

## EDITOR'S DESK

### Salvos across the Sahara

John Pepper

This special issue of *Critical Interventions* is dedicated to problematizing ideas of Africa in relation to North African art and visual culture, and was guest edited by Jessica Winegar and Kashia Pieprzak. Winegar is a noted author on modern Egyptian art (*Creative Reckonings*, Stanford, 2006) and Pieprzak's book on art and modernity in Morocco will be published by University of Minnesota Press in 2010. We are honored to have received contributions from among the leading scholars of North African and Islamic studies, and this attests to the dedication and the diplomatic gifts of the guest editors. Winegar and Pieprzak argue in their introductory essay that there is a rich history of cross-Sahara engagement between Africa's culture-makers that has for the most part remained off the map for scholars interested in either (sub-Saharan) "African" modernity, or "Middle Eastern" art and culture, or problems of "race." One indicator of other possibilities: today the supposedly windswept and barren Sahara itself is being rewritten as fertile ground, as both metaphor and geographic site for an interstitial realm of identity formation and culture creation.

Our focus in this issue is mostly on popular culture, one of the pillars of our larger mission to create a space for scholarship on questions of African modernity's deeper histories. This is also an effect of the actual submissions sent following our call for papers, more than of the original intentions of the guest editors for this issue, who had additionally sought studies of intellectual and artistic modernism. In my view there is more work

to be done in our future issues on the broader subject of historic forms of modernism and modernity in North Africa, whether these were "Africa-centered" or not.

Let this, then, be a broadly stated call: Research studies, archival materials, and retrospective statements are urgently wanted in the area of historical studies of North Africa's modernism, from the formative years of the 1950s and earlier, or from the revolutionary period of the 1960s. There is also a large blank space in the academic study of arts of the 1970s- to early 1990s period.

As Okwui Enwezor claimed in his introduction to the *Short Century* catalogue almost a decade ago, modernism in Africa during the lead-up to independence from colonial rule (in most places circa 1960) insisted on the global extension of a higher form of humanism, a future humanism that would be inclusive of African cultures and a better historicized humanism that would be more honest about European righteousness and hypocrisy during its own age of "enlightenment." But, while film and literature studies have been more circumspect, the story of how critical visual art practice moved in Africa from revolutionary fervor in the 1950s and 1960s to the positive nomadology of transnationalism seen during the past two decades still needs to be thoroughly written. Those years "in-between" were a time when artists were imprisoned for their views, or went into exile and were active in other international settings, or were disillusioned by the rise of corrupt, comprador, authoritarian or

religiously fundamentalist governments in the very countries where they had recently fought so hard for the global extension of that higher form of humanism. The question is: What happens after the euphoria of post-independence wears off? As a South Africanist who has written on the art discourse of the anti-apartheid movement, I am aware of the kinds of kinds of chaos, dissatisfaction, and intellectual emigration that haunt post-revolutionary societies. South Africa's experience over the past decade reminds me of what happened elsewhere in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. Shouldn't we study culture-makers of that earlier period if only to find clues as to how to see through the current dilemmas?

There are other concerns that must be addressed delicately, related to what Winegar and Pieprzak refer to as the neglected "race" issue in North African studies. Artists from North Africa, when referring to the rest of Africa, or even when invoking their own "identity" as pan-African, sometimes revert to a stock set of images from the colonial repertoire (or from Senghorian Négritude?) of a colorful, musical, *savage* "jungle" Africa—even while embracing these terms as a means toward a kind of social radicalism. It is not enough to say these artists are embracing their African side. Also, here in North America, given our notorious inclination toward self-regard, it is not surprising that there is interest shown in American experiences of North Africa (e.g. Brian Edwards' wonderful book, *Morocco Bound*), but less in examining the creation of a radical modernism from Maghreb or Mashreq perspectives. The authors and editors of *Critical Interventions 5* seek to redirect our attention to those local histories of experience which, incidentally, often included contributions of European and American visual artists, writers, musicians, and political activists in the local art scenes.

My title for this opening salvo was inspired by the polyvalent name of a Moroccan radical culture journal of the 1960s: "*Souffles/ Anfás*," which in French means "breath, gun blast" and in Arabic: "breath, breeze." *Souffles* began publication as a "revue of poetry and literature," in French, in 1966, a decade after Moroccan independence. Its inaugural subtitle and Francophone aspect indicated its international modernist orientation as a classically avant-garde venture, and as "a manifesto for a new aesthetics in the Maghreb." After 1968 it also published material in Arabic, and its orientation became more politically radical, shifting toward local demands for democratic culture on one hand and to connection with broader "Third World" struggles on the other. The radical turn was reflected in its new subtitles: "Maghrebian Situations and Literature" and "Action and Cultural Research." This outspokenness incensed local authorities, who banned *Souffles* in 1972 and imprisoned some of its editors, including founder Abdellatif Laâbi, who was released in 1980 and went into exile in France. Our gratitude goes to Abdellatif Laâbi, for allowing us to translate and re-present key essays from *Souffles* for the Archives section of *Critical Interventions 5*. We hope that future contributors to this journal may begin to narrate the critical moment exemplified by texts such as these, for North Africa and for the rest of the continent.

Lastly, congratulations are due to *Critical Interventions* founder and editor, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, who has been awarded the prestigious Herskovits Award presented by the African Studies Association for the best scholarly work on Africa published in English in the previous year, for his book, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (University of Rochester Press, 2008).