

“Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other”
 Berlinische Galerie
 5.8. – 7.11.2016

“Wild Style: Exhibition of Figurative Art”
 Peres Projects
 10.6. – 5.8.2016

Africa is big in Berlin, for the moment at least. Two notable exhibitions currently running the city make claims of dialogue with African aesthetic culture. The largest in terms of scale and ambition is the Berlinische Galerie’s “Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other”. The second, at Peres Projects, is titled “Wild Style: Exhibition of Figurative Art”. Sometimes, a subtitle can tell you a lot. The nod to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism in the title of the former exhibition signals that this show is aware of its complex cultural positioning and, notionally, at least, will consider the African pieces on their own terms as well as those by the European artists who assimilated the aesthetics of various historical African cultures in their own works. A fine idea, but when one of the first things you see upon approaching the exhibition is a text which includes the following passage: “Costumes worn at Dada soirées drew on designs by native peoples of North America, and Dadaist assemblage revealed Oceanic influences”, questions do start to nag. North America? Oceania? You don’t need a PhD in geography to know those aren’t to be found in Africa. The curators could be forgiven for being a bit haphazard in their geography as a byproduct of the enthusiasm of securing such works as the headless ninth-century Cambodian sculpture believed to depict the goddess Uma – a piece of direct aesthetic relevance to the work of Hannah Höch as well as a stunning object in its own right. However, lumping together indigenous cultures from various continents in an exhibition entitled “Dada Africa” comes dangerously close to expressing the same kind of reductive orientalism that the curators specifically attempt to address in the title of the exhibition. One hand makes a drawing, the other erases.

In the case of “Wild Style” the title is even more vexed. Though there is no mention of it in the press materials, it would be inconceivable that “Wild Style” does not reference the charmingly ramshackle 1983 Charlie Ahearn film of the same title. Those familiar with the film will know that its spectral plot follows the fortunes of a graffiti artist named Zoro who tries to negotiate the difficult balance of being true to his muse as the trappings of success begin to seem more like traps than successes. The film is concerned with authenticity and context while trying to bring the subcultures it de-

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picts to a wide audience. Such contradictory impulses also seem to characterise the exhibition that shares (not to say appropriates) its name. The show brings together works by contemporary artists and displays them beside masterpieces of figurative African art. The works from Africa come from a range of different territories and cultures. Included are magnificent works by Igbo crafters, Dan masks from Côte d’Ivoire and reliquaries from the Teke people of the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Peres Projects certainly deserves credit for de-museum-ising these African pieces and presenting them in a contemporary art context. Seeing these cultural artifacts removed thousands of miles and centuries from their origins and plugged into a living tradition infused by their own aesthetics is one of the most refreshing things about “Wild Style”. Unfortunately, like the title of the show, the curatorial approach

seems only periodically interested in actually establishing meaningful dialogues between contemporary works and historical reference points. And yet there are times when the presentation feels organic, even revelatory. Cécile B. Evans’s video study, *Working on What The Heart Wants* (2016), seemed truly to engage the dynamics of representation, materiality and psychic desire that many of the African pieces embody. The placement of Evans’s study among masks and figures evokes the ways in which avatars and forms of mediation have infused religious, social and spiritual practices from the earliest periods of human history to the present. Such coherence is not always so readily discernible. The relevance of Mark Flood’s *Keep it in Shape With a Simple Routine* (1985), in which a pool-ready Suzanne Somers, clipped from a magazine advert, poses with a number of additional limbs receding into the background, is somewhat ambiguous. Indeed it is “figurative art” as referenced in the exhibition’s subtitle, but its aesthetic lineage would seem to stretch more across the Pacific Ocean rather than the Atlantic. The inclusion of Donna Huanca’s painting *Apache Tears* (2016) again speaks of an almost tone-deaf desire to link all “non-Western” cultures together. It is true that “Wild Style” makes no specific geographic claims for itself, as the Dada show does, but the same easy conflation of highly distinct traditions of representation remains problematic. Such looseness risks bleaching out what makes each work, and each artist, special and can lead to the kind of homogenising generalism in which othering begins.

William Kherbek

Unknown artist
nkisi n’kondi, before 1892
Vili, Loango, Republic of the Congo

Installation view, Peres Projects
Brian Calvin: Twin Infinities, 2016
(left), Blue Eye, 2016 (right)
Igbo (Ibeku, Oloro, Olokoro or
Ngwa group), figurative male Ogbom
headdress, late 19th – early 20th
century

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"Dada Africa": Photo: bpk / RMN - Grand Palais (Michel Utrado / Thierry Olivier), "Wild Style": Courtesy Peres Projects