

Tendances et Confrontations: an experimental space for defining art from Africa

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This article traces the presence, employment, and significance of the terms *moderne* and *contemporain* as used by organizers, artists, and critics of the 1966 Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres. Coupled with analyses of the great variety of artwork on display in *Tendances et Confrontations*, the exhibition of modern and/or contemporary art at the festival, this study demonstrates how the innovative paintings by modernists from Africa and the Diaspora clashed with the artisanal, handicraft objects that were also presented as contemporary art. The trajectory of these stylistic labels and their rapid evolution in African art practices allowed FESMAN to serve as a site for defining African modernity, and proposing a contemporary Africa, to a global audience. Though its effectiveness was limited, the significance of this modern and/or contemporary exhibition was not lost on the artists, and the event is recognized as a seminal meeting space for exploring modern African subjectivities.

Keywords: Africa; art; modern; contemporary; exhibition; festival

Introduction

Fifty years after its *déroulement* in the coastal city of Dakar, the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (FESMAN) remains a significant cultural turning-point as historians continue to study the multivalent conversations it engendered. Later termed ‘the most ambitious cultural project of its time’, FESMAN’s legacy reverberates far beyond Senegal and the continent, shaping conceptions of (Pan-)African culture for actors in the Diaspora (Wofford 2009, 179). Opening in 1966 to mixed reviews and inspiring several dissenting programs, FESMAN was alternately praised for its optimistic spirit (Scipion 1966) and critiqued for depoliticizing blackness (Fuller 1966). Today’s interpretations of the festival are equally multifarious, though not without their limitations. Drawing from archives on multiple continents, governmental publications, journalistic reviews, commissioned documentaries, and personal recollections, FESMAN analyses are plagued by a broad recounting of the festival’s

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many components and tend to focus on Négritude as the lens for the large-scale reclamation and celebration of black culture (most recently, Maurel 2017). Certain studies have moved away from such generic summaries, instead exploring the web of narratives that tie FESMAN to the Cold War (Ratcliff 2014), travel and technology (Wofford 2016), histories of theatre (Quinn 2016), and other focused perspectives.

While many studies of FESMAN privilege speeches by politicians, including Senegalese President Léopold Senghor and French Minister of Culture André Malraux, few have focused on the novel exhibition of modern and/or contemporary art, *Tendances et Confrontations*. In theory, this exhibition was one of the major pillars of the festival, along with the colloquium, the *son et lumière* show, the exhibition of 'traditional' African art (*L'Art Nègre*), and dozens of dance, music, and theatre performances.¹ Housed in a turn-of-the-century courthouse, *Tendances et Confrontations* featured over 600 works of art, representing at least 35 countries and ranging in media from oil painting and bronze sculpture to tapestries and embroidered objects. Curated by celebrated Senegalese artist Iba N'Diaye, the exhibition vacillated between categories, alternately identifying as *art moderne* and/or *art contemporain*, and featured several artists – including Ibrahim El-Salahi, Gazbia Sirry, Papa Ibra Tall, and Aubrey Williams – who would come to represent a generation of Modernists from Africa and the Diaspora. For a multitude of reasons, however, *Tendances et Confrontations* received minimal attention from both organizers and attendees, especially when compared to the reception of the festival's other areas. Responding to recent studies that seek to reanimate this overlooked exhibition and tease out its legacy, this article situates the exhibiting artists in a global context of modern art styles and image-making. An analysis of the phrase *art moderne* as it is applied to publications surrounding *Tendances et Confrontations* demonstrates how such terminology distinguished these artworks from the traditional masks and figures exhibited in *L'Art Nègre*. Such naming emphasized the industry, progress, and relevance of living artists active in new modes of creation. Engaging the nascent field of contemporary art, the term *art contemporain* was also employed in official terminology surrounding *Tendances et Confrontations*.

With 'modern' and 'contemporary' art generally conceived as separate stylistic categories that began to sharply diverge in the mid-twentieth century, how does a single exhibition not only claim the status of *moderne*, but also carve out a space for joining the burgeoning, globally relevant *contemporain*? Recognizing the power of naming and categorizing, this essay traces the presence, employment, and significance of the terms *moderne* and *contemporain* for *Tendances et Confrontations*. Fresh analyses of the artwork on display from Africa and its Diaspora also demonstrate the ramifications of belonging to the modern and/or contemporary

movements for African artists – even if the significance of the label did not immediately translate to parity with fellow practitioners in Europe's metropolitan capitals. Ultimately, FESMAN's *Tendances et Confrontations* acted as a site that presumed the modernity of the African artist and proposed the notion of a contemporary African art, even as it refrained from defining parameters or directions for these stylistic categories.

Curatorial tensions: *L'Art Nègre* versus *Tendances et Confrontations*

Though it may not have been the intent of the organizers, holding two sprawling exhibitions that diverged in their conceptions of 'African art' necessarily invited their comparison. As a whole, audiences lauded the spectacular collection assembled in *L'Art Nègre*. *Tendances et Confrontations* suffered from poor reception, ranging from criticism of its content, to reduction to a mere byline, to total exclusion from reviews. Typical of responses to the festival, Jean Clay's review acknowledged the evident 'diversity and power of Negro sculpture' from *L'Art Nègre* and the glaring 'confusion' manifested by *Tendances et Confrontations*' inclusion of both pastiche and paintings that align with 'main streams of contemporary art' (Clay 1966). Critic Newell Flather 'enjoyed two hours at the contemporary art exhibition' (the extent of its mention in his review), then 'spent almost all day Tuesday' at *L'Art Nègre*, the site President Senghor had declared as 'the heart of the festival' (Flather 1966). From the planning stages through the official promotional material, *L'Art Nègre* was consistently esteemed over *Tendances et Confrontations*. Besides the clear preference for 'traditional' art by organizers, including President Senghor, *Tendances et Confrontations* was fated to pale in comparison because of its unorthodox curatorial structure.

Instead of submitting to an overarching curatorial theme, the artworks displayed in *Tendances et Confrontations* were chosen by delegations within the participating nations and later curated by Senegalese painter Iba N'Diaye. Though the planning had been underway for years, N'Diaye only took charge in 1965. Working with art submitted by national committees, N'Diaye had no curatorial autonomy in vetting what would be displayed. Even the exhibition title had been chosen before soliciting participants. Without direction over the framework, and the stipulation that each nation's contributions be confined to separate areas of the exhibition hall, it was clear from the outset that N'Diaye had limited authority to create a cohesive, unified exhibition. Instead, as some critics noted, the final product felt nationalistic in its division and the clarity in defining qualities of modern and/or contemporary art from Africa was 'inadequate' (Povey 1966, 5). As suggested by Cédric Vincent, perhaps organizers should have retained the term 'salon' in categorizing this accumulative display; the

label of 'exposition' lends itself too readily to notions of criticality and scientific organization that were clearly absent from the final mashup of art objects (Vincent 2017). The brochure sent to potential participants stipulated:

The Exhibition of Contemporary Arts 'Trends and Confrontations' ... is to reflect the unity and originality of the present-day Negro world, through its most representative works of art ... Each country is responsible for the selection it makes; however, it is necessary that this selection be extremely severe ... (FESMAN, 49)

The vague criterion granted participating nations much leeway in defining the 'originality' of an artist and how their selections would meet the 'severe' standards demanded by organizers. Accordingly, no nation's contributions would be rejected. Later reflecting on the call for participants, N'Diaye described the exhibition title as a happy accident for how it 'corrected' the overly ambitious intention declared by the organisers of the festival ... In reality, [*Tendances et Confrontations*] was characterised by a great heterogeneity, whose source was regretfully not to be found in the originality of the various artistic currents of contemporary Africa!' (N'Diaye 1970; as quoted in Vincent 2017). N'Diaye highlights the asynchronous nature of the exhibition title, contrasting the immense variety of styles that composed the project to the supposed unity in 'the present-day Negro world.' He lamented that most of the works were not rooted in the 'originality ... of contemporary Africa' (N'Diaye 1970), even though originality was, theoretically, the principal barometer for inclusion. Less concerned with refashioning fetishistic emblems, N'Diaye believed the contemporary spheres of African society were replete with inspiration and new forms of artistic creativity. These were 'regretfully' (N'Diaye 1970) not the kinds of artworks that were submitted by participants, leading to an exhibition that matched neither the tenets outlined in the call, nor the realities of contemporary Africa.

With no discernible criteria to evaluate its merits, the exhibition content was at the whim of local politics. Additional caveats restricted some artists from participating – stipulations requiring that postage and artist travel be covered by the guest nation, that works must be framed or sent with pedestals, that there was a limit of three sculptures per nation, etc. – but the subject-matter and style of work were not regulated. This was a primary factor in the exhibition's lack of thematic focus. Given that the festival also hosted a section for master craftsmen in Soumbédioune called 'Living African Handicrafts' (*L'Exposition Artisanat Vivant*), *Tendances et Confrontations* would, conceivably, showcase only fine arts. The lines became blurred, though, as the festival awarded prizes in six subcategories of contemporary art: painting, sculpture, engraving, applied art, drawing,

and tapestry design. Possibly as an affront to the classical hierarchy of fine art media, subcategories for tapestry design and applied art clashed with the international audience's expectations of what could be considered modern art. For example, John Povey notes 'the display of contemporary arts at the Palais de Justice seemed rather inadequate ... the arts of many national exhibits phased off too readily into handicrafts; oils jostled with pictures made of sea shells and pairs of decorated leather shoes' (Povey 1966, 5). Even the exhibition hall itself and the methods of installation defied mainstream conventions of how modern art should be displayed.

The exhibition venue, the Palais de Justice at Cap Manuel, featured a large hall dotted with columns at 16-foot intervals (Figure 1). Using dividing walls between the columns, the space was cordoned into smaller sections that would delineate the national displays. Open to the sky through a central atrium, certain areas were lit by sunlight while industrial lighting served to illuminate the interior spaces. Simultaneously an outdoor and indoor venue, the sandy architecture struck the foreign visitor as ill-suited for a display of modern art – a sharp departure from the norms of white gallery walls, right angles, and controlled lighting. Perhaps this arrangement of partitions and distinct national areas was the motivating force for the exhibition's clear preference for two-dimensional artworks. Whether ideological or practical, the flatness of the modern and/or contemporary



Figure 1. Installation view, *Tendances et Confrontations*, featuring Christian Latier's *Le Bélier*, Dakar 1966/Roland Kaehr, PANAFEST Archive Collection, Paris.

works was a sharp contrast to the collection in *L'Art Nègre*, which consisted almost entirely of three-dimensional sculptures and art objects.

Originally designed to host one thousand objects, *L'Art Nègre* ultimately welcomed 600 works of art, rendering it one of the largest exhibitions of traditional African art. In stark contrast to N'Diaye's curatorship, *L'Art Nègre's* committee consisted of seven commissioners who began working in 1963 (*Premier Festival* 1967, 56). The project was the result of years of multicontinental organization, with curators culling from collections of 88 separate museums, universities, churches, and collectors (*L'Art Nègre* 1966, 169–173). Artworks were chosen specifically for their artistic quality and mounted in the new Musée Dynamique, benefiting from a centralized location on Dakar's Corniche. Organized in a sleek Swiss-designed and UNESCO-funded museum, the installation met modern museological standards and conformed to audience expectations of a fine art display: glass cases, climatized galleries, and didactic materials (Figure 2). The framework of the exhibition evolved over time, but was eventually divided into five sections, each described at length in the separate catalogue published for *L'Art Nègre* (*L'Art Nègre* 1966, xxiv). The fifth section bore the title 'Communication with the World', which was initially the name for the exhibition of modern and/or contemporary art. For this final section, curators exhibited work by European Modernists to demonstrate the far-reaching, enduring impact of traditional *art nègre*.



Figure 2. Installation view, *L'Art Nègre*, Musée Dynamique, Dakar 1966/Roland Kaehr, PANAFEST Archive Collection, Paris.

Given its polish and intellectual rigor, this exhibition captured the attention of international visitors, presenters at the colloquium, and art historians of subsequent generations – to the detriment, or derision, of *Tendances et Confrontations*. Though the latter was plagued by structural challenges, a lack of a conceptual orientation, and a constrained curator, one could also read the open, undefined framework of *Tendances et Confrontations* as a positive characteristic, choosing to instead emphasize how this exhibition served as an experimental site for international artists to propose a dizzying range of contemporary artmaking. The incoherent content meant that its outcome was not a widely manifested dialogue that specified a vision for modern or contemporary art. Rather, it was a murmuring of potentiality for what modern and/or contemporary art from Africa *could be*. Though the festival did not offer parameters for defining the modern/contemporary artist beyond 'originality', each individual's contribution was a proposition for how African art might operate locally and participate in larger artistic movements. In this light, *Tendances et Confrontations* should be read as a potential crossroads for young artists and cultural actors who were already active in shaping the parameters of modern/contemporary African art in their local spheres of influence. As a space for reunion, proposition, and discussion, this exhibition is significant as a site of early convergence and self-definition, even as it embodied the anxieties of what, or who, made African art merit either of these labels.

Though some might have seen the two major art exhibitions as complementary – with *L'Art Nègre* presenting the familiar strains and implications of art from Africa, and *Tendances et Confrontations* assembling the recent visions and future directions of art from the continent and Diaspora – the disparity in ideological framework, rigor of selection, and physical installation betrayed organizational insecurities in prescribing role(s) for the twentieth-century African artist. Over five kilometers apart, the turn-of-the-century Palais de Justice was isolated on a small peninsula, far from the newly constructed Musée Dynamique on the Corniche. Even as their geographic separation may have presented a logistical challenge to visitors, the space between exhibitions also symbolizes the ideological distance between conventional interpretations of *art nègre/art moderne* and the fluid formulations of modern/contemporary African art. Indeed, seeing the latter as a natural extension of the former was a *non sequitur* for most audiences – a phenomenon that can be explained by analyzing mid-century conceptions of modern art.

Modern or contemporary?

While some writers may have employed the terms *moderne* and *contemporain* uncritically, or read them as interchangeable cues for establishing

the postcolonial state of the moment, it would be shortsighted to assume that none of the organizers, artists, or critics were deploying these labels to carve out ideological spaces for living African artists – artists who were conceptualizing new forms, experimenting with media, or synthesizing the visual vocabulary of non-local influences. Prior to *Tendances et Confrontations*, there were few occasions where such an artist might exhibit work and enjoy any status besides naïve or ‘primitive’.² The terms ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’, especially when employed by individuals savvy to the particular vernacular of art in the 1960s, have overlapping and divergent meanings.

The meaning of these terms was mutable, making their deployment by festival organizers and critics challenging to categorize. However, when paired with the work on display in the exhibition, the terminology invokes certain connotations. In identifying a painting, artist, or exhibition as belonging to an ideological movement – in donning or shedding an association – the festival challenged the categories that were themselves shaped by Euro-American critics to be exclusionary, connoting the superiority and vanguard status of select artists. In much the same way that *L'Art Nègre* was a revalorization of black creativity in the precolonial era, the labels applied to *Tendances et Confrontations* – despite the mixed content of the exhibition – were important steps in claiming the modernity of Africa’s postcolonial artists and proposing their status as producers of contemporary art.

Modern/Moderne

While recent scholarship on Modernism emphasizes its multivocal nature by recognizing how it operated on universal, transnational, and local levels, the mid-1960s definition of *art moderne* was rooted in a nineteenth-century concept of breaking with tradition. The modern world was associated with the rise of industrial technology, increased urbanization, and the foundation of capitalist systems. Tied to an affinity for progress was anxiety about the self in relation to the masses, and a fear of obsolescence in the face of continuous novelty. Tsitsi Jaji (2014, 15) eloquently summarizes Susan Stanford Friedman’s analysis of these troublesome terms by observing that ‘humanists see modernism as an aesthetic response to modernity – an (illusory) break with the past, a willed forgetting of tradition, continuity, order ... while social scientists see modernism as an attempt to manage modernity’.

Concurrent with Modernist trends in North Atlantic spaces, between 1920 and 1960, African practitioners were not considered modern artists by mainstream art circles or institutions.³ Battling the vicious lingering perception of Africa as deficient and anti-intellectual, the intrepid artists who trained or lived between Africa and extracontinental spaces were

not perceived as participants in modernity. For an African artist, to adopt the label of modern artist was to assert both individual autonomy and the right to independently formulate a response to his or her experience of modernity. As summarized by Okeke-Agulu (2006, 14), modern artists from the continent ‘confront’ Africa’s modernity in both the colonial and independence eras: ‘In the hands of these artists, modernism insinuates the visual expression of the real experiences, illusory visions, and critical imagination of Africa’s modernity’. A term prone to slippage, ‘modern’ is an identifier that connotes an experience or an aspiration; both interpretations are actively explored by artists in *Tendances et Confrontations*.

One precedent establishing early and mid-twentieth century art of Africa as ‘Modern Art’ was Frank McEwen’s First International Congress of African Art and Culture (1962). Building on these roots, he defined the modern African artist in his presentation at the FESMAN colloquium in 1966. For McEwen, ‘modern’ was merely indicative of the current era and neither a recognition of rupture with the past, nor any stylistic inventiveness associated with the movement of Modernism. In calling this work ‘modern’, McEwen believed he was defending African workshops from the suffocating influence of ‘international’ art.⁴ In this instance, ‘modern’ was only a temporal signifier. McEwen’s presentation was followed by that of Nigerian Ben Enwonwu, the only artist to present. He spoke to the challenges of being an artist ‘today’ – a modifier that emphasizes the in-the-moment-ness of Africa’s career artists. Though overlapping with McEwen’s temporal definition of ‘modern,’ Enwonwu additionally decried the abstract art promulgated by ‘modern European expression’ and eschewed the term ‘modern’ as a descriptor for African art. He categorized local artists who adopt that label as ‘so-called progressive African artists’ (1968, 424). Enwonwu’s vitriol revealed the African artist’s awareness of this term’s significance. Applying the label ‘modern’ to an African artist was to signify their participation in an avant-garde, and to acknowledge their role in disrupting conventional styles – even recent ones – by incorporating extracontinental sources of inspiration. The role of the modern artist from Africa was similarly commented upon by FESMAN organizer, Alioune Diop:

... the artist of today (like the modern poet) is better appreciated by the west than by his own fellow countrymen. It remains for us, therefore to help the artist and his people to understand each other, and to bring the African people ... face to face with the major problems of modern art. (Diop 1966, 17–19)

In addition to confirming that at least one festival organizer was engaging with mainstream conceptions of Modernist creativity, Diop’s statement transparently conveyed an insecurity for how the artistic concept of

Modernism was, or could be, applicable to literary and visual production from Africa and made relevant to African audiences.

FESMAN as a whole worked to reframe an archaic vision of Africa into one where the continent was active in global contexts. *Tendances et Confrontations*, specifically, was an attempt to valorize the last decade of African artists' work as relevant to international modern art. The FESMAN catalogue labelled *Tendances et Confrontations* as the 'Exposition Art Moderne', while the exterior of the Palais de Justice bore the signage: 'Art Moderne/Modern Art.' From Lamine Diakhate's colloquium presentation 'La Poésie africaine moderne' to the inclusion of works from Paris' Musée d'Art Moderne in *L'Art Nègre*, African creativity was presented in conversation with accepted visions of the modern. Scholars have astutely addressed the role of modernity – both achieved and aspired – in mid-century declarations of nationhood and cultural capital. De Jong (2016, 167) argues that the cultural performances represented at festivals are an archive of postcolonial modernity, while Harney (2016, 193) categorizes the conversations at FESMAN as 'African modernist and vanguardist discourses'. These studies are only the most recent in a lineage of exhibitions, projects, and publications that wrestle with the precise relationship between Modernism, modernity, and African artists.

Since there were no theoretical or curatorial essays for *Tendances et Confrontations* that addressed the modernity of certain artists or the artisanal crafts that diluted the survey of contemporary art, the art objects were left to speak for themselves. The artists who exhibited ranged in educational experience, including those from 'Western-style' schools in Africa, cosmopolitan centers of the West, apprenticeships with master carvers, and autodidacts. This fluidity made *Tendances et Confrontations* an open laboratory for expanding the vision of what modern art might include. While many of the artworks submitted conveyed technical skill or artisanship – evidenced by leather shoes, taxidermy butterflies, or patches of appliqué cloth (Figure 3) – they clearly lacked the conceptual foundations and stylistic experimentations that define Modernist art. However, in this nebulous space, without institutional critique, individual artists also proposed new visions of modern art that could not have been previously categorized. Though the organizers framed the exhibition as 'Moderne', it was the artists who, individually, offered novel propositions to their national committee, to other artists in attendance, and to the visitors who sifted through the heterogeneous exhibition. Standout artists, including Ahmed Cherkaoui, Frank Bowling, Gebre Kristos Desta, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Erhabor Emokpae, Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Gazbia Sirry, Papa Ibra Tall, and Aubrey Williams, proposed revolutionary visions of how African artists engaged the modern world (Figure 4). These creators demonstrated the resonance of their work with international Modernist praxes, even as they actively defined the flavor of Modernism



Figure 3. André Compaoré (Upper Volta), *Embroidered quiver*, leather and wood, 7 × 53 cm. Direction des Archives du Sénégal, fonds du Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres.

in their local spheres of Khartoum, Dakar, New Orleans, Ibadan, and elsewhere.

A prime example of an artist whose participation and paintings embodied a new proposition for African Modernism, South African Gerard Sekoto is now recognized as a pioneer and celebrated for his emotive scenes of quotidian life under the Apartheid regime. In 1945 he moved to the urban center of Pretoria before permanently relocating to Paris in 1947 in self-imposed exile. Sekoto participated in *Tendances et Confrontations* as a representative of the French delegation, sending two three-quarter-length portraits entitled *La Fille au collier* (Figure 5) and *La Maternité* (Figure 6). These two works demonstrate his penchant for portraits constructed from thick brushstrokes that delineate the subject's facial features and angular torsos. Though extant images of the paintings are in grayscale, we can assume that these lost canvases were vivified by a limited, non-natural palette based on their context in his oeuvre. Most striking in composition, *La Fille au collier* positions the eponymous woman and necklace along a strong vertical axis. The diagonal formed by her arms is echoed in the bold stroke of paint that connects the rigid horizontal of her clavicle to her headscarf. Set before a dark backdrop, the subject is gently framed by long lines that alternate between opaque



Figure 4. Ahmed Cherkaoui (Morocco/France), *La Vallée des pierres*, 1962, oil on canvas, 72 × 57 cm. Location unknown. Direction des Archives du Sénégal, fonds du Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres.

and transparent. Abstract and expressive, Sekoto's subject gazes piercingly back at the viewer. In her nontraditional pose and angular composition, the unnamed woman defies conventions of classical portraiture and the choice of subject does not conform to known types of African art. Where this painting was Modernist for its innovation in subject-matter and rejection of naturalistic rendering, his second canvas, *La Maternité*, presented a slightly different vision of African Modernism.

The painting might reflect Sekoto's experience as a South African immigrant in France, grappling with the distance from home and his native community – a trauma that contributed to alcoholism and a mental breakdown (Sekoto 1995). Through the downcast eyes of the mother in *La Maternité*, this subject is caught in a moment of tender reflection and parental intimacy. Looking to the canon of African art, and possibly inspired by collections in Paris' Musée de l'Homme or Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Sekoto drew on the ubiquity of a particular motif – mother offering her breast to an infant – for its universal recognition as an African theme. The figural arrangement of mothers nursing children was a known trope of West African sculpture, especially prevalent in societies built on matrilineal succession, like the Asante and Kongo



Figure 5. Gerard Sekoto (South Africa/France), *La Fille au collier*, c. 1965, oil on canvas, dimensions and location unknown. Direction des Archives du Sénégal, fonds du Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres.

kingdoms.⁵ Appealing to current techniques, he transferred the canonical motif to the Modernist medium of oil on canvas and depicted the figure's shoulders and face with a Cubist sensibility. Formally, gestural abstraction and expressionist coloring convey the mother's rectilinear torso, a form reprised in the geometricized swaddling of the infant. Blending the simplified, planar formulation of the scene with a known type from Africa's



Figure 6. Gerard Sekoto (South Africa/France), *La Maternité*, c. 1965, oil on canvas, dimensions and location unknown. Direction des Archives du Sénégal, fonds du Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres.

cultural heritage, the artist is at once sentimental and avant-garde. The face of the infant in *La Maternité* is hidden from the viewer, simultaneously anonymizing and universalizing the experience of the African immigrants who live estranged from their motherlands. Painting while working as a music composer in Paris, he is often credited among the first African artists to leave the continent to seek an education and career in the Diaspora (Al'Amin Mazrui 1998, 624). In this regard, Sekoto at FESMAN was an avatar for the many individuals experiencing a sense of displacement in the growing trend of transnational movement and practice. Even his participation in *Tendances et Confrontations* as a member of the French delegation should be read as a statement of the cosmopolitanism to which African modern art is entitled. As an artist of the

Diaspora at FESMAN, Sekoto stated, 'I accept the world as a whole without losing my African identity' (Soellé 1966). Eschewing geographical boundaries, Sekoto defines his own subjectivity – a rejection of taxonomies and rigid categories that is reflected in his unique formulation of art styles and subject-matter.

Sekoto and other pioneering artists deftly demonstrated the Modernist abilities of mid-century African artists – not only as they operated on the African continent, in the case of Demas Nwoko, who was lauded in Povey's review, but also as they moved in global circles, like Alexander 'Skunder' Boghossian, who studied in Ethiopia before pursuing a formal education in London and Paris. From expatriates active in Africa to the young philosophers and artists from the continent, many cultural actors questioned the significance of the 'modern' to postcolonial African contexts and sought alternative ways to label the art that so clearly departed from traditional forms as it reached different twentieth-century audiences. While some may have employed the term as a mere temporal adjective, many participants, including the artists, recognized the significance of the label. While some artists exhibiting at FESMAN merited the label Modernist, the term that inspires more contention in its definition and application is 'contemporary'.

Contemporary/Contemporain

As amorphous a label as 'modern' is, the term 'contemporary' is even more polyvalent. The major thorn in studying the etymology of 'Contemporary Art' as a term or category is the persistent use of 'contemporary' as a time-based adjective. The term 'contemporary' would gain traction for its ideological significance in the art world after 1945.⁶ To label one's self as a contemporary artist was to distance one's practice not only from traditional and classical models, but also from Modernism. In the United States, this division is generally drawn between Modernists and Pop Art because inspiration from mass culture strongly contrasted with Greenbergian formalist concerns for Modernism. Responding to a revolution in ideology, technology, and artmaking, the term 'contemporary' connoted these new trends in the 1960s. Therefore, while one reading of 'contemporary' at FESMAN is innocuous and descriptive – the art belonged to its time – there was also the *potential* for ideological resonance with post-Modernist trends happening more broadly. With the potential for such positioning, even though most of the art may have been better categorized as modernist, folk, or craft, *Tendances et Confrontations* acted as an experimental space for African artists where they might tentatively claim the same label as their European and American counterparts.

The descriptor *contemporain* was not lacking in the official media surrounding the event, especially in Anglophone publications. Throughout the

catalogue individual artworks were captioned *contemporain*, and the grand prize was dedicated to 'L'Art plastique contemporain'. Even though the boldface title of this section of the catalogue was 'Exposition Art Moderne' in every instance where it mentioned specific contributions by named individuals, the publications labeled that creator as *contemporain*. The term was even used in the title given to Iba N'Diaye: President de la Commission des Arts Contemporains du Festival. Organizers employed this term even during the festival's planning stages. As they called for the Diaspora to return and participate in this exhibition, there was a cognizance that the artists were actively reflecting their particular societies in a postwar world. Further, being conscientious about the new, transnational networks formed by pioneering artists, the organizers specifically noted that artists – like Sekoto – need not be in residence in their country of origin to participate. Such a gesture acknowledges that, like their Western counterparts, African artists were also participating in complex exchanges as they traveled, collaborated, and dialogued with fellow artists and thinkers internationally.

The United States committee consistently applied the label 'Contemporary Arts' to its delegation. Though the United States, Nigeria, and Brazil were the only nations to secure double the space allotted to other participants in *Tendances et Confrontations* (for their larger Diaspora populations), protests by the African-American artists actually led to the withdrawal of several participants (Blake 2011). Despite early enthusiasm for the project, Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, and other members of the Spiral group ultimately withheld their work from traveling to Dakar due to underfunding for visual artists and organizational contention over the definition of contemporary African-American art. While the final United States contribution was smaller than initially planned, its installation was better documented than the hundreds of other works on display – in large part because the United States produced a separate catalogue (United States Committee, 1966) and sponsored a film documentary by African-American filmmaker William Greaves. Greaves' camera foregrounded the work of the American artists, offering one perspective on how this exhibition productively, and ideologically, employed the term 'contemporary'.

Capturing two visitors with Charles White's *Birmingham Totem*, the camera angle highlights the verticality of this massive work on paper (Figure 7). Created in response to the bombing of an African-American church in Birmingham, Alabama, White condemns the Cahaba Boys, a supremacist group, for their violent 1963 act that killed four children. White draws the viewer's eye upwards, negotiating the splintered debris from the dark base of the painting, toward the higher values of the upper register. Atop the mound is a young boy, his innocence reflected in his naked body and his status as victim reinforced by the thick blanket

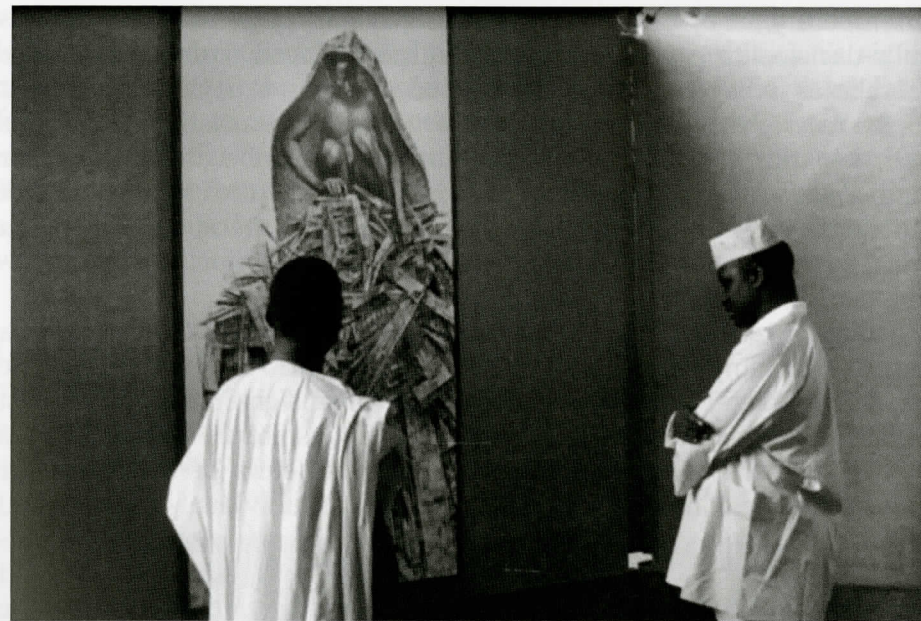


Figure 7. Still from *First World Festival of Negro Arts*, by William Greaves and the United States Information Agency, featuring Charles White's *Birmingham Totem* (1964). New York: Distributed by William Greaves Productions, 2005.

associated with disaster relief. The boy, however, is not afforded time to engage in self-care or mourn his loss; he is in the midst of the rubble, actively salvaging. White's art resisted the 'art for art's sake' narrative that pervaded American Modernism in the 1960s, and used figuration as a vehicle for socially engaged messages. Perhaps related to his experience with the Works Progress Administration, White did not shy away from depictions of African-American quotidian life and significant cultural moments. His insertion in *Tendances et Confrontations* can be seen as a foil to the domination of formalist modern art, and as representative of more contemporary themes.

Like most African-American artists' practice at this time, White's drawing is more easily read as belonging to the nascent contemporary art movement rather than as a continuation or offshoot of *art moderne*. Since pervasive ethnocentrism discounted the presence of black artists in avant-garde movements, mainstream Modernism excluded more mid-century artists than it embraced. Therefore, the mid-1960s artist and critic may have been more apt to employ the term 'contemporary', as it is less ideologically loaded and racist in legacy. An art movement that was open to desires for new contexts, including a postcolonial society, 'contemporary art' was not defined by any single artistic style, subject-matter, or medium. Even if one were to contest *Birmingham Totem's* status as

contemporary art by categorizing it as propaganda or political art, the festival's decision to categorize the work thusly placed it under the same umbrella as other recent art that defied any known styles. Whether it was the foresight of festival organizers or through the artistic propositions of participating artists, *Tendances et Confrontations* became a forum for empowering African and Diasporic art through the significance of naming. This exhibition succeeded in venerating contemporary art from Africa, moving it along some imagined scale of progression, just by associating it with the latest, post-Modernist trends.

Though a recent study (Nzewi 2013) of *Tendances et Confrontations* dismissed the employment of these labels at FESMAN as interchangeable temporal markers, there was cognizance of their significance for at least some of the organizers, artists, and attendees. Despite the overall failures of the exhibition to emphatically declare parameters or directions for modern and/or contemporary art from Africa, individual thinkers and makers capitalized on the fluidity of definitions to carve a space for themselves in Modernist discourse, and broached the possibilities of what stories contemporary art could tell. While Nzewi's study recognized the exhibition as a seminal event for its convergence of artists from the continent and its Diaspora, it overstated the ideological rigor of this uneven exhibition: 'it was the first real to attempt to understand the many dimensions of postcolonial modernism through ideological standpoints and on a grand scale' (p.216). Without a curatorial vision or specifications in the call for participants, it is difficult to argue that the exhibition was a 'test' or 'a rigorous assessment of the meaning and significance of African modernity and Modernism under a postcolonial climate' (p.221). Coupled with the fact that the artwork on display was marked for sale, another departure from standard of international exhibitions of the era, this exhibition was also unique in that it offered neither didactic texts, nor a colloquium – both of which were included with *L'Art Nègre*. The postcolonial modernism Nzewi refers to was certainly one murmur passing between the visiting artists, but it was not a hallmark of *Tendances et Confrontation* as a project.

Even as organizers boldly applied artworld labels to the exhibition, their insecurity in defining a specific vision for African art is aptly summarized by another recent study where Elizabeth Harney interprets this landmark exhibition as expressing 'the desire to craft a unique and viable modern or contemporary aesthetic practice out of the push and pull of the local and the global' (2016, 187). Though it may have been a 'desire' on the organizers' part, the exhibition lacked the structure necessary to guide the discussion or to define new ideological frameworks concerning the role of this modern and/or contemporary art. Therefore, its impact lies more in the *possibilities* it offered as an open forum wherein the artists could project personal definitions and

exchange visions with other artists and writers, even though most of the low-quality and artisanal contributions fell flat. The exhibition's significance for artists from Africa stems from how it catalyzed these labels for application to artists of both the established generation and the rising one. In the face of logistical challenges and sharp criticism, *Tendances et Confrontations* served as a platform from which these artists became active participants in the evolving twentieth-century networks of global – and globalizing – art circuits.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why the terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' might have rung hollow for FESMAN attendees. Reviewers lamented that, in addition to many paintings, there were sculptures in polished stone,



Figure 8. Antoine Ndong Obiang (Gabon), *Bikekeu* or *Ngontan* mask, wood, dimensions unknown. Direction des Archives du Sénégal, fonds du Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres.

masks created for village dances, and beaded quivers (Figure 8) – objects that do not embody the rupture with tradition that tends to define international Modernist practice (Doum 1966; as quoted in Huchard 2002). The sheer breadth of the object types on display precluded many visitors from seriously considering any element of the exhibition as modern or contemporary art. The intermingling of techniques and media may have served the festival's spirit of openness, but also clashed with the expectations of many visitors – African or otherwise.

Tendances et Confrontations included hundreds of artworks that seemed retrograde in the eyes of an audience savvy to trends in modern and contemporary art. However, to write off the exhibition as a whole because many visiting critics did so would be a shortsighted reification of the ethnocentric gaze of the 1960s. While the foreign audiences may have lauded *L'Art Nègre* as the space for elevating African creativity to fine art, the artists were not so dismissive of *Tendances et Confrontations* and its effects, recognizing that it increased exchange among artists and led to further opportunities for exhibition, collection, residencies, and recognition. As evidenced by the analyses of work by Gerard Sekoto, this exhibition was a forum for claiming Modernist praxes in African actors. In claiming the modern, other artists were free to adopt the title of contemporary, an arena less burdened by formalist ideology that was explored by artists like Charles White.

Both in Senegal and abroad, the term 'contemporary' was increasingly applied to African art exhibitions in the following years. From *Contemporary African Art* (Camden Art Centre, London, 1969) to the touring *Contemporary Art of Senegal* (1974–82), national and private institutions began to conceive of African artists from the continent and Diaspora as practitioners of contemporary art in the same way the term was applied to established artists. Most of the artists represented in *Contemporary African Art* were, in fact, originally exhibited in *Tendances et Confrontations*, a fact alluded to by catalogue author Gerald Moore. He positioned *Contemporary African Art* against 'earlier exhibitions held in Africa' that 'suffered from an excess of state sponsorship, resulting in the display of politically-favored artists at the expense of others and in the filling up of national "quotas" with Arts and Crafts of a more or less touristic orientation' (1969, 13). Moore was almost certainly expressing his umbrage at the uneven quality in *Tendances et Confrontations* and saw this new exhibition as corrective, even as its content was drawn from many of the same innovative artists displayed there. Though *Tendances et Confrontations* did not define specific visions for how African art belonged to the modern or contemporary, by activating these labels for Africa's artists it became a precedent for later projects that approached the category with increasing rigor.

Notes

1. Though problematic, I am choosing to employ the term 'traditional' in describing the genre of art shown in *L'Art Nègre*, largely because the festival organizers consistently referred to it as the exhibition of *art traditionnel*.
2. An early precedent employing the term 'modern' was the 1962 exhibition by Frank McEwen at the National Gallery in Salisbury. Before that, anti-modernist, or 'colonial nativist' tropes were prevalent (see Okeke-Agulu 2015, 40–41).
3. Two other studies that provide framework for the challenges of asserting modernism are Gikandi (1992) and Picton (2013).
4. Decrying art schools in Africa that rely on Western-based pedagogies from colonizers, he instead champions 'inducement of inborn talent' as the authentic twentieth-century African art (McEwen 1968).
5. Though the motif appears broadly in these cultures, further examples come from Baule, Igbo, and Bamileke carvers, among others.
6. Some of the earliest institutions that adopted the term 'Contemporary' in their title were the Contemporary Art Society (founded 1910, London) and the Contemporary Art Society (founded 1938, Adelaide, Australia). Others would change their name from 'Modern' to 'Contemporary' (e.g. the Boston Museum of Modern Art, founded 1936, became the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1948) because Modernism increasingly came to represent a defined art movement that was no longer actively being produced and, thus, no longer contemporary.

Notes on contributor

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