



CONGO: SHADOW OF A SHADOW RESEARCH PORTFOLIO

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Article Review on *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* in relation to Aimé Mpane's piece

Congo: Shadow of a Shadow

Contemporary African Art Since 1980 written by authors Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu speaks about the wide range of concepts and ideas which have shaped contemporary African art. The book was published in Richmond, VA in 2009 by Damiani publishing house. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu's writing relates to Aimé Mpane's piece *Congo: Shadow of a Shadow* because he is an important contemporary African artist of the 2000s. By understanding the complex term "Contemporary African Art" in an in-depth look, viewers better appreciate the meaning behind these works of art. In their book, Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu dive into the controversial world of "Contemporary African Art." Artists can be classified as contemporary artists by their use of materials, similar subject, location and many other factors. Although the term seems to have opposed opinions for every defining feature, the text helps readers to understand the complexity surrounding the artist's style.

In *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* "Chapter 1: Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction," the authors begin with the troubles African artists faced. African artists have fallen victim to the globalization phenomenon which lessens the importance of African art. European countries stole from colonized African countries to display the misidentified works in their own museums. Beginning in the 1980s, there was an increase in African art scholars and museum curators. This increase in knowledge surrounding African art led to the rediscovery of the significance of these pieces in the art world. After the colonization period of Africa, there was a significant increase in the amount of works categorized as contemporary African art. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu describe contemporary African art as a connection to African culture through either geographical, cultural, political or other such aspects. The authors pointed out the

controversy surrounding two defining features: the time period surround contemporary African art and how the work is classified.

The time period surrounding the term “Contemporary African Art” is quite debatable due to the opposing thought processes. Terry Smith, author of *What is Contemporary Art?*¹, speaks on the idea that contemporary art follows specific artistic styles. In his writing, Smith classifies three main defining features when identifying a work of contemporary art which he calls currents. These currents are greatly influenced by the characteristic and style of the works of art. He highlighted that contemporary art focuses on the aesthetic of the style rather than the specific time period. On the other hand, Arthur Danto, author of *“After the End of Art”: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*,² believes that contemporary art follows the colonization period. Danto argued that real art ended around the sixties before the rise in imperialism. In his book, “After the End,” Danto explains how contemporary art followed only after the end of “traditional” art. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu acknowledge the contrasting thought process when defining the time period of Contemporary African Art. Instead of dismissing one of the thought processes, the authors argue contemporary African Art is a combination of the two. The authors define Contemporary African Art as starting “at the end of traditional arts (seemingly precolonial) and at the end of colonialism” (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, “Chapter 1”, 12). The art style began after the colonization period of Africa with many of the subjects matters dealing with issues which arose from this time period.

¹ Artforum reviewed the overview of Terry Smith’s book *What is Contemporary Art?* Art forum is an international magazine company which specializes in Contemporary art pieces.

² Overview of the book *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and Pale of History* foreword by Lydia Goehr under the Princeton University Press.

Over the past four decades, two schools of thought have developed among African art scholars about the classification of art objects: the Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Art. The Ethnographic Museum made little to no distinction between works of art and objects of craft. In this sense, craft objects can be described as everyday objects such as pottery, basket-weaving and toys. Many scholars within the Ethnographic Museum made little distinction between the two due the lack of knowledge in African culture. During the early 1980s, scholars did not seek to gain information about African culture and art. This lack of knowledge lead to inaccurate distinction between works of art and craft object. With the emergence of contemporary curatorial projects, a new school of thought challenged the Ethnographic Museum views. The Museum of Art worked to learn more about the historical and cultural context behind works of arts. Scholars could differentiate between works intended for galley view and everyday-life-objects. Even though these two schools of thought differ, authors Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu make it clear that contemporary African art is a bridge between the two. Works of art and crafted objects have been known to blend into a complex aesthetic. African artist, Kane Kwei (3), crafted elaborate funeral coffins used for the Akan funeral system. The designed coffins took several shapes and forms which contrasted to the typical funeral coffin. Kwei blended the line between works of art and crafted objects by bringing a design element to common everyday objects. Contemporary art is neither works intended for gallery use or everyday tasks; instead, pieces combine elements from each to form their own unique style.

In conclusion, an absolute definition for the term “contemporary African art” can be argued in several different ways; however, the battleground of these opposing ideas birthed the complex, ever-changing style Contemporary African Art. As stated in *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* contemporary African art emerged after the colonization period of Africa. African

artists can be identified under the “contemporary” category by their similar subject matters relating to the issues faced under colonized European countries. In addition to the flexible definition of the term, contemporary African art includes a variety of works. This art genre is not limited to specific boundaries; instead, artists are free to use whatever medium and style they prefer. Contemporary African art complexity allows for a wide range of works with differing styles.

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Aimé Mpane Use of Contrasting Materials and Compositions to Illustrate His Recurring Themes

Aimé Mpane is a Congolese-born artist known for his skills in wooden sculpture making. Mpane was born into a family of artists in 1968. He learned how to sculpt wood from his father who was a sculptor and cabinetmaker. Mpane attended the Fine Arts Academy of Kinshasa where he focused his education on painting. After graduating from the Fine Arts Academy, Mpane continued his education at La Cambre National School of Visual Arts. After graduating, Mpane moved to Belgium where he currently resides today. Mpane has lived most of his life in Belgium, yet he considered himself a Congolese artist. After discovering the hidden, inhumane truth of the colonization of the Congo by Belgium¹, Mpane focused his art career on the Congo and the struggles the people faced. Mpane displays his reoccurring theme of the Congo throughout the colonization of the Congo with his unique choice of materials and their composition.

In Mpane's work *Congo: Shadow of the Shadow*, the raw emotions of the Congolese people are personified. *Congo: Shadow of a Shadow* was last on display at the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian. The installation is the silhouette of a man constructed out of 4,652 matchsticks. Mpane strategy removed each matchstick head. He then glued each matchstick together with the use of inflated balloons to achieve the natural curves of the human body. The figure has a wooden grave slightly risen off the ground that is attached to its feet. On the grave is a cross that reads "Congo 1885". On either side of the figure are two solid wooden figures with a pair of shoes on top of them. The figure was placed along a blank wall with a powerful white light installed behind it casting a dark shadow onto the wall ("Smithsonian:

¹ Belgium, under the leadership of King Leopold II, colonized Congo in 1885.

Congo: Shadow of the Shadow”). Mpane constructed this piece to illustrate the hardships faced by the Congolese people. During the 1880s, European countries began to colonize Africa which became known as the Scramble for Africa². In 1885, Congo became the property of the Belgium King, Leopold II. Under his rule, the Congolese people faced inhumane treatment such as genocide, mutilation and being displayed in human zoos³. Mpane accurately shows the emotions of the Congolese people with the arrangement of the people. The light behind the figure cast a large shadow which equates to a large portion of the piece. Homero Aridjis, the author of “Aimé Mpane: Exaltation of Light”, wrote, “shadows can be the boogeymen who haunt our dreams and realities alike. The great shadow of capitalism has fully cast its shade upon the Democratic Republic of Congo” (Aridjis, “Aime Mpane: Exaltation of Light”). Aridjis describes Mpane’s use of shadow as an illusion of the long-term negative effects caused by Leopold II’s colonization. In this work of art, Mpane used a delicate material to illustrate the Congolese people’s fragile state of mind.

In contrast to his dark-theme piece Congo: Shadow of the Shadow, Mpane showcase the strength of the Congolese people in the work Congo, New Breath. The piece Congo, New Breath is currently displayed at the Royal Museum for Central Africa located in Tervuren, Belgium. The wooden sculpture consists of the head of an African man. Mpane used a linear array of square cutouts through the head to give the appearance of transparency. A single bronze budding plant

² The Scramble for Africa was the race between European countries to get claims to African territory during the New Imperialism period, between the 1880s and the start of World War I. Africa had an abundance of raw materials highly sought out by the European trading market. Africa was torn apart and placed into political counties. (New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Scramble for Africa")

³ The Congolese people face inhumane treatment under King Leopold II reign. Men, women and children were forced to gather rubber, which grew abundantly in African jungles. If they did not gather enough rubber for the King’s liking, the Congolese faced mutilation of their family and themselves. In 1897, Leopold II installed a temporary exhibition where he placed Congolese men, woman and children behind a fence like animals. The Visitors viewed the Congo people as if they were animals and even threw candy at them. (Kakissis, “Where ‘Human Zoos’ Once Stood”)

sprouts out the top of the head. The roots of the plant run through the head and pool around the base of the sculpture. The piece is placed at the base of the grand entrance to the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Coirier, “Between Shadow and Light”). Mpane constructed this piece for the competition to replace the grand statue of King Leopold II⁴. Guido Gryseels, an agricultural economist, hosted the competition for African Artists to create a piece that would replace the false heroic statue of Leopold. Mpane won the competition with his entrance of Congo, A new Breath. In this piece, Mpane wanted to show the strengthen of the Congolese people as they overcame the difficulties of colonization under Belgium. In an interview conducted by TL Mag, Mpane described his work as “a project that lies outside of the context of the Congo and decolonisation. ...I wanted to share a positive image of my country, and I played on a vision of contrasts” (Coirier, “Between Shadow and Light”). Mpane used the transparency of his piece along with the bright natural light of the surrounding area to create a powerful piece. The piece alone stands at just over thirteen feet to create a larger-than-life depiction for the viewer. Mpane intends for the piece to be seen from a distance, but the grand details can be seen up close as well. The red interior of the statue contrasts and reflects the bright light to give the piece a halo-like effect. Mpane’s choice to use contrasting materials adds to the overall message of power and strength of the Congolese people.

In conclusion, Mpane uses his distinctive choice of wooden materials to personify the struggle of the Congolese people and their strength to overcome it. After learning the hard truth of the brutal treatment, the people of his homeland faced, Mpane decided to focus his art on the

⁴ After years of ridicule for the inaccurate depiction of Belgium colonization, the board of trustees decided to remodel the museum. Under the direction of Guido Gryseels, an agricultural economist, the museum went under a \$90 million renovation to give recognition of Central African artists. (Kakissis, “Belgian Museum Looks at Country’s History”)

Congo. Even though he uses a wide range of materials and mediums such as fragile matchsticks and structured bronze, Mpane can convey his message of the Congolese people in all his pieces.

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Aime Mpane's *Congo: Shadow of a Shadow*

Aime Mpane's work *Congo: Shadow of a Shadow* demonstrates the struggle and hardship the Congolese people faced under colonization. Mpane completed the installation in 2005 where it was housed at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington D.C. The piece consisted of three main figures resembling people. The middle figure is constructed of over 4000 matchsticks. Mpane carefully removed the heads of the matchstick and glued them together. He used balloons and other

round objects to achieve the natural curves of the human body. The matchsticks created a complex, transparent web. The figure has a wooden grave slightly risen off the ground that is attached to its feet. On the grave, there is a cross that reads "Congo 1885" which is the year that the Congo was colonized by Belgium. Cool white light is projected onto the figure casting a larger-than-life shadow onto the wall. On either side of the figure, Mpane placed wooden figures carved to represent human bodies. Mpane placed real-life shoes on top of the figures to give a realistic element to the two-dimensional figures.

Mpane was considered an important influential contemporary African artist of the late 1990s into the 2000s. The term "Contemporary African Artist" encompasses several artists from varying time periods and art styles. Since the introduction of African art into the art world, art historians have had countless disagreements over the time period and definition of the term. In the book *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, authors Okwui Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu

Chika take varying arguments to define the controversial term. Art critics argued over the specific time period of contemporary art. On one side, critics believed the period was classified as an aesthetic rather than specific dates. Artists used a wide range of materials and techniques to illustrate similar issues. On the other hand, critics believed contemporary art followed the colonization period. This thought process believed the term included any artist within the time period independent of their ideas and themes (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art*, 12). Enwezor and Chika combined both schools of thought to classify contemporary African art as art dealing with the issues of colonization following the end of the colonization of Africa. Contemporary African artists use a variety of materials and subject matters to tell the story of the colonization of Africa.

Congo: Shadow of a Shadow is a powerful contemporary African art piece because it communicated the hardships faced. Africa was home to a lot of untouched raw materials. In the 1880s, European countries raced to gain land in Africa. Africa was divided up by political boundaries set by European countries. The Congo was colonized by Belgium under the rule of King Leopold II. Under his rule, the Congolese people faced inhumane treatment for several decades. Andrew Hochschild, the author of the book *King Leopold's Ghost*, describes the cruelty of Leopold II's army in his book. He wrote:

"[The king] took his private army, 19,000 men, and would send the soldiers from village to village. The soldiers would hold the women of the village hostage, in chains, and force the men of each village to go into the rainforest and gather wild rubber from vines that twined around the trees" (Kakissis, *Where Human Zoos Once Stood*).

If the people refused to do so, they were either killed or faced mutilation of their families. In his piece, Mpane illustrates the raw emotions of the Congolese people. In the shadow of the figure,

the viewer can see the body language. The crossed arms and a hung head illustrate the defeated mindset of the people as they watched their loved ones and land die around them.

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