

Who Knows Tomorrow: When art becomes part of a political agenda.

By Katerina Valdivia Bruch

The Nationalgalerie Berlin has invited five renowned artists of African descent to present mostly site-specific installations in public spaces for the occasion of the exhibition *Who Knows Tomorrow*. The exhibition gives a view of Africa's colonial past as a mirror of Europe, and opens a reflection about history, identity, globalisation, multiculturalism and migration. *Who Knows Tomorrow* connects these political, social and historical approaches with some important buildings of the German capital. The works of El Anatsui, Zarina Bhimji, António Ole, Yinka Shonibare MBE and Pascale Marthine Tayou are able to be seen until September, 26th 2010 in Berlin.

The main question of the exhibition is not about African art, it is rather an approach to Africa's connections with German and European history. The starting point of the exhibition is the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, considered as the beginning of European colonialisation in Africa. At that time, Germany emerged as an imperial power promoted by Otto von Bismarck's *Realpolitik*, which demanded an overseas policy moved by merchantist thesis and ideas of power. Bismarck, the first German chancellor (1862-1890) to William I of the Prussian Kingdom, put Prussia in the foreground of European imperialism and Germany as a third colonial power in Africa. The new imperialist period had as outcome the formalisation of the Scramble for Africa, which resulted in the elimination of most existing forms of African self-governance and autonomy. Later on, the struggle between these European imperialist powers around Africa was one of the reasons that led to World War I, after which Germany lost all its colonial power in the African continent.

In the early stage of the construction of the German national identity, several emblematic museums and monuments were built in the capital city, Berlin. The appointed architect was Karl Friedrich Schinkel, who played a major role in the construction of buildings that would serve the purpose of this ideal. For instance, the design of the Museum Island, with its neoclassical style, linked Germany with antique Greek and Roman empires. Besides this, museums such as Altes Museum, Pergamon Museum and Neues Museum were places of knowledge about other cultures, but also represented German power either in archiving collections of antique Greek, Roman, Egyptian or Persian empires; or presenting important legacies from private collectors of art of the 19th century, who donated their works to the Alte Nationalgalerie. Thus, art was a pretext to show how powerful the new German state was, and the Prussian King was aware of the immanent connection between politics, art and culture.

In *Who Knows Tomorrow*, individual artists interpret German history and its search for identity, mirroring Africa and its relation to Berlin of the 19th century. Interestingly, there is a sort of nostalgia about Germany's colonial past and current African-German issues and post-colonial concerns are in some way overseen. The artworks present almost forgotten ties between Europe and Africa reflecting about social history, recalling memory and hybridisation.

Outside the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, we can appreciate the monumental installation of António Ole (1951, Luanda). The installation *The Entire World/Transitory Geometry* (2010) on the left wing of the museum shows globalised trade and local improvised housing constructions in Angola, reinterpreting massive containers as part of quotidian private sphere. These precarious buildings made with found materials remind us of similar constructions we might find in urban areas in big cities in Asia or Latin America, and have become also a subject-matter in some outskirts of major European cities, for instance Paris or London. The container marks a border between the museum architecture and the massive metal structure. It represents the gap between rich and poor and shows some consequences of global trade.

Inside the museum is Zarina Bhimji's video *Waiting* (2007) that is about a sisal-processing factory introduced by Germans to the German colonies in East Africa. The material is used for ropes, carpets and cords. Born to Indian immigrants in Mbarara, Uganda, Zarina Bhimji is known for her poetic works in photography, video and interviews. A former student of Goldsmith's College, London, where she lives and works today, she has developed work based on her observations about history and memory, especially of Africa and Europe, but also has done a series of journeys through Africa tracing Africa's and India's colonial past.

The front facade of the Alte Nationalgalerie is partly covered by the site-specific installation *Ozone Layer and Yam Mounds* (2010) by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui. The piece, which hangs on the entrance columns of the building, in

front of the inscription with golden letters DER DEUTSCHEN KUNST MDCCCLXXI (TO GERMAN ART MDCCCLXXI), is a colourful tapestry made with industrial recycled or wasted materials. The building and its almost temple-like meaning is threatened by this installation and shows the importance of thinking about colonial responsibility and its consequences. El Anatsui, who lives in Nigeria, got international attention with his participation during the 52nd Venice Biennale, for which he did a complex installation composed by a netting of thousands of bottle tops.

For *Who Knows Tomorrow* Yinka Shonibare MBE got the 14th century neo-gothic Friedrichswerde Church, known for its collection of busts made by German sculptor Christian Friedrich Tieck. In the sculpture installation *Colonel Tarleton and Mrs. Oswald Shooting* (2007), a leisure activity of British aristocracy is hiding brutal violence and immorality. On one side, we see a headless Colonel Tarleton, who was an active supporter for slavery, on the other we see Mrs. Oswald, whose husband became rich thanks to slave plantations. Both are hunting pheasants. The installation is placed in an area surrounded by sculptures of German personalities. It seems as if these British characters are dialoguing with their German counterparts.

In *Scramble for Africa* (2003), the artist represents the Berlin conference of 1884-85 portraying European leaders during a meeting at a table with the African map on top of it, discussing how they would divide the African continent. However, they are dressed in Victorian costumes with African patterns - actually, these are batik painted textiles produced in Indonesia which the British Commonwealth sent to Africa. In his work, there is a subtle criticism about mechanisms of power. With these installations, the church loses its holy meaning and becomes part of a political debate. Yinka Shonibare MBE (London, 1962) got international recognition in 1997 when he was part of the exhibition *Sensation*, which featured the so-called 'Young British Artists' (YBA) at the Saatchi Gallery. The artist, who grew up in Nigeria, became famous showing European characters and European history as if they were conquered by African people.

Further on, we can appreciate the installation *Colonial Erection* (2010) by Pascale Marthine Tayou at the Neue Nationalgalerie. This transparent building was designed by Mies van der Rohe and it considered an icon of modern architecture. It was opened in 1968 in West Berlin as a counterpart to the Alte Nationalgalerie, which was in former GDR. The 54 African flags in front of the main entrance of the museum simulate the entrance of an international institution or convention center giving the building a new meaning. Around the flag installation, there are some large-scale polychrome wooden sculptures of colon, figures that represent the colonisers by African people. Again, the building's facade is challenged by the artwork. It confronts the viewer to make her/him think about the presence of African people in global political decisions, but also about the national identities represented by the flags. Pascale Marthine Tayou (Yaoundé, 1967) is a former law student who became a self taught artist, after fearing to become part of the corrupt legal system of his country. He began his artistic career in the nineties after spending some years in Europe, mostly in Belgium where he still lives.

Close to the Neue Nationalgalerie, the Daimler Chrysler Collection at Potsdamer Platz is also showing contemporary African art in the exhibition *Ampersand*, featuring at the same time pieces from the Daimler art collection with artworks by South African artists. I believe that these exhibitions are more related to the German agenda in Africa and the president's visit to this continent, plus this year's football world championship in South Africa, than to a real interest in the African contemporary art scene. In any case, African art is suddenly 'in'.

Berlin, September 2010