibition at the main BM site in Bloomsbury, my appetite for working in Africa was revived, despite my reservations at accepting money from an oil company - I had seen the impact of drilling and mining on small, fragile desert communities when I worked in Egypt.

Sponsorship for any research is not easy to come by, and in a large museum such as the BM much of that work is done by a Development Department, though it is up to individual curators to remind colleagues of sponsorship which would be highly detrimental to accept. Many banks, oil and mining companies have well documented and often controversial relationships with Africa and the developing world, but curators should nonetheless make sure that the museum is aware of these and the possible consequences of sponsorship such as various forms of protest, including picketing and press reports. BP remains a major donor to the BM, so to refuse sponsorship would have jeopardised support for a range of other projects within the Museum. In any case the plan was not to work with desert communities but to research the urban textile traditions of Tunisia ²⁸ and at the same time to see if it might be possible to acquire the work of the three artists we had admired in *Africa '95*. Nonetheless, as would happen again when Barclays sponsored the *South African Landscape* which I curated in 2010,

²⁸ See * SPRING, C. and HUDSON, J., 2004, 'Urban Textile Traditions of Tunisia', *African Arts*, Vol. XXXVII Number 3, Los Angeles, p.32-3

the ethical dimension to the sponsorship of particular exhibitions by particular sponsors is never far from a curator's mind.

A combination of curated exhibitions and published books and articles had increased my standing both within the Department and the wider BM. To date my work and research had been largely historical or fieldwork based, but now was my chance to work with contemporary artists and to create a rather different collection 'in the field' which would include a substantial element of contemporary art. I was given a free hand as to how the work would be structured, and so I decided not to tie us in to any institutional agreement before we went, though of course it was important to write to Tunisian museum colleagues telling them of my intentions. However, I also wrote to the three artists, all of whom wrote back to say they were looking forward to our visit and that they would meet us at Tunis airport. Luckily only Mahdaoui was there when we arrived – I should have known that artists being artists do not necessarily get along with one another, but it was only later that this became apparent. I knew that Julie was extremely able and knowledgeable, so there was no danger of being forced into a situation of relying on an unfamiliar colleague to facilitate our work. Instead the artists put us in touch with additional colleagues in museums who would be sympathetic to our work. There were some tough moments, but generally speaking, what followed was a sheer delight from start to finish. The plan was to complete a 'scoping' visit, acquire a few examples and commission others, and to follow it up with a major collecting trip the following year, 1998, and to put on an exhibition at Bloomsbury. This we did, putting together the kind of collection which I hoped I might achieve in Egypt, but in addition acquiring works by Mahdaoui and Ben Slimane, all of which would be published, and much of it displayed in the African Galleries in Bloomsbury.



A weaver in Mahdia, Tunisia, 1997.

By 1997 it was clear that the MoM would shortly close to the public and that the Department would be moving back to the main site at Bloomsbury, with new galleries being built as part of the Millennium Development. Meanwhile my own career as an artist was developing. I was selling more paintings on a regular basis, and further trips to Hampshire and Meriel's inspirational 'happenings' had given me wings. I realised that the planning of the new African galleries at Bloomsbury would begin in earnest early in 1999, and as the MoM had closed its doors to the public at the end of 1997, I negotiated a nine month painting sabbatical after returning from fieldwork in Tunisia in April 1998 – it was the time for reflection that I needed before the challenge of curating the Sainsbury African Galleries. The following months, culminating in a major exhibition of my work at the SMAC in November 1998, cemented my career as an artist which would develop alongside – and complement – my curatorial work and writing.

Part 2: The Sainsbury African Galleries

Museums in Flux

The 1990s witnessed a decade of change and re-assessment throughout the world, not least the demise of the Soviet Union, the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the conclusion of the civil war in Mozambique. By the end of the decade Nelson Mandela had changed from a figurehead - and a focal point for global protest and resistance - into a statesman and visionary peacemaker who had no equal on the world stage. These global events demanded a period of reassessment in other walks of life, including the museum world and in museums of ethnography in particular. In the previous decade fierce criticism – but also intense interest - had been directed at (and generated by) exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, (MOMA New York) in 1984, *'Hidden Peoples of the Amazon'* (Museum of Mankind, London) in 1985, *'Magiciens de la Terre'* (Centre Pompidou, Paris) in 1989 and, at the turn of the decade, *'Into the Heart of Africa'* (Royal Ontario Museum) in 1990. The growing debate over the place of the museum in displaying the arts and cultures of peoples from what was then routinely described as 'the third world' or from so-called 'non-industrialised' societies was reflected in critical works by authors such as Sally Price *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 1989 and James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture*, 1988, in which he succinctly described how 'non-Western objects' were then caught between the Scylla of art and the Charybdis of anthropology, a phenomenon whose spectre still stalks the corridors of many of the world's museums:

'Since the early years of modernism and cultural anthropology, non-Western objects have found a 'home' either within the discourses and institutions of art or within those of anthropology. The two domains have excluded and confirmed each other, inventively disputing the right to contextualize, to represent these objects. As we shall see, the aesthetic-anthropological opposition is systematic, presupposing an underlying set of attitudes toward the "tribal". Both discourses assume a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption and representation. The concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists is suppressed in the process of either constituting authentic, "traditional" worlds or appreciating their products in the timeless category of "art".'²⁹

In the same year (1988) as Clifford published *The Predicament of Culture*, Susan Vogel curated an important exhibition titled *Art/Artifact* at the Center for African Art in New York in which she examined the ways in which Western outsiders have regarded African art and

²⁹ Clifford, James *The Predicament of Culture*, 1988, Harvard UP, p.200

material culture over the previous century. In the accompanying publication she outlined the rationale for the exhibition:

“An exhibition on how we view African objects (both literally and metaphorically) is important because unless we realize the extent to which our vision is conditioned by our own culture – unless we realize that the image of African art we have made a place for in our world has been shaped by us as much as by Africans – we may be misled into believing that we see African art for what it is.”³⁰

The African American artist/curator Fred Wilson credited Clifford's book as an important source for his thinking on the representation of non-Western cultures. “Ethnographic displays,” Wilson suggests, “create a distance between cultures that doesn't need to be there. This difference cuts off any connections and flattens out the complexity of our relationship in favour of exoticism. Even though I am not from the Third World, I felt myself both on display and not on display. When I was a museum guard I felt on display, but also invisible.”³¹ In his seminal works *The Other Museum* (1990) and *Mining the Museum* (1992), Wilson addressed the issue of how museums consciously or unwittingly reinforce racist beliefs and behaviours both by what they show and do not show. In using the word ‘Mining’, Wilson suggested the process of digging into the museum's collections and also of laying a minefield of explosive controversy; but most of all he was concerned with making the museum his own – ‘mine’ as opposed to the ‘othering’ which he and many other people of colour had experienced in visiting museums, an experience which Gus Casely-Hayford remembers vividly from his childhood visits to the MoM (see below). Interestingly, in the same year (1985) as the *Hidden Peoples of the Amazon* was being picketed by Survival International at the MoM, the artist Eduardo Paolozzi was mining the MoM's collections in his exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons*, an exhibition which in many ways was as ground-breaking as *Hidden Peoples* was reactionary. The then Keeper of the MoM, Malcolm McLeod, noted that Paolozzi could ‘happily ignore or reject aspects of a piece which, for the archaeologist or anthropologist, are its most important attributes.’³² For a museum so determinedly social anthropological in its approach to most exhibitions (as outlined by James Clifford above), this was a bold statement to make. Although I would not become a curator in the MoM for another two years, I remember enjoying *Lost Magic Kingdoms* very much, not least because it was refreshingly free from the

³⁰ Vogel, Susan *Art/artefact*, New York, Center for African Art, 1988, p.11

³¹ Museum News, Smithsonian Institution, May/June 1993, p. 3

³² McLeod, Malcolm, ‘Paolozzi and Identity’ in Paolozzi, Eduardo, *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons*, London, BMP, 1985, pp17

recreated cultural context of dwellings, manikins, flora and fauna which was still very much in vogue in ethnographic museums at that time. In many ways *'Lost Magic Kingdoms'* was the forerunner of Grayson Perry's *'Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman'* (2012) over a quarter of a century later at the BM, though by then the idea of an artist taking a fresh look at museum collections from a personal and possibly unexpected perspective was nothing new.

As I mentioned in the first part of this statement, the first mainstream exhibition at the MoM which broke free from the 'recreated cultural context' model was *'Images of Africa: Emil Torday and the Art of the Congo, 1900 – 1909'*, though it did so in part as much by accident as by design. Being a historical exhibition there was no call for reconstructed dwellings made out of expanded polystyrene, nor for manikins, colour blow-ups, smells or music. The exhibition was curated by John Mack, and as his assistant I worked closely with the designer Geoff Pickup who would go on to design my exhibitions at the MoM (*Power of the Hand*, 1994, and *Display and Modesty*, 1995) and the Sainsbury African Galleries at Bloomsbury. Geoff and I worked painstakingly on each display case, meticulously placing and lighting each work of art – be it textile, sword, enema or wood sculpture – in order to achieve a balance between object and information panel or label. The exhibition looked ravishing and duly won first prize from the National Arts Collection Fund (now the Art Fund) for a museum exhibition. That exhibition proved a watershed, and from that point until the MoM closed to the public in 1997, the idea of trying to create a physical cultural context in which to display objects from the collections was largely abandoned. A series of books and articles, notably Karp and Lavine *'Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display'* (1991), Roberts and Vogel *'Exhibitionism'* (1994), Coombes *'Reinventing Africa'* (1994) and Harding and Myers *'Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future'* (1994), were beginning to have an impact on cultures of display in museums:

"If the museum community continues to explore this multicultural and intercultural terrain consciously and deliberately, in spite of the snares that may await, it can play a role in reflecting and mediating the claims of various groups, and perhaps help construct a new idea of ourselves as a nation."³³

³³ Karp, I. and Lavine, S.D., *'Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display'* (1991), p.8

“Ultimately, it is only from a more complex understanding and admission of the historical role that the cultural object has played in an imperial past that we can envisage the part it might now play in the realisation of a truly Post-Colonial future.”³⁴

Many of these possibilities were summed up in the book *‘Contemporary Cultures of Display’* (Emma Barker (ed.) 1999) and in particular by Elsbeth Court’s contribution to that book *‘Africa on Display: exhibiting art by Africans’* pp. 147 – 173). Elsbeth would become a good friend as well as a staunch supporter of the approach we would adopt with the Sainsbury African Galleries, and interestingly in her contribution to Barker’s book, written shortly before the opening of the galleries, she featured the work of Magdalene Odundo and Sokari Douglas Camp, two artists who we worked with for the first time at the MoM and whose work formed part of the opening displays in the African Galleries at Bloomsbury – I commissioned a new work by Odundo specifically for the purpose of making our public think about what they were seeing as soon as they enter the African Galleries, namely a living artist, born in Kenya but trained in Britain and working in a tradition still today not always associated with fine art.



‘Vessel’ by Magdalene Odundo, 2000.

In 1995 I had reviewed³⁵ the exhibition which Odundo had curated at the Crafts Council, and had noted that in the catalogue she had celebrated the connection of her art to African traditions, while at the same time emphasising her belief ‘that historical and contemporary

³⁴ Coombes, Annie., *‘Reinventing Africa’* (1994), pp.225

³⁵ “African Metalwork.” Review article on the Crafts Council Gallery exhibition, Sept-Nov. 1995. *African Arts*, vol. XXIX, 3:78-79.

work can be viewed as a continuum',³⁶ an observation which would help to develop my ideas as to how a new Africa gallery at the BM might be curated.

First thoughts on the African Galleries.

Despite mounting some important exhibitions, in many ways we led a sheltered life at the MoM. Although I did not get to curate exhibitions there until quite late in the MoM's history, it almost always seemed to me that we were a much livelier place than the main BM at Bloomsbury. It was only when I began to speak to the art historian of Ghanaian heritage Gus Casely-Hayford, following an initial meeting at the Horniman Museum in 1999, that I began to have serious doubts about the way the MoM was perceived by a wider public beyond our fan base amongst dealers, anthropologists, and the benign and avuncular 'pet' trustee, Sir David Attenborough. I worked with Gus on certain aspects of the African Galleries and he let me use a film he had shot for Channel 4 about the *asafo* companies in Ghana to create one of the videos for the galleries. Gus would go on to be the Director of the *Africa '05* festival, followed by a number of high-profile directorships in museums and galleries and in the Arts Council. In a review article (*Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 2002, pp. 113-128) on the newly opened African Galleries, Gus perfectly summed up the mood of the time and what the hopes and expectations might be for such a gallery:

"Almost everyone rightly feels that they have a stake in what we do. Exhibitions are contested terrain for interpretation and ideological assertion, ethnographic exhibitions especially so. But one way of using that potential debate is to accept the museum visitor as co-creator of meaning. We have to embrace the fact that the true narrative and conclusions of our exhibitions may be created as dynamic collusions as people wander around. The social and intellectual contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds, is something we must embrace (Crew, S. R., & Sims, J. E., in Karp, I & Lavine S. D. 1991). So we have to find new ways of opening up the process of curation, allowing new marginal voices to be heard, to sometimes give them centre stage, and occasionally full control. Within the Sainsbury African Galleries the curators were more fully aware of these debates than I am. The gallery was born into a moment of critical flux in which these issues were echoing from conference hall to journal. And in finding a new home they have found a new epistemology, a new way of being".

Apart from myself, two other staff were engaged in curating the initial displays in the African Galleries: Nigel Barley, who was the head of the African section at the time, and Julie Hudson, who had supported me, Nigel, John Mack and other curators at the MoM and who had undertaken fieldwork with me in Tunisia and co-authored my second book *North African*

³⁶ African Metalwork, London, CraftsCouncil, 1995, p.26

Textiles. My senior colleagues at the BM were less than enamoured with what they saw as the prospect of simply re-creating some of the exhibitions and ideas which had been worked through at the MoM, and so they were more than happy to leave me to develop a rationale and write the brief for what would become the Sainsbury African Galleries, though I think they saw this as more of a secretarial than a creative curatorial role! However, far from representing a re-hash of past ideas, I saw the African Galleries as an opportunity to create interesting new juxtapositions of objects and related videos which would spark debate and discussion. Moreover, I envisaged that the whole enterprise would be mediated by contemporary African artists who would help to illuminate long-standing traditions and emphasise their continuing dynamism, as well as challenging the many existing stereotypes of 'Africa' and 'African art' which would have no part in understanding or conveying the concept of 'global Africa' at the dawn of the new millennium.

Nigel Barley, who was shortly to leave the BM, had developed research interests in Indonesia and was no longer deeply involved with Africa. So it was left largely to me, with Julie's support, to make the important curatorial decisions for the galleries. Probably foremost of these was the decision to introduce our public to the arts of Africa through work by contemporary artists, but also to commission and acquire new works which would allow us to do this – apart from three or four works by Sokari Douglas Camp, we had no other works by contemporary artists in the collections when planning for the galleries began in 1997. Other important decisions at the time included the juxtaposition of the different sections of the galleries so that they made sense to our public intellectually and visually. We had all agreed that the division of the sections by material (forged metal, cast brass, textiles, ceramics etc.) made sense, but it was crucial that the section dealing with forged metal should be in the same gallery as the ceramics so that they could have a dialogue along the lines of the classic binaries which are associated with forging metal and making pots in the literature: men/women, cold/hot, culture/nature. The five video presentations (which I edited with a professional film-maker at Ealing studios) helped to give a feeling of the on-going importance and dynamism of the long-standing traditions on display. Charles Gore's sequence of images showing modern brass-casting in Benin was particularly important in this respect.

As time went on Nigel and John left the BM and I became more and more responsible for how the galleries developed - what objects and works of art we should acquire, and how we should

use the galleries as a forum in which all sorts of discussions would take place and ideas germinate, but also a hub from which various projects could radiate to the wider global community, projects which I will discuss further in the final part of this statement.

The Museum of Mankind re-assessed

I have re-read the huge number of reviews (see Appendix 1 & 2) which greeted the opening of the Sainsbury African Galleries in March 2001, and I will use this second part of my statement to assess what they reveal about the magnitude of the task we had taken on, the success or failure of the approach I had taken by introducing our public to the galleries through the work of contemporary artists, and the comparisons which were drawn with our previous incarnation at the MoM.

I, in common with most of my colleagues, felt that the MoM offered us opportunities, as curators, that our colleagues at the main BM site in Bloomsbury rarely got. There was room for at least four or five major exhibitions from different parts of the world at any one time, together with a number of smaller or semi-permanent spaces showing the 'treasures of the collections'. It is true that some of us felt that certain practices looked increasingly anachronistic such as the use of manikins and the attempt to recreate a 'cultural context' by constructing dwellings, imitating flora, even reproducing the sounds and smells of the market place. In any case, by the mid-1990's, when I began to curate exhibitions at the MoM, these practices were largely a thing of the past. The main BM site at Bloomsbury seemed remote, its exhibitions austere and totally lacking in the lively, colourful exhibitions which opened at least four times a year at the MoM, each invariably accompanied by 'ethnic' music, drumming, dancing and much drinking. It did not occur to me until we began to plan for the new galleries at Bloomsbury that in fact we and our collections of so-called 'non-Western art' had in fact been ghettoised, divorced from the other great cultures of the world, unable to represent the ever expanding diversity of British society which should have been reflected in a 'British' museum. In short, while imagining we were forward looking and conducting cutting edge research, we were in fact contributing to a late twentieth century brand of Orientalism³⁷.

One thing that immediately struck me on reading these reviews again was the extent of the dislike for the MoM and all that it represented. The language used by reviewers (Appendix 1)

³⁷ Said, Edward, 'Orientalism', Penguin Books, 1978, pp 12-13

was very strong: 'hated', 'marred', 'cringe', 'unlamented', 'divorced' – these are words used by people who feel very passionately about their subject. Only one voice – or at least only one that I have come across - spoke up in sadness at the passing of the MoM, and that was the career museum ethnographer, Len Pole, though I have no doubt that he articulated the views of many when he commented: "There are those who regret the surgery that has resulted in the department [of Ethnography] being brought back into the main body [of the British Museum]." (Museums Journal, April 2001).

Down in the basement: the Sainsbury African Galleries

Looking back, I was simply not prepared for the large number of detailed reviews which followed the opening of the African Galleries. However, good or bad, collectively they served to remind me of the responsibilities that I and the African section of the Ethnography Department had taken on. At the MoM I might expect one or two reviews in academic journals, but little or nothing in the main stream press or media – unless I went out of my way to seek such coverage, which occasionally I did. Now, suddenly, I was faced with a barrage of strongly held opinions, many of them reacting specifically to choices and decisions I had made in curating the galleries. However, there were a number of factors relating to the African Galleries which were out of my control, most significantly their location and the means of access to them by the public. At the time of the millennium the Museum was deeply indebted to Lord Foster who had designed the magnificent dome covering the Great Court. The African Galleries were part of that development, but appeared to be the particular responsibility of one of Foster's partners. The Museum seemed unaware of the political implications of having the African Galleries in the basement with no natural light; unfortunately the initial design of the galleries, instead of mitigating this issue, made it considerably worse. The white marble staircase leading down to the galleries could have been enlivened by wall cases and by allowing visitors a view into the galleries when reaching the mezzanine floor. Instead it felt like the entrance to the tomb of some fascist dictator, with a solid wall of marble on the mezzanine landing obscuring both the entrance to the galleries and the names of the sponsors, a design aspect which did not escape the notice of several reviewers. Once in the galleries, the ceilings and the tops of the walls had been painted black, increasing the sense of oppression and

spoiling the sight lines to anything displayed there. It would have been comical had it not been so terrifyingly near to being realised at the time, but the set designer for the *Lion King* had even been consulted to bring 'the colours of Africa' to the galleries. The walls behind the textiles were to be painted a rich red, while the ceramics were to be treated to a backdrop of terracotta – I even heard it rumoured that 'animal print' was being contemplated for the masquerade section! Luckily he (the set designer) was sensible enough to see that such an approach would be ridiculous - and promptly resigned! There seemed to be an unwillingness – for a variety of reasons - to see the African galleries as a new direction taken by the Department - what Gus Casely-Hayford, as previously mentioned, would describe as 'a way of being'. The Director, Robert Anderson, was in his twilight years at the Museum, and the Trustees had brought in a financier, Suzanna Taverne, currently non-executive director of Ford Credit Europe, in a role of deputy and enforcer as the Museum was in deep financial disarray. My note to her requesting the immediate demolition of the 'wall' on the mezzanine floor of the staircase was greeted with a stern reprimand. However, after lengthy discussions, Julie Hudson and I finally prevailed in having everything but the metal panels carrying the lighting tracks in the ceiling painted white. The difference was strikingly obvious and the improvement immediate and immense. A rather more serious confrontation came when Steve Hooper, the director of the Sainsbury Institute and representative of the Sainsbury family, came down from Norwich specifically to request the removal, to another part of the gallery, of the piece which I had commissioned from the ceramicist Magdalene Odundo to be the first object the public would see on entering the galleries – and to replace it with one of the iconic 'treasures' from Africa in the collections: the Ife Head from Nigeria. Julie and I stood our ground. The whole point of introducing our public to the arts of Africa with works they would not expect to see – works by named living artists – would have been dissipated if we had agreed to that request. In the end, and to his great credit, Hooper accepted the validity of the point we were making and returned to Norwich. No further demands were made by the sponsors, though on the occasion of the private view another small innovation I had made was temporarily removed from display, perhaps in case it offended the eye of Lady Sainsbury. It was a cricket shirt of the design worn by the Kenyan team at the 1999 World Cup in the UK, sporting the Maasai shield and crossed spears which appear on the flag of independent Kenya. The idea was to show the continuing significance of 'traditional' weaponry in new political and sporting contexts. In the analogy of cricket, the Maasai shield might be viewed as

a solid forward defensive shot, whereas the spear might suggest a mighty hit for six into the crowd. Amusingly and satisfyingly, the artist of Ghanaian heritage Godfried Donkor, speaking with Henry Bonsu on Colourful Radio the following morning, specifically mentioned the cricket shirt as an example of the 'way forward' in seeking new ways of displaying the arts of Africa.



It is always pleasing to receive good reviews, but far more important for a curator to consider are those which are critical. I have therefore placed a selection of the positive reviews (Appendix 2) in the appendix to this statement and will try to analyse, particularly with hindsight, those which were less complimentary. Before that I will refer again to Gus Casely-Hayford's long and deeply reflective review article which was inspirational in many ways, not least because it lent support to many elements which were arguably more of a risk for me as a curator, such as the emphasis on contemporary art, the use of videos, the balance between the type and quantity of written information and the emphasis on the objects themselves as opposed to their use as what Gus referred to as 'corroborative evidence' for certain social anthropological ideas which tended to be a recurring aspect of exhibitions at the MoM:

"At this fluid moment in museology, this British Museum exhibition has set down a new way of being in an ethnographic gallery. A link between traditional shows we have known and with suggestions of shows we may yet know. It allows us to get up close to the objects and inhale them like art. But it also gives us back-up in panels, in film, in the catalogue, so that we can step across the gap, into the frame to decode some of the conundra that would otherwise have perplexed us and closed us out. In this period in which the tenets of post-modernity have

begun to be questioned, this is a refuge of common sense, an approach that works for the experienced visitor, and for those who are new to displayed African culture.”³⁸

The African Galleries Reviewed: Negative.

Turning to the more negative reviews, it's as well to look again at them now and analyse whether the criticisms which were levelled at that time still have weight today. These can roughly be divided into two groups: calls for restitution from the African and Caribbean press and more detailed criticism from journalists, anthropologists and museum curators who saw the African Galleries as an opportunity missed:

Ross Slater: “African Treasure: The shocking Truth”. There are more historical artefacts in British Museums than there are left in the continent itself. Hundreds of thousands of pieces of African history are mothballed in store houses up and down the country.” (New Nation, April 9th 2001).

“British Museum shows Nigeria and African Art. The exhibition while very impressive, has also been criticised for not mentioning, or for giving apparently sanitised story of the way in which these cultural objects were obtained during the colonial era. Controversy has dogged the exhibition with many questioning the rationale for showing art pieces belonging to other peoples and plundered during Britain's ignominious rule in Africa.” (Nigerian News 12.03.01).

“Fresh looting row hits British Museum. Increasingly the morality and legality of holding art collections seized by force is being questioned. In the true sense of justice and self-determination, the Benin artefacts belong to the culture from which they were derived.” (Lagos Daily Champion 12.03.2001)

Denrele Ogunwa. “Stolen from Africa. A new exhibition has opened up all the old wounds. There are examples of thrones, carvings of deities, Benin Bronze heads of Kings and Queens and so forth that are symbols of power, magic and spirit that sit there for all the world looking like displays in a shop window. It robs them of their potency. Somehow it feels hugely disrespectful.” (The Pulse, 12.03.2001)

Julian Spalding. “Little light cast on the Dark Continent. Art in much of Africa cannot be divorced from life. But that is what's happened to it in these displays, and that is the reason why so many visitors are bewildered by what they are looking at. It is totally misleading to put Islamic, Christian and tribal artefacts together in one case as happens again and again in this display, as if they had a common, overarching African identity.” (The Times, 21.04, 2001)

Len Pole. “But many voices are silent by omission; acknowledgement of the sacrifice of the people of Benin City massacred in 1897, for example, is missing. There are as many stories as there are objects, and admittedly more of each than can be displayed, but this is a glaring lapse.” (Museums Journal, April 2001)

Ruth Phillips. “The curators stress their new installation's recreation of the original sight lines for the mounted [Benin] plaques, but the highly decorative and aestheticized installations overwhelm this worthy achievement, and act, rather, to anesthetize and efface the other history of imperialism and appropriation. As elsewhere in the Sainsbury Galleries, the

³⁸ Casely-Hayford, A., 'A Way of Being: Some Reflections on the Sainsbury African Galleries.' Journal of Museum Ethnography, No.14, March 2002, pp 127

elegance of the design recalls the glossy displays of a superior department store, privileging the impression of quantity and variety over both ethnographic specificity and aesthetic singularity.” (American Anthropologist Vol. 104: No 3, Sept. 2002. Pp 944-952).

Mark O’Neill. “What has 9/11 clarified for museums?... It has made clear the fact that the African Galleries at the British Museum constitute the single greatest missed opportunity in a generation. Far from illuminating cultures, they subsume human experience to a brutal modernist aesthetic, reducing the collection to an archive of specimens.” (Museums Journal Sept. 2002)

I had the deepest respect for those who saw the works of art on display in the African galleries as ‘looted cultural heritage’ and for the calls for the return of these works, particularly those which related to the worst periods of colonial or imperial barbarism such as the sacking and looting of Maqdalla, Kumase and Benin. Several reviewers noted that I, as a curator, had agreed that I could not possibly begin to defend the ways in which some of the works in the collections had been acquired. However, I felt that, in common with the views which Kwame Anthony Appiah would later express in his book ‘*Cosmopolitanism*’ (2006), these magnificent works should represent the varied cultures of Africa in a museum in which so many other great cultures of the world were strongly represented, and that in some sense they would help in the struggle against the ignorance which led to their acquisition by force during the colonial era, an ignorance of the sophistication and dynamism of Africa which is still strongly alive in so many societies today. I discuss this in more detail in Part 3.

Spalding’s criticism goes right to the heart of decisions we had to make in creating a clear and coherent structure and rationale for the way in which the collections might best be displayed in the galleries, both in terms of the overall narrative and the content of individual cases and ex-case plinths. The shape of the galleries, with three possible entrances, militated against any linear narrative - even if the ‘contemporary art’ section might be considered a ‘beginning’, there was no clear ‘end’. Furthermore, the composition of the collections, with a huge imbalance in favour of Anglophone West Africa, particularly Nigeria and Ghana, meant that any geographical approach would simply highlight the origins of the collections in British colonial history. A thematic approach was possible, but I felt that we should avoid some of the conventional headings which might be employed such as ‘history’, ‘trade’, ‘religion’ etc and instead examine the deep significance inherent in materials such as clay, iron, wood, brass and cloth – and within these material divisions allow a discussion of some of the issues people might expect to encounter under the thematic headings mentioned above. Far from provoking confusion and bewilderment, I feel that this juxtaposition has opened up the galleries to a

much deeper discussion, for example in placing 'clay' and 'iron' together in one space, especially with the leavening addition of work by contemporary artists working in the ancient traditions of ceramics (female potters) and metalwork (male blacksmiths). In this case the classic binaries of hot and cold, nature and culture, women and men as discussed at length in anthropological and art historical literature are allowed full expression.

I had a lot of sympathy for Phillips's criticisms, particularly the repeated use of the word 'primitive' in the introductory panel which had not been written by any of the curators, but in the end I felt that, as an anthropologist, she was yearning for the kind of exhibitions which characterised the majority of those mounted at the MoM and which had had their day.

Mark O'Neill's criticism of the African Galleries appeared in an article entitled *Beauty and the Beast*, written on the first anniversary of 9/11, in which he argued that "The effectiveness of museums is reduced by the way we separate out good and evil." To illustrate his point he cited the example of a Sande mask from Sierra Leone (one of which is displayed in the African Galleries) and suggested that because of its association with girls' initiation, which involves FGM, (very much in the news right now) it should be displayed together with an explicit photo of a girl undergoing FGM if necessary from another culture and country. He justified this standpoint in a statement which has very interesting similarities – and differences – with what both Fred Wilson and Gus Casely-Hayford identified as among the reasons they felt remote from museum displays: "People who have been victims of abuse often feel ashamed and they don't belong. Acknowledging their experience in the museum may enable them to feel that they belong in the museum, and it is easier for them to feel that the museum belongs to them." It raised the question of whether I as a curator should highlight such issues as FGM, particularly in relation to its practice in the UK? Furthermore, should graphic images of women undergoing female circumcision from another country and culture be displayed next to the Sande mask as O'Neill seemed to be suggesting? I faced similar decisions in persuading the BM that images of dead bodies and child soldiers should be shown in the film accompanying *The Tree of Life*. In that case I felt that those images were essential in telling the story of how the people of Mozambique had made peace, despite the efforts of the international community to keep them at war³⁹. I also felt that in the context of the way the *Tree of Life* was displayed,

³⁹ Mitchell, Jolyon, *Promoting Peace, Inciting Violence*, Routledge, 2012, p.3

those images represented an antidote to all those images which continue to fill our TV screens showing African people at war with one another. However, I felt that the use of images from another culture that O'Neill was suggesting in order to highlight the various practices associated with girls' initiation in Sierra Leone, including FGM, might have a place in another context and in another exhibition, but in the context of the African Galleries it would simply have come across as negative and judgemental, reinforcing unintentionally the stereotypes of Africa as a place of primitive savagery.

A number of reviewers (see Appendix 2), while being positive about the achievements of the African Galleries, saw the displays as a beginning, a launch pad for all sorts of ideas, workshops, innovative art, exhibitions, projects, publications, field work and conferences. In the next section of my statement I will look in detail at how and why the African Galleries became the focus for such developments within the BM, the UK and globally during the fifteen years they have been open to the public - and how, occasionally, I and my colleagues have been unable to achieve our goals for a variety of reasons.

Part 3: The Forum

Recent Reactions to the African Galleries.

In this final part of my statement I will try to suggest in what ways the African Galleries have sparked creative initiatives, not just in my own work, but in the work of others – academics, artists, publishers, musicians, poets, politicians, activists – who in one way or another have been inspired by the arts of global Africa which they have experienced in that space and in that forum.

Dear Chris 12.08 2014

I was just thinking of you as I plan my next trip to the U.K. I'm presenting at Oxford the first week in September and thought about the terrific time I had visiting the British Museum during the Royal Anthropological Institute Conference. I appreciate the tour you gave of the museum's galleries and I actually returned to the African galleries at least twice again during my stay in London. I was able to see most of the museum's exhibits during my trip, and I must say, I especially enjoyed the African Galleries.

Congratulations on creating such a beautiful, paradigm-shifting space. You've really created a new way of viewing and engaging African artefacts. I shared photos of your galleries with colleagues here at my museum. Like me, the Senior Curator of Culture, Elaine Nichols, was impressed with your displays, and the ways in which you've tastefully exhibited ancient objects with contemporary art. You've created a seamless historical and visual narrative that sheds new light on the relationships between past and present cultures.

Also, thank you for your expertise and help with my research on the Ethiopian cloak. Both Elaine and I appreciate the insights you've shared. Your knowledge regarding the cloak, African political history, and African textiles really helped contextualize the significance of the Ethiopian garment we have in our collection.

I hope to see you again soon, and please keep me informed on events happening with the British Museum. Best Regards, Aaron

If this recent e-mail to me by the African American scholar Aaron Bryant is anything to go by, the African Galleries continue to thrill and impress the majority of visitors almost fifteen years since they first opened to the public, though the question remains as to whether they are doing this in the 'right way' – or at least in the ways in which I and others who have worked on the galleries intended? This of course begs another question, namely is there a 'right way' – or indeed a 'wrong way' – to curate the galleries, and who is to judge this? Should the approach be driven by anthropology, by archaeology, by art history, by aesthetics, by politics - or perhaps by a little of each, which was the approach I had adopted in order that as many voices as possible might be heard, without at the same time presenting a confusing patchwork of approaches to displaying the arts of Africa. In any case, no matter how large, how

comprehensive and how inspirational they may be, the African Galleries represent not only an entire continent, but also a global phenomenon. Therefore they can only be a starting point, a launch pad, a forum, a springboard – call it what you will – where a great variety of projects begin, where ideas for art works, for exhibitions, for festivals, for field work and for publications are generated, and where discussions, arguments and debates take place. It is intended as a space in which ideas germinate and from which projects flow. I did think of describing as many of these different projects as I could as part of this statement, but I decided simply to list them in an appendix at the end of this document with a very brief description of each. In this context I was interested to hear the reaction of Jack Obonyo, Curator of the Abasuba Peace Museum in Kenya during a recent visit to the Africa Galleries as part of our Africa Programme. He felt that the Africa galleries' positioning in a discrete space not criss-crossed by people on their way to other galleries – as almost all the other galleries in the BM are – imparts to them a particular dignity and level of respect. In other words, everyone who visits them wants to be there and has taken a conscious decision to do so, rather than simply coming across them on their way somewhere else. In common with Aaron Bryant, he does not appear to feel that the positioning of the African Galleries in the basement creates a negative impression – quite the contrary, in fact.

Artists as Mediators

Perhaps the greatest challenge in curating the arts and cultures of Africa is to present a positive picture of the continent's diverse, dynamic, creative and profoundly spiritual and humorous peoples, while at the same time acknowledging the darker side of their history. For example, how should a museum curator attempt to represent traumatic events which may have left a deep-seated legacy of pain for people today? The Slave Trade, colonialism, the Cold War, apartheid and the HIV and AIDS pandemic are all alluded to in the works on display in the African Galleries and in the publications, exhibitions, film and TV work connected to the galleries which I have undertaken in the past fifteen years. People often ask me why the galleries do not pay more specific attention to these subjects, to which I reply that in many ways they are more to do with European history – or at least global history – than with Africa. Therefore I hope I have not allowed them to take centre stage as they so often do in the various ways in which Africa and African history are represented by the media. Instead my first-hand experience of the on-going legacy of these terrible events has helped me to address

a seldom studied aspect of museology – the curatorial experience and the curator’s intellectual and emotional journey – and at the same time to come to grips with this legacy in some of the work I have produced as an artist.



The Sainsbury African Galleries (from I-R) Kester, Odundo, El Anatsui and Koraichi.

One way in which I have been able to negotiate this awkward curatorial terrain has been with the help of contemporary artists. From small beginnings when the African Galleries opened in 2001, outstanding work by more than twenty contemporary artists of African heritage are today to be found throughout the galleries, in effect mediating the displays and allowing the curatorial voice to fade into the background. By that I mean that my role as curator has subtly changed over the fifteen years the gallery has been open to the public. Normally the curator is perceived as the mediating presence in any exhibition, a lens through which the content is interpreted and made accessible. Of course, that is still my role to a certain extent, but as the number of works by contemporary artists has grown, so has their ability to speak for themselves and to interpret or contextualise the other ‘traditional’ works of art which may surround them. My role now is more in finding the right place in the extended canvas of the gallery to place each work so that it may have the maximum effect and impact. Many more contemporary art works from the BM’s collections are either travelling the world with touring exhibitions, or are featured in books, articles, films etc. These works represent both the independent voices of individual artists, but also act as dynamic contemporary standard bearers for long-established traditions which were once portrayed in museums as frozen in time, rather than as living traditions with a vibrant present as well as a distant past. During the *Africa '05* festival of African arts and cultures in the UK, Hassan Musa, an artist born in Sudan but now living and working in France, threw down a challenge to all curators of the arts of

Africa, particularly curators like me who would like to acquire the work of artists like Hassan Musa:

“To hell with African art! I have been forced – me, an artist from Africa! to consider African art as a hindrance to my artistic projects, rather than a favourable framework for their fulfilment.”⁴⁰

I knew exactly what Hassan meant yet, as I pointed out to the audience in a talk I gave at the Victoria and Albert Museum:

“I am also a curator charged with displaying objects from the BM’s collections which most people still think of as ‘African art’ – the masks, wood sculpture, the textiles, ceramics, metalwork and basketry – which were once the staples of the ‘ethnographical’ display in museums the world over. Acquiring works by Hassan and other contemporary artists of African descent, while at the same time creating “a favourable framework for their fulfilment” - and a welcoming environment in which our public can enjoy both – has to be my prime consideration as a curator. One way in which we have approached this task is to work directly with contemporary artists, to collect their works and to encourage our public to engage with the artists and with the topics of their work in order to turn the African galleries into a forum for debate in which as many voices as possible are heard.”⁴¹

The African Galleries, and particularly the five video monitors in the galleries, provide a showcase for fieldwork projects in Africa by BM curators and for the work of invited experts from outside the Museum. My own fieldwork in Africa and in ‘global’ Africa has almost always been conducted in collaboration with contemporary artists who unfailingly provide the introductions to other interested colleagues (often in local museums) and the insights which their own work provided to make each trip and each project a full and rounded experience. I have therefore chosen six such projects which I have undertaken in different parts of the continent and in global Africa to illustrate the ways in which the African galleries have provided both the catalyst for such projects, the showcase and the favourable framework for their fulfilment. These projects have demanded a level of commitment, emotional and intellectual, from me as a curator and artist, and have forced me out of my comfort zone and into a steep and sometimes painful learning curve.

Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco

The first project was undertaken in a small country in North Africa: “where in 2010 a poor vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, set fire to himself in despair at the abuse of his human rights and personal dignity, and by so doing began what in Tunisia became known as *The*

⁴⁰ Musa, Hassan, ‘Comment expliquer “l’artaffricanisme” a vos filles?’, *Art*, no.3, July/August 2005, p.20

⁴¹ ‘Collecting the Core at the Margins’ in: *From the Margins to the Core*, Victoria and Albert Museum Conference, Papers and Notes, 2010, pp129

Dignity Revolution, though the global media dubbed it *The Jasmine Revolution*. In the disturbances which followed the ousting of President Ben Ali, I heard with sadness that Tunis railway station had burned down, probably at the hands of pro-Ben Ali supporters. It was there that Julie Hudson and I, on our first evening in Tunisia at the end of Ramadan in 1997, had witnessed a 'happening' master-minded by the artist Nja Mahdaoui, and I can still see in my mind's eye his vast calligraphic patterned banners hanging at one end of the concourse, beneath which musicians performed, their costumes also designed by Mahdaoui."⁴²



Mahdaoui's 'Joussour', 1997

I had first seen Mahdaoui's work at the *Africa '95* festival, and I wrote to him, and to two other artists, Khaled Ben Slimane and Rachid Koraïchi (an Algerian artist based in Tunisia at that time), in the hope of meeting them and gaining an introduction to their work and, more broadly, to the urban textile traditions of Tunisia which we wished to study. I really wanted to emphasise the importance of urban Africa to dispel a prevailing notion that rural Africa is the only 'real' Africa in the public imagination. Later I would reinforce this research interest in Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania), Maputo (Mozambique) and Johannesburg (South Africa). I knew that all three artists used textiles in their work and that Mahdaoui's father had been a weaver in the ancient port city of Mahdia. So it was from Tunis railway station we took a train south to Mahdia, and from there to many other towns and villages as we travelled deep into the Sahara desert. In the course of those journeys we met many weavers who I would describe as artists in their own right, notably Karim el-Arousse, a master-weaver of Mahdia, who had been researching the old patterns once used by weavers in Mahdia and had woven samples with

⁴² Spring, C, 2012. *African Textiles Today*, London, British Museum Publications, and Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, pp232, 68-9

colour combinations quite unlike anything else his workshops produce. Karim was modest about his achievement, but clearly excited about its potential, not only as a way of expanding his business into a new market and of satisfying his own creativity, but at the same time remaining true to what he undoubtedly saw as his responsibility in maintaining historical but dynamic and vital textile traditions in Mahdia, traditions worthy of Tunisia's *Dignity Revolution*. In the end we made superb collections of textiles⁴³ as well as of the work of Mahdaoui and Ben Slimane – both artists featured in the display of contemporary art which our public first encountered when the African galleries opened in 2001. A selection of Tunisian textiles, together with an edited montage of the photographs I had taken, became the first of two case studies based on my fieldwork to appear in the textile section of the galleries. The third artist to whom I had written, Rachid Koraïchi, was ill and unable to see us – probably just as well in retrospect, because not all artists see eye to eye with one another - a lesson learned! Later I would acquire for the BM Koraïchi's multi-faceted *Path of Roses*, a work which, as well as being a celebration of the 13th century mystic poet Rumi, is also a reflection on the on-going struggle of the Palestinian people. Years later (in 2013) I would also accompany Rachid into the Algerian Sahara to the small desert town of Témacine where the Sufi Tijani order was founded by Cheikh Sidi Ahmed Tijani in 1782. There Rachid introduced me to Cheikh Sidi El-Haj M'Hammed, the current Grand Master of the Zaouïa Tijaniya at Témacine.



In Témacine, 2013.

The Tijaniyya is by far the largest of the Sufi confraternities, having upwards of 100 million Tijani followers in Africa, Indonesia, the USA and worldwide. It was on that trip that, sitting in a tent outside Rachid's partially built house in the desert, only a few kilometres from where the

⁴³ 2004. "Urban Textile Traditions of Tunisia" (with Julie Hudson). *African Arts*, UCLA, vol. XXXVII, 3, 24-41, 90.

oil workers had been massacred by extremists a couple of months earlier, the Moroccan artist Mustapha Romli looked at my own artist's website and immediately invited me to take up a residency in the arts centre at Ifitry on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. That residency began a chain of events which are still in the process of unfolding so far as the African Galleries are concerned, but some of the images I created at or shortly after the residency may be seen on my website:

www.chrisspring.co.uk



Ifitry, Morocco, 2013

Tanzania

My fieldwork in Tanzania, beginning in 2002, then in Kenya, Mozambique and in South Africa, was precipitated by a number of factors, not least that Julie Hudson had taken charge of the North African collections and my new curatorial responsibilities now lay in eastern and southern Africa. The African Galleries demanded a new focus on this region of Africa because little or no work had been done there by members of the Department for many years, and certainly nothing focusing on the creativity within the great urban centres of the region such as Dar Es Salaam and Mombasa. My friend and colleague Elsbeth Court had suggested some ideas on the directions in which my research might move; another impetus was the newly established Wellcome Trust Galleries (WTG) immediately above – and closely linked to - the African Galleries at the BM. The theme of the WTG was 'Living and Dying', something I became acutely aware of everywhere I went on that first trip to Tanzania.

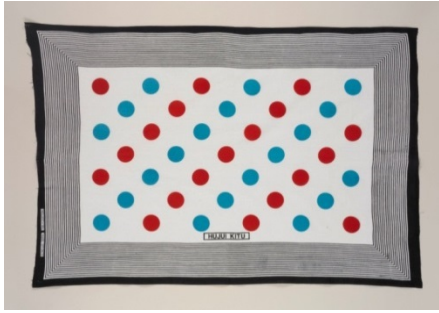
Following the pattern which had worked so well in Tunisia, both in studying urban traditions and in working with artists, I wrote to the Tanzanian artist Robino Ntila, with whom Elsbeth had worked, requesting his help, as well as to several colleagues in the National Museum. Elsbeth had inspired me to study the phenomenon of *kanga* cloth, and shortly after meeting Robino on arrival in Dar Es Salaam I discovered that he had once designed a *kanga* with a theme of 'practice safe sex' and he was very interested to find out whether his design might still be in the archive of the Urafiki (Friendship) textile mill where I was to begin my research. I had arrived at the height of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and I was immediately struck by how the slogans on *kanga* ('we young people declare war on AIDS', 'Don't be boastful – have you been checked?') reflected the variety of concerns and responses which this terrible threat to life posed to the peoples of eastern and southern Africa. At that time many of the more light-hearted and sexually suggestive slogans were not so common – instead, exhortations to put trust in God and not to set too much store by worldly goods were everywhere: KILA LENYE MWANZO LINA MWISHO – "Whatever begins must come to an end".

Elsbeth also encouraged me to research the work of the self-taught artist Edward Saidi Tingatinga who had the courage and creativity to paint from his heart the people and the creatures of the land that he loved and knew so well. Since his first exhibition in 1968 outside the Morogoro stores in Dar Es Salaam his name has become internationally known. Yet Tingatinga himself died in tragic circumstances only four years after that first exhibition. So what is it that has kept his name alive and the popularity of the work he inspired expanding day by day? While he was alive, Tingatinga encouraged and taught several younger apprentices who would form the core of the Tingatinga Cooperative society. Today their central studios are still in Oyster Bay, Dar Es Salaam, but many artists paint in the Tingatinga style throughout Tanzania, and even in neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Mozambique.

Clearly some of the artists in the cooperative are more talented than others – seen from a Western perspective, at least – but a global rule of thumb suggests that the most talented artists are not necessarily - or even not usually – the most commercially successful. The power of Tingatinga lies in its collective strength, each artist working for the group first and foremost, rather than for himself alone. This has allowed an ever increasing broadening of the artists' repertoire and the range of subjects they have been able to tackle, from deceptively

simple paintings of flora and fauna (though often with a significant and local proverbial sub-text) to the great social, political and personal issues of the day. In common with the slogans on many of the *kangas* I had seen, the themes of the paintings which I acquired for the African Galleries by the Tingatinga collective in Oyster Bay, Dar Es Salaam, echoed the daily battle with 'UKIMWI' – HIV and AIDS. 'Dar Es Salaam By Night' by Isa Mitole, though apparently showing a great crowd of people enjoying themselves in the most abandoned way, nonetheless had an important educational message, because in between the revellers are stalls selling free condoms, and used condoms provide something close to a decorative border for the painting. 'Muhimbili Hospital' by Hassan Mocha, a painting in cartoon style showing a cutaway version of the famous general hospital in Dar with its inevitable HIV and AIDS ward, and 'Teso Bus' by Ahmed Jonas, which portrays the up country journey taken by AIDS sufferers, only to be told by the spirit healer whom they have come to consult: "I am the *mganga* and cure everything but AIDS which kills', starkly demonstrate the fate of the many Tanzanians who believe that alternative medicines will succeed where conventional medicine has failed.

An important lesson I have learned about deciding what to research and to display in the African Galleries is that whenever I hear the phrase 'not really African' applied by somebody to people, objects, practices and beliefs, it is almost certainly a subject worth researching as a way of broadening public and academic understanding of the arts and cultures of Africa. Both *kanga* and the Tingatinga movement are important and dynamic traditions that were not represented at all in the collections of the BM. I like to think that the increasing scholarly and popular appreciation of both traditions in recent years has helped to acknowledge their significance – two of the Tingatinga paintings I bought on that first trip are currently on display in the Wellcome Trust and African Galleries at the BM, while *kangas* proudly occupy an entire case to themselves in the African Galleries.



I remember showing the first *kanga* I ever bought (see above) in Tanzania to a group of potential funders of my further fieldwork at the BM when I returned to the UK “What is it that’s African – never mind Tanzanian – about that? It looks more like a Damien Hurst spot painting than anything else, and it’s printed in India. It’s not really African at all is it?” they asked. I pointed to the slogan in Kiswahili HUUJUI KITU “You know nothing” to explain what was, among many things, ‘really African’ about it, and that it would be worn by an older woman to comment on her presumptuous young rivals: “HUJUI KITU – you young people know nothing!” I also knew NOTHING– that was me then and it still is me now. It’s a good rule of thumb for working anywhere in Africa, because if you know nothing you may begin to learn something, whereas if you think you know everything you’ll never learn anything.⁴⁴ In the end they did grant me the money for my fieldwork, and that *kanga* together with a number of the Tingatinga paintings I had bought were chosen by my friend and colleague Kiprof Lagat from the National Museum of Kenya to feature in a ground breaking exhibition called *HAZINA*⁴⁵ which was a collaboration and a sharing of collections between NMK and the BM and which was displayed in a specially refurbished gallery in Nairobi in 2006 – 7. It might have seemed like taking ‘coals to Newcastle’, but my fellow curator Lagat could see the potential for these particular *kangas* and Tingatinga paintings to tell a story to his public in Nairobi, just as I could see the impact they could make on my public at the BM in London. In less than four years those works of art had taken a new and remarkable journey of their own.

⁴⁴ ‘Notes from the field: Contingency’, *The Art Bulletin*, New York, September 2012, Volume XCIV Number 3, 359 -361.

⁴⁵ Lagat, K and Hudson J. (Eds.) ‘Hazina: Traditions, Trade and Transitions in Eastern Africa’, Nairobi, National Museums of Kenya, 2006.

Mozambique



Kester sitting on the *Throne of Weapons* , Maputo, Mozambique, 2000

In 2004 the inspirational *Throne of Weapons* sculpture by the Mozambican artist Kester, which I had bought for the Museum in 2002 at a small exhibition in the Oxo Tower, London, and subsequently displayed in the African Galleries, was now touring the country. In fact, it had just started a period of display in Pentonville prison where the inmates, many of whom had first-hand experience of guns and gun crime, made a moving film of their reactions to the sculpture. It is a sculpture made of weapons, a kind of war memorial in many ways, but one which celebrates not the heroes of the armed struggle but those who suffered at its hands, including thousands of child soldiers. It commemorates not so much the bravery of those who fought with guns, but more the bravery of those who were prepared to stand up, unarmed, against a culture of violence. It is about lives destroyed but also about the bravery of those who stood up to human destructiveness, often unarmed, and in the end defeated an addiction to the gun which had gripped the country for so long. The first venue for its global tour was at the Royal Ulster Museum in Belfast where it spoke loudly to the Peace Process in northern Ireland; in fact, there is much which the whole world can learn from the story of Mozambique told through this remarkable sculpture. I had spoken about the *Throne of Weapons* to different audiences in a variety of venues and its tour had demonstrated beyond doubt the impact which a powerful contemporary work of art from Africa could have in reaching audiences and addressing issues in ways which could not be achieved either through our existing collections

or by simply showing the work within the Museum⁴⁶. Among the many reactions to the Throne on tour was this tribute by the Zimbabwean poet Nkosana:

A monument to death To those who never heard your thud
Now shelved in graves and caves You wrecked your way
And now you pose here Down a trail of havoc
Asking me to admire. Challenged, I stare
Trembling at your serenity Mundane and tranquil
Inviting not threatening The conflict between guns and chairs
You play me the fool. You bred turmoil and toil
Fear, confusion and dread Determined and incorruptible
Amputees, orphans, the widowed cursed you Conceal your past and cradle me.
You dismissed lives Your prowess broken
Impotent arms, prick backs, elbows A monument of silence
To those who never heard your thud.



Tree of Life in Peace Park, 2004

The *Throne* led me inexorably to the *Tree of Life*, a sculpture which I commissioned from four artists based in Maputo, a sculpture which was to become the centre piece and logo image for the BM's *Africa '05* programme and played a crucial role in the dynamics and development of the galleries. Armed with a film of the galleries and a sketchy knowledge of the long and bloody Civil War in Mozambique which tore the country apart so soon after independence in 1975, I embarked for Maputo to work with the artists and the other members of Bishop

⁴⁶ Holden, J. (2006) *Throne of Weapons: a British Museum tour* London, British Museum Press

Sengulane's *Swords into Ploughshares* (*Transformação de Armas em Enxadas* literally *Transforming Arms into Tools*) project engaged in retrieving weapons from citizens brave enough to give them up in exchange for more useful hardware. By the time I went out for a second trip the BBC had become interested in filming the *Tree of Life* project from its roots in Mozambique to its (possibly) final destination in the BM. A short compilation of the film the BBC produced became a vital element in the artwork, where the interaction between Tree, film and the other objects in the African Galleries created a composite experience for our public. No other objects have caught the imagination in quite the same way as the Throne and the Tree, so much so that within a few short years they had claimed their own chapter in that Holy of Holies *Treasures of the British Museum*, a weighty tome which is a kind of Who's Who of the BM's most revered artefacts.

Africa '05

The *Africa '05* festival was the brainchild of Dr Gus Casely-Hayford and was partly intended as a kind of rain-check to see how far the arts of Africa, in particular the rapidly growing field of contemporary African art, had progressed in terms of production and public appreciation since *Africa '95*. Museums, galleries and a host of other institutions, large and small, contributed to the festival, and the BM could have been left behind had the African Galleries not kept pace with the changing times. As it was, the BM contributed three seasons of Africa-related events, beginning with the installation of the recently commissioned *Tree of Life* in the Great Court, and a conference 'In and Out of Africa' which drew together contemporary artists from global Africa in lively debate. A small exhibition at the entrance to the BM entitled 'Made in Africa' focused on the artistry and aesthetic appeal of the oldest objects in the BM's collections, the million year old stone hand axes from Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. Moving into the bright, open space of the Great Court, the public then encountered what was then the most recent acquisition in the African collections, the *Tree of Life*. It was a supremely powerful juxtaposition, and I think for the first time there was a real public understanding of the dynamism and continuity in the arts of Africa from the distant past to the present day, instead of the old, rigid divisions between archaeology, ethnography and contemporary art. The African Galleries, with their conversations between long established traditions and contemporary practice, were able to reflect this dynamism and sense of continuity.

The appearance of *Oxford Man* by the South African artist Owen Ndou in the middle of the *Africa '05* festival as a replacement for the touring *Throne of Weapons* opened up another area of development for the African Galleries and the African section of the Department. It was loaned by Robert Loder whose Triangle Arts Trust had been supporting artists workshops all over the world since he and Anthony Caro dreamed up the idea in early 1980s New York.⁴⁷ Initially these artist-led workshops – structured around approximately 30 artists, half from the host country, half from the international community – were located in places as remote as possible – they were about process not product, and artists including Chris Ofili acknowledged the importance of attending them in their work – in Ofili's case the Pachipamwe workshop in Zimbabwe. However, in discussion with Robert Loder we began to see the potential importance of reaching and empowering artists by locating these workshops in or near large museums or cultural centres within some of Africa's great cities, and in 2008, 2009 and 2010 the BM supported three Triangle Arts workshops in Maputo, Mozambique, in Kumase, Ghana and in Lagos, Nigeria as part of its wider programme of work in Africa led by my friend and colleague Julie Hudson which, since 2005, has included training courses, establishment of storage facilities and exhibitions in various parts of Africa – often with the African galleries at the BM as a kind of template.



Atta Kwami at his 3rd 'Sansa' workshop, Kumase, Ghana, 2009

⁴⁷ Savage, Polly, ed., 'Making Art in Africa 1960-2010', London, Lund Humphreys, 2014

Republic of Benin and Senegal: The Bicentenary and 'La Bouche du Roi'

The following two sections are adapted from my contribution to a collection of essays commissioned by York University to mark the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade⁴⁸:

“Towards the end of 2005 the BM began to address the sensitive problem of how best to mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade in 2007. The idea of a season of exhibitions, public events, lectures and performances which had worked so well for programmes such as *Africa '05* now seemed problematic when considering the Atlantic Slave Trade. *Africa '05* had been a celebration of the many and varied arts of Africa; the Bicentenary was not a celebration in any sense of the word, and to shoe horn it into a sequence of very loosely related exhibitions under the general heading of Atlantic Trade and Identity seemed almost disrespectful. As to a major exhibition, the African collections seemed the logical place from which to draw suitable material, but identifying this material and how to display it was proving equally problematic, as were the well documented early connections between the BM and the Slave Trade. Hans Sloane, whose collection founded the BM, certainly benefited from the Slave Trade through his wife who received money from plantations in Jamaica. It is also undeniable that many of the Museum's early benefactors were similarly involved in the sugar trade. To make matters worse, initial attempts by the BM's education department to join African heritage community groups in discussing the Bicentenary had met with a hostile reaction. The level of emotional intensity of these encounters was such that a key member of staff had walked out of one particular meeting and did not attend subsequent meetings, thus effectively severing vital links between the Museum and arguably the most important stakeholders in the commemoration of the Bicentenary.

It is not hard to see why the BM might arouse such resentment – guarded by stone lions and spiked railings, some of the Museum's African collections are rightly regarded as having been acquired through force of arms or through colonial oppression, the natural successor to the

⁴⁸ 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance: A Bicentenary at the British Museum' in: L. Smith, G. Cubitt, R. Wilson and K. Fouseki (eds.) *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, Routledge, New York and London, 193-212.

Slave Trade. Worse still, these African collections were now seen as buried beneath the neo-classical columns and white marble of the Great Court in underground galleries deprived of natural light. The fact that these galleries were state-of-the-art and the envy of the Museum could not diminish the impression that the African collections were imprisoned in the hold of some vast, modern day marble slave ship.

In the end we decided to purchase *La Bouche du Roi*, a work by Romuald Hazoumé of the Republic of Benin which had been first conceived in 1997 and not completed until 2005.



***La Bouche du Roi* 2007**

It was a work which could be the focus of the BM's response to the Bicentenary, but which was not created with the Bicentenary in mind – yet with its themes of Resistance and Remembrance, and its modern take on the famous Abolitionist image of the slave ship *Brookes* – substituting petrol drums for the images of enslaved Africans - it was obviously appropriate for display during that year and beyond. It toured the UK, and the BM's wider aim is to have it permanently touring the world – institutions as dynamic and diverse as the *Weeksville Center* in Brooklyn, the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, The National Museum of Art in Maputo, and the Fondation Zinsou in Benin have all shown a keen interest.

Unfortunately, the deployment of contemporary art as a means of illuminating and learning from the past and its long-established artistic traditions was - and regrettably still is - viewed by many colleagues at the Museum as something of a 'cop out' and a poor substitute for displaying artefacts from the period in question or from earlier manifestations of a particular artistic tradition. As the Bicentenary progressed, I found that this was also a view held by other colleagues in the heritage sector, and so it was with considerable trepidation that I approached the steering committee at the British Museum with the first tentative ideas for displaying *La*

Bouche du Roi. I and my colleague Frances Carey had a vision of the work on tour in Britain, and felt that we should purchase it in order to give weight and authority to a potential BM/UK partnership tour. However, touring a single, portable, reasonably robust sculpture such as the *Throne of Weapons* was one thing, a major installation with several hundred component parts including sounds, smells and a large video projection was quite another. Yet by another stroke of good fortune the BBC was in the process of planning a series of films about the BM. Clearly the story of *La Bouche du Roi* and its acquisition would make for interesting TV, and in this respect its size and complexity worked in its favour.

Just as I knew little about the civil war in Mozambique or the multitude of issues which would be raised by the *Throne of Weapons* before I purchased it for the Museum, so I could respond to the initial power of *La Bouche du Roi* as a work of art without being greatly conversant with the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and its on-going legacy. Clearly the next and arguably most vital question lay in how this artwork might be perceived by colleagues in the Heritage Network set up by Anti-Slavery International and in African heritage community groups represented by organisations such as *Rendezvous of Victory*. There would be no point whatsoever in acquiring a work that might enrage and alienate many of the audiences the BM should be trying to reach.

The first meetings I had with Anti-Slavery International and with the Heritage Network group took place very early in 2006. I remember bracing myself for some of the anger and emotion which I felt would inevitably come, but although it wasn't exactly a smooth ride it was my first taste of the kind of deep and passionate engagement with the subject which I urgently needed to experience – the Bicentenary was less than a year away. A couple of years later, at one of the workshops organised by the University of York to assess the response to the Bicentenary, I remember one of my colleagues interjecting in a heated discussion to the effect that “we'll never get anywhere if we become emotional”. I understood what she meant, but I also felt that if I had learned one thing from the experience of the Bicentenary it is that curators should come out of their comfort zones, should not be afraid to be emotional, whatever their positions in museums, and that until they do they will never truly be able to begin to suggest and portray to their public the many layers of interpretation which may lie within traumatic historical periods or events. Denis Byrne and others have argued strongly that the field of cultural heritage should break free from “the politics of tangibility” in order to make an emotional connection

between our lives and those who have lived in the past. If we museum curators are not careful we may, as Byrne puts it “create landscapes of the past that seem to be inhabited by stone tool traditions and ceramic cultures rather than people”⁴⁹. In other words, an intellectual grasp of the dates, taxonomies and stylistic nuances of artefacts and works of art can get you only so far in creating a display of the work of the living, breathing human beings who created them.

In early 2006 my first consideration was to gauge reaction to *La Bouche du Roi*. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, but nonetheless it was a great relief to hear such positive initial reactions from the Heritage Network group. Many museum colleagues had benefited from the tour of the *Throne of Weapons* and knew the potential of contemporary art to move and involve audiences of all ages and backgrounds. I remember a meeting in Birmingham where I first met Kofi Klu, the joint coordinator of *Rendezvous of Victory*. He took to the idea of *La Bouche du Roi*, appreciating that this was a work of art by an internationally known African artist and that it was not a work conceived especially for the Bicentenary. This was an artwork which evolved over a ten year period, which looked at history not in a linear, Eurocentric fashion but rather with a cyclical approach in which past, present and future are inextricably intertwined, much in the manner of African oral history. The history of Africa is often portrayed not as the living history of African people but as the history of the impact of other people upon African lives: the coming of the Phoenicians and Romans, the Arab invasions and the impact of Islam and Christianity, the Atlantic Slave Trade, the colonial period, the Cold War and so on. One thing which Kofi immediately taught me was that there was no getting away from the historical fact of the Slave Trade and its legacy, but there are ways of counteracting its effects. One of these ways is to take ownership of that history by showing the Slave Trade from an African perspective, by highlighting African resistance to the trade, by showing how Africans as much as, if not more than, Europeans contributed to the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean ‘worlds’, and how African culture and people of African heritage emerged victorious even from this most evil and devastating assault. Kofi suggested that the process of Abolition

⁴⁹ Byrne, D. (2009), A critique of unfeeling heritage. In: Smith L. and Akagawa, N. (2009) *Intangible Heritage*, London, Routledge, pp 229-252

could be suggested by the ancient Akan (Ghana) *Sankofa* symbol that urges us to learn from the past, to live more fully in the present and to build for the future.

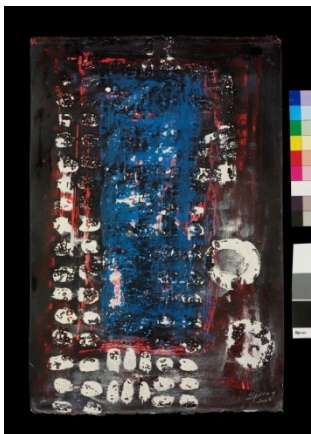
Two very important consequences sprang from that first meeting with Kofi: firstly my colleague Sheila O'Connell and I attended one of the Cross-Community Forum meetings jointly organised by Rendezvous of Victory, Anti-Slavery International and the World Development Movement; secondly, Kofi and a number of young people from organisations such as the Pan African Youth and Students International Link (PAYSIL) came to the BM and to the African galleries for the first time. From these visits a deeper understanding of where we were both coming from began to grow, and with that a mutual respect and appreciation of the potential of working more closely together.



***Terror and the Tree of Life* 2005**

Early in 2005 I had been painting a series of works in my studio which tried to look at the fundamental idea of 'Terror', not just as springing from religious fundamentalism or from extreme political activism, but as an expression of something which runs more deeply within all societies, something which found a visual metaphor in the collision of those planes with the Twin Towers. Ironically, while I was painting one of these images the London bombings of July 2005 had taken place. Early in 2006 I began another series of pictures in which some of the images of Terror and the Twin Towers began to merge with my reinterpretation of the iconic image of the *Brookes* and the *Tree of Life*. In May 2006 I travelled to Dakar, Senegal to attend

the Dak'Art Biennale of contemporary art from Africa, and while I was there I visited Gorée Island, one of the many infamous slave ports along the West African coast. In common with many of these ports and the forts and slave houses which are preserved in them, Gorée had its own *Door of No Return* in a particular building which had become a shrine of pilgrimage for the many thousands of people of African heritage from around the world who visited the island each year. Of the handful of iconic images spawned by the Slave Trade, the *Door of No Return* must rank as the most poignant. It was at this time that I and many others involved in the Bicentenary who had never thought deeply about it in the past were beginning to see the landscape, particularly the urban landscape, as a reflection of the history of enslavement and of how the wealth of Europe and the Americas in particular had been built on African suffering and death – *the African Burial Ground*, where the graves of 20,000 enslaved Africans who helped to build the city which would become New York are commemorated - is only a short distance from Ground Zero. One Cross-Community Forum meeting was held at the Museum of Docklands in London's West India Quay. Emerging from the museum after the forum I remember the delegates looking up and seeing the vast towers of Canary Wharf and thinking how unashamedly the names of these buildings recall the history of African enslavement – the Canary Islands were an entrepôt for enslaved Africans on their way to the plantations of the West Indies . So the collision or the interaction of images in my paintings began to feel more and more logical.



***Door of No Return* 2006**

Romuald Hazoumé taught me that the film showing the hazardous trade in black market petrol between Nigeria and Benin, which is an integral part of his artwork, did not represent as we had at first thought a modern form of enslavement - quite the contrary in fact. By risking their lives in tapping the oil pipelines and running the highly inflammable proceeds across the

border by boat and then on by motorbike, these men should be seen as clawing back a little of Africa's huge wealth of natural resources which for centuries have been exploited by a few while the vast majority remain in poverty.

The day of *Resistance and Remembrance* was among the most remarkable events which I have ever experienced during my career at the British Museum, an event which was introduced in unforgettable terms by Bonnie Greer, the African American author and playwright who was then the Deputy chair of the trustees of the BM:

“On 25th March we will remember – through testimony, poetry and spoken word; through music, film, movement, a gathering of youth and above all in silent private meditation – all those who lost their lives and all those who struggled to live ... Resistance and Remembrance is a day to remember the past, to live in the present, and to look to the future. A day for the entire family – the human family.”

In many ways *La Bouche du Roi* and Romuald's inspirational presence, right at the physical centre of the Museum, played a big part in the success of *Resistance and Remembrance*: “With *La Bouche du Roi* the British Museum has achieved something extraordinary”, wrote the producer and director Pam Fraser-Solomon in an e-mail to me shortly after the event, “I am a regular visitor to the Tate Modern and yet *La Bouche du Roi* is the best example of the global importance of contemporary art that I have ever witnessed”. In addition to *La Bouche du Roi*, every corner of the Museum seemed to have a story being recited, music being played, a film being shown, a performance being enacted or a discussion taking place. The day culminated in a ceremony of remembrance in the Great Court, with numerous very moving testimonies, a rousing recital from Jean Binta Breeze and a live telecast from Nelson Mandela. However, it was the involvement of community organisations such as Rendezvous of Victory, Keep it Real and PAYSIL - and in particular their young people who chaired discussions, played music, gave gallery talks and put on art exhibitions throughout the day - which not only gave us the title *Resistance and Remembrance* (it could so easily have been *Remembrance* alone), but also helped to turn the event from what might have been a showcase for the solemn pronouncements of the great and the good into a day for all people, particularly people of African heritage, to affirm the enduring glory of global Africa, a glory which the Slave Trade tried and failed to extinguish.

South Africa: Apartheid and the Landscape



South Africa Landscape 2010

In relating these events I hope to suggest that curators faced with similar responsibilities in the future might think of negotiating both the intangible and the tangible aspects of heritage, and in so doing create a response to traumatic events of the past which builds an emotional bridge to the present. If this proves difficult to achieve with objects and images which are readily accessible, it may be that the imagination and the creativity of artists can suggest ways in which such connections can be made in the minds of our visiting public. There may also be other unexpected avenues to explore. Together with my friend the South African June Bam-Hutchison, who had written passionately about her experience of growing up in the apartheid era⁵⁰, I led the curatorial element of the BM's collaboration with the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew resulting in the *South Africa Landscape* which transformed one of the anonymous strips of grass on the forecourt of the Museum. The Landscape was something much more than a display of exotic flowers – it was at pains to show, through strategically placed information panels and artworks, the deep-seated connections between plants, people and the ownership of the land in South Africa.

⁵⁰ *'Peeping Through the Reeds: A Story about Living in Apartheid South Africa'*, by Musuva (June Bam-Hutchison), Peepal Tree Press, 2010



A blind woman ‘feeling’ the South Africa Landscape.

It made reference to Saartje Baartman, a Khoisan woman, who was shamefully displayed in early 19th century France and Britain as an exotic attraction and her remains – even more shamefully – were exhibited at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until the early 1970s. They are now happily returned to a final resting place in her beloved *fynbos* in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, an event which was anticipated in the poem ‘I have come to take you home’ by Diana Ferrus:

*I have made your bed at the foot of the hill
Your blankets are covered in buchu and mint
The proteas stand in yellow and white
And the water in the stream chuckle sing-songs
As it hobbles along over little stones.*

I asked my friend, the artist Taslim Martin whose work is displayed in the African Galleries, whether he might be able to reproduce on the rocks in the landscape some of the works by San artists of the past. In so doing he himself learned deeply from a tradition he had never paid much attention to in the past, and thus helped to create respect for the San people of today whose ancestors were responsible for these magnificent works of art. In so doing, and without talking overtly of the apartheid regime and earlier atrocities, it became a potent means of coming to terms with the recent troubled history of that part of Africa. It was also the focus for the BM’s *Mandela Day* celebration in July 2010 which in many ways mirrored the day of *Resistance and Remembrance* three years earlier. More than twenty thousand people came to

celebrate the life of Nelson Mandela and the gift of freedom he had given to the peoples of South Africa and of the world.

One summer's evening I got talking to a woman in the *South Africa Landscape* and she told me how it had affected her - she had been born in South Africa and grew up during the apartheid years, suffering endless pain and discrimination. She left the country and never returned to her native land. Although I spoke to her in the evening, she had been at the BM since 10am that morning. She told me how she had walked through, stood and sat in the *Landscape* at different times of day; how she had read the poem about Saartje Baartman by Diana Ferrus; how she remembered the San people and their wonderful art - and how they had suffered - and she remembered vividly the extraordinary plants and landscape of the Cape where she grew up. She told me how the pain of her own experiences had begun to ebb away as she returned to the *Landscape* again and again during that day, so that by the end of the day she felt that she too had come home".

Nigeria, Benin and Leo Asemota's 'Ens Project'



The Long March of Displacement, 2008

Coming to terms with and confronting the realities of colonialism in general and of British Imperial looting of African works of art in particular has to be one of the most delicate and demanding duties of British curators today faced with the task of displaying these works of art to the public. The bombardment and sacking of the emperor Tewodros's stronghold at Maqdalla, Ethiopia in 1868, the recurrent looting of the Asante capital Kumase during the four Anglo-Asante wars of the late nineteenth century, and, of course, the so-called 'punitive expedition' to Benin City, Nigeria, in 1897 are among the most notorious of Britain's colonial

appropriations of Africa's cultural heritage. Of course it is easy to argue, as European and American museum directors have done⁵¹, that these works of art belong to the world, or at least to global Africa. It is also true to say that the ignorance and racist bigotry which allowed the looting of these works in the first place is still very much alive in British and global society, and that displaying these works of art and the history of their acquisition confronts and questions those who still hold such views today. This, however, does not cut much ice with those who point out that the Abuna of the Ethiopian church, the Asantehene of the Asante kingdom and the Oba of Benin are still vital, living heads of their respective cultural, religious and political organisations, albeit deprived of the power they once wielded, and that they have a just and rightful claim to the return of sacred and revered objects and works of art looted during Britain's colonial past. Perhaps the key to displaying such works – with the exception of a few which still today might cause deep offence if displayed in a public gallery – is to try as far as possible to tell the true story of their acquisition at the same time as drawing out the full complexity of their significance and the brilliance of their execution as works of art. Although a number of works of art from Benin are well displayed, much of this important contextual information is not well set out in the African Galleries. In the case of Benin, there has never been a stronger case for presenting the ongoing and dynamic significance of the works on display through the lens of a contemporary artist's practice, in particular that of the Benin-born, London-based artist Leo Asemota.

Ten years before I met him for the first time, Leo visited the Great Benin exhibition in 1994 at the MoM. This helped to inspire him to embark on a five-stage, multi-media artwork, *The Ens Project*, focusing on three distinct elements: the ancient *Igue* ritual of Head worship practiced by the Edo people of Benin, the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 against the Royal Kingdom of Benin and Walter Benjamin's essay *The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*. The *Ens Project*, focusing on the human head as its expressive weight, is inspired by questions about how advances in technology and cultural globalisation impact on defining the self in contemporary society. *The Ens Project* is also distinguished by Asemota's sensitive understanding and use of material such as coal, *orhue* (kaolin chalk), brass/bronze, iron, palm oil, calfskin vellum, fleece, crystal, gossamer and fur to give form to his ideas, as well as situating myth and chronicle alongside the contemporaneous and urgent.

⁵¹ Cuno, James, 'Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities', 2009, Princeton University Press.

The third stage, MISFORTUNE'S WEALTH, examines the *Igue* ritual, as well as the ritual materials used: *orhue* (kaolin/chalk), coal and iron. These materials carry magical and historically symbolic meanings for the empires of both Benin and Britain, in one case healing and protecting the Oba and his kingdom, in the other fuelling the Industrial Revolution and the economic and military power it engendered. For example, the piece entitled Behold the Great Head, features a post-card of Oba Ovonramwen after his capture by the British in 1897 based on the famous photograph taken by the Nigerian J.A. Green. The faces of his captors are obliterated with coal, while kaolin/chalk is used to create two sacred mud-fish springing from the Oba's legs.



'Behold the Great Head'

I think it was this deeply thoughtful and respectful use of materials which first attracted me to Leo's work, not least because the rationale underpinning the African Galleries at the BM is similarly devoted to an understanding of the complexities inherent in substances such as clay, iron, wood, brass and cloth. I also read an important essay by Charles Gore⁵² on Leo's work, and so this understanding became deeply embedded in me when I accompanied Leo on his performance piece *The Long March of Displacement* in September 2008 from the Houses of Parliament to St. Paul's Cathedral where he placed two symbolic sculptures beneath the inscription marking the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897, the same year as the infamous 'punitive expedition' against the kingdom of Benin:

⁵² Gore, Charles 'Inscribing Histories: Leo Asemota and *A Circle in the (w)Hole*', in: Asemota, Leo, 'A CIRCLE IN THE (w)HOLE, 2007, EOTLA.

HERE QUEEN VICTORIA RETURNED THANKS TO ALMIGHTY GOD FOR THE SIXTIETH
ANNIVERSARY OF HER ACCESSION JUNE 22 A.D. 1897

I later wrote (unpublished) in appreciation of the Long March, using the methodology of autoethnography⁵³ to describe, in a personalized and reflexive style, my reactions to being a part of that event, of that conceptual piece, and how, at the beginning of the March, standing in front of the Houses of Parliament, I recalled how an earlier performance piece by Leo, focusing on a photograph of a painting of Queen Victoria, which I had attended at the National Portrait Gallery (2006) was beginning to take on a new significance. The following is an extract from what I wrote:

“As Leo drew in coal and kaolin/chalk upon the pavement in front of the Houses of Parliament I became intensely aware of the plants and sea creatures which, in their death long ago, gave these materials life today. How these materials had such a profound significance for two peoples and two empires locked into the artist’s Correlative Arc. And these materials in turn lit up the chewing gum halo and the fag ends which Leo gently brushed aside. Rubber from the ‘Congo Free State’; latex from Brazil; tobacco from the plantations... A girl from Manchester posed for her boyfriend’s camera while the people of London went about their business now as then when Victoria’s troops sacked Benin City. In 1897 such news of the event as did appear in the Illustrated London News would simply have added to the Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

At the end (or the beginning) of the Correlative Arc, from Westminster to Blackfriars Bridge, Leo paused again to draw. People talked on mobiles, someone commented on the weather: “Lucky it isn’t raining”. Here the statue of Queen Victoria, standing with the Sovereign Orb in her hand, is surrounded by blue wooden boards which make her look as if she is rising from the sea, or perhaps about to sink. Someone had written in white chalk on the blue boards immediately above where Leo knelt: “*Love be the change*”...

From Blackfriars they set off once again until they reached St. Paul’s Cathedral, where the three men came to a halt and stood at ease, having first set down the iron boat and its precious cargo of kaolin *orhue*. they had been carrying. I could see clearly now that they came as much from the sea as from the land, their military forage caps made of red coral, their feet webbed. Then Leo stepped forward and stood in silence for a moment contemplating the words engraved in the stone in front of him before gently cleaning the words as you might dress a body before burial. Reverently he returned to the iron ship and dismantled the mast and rigging which had held the *orhue* in place - red, white and blue merging for the first time. Beneath the inscription he placed the *orhue* and above it the sceptre topped with the Sovereign Orb, as if laying a wreath at the monarch’s funeral. Again he stood back, watching the sceptre roll first one way then the other, its pointed shaft the hand of a clock, or of a weighing scale, or of a Wheel of Fortune: the Orb rested on ‘thanks’ the sceptre’s point on ‘V’. Leo glanced up at the sky, and some machine which had been quietly murmuring in the background suddenly swelled to crescendo. A pigeon walked across the inscription, then flew startled into the air as Leo flung high the kaolin bomb which hung for a moment, then fell to earth, the *orhue* bursting from the iron bands which had bound it for so long... A woman dressed in black walked by without turning her head, resolutely staring ahead of her...”

⁵³ Wall, S.(2006). ‘An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography’ International Journal of Qualitative Methods 5 (2) June 2006.

In 2012 Leo and I organised an afternoon symposium which used the '*Ens Project*' as a focus for debate and which we titled *Benin, Benjamin and Britain: A Diamond Jubilee Discussion*. During the course of the afternoon, participants (invited artists, curators, scholars and members of the audience) examined the creative exchange between Leo and the Edo-Benin culture of art and ceremony, Victorian Britain's age of invention, exploration and conquest, and the seminal essay on art and advances in technology by the late German thinker Walter Benjamin. Discussion focused on themes such as national identity in culturally diverse Britain, the current interest in contemporary art from the African continent, and ideas of authenticity and displacement. Invited discussants included Helena Foster (Tate Collective), Manuela Barczewski (artist and lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture and Spatial Design, London Metropolitan University), Mark Miller (Convenor: Young Peoples' Programmes across LondonTate Galleries), Mark Rawlinson (Associate Professor in Art History at the University of Nottingham), Nathalie Mba Bikoro (French-Gabonese interdisciplinary artist based in Berlin), Paul Goodwin (Associate Lecturer, MA Curating, Chelsea College of Art and Design, formerly curator at Tate Britain).

Participants in the conference were then invited to go the African Galleries in groups where some of the discussants posed questions such as: "Does Britain's colonial past still inform our sense of national identity in this diamond jubilee year? What are the distinctions between contemporary African art and contemporary art? How do you define the self in an unstable age driven by technology and cultural globalization? How does the reconfiguration of museums help in coming to terms with the troubled history of their collections? The event brought this response in an e-mail to me from the artist and academic Dr Atta Kwami whose work has been displayed in the African galleries for many years:

"Thank you so much for bringing a gathering of critics, theorists, art historians, artists/ curators and friends to debate the relevance of Leo Asemota's innovative works. It was a delight to see this happen at the British Museum, one of the few venues in London where such a discourse is taking place.

It was equally enlightening to see Asemota's achievements as an innovator examined, by tracing historical developments in Victorian Britain and in Edo (Benin), within Benjamin's critical aesthetics. I learned much about critical theory from the various discussions; in particular, the workshop session on Black British identity and "The Question of Authenticity: Contemporary art, Africa and its Diaspora" was relevant.

The breaking-up of the kaolin ball, as it hit the granite surface of St. Paul's Square, in the film by Leo Asemota, was for me a metaphor for the way knowledge of artistic excellence from the Edo kingdom spread throughout the world in the nineteenth century. The British Museum's workshop on film and video performances, accompanied by lively discussions, proved a rewarding experience. I look forward to similar programmes that create a much-needed forum for contemporary art."

I had begun to understand the many faces of the transfiguration of the character which Asemota calls "The Handmaiden" by attending not only Leo's performance pieces, but also his residency in the old Victorian engine sheds and station buildings which are now the home of the Arts Centre known as METAL in Liverpool. This understanding was taken a step further in a performance "*Count Off for Eo ipso*" in the Tanks at Tate Modern on Thursday 23 August 2012.

It set me up for another event at the BM celebrating the 50th anniversary of the African Studies Association in October the following year, an event which Leo entitled *Sash of Fulfilment*. This involved a discussion with Leo exploring key themes in '*The Ens Project*', beginning with a screening of films from his live artworks in the Tanks at Tate Modern and St Paul's Cathedral. This was followed by a procession of characters from the performances around the Great Court of the BM draped in the '*Sash of Fulfilment*' marking the end of their involvement in Leo's project.

I will be sad when *the Ens Project* finally draws to a close. It has been described by the cultural theorist Paul Goodwin as 'post-contemporary African art' and as 'the defining comprehensive art work for the 21st century'. I wouldn't disagree with either description; I am simply proud and profoundly grateful to have been involved in a small way with the discussion and the events which have shaped it over the past eight years. Now my task is to incorporate elements of Leo's work into the African Galleries, and to convince colleagues that this would be an important step towards confronting the troubled history of some of the works of art on display, at the same time as giving them and their history an on-going dynamism and relevance today.

An Ending, a Beginning

I believe this illustrates my understanding of the way the African Galleries might continue to develop in the future, though the first step would be to convince the BM of their extreme importance and guarantee their continued existence as an evolving and dynamic part of the museum. Large institutions are, rightly, always seeking ways of re-inventing themselves and identifying and wooing new sources of funding. Individuals in positions of power within such institutions inevitably change and different priorities are introduced. Stewart Culin, a visionary American curator in the Brooklyn Museum in the 1920s, created what is still thought to be the largest permanent display of African art anywhere in the world, in terms of numbers of objects at least. It had a huge impact on the nascent Harlem Renaissance movement in New York,⁵⁴ as well as inspiring a generation of fashion designers, architects and musicians. Sadly, when Culin retired his successor was not an Africanist and promptly dropped the African displays down to the 'side ambulatories', a kind of foyer area on the ground floor where they have remained ever since, in a space which I feel does not do them justice – and I dare say Culin would have felt the same. Something similar could easily happen to the African galleries without some forceful advocacy on their behalf.

A recent survey of the African Galleries at the BM came up with some interesting findings. Firstly, the 'dwell time' – the length of time members of the public spend in any particular gallery of the BM – is twice as long in the African Galleries as anywhere else in the museum. Second, people behave in very different ways in the African Galleries compared with elsewhere in the museum. They are more calm, less loud and more respectful, spending time looking at the videos and the major installations such as the *Tree of Life*, the throwing knives, the textiles and the Benin plaques.

Wherever the African Galleries are situated in the future, curators should make sure this level of public engagement is maintained. This, I believe, can be achieved by

⁵⁴ Siegmann, William C. 2009, 'African Art: a Century at the Brooklyn Museum', Prestel

continuing to keep the African Galleries in touch with developments in the field of contemporary African art, which in turn will help to insure that the galleries reflect the changing socio-political landscape of Britain and the world. We have been working with the British/Trinidadian artist Zak Ové to see whether he might bring the story of carnival (and the slave trade) into the galleries through the creation of two *moko jumbies*, stilt walkers from Trini carnival which have their roots in West African and Tanzanian masquerade. This in turn would involve working with African/Caribbean community groups which will help these important stakeholders to have a sense of ownership of the project, the African Galleries and the wider BM. More artist/community led projects of this type will help to fulfil the role of the African Galleries in serving the British public in general and the African /Caribbean community in particular. This sense of ownership of the galleries has, I believe, been growing steadily over the years and must continue to be nurtured by future curators.

We should also work towards acquiring the work of the British/Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj, whose powerful, yet playful, de-mystification of stubborn Orientalist notions surrounding the veil and the role of women in Islamic societies will help to tell the other story behind the relentless portrayal of Muslims as people bent on radicalisation, terrorism and *jihad*⁵⁵, when the Western invasion of Muslim countries, persecution of individuals and discrimination against Islamic traditions is conveniently swept under the carpet.⁵⁶ Hassan's work, together with that of other artists already in the galleries such as Susan Hefuna (Egypt) and Rachid Koraïchi (Algeria), will help to empower and make accessible the many works of art from Islamic Africa on display. This may seem like a straw in the wind against the unrelenting demonization of Islam, but it is a stand which the African Galleries and the wider BM must make, even as IS extremists take sledge hammers to the antiquities of Nimrud.

⁵⁵ Nader, Laura, 'Thee jihads: Islamic, Christian and Jewish', *Anthropology Today*, Vol 31 no 2, April 2015, pp 1-2

⁵⁶ Fassin, Didier, 'In the Name of the Republic: untimely meditations on the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.', *Anthropology Today*, Vol 31 no 2, April 2015, pp 3-7

A few weeks ago Bonnie Greer, the African-American playwright and former deputy chair of the trustees of the BM, visited the African Galleries together with colleagues from Spelman College in the States. In common with many people, Bonnie had always felt the positioning of the African Galleries to be a major impediment to her appreciation of the work displayed there. This time, however, after we had spent a full hour in the galleries, she stopped, turned to me and said: "This is right."



I acquired the work ***Nine Flags*** (2000) by Raimi Gbadamosi a couple of years ago with a view to showing it in the first room of the African Galleries as soon as I have the opportunity to move El Anatsui's 'Man's Cloth', which currently occupies that position, to another prominent site in the BM. As I wrote in *African Textiles Today* (p. 72), "Each of the flags represents not an individual nation state but a loose grouping of peoples defined sometimes by ethnicities, sometimes by geographical location, occasionally by both: **Top left**: the Arab World; **Top middle**: southern Europe; **Top right**: Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia; **Middle left**: China and India; **Middle centre**: Africa; **Middle right**: the Celtic nations; **Lower left**: the Anglo Diaspora, including Australia, Canada and the USA; **Lower middle**: the Caribbean and South America; **Lower right**: Scandinavia."

Nine Flags will, I think, add another dimension to the African Galleries because, as I go on to say, "it is a conceptual work which extends our notions of Britishness and

British-associated identities in offering a decolonization of the Union Jack. One interpretation of the central flag of the 'Nine' is that it suggests an idea of Africa by taking the colours (black, red and green) of Marcus Garvey's pan-African banner, and at the same time mocking the old British National Front slogan "*There ain't no black in the Union Jack*". The central position of this flag also suggests the centrality of Africa in the history of human life on earth and the place where the most ancient examples of 'artistry' were created, an Africa which is both a continent of that name and a phenomenon which reaches out to every corner of the globe". Far from mocking the Union Jack, the work suggests a new kind of respect for this sometime symbol of imperial dominance in the diverse society of Britain today.

On that note I feel that it is the moment to draw this statement to a close. I have resisted the temptation to write a 'conclusion', mainly because the work it describes is very much an on-going process. I can only say that I feel deeply privileged to have met so many African artists and African people from all walks of life with whom I have worked at the BM and in my capacity as a trustee of both the Powell-Cotton Museum and the Africa Centre. I will work with them a little longer, though the journey has only just begun. I hope between us we may offer some useful ideas as to how that journey may go forward in a way which will continue to push the boundaries and question the misconceptions and prejudices which are unfortunately still deeply entrenched in some peoples' minds when it comes to thinking about the great continent of Africa and the global phenomenon which is Africa today.

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Appendix 1

Comments regarding the MoM in reviews of the Sainsbury African Galleries.

Augustus Casely-Hayford: “Many people of African descent feel a genealogical and cultural claim to the contents of our galleries, but find their relationship to typical exhibition conventions to be problematic. They too want to be part of the audience, to be a part of the curation, to feel a museum visit to be a pleasure, to feel proud; not to cringe... I began to remember how I felt as an adolescent in the Seventies, how I faked illness to escape a visit to the old Museum of Mankind, to avoid the jibes as we went around another dioramic reconstruction.” (Journal of Museum Ethnography, No. 14, March 2002)

Martin Gayford: “The problem of what to do with all this non-Western art was symbolised by its exile in ...the old Museum of Mankind in Mayfair.” (The Spectator, 17.03.01)

Antony Thorncroft: “Getting rid of the books also enables the ethnographic departments of the BM to return to Bloomsbury after 30 rather unhappy years of exile in the Museum of Mankind...” (Financial Times)

Richard Cork: “...when the Museum of Mankind opened in Piccadilly more than 30 years ago, African art was divorced from its old home. Deprived of an arena in the main Bloomsbury building, it became marginalised – and the British Museum’s representation of world cultures was gravely distorted without a proper display of its African artefacts.” (The Times, 07.03.01)

Richard Dorment: “If you remember the way African art was shown at the old Museum of Mankind... you may be taken aback by the sheer theatricality... at the Sainsbury Galleries in Bloomsbury... At the old museum, for example, the full-scale recreation of an Africa village was not dreary, exactly, but, goodness, it was educational.” (Daily Telegraph, 07.03.01)

Jeremy Harding: “A little nostalgia is in order, then, for the dusty, understated entrepôt of Burlington Gardens, where the collections looked more at home, entangled – it seemed – in the creeper-like attentions of the few: frayed and hollow-eyed adventurers in baggy trousers; scholars and devotees from SOAS; seething parties of schoolchildren from Lewisham. But there’s no doubt that the new location ... is the better option.” (London Review of Books, 10.05.01)

Hugh Pearman: “This...marks the return of the Museum’s ethnographic collection to base camp from its previously isolated home, the Museum of Mankind...” “My memory of the old Museum of Mankind – which, in common with almost everyone else, I hardly ever visited – was of a dark, mournful place stuck in a backstreet.” “And all of that will leave the RA free to kick some sense into the unlamented old Museum of Mankind.” (Sunday Times, 18.03.01)

Sarah Kent: “I rarely visited the Museum of Mankind – I hated the way that objects were either grouped in explanatory clusters or overdramatized in spot-lit isolation. It seemed patronising to the exhibits and their audience (as though the artefacts couldn’t speak for themselves). (Time Out, 24.04.01)

Beverly Andrews: “Gone are the ethnographic displays of ‘tribal’ villages which marred so many African exhibitions [at the Museum of Mankind] in the past, and in its place is a serious attempt to display African art in an intelligent and sensitive context.” (New African, June 2001)

Appendix 2

The African Galleries reviewed

Beverly Andrews. “The new Sainsbury Galleries will hopefully go a long way in challenging visitors’ pre-conceived ideas about African art and also place the works within a global and historical context. A key ingredient of this beautiful exhibition is the five videos which are shown throughout and which attempt to place the work into a context of the society from which it was produced. The question of ownership will not go away or be easily resolved. But at least for the moment this enormous collection is finally presented in a way which is both sensitive and inspired, and does the work justice. (New African, June 2001)

Ruth Pavey. “These galleries reflect the more chastened attitudes Western scholarship has gradually been adopting towards the immense diversity of Africa, compared with the breezy confidence of the colonial era. In the labelling, video installations and the book there is a sense of African peoples speaking about their cultures as the experts, not just as living parts of a collection of curios. (Crafts, July/August 2001)

Sarah Kent. “Rather than being treated as ethnographic curios, the exhibits are accorded due respect. I’m not a lover of weapons or pots, but a glass wall filled with throwing knives and a floor-to-ceiling ‘tree’ of pots are eye-catching ways of impressing you with their sculptural beauty. Mixing together objects from different regions, peoples and eras probably irritates the specialists but, for a lay person like myself, it brings home the fact that they are part of a cultural tradition which is often still very much alive. Welcome back to Bloomsbury.” (Time Out, 24.04.2001)

Hugh Pearman. “The display, much of it in modern glass cases, with the occasional discreet video monitor, but no tiresome interactive stuff, is laid out in eight very clear sections. There’s enough space. Given that the curators had so many objects to choose from, they have avoided the curse of museological clutter. And the stuff on display is just very, very good” (Sunday Times, 18.03.2001)

Lawrie Douglas. “The opening of the new African Galleries in the British Museum in London is a wonderful showcase for African artistic achievement. The Museum has a policy of being a living museum, by continuing to collect objects from living artists. It is full of vitality and skill, but it raises many questions as well. Can the word ‘African’ encompass art throughout a huge continent, from Algeria to South Africa, The Gambia to Ethiopia? It raises the question of how non-African museums regard art from Africa. It is usually classified as being in the ‘Department of Ethnography’. And wonderful as the galleries are, there is always the dark question of provenance. How did these objects get there?” (News Africa, 09.04.2001)

Jeremy Harding. “The difficulty is that when you take an ethnographic collection and ask people to think of it in terms of art – as these rooms do – you replace an oddball discipline, which can handle all kinds of material, with a grand categorical assertion that cannot. Yet the suspicion that everything on display may one way or another be thought of as ‘art’ is carefully – and brilliantly – allowed to linger in the visitor’s mind. It is a proper, and properly political, strategy to preface the big rooms we’re about to enter with a clutch of works whose attribution to individual artists or workshops is certain. Anthropology is happy with named informants; ethnographic collection, on the other hand, seldom saw the point in attaching a name to a work, even when it was possible. Which is one reason for the long-standing belief that African art was an almost mystical expression of the collective. The Africa Galleries make this seem like a silly idea. And so one can go deep into the past without losing that sense of a maker who would also have had a name.” (London Review of Books, 10.05.01)

Richard Dorment. "In short, the Sainsbury galleries are a stunning success – as thrilling both for adults and children as the neighbouring Assyrian and Egyptian Galleries, whose collections many of us now feel we know almost too well. My prediction is that these new galleries will become among the most popular attractions at the British Museum." (Daily Telegraph, 07.03.01)

Richard Cork. "The African galleries open with a bold declaration of their involvement with the new. Straight ahead of us in the opening room an appliqué wall hanging by contemporary artist Chant Avedissian strikes an uncompromisingly geometrical note. This energy pulses through all the galleries ... signalling a determination to redress gross misrepresentations from the past." (The Times, 07.03.2001)

Martin Gayford. "The notion of African art raises the usual problems of classification: what is Africa? Are for example, Tunisia and Egypt part of the same unity as Nigeria and Uganda? For the purposes of these new displays, North Africa is included, and in terms of time, African art is treated as a living tradition. Some of the exhibits are hundreds of years old, some by contemporary artists such as the potter Magdalene Odundo – who was born in Kenya but has been resident in the UK for many years." (The Spectator, 17.03.2001)

Jonathan Hope. "Entering the first room, some striking contemporary art assails the eye and it would be easy to feel disappointed were you expecting a glorious array of the spoils of empire. The semi-permanent exhibition presents Africa's diverse and vital culture as a continuum, from antiquity to the here and now, forever renewing and adapting itself to changing circumstances and relationships with the rest of the world. The African galleries have achieved a fine balance between the politically correct and the aesthetic. Purists may complain about the relative scarcity of sculptural masterpieces on view, but this is not a Fine Arts exhibition. It is a brave and largely successful evocation of Africa." (Hali, No 116, 2001, pp 141)

Jane Thomas. "The pleasure of this exhibition with its heady brew is also one of its faults. When attempting to show objects from a continent as diverse and vast as Africa you are bound to run into problems. But what these new, permanent galleries also do is show us other sides to African art. There's a beautiful wall hanging by contemporary Egyptian artist Chant Avedissian. In future shows, perhaps we will be introduced to more contemporary artists from the continent than the few they tantalisingly have the space to show here." (Ham and High, 30.03.2001)

Antony Thorncroft. "In recent years the BM has come to be seen as a depository of the tangible history of the world. With Africa and the return of ethnography, it becomes once again a living museum." (Financial Times)

Augustus Casely-Hayford. "The first Sainsbury African Galleries' exhibition is introduced by contemporary work. Some of those artists, including the ceramicist Magdalene Odundo, are British-based. Some of their work reflects a spectrum of the complex issues upon which many ethnic-minority people ruminate every day. But by being placed amongst this traditional African work, it forces us to reconsider where we are - whether the Sainsbury African Galleries are traditional art gallery spaces or a conventional museum - how they can straddle both art gallery and museum gallery in one concept. The Sainsbury African Galleries also force us to look again at objects of utility and accept their integral art, to read each object as individual and unique and important, not as an exemplar of its type. By bringing in African experts to create videos, to advise on information panels, to contribute to the catalogue, the Sainsbury African Galleries have become a dynamic forum. We get the sense it is a place full of ideas, not just facts; ideas that will change and develop - and I have been assured that this is just the first step. For The British Museum to do this is very inspiring. Historically museums have tended to become more conservative as they get older. But like a few other landmark

international museums, the Sainsbury African Galleries have rewritten the rule books.”
(Journal of Museum Ethnography, No.14, 2002, pp 127)

Appendix 3

Chris Spring bibliography

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Appendix 4

Fieldwork

- Egypt 1993-4
- Tunisia 1997-8
- Tanzania 2002-4
- Kenya 2003-4
- Mozambique 2004-8
- South Africa 2006-8
- Ghana 2009
- Senegal 2006, 2014
- Nigeria 2010
- Algeria 2013
- Morocco 2013

Appendix 5

Exhibitions (outside the African Galleries)

- Power of the Hand 1994-5
- Display and Modesty: North African Textiles 1995-6
- Secular and Sacred: Ethiopian Textiles 1995
- Kanga 2004
- *La Bouche du Roi* (toured UK) 2007 - 2009
- South Africa Landscape 2010
- Throne of Weapons (toured UK and the world) 2005-2011
- Social Fabric (touring UK in 2015) 2013-2017
- Healing Music (forthcoming) 2015
- African Art Now (forthcoming) 2016
- Global Africa (forthcoming) ?

Appendix 6

Major acquisitions and commissions

- Tunisian Textiles (several commissioned) 1997-8
- Nja Mahdaoui (Tunisian artist) 'Drum', 'Banderas' and gilets. 1998
- Khaled Ben Slimane (Tunisian artist) Ceramic collection. 1998
- Magdalene Odundo (British/Kenyan artist) 'Vessel' (commissioned) 2000
- John Muafangejo (Namibian artist) 3 linocut prints 2000
- El Anatsui (Ghanaian artist) 'Man's Cloth' and 'Woman's Cloth'; 'Kente Rhapsody' 2002
- Printed and factory-woven textiles (*kanga* etc) of eastern and southern Africa 2002 – large and growing fieldwork-based collection.
- A substantial collection of works by the Tingatinga Artists' Collective of Tanzania, 2002-3
- Rachid Koraïchi (Algerian artist) 'The Path of Roses' 2004
- Kester (Mozambican artist) 'Throne of Weapons' 2002, 'Nurse and Child' 2011
- Kester, dos Santos, Maté and Nhatugueja (Mozambique) 'Tree of Life' (commissioned) 2004
- Mo Abdalla (Sudanese artist) five ceramics, 2005
- Muhammed Bushara (Sudanese artist) 3 prints 2006
- Taslim Martin (British artist) 'Secret Dovetail' 2006 and 'Head of Raimi' 2010
- Owusu-Ankomah (Ghanaian artist) 'Free' 2007
- Atta Kwami (Ghanaian artist) 'Kokrobite' 2007
- Gérard Quenum (Beninois artist) 'Les Femmes Peul' 2007
- Sokari Dougla Camp (British artist) 'We were Brave' 2008
- Ibrahim El Salahi, from the 'Tree' series 2010
- Printed cloth from Africa: Wolfgang Bender collection, 2011
- Fiel dos Santos (Mozambican artist) 'Mother' 2011
- Peterson Kamwathi (Kenyan artist) From the 'Queue' series, 2011
- Raimi Gbadamosi (British artist) 'Nine Flags' 2011
- Georgia Papageorge (South African artist) 'Kilimanjaro Southern glaciers' (triptych) 2011
- Ann Gollifer (Botswana artist) 'Mother Tongue' 2014

Appendix 7

Festivals and conferences

- Africa '95 1995
- Sudan Ancient and Modern. 2004
- Africa '05 2005
- In and Out of Africa. 2005
- East Africa arts and cultures. 2007
- Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade 2007
- Africa Programme and Triangle Arts workshops. 2008,9,10
- Prince Claus Fund Awards. 2009 –
- South Africa season and Mandela Day 2010
- Benin, Benjamin and Britain. 2012
- Sash of Fulfilment. 2013
- Dakar Biennale (contributor) 2014