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Research note

The rise of Africa in the contemporary auction market: Myth or reality?

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ABSTRACT

In the West and Africa alike auctions dedicated to contemporary African art have become increasingly common. Along with other developments, these specialized sales are cited in claims of a boom for contemporary African art. However, there is a dearth of empirical research on long-term changes in the incorporation of African born artists in “mainstream” contemporary sales at Western auction houses. Given that these sales bring together art from across geographic lines, they are an important indicator for measuring the degree to which the market for this work has internationalized. This paper helps to fill this gap in knowledge by presenting the first complete history of African born artists in the main contemporary sales at Christie’s. It draws on an original archive of all artworks consigned at Christie’s New York May and November contemporary day and evening sales from their inception in the 1970s until 2015. Findings show that there has been a slight rise, but not a boom, in the consignment of works by African born artists in the post-1989 era. I speculate that the small increases are related to directed efforts to legitimate contemporary African art as well as other shifts in the symbolic valuation of contemporary art. This paper advances scholarship on the internationalization of the art market by offering new empirical insights on the cultural hybridization of contemporary auctions in the West. More specifically, while the increases support arguments that contemporary African art is globalizing, the small rates of participation across time lend credence to critiques that claims of a highly internationalized art world are overstated. Also, by attending to the particularities of the African case, this paper sheds new insight on how the contemporary art market has internationalized.

1. Introduction

In the West and Africa alike auctions dedicated to contemporary African art have become increasingly common.² Along with other developments, these specialized sales are cited in claims of a boom for contemporary African art (Prisco, 2015). While auction sales focused on contemporary African art offer evidence of a growing global market for this work, we still know very little about long-term changes in the incorporation of African born artists in the main contemporary sales at Western auction houses. The cultural

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² These include such auctions as Bonham’s “Africa Now” series inaugurated in 2009 and held in London and New York; Piasa’s “Art Contemporain African” sales starting in 2014 and offered in Paris; Sotheby’s “African Modern and Contemporary Art” sales which debuted in London in 2017; Circle Art Agency’s “Modern and Contemporary East African Art Auction” sales beginning in 2013 and held in Nairobi, Kenya; and, sales of contemporary African art in Lagos, Nigeria held at Art House Contemporary Limited which was founded in 2007.

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flows model of globalization posits that cultural globalization is characterized by multi-directional flows of culture (Crane, 2002: 7–9).³ Culture flows not only from Western regions to non-Western regions, but also back in the other direction. These “contra-flows” from non-Western areas such as Africa to the United States and Europe give light to how the “core” is being transformed by the “periphery” (Thussu, 2008). The integration of works by African born artists into the main contemporary auctions in the West is an important measure of cultural globalization because these sales bring together art from across geographic lines. As such, understanding the degree to which contemporary African art has been internationalized in the market necessitates investigation of these auctions.

Within the broader discourse on the globalization of fine art, one school of thought would predict that after 1989 the share of African born artists in mainstream contemporary auctions increased substantially. This dominant narrative that emerged in public discourse and scholarship on the art world at the turn of the 21st century asserted that a spectacular change had been underfoot: Western cultural supremacy was being challenged as artists and art institutions from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other parts of the world rose in prominence (Belting, Buddensieg, & Weibel, 2013; Bydler, 2004; Crane, 2009; Griffin, 2003). Cultural commentators and scholars point to developments like the establishment of art fairs in nations such as South Africa and the United Arab Emirates, and the rise of superstar artists from countries such as China and Mexico, to assert that the internationalization of the art world is now an established fact. In particular, 1989, a year that brought significant political and economic shifts across the world, is highlighted as the time when cultural globalization accelerated. Despite the enthusiasm with which this perspective is embraced, some social scientists point out that claims of art world globalization are more theoretically than empirically grounded (Velthuis & Baia Curioni, 2015). For example, after analyzing historical trends of worldwide artist recognition in the popular German *Kunstkompass* ranking and finding that Western artists dominate across time, Buchholz and Wuggenig (2005) conclude that “[t]he talk about the globalisation of art in important respects seems to refer to no more than a myth.” Similarly, in his research examining the nationality of contemporary artists represented by galleries in Amsterdam and Berlin, Velthuis (2013) finds that there is a strong “home bias” in both cities.

However, it is not only the scope of globalization that is critiqued but also its timing and applicability to artists living and working outside of the West. Some scholars question the timing of cultural globalization arguing that internationalization is not a new phenomenon (Velthuis & Baia Curioni, 2015: 5–6). This argument does not undermine the assertion that global boundaries surrounding culture are dissolving, but rather it questions when the boundaries started becoming more diffuse. Indeed, the internationalization of traditional African art does not follow this post-1989 timeline (Steiner, 1994; Zolberg, 1997). For example, the Museum of African Art was founded in Washington, D.C. in 1964. Similarly, the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City opened to the public in 1957 and its founder, Michael C. Rockefeller, donated the collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969.

Next, this critical perspective raises questions about whether or not the incorporation of non-Western artists into the global art world varies depending on if they live and work in their countries of birth or move to the West to live and work. If it is the latter that are the most globally integrated then the case that the art world is highly globalized is weakened. For example, Quemin (2006: 544) comments “While more and more artists from peripheral countries are managing to gain international recognition, at least in the rankings of the *Kunstkompass* or selections of biennials of contemporary art, most of these artists only come from those countries: they do not live there.”

I use the case of Christie’s New York to examine the integration of work by African born artists into mainstream contemporary auctions in the West. In accordance with the conventional approach to the globalization of fine art there should be a large rise in the proportion of work by these artists after 1989. In contrast, the more critical school would predict that their work would have a steady presence over the course of the sales or alternatively that any increases after 1989 would be small. While the dominant approach would not predict different patterns of incorporation for artists living in Africa versus those living in the West, the critical approach would suggest that the former would be integrated earlier and/or at a higher level.

To study longitudinal shifts in the consignment of art by African born⁴ artists at Christie’s New York, this paper draws on an original archive of all art works included in the catalogs for the May and November day and evening contemporary sales from their start in the 1970s to 2015 (see Appendix A). Christie’s New York is an important site to study because of its long-term dominant position in the market for contemporary art in the West. While other contemporary sales occur at the auction house, the spring and fall, and especially the evening sales during these seasons, are when the most notable auctions take place. Biographical information on all of the artists included in the sales was gathered using a range of sources such as artist CV’s, the Getty Union List of Artist Names, and Oxford Art Online.⁵

In the next section, the evolution of African born artists in the day and evening sales is described. To help illuminate this market trajectory, the following section presents a historical account of the shifting recognition of contemporary African art.

³ I use the terms globalization and internationalization synonymously to refer to the flow of goods—in this case contemporary art—across the world.

⁴ Since this paper focuses on artists born in Africa, Yinka Shonibare an artist of Yoruban descent who is often categorized as an African artist, is not included in the analysis. While Shonibare moved to Lagos, Nigeria when he was a child and was raised there, he was born in London. My analysis of Shonibare’s participation in the sales reveals that his work was not introduced until after 1989. As such, his absence from the analysis does not change the overall findings.

⁵ The designation of artists as living and working in the West or Africa is relative rather than absolute. For example, while El Anatsui’s home base is in Nigeria he has participated in residencies abroad (Vogel, 2012: 11).



Fig. 1. Work by African Born Artists in the May/November Evening Sales, 1977-2015.

Table 1
Artists in the Evening Sales.

| 1989 and before | Post 1989 |
|------------------|--|
| Live/Work Africa | William Kentridge (1955-)(South Africa/South Africa)(2) |
| Live/Work West | Marlene Dumas (1953-)(South Africa/Netherlands)(13); Julie Mehretu (1970-)(Ethiopia/USA)(4); Wangechi Mutu (1972-)(Kenya/USA)(1); Mario Schifano (1934-1998)(Libya/Italy)(1) |

2. Incorporation in the evening and day sales

First, turning to the evening sales that began in 1977, there was a slight rise in the number of works by African born artists. However, there was a different pattern of incorporation for artists living in Africa and those living in the West (see Fig. 1 and Table 1). The first work by an African born artist working in Africa was offered in 2000. That year, and in the following year, works by William Kentridge, a South African born artist who also lives there, were offered for sale.⁶ After 2001 no more works by Kentridge or any other artist working in Africa were consigned. The first offering by an African born artist working in the West was by another South African born artist, Marlene Dumas. Work by Dumas, who lives in the Netherlands, was included in evening sales in 2003–2007, 2010, 2011, and 2013. With the exception of three years, there was at least one work offered by an African born artist who lives in the West between 2003 and 2015.

Next, turning to the day sales that commenced in 1979, there was a slight increase in works by African born artists. Yet, like the evening sales, the patterns for artists living and working in Africa and the West vary. No works by the former group appear in the sales until 1998. The 1998 consignment was a painting by Chéri Samba, a self-trained artist who lives and works in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Photographs by Zwelethu Mthethwa, who was born and is based in South Africa, were also offered for sale in this period. Every year since 2012 assemblages by El Anatsui, a Ghanaian born artist who works in Nigeria, were also consigned in the day sales. Finally, since 2004 works by Kentridge were fairly regularly included in the day sales (see Fig. 2, Table 2).

The first work by an African born artist living in the West was offered in 1983. It was a mixed-media work by conceptual artist John Latham who was born in Zambia, but moved to the U.K. as an adolescent. Two years later in 1985 a steel sculpture by William Tucker and a painted bronze sculpture by Isaac Witkin were placed in the sales. Tucker was born in Cairo, Egypt but his family moved back to England when he was an infant. His career was centered there until he moved to Canada, and then the United States, in the 1970s. Witkin was born in South Africa and spent his childhood and adolescence in Africa. He immigrated to the UK when he was 21 and later to the United States in the 1960s. At the end of the 1980s, three more works by African born artists living and working in the West were placed in the day sales. One was a drawing by Tucker. Another was a painting by Jean-Michel Alberola who was born in Algeria but moved to France as a child. Ibram Lassaw’s *Field* (1985) was also consigned in this period. Lassaw was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1913 but his family moved to the United States in 1921.

While there was a presence of art by African born artists living and working in the West prior to the 1990s, the consignment of work by these artists picked up in pace and proportion in the subsequent decades. However, this was not before consignments came to a halt. From 1990 to 1997 no works by African born artists were offered for sale. This dead stop in sales came to an end in 1998

⁶ The 2001 lot included multiple works.

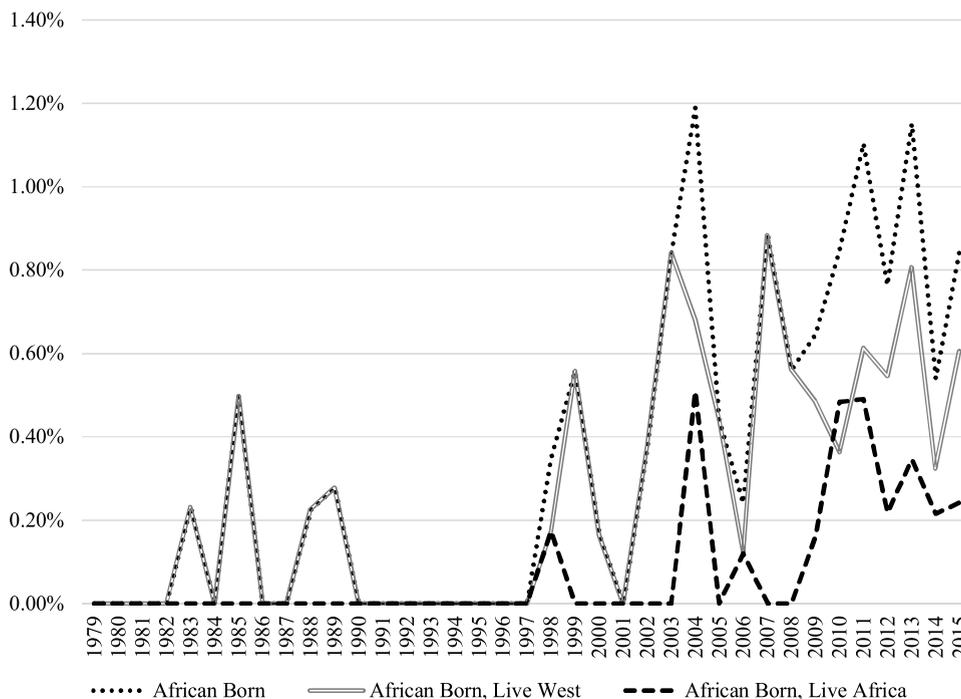


Fig. 2. Work by African Born Artists in the May/November Day Sales, 1979-2015.

Table 2
Artists in the Day Sales.

| | 1989 and before | Post 1989 |
|------------------|--|--|
| Live/Work Africa | | El Anatsui (1944-)(Ghana/Nigeria)(4); William Kentridge (1955-)(South Africa/South Africa)(16); Zwelethu Mthethwa (South Africa/South Africa)(2); Chéri Samba (1976-)(Democratic Republic of the Congo/Democratic Republic of the Congo)(1) |
| Live/Work West | Jean-Michel Alberola (1953-)(Egypt/France)(1); Ibram Lassaw (1913-2006)(Egypt/USA)(1); John Latham (1921-2003)(Zambia/U.K.)(1); William Tucker (1935-)(Egypt/UK/Canada/USA)(2); Isaac Witkin (1936-)(South Africa/UK/USA)(1) | Joseph Amar (1954-)(Morocco/Canada/USA)(1); Ghada Amer (1963-)(Egypt/France/USA)(6); Marlene Dumas (1953-)(South Africa/Netherlands)(27); Julie Mehretu (1970-)(Ethiopia/USA)(11); Wangechi Mutu (1970-)(Kenya/USA)(10); Evan Penny (1953-)(South Africa/Canada)(1); Robin Rhode (1976-)(South Africa/Germany)(4); Cosima Von Bonin (1962)(Kenya/Germany)(1) |

when two works were consigned. One was a painting by Joseph Amar who was born in Casablanca, Morocco. He immigrated to Canada as a child and to the United States as an adult. In 2005, 2006, and 2007, respectively, works by three other artists who would come to have a frequent presence in the sales were introduced—Julie Mehretu, who was born in Ethiopia and lives in the United States; Wangechi Mutu, a Kenyan born artist who also lives in the United States⁷; and, Ghada Amer who emigrated from Egypt to France as a child and then moved to the United States in 1995. Like the evening sales, Dumas’ work was also frequently offered in the day sales. Other artists working in the West, such as Robin Rhode who was born in South Africa and moved to Germany in the early 2000s, were introduced in the last five years.

Taken together, the findings offer support for both the conventional and critical schools of art world globalization. The conventional view asserts that after 1989 the art world became internationalized. This is entirely true in the evening sales where there were no works by any African born artists until the 21st century. Works by African born artists living and working in Africa in the day sales also fit this pattern since the first work debuted in 1998. While works by African born artists living and working in the West were in the day sales as early as 1983, it is after 1989 when the offerings picked up and became more consistent. Despite these increases, the tiny share of works by African born artists in the sales across time lend support to critiques that claims of a highly globalized art world are overstated. Moreover, the fact that works by artists living in Africa entered the day sales later, and generally have a lower presence in both sales, also lends support to critiques that living in the West facilitates international penetration for artists born outside of the West.

⁷ Later in her career, Mutu also established a studio in Nairobi, Kenya along with her studio in New York City. Given that during the period of analysis Mutu is described as living and working in New York she is designated as working in the West.

3. Shifting cultural recognition

In general, African born artists became slightly more integrated in these auctions in the post-1989 era. I conclude by conceptually elaborating, as well as preliminarily empirically exploring, an “aesthetic mobility” (Peterson, 1994: 179) and market reorientation hypothesis to explain the shifts. I suggest that different types of changes related to the legitimation of contemporary art—including contemporary African art as a whole, different segments of African born artists, and contemporary art at large—may have contributed to the repositioning of work by African born artists in these sales.

In the creative economy there is an intimate relationship between cultural recognition and the market. Or, to a degree there exists an interdependent relationship between the economy of cultural value and the economy of financial value (Bourdieu, 1983; Bull, 2011). In contrast to performance-driven products where function is fundamental to determining economic value, for taste-driven cultural objects validation by gatekeepers can play a significant role in establishing market value (Currid, 2007: 132). Thus, a cultural object’s position in the creative economy is dependent on the establishment of its aesthetic value by cultural mediators (Janssen, 2001: 328–329; Maguire & Matthews, 2014: 11). In the market for fine art this plays out so that works by artists who are symbolically valorized via the efforts of aestheticians and legitimizing organizations are more sought after (Becker, 1982: 131; Beckert & Rössel, 2013; Khaire, 2017).⁸

From this perspective market outcomes for contemporary African art will depend on “the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work” by “critics, publishers, gallery directors, and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such ...” (Bourdieu, 1983: 318–319). If the legitimation of contemporary African art evolved over time, it could have contributed to a reorientation of the auction market. Or, establishing the symbolic value of the work may have stimulated the auction market for contemporary African art.

Over the course of the late 20th century there was a shift in the critical position of contemporary African art in the Western cultural world. Before this time, it was generally traditional African art that was legitimated in this sphere. In fact, the legitimation of traditional African art rested precisely on the grounds that it was *not* contemporary. Traditional African art was valorized based on its degree of authenticity which itself largely depended on being produced in the pre-colonial era (Steiner, 1994; Steiner & Forni, 2015). The dominant ethos was that contact with the West was a source of contamination so that any cultural objects produced by Africans after colonialism were deemed inferior. Modern and contemporary African art was largely derided as substandard to traditional African art and derivative of Western modern and contemporary art. In the case of the former as art historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbecchie describes it was deemed “third-rate artwork that emulates the western tradition” (Ogbecchie, 2008: 12). However, in the late 20th century the valuation of modern and contemporary African art began to change as a group of “reputational entrepreneurs” (Fine, 1996) directed attention towards shifting its image. This group of curators, scholars, critics, gallerists, and other cultural ambassadors self-consciously labored to change the reputation of modern and contemporary African art by making “changes from within” (Baumann, 2007: 52–110) the contemporary art world and shifting the evaluative criteria and strategies used to judge it.⁹ Through mechanisms such as developing a new critical discourse to assess contemporary African art¹⁰; publishing it in exhibition catalogs, books, and journal articles; awarding it with newly established prizes; and, exhibiting it in museums, art fairs, and biennales, contemporary African art was increasingly legitimated. As Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, two influential aestheticians involved in this cultural movement write, “It is the after – the post-1989 period – that allows us to chart the changes in the fortunes of contemporary artists from Africa (living and working both inside and outside the continent) as their work and the complexity of their art enters into greater circulation in the global network of international exhibitions, museums, galleries, magazines, residencies, etc.” (Oguibe & Enwezor, 1999: 9–10).

Nineteen eighty-nine was the year of the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, France. In the exhibition contemporary art from Western nations and non-Western nations, including from Africa, was displayed side by side. Through this approach head curator Jean-Hubert Martin hoped to show the cultural equivalence of art from different parts of the world. While this curatorial strategy was later critiqued by some as actually reinforcing a Western/non-Western cultural dichotomy, the show is nonetheless recognized as a critical beginning in the widespread reevaluation of modern and contemporary art within the West. As art critic Holland Cotter (2002: A1) writes, “Up to the late 1980’s, almost nobody in the West knew, or wanted to know, about modern and contemporary art from Africa, meaning art that wasn’t ‘tribal,’ that was maybe conversant with Western trends and styles. Then came an exhibition titled ‘Magicians of the Earth,’ in Paris in 1989, which mixed young African artists with some of their hip Western and Asian counterparts.”

Given that this reassessment began about a decade before the upswing in work by African born artists at Christie’s it is possible that it may have played a role in the increase. Or, the growing recognition of contemporary African art may have helped to reposition it in the sales. To look further into this possibility I examined whether or not the African born artists included in the sales specifically gained recognition from concerted efforts to valorize contemporary African art. I focus on two measures, inclusion in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* and participation in one of the major “mega shows” for contemporary African art.

With the inaugural issue published in Autumn 1994/Winter 1995, *Nka* would arguably become the most influential journal of contemporary African art in the art world. Founded by major figures in the field, including Enwezor, the goal of *Nka* was to produce and

⁸ Also see Velthuis (2005) and Moulin (1967 [1987])Moulin, 1967Moulin (1967 [1987]) for discussions of how the creation of symbolic value influences the art market.

⁹ See Baumann’s (2007) legitimation framework for the necessary steps for art forms and genres to become culturally mobile.

¹⁰ Or, since the prevailing aesthetic system deemed contemporary African art inferior, new interpretive strategies had to be developed to evaluate the work. This new critical discourse offered an original approach for giving meaning to the art so as in the words of curator and scholar Elizabeth Harney “[w]hat critics once dismissed as mimicry is now seen as a useful analogy or refraction of better-known precedents (Harney, 2017: 115).”

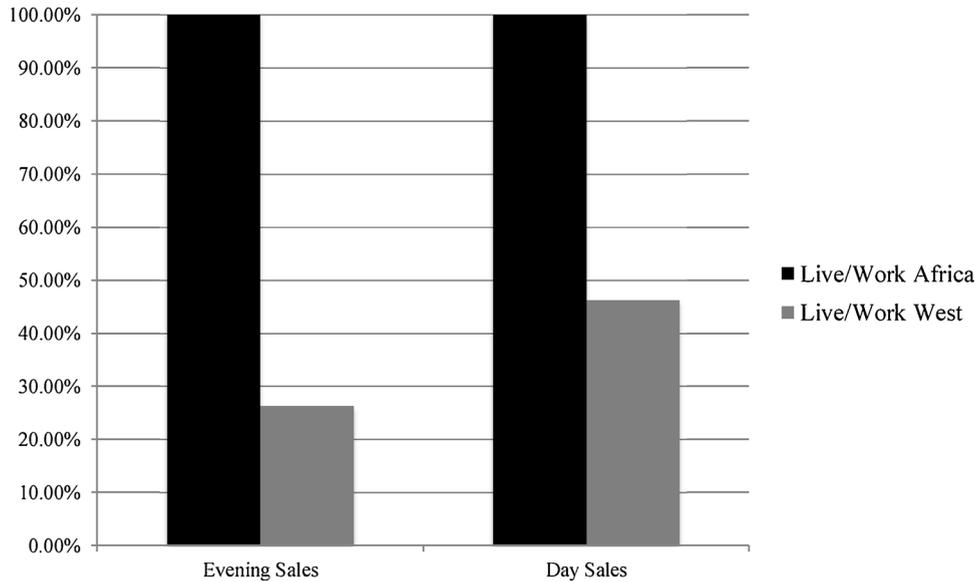


Fig. 3. Work by African Born Artists Receiving Contemporary African Recognition Prior to Participating in the Sales (Post-1989 Period).

provide a platform for critical discourse on this category of art. As the mission statement of the journal describe its role (Nka, n.d.),

Where no art history exists, critical journals and other related platforms are crucial to molding its discourse and involve all the intellectual processes that such an undertaking implies. In a newly developing field such as contemporary African art, a critical journal should play a significant role in creating the very discourse of the discipline itself. *Nka* represents a step forward in that direction. The field of contemporary African and African Diaspora art has been neglected within the art historical debate.... Hence, *Nka* serves as an urgently needed platform, filling a serious gap in the field.

After *Magiciens de la Terre*, influential “mega shows” focusing on contemporary African art have also accelerated across the globe. As described by *Nka* editor and art historian Salah Hassan (2008: 154) in the introduction to an *Nka* forum dedicated to these “All-Africa” shows, “They are, whether we like it or not, the building blocks of art history and are therefore crucial in ‘mediating the art object and in moving it from the private to the public domain.’” Chika Okeke-Agulu, an artist, art historian and *Nka* editor also recognizes the role of these “large-scale exhibitions” in the cultural mobility of contemporary African art noting that they “have been instrumental in bringing the work of African artists to global attention” (Okeke-Agulu, 2010: 81).

To determine if any of the critical recognition of African born artists in these sales was directly generated through these concerted efforts to valorize contemporary African art, I examined whether or not they were featured in any articles in *Nka* or included in major mega shows (see Appendix B). In both the day and evening sales, all works by artists living in Africa are by artists who were recognized in *Nka* or via a mega-exhibition prior to introduction to the sales. Among artists working in the West less than half and over a quarter are by artists who received either of these forms of recognition prior to introduction to the day and evening sales, respectively (see Fig. 3).¹¹

While a range of factors above and beyond cultural recognition influence the auction market, this preliminary exploration suggests further investigation is warranted concerning how African born artists’ trajectories in these sales, particularly those living in Africa, may have been influenced by the broader efforts of tastemakers to valorize art from this continent.^{12,13} Possibly, directed efforts that

¹¹ None of the artists with works in the sales before 1990 have been valorized in these streams.

¹² Another important shift in the institutional structure to legitimate contemporary African art has been the founding of biennales on the continent. Dak’Art, first held in 1990 and shifting to a focus on exclusively visual art in 1992, takes place in Senegal every two years. It is the largest biennale on the continent. While I wasn’t able to obtain complete artist lists for each edition of Dak’Art, I examined artists’ vitae and biographies to determine if their work was shown at the biennale. As they may leave out some exhibitions, vitae and biographies aren’t a perfect source of data, but the following is informative: Among works by artists living in Africa, about one-third in the day sales are by artists who participated in the biennale prior to introduction to the sales, while none in the evening sales are. Among works by artists working in the West about 6% in the day sales are by artists who participated in the fair prior to introduction to the sales, while none in the evening sales are.

¹³ *Magiciens de la Terre* was not solely concerned with contemporary African art, but it is the moment when one artist in the sales, Samba, came to widespread international attention. His work was selected by curator André Magnin, who “traveled almost everywhere in Africa” to choose art for the show (Floyd, 2015: 251-252; Hanson, 2015; Magnin, de Lima Greene, Wardlaw & McEvelley, 2005: 22). Following, Samba’s stature has been further nurtured through the joint efforts of Magnin and French art collector Jean Pigozzi. Pigozzi was inspired to begin amassing what would become one of the biggest collections of contemporary African art (the Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC)) after visiting *Magiciens de la Terre* where he “was transfixed by the works of Chéri Samba” and other African artists appearing there (Hanson, 2015). The collective project of Pigozzi and Magnin, who was hired by Pigozzi after seeing *Magiciens de la Terre* to direct the CAAC, has been to champion a specific segment of African artists—those who are self-trained and live in sub-Saharan Africa (Floyd, 2015: 251–253; Sunyer, 2014).

established and developed the symbolic value of contemporary African art were a necessary condition for maturing the auction market.

It should be noted that in the late 20th century the rise in cultural recognition for contemporary African artists was part of a broader critical turn towards artists falling outside the range of non-Western, non-White, and non-male. Along with reputational entrepreneurs dedicated towards valorizing contemporary African art, there were also aestheticians focused on developing new critical devices and institutions to interpret and evaluate the work of South African, Middle Eastern and North African, and African Diasporan artists. Moreover, artistic values championing multiculturalism, internationalism, difference, and identity became infused within the structure of contemporary art valorization at large (Iskin, 2017; Petersen, 2012; Zolberg & Cherbo, 1997). These shifts in valorization may have also helped to reorient the auction market towards contemporary African art.

For instance, the end of apartheid brought significant changes to South Africa's relationship to the art world. In particular, it ended the three-decade cultural ban that restricted the international exposure of artists in the country (Jantjes, 2011: 31). While making reference to the fact that the cultural boycott in some ways protected his artistic vision as a young artist, the following comments by Kentridge are illustrative of the isolation of South African artists. "The irony is the cultural boycott meant there was no expectation that curators from the outside, or critics, would come to South Africa," he explained. "So I could do these animated films and these figurative drawings without the terror of the weight that the international art magazines had over young artists in the periphery" (Nathan, 2014). With the end of apartheid South Africa and its artists were welcomed back into the international cultural community. As part of this shift, there was increasing critical attention directed at South African artists including major group shows of South African art. One major development was the readmission of South Africa to the Venice Biennale (1993) where Kentridge was among the artists shown in *Incroci del Sud: Affinities-Contemporary South African Art* at the Fondazione Levi (Cowell, 1993). There was also the Johannesburg Biennales of 1995 and 1997 that brought major curators, critics, and other art world figures to the city.

The 1997 Biennale, curated by Enwezor, is considered to have played a particularly important role in raising the status of South African artists. As a cultural reporter summarizes, "In 1997, the New York art world discovered South Africa. Curators, collectors, museum directors and art dealers deserted the streets of Chelsea to attend the Second Johannesburg Biennial, lured by its charismatic curator, the Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor, and his stellar list of international artists. The event launched the new 'global art world,' and the travelers returned home with a revised map that added Johannesburg to Paris, London and New York on their art itinerary" (Pollack, 2003). For Mthethwa who participated in the 1995 and 1997 shows, "[a]n important breakthrough came in 1997, when his work was included in the second Johannesburg Biennale, a major international art exhibit (*Out of Apartheid*, n.d.)." Of the other South African born artists, Kentridge's work was shown in the 1995 and 1997 biennales, Dumas' work was shown in 1995, while Rhodes' was shown in neither. Both shows happened before the artists' work entered the sales though Dumas who lived in Europe had a well-established reputation there even before 1995 (Butler, 2008). It is artists who were living in South Africa, such as Kentridge, who appear to have experienced the most significant boost in critical attention related to the end of the cultural ban and the increasing spotlight on artists from the country. The following passage captures the accumulation of recognition that Kentridge experienced after the end of apartheid (Drohojowska-Philp, 2002):

Meanwhile, the apartheid system was slowly being dismantled, and in 1993, the U.N. lifted sanctions. The artist could travel abroad and critics and scholars began to visit. It was Catherine David, former curator of the Pompidou Centre, who selected Kentridge's films for Documenta X [in 1997]. That was his first major showing of the films outside of South Africa, and the reaction cemented his growing reputation in Johannesburg.

Next to consider is the increasing cultural recognition of art included in such categories as contemporary "Arab art," "Islamic art," and "Middle Eastern Art." While some major reputational entrepreneurs concerned with contemporary African art insist on the inclusion of the Maghreb within this category (Hassan, 2009), artists from North African nations are also routinely included as part of focused efforts to critically interpret and bring attention to modern and contemporary Middle Eastern and North African art (MENA). Moreover, artists from this area are also often included in efforts to bring critical attention to modern and contemporary "Arab" and "Islamic" art. In particular, the museum boom in the Arabian Peninsula beginning in the late 20th century has been part of this effort (Exell & Wakefield, 2016; Exell, 2016). Of artists born in the MENA region with works in the sales in the post-1989 period, it is Ghada Amer who appears to be the most engaged with these critical efforts. For example, she participated in two shows at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, though the exhibitions took place concurrent with, rather than before her debut in the sales.

Finally, the growing critical attention to art by black artists may have also helped to stimulate demand for artists born in Africa.¹⁴ While concerted and collective attempts to valorize black artists in the United States trace back decades to cultural entrepreneurs such as Alain Locke during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, these efforts rose considerably in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the broader movements for black equality (Patton, 1998). This was the period when a critical mass of African American museums, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem (SMH) and the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA), were founded and the first major journal on African American art, now titled the *International Review of African American Art*, was founded. Over the ensuing decades the influence of some cultural institutions, curators, critics, and other mediators focused on African American/African Diasporan¹⁵ art has risen to such a degree that they are integral to establishing and nurturing the

¹⁴ In his research showing rising prices for work by African American artists, economist Richard Agnello notes that future researchers should investigate if "evolving artistic appreciation" can help to explain a strengthening of the market for this work (2010: 69).

¹⁵ Today the focus of these cultural entrepreneurs is often on the broader category of African Diasporan art thus including not only artists of African descent born and working in the United States but also those born and working in Africa and the Caribbean and sometimes also non-black artists from Africa. At the SMH for instance the mission is defined as "the nexus for artists of African descent locally, nationally and internationally

international recognition of these artists. For example, museum director and curator Thelma Golden, and the museum that she directs the SMH, are widely recognized for helping to boost the reputations of several contemporary art stars of African descent. In particular, the museum's Artist-in-Residence program is acknowledged as helping to launch the careers of emerging artists from the African Diaspora. The influence of the program and its role in the legitimation of Mehretu and other artists of African descent is noted in a passage from an article in *The New York Times* about the museum's planned expansion (Pogrebin, 2015):

The new building will also allow the museum to continue its tradition of providing studio space for three artists in its yearlong residency, which has nurtured numerous now-prominent figures, including Sanford Biggers, Julie Mehretu and Kehinde Wiley. 'Without the Studio Museum, I can't imagine that these artists would have had the opportunities to soar the way they have,' said Anne Pasternak, who is soon to become the new president of the Brooklyn Museum.

Using participation in the SMH Artist-in-Residence program as a measure of critical recognition derived from concerted efforts to champion African American/African Diasporan artists, a moderate proportion of works by Western living artists are by those who were valorized in this way prior to the entrance of their work in the sales—a little less than one-third and slightly over one-quarter of works in the day and evening sales, respectively.¹⁶ Among works by artists living in Africa in the day and evening sales, none are by artists valorized through this stream.

Given that since the late 20th century there has been a broad reshaping of the critical landscape in contemporary art such that there is now more recognition of a wide range of artists who were previously on the margins, these shifts—such as increasing recognition of South African and African Diasporan artists—may have also nurtured demand in the market for artists born in Africa. This suggests that any rise in sale offerings by contemporary African artists linked to growing cultural recognition may not only partly trace back to concerted efforts to consecrate artists from the continent, but also to conscious attempts to build the acclaim of artists falling in these other categories, as well as a more inclusionary ethos for valorization in the contemporary art world at large.¹⁷

While the small rise in works by African born artists in these sales is consistent with research in other contexts that does not find sweeping changes in globalization in the contemporary art market (Favell, 2015; Vermeulen, 2015), this study suggests that in some ways the case of Africa is distinct. Research on the contemporary art market in countries such as Russia, China, and Brazil (Brandellero, 2015; Kharchenkova, Komarova, & Velthuis, 2015) shows that political structures shaped the development of these markets. The argument presented here suggests that explanations for the evolution of the market for contemporary African art must take into account national and international politics of race. For example, the end of the apartheid system in South Africa appears to have played a role in bringing artists living there to international attention. It is also the case that the market position of African born artists may have been influenced by greater international recognition of black artists. By bringing attention to racial boundaries, specifically boundaries around blackness, the analysis presented here offers a more complex accounting of the globalization of the contemporary art market. It also suggests directions for future research on Africa and cultural wealth—e.g. the added value to products that emerges from beliefs about the heritage of their producers (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011). In light of the proposition that the market outcomes of contemporary African art are related to broader efforts to shift the value of art created by black artists, future research on cultural wealth should examine how beliefs about black heritage across the African Diaspora influence the value of products made by African producers. For example, we need to better understand how the economic value of goods labeled “made in Africa” is interrelated to beliefs about African American heritage.

The research agenda on the contemporary African art market should also attend to postcolonial dynamics. Artist, curator, and art historian Oguibe (2000: 11) asserts that the shift in recognition of contemporary African artists is partly due to the specific efforts of Africans. He writes, “... the few changes that we have witnessed owe a great deal to the fact that a handful of African critics, scholars, and curators have taken the initiative to bring these artists to the barred gates of international visibility, and to make a case on their behalf.” Future research should explore if growth in the market for contemporary African art is related to rising valorization that was especially driven by African born tastemakers. More specifically, the question of whether in the decades after decolonization African born cultural ambassadors have gained more authority to legitimate art, and ultimately influence the market, is important. Given research showing that art collectors from culturally dominant regions have more legitimacy (Braden, 2016), a related question is whether tastemakers residing in the West, such as African born curators based in Europe, also play a particularly important role in shaping the legitimacy of contemporary African art and its position in the market.

Finally, this paper offers insight on cultural capital. Cultural capital theory asserts that the cultural tastes of the dominant class

(footnote continued)

and for work that has been inspired and influenced by black culture” (Studio Museum in Harlem, n.d.).

¹⁶ These works are by Mehretu and Mutu who participated in the program in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Their residencies were before the debut of their work in the sales.

¹⁷ In essence, an explanation for rising auction market penetration related to growing recognition should take account of these various intersecting factors that helped to shift the symbolic value of works by contemporary artists born in Africa. To take El Anatsui as an example, the inclusion of his work in the auctions was preceded by one moment where international consensus about his status as an important contemporary artist crystallized: The 2007 Venice Biennale where *Fresh and Fading Memories*, one of his shimmering bottle-cap assemblages, was prominently featured draped over the Palazzo Fortuny, and *Dusasa I* and *Dusasa II*, were displayed in the Arsenale. Yet, as Susan Vogel, an aesthete concerned with African art (and also the curator for the mega exhibition *Africa Explores*) notes, this worldwide acclaim was not “sudden” but rather part of a longer gradual accumulation of praise spearheaded by mediators focused on African art, including contemporary African art. She writes, “In the years leading up to Anatsui's emergence in Venice in 2007, virtually all those who introduced his work into places visible to the contemporary art world, if sometimes on its outer edges, had a special commitment to Africa” (Vogel, 2012: 13).

define legitimate culture and reproduce membership in that class. In the original formulation of this theory Bourdieu (1984) asserted that the cultural orientation of the middle class was distinguished by an exclusive focus on high culture. In contrast, proponents of the omnivore perspective assert that over time the tastes and preferences of the dominant class have become more heterogeneous (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Khan, 2011; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson, 1997). The finding that there has been a small rise in works by African born artists in Christie's contemporary sales, lends support to the argument that middle and upper class culture has become more cosmopolitan.

4. Conclusion

The rise in contemporary African art auctions across the world speaks to the globalization of the market for this work. Indeed, in May 2017 Sotheby's in London debuted its Modern and Contemporary African Art sale. However, arguably one of the highest standards for determining the internationalization of contemporary African art in the auction market is the degree to which it is offered in "mainstream" contemporary sales outside of Africa. When included in these sales, work by African born artists is placed in the Western marketplace without a structural or symbolic boundary distinguishing it along geographic lines. Using this standard, this paper offers evidence of a slightly globalizing market for work by contemporary artists born in Africa. In the examined sales it is generally more present, but not booming, in the post-1989 era. While this paper only examines the incorporation of works by African born artists in contemporary auctions at one site, the dominant position of these sales means that they offer important insight on developments in the Western contemporary auction market at large. Still, more empirical study is needed in other cities, such as London, and auction houses, such as Sotheby's and Phillips, to determine the extent to which work by African born artists has penetrated "mainstream" contemporary auctions in the West.¹⁸

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Appendix A. Christie's New York Auctions

In Appendix A, I provide more information about contemporary sales at Christie's New York. While other auction houses also sell contemporary art Christie's, along with Sotheby's, have historically been a duopoly. Moreover, while the London sales of contemporary art have grown, New York has historically been the center of this market. Contemporary auctions at Christie's New York can generally be divided into four categories: May and November evening auctions, May and November day auctions, area sales, and all other auctions. In the May and November sales, the most expensive art is slated for the evening auctions. Area sales include sales of contemporary art by artists from specific parts of the world such as "South Asian + Modern Contemporary Art." The last category, other auctions, includes auctions at Christie's now closed secondary location, Christie's East, auctions at other times in the year, such as March and September, and special sales, such as those featuring works from a particular collector. With the exception of collector sales, these auctions are sometimes advertised as being directed towards younger and/or newer collectors and generally have a lower estimated price range than May and November auctions. The unit of analysis for this paper is lot—e.g. the single object or set of objects offered for sale at an auction. Generally, a lot includes a single work by one named artist. But, in some cases, a lot includes multiple works by the same artist, multiple works by different artists, or a work by a creator whose identity is not known. With the exception of lots in the first such category, these types of lots are excluded in the analysis for this paper. In some instances, works that are consigned and included in the catalog are ultimately withdrawn—for reasons such as questionable provenance or title disputes—and not placed on the auction block. This is not a concern for this study as the focus here is on consignment. Also, a small number of works in day sales are by artists who live and work in the West but their place of birth could not be confirmed. It seems unlikely that these works are by artists who were born in Africa given that I have not come across their names in literature or lists of African artists.

Appendix B. Valorization of Contemporary African Art

I consider an artist to be recognized via *Nka* if they received focused attention from the journal. This is measured by whether their

¹⁸ Given that there is some indication that other parts of the market for contemporary African art are more robust in Europe—e.g. contemporary art fairs such as AKA: Also Known as Africa taking place there and 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair starting there—it is possible that there is more integration of works by African born artists in the "mainstream" contemporary auctions there. Also, if incorporation into main contemporary sales is dependent on recognition, than less high-end Western auction houses may have more integration of works by African born artists in these types of sales. Finally, while Sotheby's like Christie's is situated at the top of the contemporary art market, differences between the firms, such as Sotheby's public ownership, may mean that there are some distinctions in patterns of globalization in their sales.

name is included in an article title. To determine this, searches for all of the artists with work in the sales were conducted on the journal's website. The mega exhibitions that are measured include those that are frequently identified as noteworthy in the discourse on contemporary African art. To determine if the artists' whose work is in the sales also participated in the shows, artist lists for each exhibition were obtained. The shows include: 1990-*Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (Traveled); 1990-*Five Contemporary African Artists*, 44th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy; 1991-*Africa Hoy/Africa Now*, *Atlantic Center of Modern Art*, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain (Traveled); 1991-*Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, The Center for African Art and the New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York, NY (Traveled); 1995-*Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (Traveled); 1996-*In/Sight, African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; 2001-*The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany (Traveled); 2001-*Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, 49th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy; 2003-*Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy; 2003-*A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad*, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, MO (Traveled); 2003-*Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, Museum for African Art, New York, NY (Traveled); 2004-*Africa Remix*, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf (Traveled); 2005-*TEXTures: Word and Symbol in Contemporary African Art*, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.; 2005-*African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, TX (Traveled); 2006-*Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, International Center of Photography, New York, NY; 2007-*Check List Luanda Pop*, *African Pavilion*, 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy; 2008-*Flow*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY.

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