

# André Magnin: It seems that contemporary African art is in...

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The latest dinner-debate organised by Art Media Agency put the spotlight on André Magnin, a renowned specialist in African art, invited to talk on the theme: “It seems that contemporary African art is in...”

Dishevelled white hair, an air of cheekiness behind his round glasses, a — deliberate? — distractedness, a neglectful chicness about him. André Magnin is a big traveller who has crisscrossed Africa from one end to another. Already, his free spirit, tending towards provocativeness, is suggested by the title which he chose for this dinner-debate: “It seems that contemporary African art is in...”

As far as Magnin goes, African art has been a strong trend for a long time already, possibly dating back to his childhood in Madagascar. And definitely by the time that he started winding his way through the Dark Continent in the mid 1980s — as well as Papua New Guinea and the “Great North” —, looking for new artists for the exhibition “Les Magiciens de la Terre” (Magicians of the Earth), which he organised in conjunction with Jean-Hubert Martin. The exhibition was presented in 1989, jointly at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette. This was the first exhibition of the type to really pay an interest in non-Western arts.

## From Magicians of the Earth to the CAAC

But the real shift occurred when André Magnin became artistic director of the Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC), a private collection owned by Italian investor Jean Pigozzi, which has emerged in the last two decades as a reference in the art world. It was André Magnin, more or less, who set up the collection containing some 12,000 pieces.

Gathering works was one thing; what was also necessary was to show them, to make them known. A task to which André Magnin devoted himself from 1989 to 2009 with “hundreds of loans” and nearly fifty exhibitions in institutions all over the world, namely the Fondation Cartier in Paris, “whose interest in other cultures deserves recognition”. In the end, the CAAC succeeded in promoting “about thirty artists throughout the world, including Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé and Chéri Samba”.

In this way, André Magnin has spent nearly thirty years exploring the African continent. “Africa constructed me, deconstructed me, reconstructed me. Going towards the Other implies doubt,” he confides, before adding: “I think that I’ve contributed to building the market of around thirty artists that I love.”

Following his roamings across the globe, it was in Paris that André Magnin opened, with Philippe Boutté, his own gallery, in 2009, with the aim of adding a new page to this wonderful story: the promotion of contemporary non-Western art, especially from Africa.

## Contemporary African art

But what exactly is this African art that is “in”? It’s impossible to reduce such a complex continent to a so-called African identity. “Africa means 54 countries and as many identities, cultures, beliefs, and therefore artists.”

At the risk of generalising, André Magnin nonetheless emphasises a “free art that does not bite its own tail as in the West”, and mentions the changes brought by Internet. We can say that the Web tends to align cultures rather than diversifying them. But Internet and social networks, which have taken off on the continent, also lead artists to share their work on a large scale and to find recognition more quickly — or to become visible in any case. A change that is accompanied by benefits, namely the development of a new artistic scene, but which also comes with its share of negative effects.

“Before, artists would construct their works with a long-term perspective,” explains André Magnin, taking the example of Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, an enlightened intellectual, illustrator and poet, also creator of an alphabet attempting to save from oblivion the culture of the Bété people — long ignored in the West until Théodore Monod turned his attention to them. “Today, some people lay down three brush strokes and then declare themselves painters.”

## Complex recognition

André Magnin goes on to say: “Great artists invent. Art isn’t just a matter of savoir-faire or style”. He himself discovered “in Africa artists falling completely outside of our tropes, who have created new things”. Their grammar has been unknown, a state which has possibly not encouraged the recognition of “African art” if it can be termed as such. “Until the 2000s, there was nothing! Or else very little...”

Indeed, events dedicated to art from the continent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were more like epiphenomena, despite a few notable ones such as the World Festival of Black Arts, initiated in 1966 by the journal *Présence Africaine* and the Société Africaine de Culture, or the first edition of the Dakar Biennale, held in Dakar in 1990. In the West, André Magnin draws attention to the role of Pierre Gaudibert, a curator at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris before becoming head of the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens in Paris and also author of the book *L’Art africain contemporain*. A pioneer...

But things started speeding up when the new millennium began. Firstly, thanks to private initiatives which flourished on the continent and injected dynamism to the emerging scenes. These include the Fondation Zinsou created by Marie-Cécile Zinsou in Cotonou (Benin) in 2005, the Nubuke Foundation created by Nubuke Investments in Accra (Ghana) in 2006, and the Fondation Donwahi launched in 2008 in Abidjan by Illa Donwahi, widow of Charles Bauza Donwahi. And today, around fifteen biennials are held in Africa whereas Dakar was the only one in the 1990s.

In the West, specialised fairs have also been born, such as 1:54 — in London in October 2016 and in New York in May 2017 — or AKAA, whose first edition will be on in Paris from 11 to 13 November. “In Europe and the United States, there are now many collectors who buy African art.”



Abandoning his provocative stance from the start of the dinner, André Magnin concluded by declaring: “We can note growing interest in Africa, far from a fad. Inevitably, this is the continent of the future.”

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