

**AN AFROCENTRIC APPROACH TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF  
21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AFRICAN ART: THE TRANSFORMATIVE  
POWER OF AFRICAN AGENCY**

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## ABSTRACT

From African rock paintings created 50-70,000 years ago during African migrations to the art of the Nile Valley and the Benin bronzes, much of African art has been claimed and controlled by European institutions governing the capitalization and exploitation of African art and artists. The Western art world has had a vested interest in African art since the European conquest of Africa when much of it was stolen. Incorporating evidence from books, essays, magazines, reports, interviews, and documentaries, this study shows that an operational Afrocentric approach to African art administration dismantles the exploitative agency of the Western art industry to initiate a liberation process from its artistic confines. It enhances how African artists, the community, and cultural representatives on the continent and throughout the diaspora view African artistry from a cultural perspective and free themselves from the control of an industry profiting from their works by defining them from a Eurocentric racist perspective. Cultivating a creative ecosystem that functions as an organizing method by executing Afrocentric infrastructure to demonstrate creative, economic, and social values establishes a culturally sensitive platform to develop the administration, accumulation, and pedagogies of African art. It will have an educational purpose that requires becoming conscious of African cultural history and the function of art. From this perspective, it is possible to develop a cultural identity and grounded analysis of the creativity of the African world and its value from the past to the future.

Dedicated to the life and memory of Stephen “Hakim Sabree” Carr.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*The question of a "return to the source" or of a "cultural renaissance" does not arise and could not occur for the masses, for it is they who the repository of the culture is and, at the same time, the only social sector who can preserve and build it up and make history.<sup>1</sup>*

- Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*

History is not merely something that happened yesterday. It influences our contemporary and future realities and describes the connection between events that transpired in the world and their impact on generations. Consciousness and knowledge of these experiences shape our culture and allow us to carry and comport ourselves in the world on our terms. History and culture have always been vital in constructing African creative expressions. As culture adapts to society, aesthetic and functional qualities of African art evolve, retaining these elements no matter its transformation. Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup> century African visual art within the concept of African agency, using Afrocentric theoretical framework, centers our working knowledge of African creative units within its own cultural and historical worldview and demands an Afrocentric orientation to the administration, accumulation, and pedagogies of its creativity and purpose. This research seeks to understand how exercising agency is a functional approach to dismantling the

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<sup>1</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, (Monthly Review Press, 1973), 61.

Western art industry at the conceptual, psychological, economic, and creative levels. It will identify the Eurocentric-oriented system and institution as a capitalistic structure that, historically, has engineered the global conceptualization of African art. In addition, this research details the exploitative agency and power structure of the Western art industry that strives to dominate the African narrative through the monetization and monopolization of 21<sup>st</sup> century African art.

An operationalized Afrocentric approach recenters historical consciousness, repairs notions lost in translation, heals the disjointed culture, and sets the foundation for an effective pedagogy to study, teach, and display African art. It promotes Afrocentric orientation in African people on the continent and across the diaspora, defines aesthetic and artistic qualities, and urges us to engage our creative and cultural history. Outlining the cultural and historical attributes of African visual art and determining its function utilizes the Sankofa concept for the next generation of African people, equipping them with tools and wisdom to approach the distortion of Western hegemony and continue the cultural legacy of our ancestors.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

How does asserting African agency dismantle the exploitative agency of Western art institutions and their converted interest in African art? How should 21<sup>st</sup> century African art be contextualized within the meaning of culture? How can we ensure these artworks remain independent of another culture while using Africa as a reference point? The Afrocentric study of African phenomena, events, ideas, and personalities forms the foundation of the Africology discipline and has led to brilliant dissertations, exhibitions, and books by scholars. Africologists seek to refrain from studying African societies as the carriers of detached, isolated, and quixotic cultures separate from tradition.<sup>2</sup> We rely on a conceptual apparatus made up of three key concepts: center/location/place, dislocation, and relocation.<sup>3</sup> Other terms, such as worldview, cosmology, axiology, aesthetics, and epistemology, are frequently used by Africologists in our attempt to consciously and precisely delineate the metaphysical contours of the Afrocentric paradigm and the African worldview on which Africology is based.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, scholars have brought much transparency to African art studies, revealing, and analyzing the impact of European encounters, the museumification of African arts, the role of the Western market, and the effects of contemporary life and

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<sup>2</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, (Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Ama Mazama, "The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions" in *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 31, No. 4, (Sage Publications, Inc., 2001), 397.

<sup>4</sup> Mazama, "Afrocentric Paradigm," 398.

globalization.<sup>5</sup> In addition, African art has been maligned in the writings of Western scholars who have yet to understand its source and origin. This failure has led to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of African artistic production and expression.<sup>6</sup> Based on the constant perpetuation, history, and imposition of Eurocentric ideologies, global intellectual knowledge and perspectives of African creative expressions are exploited through the agency of Western institutions. Historically, Western ethnographic and art institutions have functioned to uphold myths of cultures foreign to them. As a result, how African creative units are perceived, presented, and promoted is devalued and administered through a Eurocentric paradigm.

African art, at large, is a widely researched area ranging from scholarship on literary creations, cultural performances, visual and musical creative expressions, and cultural aesthetics. This scope of the study is covered by an array of scholars toward uncovering historical, political, cultural, social, and aesthetic dimensions. Conversely, some literature on African art utilizes Eurocentric ideological positions to analyze creative units, lacking historical, cultural, and conceptual accuracy. Upon reviewing the literature, it was evident that applicable forms of scholarship came from sources that directly or indirectly accept an African-centered position as their frame of reference. To center this review within the context of the African worldview, I utilize Afrocentric theoretical and conceptual frameworks to examine the contents.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts, "Tradition is Always Now: African Arts and the Curatorial Turn" in *African Arts*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (Gale Academic OneFile, 2012), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Dele Jegede, "Art for Life's Sake: African Art as a Reflection of African Cosmology" in *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of Traditions*, (Praeger Publishers, 1994), 237.

Appropriately, the research criteria in this study have been widened to include: (1) an interpretation of historical consciousness and (2) studies of African culture, creativity, and aesthetics as it pertains to the construction and functional aspect of African visual art. This review aims to determine the context of its characteristics and purpose as a communal and cultural manifestation. The relevant literature will follow a thematic structure, organized by three key themes: the qualities and attributes of pan-African art, the responsibility of the African artist, and the functional utilization of African art in the community.

Historical consciousness as a research tool contributes to understanding the evolution, operation, and institutionalization of Eurocentric ideologies on a global platform. The great scholar Dr. Amos N. Wilson, in *The Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness* (1993), outlined the role that European history writing plays in rationalizing European oppression of African people. His interpretation of European historiography and the rewriting of African history establishes the foundation for this study. An African historical context is essential to understanding African art. Wilson identified European historiography as a critical term for the biasing and falsifying of history in ways that justify extremist ideologies. This position is of dual importance to the research, beginning with how historical consciousness is essential and indispensable in relation to an Afrocentric approach to organizing African art and how it reveals the operative features of Eurocentric infrastructure and tools of oppression.

While numerous texts analyze the characteristics of African art, many rely exclusively on visual observations informed by non-African criteria, focusing less on cultural and historical influences and more on visual aspects. Of course, visual aesthetics

are unique qualities of African art. However, aesthetics in relation to culture indeed informs its most profound character. The best analysis of African art comes from a scholar who seeks not to separate African creativity from the African experience but to draw connections and determine its variations.

A review of the literature on the traditional qualities of African art yielded one study that specifically addressed the themes and characteristics that inform aesthetic construction. Thelma R. Newman, in *Contemporary African Arts and Crafts* (1974), specifically addressed these distinctions. Her research determined that: (a) history and heritage give the African artist a sense of identity, (b) African art is a way of living and being in the world; (c) the conception of African art is communal. This research revealed how contemporary African designs and motifs in African arts and crafts are indispensable to African heritage. Newman collected firsthand, on-site ethnographic data demonstrating the assimilation of culture and tradition as a form and technological process in art and craft making.

The theory of a new era in African art emerges from Newman's research that unifies traditional qualities with contemporary interests in a transformed vessel. She envisages that the most contemporary variations reflect today's Africa and will become tomorrow's tradition.<sup>7</sup> The collected evidence reveals the inventiveness of African creativity, highlighting the creative process to understand and determine its aesthetic qualities. The study concurred with Newman finding that for African art to be understood and shared with the world, one must consider how heritage and culture guide the art-making process to define aesthetic qualities. The limitations presented in the research

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<sup>7</sup> Thelma R. Newman, *Contemporary African Arts and Crafts: Onsite Working with Art Forms and Processes*, (Crown Publishers, Inc., 1974), xiii.

include being confined to a specific range of African art due to the vastness of arts across the continent and the size of her volume.<sup>8</sup> Newman implied that future research should produce analyses grounded in the observation that current African art processes are a transformed custom, linking heritage with contemporary inspirations. Newman's research is significant as it perpetuates the necessity of analyzing African art contexts within an African worldview. This body of work is essential to understanding the African art-making process that informs aesthetic qualities relevant to transgenerational African art.

Afrocentricity helps to understand the theme of pan-African art qualities and attributes. As an intellectual theory, Afrocentricity is the study of the ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as the key players rather than victims. This theory becomes, by an authentic relationship to the centrality of our own reality.<sup>9</sup> In many ways, the theme of this review is currently being addressed using Eurocentric framework to study and draw conclusions about African art that contribute to the falsification and misrepresentation of the African experience. Answers and solutions to this approach can be found in the Afrocentric idea.

While research supports distinguishing African art qualities, these units do not operate in isolation. As with an Afrocentric worldview, the role of art should be to function for the benefit of the community.

The review of research by Jimmy L. Kirby, Jr., in "A Critical Afrocentric Reading of the Artist's Responsibility in the Creative Process," addressed the idea that African artists have a responsibility to the community by employing a worldview in the

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<sup>8</sup> Newman, *Contemporary African Arts and Crafts*, xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education" in *The Journal of Negro Education*, (Journal of Negro Education, 1991), 172.

construction of African art that reflects Afrocentric cultural aesthetics and qualities. Kirby defined this function as the African artist's awareness of their obligations and responsibilities to their communities. He provided a detailed set of criteria that expressed the employment of cultural symbols and qualities common to the African experience. Short answers do not quickly assess the areas of research defined by Kirby. They are more accurately evaluated through performance that incorporates paragraph and essay assessment, the types of arrangements accessed within a dissertation writing process.

Knowledge building affects the way people receive and process information. The work of Kirby identifies two required conditions for the responsibility of the African artist: a) artists who utilize these intrinsically unique qualities and direct their work towards themes that echo an African heritage, and b) artists who consciously respond to these echoes and have a defined role as a participant in their culture.<sup>10</sup>

The Afrocentric approach to assessing the artist's role in the development of African people identifies creative expression as a form and function of activism, self-determination, self-actualization, community transformation, and cultural resilience/survival.<sup>11</sup> It helps us understand how Afrocentricity, its theories, and concepts are used to link and strengthen African world communities while concurrently resisting Western hegemony, European essentialism, and universalism.<sup>12</sup>

These principles of Afrocentricity align themselves with Newman and Kirby's research. Newman's distinguishing qualities and attributes of African art parallel Kirby's

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<sup>10</sup> Jimmy L. Kirby, Jr., "A Critical Afrocentric Reading of The Artist's Responsibility in the Creative Process", Doctoral Dissertation, Ph.D., (Temple University, 2020), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Kirby, Jr., "Critical Afrocentric Reading," 10.

<sup>12</sup> Kirby, Jr., 38.

idea that African artists are responsible to their community. The dynamism of the African artist to retain a cultural identity on the one hand and, on the other, engage in the character of creativity is its transitional nature. It provides yet another dimension of the contemporary rendition of traditional forms.<sup>13</sup>

In the opinion of Thami Mnyele, African people should be esteemed as conscious and committed men and women who can carry the responsibility and destiny of Africa in their own hands.<sup>14</sup> In an essay titled “Observations on the Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts in South Africa,” he wrote that the work of the socially committed artist is treated with traditional coldness due to the avoidance of the content of the artwork by some observers.<sup>15</sup> Mnyele’s argument explains that any understanding of African art, grounded in an African worldview, cannot be divorced from a theoretical and practical perspective. His sentiments are based on honest and personal reflections on his experience as a South African artist and revolutionary organizer and conversations centered around the unfairness of the exploitation of artists by art institutions. According to Mnyele, the role of an artist is to learn, teach, and search for ways and means of achieving freedom.<sup>16</sup> Appropriately, he produces these three highlights: a) artists must explore the possibilities of African art forms in the context of African time, place, and events, b) art-making should be a conscious act on behalf of the artist who possesses self-

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<sup>13</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Beyond Aesthetics: Use, Abuse, and Dissonance in African Art Traditions*, (Yale University Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Thami Mnyele, “Medu: Art and Resistance in Exile,” in *Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*, (Jacana Media, 2009), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Mnyele, “Medu,” 25.

<sup>16</sup> Mnyele, 27.

identity, c) the artist who engages with methods and materials of art-making, engages with themselves and the community around them, creating culture.

Organization and organizing skills are the most effective weapons against our problems. However, the supreme purpose of organizing can only be achieved with deep social and cultural awareness.<sup>17</sup> A new perspective on artistic indulgence as a communal function emerges from Mnye's work as an approach to addressing international political struggle in the arts. One strategy for addressing this predicament and developing and improving our techniques and knowledge of art is to understand the meaning and intention of African art and the conditions that gave birth to it.<sup>18</sup> Future studies conducted under this observation will yield research that centers African national and transnational priorities while inherently involved in the process of constructing and producing arts.

The three exemplary authors in this review made significant contributions to the evolving conversation regarding the creative works of Africans. While Newman outlined the qualities and attributes of the African art and craft-making process as informed by African cultural and social standards and described the future of African art as a transformed extension of tradition, Kirby emphasized the role and responsibility of being an African artist as a collective initiative, informed by the act of cultural awareness. Both utilize aesthetic principles derived from African tradition and the idea of community transformation to draw the observation that African art maintains cultural qualities across generations. On the other hand, Mnye advocates for reforming the national and transnational utilization of African art as informed by these same principles. His

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<sup>17</sup> Mnye, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Mnye, 25.

sentimentality recognized political implications governing how art is utilized today and the exploitation of these arts by Western forces. Essentially, Mynele advocated for a practical application of African art in the community to inspire change and promote cultural awareness.

As cultural and historical awareness increases through bodies of knowledge by Newman, Kirby, and Mnyele, the necessity to effectively integrate an Afrocentric approach to the administration and organization of African art becomes relevant.

In its current form, African art administration and organization should reflect Afrocentric ideological positions to impact the community in a transformed way. An approach grounded and centered in the African worldview positions examinations of African art within the context of the African historical timeline and the all-encompassing objective of collective liberation. The diversity of references in this review offers an overview of a knowledge base and orientation of knowledge that helps us understand the conceptualization of African art, define what African art is and its function in the community, and provide a structure on which we can identify and dismantle the challenges of Eurocentric ideological imposition in the managing of these arts, which is a consistent theme across this study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Our liberation and Afrocentricity rest upon our ability to systematically displace European ways of thinking, being, and feeling and consciously replace them with ways practical to our African cultural experience.<sup>19</sup> The capitalization of the artistic opportunities created by 21<sup>st</sup> century African artists has been enlarged to an unprecedented degree during the last twenty years. The Western art industry, which has historically operated from the perspective that African substance is inferior, monopolizes and monetizes productions of African art through Western commercial and cultural economies. Institutions have benefited exclusively from the economic and social stimulus of this increased viewership of African art. As a result, the assertion of African agency in creative affairs is compromised, and cultural contexts are manipulated.

This trend is rooted in the historical oppression and devaluation of African art, spiritual, cognitive, and creative thought. It is exemplified in its desire to disconnect and displace contexts and present an exploitative cultural outlook. Through the imposition of Western hegemony, Eurocentric formulations recognize neither African thought nor African presence.<sup>20</sup> In this industry, a discussion of African cultural substance rarely calls forth African contexts to its administration and organization. This includes the so-called experts on African art who issues analyses from a Eurocentric perspective.

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<sup>19</sup> Ama Mazama, 388.

<sup>20</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea" in *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, (Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), 43.

This research aims to describe how Eurocentric art institutions exploit the artistic opportunities created by 21<sup>st</sup> century African artists and why an Afrocentric model of a creative ecosystem is a solution to be implemented community-wide by exercising agency in pursuit of liberation.

In my approach to investigating this research problem, I examined three key areas that provide detail to the themes and patterns found in this research. I began by describing and defining African art, from traditional expressions to its most contemporary form, by gathering existing research in books and essays and using these references to identify its function and characteristics. Identifying these aspects formed a foundation on which I could interpret the purpose of African art today and use conclusions to determine a need to dismantle existing ways of operating. I next utilized Afrocentric theoretical framework to identify the historical root and formation of the Eurocentric operation, describe how and why it formed, and explain the existing data that supports this problem. Outlining this area established an understanding of how this Western art industry, as it exists today, is a manifestation of these circumstances and why they continue to operate from the Eurocentric perspective. Lastly, I identified the Western art industry. I described its operating institutions in detail based on the conclusions drawn from the two previous observations and supporting data developed from the research. These three investigations determined how to move forward in addressing a solution to the research problem.

Benefitting from addressing this problem is our orientation to African art analysis and organization, the knowledge base that informs how it is utilized in the community, and African national and transnational creative impact. Artists, scholars, analysts,

curators, and educators will have relevant information and an applicable model for African art analysis, administration, accumulation, and pedagogies.

This research will take on an Afrocentric theoretical approach to assert African agency as an empowerment approach to the administration of African art and dismantle the exploitative and capitalistic system of the Western art industry.

The overarching theoretical field in this qualitative study of African art is Afrocentricity. Molefi Kete Asante, in his invaluable publication of *Afrocentricity: Theory of Social Change* (1980), advances this perspective:

Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regard to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena. Thus, it is possible for anyone to master the discipline of seeking the location of Africans in a given phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

This theory is how African art should be understood and structured. The inappropriateness of Eurocentric ideologies in the management of art displaces contexts and recenters African substance in a European worldview. Therefore, Afrocentricity as a theoretical perspective provides a base associated with discovering, locating, and actualizing African agency within the context of history and culture.<sup>22</sup>

Afrocentricity is liberatory, for it establishes agency as a key concept for freedom.<sup>23</sup> This research will also reference the functional factor of the Afrocentric paradigm in the iconic work of Ama Mazama. Afrocentricity is not only an intellectual initiative; it also satisfies a functional aspect in implementing the Afrocentric paradigm.

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<sup>21</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, (African American Images, 1980), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, (Temple University Press, 1998), 21.

The holistic practice ingrained in the Afrocentric enterprise yields conceptual and cultural space for African people to self-actualize as principal determinants of meaning-making and understanding.<sup>24</sup> The three main aspects of Afrocentricity's paradigmatic attributes, according to Mazama, are Cognitive, Structural, and Functional.<sup>25</sup> The functional attribute provides this research study with a practical framework for African liberation.

Agency foundation is more than a theory; it's a practice. Molefi Kete Asante's (1980) text is primarily concerned with a methodology of agency of African people as subjects instead of objects of history with their cultural/ontological centeredness. Agency is the most significant factor in visualizing an Afrocentric orientation to the administration of 21<sup>st</sup> century African art. It allows us to assert control in applying governance where matters have been otherwise exploited by Western hegemony. The quest for transcendence of this matter, in the sense of going beyond the simple affirmation or rejection of African presence, can be affirming and fulfilling so long as an Afrocentric agency is constituted in creating a new manifestation.<sup>26</sup> Given the history of foreign interventions in African cultural matters, the assertion of African agency needs to be viewed from both a historical and a contemporary lens. In this research study, African agency reassures and centers our working knowledge of African creative units within its own cultural and historical experience. The significance of this perspective is profound in that it provides a healing framework rooted in shared historical experiences and cultural heritage.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kirby, Jr., 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ama Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, (Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Asante, "Afrocentric Idea," 43.

<sup>27</sup> Kirby, Jr., 36.

To satisfy the objectives of this research, a qualitative study was held. A qualitative research approach offers descriptive data on lives and behaviors and manifests in words, narratives, pictures, and descriptions.<sup>28</sup> This approach is most suitable for answering my research question regarding the observational techniques used to gather information. The main characteristic of qualitative research is most appropriate for small samples, while its outcomes are not measurable and quantifiable. Therefore, the research strategy held concerning this thesis was a descriptive one. Numerous pieces of previous academic research exist regarding African art, not only for aesthetic appreciation but also for identifying, describing, and clarifying the standards and qualities of African artistic expression. As such, the proposed research took the form of new research on an existing research subject.

For this research, discourse analysis was used. Discourse analysis as a research technique allows documented content to be systematically analyzed.<sup>29</sup> Referring to the texts, writings, and materials produced by other researchers, the main advantage of discourse analysis is that it uncovers the motivation behind a text and helps study an underlying meaning while considering cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, discourse analysis allows the problem to be viewed from a higher perspective to gain a comprehensive understanding. For this reason, discourse analysis was most suitable for gathering information to address the problem.

As far as data collection tools were concerned, the conduction of the research involved the use of online research and literature databases, digital and material library

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<sup>28</sup> Serie McDougal, *Research Methods in Africana Studies*, (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2014), 256.

<sup>29</sup> McDougal, *Research Methods*, 265.

resources, and audio, visual, and written content generated by primary sources. I collected and selected material based on the themes and patterns relevant to the study. This included the analysis of books, essays, magazines, reports, interviews, and documentaries. Additionally, I analyzed the structural features of the texts, coded materials, examined statements, and identified cultural references. Due to the scope of this research project, I collected data from multiple sources. Therefore, this study is limited by the comprehensive range of illustrations.

Where is agency in the idea of *contemporary* African art? *Contemporary* is a term that was used often in this research. During my study of multiple sources, contemporary was used to describe art made by African artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2023 Cambridge University Press & Assessment dictionary defines contemporary as “existing or happening now, and therefore seeming modern.”<sup>30</sup> However, this terminology, used in the Eurocentric context of conceptual designation for categorizing African creative units, presents theoretical inequalities.

The idea of modernity was first developed by Europeans during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, into the 1950s and 1960s, to suggest that “traditional” or “under-developed societies” progress as they adopt *modern* practices, otherwise known as European industrialization. This analysis is significant under the supposition that the notion of *contemporary* places a given subject within the periphery and timeline of the modernized European experience. Therefore, contemporary African art is represented as a breaking point in which African art becomes present or relevant within the Eurocentric notion of

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<sup>30</sup> “Contemporary,” Cambridge University Press & Assessment, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/contemporary>.

modernization and the European art historical timeline. Similarly, Dr. Amos Wilson defines this method for terminological labeling as a form of social control. He asserts:

Under oppression, the process of labeling behavior is as much a part of the problem as it claims to be a part of the solution. The labeling process obscures the purposes for and means by which those states labeled are generated, maintained, and changed to fit the needs of those in power.<sup>31</sup>

The notion of contemporary African art and the exploitative agency of the established Western art industry indicate the utilization of oppression methods to decenter African art contexts. The understanding is that terminological categorization needs to be “labeled” to describe art generated elsewhere from the European art realm. For this reason, an Afrocentric theoretical framework is necessary for this research study and recentering African substance.

This research must deconstruct analyses that center African contexts within Eurocentric paradigms, all of which describe a margin of the study that neglects to examine African art from the perspective of African people. African people do not exist on borrowed terms. We must orient ourselves from dislocated terminology that places us within the timeline of Western phenomena. The African narrative is malleable through the idea of contemporary Africa. Agency is distinguished by the positionality of the subject and object of investigation. It is pushed through the notion of African people as subjects rather than objects in the European experience.<sup>32</sup>

Using theoretical and methodological tools that have emerged from Afrocentric scholarship, I examined their philosophical base to extract a holistic and active approach to deconstructing the exploitative agency within the established Western art industry. The

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<sup>31</sup> Amos Wilson, *The Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness*, (Afrikan World InfoSystems, 1993), 104.

<sup>32</sup> Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, 21.

research questioning in this study interrogated how exercising agency is a functional approach to dismantling the Western art industry at the conceptual, psychological, economic, and creative levels. What and where is this notion of the “West”? What is the Western art industry? What are its specific characterizations? Several criteria which represent the Western art industry were applied to this study: geographical terminology, location, place, and region; historical conceptualizations; and economic constituents. Since this industry operates as a system, business, and arena, many geographical coordinates of operation exist, including North America, Asia, Europe, and South America. However, this research will be specifically concentrated on the North American and European regions, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, as zones of operation.

First, in addressing the matter of agency and exploitation, I outlined the nature of this industry as a system and infrastructure that, historically, has engineered the conceptualization of African art and the perception of African culture. Next, I looked at four categories of institutions within the Western art industry that have proven responsible for this exploitation: museums, cultural organizations, galleries, and auction houses. These institutions were then allocated into two auxiliary categories, which either monopolize or monetize, in some instances, both. From there, I mapped the social and economic areas of impact. The factors I have gathered prove essential for an Afrocentric functional approach to dismantling the exploitative agency of the Western art industry and initiating an empowerment solution.

Within the scope of this research, my primary concern is African visual art constructed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the material discussed in the following

chapters can extend to discourse and research that centers other African art forms in its cultural and historical worldview. African art can be understood as the culmination of various objects with shared characteristics carrying meaning and form from many cultures and traditions. The traditions of African art are rich in their variety of objects, materials, and media, including sculpture, pottery, metalwork, and painting. I cannot attempt to address all these varieties of arts, which include African music, dance, drama, verbal, and visual art, not to mention traditional African artefacts and decorated vessels with carved and pyrographic designs, metalwork, pottery, basketry, weaving, embroidery, leatherwork, beadwork, and jewelry, bodily decoration, or architecture.

African art genres include music, visual arts, literature, films, fashion, and performance. This research pays particular attention to visual arts that utilize material mediums, including painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, photography, textiles, and digital forms. This study uses African art as a line of research to center our working knowledge of African creative units within its own cultural and historical worldview. It also demands an Afrocentric orientation to the administration and organization of its creativity and purpose. The methodological approach taken in this research is vital to initiating an empowerment process and addressing the research problem.

## CHAPTER 4: CULTURE AND CREATIVITY: AFRICAN ART DEFINED

Throughout history, from ancient Kemet and the great civilizations of classical Africa to traditional and current African art forms, creative manifestations testify to the power and originality of African artistic expression. African arts have always been vehicles for knowledge production and imply traditional reinvention through cultural and creative innovation. Art that transforms our world never emerges from a vacuum.<sup>33</sup> The very transitional nature of art is perhaps its most defining trait. The complementary aspect is that art also manifests itself and can be tracked down to its root as a product of specific cultures and traditions. This product retains congruence with its ancient origins, no matter its transformations.<sup>34</sup> Author Judy Seidman explains it as a conjunction of circumstances that begins with a specific time and space and opens a door for creativity and vision. It requires understanding and ideology that frames and directs creativity. It utilizes an assured aesthetic and visual language that speaks to both the maker and the audience. And lastly, it requires praxis, defined as “the practice of a complex ideology,” to put all these factors into play to construct the work of art.<sup>35</sup> As the great African

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<sup>33</sup> Judy Seidman, “The Art of National Liberation: The Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective,” in *Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*, (Jacana Media, 2009), 87.

<sup>34</sup> Soyinka, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Seidman, “Art of National Liberation,” 87.

historian Cheikh Anta Diop articulates, these are considered cultural invariants, meaning elements left untouched by the revolutionary cultural transformation.<sup>36</sup>

The word "art" is, to a degree, an unrealistic expression when we describe African art. By nature, it is a European term growing out of Greek philosophy and later reinforced by European culture.<sup>37</sup> Fundamentally, it is a Western idea developed in the mental climate of Western philosophy and applied to the expression of Western culture.<sup>38</sup> In using the term "art" as a conceptual category, in many cases, we risk displacing criteria for categorizing and evaluating cultural and creative productions. Since there is no term in our language to distinguish between the essential differences in thinking, it is best to frame it conceptually by identifying, describing, and clarifying the standards and qualities of African artistic expression.<sup>39</sup>

This research refers to Africa as a geographical and ethnographical expression and ontological landscape. According to Jimmy L. Kirby, Jr., to be African, for example, means to live and celebrate an African philosophy of life and view of the world.<sup>40</sup> For ancient Kemet, it was all the above, fulfilling higher ideals, to be the manifestation of Ma'at, otherwise interpreted as righteous, truthful, honest, just, and unalterable.<sup>41</sup> It is to be an aspiration of divinity, to be righteous, in alignment with principles, and to stand in

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<sup>36</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, (Lawrence Hill Books, 1981), 227.

<sup>37</sup> Newman, 1.

<sup>38</sup> René S. Wassing, *African Art: Its Background and Traditions*, (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968), 5.

<sup>39</sup> Newman, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Kirby, Jr., 43.

<sup>41</sup> E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, (Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), cxix.

dignity with integrity. African culture provides wisdom, lessons, guidelines, and models of what it means to be African. Thus, when we speak of this idea of an African work of artistic intellect, we consider African history, philosophy, spirituality, and, most essentially, culture.

Culture is the foundation of life in our spirit and how we grow and evolve in our communities. Professor Kwesi Kwaa Prah articulates culture as an extensive and encompassing concept that implies the totality of products that have resulted from the creative ingenuity of humans.<sup>42</sup> Prah states that some of these products are material and tangible. In contrast, others, in such areas of social life as religion, language, beliefs, customs, and values, are intangible but often more instrumental in behavior guidance than culture's more recognizable material products.<sup>43</sup> As long as African culture is strong and dynamic, African people are assured of reproducing themselves as Africans because their culture directs them on how to do so.<sup>44</sup>

When the 21<sup>st</sup> century African artists use components of their culture to render the physical and material work of art, they celebrate who they are and where they come from. Seidman classifies three principles that should guide these cultural and creative productions. First, she states that the message of the art should stem from the vision of the nurturing community, inspired by a cultural perspective and collective responsibility. Additionally, each element of the work, including the material construction, skills, technique, symbol, and image, must be culturally informed and contribute to the meaning

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<sup>42</sup> Kwesi Kwaa Prah, *Anthropological Prisms: Studies on African Realities*, (The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2008), 107.

<sup>43</sup> Prah, *Anthropological Prisms*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> Kirby, Jr., 42.

and message of the production. Lastly, she states that the audience's reaction plays a key role and that an artwork's message depends on how the audience interprets the work in terms of the artist's history and experience. Newman speaks to the identification of African art qualities further in her study on the changing of African art forms by stating:

In all cultures, in varying degrees, art, as a language, has socially determined limits. However, formalized patterns of expression are constantly shifting. Today we accept forms that once were considered outlandish. A rarely gifted individual may dare to deviate and override traditional boundaries, thereby remapping and extending the acceptable range of expression. This shifting and changing of art form is a characteristic of more isolated and protected societies as it is of our own. Speed of acculturation, however, does vary.<sup>45</sup>

She adds an essential component to this discussion by explaining the impact and influence that social, political, and economic circumstances have on the evolution of these arts. The tragedy of the Maafa and expressed oppression under colonial rule are direct impacts on existing African arts. This can be traced throughout the African diaspora and on the continent, where some arts are born out of liberation movements, such as Medu Art Ensemble during Apartheid in South Africa and the 1965 African American-led Black Arts Movement. Many visual artists of the Black Arts Movement were crucial towards establishing cultural agency. They wanted to remain relevant to the needs of their people rather than create culturally bankrupt apolitical works.<sup>46</sup> These types of art are revolutionary in that the construction acts as a channel to convey the message of resistance and unity.<sup>47</sup> This discussion can evolve into an extended meditation

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<sup>45</sup> Newman, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Kirby, Jr., 107.

<sup>47</sup> Sergio-Albio González, "Medu: Art and Resistance in Exile," in *Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*, (Jacana Media, 2009), 81.

on the relationship between African art and political power. However, it is important to note that in terms of a transformed work of art, they maintain culturally relevant qualities while addressing contemporary interests. Thelma R. Newman continues:

But the speed and force of change may be accelerated by outside-indeed foreign influences. Many years ago, William Fagg wrote: "We are in at the death of all that is best in African art.." He was describing a well-known phenomenon in Africa. Patron kings had lost their power, rituals were dying out, and carvers were putting down their tools. Art forms, though, flourish and die everywhere. This is not unique to Africa; New styles emerge from the fertile fields of the past. New identities are born.<sup>48</sup>

She explains the continuation, reinvention, and transformation of African art forms from classical periods to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unequivocally, African art has never expired and is not returning in the "contemporary" sense and is certainly not rising out of primitive darkness, contrary to the narrative pushed through Eurocentric institutions. As Thami Mnyele eloquently expressed:

Our communities will restore us with the respect we have lost the moment we utilize every form of art at our disposal, along with the political poster. We shall need to do it from the bottom of our hearts, with purpose, technical skill, and intelligence. Our self-subjection to technique also implies that form (i.e., style, drawing skill, and even the frame of the picture) is paramount to content (i.e., what we paint and the root purpose or need to create visual imagery). This seeming detachedness of contemporary art from society differs sharply from the principle that governs African traditional art.<sup>49</sup>

African art has always been, and according to Newman, should be considered pan-African. Pan-Africanism, its theories, and concepts link and strengthen African world communities while concurrently resisting Western hegemony, European essentialism, and

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<sup>48</sup> Newman, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Mnyele, 25.

universalism.<sup>50</sup> Working with the fluidity of African identities, like the planet Mercury, these shifting expressions are constantly in motion but stay within the container of African universal concepts. African art is responding to these influences and conceiving of metamorphosed formulas. New forms are born as we change and evolve.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Newman conveys that African people creating art today may not be the sons and daughters of tradition and that some ceremonies are gone. Still, new artists are emerging who incorporate tradition into contemporary imagery that engenders as much emotion, power, and vitality as traditional forms did.<sup>52</sup> As Cheikh Anta Diop illustrates:

Whatever its significance might have been in the past, art should today help us to solve our present problems, to adapt to new conditions of existence. In our socio-political context, art must, without ever losing its aesthetic ideal, address the burning issues of the day: class relations, political demands, national aspirations, and cultural and intellectual aspirations. In terms of philosophy, it should enhance the realization of an objective view of the world. It should enable us to realize the importance, the weight, and the reality of the matter. All these reasons make it inappropriate for African art, at present, to be concerned with non-figurative, abstract subjects. The time has not yet come for modern abstract art in Africa.<sup>53</sup>

In this essay titled “A Continent in Search of its History,” Diop explains that today's African art should maintain its cultural essence through a transformed vessel of present reflections, arguing the incapability of African art positioned within Eurocentric contexts. This position introduces a perspective that allows the development of an Afrocentric paradigm during the administration of African art.

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<sup>50</sup> Kirby, Jr., 38.

<sup>51</sup> Newman, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Newman, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development*, (Karnak House, 1996), 125.

The African conception of art is communal compared to European individualistic expression. In terms of the Eurocentric conception of African art, it is an invention founded on the exploitation, theft, and illegal dealing of African artifacts located in Western ethnographic institutions beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This development runs parallel with the developing concept of art in European history, which concerns a matter of European aesthetic ideal, appreciation, and criticism. However, these institutions were the sole contributors to perpetuating harmful stereotypes that dehumanize African people. Peter Mark stated:

For art galleries of the day, the goal was to promote cultural artifacts as marketable commodities. It was in the interest of both groups to emphasize the "aesthetic" qualities of African art. There was little need to understand the culture from which a piece came if one could appreciate the object on purely formal grounds. If one could speak, as both collectors and dealers did, of a "universal aesthetic," then the specifics of the object could be ignored.<sup>54</sup>

The cultural and commercial promotion of "primitive" art was often the work of individuals such as the 20<sup>th</sup> century French art dealer Paul Guillaume. Guillaume and others who possessed collections of African "art" loaned their pieces to museums.<sup>55</sup> Mark adds that in their publications on the works they were bringing to the public's attention, they enunciated the concept of universal aesthetics and proposed criteria for evaluating art, which, they maintained, transcended cultural context.<sup>56</sup>

One of the primary stated objectives of the Guggenheim exhibition is to separate African artifacts from their cultural context so that they can "be judged" simply as art. This theme is made particularly clear in an interview with its curator, artist Tom Phillips: "We're not trying to beat

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Mark, "Is There Such a Thing as African Art?" in *Record of the Art Museum* Vol. 58, No. 1/2, (Princeton University, 1999), 10.

<sup>55</sup> Mark, "Is There Such a Thing as African Art?" 10.

<sup>56</sup> Mark, 10.

people over the head with the idea of Africa..... We're simply inviting them to look at objects made on the continent as works of art equal in aesthetic quality to Western artwork".<sup>57</sup>

This excerpt proves that the idea of African art in the Eurocentric designation was an invention and conspiracy to separate the cultural resonance of these pieces from their original context and frame them within the European-oriented, monocultural values that still exist within the Western art industry today. Thus, Dele Jegede concludes that:

I have referred to these experiences also to underline the submission that a definition of African art cannot be meaningfully attempted within a Western framework. We may define art as being culture-specific. It may be customary in some circles to use as a point of departure the platform - by no means an infallible one - that art has a universal meaning. But we suffer from nothing by repeating the view which is shared by discerning minds that a people's perception of what qualifies to be art, in form, content, import, and usage, varies from one culture to another.<sup>58</sup>

Cheikh Anta Diop's two-cradle theory of culture and civilization is incredibly relevant here since African and European attitudes toward the creative act are so different. The African conception of art is communal compared to European individualistic expression. This theory can be used to define the oppressive qualities of the European-oriented institutional agenda and understand how its exploitative power structure was established. Diop demonstrated his two-cradle theory by illustrating key underlying structures and foundations of African civilization to dispel notions of African inferiority.<sup>59</sup> Diop characterizes the proto-cultures of the three "cradles" of civilization, which he positioned as the southern, northern, and zone of confluence. Each cradle

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<sup>57</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "Discovering African Art...Again?" in *African Arts*, Autumn, Vol. 29, No. 4 (UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 1996), 4.

<sup>58</sup> Jegede, "Art for Life's Sake," 238.

<sup>59</sup> Troy D. Allen, "Cheikh Anta Diop's Two-Cradle Theory Revisited," in *Journal of Black Studies*, (Sage Publication, 2008), 813.

produced a distinct culture regarding its environmental demands and life needs. Cradle, in this case, is used as a metaphor for the environment, one labeled “northern” and the other “southern.” When the two cradles exist side by side or are imposed on one another, Diop marks these areas as “zones of confluence.”<sup>60</sup> He states in *The African Origin of Civilization* (1974):

The history of humanity will remain confused as long as we fail to distinguish between the two early cradles in which Nature fashioned the instincts, temperament, habits, and ethical concepts of the two subdivisions before they met each other after a long separation dating back to prehistoric times. The first of those cradles, as we shall see in the chapter on Egypt's contribution, is the valley of the Nile, from the Great Lakes to the Delta, across the so-called "Anglo-Egyptian" Sudan. The abundance of vital resources, its sedentary, agricultural character, and the specific conditions of the valley will engender in man, that is, in the Negro, a gentle, idealistic, peaceful nature endowed with a spirit of justice and gaiety. All these virtues were more or less indispensable for daily coexistence.<sup>61</sup>

Diop's theory demonstrates that the first “southern” cradle is limited to Africa and existed thousands of millennia before the northern cradle:

By contrast, the ferocity of nature in the Eurasian steppes, the barrenness of those regions, and the overall circumstances of material conditions were to create instincts necessary for survival in such an environment. Here, Nature left no illusion of kindness: it was implacable and permitted no negligence; man must obtain his bread by the sweat of his brow. Above all, in the course of a long, painful existence, he must learn to rely on himself alone, on his own possibilities.<sup>62</sup>

The distinction between the two cradles of civilization allows us to understand the root differences in African and European social and political organization to avoid all mystery and confusion concerning the cultural foundation of African artistic construction.

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<sup>60</sup> Allen, “Two-Cradle Theory Revisited,” 817.

<sup>61</sup> Diop, *African Origin of Civilization*, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Diop, 112.

The Northern cradle values that oppress and exploit describe why and how European-oriented art institutions have engineered the chasm between the conceptualization of art and the perception of African culture. It identifies how Eurocentric power structures strive to dominate and control African creative expression and the desire to disconnect and displace cultural substance. The notion that African art is only admirable when applied to European purposes or primitivism rhetoric in the higher flights of artistic expression, which is considered European “fine art,” is rooted in Eurocentricity. Instead, its definition, distinction, and attributes should be framed within an African cultural and historical canon using an Afrocentric paradigm and theoretical framework.<sup>63</sup> Through a clear perception, this concept should inform the construction and organization of African visual art today.

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<sup>63</sup> Newman, 5.

**CHAPTER 5:**  
**AGENCY AND EXPLOITATION: THE SEARCH FOR FREEDOM**

What is the purpose of African art administration if its operation utilizes Eurocentric paradigms and conceptual structures to demonstrate creative, economic, and social values? What good is a demonstration of African art if its educational criteria and organization are perceived through and informed by Eurocentric framework? Over the last several centuries, European and North American institutions have exhibited their exploitative agency in their interpretations, conduct, and expectations of African people, history, and culture. This racist system has been bent on destroying the resistance culture of the masses to implant an unscientific culture of submission and ignorance.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the people who have oppressed us have prepared most of the standard body of knowledge and organization of our ancestral and present artistic achievements. Consequently, this has laid the foundation for the institutional and systematic exploitation of African arts, culture, heritage, and traditional knowledge systems by promoting abstract, mystic ideologies and being less concerned culturally.

Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup> century African visual art within the concept of African agency, using an Afrocentric theoretical framework, centers our working knowledge of African creative units within its own cultural and historical experience. It expresses the need for an Afrocentric approach to its administration, which embraces control and ownership of the cultural products as a collective and provides an outline on which we should interpret

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<sup>64</sup> Mnyele, 26.

African art. In addition, it assists in dismantling the exploitative agency and power structure of the Western art industry that strives to monopolize and monetize African art.

As the previous research determined, African art explains the past, describes values and a way of life, helps relate to spirituality, and social relations, expresses emotions, and enhances the present life as an embellishment expressing self-identity.<sup>65</sup> It also established the historical precedence and foundation of the exploitative Western art industry. Today, these metamorphosed configurations maintain the spirit and essence of traditional creativity while contemporaneously fusing present-day African experiences. Along with the method of changing and transforming physical forms, the mode in which these forms are shared with the community has also evolved. African art is functional and, in many instances, can be used physically and metaphorically. The prevailing format where the meeting of art and community takes place has certainly transformed to optimize its impact through curated exhibits, dedicated institutions, art fairs, art schools and residencies on the continent.

A profound example of this would be the development of The Dakar Biennale, or Dak'Art, which since 1990 has been a platform for exhibiting art with cultural roots in Africa, organized by the Senegalese Ministry of Culture and Heritage. Most recently, ART X Lagos, an international art fair in Lagos, Nigeria, was launched in 2016 to showcase 21<sup>st</sup> century African continental and diasporan visual arts. However, in recent years, the Western art industry, comprised of European and North American museums, art galleries, cultural institutions, and art markets, has created a decided movement toward 21<sup>st</sup> century African art. As a result, these institutions have hosted an

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<sup>65</sup> Newman, 5.

unprecedented number of curated exhibitions and profited exclusively from African artists' representation and work.

The increased global viewership of African art is a capitalistic trend within the multibillion-dollar Western art industry, which uses qualitative and quantitative measures to control the means and modes of art administration. European and North American art institutions make up two-thirds of the Western art industry. They not only perform as the monopoly outposts and shrines of African art but through the monetization of these visual works of art, they determine what arrangement, substance, and assessment they should take on by merely promoting the idea of *contemporary* Africa. During the previous chapters, I identified the problematic use of the notion of contemporary African art and its historical underpinning. Using such terminology to describe the classification of African art is represented as a breaking point in which African art becomes present or relevant within the Eurocentric notion of modern and the European art historical timeline.

The Western art industry presents the illusion of African agency and autonomy by utilizing their manifesto to exhibit and market African art worldwide. This is an observably disingenuous agenda and decoy to decenter the African experience and recenter Western standards by allowing geographical categorization under the conditions and authority of the Eurocentric paradigm. In this industry, the oppression of African thought, analysis, and criticism is exercised and subjugated into a cultural outlook that contradicts the assertion of African agency in the socio-political and economic affairs that determine us and our activities. Therefore, this continued research will seek to understand how exercising African agency is an Afrocentric methodology for liberation through the administration of 21<sup>st</sup> century African visual art.

An Afrocentric foundation and functional factors are tools to exert agency. The dominant principle of African art administration should be based on the functional dimension of the Afrocentric Paradigm to function in the direction of African liberation through art and culture. As explained by Dr. Ama Mazama, Afrocentricity's profound impact on African lives can be detected in at least three areas: the exhibition of cultural phenomena, the emergence of a new political discourse and praxis in Africa, and the building of institutions, such as schools and spiritual centers, in Africa and in the diaspora whose main purpose is to spread Afrocentric consciousness.<sup>66</sup> In this culture, art is a vital part of life and education, just as it was in the creative expressions of classical African civilizations. The complexity of administrative leadership in art deals with organizations in public, private, and non-profit sectors. This role analyzes financial management and effective practices of art organization, assesses the civic engagement and impact of art on the community, evaluates and applies research methodologies in its approach, analyzes the responsibilities governing and impact, and develops a philosophy based on historical, theoretical, and cultural influences. As it concerns 21<sup>st</sup> century African art, it is imperative to demonstrate Afrocentric theory in the organization and administration of art to reaffirm our centeredness in African culture and history and dismantle the forces that seek to dominate African creative units. What this inspires raises the following issues: what should be done to ensure that the works of African artists are shielded from the Eurocentric systemic structure while celebrating African art on a global platform? How should they link to African national and transnational networks?

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<sup>66</sup> Mazama, 404.

Over the last 30 years, the Western art industry has branched into the art business that exists today as an interconnected global network dominated by multi-billion-dollar corporations and capitalistic financiers who care about numbers as much, if not more, than they care about the art itself. In 2019, the total size of this market, including gallery and online sales, was worth over \$60 billion.<sup>67</sup> The European-dominated market regulates art from a transactional perspective. Its financial urgency operates in a Eurocentric economic model that is a hybrid prediction market where art is bought and sold for values based not only on a work's perceived cultural value but on its past monetary value as well as its predicted future value.<sup>68</sup> This operation reveals how African art becomes porous to unharmonious forms of administrations and organizations when analytically and systematically processed through Eurocentric measures. In this instance, knowledge production and education are affected due to the constant perpetuation and imposition of Eurocentric ideologies in an approach to African art, as reflected in the institutions that parade them. The two-fold dichotomy of monetary intentions and administrative power is exposed in the institutions that scramble for 21<sup>st</sup> century African art to increase market profitability and viewer engagement.

African art is meant to communicate beyond the artist's studio. Once it leaves and is presented elsewhere, it begins acquiring analysis outside the artist's intent and control. This suggests that African art must leave the community and be repositioned in Eurocentric infrastructure to be deemed a valuable work of the artistic intellect. For the African artist willing to assimilate into this industry, withdrawing back into false self-

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew Goldstein, *Welcome to the Age of the Art Industry: The Art World is Over*, Artnet News, (Intelligence Report, 2019), 1.

<sup>68</sup> "Art Market," Wikipedia, accessed June 5, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_market).

importance, which to them it means money, fame, and travel, Thami Mnyele asks, but fame, money, and travel at what cost?<sup>69</sup> Many artists have already accepted this ideology in many ways, giving them the authority to promote our art and control its global affairs. Are we looking for inclusion and elitism in Eurocentric institutions? As scholar Chancellor Williams expressed, the present-day confused outlook of the African people is the result of centuries of European acculturation, where the ideologies and value systems of the oppressors unconsciously become those of the oppressed, even when the result is demonstratively against themselves.<sup>70</sup> The Western art world did not just have a change of heart; they did not just bear witness to the greatness that globally marvels its viewers or the African art historical cannon. Instead, they use tactics and mechanisms to present the illusion of autonomy and strive to profit from the opportunities created by African artists.

The invaluable eminence of African art is its cultural, historical, and social quality. Therefore, one must have a culturally centered idea of African art grounded in the functional dimension of the Afrocentric paradigm to have a thorough and sound understanding of African art administration and analysis, even the African artist themselves. Artists should not be concerned with being accepted into the Western art world. We celebrate elevating in their industry spaces while they monopolize and monetize our arts. Must we seek to sustain our arts outside of our given culture? Must we strive to be defined wholly externally? As the Western art world has decided to engage with African art, its monetary and visual value is increased. Tomorrow, if this fickle

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<sup>69</sup> Mnyele, 25.

<sup>70</sup> Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.*, (Third World Press, 1976), 351.

industry decides there is a new trend to follow, the value will not maintain, yet it is viewed as an entry point, affirming the idea of “making it” in their infrastructure.

21<sup>st</sup> century African art has become a staple element in the Western art industry, with auctioneers like Piasa, Artcurial, Bonhams, and Sotheby’s regularly hosting dedicated sessions. In addition, Christie’s and Phillips constantly inquire about works by African artists to supply their generalist sales of Contemporary art.<sup>71</sup> Christie’s and Sotheby’s auction houses, the two leading auctions in the Western art industry, account for more than 40% of auction sales and are worth approximately 7 billion dollars each. Their strategic model follows economic and buyer trends; for these institutions, value is contingent on relevant taste and profitability, neither on the artist’s cultural background nor the piece’s cultural context. These institutions function as an artist’s secondary market, meaning that after the work is purchased on the primary market, from the artist to anyone, whether galleries or art collectors, it can be resold for any price contingent on who holds power to deem it valuable. The secondary market is liable to oversell the idea of art, determining its value, typically earning triple what the art was when it was acquired from the artist. On the other hand, museums and other art institutions utilize these collectors as a resource when looking to acquire art for exhibitions. Additionally, the artist does not receive any reparation from the profit of the secondary seller nor from any financial exchange between museums and the collectors they work with regularly. In this process, however, artists have no control over the direction of their work as it moves into spaces that can shift and change its context, meaning, and function.

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<sup>71</sup> Artprice, “Contemporary African Art: Another Record Year at Auction,” accessed June 5, 2023, <https://www.artprice.com/artmarketinsight/contemporary-african-art-another-record-year-at-auction>.

In 2022, works by artists born in Africa generated \$63 million at auction versus a previous record of around \$47 million in 2021.<sup>72</sup> Ghanaian painter and visual artist Amoako Bofo is one of the continent's most highly regarded 21<sup>st</sup> century artists, next to the excellent El Anatsui. On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, his painting, *Baba Diop* (2019), was sold for 1.14 million dollars at Christie's 20<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong to New York live-streamed auction.<sup>73</sup> Bofo's presence in the industry began in 2018 when African American painter Kehinde Wiley engaged him with figures in the American arts sphere, including the Roberts Projects, an LA-based art gallery, who was interested in representing Bofo as one of their artists. Bofo's relationship with the Roberts Projects developed into several monumental-scale exhibitions and residencies across the United States. This quickly evolved into his work being consigned to numerous shows and curators, falling into the hands of collectors interested in spinning their investment, such as Stefan Simchowitz, who blatantly flipped one of Bofo's paintings at auction for \$875,144 more than ten times its original acquisition value of \$64,825.<sup>74</sup> These collectors and investors are not looking to hold, love, and engage with his work, never mind its cultural significance and importance; they intend to make a profit. This example illustrates how the Western art industry, its consumers, museums, galleries, and auction houses, monopolize and monetize, and therefore exploit works by African artists, accumulating hundreds of thousands of dollars in profit, none to be distributed to the artist themselves.

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<sup>72</sup> Artprice, "Contemporary African Art".

<sup>73</sup> Christie's Auction House, 20th Century: Hong Kong to New York Auction, accessed June 5, 2023, [https://www.christies.com/auctions/20th-century-hong-kong-to-new-york#overview\\_Nav](https://www.christies.com/auctions/20th-century-hong-kong-to-new-york#overview_Nav).

<sup>74</sup> Claire Voon, "The Artsy Vanguard 2020: Amoako Bofo," accessed June 5, 2023, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artsy-vanguard-2020-amoko-bofo>.

In March of 2023, Artprice published an article in *Diptyk Magazine* titled “Contemporary African Art: Another Year at Auction,” detailing the “top performing,” or what should have been designated “most exploited,” artists within this marketplace. Phillips auction house, which initiated Amoako Bofo’s auction presence by presenting his first painting at auction, *The Lemon Bathing Suit*, which sold for \$900,000 in 2020, introduced its network of collectors to other Ghanaian artists through a dedicated exhibition and sale held in London in February 2022 titled, “Birds of a Feather.” They featured the works of Awanle Ayiboro Hawa Ali, Courage Hunke, James Mishio, Araba Opoku, Abdur Rahman Muhammed, and Kwaku Yaro. Meanwhile, Christie’s and Sotheby’s were engaged in a price records race: \$2.19 million for a work by Toyin Ojih Odutola at Sotheby’s in November 2021, then \$4.47 million for a painting by Njideka Akunyili Crosby at Christie’s in November 2022. The desperate need for a source of financial income resulted in a near stampede in organizing African art exhibits and collecting works.<sup>75</sup>

A short documentary directed by CNN, “Africa's Time is Now as an International Art Destination,” calls attention to this working economy and the establishment of a market for African art by these institutions. It features auction houses that are looking at capitalizing on the wealth of art by African artists. It includes discourse from Hannah O’Leary, the head of Modern and Contemporary African Art at Sotheby’s New York, who rationalizes that the momentum in the art market justifies giving Africa the spotlight to exhibit art and supply their demand:

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<sup>75</sup> Mnyele, 23.

There has always been a wealth of art history on the continent, and that's something that we're trying to explore here at Sotheby's, and I think there have always been people who have been interested in collecting it.<sup>76</sup>

The documentary describes the live scenes of a Sotheby's Contemporary African Art auction with a crowded room of European purchasers, busy phone lines, and bids flooding in. Meanwhile, an image of an elder woman dressed in an African Gele headwrap displayed at the forefront of the room is exhibited to be acquired. The contradiction is quite clear. Are these auctioneers even knowledgeable in African cultural substance to recognize the work's most authentic value, its cultural significance? Hannah O'Leary, on the record-breaking prices of African art, none of which is reimbursed to the artists themselves, describes the success of the auction as a significant marker of how the art market is doing:

We're really delighted with how it went. The results were fantastic! We are going from strength to strength with this market. We had a very full room, and we set several new world records for artists from Africa.<sup>77</sup>

Sharon Oboubi, the junior cataloguer for Modern and Contemporary African Art at Sotheby's, corresponds:

For an auction house like Sotheby's to pay attention to modern and contemporary African art has been a signal of confidence in the industry...The world is starting to sit up and pay attention to contemporary African art. The hope is that with more involvement in the industry, we can continue to build a profile of the works of artists in the modern and contemporary African arts.<sup>78</sup>

The scramble for 21<sup>st</sup> century African art shows how the imposition of Eurocentric orientation is at the root of the operative economic model that regulates the

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<sup>76</sup> CNN, "Africa's Time is Now as an International Art Destination," *Inside Africa*, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> CNN, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> CNN, 2018.

monetization and monopolization of African art by the Western art industry. Here, we can distinguish how art institutions have been instrumental in supporting Eurocentric ideologies within the manifestation of this systemic structure. They are changing their corporate model to distract from their racist and oppressive history and integrate strategies that shift their focus on Africa. Additionally, the institutions that exhibit, display, and educate the public on African art hold the authority to monopolize the pedagogy of these artworks, with recycled and repetitive exposition themes due to a lack of a holistic understanding of African art. What are the ramifications if these problems aren't addressed?

African agency as a concept allows for the restructuring of society in terms of continental and global affairs. If institutions utilize Eurocentric paradigms in their approach to analysis, they confine African art to the parameters of the European worldview. They offer disempowered positions by limiting and misrepresenting contents that mold and shape our consciousness. Dealing with this Eurocentric infrastructure presents the illusion that African art is progressing in the Western art world while artists themselves waste their resources wrapped in deception and distraction. Therefore, it is imperative to use agency to involve 21<sup>st</sup> century African art in local and global society. The concept of African agency and the functional dimension of the Afrocentric paradigm dismantle the power structure of the Western art industry and Eurocentric orientation to African art administration. It initiates an empowerment solution that inspires the development of an African creative ecosystem and economic structure to promote 21<sup>st</sup> century African art nationally and transnationally using Afrocentric formulations and methodologies to administrate and systematize our creativity. Ultimately, the information

that I gathered in this chapter demonstrates how the industry of European and North American art institutions and markets use a methodical structure centered on Eurocentrism that is contrusive to the liberation of African people and continues to function to sustain oppression in the sectors of art and culture and is therefore exploitative in its operation.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

An Afrocentric approach to the administration of 21<sup>st</sup> century African art is not a form of resistance to exploitative and capitalistic Eurocentric institutions. Yet, we are fulfilling the responsibilities of our collective advancement in pursuing our liberation by exercising our agency. Institutions can play a critical role in shaping the future of African art. We will collapse by relying on the Western industry to manage and display our art, and neither will we succeed by attempting to create an imitation of Eurocentric infrastructure to organize. The solution becomes an Afrocentric model of a creative ecosystem that functions as a network of people operating with each other, giving oxygen to African universal views and experiences while exploring self-reflection through creativity, community, and culture. Its creative, economic, and social values should reflect the Kawaiida concept that assumes an ability and obligation always to strive to leave the community more beautiful and beneficial than before. We should use a creative economy not to compete in production costs but rather to build knowledge and African regeneration. By cultivating an ecosystem that employs Afrocentric infrastructure, we establish a new platform of thinking in terms of the administration, accumulation, and pedagogies of African art.

Maintaining our strong cultural identity, historical affirmation, and agency is essential and indispensable to African liberation. Promoting African-centered constructs and paradigms supporting an African worldview provides a sociocultural identity that allows us to nurture our affairs. In addition, cultivating a creative ecosystem and

economic structure supports the reconstruction of historical consciousness and continuity by using Afrocentric formulations to center and celebrate our creativity.

Nia, the fifth principle of Kwanzaa, meaning purpose, encourages us to commit to the collective vocation of building, developing, and defending our community, culture, and history to regain our historical initiative and greatness.<sup>79</sup> Creativity and purpose aligned should be a commitment to practicing Ma'at, reaffirming and restoring truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order. This parallelism should elevate the aesthetic, contextual, and cultural qualities in 21<sup>st</sup> century African art and inform a functional administrative and organizational aspect by reaffirming and restoring the African spirit:

With our brushes and paints, we shall need to visualize the beauty of the country we would like our people to live in. We, therefore, need to humble ourselves to heed the people's word. We need to learn the techniques of organization and administration as this will be of help in the conducting of meetings and documentation of materials, works, and information. This is the process that will reward us with training to articulate ourselves to one another and to the world. We shall be able to read and account for our work with the clarity of the true revolutionary. This clarity will help us base our collectivity on a less bellicose patriotism and avoid a narrow and chauvinistic definition of ourselves. 'Revolution is a conscious act. It permits the unthinkable to be thought, the inconceivable to be imagined, and the unspoken to be shouted out loud...<sup>80</sup>

There are myriad opportunities for solutions to make national and transnational impacts and share our narratives using our arts. Whatever we create and how we utilize those creations should be centered in an African worldview and function as an empowering and revolutionary tool, leaving a legacy that builds on and enriches the legacy that comes before us.

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<sup>79</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Nguzo Saba: The Seven Principles Kwanzaa*, (1967).

<sup>80</sup> Mnyele, 27.

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