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Review of

*African Metropolis: Una città immaginaria / An Imaginary City*

Organization Institution: MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Art

Venue: MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Art

Curators: Elena Motisi and Simon Njami

Curator extraordinaire, Simon Njami, envisions the African city as an organic site of radical articulation, a speakerly space with its own tenor, its own language, and its own aesthetic vocabularies. As he puts it, the city is an iterative “labyrinth wherein multiple lives can express themselves...,” either as distant and indirect or, coquettishly, “...like a lady who says no while spreading her legs” (Njami 1999, 20). It is, for him, “both polysemy and symphony” (Njami 1999, 20). Njami writes: “Everywhere, the traffic noise, the places where people meet and exchange are peppered with voices and exclamations that give each city its own distinctive tone” (2018, 26). For nearly two decades, the curator has envisioned the city as a place where “home is an illusion that we rebuild from one day to the next” (Njami 1999, 26). It bestows no fixity, affords no sure future. The full force of these sensibilities bleed into Njami’s 2018 exhibition, *African Metropolis: Una città immaginaria / An Imaginary City*, co-curated with Elena Motisi.

The sprawling survey of more than 100 works by 34 contemporary African artists is framed by sounds of modernity that

blend, overlap, and intertwine to create a cacophony of spell-binding noise. Rumbling thunder, amplified music, and rickety rollercoasters spill from Simon Gush’s showcase of South African work habits, *Lazy Nigel* (2016), to collide with the blaring car horns, whistling brake hydraulics, and discursive chatter in Amina Zoubir’s neighboring video installation *Take the Bus and Look* (2016). Zoubir’s disruptive commuter scenes are, in turn, punctuated by well-paced shuttering camera clicks echoing from *Debris de Justice 2016*, Antoine Tempe’s photo slideshow compilation of wreckage from Dakar’s long discarded first Supreme Courthouse. The video installations each capture and reflect myriad ambiguities of city life—how it simultaneously pushes and pulls at the boundary conditions of human experience; how it necessitates engagement, envelopment, and exposure; how it excites all senses as it collapses into a monotonous abyss of buildings, buzzes, beeps, bangs, bustling passersby, and, too, the fitful, haunting silences of abandoned spaces.

The entire show is ensconced in a riotous soundscape so consuming that even serene artworks like Nicholas Hlobo's morbid, slithering sculpture, Waxhot-yiswa Engekakhawula, and Delio Jasse's ghostly cyanotypes *Cidade Em Movimento* (2016) pulsate to the rhythm and rhetorical strategies of Njami's and Motisi's bold imaginary. The soundtrack to this fictitious third space is a well-choreographed mixtape of urban utterances locatable in any major African city. In fact, in any major city—anywhere. Its lyrical language is deliberately ambiguous Orwellian double-speak.

The curators' spatial design and artist selections foster a sense of familiarity. Spread across multiple rooms and levels connected by climbing pathways, along and through which vibrant displays like fashion designer Lamine Badiane Kouyate's dresses from the Xuly Bët collections of 2016 and 2018 and Abdoulrazaq Awofeso's *Behind This Ambiguity* (2015-2018) articulate the incongruencies of presence and absence, ambition and apathy pervading Africa's complex matrix of human identities. Crevices, ceilings, and walk-throughs are lined with artworks by Bili Bidjocka, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Maurice Pefura, Abdoulaye Konate, Franck Abd-Bakar Fanny, Hassan Musa among several others who frequently appear in Njami's shows. Pascale Marthine Tayou's *The Falling Houses* (2014) descends from the roof. Youssef Limoud's *Labyrinth* (2018) towers above all else and creates a space within a space. Samson Kambalu's video installation, *Nyah Cinema: Ghost Dance* (2015-2017), consumes an easily missed corner. This constellation of organized chaos, of unwavering instability, of intentional incomprehension is the materialization of Njami's long-held desire to construct the biblical city of Babel,

“a non-place that would bring together all the sounds, smells and music of the world” (Njami 2018, 22).

The works on view certainly bespeak the exhibition's five major themes: wandering, belonging, recognizing, imagining, and reconstructing. However, if it all somehow seems stale or plain underwhelming, then it might be because the total exhibition reads as a replay or at best as a continuation of styles and subjects repeatedly seen in Njami's expanding canon of curatorial projects. More than half of the thirty-five artists in *African Metropolis* were also featured in Njami's 2017 exhibition, *Afriques Capitales*, shown as two episodes in Paris and Lille, France. In fact, most of the artworks shown are the same. Each of Njami's other recent shows advance the notion of the African city as a non-space, and, in so doing, inadvertently perpetuate dystopian stereotypes of African city life. His most recent exhibitions include *African Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (2005), *The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists* (2014), *Reenchantments: The City in Blue Daylight and The Red Hour* for the 2016 and 2018 Dak'Art Biennales, respectively. Seeing one recent Njami exhibition, it seems, is as good as seeing them all.

Consequently, new commissions for *African Metropolis*, for example, Hassan Hajjaj's *Le salon bibliothèque*, well thought out as it is, seems not so new at all but rather as a second-hand showing of the 'same old, same old' consumerist scene. Similarly, powerful simplicity and provocative subtleties in works like Francois-Xavier Gbre's *Wo shi feizhou/Je suis africain 2016* or Abdoulaye Konate's textiles, *Calao 2016* and *Ayep 2017*, slip into the shadows of more pronounced pieces like El

Anatsui's shimmering woven sculpture, *Stressed World 2011*. These unfortunate outcomes result from Njami's continuous shuffling and recycling of content far more so than the quality of the artworks themselves. Given Njami's depth of knowledge, including his literary background, his range of experience, and his ready access to fresh material, *African Metropolis*, as one artist friend put it, could, and really should, be better.

Perhaps the disconnect has something to do with the fact that, despite its expansiveness, the exhibition largely fails to exact a site-specific viewing experience. For example, Lavar Munroe's *Gun Dogs* comments upon American police authority. Andrew Tshabangu's photographic series, *City in Transition*, documents rituals and materiality in apartheid South Africa. Other works, like Joel Andriannomearisoa's two-toned triptych *Chanson de ma terre lointaine* and Outtara Watts' mixed-media painting *Vertigo #2*, project abstract variations on themes of musicality, opposition, and otherness, as well as distance and desire in Mali and Paris. However, direct reference to historical connections between Africa and Italy or to the swelling presence of new African immigrants in Rome are virtually nil. One exception is Kiluanji Kia Henda's popular photograph, *Merchant of Venice 2010*, which simultaneously signals William Shakespeare's play of the of same name, Europe's appalling colonial past, and the current precarious existence of African immigrants born or newly arrived on Italian soil. Kia Henda's photograph depicts a black street vendor in colorful West African regalia holding several counterfeit European handbags. The subject's positioning atop a pedestal, within a monochrome marble niche, elevates the notion of the African immigrant from unwanted

foreign other to dynamic facet of Italy's complex socio-cultural landscape. Merchant of Venice certainly reveals the complexity of the African presence in Italian city centers, but, aside from Kia Henda's work, the curators seem to aggregate their selections under the rubric of belonging in a kind of shorthand that presupposes the social relevance of the works on view in relation to the local surroundings.

The artwork bundled together under the banner of "Belonging" share single narratives of dissonance and defeat. This is notwithstanding Sharma Shuma's astute acknowledgment in the exhibition catalog that African identity is hybrid and multifarious. Shuma writes:

This is particularly true in Europe where immigrants not only encounter racial, economic and social-cultural demands for integration and assimilation, but also occupy a proximate past with colonization, which is a constant memory on the boulevards, and in the statues that adorn squares. It is in the streets named in memory of Viceroy and Colonial Vassals, in Museums filled with the loot of previously colonized lands, cuisines enriched with exotica and flavor, residency permits, political slandering, and celebrated tokenism (2018, 87).

The exhibition's accompanying public program agenda works to compensate for the universal nature of the show. *Authors at MAXXI: How to Tell Africa* featured Afro-Italian writers Cristina Ali Farah, Gabriella Ghermandi, Igiaba Scego and Brhan Tesfay. Still, it would have been fresh and relevant if Njami and Motisi had also tapped local talent like Jebila

Okongwu, whose 2015 installation *The Economics of Reality is My Nationality* immediately resonates with the exhibition's central themes. Comprised of forty monumental cardboard bananas imprinted with the logos of European fruit importers, Okongwu's work reflects the co-dependence of African and European socioeconomic identities in the aftermath of colonialism; the work represents how each relies upon the other for sustenance in ways that supersede space and place. The cardboard bananas—with their not-so-subtle references to boats, exotica, branding, and exaggerated black male body parts—are a cunning critique of both the location of culture and the economies upon which local cultures depend, particularly in places like Italy where city life shapes and is shaped by burgeoning African communities. The curatorial choice to overlook local talent in favor of far-flung artists results in a generic, all-encompassing yet somewhat socially disconnected compilation of African artworks.

Neglecting Rome's unique history and current social reality is a missed opportunity. After all, many consider Rome the eternal city, caput mundi (capital of the world) the heart-blood of Western civilization from which notions of time vis-à-vis the Gregorian civil calendar, modern imperialism, democratic governance, colonial architecture, and dominant lingua franca emerge. It is the place that accorded the continent its singular name, and, in so doing, constricted its vast geographies, histories, peoples, and cultures into an imaginary monolith that is now readily mistaken for a single country. These are the conditions and organizing principles to which the postcolonial African city respond and contest. From the

piazzas with their hieroglyphs and Egyptian obelisks to the street vendors, panhandlers, and service workers shuffling through cobbled-stone streets, Rome is replete with ripened fodder for probing the past while pushing us all to rethink how we think about Africa.

Admittedly, the issue with African Metropolis is not so much a matter of who or what has been omitted in as much as it is the specific lens through which the objects on view are shown. The true challenge is audience. For whom are Njami and Motisi imagining a fictitious, new-fangled urban Africa with its own distinct gibberish? Have not Europeans already thoroughly traveled and documented this terrain—each time doubling back to the same 19th century 'Dark Continent' trope? Why must canonical European texts, in this case the Bible and Fritz Lang's film adaptation of *Metropolis* function as the organizing principles for how we must imagine yet another futuristic African dystopia? In fact, why must it be a dystopia at all? Given the myriad, pervasive, and readily accessible narratives and images of African dysfunction, is it really all that futuristic anyway? Isn't this the Africa that we are each already, always forced to consume—an Africa comprised of what disgraced former American president Donald Trump reportedly described as "shithole nations," where the only certainty is uncertainty? Sadly, it seems that Njami and Motisi have imagined yet another Africa not for Africans, though it is about them, but for non-Africans whose sensitive palates can only stomach little by way of African progress.

To the thematic groupings I would add two interconnected, underlying themes that reverberate through much of the objects on view: Spectacle and Surveillance.

Here the lines between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, the observer and the observed blur like sfumato lines. Zoubir's *Take the Bus and Look* is exemplary. Positioned across four single file screens cordoned off by blackout carpet and curtains, the documentary short coopts the viewer as a voyeur, a complicit actor to an invasive, private look into the everyday lives of Algerian bus passengers. The viewer witnesses agitated subjects squirm in discomfort as Zoubir's camera forcingly zooms and refocuses its lens in effort to display social inequities and negotiations of territory, time, and overcrowding in public space. One passenger suggests slapping Zoubir for violating unspoken societal norms. Another suggests that she should be ashamed. Zoubir's taboo acts of watching and openly recording holds subjects hostage while affording outsiders a window-seat view to scrutinize their struggles.

The tension heightens the viewing experience and intensifies the desire to gawk at the ensuing conflict between the camerawoman and the captured, but it also calls into question the bigger issues of witness responsibility and the ever-thorny politics of the gaze. Should the viewer turn away in resistance? Should the viewer give more credence to the subject's devalued but no less responsive counter-gaze? Who is looking at whom in *Take the Bus and Look*, and who is looking at the film? Consistent with the exhibition in full, Zoubir seemingly assumes a particular type of viewer: one versed in ways of seeing African otherness and superimposing upon it Eurocentric normative values. For the exhibition as for *Take the Bus and Look*, legacies of colonialism continue to govern how we see and imagine Africa.

Survey shows often begin with bold, ambitious visions that inevitably result in jumbled signifiers, mixed messages, and lost symbolism. Unintentionally or otherwise, *African Metropolis* overwrites the chaos of urban Africa such that it traffics in ruin porn. The exhibition inadvertently romanticizes an aesthetics of atrocity as it strives and fails to achieve alterity. It shackles Africa to European values of orderliness by casually insisting upon a singular definition of dystopia, and, in so doing, tragically reinforces and replicates abuses of the colonial past. The unknowing visitor succumbs to this faulty but familiar script, and sadly suffers the potential to see tomorrow's Africa just as it has always existed in the misguided popular imagination: dark and disorderly, if not deadly.

## References

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