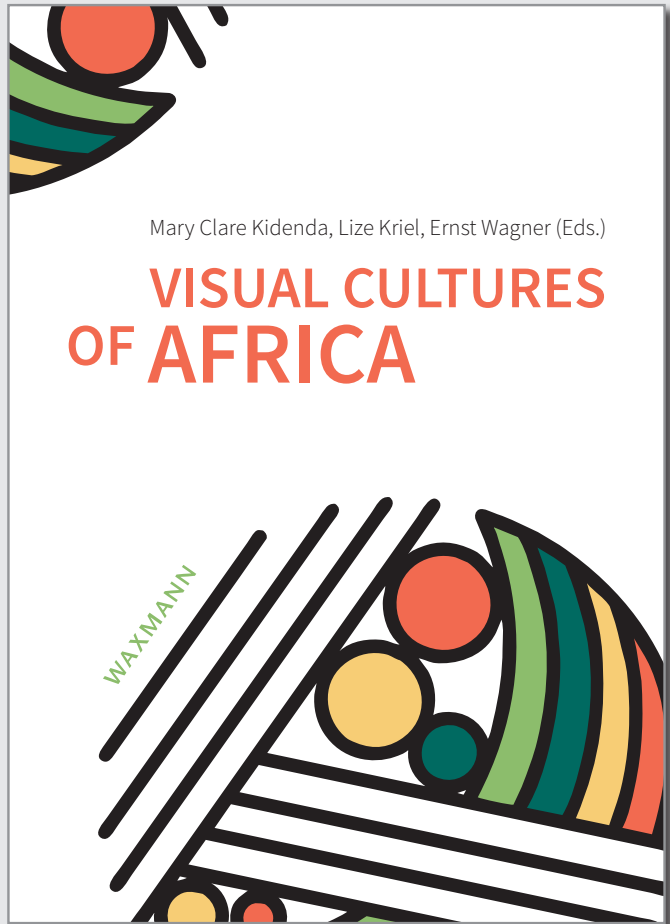


Mary Clare Kidenda, Lize Kriel,
Ernst Wagner (Eds.)

Visual Cultures of Africa

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Preface

The Technical University of Kenya is part of the *Exploring Visual Cultures* project.¹ There, the School of Creative Arts and Media, together with the Kenya National Museum, Kenyatta University and the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich were scheduled to host a joint conference on Visual Culture in Nairobi in April 2020. The conference subthemes were: Visual culture in ‘traditional’ arts and crafts; visual culture and the archaeological record; visual culture in music and the performing arts; visual culture in the ‘fine’ arts; visual culture in journalism and popular media; visual culture in interactive and other digital media.

Because of the COVID pandemic, we could not have a face-to-face conference. Thus, we decided to write a book instead. This book *Visual Cultures of Africa* tells stories of the past, present, and future and how intricately linked cultures and identities are. The book explores the complex histories and discusses how people have used images, objects, and artefacts to describe what is going on in society and give expressions of their fears, hopes, and resolutions for centuries.

Visual Cultures of Africa is a book of many voices. Many people helped bring this book to fruition, and we are grateful to them. Once this book started, there were many people involved who deserve acknowledgement. Their ideas and suggestions helped us get to a manuscript that made us say, “Yes, it finally is a book!”

Our first debt is to members of the *Exploring Visual Cultures* panel of experts chaired by Avitha Sooful, University of Pretoria, South Africa who

1 *Exploring Visual Cultures* (EVC) focuses on the concepts of *Shared Heritage*, *Education for Sustainable Development*, and *Global Citizenship Education* (as defined by UNESCO). The project addresses traditional academic subjects like art and history. It looks at images and image practices through a broad inter- and transdisciplinary lens, asking questions about culture, heritage, and our shared globalized future.

Exploring Visual Cultures project focuses on the conscious selection of images in different countries or regions, their respective interpretations, and their use in education. The different interpretations of an image or object often tell us about people’s culture, self-concepts and being. Throughout the use of art, visual images and artefacts, people can interpret, think through and give meaning to the object, image or piece of art.

Exploring Visual Cultures provides a platform online and through face-to-face discussions where all participating teams give different interpretations. It also looks for answers in transnational dialogues between artists, (art) educators, (art) historians, (cultural) anthropologists and students. It is collaborative and multi-perspectival, and it aims at mutual exchange about imageries and their meanings. *Exploring Visual Cultures* shares results with a worldwide community of researchers and educators through conferences, publications, and websites.

responded generously to the call to write and review the chapters. We would like to acknowledge the outstanding debt we owe to the writers who wrote chapters for this book in the last two years. Special appreciation goes to the peer reviewers. They made the thoughts, ideas, and words sing. They were all so critical to this book's success. Each chapter was blind peer reviewed by two critical readers and changes and corrections required for the approved chapters were overseen by the editors.

George Washington Karani, our secretary, did a tremendous job writing the minutes and keeping us updated and up to speed during all the meetings. We want to let him know how incredible he is.

We also thank the publisher Waxmann for the always helpful support and patience with this complex project.

We thank the Federal Foreign Office of Germany for the financial support as well as the South African National Institute for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NIHSS) (Catalytic Project CRP20/1032) in the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria: "African au-o-ral art in image-text objects: Cultural translations of precolonial objects and remains" for supporting the publication of this book.

Mary Clare Kidenda, Lize Kriel, and Ernst Wagner

Introduction

Lize Kriel

Visual cultures of Africa

The voices in this book offer a multi-perspectival approach to visual culture – hence, our use of the plural, visual cultures, in the title. Culture, being practised, is a hard thing to describe in the singular, or to capture in a fixed series of images, whether graphic, mental, metaphoric, or otherwise. This becomes even more apparent when applied to the complex ‘Africa’ – a continent, a place, a space, a history, an idea, an experience, a view on the world, a vision. Thus, there are numerous ‘conversations’ between the chapters in this book, with various aspects featuring in several of them, and with authors inadvertently complementing, commenting on and contradicting one another. Yet there are recurrent themes that draw the chapters towards one another. Following both the coherences and centrifugal motifs, the contributions to this book are presented in four sections, with the chapters on the margins of each heralding the transitions between them.

Skills and knowledge in Africa: The preservation and transfer of visual cultures as praxis

The first section is presented from positions within Africa, focusing on making. The authors of the chapters in Section One are all concerned with the skills and the knowledge underpinning the visual cultural expressions they investigate, along with their transfer and preservation as praxis. *Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah and Isaac Opoku-Mensah* take the reader to Ghana for the opening scene, providing a glimpse into the ways Akan symbolism is reproduced in objects like cloth and chiefly regalia, illustrating how many age-old symbols continue to be adapted to the social and religious needs of contemporary society.

In the second chapter *Jane Otieno* moves the spotlight to Kisumu, Kenya and the role of traditional pottery production in the social sustainability of a Jonyuol Nyalo women group. Otieno emphasises that, along with the appearance and utility of the pottery, the production process itself expresses the belief system of this community of women in the Seme region.

Staying in Kisumu, *Mary Clare Kidenda*’s chapter introduces the work of women artisans in Karachuonyo and the Obunga slum. These women harvest and process water hyacinth for furniture production. Similar to Otieno, Kidenda emphasises the cyclical process of observation and imitation through which the skills are being transferred, but she also stresses the elements of self-reflection

and self-evaluation under the tutelage of master artisans and how these practices enhance the sustainability and profitability of the women's endeavours.

In chapter four *Rashida Resario* takes the reader back to Ghana where she continues with the theme of skill transfer. Her topic, dance, brings to the surface embodiment and performativity, underlying aspects in all the chapters in this section. The capability of performers, through mimetic empathy, to mediate the invisible values intrinsic in cultural-specific dance repertoires which are not their own, shows powerful capacity for authentic representation, cultural translation, the transfer of tradition, and heritage conservation.

In their chapter *Melisa Achoko Allela and Odoch Pido* move on from dance to another deeply ingrained dimension of a specific kind of knowledge transfer in Africa: orature. They find their answer for safeguarding the continuation of embodied visual cultures in the digital, by suggesting a virtual alternative for the enactment of oral performative practices. They report on the creation of an expressive animated Embodied Conversational Agent, or digital prototype, of *Lawino*, the woman storyteller in Okot p'Bitek's East African literary classic. Significantly, by digitising the narrator, the authors of this chapter highlight the extent to which the viability of embodied visual culture hinges simultaneously on the skill transfer from performer to performer, as well as on the transfer of knowledge and experience from the performer to the audience.

Finally, *Alexis Malefakis's* chapter on skill research in an ethnographic museum consolidates the themes in the first section and bridges over to the second cluster of chapters in the book, featuring objects in collections, museums and other practices of conservation and display. By applying the notions of thinking-through-making and social learning, Malefakis contextually 'returns' a collection of wire models in the Ethnographic Museum, University of Zürich, to their community of production in Bujumbura, Burundi. This heralds a new broad theme in the book: visual cultures of Africa: the wire models of well-known Western car manufacturers crafted in Bujumbura are African-designed, -engineered and -crafted. These items of African ingenuity, based on the observation of imported goods, have been exported as high-end commodities.

Visual Cultures of Africa in collections, museums, and exhibitions: From conservation to conversation

While the visual cultures featured in the first section emphasise longevity through experiential and observational transfer within African communities of practice, the second cluster of chapters focuses on visual cultures contained in receptacles for display, often to communities of spectators that exceed the audiences these objects and their use had initially been intended for. In all the cases featured in this section there is an element of dislodgment, decontextualiza-

tion and severance which enables conservation but necessitates conversation towards reconnection and an approximation of the mimetic empathy which Resario had advocated for in her chapter in the previous section.

In his chapter *Stefan Eisenhofer* discusses *minkisi*, also referred to as “fetish figures”, from the ancient central African kingdom of the Kongo which had found their way into collections in Germany. Eisenhofer explains them as evidence of visual interactions between Africa and Europe since the seventeenth century. These objects, crafted by central African artisans, were for Christian worship and as such incorporated Catholic forms, and yet they retained indigenous central African characteristics linking them to the ancestral realm as well as the royal power of the Manikongo.

While the *minkisi* present a case of African artistic incorporation of European symbolism, *Mark Evans* writes about European collectors, critics and artists drawing inspiration from Africa. In his chapter, he explains how African art, as introduced to England by twentieth-century émigrés from central Europe, contributed to, as he refers to it, “the Western discovery of the ‘artness’ of African art”.

The conversation between the German and Kenyan curators *Njeri Gachihi*, *Frauke Gathof*, *Clara Himmelheber*, *Lydia Nafula*, *Leonie Neumann*, *Philemon Nyamanga*, and *Juma Ondeng* addresses the point of accountability. It drives to the fore the questions of provenance, ownership, and custodianship of the material remainders of African visual cultures as conserved in museums, both in Africa itself and in overseas institutions. The conversation format of this chapter resembles the reciprocal nature of the ameliorating interaction between the participating curators of Kenyan collections ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’.

The last two chapters in this section build upon the necessity and the complexity of a conversation between custodians of African cultural heritage. High on the agenda, is the measure of control either Africans or descendants of former colonisers wield over the location and the representation of the sites or collections at stake. *Bea Lundt* writes about the castles, or fortified trading-posts, built as from the fifteenth century by European traders along what is today Ghana’s coast. Soon their “merchandise” also included human labourers, who were held in “slave dungeons” within the castles before being shipped across the Atlantic. Lundt investigates how the dubious inheritance of these castles is managed by an independent African state and perceived globally as world heritage, although in more tormenting ways by descendants of the former slavers and enslaved. Lundt’s investigation into the legacy of the fixed stone citadels along the west coast of Africa aptly invites juxtaposition to *Benjamin Merten*’s essay on CONCRETE LIMBO, a three-week exhibition which brought West Africa’s spatial environs to Berlin in October 2020. Merten’s chapter explores the role of art and architecture in sub-Saharan city life. He emphasises the possibilities and opportunities for engagement also by Africans

in the Diaspora, especially when configuring spaces as public, private, institutional as well as digital.

Visual expressions in Africa appropriated from encounters with the West

The contributors to this section, with their focus on conserved and/or displayed objects and sites, affirm the adage that African history is world history. Through transcontinental dialogue the intricate entanglement of African visual cultures in legacies of long-distance trade, migration and colonialism come to the surface. Sections Three and Four build on this argument. With Malefakis' critique of a reductive stereotyping of African ingenuity as 'recycle culture' still resonating from the first section, Merten concludes Section Two with suggestions about the potential of digital platforms for conversation. The focus of this section must therefore be on the materials and media of African visual expression – as appropriated through encounters with the rest of the globe. The authors contributing to it successively hinge their arguments on the following: beads, shoes, books, film, and cellular phones.

Poetically calling it a “movement on its own”, *Esther Kute and Odoch Pido* illustrate how footwear came to play a specific role in Africa during the twentieth century. Whether by making, decorating or wearing them, shoes have become a marker of 'indivisuality' (the authors' term): of individual tastes and preferences by the personalisation of global trends. Painted canvas shoes, bead- and fabric-adorned Akala and funky Velskoene from Africa, are also setting trends in the global market. Kute and Pido add an important dimension to their chapter by probing into the changing role of footwear as individual expression for successive generations in Africa by including the nostalgic reflections of Africans on this via social media in the twenty-first century.

Lize Kriel pulls back to pre-digital print media in her chapter on the continued significance of the book as object, specifically with its cover art, to make truth-claims about identity and belonging in South Africa.

In their chapter *Lydia Muthuma and Fred Mbogo* probe further into the (counter-)factual shaping of common imaginaries and how they delineate identity. They take a philosophical approach to imagination as both content and process: drawing on content (the stockpile of mental images a community has access to), members of the community do the intellectual work of arranging (and rearranging insight from the available content. The medium they focus on to investigate this process is the motion picture documentary. They offer a sensitive reading of the metonymic approach in the film *Softie*, featuring the Nairobi social media activist Boniface Mwangi. Their argument is that the documentary deliberately offers only a portion of the 'brand' Boniface Mwangi,

presupposing viewers are already familiar with it, having encountered it on Facebook, Twitter, television, in the newspaper, in his book (an autobiography titled *Unbounded*) and at the physical base for his operations, Pawa 254, State House Crescent Road, Nairobi. Because the documentary ‘slice’ of the brand refers to the other ‘slices’, or sites the audience is already familiar with, the intertextual discourse in the documentary is at liberty to add images to the audience’s imagination without scaffolding them with contextualising facts that can enhance further insight.

Amanda du Preez’s chapter stays with visual activism, and the discourse between presences on-site and online, by illustrating how selfie-takers asserted their right to be seen in the 2015–2016 #FeesMustFall and 2020 #endSARS protests in South Africa and Nigeria respectively. She explains the selfie as expanding the genre of the self-portrait (as it evolves from its long history). Her approach links up with that of Muthuma and Mbogo in that it reminds the reader that the selfie operates as a slice, or a portion, of the multi-medial branding of an activist movement.

Contemporary Art in Africa: Praxis as conversation with the past and with the world

Section Four is dedicated to contemporary art and African praxis as conversation with its past and with the world. It is confirmed in the opening voice of *Douglas Sokari Camp*, Nigerian-born-London-based artist, interviewed by *Ernst Wagner*. Camp’s “memory of visual culture [as] dance, dress, masquerade, performances,” resonates with the research contributed to the previous sections of this book. In her interview Camp also reiterates the specific conundrum tackled by the authors in Section Two. She describes the de-contextual conservation and display of objects as stories ‘edited’ on a “Western level”. What contemporary African artists do, according to Camp, is to reintroduce these stories in their creative work. Besides reflecting on her own art, Camp also refers to the work of Alexis Peskine, Osi Audu, Romuald Hazoumè, and El Anatsui. She also mentions Nicholas Hlobo and Zanele Moholi to make the point that “South African artists bring their historical struggle of race and inequality to the conversation”.

The next two chapters of this Section feature more such South African Artists. *Runette Kruger’s* chapter features the work of Titus Matiyane and Candice Breitz and their strategies to battle for social equality. *Avitha Sooful* demonstrates how black African female artists Muelwa Noria Mabasa and Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi’s artmaking has been defying the masculine conventions of a European aesthetic.

When *Paul-Henri Souvenir Assako Assako* then reflects upon the ‘conflict of representation’ in the art of urban Cameroon, he lays his finger on the chal-

allenge to contemporary African art everywhere: how to be both commemorative and reinventive, endogenous and global. This is the question which this book invites the readers – both as scholars and practitioners – to continue grappling with. *Angelika Boeck* discusses two examples, of West African artists sculpting European sitters as decolonial practice inverting the Western gaze. Boeck's examples are mesmerising also for another reason: she reminds readers that artistic action is intuitive. Therefore, artworks continue to invite “new impressions on repeated viewing” – in quick succession and over longer periods of time. *Ronnie Watt* echoes this in his nuanced overview of South African ceramic art as a conversation between African and European forms and techniques of meaning making and aesthetic expression, and the resultant blending of traditions and materials. In the process, this final chapter in the book bends the narrative back to its beginning, into a circle of praxis.

How are African visual cultures both ‘in’ and ‘of’; identifying and confrontational; post- and decolonial; preserved and practised; old and new; borrowed and authentic; becoming and complete; rooted and soaring? The success of the explorations in this book will lie in the furthering of conversation and praxis in an emporium of disciplines such as visual culture studies, media studies, performance studies, orature, literature, art, design – as well as their histories.