

Armory Focus: Challenging Our Idea of 'African Art'



Ed Young, *Your Mom*, 2016, Latex Balloon

Art produced by African artists and the diaspora has been gaining traction on the international stage in the last few years. In 2013, for instance, Touria El Glaoui set up 1:54, a London fair focusing on contemporary African art that runs alongside Frieze. Despite its success in shedding light on underrepresented art, it has also raised the questions on whether the art presented at 1:54 shouldn't simply be part of the main event. Adding to this discussion are Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba, the first female curators of [Armory Focus](#), a branch of [The Armory Show](#) in New York, which this year is dedicated to art with African perspectives. The Berlin and Frankfurt based curators and art historians, who also founded [Contemporary And](#), took up the task of challenging conceptions of what "African art" is, starting with the language to address it.

Sleek's online editor, Will Furtado, met co-curator Julia Grosse at Soho House Berlin to discuss their risky curatorial choices, why there isn't such a thing as contemporary African art and the African artists to look out for.

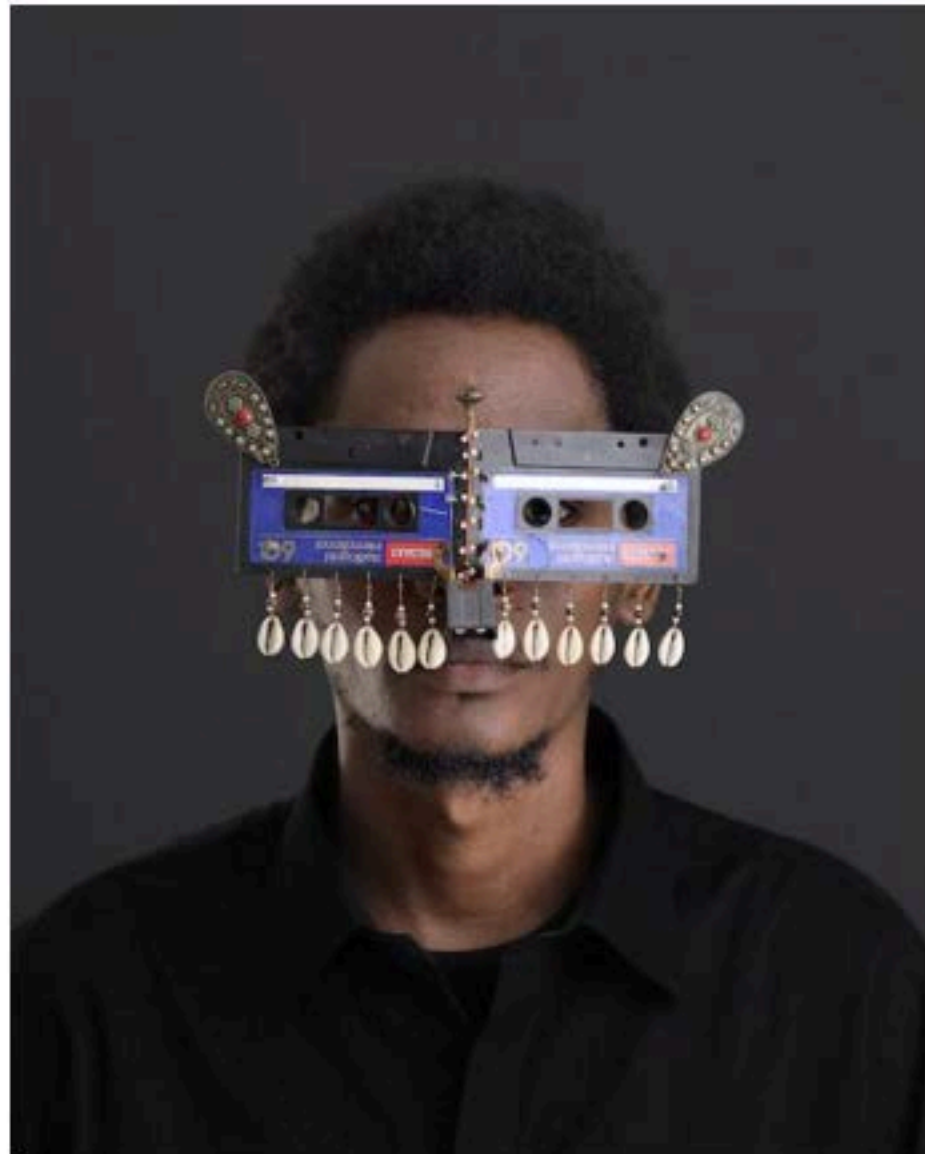
Sleek: What will you do differently at this iteration of Armory Focus?

Julia Grosse: They've had Africa in mind for a long time and finally thought it'd be a good chance or a good year to do it now. It's always tricky to say how we'd do it differently but we really tried to. The first step was not to focus on Africa as a continent because it's not in our interest to focus on a region, it doesn't make sense for us. Then you have to ask yourself what is African art or what is an African artist, and for example what has a painter in Johannesburg have to do with a conceptual artist in Nairobi. Nothing really necessarily; their practices might be completely different and still you label them all as African artists – and this is something we want to challenge.

We want to go beyond this kind of old idea and this is what we do at Contemporary And as well. This was our first approach: to state that the focus is just a perspective, and we look at art from Africa and the diaspora, wherever artists may be or come from.

Even if they might be white?

Yes, we have a few white artists; however, the focus of course is more on black artists. But for us it's super important to focus on the diversity of artistic positions. We are both art historians and we approached the whole idea through the individual artists and then we approached the galleries and convinced them to show just a solo exhibition rather than having the booth full with work from ten different artists. That would have made sense for big recognisable names but in this case most of them aren't really known; they are pretty young, the youngest was born in 1991. All the galleries agreed on having only one voice per booth. This is still like a little risk in terms of selling them. But we know these artists are great; we are really looking forward to see it happen.



Cyrus Kabiru, *Throwback*, 2015, HP Premium Satin Photographic Paper 150 x 120 cm

Why did you only select young artists?

Compared to, for example, older artists who are in their 50s now and decided to stay in the west, the tendency among young artists is to go back, spend a few years in Nairobi and start a residency programme or an artist run space. And then maybe they want to go back to New York or elsewhere: so this kind of flux is quite telling for the young generations. It's something we really relate to in our world so that's why the focus is on the youngsters. But we also included two galleries who focus on modernists like Ibrahim el-Salahi, demonstrating the long history of contemporary art from African perspective.

You've once said there isn't such a thing as contemporary African art. What exactly do you mean by that?

It is more about the idea and wording. Of course it exists, this tendency of all the artists in the 54 African countries to deal with Africa as a topic but it's just too easy to put it all down to one label.

So contemporary African art is just contemporary art?

Yes – that's it. This is the goal as well, that ideally in 10 years you wouldn't need something like Contemporary And anymore. An artist is foremost contemporary, and to the younger generation identity is important but not in the sense of "I'm from here or there", but more like "I was here and there and this is all part of my identity." In our next print issue which comes out during the Armory, there's an interview with Martine Syms who is such a good example of this. Of course she has an inclination towards black culture, but she is also present in group shows at the New Museum and other not as a black artist but as a contemporary artist, and this is the goal. You don't ask an artist where they're from but what they're working on.



Namsa Leuba, Untitled II, The African Queens, 2012



Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba, Courtesy of Benjamin Renter

Could you give us one artist we should look out for?

Namsa Leuba. She was born in 1982 to Swiss-Ghanaian parents, studied art and design and often works for fashion magazines like i-D. Leuba works with the stereotypical western images of Africa and juxtaposes them with elements from fashion and design. The end result features crazy settings with models in this kind of ritual tribe masquerades. She's presenting a new project as well, which she produced during her residency in Lagos last year.

The Armory Show takes place in New York from 3 until 6 March 2016

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Written by: [Will Furtado](#)

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