

Individuality and Tradition

A Conversation with Three Contemporary Artists

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For the conclusion of the symposium "Perspectives on African Art: A Dialogue with 'Tradition'" held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on February 8, 1998, Alisa LaGamma and I organized the panel "Contemporary Artists: Issues of Individuality and Tradition." We invited three important presences on the contemporary art scene—Arturo Lindsay, José Bedía, and Manuel Vega—to discuss their involvement with concepts, beliefs, and aesthetics that are grounded in traditional African art and culture, specifically that of the Yoruba. The three are of various cultural backgrounds and currently work in the United States: Lindsay, from Panama, in Atlanta; Bedía, from Cuba, in Miami; and Vega, of Puerto Rican heritage, in New York.

In my opening statement I noted that the context for this discussion could be found in the 1996 publication *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, edited by Professor Lindsay. Lindsay also contributed an essay in which he outlines some of the main points that predicate the consideration of the work of these artists and their contemporaries who have been interested in marrying their cultural realities with the imperatives of Western critical paradigms, be they modern or postmodern.¹ The pioneer in this effort was the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, who in the 1940s conceived a synthesis of Cubism, Surrealism, and motifs from the Afro-Cuban philosophy and religion known as Lucumi or Santería. This process of introducing cultural specificity into the language of contemporary art was continued by a number of artists in the 1960s and '70s, the best known being the Cuban-born Ana Mendieta, Carlos Alfonzo, and Juan Boza; the Puerto Rican-born Jorge Rodríguez; and the African American artist Charles Abramson. As Lindsay notes

in his essay, over the last three decades "postmodern artists have been questioning the essence of art and reality and debating issues of political and cultural hegemony, identity, gender and cultural democracy, pluralism and self-representation" (*Santería Aesthetics*, p. 203).

Lindsay notes further the attraction of genres such as body art, conceptual and performance art, and installations, which challenged the increasing commodification of art and allowed artists of color, in particular, to connect their art to their lives and communities. This panel might be said to have approached the question of artistic identity and individuality from the opposite direction: these are artists who have been trained to pursue individual visions but have come to a point where they want to reconnect themselves with a much more communal spirit. "These new art forms and theories," Lindsay adds, "provided a familiar forum for some Latino artists whose traditional cultures are rooted in manifesting spiritual and supernatural concepts in multidisciplinary performances of music, dance, costume and spectacle" (*Santería Aesthetics*, p. 204). Because of the now familiar dynamics of cultural adaptations by Africans in the New World, the expression of traditional African manifestations in the work of these artists is highly individual and demonstrates a rich mixture of Christian (specifically Catholic), Yoruba, Kongo, Islamic, and Native American elements.

In their individual panel presentations, Lindsay, Bedía, and Vega covered many points that they held in common as well as those specific to their own situations. Lindsay first addressed the issue of recognizing individual creativity in African art: "In the twentieth century I am known as Arturo Lindsay, in the nineteenth I was 'anonymous,' in the eighteenth, 'unknown.'" His description of

the history of African peoples in the Americas as "marred by erasures" of traditional cultural identities, religious practices, and art-making was followed by a converse observation: that history was characterized by the "innovation and the creativity of New World cultural identities, religious practices and art-making." He then described himself as "born of a hybrid mixture, a *mestizaje cultural*." Lindsay divided the presentation of his artwork into two categories. The first included "gallery" pieces and installations that demonstrated the application of Yoruba aesthetics and beliefs as they related to events in his own life and that of his family and friends. The second set of slides presented aspects of his on-going study of African cultures around the town of Portobelo in Panama.²

José Bedía³ showed objects associated with the Yoruba traditions in Cuba (La Regla de Ocha) from the collection of Cuba's foremost pioneer in the study of Afro-Cuban culture, the ethnologist and criminologist Fernando Ortiz. He also discussed the differences and interrelationship between Yoruba rituals and beliefs and those of the Congo (e.g., Palo Monte)—of which he is an initiate—and elements of spiritualism and Native American (specifically Taino) culture. Through slides he traced his efforts to visualize the oral traditions, ritual elements, and practices of Afro-Cuban religions as they related to the current political reality of Cubans who have left their homeland but are determined to carry memories of it with them.

Manuel Vega⁴ described his evolution as an artist and the consistent influence of Puerto Rican culture on his life: from the drumming he learned as a youth, to the cultural dislocation he experienced visiting his home island for the first time, to his contact with art institutions in the East Harlem community such as the Taller