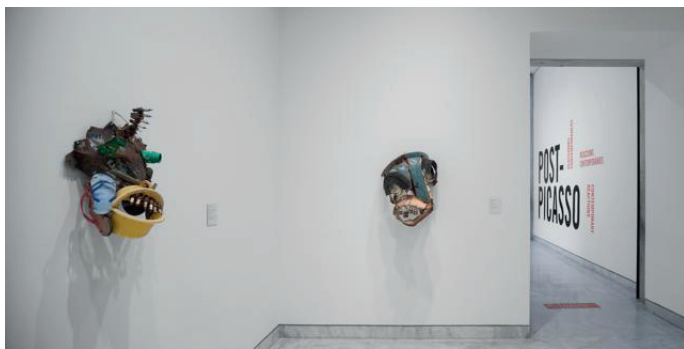


POST-PICASSO

Michael Fitzgerald • Revoir Picasso's symposium • March 27th, 2015

The topic of contemporary artists' responses to Picasso is vast. Yet, it has largely been ignored by the art world until very recently. In 2014, I curated "Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions" for the Museu Picasso in Barcelona, the first exhibition addressing this subject on a global scale. In the spring of 2015, the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg displayed the work of 80 artists in "Picasso in Contemporary Art." That fall, Didier Ottinger, (curator, Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Georges Pompidou) Diana Picasso, and Émilie Bouvard (curator, Musée national Picasso-Paris) addressed the subject through an exhibition held at the Grand Palais in Paris. Clearly, these three major exhibitions mark a fundamental change in awareness of Picasso's relevance for contemporary art.



"Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions" Installation, Museu Picasso, Barcelona, 2014
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Except for a cluster of shows around the time of Picasso's death in 1973, exhibitions during the following four decades have usually been narrow in scope. Generally, they have focused on a particular artist's relationship with Picasso's work, rather than attempting to address the broad issue of Picasso's relevance to recent art. My own involvement with the question began twenty years ago, when Adam Weinburg, then a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, invited me to join him in selecting from the museum's collection of drawings a small exhibition on American artists' responses to Picasso. Held in the fall of 1995, that show, called "Picassoid," included works by Jasper Johns, George Condo and Nicole Eisenman, but emphasized historical artists, such as Abraham Walkowitz, Max Weber, Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock.

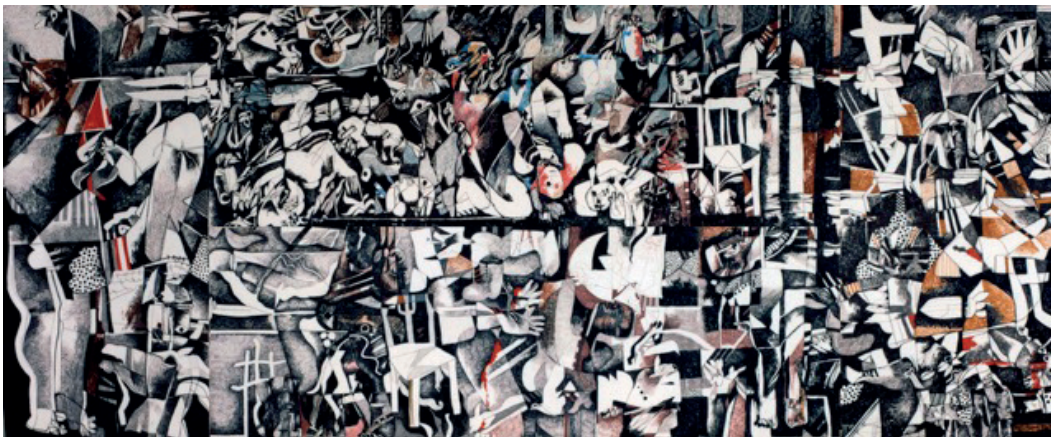
Our brief research identified considerably more contemporary artists than we had expected, but we were particularly struck by how little was understood about historical issues of American artists' involvement with Picasso's work during

his lifetime. The Whitney commissioned me to address this situation, and after many years of research, "Picasso and American Art" opened at the museum in September 2006. That exhibition and the accompanying catalogue presented a precisely documented and, I believe, transformative history of what artists from Max Weber to Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns did with Picasso's oeuvre before his death. In the galleries, our research enabled us to juxtapose these artists' works with their sources in specific paintings and sculptures by Picasso and allowed viewers to address Picasso's significance for art in the U.S.

As a major exhibition that traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Center, "Picasso and American Art" received considerable critical attention. While the scholarship was generally applauded, some critics devoted to contemporary art took offense that a major exhibition had been dedicated to Picasso's historical relevance. They claimed that his insignificance for contemporary art rendered his past impact irrelevant to current audiences.

This outcry against Picasso and contemporary art piqued my curiosity. While planning the exhibition, I had been disappointed that I could not include the work of Condo or Basquiat, among other American artists, and that the museum's mandate of showing American art precluded including the work of Baselitz, or other European artists whose work reflected on Picasso's. Even though we installed the exhibition on the Whitney's largest floor, it could not accommodate a thorough survey of historical and contemporary material. Yet, the critics' ire reinforced my eagerness to investigate Picasso's relevance after his death, and my enthusiasm grew as the century turned. When Pepe Serra, then the director of the Museu Picasso in Barcelona, invited me to organize an exhibition that would extend the model of "Picasso and American Art," I proposed investigating the art of our time.

So much of the commentary about Picasso in recent decades has been wrapped up in assumptions that he embodied outdated conceptions of art: patriarchal, Euro-centric, craft-based, and a practice primarily narrowed to painting and drawing. The most pointed of these, in my view, was the issue of cultural imperialism. The more we learn about Picasso's development, the more we realize how much he took from the art of non-Western peoples. I thought that any exhibition focused on Picasso in the context of contemporary art would have to address this issue above all others, and the frame of reference could not be confined to the U.S. and Europe—that would merely structure a hall of echoes. Artists outside the West offered the best chance of refreshing the discussion and defining new viewpoints. Given Picasso's fascination



DIA AL-AZZAWI
Shabra and Shatila Massacre
1982-83
Mixed media on paper mounted on
canvas, 300 x 750 cm
Tate, London
Courtesy of Meem Gallery, Dubai

with historic African sculpture, I believed that contemporary African artists offered the greatest potential to revolutionize our understanding of the Picasso paradigm. Assuming any African artists cared, and, if so, I could locate them.

As the research progressed, I was frankly amazed by the quality and abundance of the works we encountered by artists in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East. While the exhibition included crucial works by artists from Europe and the U.S., the emphasis was on art produced outside the West. At the Museu Picasso, “Post-Picasso” included more than 80 works by 40 artists from over 20 countries.

The exhibition was never about influence as it is commonly defined. We did not consider the artists as subjects of Picasso’s aesthetic reach. Instead our focus was on contemporaries as active agents, who have chosen for a wide range of reasons to engage Picasso’s work and reputation. The contemporary artists were primary, and their involvement with Picasso an avenue to understanding their work.

As much as possible, I chose to follow the artists by attempting to define gathering themes for the exhibition that reflected the ways they have engaged Picasso. Although the responses are extremely varied, in recent decades many have focused on five aspects of Picasso’s oeuvre: *Guernica* and *Les Femmes d’Alger* and three periods—his late work, the Surrealist years, and the phase of the Blue and Rose. The following discussion is a very concise survey of this material that I have examined at much greater length in the catalogue of “Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions”.¹

GUERNICA

The great painting Picasso made in support of the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War continues to be an essential inspiration for artists in many parts of the world, particularly Africa and Asia, as they define their own strategies of contemporary art, ones that span diverse cultures by engaging Picasso’s example alongside their own traditions.

In 1971, the eleventh São Paulo Bienal invited two artists to participate *hors concours*: Pablo Picasso and Maqbool Fida Husain. If the exhibition caught Picasso only two years before he died, the Indian artist Husain was just emerging as one of the world’s most influential non-Western artists. The 1971

Bienal was Husain’s debut on the world stage, and he took his pairing with Picasso as a defining challenge. He chose a subject from his own culture that equaled the physical presence and humanistic themes of *Guernica* and would allow him to interweave East and West—the Mahabharata, the great Hindu epic of war and morality.

When Husain painted his Mahabharata series, India was in its third decade of independence, a period of continuing violent conflicts with Pakistan, as well as among Hindus and Muslims in both countries. Husain addressed these current events through Picasso’s painting: “The fracture of forces on a vast canvas GUERNICA. That created history and gave birth to Picasso, painter who inhaled the smoke of burnt colors and charred bodies. That was Spanish civil war transferred on several lands of liberty.” More than any of Picasso’s stylistic devices, Husain sought in his Mahabharata series to harness the power of the humanitarian themes that he found in *Guernica*.²

Like Picasso, the Iraqi Dia al-Azzawi based the *Sabra and Shatilla Massacre* (1982-83) on newspaper accounts of a horrific attack—the three-day rampage by Christian Phalangists through Palestinian refugee camps.³ The account was by Jean Genet, who toured the camps immediately after the massacres. Genet vividly described the experience of stepping over densely-packed, mutilated bodies—an experience Azzawi magnifies through the distorted anatomies of *Guernica*. His tortured figures and blasted homes extend across a series of canvasses nearly as large as the mural to present overwhelming desolation and death, whose meaning, like *Guernica*’s, is not limited to this tragedy.

Unlike Husain and Azzawi, the Polish artist Macuga questions the potential of art to inspire political change. The ironic juxtaposition between the continuing power of *Guernica* as an antiwar image and the diminished authority of artists to control the meaning of their work is the subject of Goshka Macuga’s *The Nature of the Beast*.⁴ In April of 2009, Macuga opened an installation at the Whitechapel Gallery in London to commemorate the showing of *Guernica* there in 1939. Macuga borrowed a full-sized tapestry of the composition—a tapestry, however, that introduced a contrasting theme, since it had been the backdrop at the United Nations for U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s decisive speech justifying the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, although on that occasion it had been shrouded in blue cloth.

This dual reference to *Guernica* past and present structured the experience of Macuga's piece. Her installation offered a gathering place for conversation and discussion that the Whitechapel made available to all interested groups. As Macuga learned, "This situation quickly got out of my control and the space took on multiple functions, some of which had nothing to do with or even contradicted the principal meaning of Picasso's work." A formal speech there by Prince William, prompted her to make her own tapestry, "a critique of my own practice." The basis for this work, which she called *The Nature of the Beast*, is a series of press photographs taken while William addressed a gathering of dignitaries before the tapestry of *Guernica*. Macuga constructed her tapestry from a collage of these photographs and salted it with a few contrary images, including an Arabic woman in a headscarf. She added an image of herself on the far left; she seems to flee the event.

Macuga's tapestry confronts the realities of the art world in the early twenty-first century, particularly the assimilation of art, however critical it may once have been, into the mainstream of wealth and power. Having created a context in which both sides of this dynamic could play out, she frankly admitted the artist's contingent role.

LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON

Picasso's appropriation of African art is a deeply problematic issue for many contemporary artists. Yet, his devotion brought Western attention to African art and played a crucial role in enabling African artists to gain recognition in the West. In many cases, African artists continue to define their dialogue with Western art through Picasso's legacy.

Eight years after "Les Magiciens de la terre" opened at the Centre Pompidou and Parc de la Villette, in 1989, the Congolese Chéri Samba painted his triptych, *Quel avenir pour notre art?* (1997).⁵ While controversial, the exhibition had been the first major exhibition to bring together contemporary art of Europe and North America with its counterparts around the world. It brought Samba international recognition. Depicting Picasso as the hinge between cultures, Samba's triptych is a complex meditation on issues of racism and the situation of African artists in the Western art world. The Picasso of Samba's debate is not the mid-career artist of *Guernica* but a Janus figure, facing both the groundbreaking challenges of 1907 and the unstable prominence of his last years.

The year of "Les Magiciens," the South African Gavin Jantjes painted *Untitled* (1989), a richly complex image of interdependency. Jantjes stated, "Picasso is the critical image of a dominant masculine and Western European culture that revealed itself as it encounters otherness and difference." Yet, he also allows that the linear structure of his composition, which encircles both a Dogon mask and one of Picasso's demoiselles, "maps a life sustaining breath" that connects Europe and Africa "to underline the affections Africans had for the 'otherness' of Europe."⁶ His painting addresses both Picasso's inspiration by African art and acknowledges African artists' inspiration by Picasso—in a continuous entanglement that is both combative and symbiotic.

For many contemporary artists, masks are a primary connection with Picasso's legacy. The Benin sculptors Calixte Dakpogan and Romuald Hazoumé pursue complex dialogues with traditional African masks and their legacy in Western art through their observations of everyday cultural collisions in the city of Porto Novo. While Dakpogan's *Death Resuscitated* (2002) appropriates the principle of collage by adapting found metal objects and Hazoumé chooses discarded plastic containers, both "send back to the West that which belongs to them, ... the refuse of consumer society that invades us everyday."⁷

The Australian Daniel Boyd is of aboriginal descent, and he chose the famous Vanuatu Body Mask, given by Matisse to Picasso and now in the collection of the Musée national Picasso-Paris, to address issues of loss and misunderstanding by dissolving the image in a complex process of layered colors and applied dots in *Untitled* (2012). These disruptive effects evoke "all the memories of this object we have lost."⁸ His choice to refer to this mask is based on his personal history—his great, great grandfather was taken from the Vanuatu islands to Australia to work as a slave on a sugar plantation.

CODA: CUBISM

Many artists are reinvigorating Cubism. Chinese artist Zhang Hongtu created *The Bird's Nest, in the Style of Cubism* (2008)⁹ to critique the Chinese government during the Beijing Olympics through an astonishing appropriation of Analytic Cubism's fractured planes, somber tonality and verbal references, which here include the words "Tibet" and "Human Rights." The Chinese government banned the painting from exhibition because of its explicit words and "unacceptable dull colors." It has become a highly influential work of protest.

Guillermo Kutica's *Desenlace* (2006)¹⁰ is almost 2 x 4 meters. It began as an exercise in physical and psychological mapping that evolved into the most substantial reevaluation of Cubism in our time. His series of paintings was chosen to represent Argentina in the 2007 Venice Biennale. In the last year, Kuitca has extended the dialogue to deal with both illusory and literal space in three dimensions in a temporary room he constructed at the Sperone Westwater gallery in New York and the central room of an ancient farmhouse at Hauser and Wirth's complex in Somerset, UK.

THREE PERIODS



ZHANG HONGTU
Bird's Nest, in the Style of Cubism
 2008
 Oil on canvas, 91,4 x 121,9 cm
 Collection of the artist, New York

Three periods of Picasso's work have drawn particular attention by contemporary artists. Many European and U.S. artists have focus on Picasso's late career, either acclaiming his last styles of painting or satirizing the celebrity that surrounded him. Non-Western artists, however, rarely see these issues as problematic; they are less concerned with Picasso's styles and less critical of his fame. Here I can only highlight two opposing viewpoints—Jean-Michel Basquiat's obsession with Picasso that led him to place his own head on Picasso's body and repeatedly inscribe Picasso's name on the panel of *Untitled (Pablo Picasso)* (1984).¹¹ And Maurizio Cattelan's (*Untitled, 1998*), an oversize mannequin of the artist in late middle age that served as a costume for an actor as he greeted visitors at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹²

Picasso's exploration of mythology and metamorphic styles during his Surrealist period inspires global artists. In *Sour Grapes* (1997)¹³, the Indian Atul Dodiya combines Picasso's *Portrait of Sabartés* (1937) with a popular lithograph of the god Brahma blossoming from Vishnu's navel. It constructs a humorous, critical commentary about the egotism of artists of both the East and West. Dodiya's Brahma (the Hindu god of self-awareness) bears the facial features of both Sabartés and Dodiya, himself, thereby extending Dodiya's meditation on artistic consciousness from Picasso to Dodiya and across continents.

One of Japan's leading graphic designers, Tadanori Yokoo was inspired to return to painting by MoMA's 1980 retrospective of Picasso's work. In *Cleaning of Art* (1990)¹⁴, he conveys his sense of Picasso's transformative power by weaving cascading waterfalls through one of Picasso's polyvalent female figures of the late 1930s.

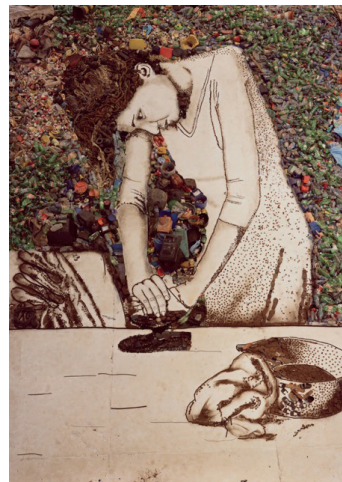
Perhaps the most surprising response among contemporary artists is their revival of Picasso's early work. Often criticized for its sentimentality, Picasso's Blue and Rose work has become a prime source for artists who address the mediated character of our culture.

In *Verso (Woman Ironing)* (2008)¹⁵, the Brazilian Vik Muniz addresses Picasso's position in art history by making exact copies of the backs of his paintings to reveal the labels documenting owners and exhibitions of the work. In a contemporaneous work, he recreated *Woman Ironing's* frontal image by photographing a woman named Isis, who earned her living collecting recyclable materials from one of Rio's largest landfills.¹⁶ Muniz employed Isis and a team of her fellow pickers to construct the image from bottles, shoes and buckets gathered from the dump. Finally, he photographed this assemblage, which covered the floor of a large warehouse. Besides commenting on the current state of marginal workers in the context of Picasso's precedent, Muniz helped the workers by giving them profits from the sale of the photographs.

This description omits large elements of the experience of seeing the exhibition at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona. The five sections of the exhibition did not chart the chronology of his career. Rather, the sections were sequenced to reflect when contemporary artists engaged his work during the past forty years. As a result, chronology was scrambled and largely reversed, with the final section presenting responses to

his early work (in the sequence described above). Our goal was to structure a situation that would enable viewers to examine a dual engagement: contemporary artists' responses to Picasso's work and to each other's work through mutual address to issues of our time.

Viewers experienced the architecture of the museum: a series of Renaissance and Baroque palaces constitute the physical setting and offer a historical context that evokes Picasso's attachment to the city. Most important, visitors viewed the exhibition in the context of a comprehensive collection of Picasso's art. In keeping with our goal of focusing the exhibition on contemporary art, the "Post-Picasso" galleries did not display any works by Picasso. Yet, great collections of each phase of Picasso's work were available only a few steps away, and this proximity encouraged an expanded exchange between Picasso and contemporary artists. Certainly for the artists whose work was exhibited, this was one of the most satisfying aspects of the project. It demonstrated not only by the global reach of Picasso's work, but also the intensity of artists' involvement with Picasso now—in the twenty-first century.



VIK MUNIZ
Woman Ironing (Isis), From the series 'Pictures of Garbage'
 2008
 Digital C-Print, 253,74 x 180,34 cm
 © Vik Muniz / Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

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1. I especially thank Bernardo Laniado-Romero, director of the Museu Picasso, and Isabel Cendoya, coordinator of the exhibition, for their collaboration. The exhibition took place from 5 March – 29 June, 2014.

2. For Husain, see *Post-Picasso*, pp. 22-26.

3. *Post-Picasso*, fig. 7, p. 41.

4. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 8, p. 51.

5. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 9, pp. 55-57.

6. *Post-Picasso*, pp. 82-83.

7. *Post-Picasso*, pp. 74-77.

8. *Post-Picasso*, pp. 75, 79-81.

9. *Post-Picasso*, pp. 98-99, cat. 27.

10. *Post-Picasso*, pp. 96-98, cat. 25.

11. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 12, p. 69.

12. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 10, p. 61.

13. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 41, p. 148.

14. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 30, p. 113.

15. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 50, p. 170.

16. *Post-Picasso*, cat. 51, p. 171.