

## **THE SEA THAT TAKES US APART AND BRINGS US TOGETHER**

Built at the water's edge and overlooking the Baía de Todos os Santos, the Solar do Unhão, in Salvador, exudes the memories of times gone by and a special part of Brazilian history: during colonial times it was the site of a thriving agro-industrial complex with its own main house, a chapel, a whipping post and slave quarters. It has been converted and today is home to the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia but the building still portrays material evidence of a time when the exploitation of slaves was one of the fundamental bases of the economy. The choice of this location and of Sala Walter da Silveira to present the Pan-African Exhibition of Contemporary Art reaffirms the same vibrant and natural significance as that of choosing the city of Salvador; one that is concerned about conserving the past and manages to transform the influences of its African legacy in such a creative way. These transformations and hybridizations, the reflection on the Black Diaspora, and the role that art plays in the construction of an Afro-descendent identity are the underlying issues of this exhibition.

Herein we find some of the most active African artists and thinkers together with those from the African Diaspora. The goal of the Pan-African Exhibition of Contemporary Art is to raise and discuss issues common to countries as different as Brazil and Burkina Faso, Cuba and Angola, the United States and Ghana. Art and thought are efficient ways of bringing people together, tools for forging the understanding of experiences that seem to be so far apart but can easily be shared the more we get to know them.

This show is a unique opportunity for us to find out what we share with and what makes us so different from Africa and other countries that were influenced by the African Diaspora. This initiative is a result of a partnership between Associação Cultural Videobrasil and Fundação Cultural Palmares, and was developed with the support of the Ministério da Cultura (Ministry for Culture) and sponsorship from Petrobras. It strengthens the growing number of initiatives towards relating to other cultures where there is so much to exchange. The opportunity of being the curator of the Pan-African Exhibition of Contemporary Art offered the chance of delving deeper into the art of this continent, a subject that I had become more involved with at the end of the 1990's. This was a time when I became more familiar with the art of countries like South Africa, Burkina Faso, Mali and Zimbabwe. The innovative formal approach and courageous manner whereby artists from these countries embrace a vision about the social-political and historical questions of their homelands and the continent as a whole were etched in my mind.

In 2000, the support from SESC São Paulo and the Prince Claus Fund, together with a key partnership with curator Clive Kellner allowed Associação Cultural Videobrasil to organize in São Paulo the Contemporary African Art Show that, for the first time, brought to Brazil an important part of the artistic richness of countries that are constantly changing. The knowledge that we acquired was fundamental for preparing this new event in Salvador.

Almost five years have gone by since the exhibition in São Paulo, and this time, one could say that the sea was the point of departure for the curatorship. The sea that physically separates the Americas from Africa and that for centuries played its role as a means of transport and trade. Trade, it should be said, that was subject to the mandates of colonization and where men played the double role of merchant and merchandise. It makes sense that in the trading triangle formed by Africa, the Americas and Europe the slave labor was an important commercial item. The slave was a commodity to be bought and sold like any other.

The sea was a passageway of forced labor that were uprooted from Africa and brought to the Americas. The vessels can thus be seen as icons of this traumatizing experience

of cultural uprooting. Ships, or boats, that can be seen in the work of artists such as António Ole from Angola. In the installation “Canoa quebrada”, those vessels evoke the feeling of setting out upon the sea. Ole, who has been depicting the history of Angola in his own poetic way reverts to this transportation element by using its image of coming and going to make us reflect upon the trajectory of his country. It could be said that in different ways the sea invades our imagination and works as a fluid and provocative link between present and past.

The sea appears again in an original work created by Mario Cravo Neto for this exhibition. The water, apparently calm, is a witness and guardian of a historical place in time. Mariosinho has been a friend of mine for many years, and for several decades he has portrayed with remarkable intimacy the hybridized Afro-Brazilian religious beliefs and rituals. In his overall work the focus is not on fetishism, and knowledge takes over from curiosity. We now have the privilege of witnessing a new phase in his rich work: it turns toward the horizon, the intense light of the day, the open windows and the passage to the sea. His images have a revolving feeling about them where the present implies the past, though never imposing surviving material elements. The core feeling here is one of subtlety combined with flashes that spark memories and recall fragments of history.

Retracing our footsteps to the sea that is presented once again as both a dividing and unifying factor we should turn our attention to the work of young urban artist Daniel Lima. He uses a laser beam to create a virtual and untouchable bridge between Brazil and Africa. In this work the sea is no longer a barrier and a dividing element, but one that walks side by side with light until they both disappear on the horizon.

This deconstruction of material (or the recomposition of the image) can also be seen in the work of photographer Eustáquio Neves. Author of a number of important works with great visual impact and known as an artist that does not shy away from interfering in the very basics of photography – be this through chemical or physical manipulation of the negatives, or the paper itself – Neves presents an installation in Salvador in which he opted for the projection of the series “Arturos”, “Boa aparência”, “Objetização do corpo” and “Máscara de punição” to make a statement about the social aspects of the country. He says that the series which focuses on memories or daily circumstance – “boa aparência” – is a reference to the subtle way that advertisements for employment exclude Blacks – make us think about issues our minds refuse to admit although they are around us all the time.

When she chose to use autobiographical elements, the Cuban-American artist, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons also brought to the forefront something that had been discretely hidden under the hollow and superficial history told by the conquerors (colonizers). Campos-Pons brings “this side” of the memory, the development of the Afro-descendent identity in Cuba, as heterogeneous as a large portion of the Americas. The separation or “uprooting” is a vital element in the work of these artists. It is not hard to understand that the search or need for dialogue with “their origins” represents a key question in the art of these Afro-descendents who are trying to reorganize a chapter of history that has frequently been marked by chaos: the forced disintegration of their social structures, the migrations that also preceded the colonial period. Africa needs to be thought of as a dynamic continent with a historical background that antecedes, by far, its “discovery” by the Europeans. All of this culminates in a need to remember the past and transform this in a way to resist the impositions of and an act of structuring a new life in the “New World”.

Amongst the guests invited to join us in debates in Salvador are a number of collaborators that will contribute greatly to our objectives. Antônio Godi, Cheryl Finley, Zita C. Nunes and João Carlos Rodrigues will be discussing questions directly

connected to the event. This will include issues such as the Afro-descendants' cultural production, which still does not benefit the artists themselves significantly enough; "roots tourism" that finds a way of revisiting the past and strengthening the Afro-descendent identity on visits to Africa; the creation of a black consciousness that should never be simplified or reduced to the color of a person's skin; the production of films in Brazil, the stereotypes, forgotten causes and, what appears to be a greater acceptance of Blacks in the film industry. An example of this is the film "Filhas do vento" ("Daughters of the wind") that we will be showing during the event with the participation of the director. It is the first fiction feature film directed by Joel Zito Araújo. It brings together the largest cast of Black actors and actresses in the history of Brazilian cinema and, at the same time, succeeds in doing away with stereotypes typically associated with Black characters. The works that have been chosen for this exhibition focus on the legacy of slavery – people who were marginalized and non-participant in society as we know it – an understandable consequence of the African Diaspora. They encourage us, creatively, to change our perceptions. It is important to note that for the majority of Afro- descendants, the "return", even though it might be symbolic or temporary, seems to have a strengthening effect. Campos-Pons, for example, evokes her family's memory, reminds us of the city where she was raised amongst sugar cane plantations and of the country that she left to bestow meaning to a set of fragments. Art, as we are aware, holds a covenant to reveal these connections in a way that reaches people immediately through an aesthetic and emotional relation.

In texts that describe the works of these artists, the poet José Eduardo Agualusa, the scholar Salah Hassan, the curator and editor Mark Sealy and the writer and editor Ricardo Rosas help us see beyond our original conceptions and open our minds to contemporary productions. The effect of aesthetics, vital to establish communication and keep arts alive, can also be seen in a selection of photographs from Senegal (Bamako V, in Mali) that focuses on contemporary questions in Africa: the appearance of the "artist-photographer" – is he/she different from the studio or news photographer? –, the documenting of traditions undergoing change and/or becoming extinct, the precariousness of large cities, something that can be seen in a good part of the world. The dreams, the passion and the history of post-colonialism find an efficient form of expressing themselves through cinema. Films selected for this exhibition are part of one of the most successful cultural cooperation initiatives to have taken place in Africa. Sponsored by institutions from all over the world the Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision (FESPACO) (Pan-African Cinema and Television Festival), held in Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso, has been responsible for encounters that increase the visibility of the fragmented productions of this enormous continent. The concept of bringing this film exhibition to Salvador was possible thanks to the support of the Embassy of France in Brazil (France finances a large number of films in French speaking countries). This is not only a way of marketing these films, but the initiative in itself should serve as a model for a number of countries on the Southern circuit. Turning our thoughts to the art that is produced in Africa and by Afro-descendants we should not forget the idea of diversity. If post-colonialism promised the continent a future ultimately based on independence, prosperity and social-economic reorganization after decades of being tied to Europe, reality posed a trajectory that was often far more challenging and unexpected. The widening gap between rich and poor countries, uncontrolled urbanization and, in the last few years, the irreversible phenomena of globalization are amongst the factors that made artistic creativity even more complex in today's world by raising questions regarding the permeability of (and, at the same time, the difficulty to clearly establish) identities and frontiers. Or, and more pragmatically speaking, of production and the market themselves. A market that is often tempted to

reduce or simplify not only Africa but also the art produced on this continent relegating it to the unthinkable generalization and terminology of “African Art” – something that does not exist.

The events in Salvador intend to examine the questions of representation of art produced not only in Africa but also in countries like Brazil that were a part of the Black Atlantic route that was characterized by cultural diversity and the forced relocation of peoples.

During the Pan-African Exhibition of Contemporary Art questions of identity and contradictions will be discussed along with traditions and contemporary issues. Themes that are inherent and impossible to disassociate from the cultural production of Africans and Afro-descendants. A large part of the cultural production of artists from the African Diaspora is built around questions of a black identity. As a continent Africa remains crystallized and unaltered in the eyes of Afro-descendants. Eyes that continue to identify it as the land of “authenticity” and “tradition”. This Africa of the roots however is living a reality that has changed with time. Africa today is a continent made up of heterogeneous countries that confront their challenges with a penetrating awareness, as pictured in the documentaries screened in Salvador. Ethnic conflicts, Aids and the dream of a brighter and more prosperous future are some of the issues that represent reality today.

The histories of Africa are intrinsically entwined in the religious syncretism of religion, trade and the expansion of the West. But today the histories of Africa are also bound to a world that seems to be smaller and closer – even though this may turn out to be an illusion. And that is why artists and thinkers that are capable of showing both sides of the same history were invited to participate in Pan-African Exhibition of Contemporary Art. Over the course of time Brazil, one of the key countries in terms of the Black Diaspora, was rarely given the chance to become better acquainted with the contemporary works of Africa. Despite the geographical, historical and cultural proximity with Africa, our eyes have always been turned towards what is more emphatically presented to us by the North.

It is essential that this dialogue be explored to a greater extent and that it results in exchanges not only with the North but with the South as well. This is the only way we will be able to advance more quickly towards the reorganization of the fragments of a heritage that was interrupted and rediscovered.

There is a real sense of humanity to be found in the ideas contained in the work of these artists. Not necessarily as a statement of resistance or bravery but as a model for change based on the experience of survival.

The Pan-African Exhibition of Contemporary Art owes its existence to the tireless work and cooperative spirit of people and entities from all over the world. But I would especially like to thank my team of producers and collaborators for their unflagging and remarkable help over this long road we have traveled together.

**SOLANGE OLIVEIRA FARKAS**  
Curator

SOLANGE FARKAS \_FEIRA DE SANTANA (BAHIA), 1955.  
LIVES AND WORKS IN SÃO PAULO

\_One of the most active articulators of electronic art in the Southern circuit, Solange is the director and curator of the “Festival Internacional de Arte Eletrônica”, which she created in 1983, in São Paulo. That festival shows selections of Brazilian and South American video art in the world’s major festivals of the kind. She is the President of Associação Cultural Videobrasil, which has the country’s largest electronic art collection,

and created the “Videobrasil Coleção de Autores”, an annual series of documentaries on artists from the Southern circuit; several films have been launched, amongst which one on the South-African William Kentridge, as well as others on the Brazilian Rafael França, on the Brazilian-Swiss long-term collaborators Mau Wal (Maurício Dias and Walter Riedweg), and on the Lebanese Akram Zaatari. In 2000, she was the curator, together with Clive Kellner, of Contemporary African Art Show, at SESC Pompéia (São Paulo).