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The Short Century in Berlin
Notes on an exhibition

In 1884, Berlin hosted the Belgian Congo Conference, where the representatives of fifteen non-African states decided upon the fate of African peoples by drawing borders that paid little respect to natural, ethnic or cultural prefigurations. In 1960, seventeen African nations gained their independence from colonial rule; the United Nations proclaimed it the Year of Africa. Borders were maintained. The period from 1880 to 1960 appears to be a century that has never ended. The discourse of colonialism and imperialism, today perceived as globalization, continues.

How are we, then, supposed to understand the dates that the curator Okwui Enwezor offers as delimitations in an exhibition about Africa’s trajectory towards independence: The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994, presented from 18 May to 22 July 2001 at Berlin’s prestigious Martin-Gropius-Bau in cooperation with the House of World Cultures? Forty-nine years are a very short century indeed. Have the independence and liberation movements really reached their goal? Has independence been gained, simply because apartheid has finally been overthrown?

Whenever Berlin hosts an exhibition about African art, journalists and critics offer a set of recurrent observations. Firstly, they regret that in Germany there is a lack of interest in and knowledge of Africa’s history as well as its current state of affairs. Secondly, they complain that Africa is always depicted as a continent full of

horrors, wars, famines, AIDS. Thirdly, they announce that there is art to discover. But in their efforts to introduce the public to a field of artistic expression it has rarely been in a position to savour, many exhibitions place works of art next to religious artefacts or political documents, thereby blurring the differences of art, religion, and politics. *Porträt Afrika: Fotografische Positionen eines Jahrhunderts* (Portrait of Africa: a century’s photographic positions), a major show at the House of World Cultures in 2000, exhibited ethnographic documents alongside with African studio photography and the works of expatriates who acquired their photographic and artistic skills at universities in the USA. The show did not manage to illustrate the specificity of African photography – if there is any at all.

What kinds of exhibits, then, is one to expect in an exhibition about political movements. Manifestos? Press photography? Weapons? Works of art? In fact, the title of the show – first set up at the Museum Villa Stuck in Munich earlier in 2001, before coming to Berlin and then moving on to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and the The Museum of Modern Art in New York – seems more suitable to appear on a book cover. Enwezor has decided to display an abundance of material; he assembles works of art, photographs, books and films, architectural models and graphics. He does not demonstrate an outspoken interest in educating his German public (undoubtedly the exhibition will provoke different reactions in America), his curatorial commentary is restricted to occasional boards that feature subtitles for some of the rooms that serve as points of orientation: “The Colonial Text and Post-Colonial Archive: Art, Cinema and Visual Culture after Independence,” “Medina, Casbah, Native Quarter, Township, the Settler’s City,” “Shift: History, Identity, Authenticity” and the like. Fragments of academic discourse offer only little guidance.

Upon entering the sequence of more than twenty show rooms on the first floor of the building, ranged around a central patio, the visitor has to decide for himself whether to turn left or right. Walking around clockwise, he would start with “Modernism and Art,” including works by the South African painter Ernest Mancoba, a member of the Paris-based group of artists called CoBRA, or photographs by Seydou Keïta, cherished by European critics for his portraits of the inhabitants of Bamako. For another six rooms he will be confronted mainly with decontextualized works of art, paintings, installations, photographic and video art, to be appreciated for their chiefly formal qualities. As he reaches a small room, the visitor will be charmed by Bodys Isek Kingelez’s pseudo-architectural models of high-rise kitsch palaces that seem to propose a different stance toward architecture, which in the context of this exhibition is deemed to be African. In the corner of a room, a movie by Ousmane Sembène, *Borom Sarret* (1963), demonstrates how a new style of hous-