

Discussion

Between Art and African Art - The Refusal of Ousmane Sow

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I have been impressed by each of the insightful presentations of Professors Yoshida, Ochiai, and Muroi. Thank you.

Prof. Yoshida presented us with two major issues: one is the problem of the system or institution which demarks a clear border between what is meant by museums of Art and museums of Natural History or Ethnology, or the border between art and artifact, and the other is the issue of the current impossibility for the exhibiting side, for example curators and museums, to one-sidedly represent one's own culture or that of another area. Prof. Yoshida says that such systems have operated very politically in recent history. He has stressed the essential nature of a reciprocal dialogue between the exhibitors and the side of the 'exhibited.' He says, therefore, that museums should try to be a center of dialogue and discussion, in other words, a forum, where the possibility of developing creative intercultural relations must be pursued.

Prof. Ochiai offered a comparative analysis of details found in photographic albums edited and published in Europe and Japan from the late 19th to the early 20th century. He showed us clearly how they were put together and how their contents differed. For example, in his analysis, the Big Album of Carl W. Dammann, published in Germany contains only 4 sheets of photographs from Europe, and that these are not of the so-called fully civilized German and British peoples. On the other hand, some of the albums edited by the Japanese contain many more sheets from Europe, including portrayals of English, German, and French peoples. In this way, Prof. Ochiai pointed out the clear contrast in contents between those albums put together by Europeans and those made by the Japanese. At the same time, he has pointed out that both types of albums share the same worldview based on evolutionism and Eurocentrism. Then Prof. Ochiai makes clear that what lies behind this similarity is the idea of enlightenment as the converting software which the modern history of Western Europe had produced. Finally, he suggests that if this converting software of enlightenment were not questioned, we would never find any effective answer to our question. The question is one of modernism, as well as that of establishing reciprocity through mutual dialogue. And I agree that the possibility of de-enlightenment would be a definite problem to us

as Prof. Ochiai has so correctly pointed out.

Prof. Muroi refers to various problems in the age of "internationalization," particularly the dualistic structure of so many fields in Japan, which is a latecomer in the international race toward modernization.

I felt that the presentations by these three panelists are deeply linked. In fact, in them I can pick up several keywords which define this part of the symposium. The first two are, of course, dialogue and reciprocity. Prof. Yoshida has pointed out the dialogue between the exhibitors' side and the exhibited side in the field of representation that we call 'the exhibition' will be more and more important. I think we can include in this dialogue the voice of the viewer, that is, what the audience has to say. The problem then proceeds in another dimension. That is, in order to construct a continuous opportunity for dialogue, and moreover in order to recycle the achievement of dialogue to the actual field of representation, what is actually required? In other words, though we can declaim our slogan of dialogue and reciprocity, how can we make it practically effective? I think there has to be a some sort of institutional guarantee.

What I am saying is related to Prof. Muroi's presentation; would it be possible to imagine a narrative made up of plural subjects? I am rather skeptical. I can imagine narratives which believe their subject to be plural and/or public, but I think all narratives are private, and then inevitably politicized in the end.

It was very interesting for me to see that Prof. Ochiai pointed out that whenever we discuss the possibility and impossibility of dialogue and reciprocity, we have to question the converting software of enlightenment which stands as their foundation. Incidentally, I think his comparison of enlightenment to software is very appropriate. But, if I may be permitted, I would go further, to compare it to an operating system running on as fundamental a piece of software as Windows, made by the Microsoft Empire. No matter what we choose to discuss, everything should be reduced to its architecture. Who knows? We may end up calling this a blind alley, or an irony of enlightenment. Anyway, the problem arises. If the software of enlightenment is not mastered, neither dialogue nor reciprocity could make any sense.

I am inevitably led to select another keyword at this point: enlightenment and de-enlightenment. I am quite sure that we must question the possibility and impossibility of enlightenment and de-enlightenment. Perhaps discussing de-enlightenment might seem too elusive here, so I would like to suggest that, to make clear the historical authenticity or inauthenticity of enlightenment, we should take up the problem of the perception of the 'Other' and the representation of other cultures in pre - modern history before the idea of enlightenment came to be shared throughout Western Europe.

Finally, Prof. Inaga, the coordinator of the symposium, kindly suggested to me that I present my own view on the theme of this part of the symposium, so I would like to take this opportunity to do so.

Let me begin by introducing a small episode from my own experience. Four years ago, in 1995, I organized an exhibition entitled 'An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time.' The aim of this exhibition was to present a comprehensive image of contemporary African art to the Japanese public, who cannot be expected to have many opportunities to access African culture in their everyday lives. This exhibition focused on two major issues: one was to trace the historical development, not of so-called traditional art such as masks or god figures, but of contemporary art and artifacts in Africa, and the other focus was to present artifacts as well as art in as wide a context as possible by including street signboards, and a display of street vendors right next to such fine arts as painting and sculpture. I am proud that this exhibition was a breakthrough to a new stage in the history of cultural interchange between Japan and Africa.

In the process of making this exhibition happen, a small incident came up, which I needed to address. When I asked Mr. Ousmane Sow, a Senegalese sculptor, to join in the exhibition, to my surprise, he refused. "I would never contribute to any exhibition with the title of African art," he said. His reason was very clear; he is just an artist, never an artist who does African art. In fact, I could not find his name in the cultural project 'Africa 95' which was held in London at almost the same time to commemorate the abolition of apartheid in South Africa.

Let me make a few background statements concerning the sculptor Ousmane Sow. He was born in Dakar in 1935. Though he knew sculpture from his early days, it was only after spending many years as a Physiotherapist in Paris that he returned to his sculpture. He had been inspired by photographs of Nouba fighters in Sudan, East Africa, taken by the famous Leni Riefenstahl.

He had already had several one-man exhibitions organized for him in Paris and other European cities. The Pont des Arts in central Paris was filled with his works in an exhibition held in 1999. And also in 1992, he had been invited to 'Documenta 9,' a big international project of contemporary art held every four or five years in Kassel, Germany. Here in Japan, too, a small one man show was held in Tokyo in 1992.

Coming back to my subject, I was very embarrassed by Sow's refusal. I had been sure that his participation was indispensable to my project, and had never doubted his willing acceptance. I had my first rendezvous with him in 1990 in Dakar, more than five years before. I had even invited him to my museum to foster our friendship when he visited Tokyo for his exhibition.

I knew I had two options at hand: the first was to give up on having his works, and the second was to make a loan request not to the artist but to a collector of his works. At that time, I knew but just one collector who collected Ousmane's work in Japan, and it would not have been terribly difficult to make contact with other collectors in Paris.

I selected the former option, that is to say, I gave up on his participation in my project. The episode, however, has haunted me ever since, particularly when I came to address the problem of cultural interchange.

I think one can see broadly two points, in terms of the theme of this symposium, in the problems raised by Ousmane Sow's refusal. Firstly, there was the problem of the power politics being played between the exhibitor's side and the exhibited side right in the center field of our contact zone--the art exhibition, where cross-cultural contact must be in constant view. Here I don't think many words need to be wasted to point out that the power on the 'exhibitors' side, say, the power of the planners side such as curators or museums, is stronger than that of the 'exhibited' side. Now that we agree on that, here are the dilemmas.

Generally speaking, we should be able to accept that the exhibitors' side has the freedom, as well as the right, to interpret the significance of any particular artist or artwork within various contexts as it sees fit. On the other hand, the exhibited side, typically the artists invited to exhibitions, should have the same freedom and right to reject any unsatisfactory, unfair, untrue interpretations imposed by curators or museums. If this is so, then how, on what points, can we reconcile both the freedom and the right of interpretation, with that of rejection? If the freedom and the right to interpretation on the exhibitors side is accepted totally, the rights of the exhibited side might be utterly ignored. And if the freedom and the right of rejection of the exhibited side should be wholly accepted, then exhibitions might become impossible to be organized at all. In any case, the contact zone of the exhibition is exposed to what may be a fatal crisis.

The second of the two problems raised by Ousmane Sow's refusal is that there are generally two different types of exhibitions, and that these two types of exhibitions are arbitrarily and politically chosen according to a context that represents a kind of double standard on the part of organizers. From Ousmane's viewpoint, it follows that there are these two types of exhibitions in the world: one an exhibition of art, and the other an exhibition of African art. If he, Ousmane, participates in an exhibition of African art, he will be recognized as an artist of African art and treated accordingly. Once he is positioned somewhere in the framework of African art, it might be absolutely difficult for him to escape it. One can agree that he has a good reason for

refusing to participate in any exhibition with the title of African art.

Let me examine the difference of art, and African art, a little more minutely. Not much needs to be said about the word art, especially as to how, and when, and where it was made. What is widely accepted as art among us today is a conception formed around the mid-nineteenth century in Western Europe. In terms of geography and space, as well as in terms of time, art was originally a conception peculiar to Europe, particularly to Western Europe. It follows that 'art' is European and modern from the outset. In other words, art is none other than what is European on the one hand, and modern on the other. It goes without saying that its characteristics are beauty and fineness. Thus, the difference between art and African art is, to tell the truth, the difference between European, modern art, and African art, or beautiful, Fine art as contrasted with 'not beautiful art.'

By the way, it is Europe itself that asserts this difference through its various media such as academies, museums, journalism and so on. So, the idea of European art and African art become interchangeable with 'Our art' and 'African art.' This dualism shows us that Africa is just an indicator of that which distinguishes the 'Other' from 'Us,' or the 'Other' from modern Europe. It is not difficult to make a list of other such indicators. For example, one of the most representative of indicators is the 'primitive,' which can be referred to as the 'Other' when it is juxtaposed with modern Europe in terms of time. Another sort of indicator is the word 'Japanese.' I needn't specify in words at this symposium organized by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

The problem results from the fact that determining adjectives such as the ones I have used are fused in a bond with the word 'art' which shows no hesitation in advocating its universality. As a result, African art or primitive art or Japanese art is regarded as having a universal value as art on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is distinguished from 'art' as African, primitive, or Japanese. The effect is one of ambivalence. Either of two faces may be freely and conveniently chosen for whatever special purpose by those who assert the difference and the sameness among 'art,' African art, primitive art, and Japanese art. Modern Europe can cover the 'art' of the Other, but at the same time it can cover, even conceal the difference or the discriminatory factor between European 'art' and the art of the Other. Europeans tend to say that though there is a slight difference between 'art' and African art, or between 'art' and primitive art, or between 'art' and Japanese art, all of them are universal. After all, through the narrative of 'art,' the whole world has been beautifully represented by Europe as if nothing had happened to the Other's art in the whole span of modern history.

Isn't Ousmane Sow's rejection of us, his objection to the ideology of our 'art'?