

African Art and Agency in the Workshop [book review]

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Abstract:

African Art and Agency in the Workshop, edited by Sidney Kasfir and Till Förster, is the ideal outcome of a disciplinary conference. The sixteen essays in this volume, products of the 2007 Arts Council of the African Studies Association Triennial Conference, interrogate an underlying and often unquestioned inter-disciplinary category: the workshop. Contributors address artistic production in African nation-states and multinational-states, as well as at least one workshop model operating through global networks. This worthy addition to Indiana University Press' *African Expressive Cultures* series contains a broad array of data derived from archival research and fieldwork, as well as artists' observations drawn from direct workshop participation.

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example, Lofchie only fully defines the term “parallel economy” on page 155, after devoting a good deal of the preceding chapters to an extended discussion of the operation of this very entity. Furthermore, several inconsistencies emerge over the course of the text. This is particularly true with respect to Lofchie’s treatment of the type of power wielded by the Tanzanian government, which he alternately refers to as “authoritarian” and characterized by “divided authority.”

The Political Economy of Tanzania seems to have been written out of a genuine commitment to illuminating the twists and turns of post-socialist transition in Tanzania so as to improve policy recommendations directed towards the country in the near future. This is a commendable endeavor, and Lofchie succeeds in employing a frank, direct style of writing that readers from the world of public policy and NGO work will likely find accessible and appealing. Yet in avoiding some of the jargon and verbosity of bad academic writing, Lofchie simultaneously dispenses with some of the basic elements of good scholarly inquiry: thorough research, careful dialogue with current literature in the field, and explicitly stated analytical interventions. For this reason, Lofchie’s book ultimately makes a rather limited contribution to our understanding of Tanzania’s postcolonial political economy.

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African Art and Agency in the Workshop. Edited by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Till Förster. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. vi, 410; 65 b/w illus., 8 color illustrations, notes, references, index; \$30.00 paper.

African Art and Agency in the Workshop, edited by Sidney Kasfir and Till Förster, is the ideal outcome of a disciplinary conference. The sixteen essays in this volume, products of the 2007 Arts Council of the African Studies Association Triennial Conference, interrogate an underlying and often unquestioned inter-disciplinary category: the workshop. Contributors address artistic production in African nation-states and multinational-states, as well as at least one workshop model operating through global networks. This worthy addition to Indiana University Press’ *African Expressive Cultures* series contains a broad array of data derived from archival research and fieldwork, as well as artists’ observations drawn from direct workshop participation.

The term “workshop” is decidedly amorphous by the end of the volume. However, this ambiguity is a reflection of the term’s highly diverse employment, rather than a fault of the contributors. Kasfir and Förster propose a working definition of “workshops” as “any group of artisans, large or small, who not only share a workspace, but in most cases, also draw on it as a stable framework for communication and learning governed by the acknowledged expertise of one or more senior members of the group” (p. 1).

Kasfir and Förster cite master-apprentice models of learning, late colonial institutions run by cultural outsiders, and royal workshops as key examples of this production framework. The volume's case studies quickly reveal this definition must be modified to fit practice on-the-ground. Through integrated economic and sociocultural analyses, authors reveal the fluidity of the "shared" nature of workshop space, "stability" of its structure, and power dynamics of "seniority" (p. 1).

Förster's research in Ivory Coast and Cameroon address the fluidity of material and social collaboration in master-apprentice style woodcarving and painting communities (Ch. 13). His fine-grained observations of young carvers moving between physical sites of production in Ivory Coast are particularly astute and reveal the fluidity of place, even in sites considered to be canonical African workshops.

In the post-colonial workshop genre, Chika Okeke-Agulu's analysis of the Nigerian Osogbo workshop (Ch. 6), and Christine Scherer's work on the Zimbabwean Tengenenge sculpture community (Ch. 7) both question dichotomous portrayals of cultural insiders and outsiders. Okeke-Agulu and Scherer document subtle flows of power and persuasion, undermining preoccupations with racial power dynamics that have oft overshadowed objective analysis of the Osogbo and Tengenenge examples. Workshop participants or community members are fleshed-out as actors who question the pedagogical norms supposedly imposed by European art instructors or owners.

Nicholas Argenti's Cameroonian participatory case study (Ch. 2) provides breadth to the volume by engaging with royal cosmological structures often missing in contemporary or modernist workshop studies. Argenti addresses anthropomorphization of trees and wood as a moment when materials and royal interests intersect, helping to define aesthetics and carving methods.

This volume clearly seeks to affirm the workshop as an analytical category, a tool scholars can use to critique the economic and sociocultural diversity of artistic production across cultural and geographic divides. During their description of workshops as economic institutions, Kasfir and Förster provide comparative examples from Gothic European artisanal workshops (p. 6), as well as the structures formed by Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus art school in Germany (p. 8). They point out that the workshop "has been neglected as an analytical category," despite its "relevance to our own history and its presence in our society" (p. 7). The "our" used here clearly refers to an abstracted "Western" culture. But, who today would claim that Kasfir and Förster's cultural backgrounds in the United States and Switzerland constitute a unified "our" or "we"? This is an unfortunate rhetorical turn in a volume containing contributions from an admirably diverse set of American, Canadian, German, Nigerian, South African, Swiss, and Ugandan scholars.

Rhetorical missteps and several typographical errors in the introduction notwithstanding, this volume clarifies the diversity of African workshops. When Kasfir and Förster emerged as leaders in their respective fields of art history and social anthropology, the term "workshop" often indicated a unified local artistic style and bore connotations of slavish reproduction. These influential scholars mentored a generation and ensured this model was dismantled. They are quite right; the definition of "workshop" and

its broader application require further theorization. Might scholars of African art and culture address the contemporary field of “art as social practice” or the rise of curatorship utilizing the lens of the “workshop”?

Kasfir hints in the book’s final chapter or “Coda” that the physical workshops and online networks that are becoming fixtures of global art might benefit from workshop analyses. She astutely observes that a “constellation of factors” (p. 393) is influencing artisanal practice and demand further study. She highlights commodification, global tourism, political conflicts, and urbanization as just a few aspects that have transformed workshops. UNESCO World Heritage designations, both physical and intangible, are having an impact on definitions of “tradition” and the continuation of many workshops on a global scale (p. 395).

Kasfir’s final chapter highlights workshops’ value as lenses to study the construction of “localities,” the sense of community Arjun Appadurai defines as “an achieved sense of social immediacy among the members of a group” (1996). In the contemporary art world, digital 3D printing, collaborative art practice, and global workshops are challenging the geographical basis of localities and increasingly bring Appadurai’s theories to life, integrating materials with social constructions. It is in this moment of flux when fine-grained studies, such as those found in this volume, are required and increasingly difficult to execute. Scholars must be aware of African artists leading or participating in workshops in Amsterdam, London, or New York. Even carvers and potters from communities based around more “traditional” workshop models participate in globalized folk-life workshops and development conferences. It is this type of connectivity that may lead the field back to the workshop as a powerful theoretical tool, as well as a term in need of redefinition.

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The Precolonial State in West Africa: Building Power in Dahomey. By J. Cameron Monroe. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xvii, 265: 81 figures, 3 tables. \$99.00.

Dahomey has served as a case study for many aspects of African history; for the study of African institution building, as an example of absolute monarchy, an administered state, and a paragon of a dependency on slave trading. Generally, our understanding of its history comes from its fairly well documented history, and its rich oral tradition, and by its arts. But the archaeological study of the kingdom is fairly late in coming, though now, thanks to the efforts of several research schemes created in the 2000s, a serious overview of its archaeology is possible.

Monroe, one of the leading archaeological researchers in the country, makes an ambitious and engaging attempt to marry the widely varied sources into a new vision of the country’s history making particular use of the landscape surveys done in the recent past.