



## A Fiction of Authenticity

Contemporary Art Museum St Louis |  
St Louis, Missouri, United States

**Left:** *A Fiction of Authenticity* installation shot with Siemon Allen's *Newspapers*, *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (April 2001–July 2003), 2003, in background  
**Right:** *A Fiction of Authenticity* installation shot with, left, Mary Evans, *Scope*, 2003, and right, Odili Donald Odita, *Power Line, One, The Third Eye*, 2003

No questions have been more pertinent to Western art history's understanding of African art than: how have museums affected its interpretation? How have various institutional contexts constructed, distorted and illuminated its meanings? What, indeed, is meant by the term "African art"? The Contemporary Art Museum St Louis takes on these large issues in the exhibition *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad*, co-organised by the Contemporary's curator, Shannon Fitzgerald, and Tumelo Mosaka, an assistant curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art who moved from South Africa to the United States in 1998. According to Fitzgerald, the exhibition seeks to analyse perceptions of what constitutes authentic African identity and how "Africanness" is "expressed, understood, exploited and relevant in contemporary global culture".<sup>1</sup>

Certainly these questions have been on the table for at least a decade. In the late 1980s curators and artists began to deconstruct ways in which museological choices determine how African art is read and interpreted. In the US the most prominent of these was the exhibition *ART/artifact* held at the Museum for African Art in New York in 1988, and most prescient for artistic practice was Fred Wilson's exhibition *Rooms with a View: The Struggle Between Cultural Content and the Context for Art* held in 1987-88 at the Longwood Art Gallery in the Bronx, New York. More recently, in the 1990s, these deconstructive projects have been followed by exhibitions, as well as scholarly and critical publications, showcasing contemporary African art in a more self-determined pan-African context. A new generation of artists, curators and writers – mostly black, mostly male, and mostly born in Africa and now living elsewhere – began to shift the focus onto African art of today made by artists who have been academically trained, are often

well-traveled and have a cosmopolitan command of multiple cultural and artistic contexts. Most notable among these projects was the founding of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* in 1994; the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997; and *Authentic/Ex-centric* at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. These projects have laid the foundation for a new global discourse on African art and launched the careers of a number of artists who have since been "mainstreamed" into the circuit of international biennials and group exhibitions.

*A Fiction of Authenticity* inserts itself into this conversation with new commissions by 11 contemporary African artists in a wide range of media, including painting, photography, video installation and interactive computer display. The artists are a diverse group from seven different African countries and currently live throughout Europe and the United States. Siemon Allen was born in South Africa and now lives in the United States; Fatma Charfi, Tunisia and Switzerland; Godfried Donkor, Ghana and the United Kingdom; Mary Evans, Nigeria and the United Kingdom; Meschac Gaba, Benin and the Netherlands; Kendell Geers, South Africa and Belgium; Ingrid Mwangi, Kenya and Germany; Odili Donald Odita, Nigeria and the United States; Moshekwa Langa, South Africa and the Netherlands; Owusu-Ankomah, Ghana and Germany; and Zineb Sidera, Algeria, France and the United Kingdom.

The exhibition thus includes three artists from South Africa: Allen, Geers (with K.O. Lab) and Langa. Allen makes installations comprising newspaper pages in which almost the entire surface of the page is covered with an overlay of translucent tracing paper except where the artist has found images and articles about South Africa, which he then makes visible through cut-out windows. A quick scan of these pages and the artist's own analyses reveal that the majority of these references focus on sports and topics related to AIDS, illness and disease. The work encourages museum visitors to see the local newspaper as a lens that both focuses and distorts reality.