In 1997 I described ‘the discourse of globalisation’ as the cultural process that creates its own object. 1 In this process, cultural practitioners are forced not only to make explicit the criteria by which they select the objects of their enquiry, but also to present the resulting analytical punctuations as a constituent part of the ‘making of the object’ itself, as it were. This methodology produces results which run directly contrary to the liberal and democratic premises - and no doubt contrary to the intentions - of at least some of its practitioners. Domains of the lifeworld hitherto relatively autonomous and loosely connected are summoned to the roll-call, encircled and finally ‘located’ within the system of existing - and dominant - cultural practices.

With regard to the field of what is known as African Art, ‘art’ is what the dominant culture designates as art, often irrespective of the original function and intention of its producers. This operation is all the more problematic in a field of production as diverse and internally contradictory as what is currently encircled and subsumed under the category of ‘art’ in Africa. Here, a wide variety of creative outputs, ranging from ‘academic art’ to what elsewhere may be regarded as little more than ‘tourist art’, are mustered under the banner of the ‘hybrid’, the ‘dis-located’ and the ‘ex-centric’ - central aesthetic categories of postmodernism.

1
Re-locating African Art

Perhaps the most ambitious, and certainly the most comprehensive, attempt to take stock of the variety of visual art forms currently produced on the African continent is the 1991 exhibition *Africa Explores: 20th century African Art*, curated by Susan Vogel for The Center for African Art in New York. Coming at the beginning of the last decade of the Millennium, and at a time when the market’s omnivorous capability to absorb a diverse range of visual products was already well established, the exhibition, as implicit in its very title, represented a brave attempt to let Africa speak on its own terms.

*Africa Explores* purports to reverse the terms of engagement between ‘Africa’ and the rest of the world, namely - of course - the omnipresent, ominous, shadowing ‘West’. Africa is conceived as actively ‘exploring’ rather than passively ‘being explored’, as was the case in colonial imagery. Nonetheless, a subjectified, autonomous and authorial ‘Africa’ still finds it hard to find a place. In terms of location, Africa continues to come under an idiom of placement - ‘exploration’. Despite the attempt to reverse its meaning, ‘exploring’ is still linked to the heteronomous trope of ‘discovery’ and the ‘opening up’ of the continent. In terms of time, the structure of the exhibition imposes categories onto African visual production which are - once again - patterned by an analytical time-grid of the dominant cultural superpowers.

The exhibition was divided into five sections ‘Traditional art’ was distinguished from ‘New Functional Art’ and ‘Urban Art’. These sections were subtitled in turn ‘Elastic Continuum’, ‘future traditions’ and ‘Art of the here and now’. Beyond the actual content of each of the sections, the very fact that they appear as analytically separate suggests rupture and discontinuity. Rupture supposedly occurs between a traditional past so sticky and hard to die as ‘to reach beyond the grave’, as it were, and grab the future by its own tail (hence ‘Elastic Continuum’) and a future which has - already, fatally and inexorably - the stigma of ‘tradition’, whatever that actually means.

The act of singling out ‘tradition’ and projecting it into the future ends up by displacing - and therefore effacing - it. In the exhibition’s ordering of time, ‘tradition’ may be past and future, but never will it be contemporary, ‘of the here and now’. This is because ‘tradition’ is displaced by the next section: ‘Urban Art’, the true representative of the ‘here and now’. This ordering of things is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, so called ‘Urban Art’ has ramifications which reach well out into the culturally and sociologically ‘rural domains’, whence it often originates and/or develops. Moreover, the relationship between the distinct landscapes that constitute the cultural continuum of contemporary Africa is such that it is extremely problematic to distinguish between ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural’ in the same way -say - that one can legitimately talk about inner London and the villages of East Sussex. Even in its weak version - which is most possibly what the organizers intended - juxtaposing a ‘traditional elastic continuum’ which already reaches out into the future (‘future traditions’) to a here and now located in the urban space, results in the dislocation between two (supposedly) radically different spaces and times. Between ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ there opens both a topographical hiatus and a historical disjuncture: Africa - or at least a
substantial part of it - still lives in another time and in another space.

According to this kind of logic, Africa’s ‘explorations’ are forever relegated to other places and other times. However, even a cursory look at the division of artistic labour in Europe, the United States and increasingly any cultural scenario where bourgeois taste has become historically dominant (as in the relevant sections of e-Bay, the globalized web-based auction house) would suggest that there is more sense in talking about ‘elastic continuums’ in the artistic production of the West than in that of Africa. In all probability there is a bigger hiatus - both cultural and social - between consumers of Western and Oriental ‘extinct art’ (to use the definition that Africa Explores deployed for African ‘classic’ art) and those who cannot afford it, than there is between consumers of ‘Urban’ and ‘Extinct’ art in Africa.

Tellingly and revealingly, certain distinctions only apply to Africa and not to The Rest. This is the result of deeply-rooted perceptions whereby the appropriation of the creative works emerging from the African continent (and - incidentally - from other comparable domains of the former colonies) is conducted after aesthetic tastes and trends of a much more catholic nature than what seems to be the case with regard to the home product. Even today, in the context of an ever-expanding and inclusive notion of ‘art’, European barber-shop billboards have not (yet?) found their way to the art galleries, while their African counterparts have long been there as icons of the hybrid and the exotically surreal.

Subsuming Africa, assimilating difference
Africa Explores must be credited with a serious attempt to illustrate the variety of creative production in the visual arts in contemporary Africa. The dislocations in time and space indicated above are probably due as much to the complexity - even intractability - of the situation on the ground as to the inherent inanity of the analytical grid and its theoretical underpinnings.

Interestingly, though, where the New York exhibition fell short of locating African art of the ‘contemporary’ kind was on the ‘home ground’ itself, so to speak. The last two sections of the exhibition, in fact, juxtaposed yet another set of (presumed) diacritical features in what the curator titled ‘International Art: the Official Story’ and ‘Extinct Art: Inspiration and Burden’.

The ‘International Art’ section illustrated the wide spectrum of arte d’autore produced in contemporary Africa - of the kind, that is, that was eventually to be exhibited in professional venues such as the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 1995 or - mutatis mutandis - the Venice Biennale in 2001. The ‘Extinct Art’ section, of course, illustrated the art that would be extinct in its ‘authentic’ incarnation, but which still haunts the markets in the form of vast quantities of copies(?), fakes(?), clones(?) so as probably to outbid any other sale of ‘art’ on the Internet.

What the New York exhibition probably failed to take on board was a trend inaugurated already in 1989 by the exhibition Magiciens de la Terre curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. As I have written elsewhere, the exhibition ‘both interpreted a trend and institutionally established it’. On the one hand Magiciens represented the first gathering of ‘World Art’ under a globalised...
notion of creativity in the visual arts. On the other hand, perhaps more subtly and enduringly, it gave public recognition to the set of aesthetic categories which have come to constitute ‘the postmodern canon’. Famously, the exhibition set on the same would-be level playing field the graphic work of artists of the transavanguardia such as Enzo Cucchi, and the work of Ghanaian artist Kane Kwei, who made coffins shaped after objects connected to the deceased’s occupation. In the same vein, the product of Richard Long’s conceptual landscape art came to occupy the same cultural space as Cyprien Tokoudagba’s Vodoo shrine figures, while the work of Nam June Paik was put in the neighbourhood of Agbagli Kossi’s figures for the Densu shrine, in Togo.

Setting next to one another such apparently incommensurable works was more about establishing equivalencies between ‘magiciens’ than about stating shocking juxtapositions; more about proclaiming continuities than ruptures, suggesting metonymic transformations - and therefore similarities - rather than gauging difference. This was rendered possible by the overall meta-aesthetic of the exhibition: the postmodern celebration of the hybrid, the pastiched, the ‘contaminated’, the in-between, the ‘impure and inauthentic’. In the domain of moral attitudes, this was the height of the much-celebrated category of ‘the ironic’, which gained wide currency, seeping beyond the confines of academia. 6

The fusion of the aesthetically ‘hybrid’ with the morally ‘ironic’ was perhaps best expressed in the public understanding of Kane Kwei’s coffins. They became so popular as to become the object of a documentary film, a book and ‘ironic’ articles in major national newspapers. 7 Similarly, the death of the artist was widely reported in obituaries. Unconfirmed rumours circulated at some point within specialist networks that a number of coffins had been bought by North American collectors to be turned into (no doubt in their turn ‘ironic’ and ‘hybrid’) drink cabinets.

The work that best illustrates both the intentions and the scale of the ‘hybridisation’ fostered by the trend endorsed by Magiciens was a work by Daniel Spoerri, a Rumanian artist living in Switzerland, entitled Ethno-synchrètisme. It featured a mask of the kanaga type used in funerary celebrations by the Dogon of Mali. In its original form, the mask carries on top a distinctive superstructure of wooden planks arranged in a guise known amongst collectors as a ‘cross of Lorraine’. Spoerri’s pastiche has substituted the original wooden superstructure with a garlanded funerary cross of the type common in Continental cemeteries at around the turn of the 19th century.

To ask whether ‘pastiche’ and ‘irony’ can account for the original intentions of the makers of coffins in Ghana or of funerary masks in Mali calls, of course, for obvious answers. But the critique of Magiciens de la Terre must go beyond accusations of ‘inappropriateness’ or ‘cultural incorrectness’. What is more problematic, and this because of cultural and political, and not merely ‘moral’ reasons, is that - with perhaps one exception - all ‘magiciens’ operating outside the Euroamerican establishment had hitherto been categorised as ‘primitive’ or ‘folk’ art.
What *Magiciens* left out in its first selection of ‘World Art’, in other words, were precisely the trained, professional artists which *Africa Explores* classified under the heading ‘the official story’. The implication was that Africa could still only produce interesting visual works - incidentally or accidentally - as coffins or cult figures meant for corpses and for gods. They all waited, like their predecessors at the dawn of the discovery of ‘primitive art’, to be belatedly endorsed as ‘Art’, this time by pastiche-sensitive and ironically-minded curators, merchants and finally collectors, in Europe and the United States.

*Magiciens* set a trend that brought to the international stage - and market - artists such as the Congolese Chèri-Samba, who had a retrospective exhibition at the ICA in London in 1991 - and market prices to match. It also started a trend amongst collectors searching for works to meet the new aesthetics of postmodernist sensitivity, as conceived in *Africa Explores*. A case in point is the Jean Pigozzi Collection. Selecting from somewhere in-between the ‘future traditions’ of the ‘New Functional Art, the ‘Art of the Here and Now’ produced in the shanty towns of West and Central Africa, and the more familiar venues of ‘The Official Story’, the Pigozzi Collection toured Spain, the Netherlands and Mexico between 1991 and 1992. Basically a repetition and a development of the trend set by *Magiciens*, this collection marks the consecration of certain selected works in the production of visual culture in Africa. It also marks - apparently and probably only for a while? - the last public appearance of an aesthetic taste which showed, already at that relatively early age, a tendency towards becoming rather ineffective maniera.

*Africa Now* followed in the steps of *Magiciens* and *Africa Explores*. Objects meant for a specific, functional purpose such a Efiaimbelo’s aloal funerary poles were exhibited alongside the conceptual and visual ‘ironic puns’ of the Cameroonian artist Jean-Baptiste Ngnetchopa, who carves banknotes from wood. Once again, the cult figures of Agbagli Kossi featured alongside the patterns for mural decoration of the Ndebele artist Esther Mahlangu. These were downscaled for the occasion to a more collectable ‘industrial paint on canvas, 186x124cm’ of 1991. Later, these were once again ‘subsumed’ as blown-up decorations for British Airways’ not-so-successful attempt at ‘globalizing’ its image by painting the tails of its aircraft with ‘World Art’ patterns. As it will be recalled, the initial enthusiasm soon met with objections, and BA was forced to repaint its aircrafts with the customary Union Jack.

**The Call to a Future Order**

If *Magiciens de la Terre* served to canonize postmodern and urban African visual culture, *Africa Now* consecrated it as a specific, albeit eclectic, genre. These templates came abruptly to an end with the massive Royal Academy exhibition of 1995 titled *Africa: the Art of a Continent*. Set in the context of the yearlong festival Africa95, this exhibition helped to set the agenda for the analysis of the arts of Africa for many years to come. It represented both an endorsement of well established ‘modernist’ views - some would say worn out and exhausted ones - while, with its deliberate omissions, it paved the
way for the ‘normalisation’ of African visual culture as a (would be) equal partner on the stage of international art.

The show at the Royal Academy was confined to the kind of work which would have fallen, by and large, under the inventory of ‘Extinct Art’ (what I have termed above ‘classic’). In typical fashion, the show intended to ‘endorse’ this kind of African art with the stamp of approval of the ‘Great Tradition’. Worn out, hopelessly belated clichés about African art (again, do not forget: that type of African art) being able ‘to stand up to any other’ or ‘being inspirational for some of the most exciting developments in modern European art’ kept recurring in reviews and media events. The show also came under criticism from various quarters for its decontextualization of African works away from their functional specificity and cultural significance, a by now standard charge against any perspective on African art which privileges a ‘purely aesthetic’, formal appreciation against a cultural and contextual approach. A more sophisticated argument was that the exhibition represented - once again - an act of encirclement and, finally, subsumption of African artistic production to the ‘redemption paradigm’.

By being endorsed with the blessing of the enlightened, ‘modernist’ and progressive Royal Academic gaze, ‘classic’ African Art was finally rescued from the grips of its humble origins and (‘sorry if we are so late’), enshrined alongside the other canonic achievements of World Art.

However, it was the alternative, ‘progressive’ side of Africa95 which was to complete the new re-location of African art. The Whitechapel exhibition, Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa, curated by Clementine Deliss, aimed to highlight precisely what had become obscured by the Royal Academy’s insistence on ‘classic’ African art as the sole representative of the canon. Seven Stories aimed to show that Africa did, in fact, produce its own episodes in ‘modernist’ art. These were explicit in educational centres such as Makerere College in Uganda with roots in the colonial past, as well as in nationally grown centres of artistic production such as the Nsukka School of Nigeria, as well as in the rich, contemporary legacy that such establishments fostered. Against the vaguely dated, loosely provenanced (and occasionally illegally acquired) ‘classic’ works of the Royal Academy, Seven Stories demonstrated that African art is not ‘without a place and out of time’, but was historically situated and dated within the boundaries of the specific forms that modernity attained on the African continent. Against the anonymity of ‘preliterate’ classics, the Whitechapel exhibition certified that ‘authority’ in African art occurred with the same political (and marketing) implications and dilemmas as anywhere else on the artistic scene.

There is in all this a paradox, though. Seven Stories may have represented a courageous counterbalance to The Art of a Continent. And yet the dialogue between the two exhibitions ended up displacing, and ultimately obliterating from view the domain of visual production in contemporary Africa which fits neither the ‘classic’ nor the ‘modern’ paradigm. In fact, none of the works that were so problematically herded together within the confines of the sections ‘New Functional Art: Future Traditions’ and ‘Urban Art: Art of the Here and Now’ of Africa Explores featured in either the RA or the Whitechapel exhibitions. Likewise, none of the ‘hybrid’ works canonised
in both *Magiciens* and *Africa Now* found a place in the set of Africa95, which, ultimately, synchronised the times and places of African art with those of the rest of the artworld. The dialogue between the ‘classic’ and ‘modern’ had the effect of normalising the analytical grid through which African visual production was to be perceived for years to come.

The influence of this analytical grid is evident in the new African gallery at the British Museum. It features works (or are they ‘exhibits’?) which might be considered ‘classic’, while at the same time it acknowledges - by setting ‘samples’ at the very beginning of the exhibition - the existence of a form of production in the visual arts which is wholly contemporary and ‘international’ in nature. It is revealing that none of the works associated with ‘postmodern’ aesthetics in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s are included. At the 49th Venice Biennale of 2001, a major exhibition of art from Africa concentrated on the production of conceptual art. 13 This provides evidence for the argument that African art is - at the moment - promoted and perceived in line with the formal principles of World Art.

‘*Hic Sunt Leones*’ 14: the intractability of African art
Attempts to situate African art to take into account ‘postmodern’ developments are often, in the end, problematic. On the one hand, an enduring ‘traditional’ art is relocated in an enduring ‘other time and other space’ (which is so enduring as to include the future). On the other hand, works of art which are highly functionally specific and, in that respect, ‘local’, are relocated somewhere within the flux of the postmodern ‘anything goes, the weirder the better’. Setting up African art as an instance of the ‘same’ - a variation in the variety of World Art - destroys its specificity. Yet the more its specificity is exalted, the more it is cast - yet again - in the enduring ‘other time and other place’ of old, as witnessed by the neoprimitivizing tastes of postmodern aesthetics.

In spite of the efforts to relocate African artistic production in place and time, it proves elusive, slippery, difficult to handle. Caught between a sense of place which does not fit the requirements of its cultural topography, and cast in a periodisation of time out of sync with a contemporaneity set on other cultural meridians, Africa’s picture is fatally, still, constructed as that of a continent out of place, out of time: hic sunt leones.

Notes
3 www.eBay.com/antiques/ethnographic/African
University Press.
14 ‘Hic sunt leones’ means ‘here are lions’. It was written on the uncharted regions of the African continent in old maps.

Cesare Poppi was born in Bologna, Italy, in 1953. He took his first degree in Philosophy at the University of Bologna. Later he studied in Cambridge, were he was awarded an MA and PhD in Social Anthropology in 1983. Since 1989 he has been the Deputy Director of the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he lectures in the Anthropology of African Art. He has conducted extensive fieldwork amongst the Ladins of the Dolomites (N Italy) and the Gurunsi-speaking populations of NW Ghana, where he is studying the Sigma initiation cult of masks. He has collaborated in the production of a number of ethnographic documentaries and has planned and overseen the realisation of the Ladin Cultural Museum in Vigo di Fassa in collaboration with Ettore Sottsass jr. He has published numerous articles on ethnicity, popular culture, carnivals, secrecy and secret societies. Amongst his recent publications are ‘Wider Horizons with Larger Details: Subjectivity, Ethnicity and Globalization’ in A. Scott, The Limits of Globalization, London 1997 and, with R. Morelli, Santi Spiriti e Re: Mascherate Invernali nel Trentino, Trento 1998. c.poppi@uea.ac.uk

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