

A Spiritual Contact Zone

Re-inventing Ritual Space in The Netherlands' Afrika Museum

*Elise Kleuskens, Fransje School, Suzanne Thijs, Mariske Westendorp
& Eric Venbrux*¹

1. Turning the ritual space of a museum into a spiritual contact zone

The research project Holy Ground, led by Paul Post and Arie Molendijk, has drawn attention to the process of 're-inventing ritual space in modern Western culture' by examining various places, such as 'rooms of silence and memorial shrines for victims of disease and violence'.² Here we want to address 'the art museum as a ritual site',³ especially with regard to a major exhibition that sought to bring religious experiences across. Our case is *Roots & More: The Journey of the Spirits*, a groundbreaking exhibition in the Netherlands' Afrika Museum, focusing on spirituality in the art from the African diaspora.⁴ 'At the heart of the exhibition', states curator Wouter Welling, 'we can recognise a magical consciousness, which, despite the Enlightenment, we have never lost touch with'.⁵ Or as Irene Hübner, the director of the Afrika Museum, phrases it: 'A striking aspect that will undoubtedly come to the fore is that the concept of a world where humans and spirits interact, is not that different from old magico-religious practices in the West.' What is more, many 'Western secular individuals' seem to be on a spiritual quest. Therefore, Hübner suggests, the

¹ This article resulted from a joint project in the 2009-2010 course on Material Religion of the MA programme Religion and Culture in the Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen. We are grateful to the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, the Netherlands, for giving us free access to the museum so we could visit the exhibition *Roots & More* whenever we wanted, and to Irene Hübner in particular, for providing us with further information on the exhibition and its background. We also would like to thank the Afrika Museum for the photograph of 'The Haitian Night Watch' and for permission to use it as an illustration in this article.

² P. POST & A.L. MOLENDIJK (eds): *Holy ground: re-inventing ritual space in modern Western culture* (Leuven 2010 = Liturgia condenda 24).

³ C. DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals: inside public art museums* (London 1995) 7.

⁴ I. HÜBNER & W. WELLING: *Roots & More: De reis van de geesten / The journey of the spirits* (Berg en Dal 2009).

⁵ W. WELLING: 'Encounters at the crossroads', in HÜBNER & WELLING: *Roots & More* 65-179, 82.

exhibition 'can also be a journey to a spiritual motherland for them'.⁶ In other words, the makers of *Roots & More* considered the ritual space of the Afrika Museum a spiritual contact zone.⁷

Sharon Macdonald points at the strong analogy of museum and religion as well as recent parallel developments in a diminished stress on the transmission of authoritative knowledge and a greater emphasis on enchantment or magic in new forms of religiosity and museum exhibitions. In the interplay between scholarly knowledge and enchantment common in museum exhibitions the balance has shifted towards 'museum magic', strongly drawing on the ritual features of the museum, and like new forms of spirituality highlighting subjectivity and experience.⁸ 'No longer is there a canon of what might be expected in an established museum: exhibitions and approaches change as often as do the liturgies in the Church of England', Macdonald notes.⁹ New types of art exhibition, premised on enchantment, require a re-invention of museum display. As Macdonald already notices the re-invention of ritual space may also involve a redefinition of the museum.¹⁰ The *Roots & More* exhibition, as we will see, was intended to mark the Afrika Museum's rite of passage from a traditional ethnographic museum to an avant-garde art museum. Simultaneously, it wanted to elevate the status of art from the African diaspora in the art world and to increase the understanding of the spiritual underpinnings of this art.

Carol Duncan's book *Civilizing Rituals* contributed to the wider recognition of the art museum as a ritual site. She writes: 'Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning'.¹¹ Duncan regards 'the totality of a museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind'.¹² Consequently, 'art museums appear as environments structured around specific ritual scenarios.' Furthermore, Duncan is 'concerned with the way art museums offer up values and beliefs [...] in the form of vivid and direct experience.' She believes 'that a museum's central meanings, its meanings *as a museum*, are structured through its ritual'.¹³ In her chapter 'The art museum as ritual' Duncan elaborates on the ritual dimensions of art museums.¹⁴ She does so by applying Victor Turner's notion of liminality

⁶ I. HÜBNER: 'Preface', in HÜBNER & WELLING: *Roots & More* 6-9, p. 6.

⁷ The term 'contact zone' has been coined by Mary Louise Pratt, see M.L. PRATT: 'Arts from the contact zone', in *Profession* 91 (New York 1991) 33-40.

⁸ S. MACDONALD: 'Enchantment and its dilemmas: the museum as a ritual site', in M. BOUQUET & N. PORTO (eds.): *Science, magic and religion: the ritual process of museum magic* (New York 2005) 209-227.

⁹ MACDONALD: 'Enchantment and its dilemmas' 214.

¹⁰ MACDONALD: 'Enchantment and its dilemmas' 209-227.

¹¹ DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 10.

¹² DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 1-2.

¹³ DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 2.

¹⁴ DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 7-20.

to the art museum, showing it to be set apart in space and time from everyday life. The ritualized museum experience, in Duncan's view, has to do with 'the kind of attention one brings to it and the special quality of its time and space'.¹⁵ The ritual enactment or performance is structured, for instance, by means of a prescribed route. The location and architecture of the building, and the indoor design and presentation of objects, are also factors in the sacralization of the works of art. It must be noted, however, that Duncan is mainly interested in the ritual of citizenship and is not concerned with how western museums represent other cultures and religions and non-western art.¹⁶

Since museums are venerable institutions representing society's values and aspirations, the 'sanctification' of particular art works in ritual fashion and related art writing have a political dimension. The politics of representation of non-western art in western museums have been hotly debated,¹⁷ but here we confine ourselves to looking at this representation from the viewpoint of ritual. Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto take Duncan to account for overlooking the active role played by visitors and personnel: 'The neglected issue of agency, both of museum staff and of visitors, is of central importance to understanding the museum as a ritual site'.¹⁸ They also argue that Turner's concept of liminality, as employed by Duncan, is derived from ritual in non-western, small-scale societies, and fails to do justice to the modern contexts of western museums, in contrast to Turner's specific notion of the liminoid, 'considering individual experience rather than general social structure'.¹⁹ The reception of museum going as a ritual process, therefore, might be diverse and depend on the visitors' subjective points of view.²⁰ In our discussion of *Roots & More* we will pay attention to the responses and interpretations of visitors as well as to the intentions of the museum staff and their realization of the exhibition or re-invention of ritual space cum spiritual contact zone.

First we briefly introduce the Afrika Museum, in Berg en Dal, and its *Roots & More* exhibition. Next we discuss the bilingual catalogue accompanying the exhibition as it is telling about 'the role of the museum priesthood'.²¹ Both the catalogue and the exhibition itself are presented as a 'journey', denoting the symbolism of a passage familiar to ritual processes. The design, lighting, drapes, routing, art objects of the exhibition materialize a ritual scenario. In the following section we describe the staging of the ritual performance, present and

¹⁵ DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 12.

¹⁶ DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 3.

¹⁷ See, for instance, I. KARP & S.D. LAVINE (eds.): *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display* (Washington, D.C. 1991) and M. NOOTER ROBERTS & S. VOGEL (eds.): *Exhibition-ism: museums and African art* (New York 1994).

¹⁸ M. BOUQUET & N. PORTO: 'Introduction', in BOUQUET & PORTO (eds.): *Science, magic, and religion* 1-25, 20.

¹⁹ BOUQUET & PORTO: 'Introduction' 18.

²⁰ BOUQUET & PORTO: 'Introduction' 18-19.

²¹ MACDONALD: 'Enchantment and its dilemmas' 215.

discuss a selection of exhibited works, and the way these were perceived or experienced by visitors. And finally we will make a few concluding comments on the museum as a ritual arena.

2. The Afrika Museum and *Roots & More*

The recent *Roots & More: The Journey of the Spirits* exhibition, held from April 1 to November 1, 2009 at the Afrika Museum in the Netherlands, took spirituality in the art from the African diaspora as its theme. The stated aim was to introduce this diaspora art to the general public as well as to elevate its status in the art world. This was deemed necessary because the major art institutions in the Netherlands hitherto failed to put contemporary art from the African diaspora on show. The curators of these institutions claim that they are unfamiliar with it, and, therefore, neither see the need nor dare to collect and exhibit such art. Of the sixty art critics and curators who were sent an exhibition catalogue and invitation for the opening of *Roots & More* none showed up.²² The Afrika Museum, however, launched a national advertising campaign for the exhibition: advertisements on billboards, in newspapers, and commercials on national television. The museum considered the investment worthwhile, because it considered *Roots & More* to be the most important and largest exhibition in its history.

In 1954, Roman Catholic missionaries from the Congregation of the Holy Spirit established the Afrika Museum. They wanted to show something of the traditional cultural and religious life from the African regions where they worked to Dutch people back home. To this end they installed a first exhibition of art and artifacts, brought from Africa to the Netherlands by the missionaries themselves, in one of their buildings in the scenic surroundings of the village of Berg en Dal. Over the years the museum assembled an impressive collection. Furthermore, an open-air museum with reconstructed African village buildings was added to the museum.²³

During the period of the museum's existence of over 50 years the collection of the museum has been impressively enriched and enlarged. The open-air museum often forms the setting for various cultural activities inspired by African culture, such as performances by African musicians and dance workshops. The indoor galleries, expanded in 2006, host several permanent exhibitions, including *Encounters* and *Western and African perceptions of African art*.²⁴ They confront the visitors – after the galleries's refurbishment, restyling and expansion – with a great many issues that had not been raised explicitly before. Issues such as the

²² Irene Hübner, personal communication.

²³ For the history of the museum, see further J.-L. GROOTAERTS & I. EISENBURGER (eds.): *Vormen van verwondering. De geschiedenis en collecties van het Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal*. 2 vols. (Berg en Dal 2002).

²⁴ <http://www.afrikamuseum.nl/tentoonstellingen/vast.php>

politics of representation, cultural property rights, and perceptions of art held in Africa in contrast to the ones of the museum's constituency. They also raise questions about the European image of Africa, about the collection of African art and artifacts, and about distinctive aesthetic notions. The galleries show aspects of the interrelationship between Africa and Europe and its history, the role of various religions (including Islam) in Africa, and important (transition and healing) rites during the life course. What is more, the Afrika Museum increasingly put contemporary African art on show, including art from the African diaspora. In addition to the permanent expositions, the museum organizes temporary exhibitions on a regular basis.

The most important temporary exhibition in the restyled museum thus far has been *Roots & More*. It took considerable preparation, because many of the works had to be obtained on loan from overseas. The exhibition consisted of works of art from eighteen contemporary artists, who had in common that they all belonged to the African diaspora. These artists were represented with several works each, in addition to a marvelous collection of thirteen *lwa* (spirit beings) of human proportions from the Bizango secret society in Haiti, purchased by the museum (see photo p. 54). *Roots & More* marked the transformation of the Afrika Museum, previously conceived of as an ethnographic museum, into a museum for contemporary art. By presenting art from the African diaspora it also reached out to the established art museums in the Netherlands that had hitherto failed to show this art.

The art (from the eighteen artists of the African diaspora) on display in the exhibition was supposed to demonstrate that the African roots had mingled with the cultures and religions of the new countries on other continents where Africans had settled. *Roots & More*, the main title of the exhibition, was taken from a painting by African-American artist Renée Stout, namely *Oil no. 14*, on which the words 'Roots & More' are written. Irene Hübner states in the accompanying catalogue of the same title the intention that the exhibition and book offer the selected artists from the African diaspora an opportunity to 'reach a wider audience'. She hopes these productions will 'contribute to the anchoring of this art form in the (inter)national art world, which is in constant flux'.²⁵ The innovative exhibition of art from the African diaspora, so it seems, was also a means for the Afrika Museum in Berg and Dal, a village in the east of the country, to put a stamp on the Dutch art world. It makes one wonder why there is no place for great international artists, like Renée Stout, in major art institutions in the main cities of the Netherlands, such as Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and Rotterdam. Is it because the art is incomprehensible? Or can attempts at explication be made, and the apparent taboo in the Dutch art world be broken? The exhibition and catalogue of *Roots & More* explore the aesthetics of the art form, while at the same time trying to connect the underly-

²⁵ I. HÜBNER: 'Always on the move, never on the run: the journey of African spirits', in HÜBNER & WELLING: *Roots & More* 11-59, p. 14.

ing spirituality with the one of the visitors and readers. The idea of a journey is expressed both in the design of the exhibition and in the text of the bilingual catalogue. Architect Maya Lin designed the new space of the Museum for African Art in New York in 1992 in a way 'that evokes the experience of a journey rather than the fixed structure of a narrative', as Mary Nooter Roberts describes in a section entitled 'The architecture of ritual: the museum as a journey'.²⁶ The metaphor of a journey permits greater openness to subjective experiences. Before we turn to the exhibition and a selection of works let us first take a look at the catalogue.

3. The journey of the spirits from the African diaspora to a Dutch mambo

In the first part of the lavishly illustrated catalogue director Irene Hübner explains the backgrounds of the exposition. She starts off with a short and rather theoretical elaboration on the history of slavery, and the rise of what she indicates as 'diaspora religions':

those beliefs that emerged in the shadows of age-long slavery and under the strain of the colonization process, from – seemingly – mutually exclusive religions, through an active transformation process of negotiation, reorganization, and re-definition. The most striking aspects of this process are the fundamental analogies between the slave owners' Christianity on the one side, and the beliefs of enslaved Africans on the other.²⁷

Within these diaspora religions, spirits play a crucial role. These spirits are numerous, and, throughout the African diaspora, they are presented in different ways. In her contribution, Hübner discusses three categories of spirits, which correspond to the countries that play a central role in the exhibition: the *santos* or *oricha* (Cuba), the *lwa* or *loa* (Haiti), and the *orixa* (Brazil). For each category of spirits, she describes their present-day function and meaning. With this imaginary journey through South America and the Caribbean, Hübner successfully demonstrates the importance of considering these diaspora religions as global religions that 'in a permanent 'dance' of old and new traditions in continuously changing environments, [enrich] the world with new belief systems, new dance forms and new music'.²⁸

²⁶ M. NOOTER ROBERTS: 'Outside/inside: the space of performance', in NOOTER ROBERTS & VOGEL (eds.): *Exhibition-ism* 57-78, esp. 65-70, citation from 65.

²⁷ HÜBNER: 'Always on the move' 16.

²⁸ HÜBNER: 'Always on the move' 52.

In the second chapter, entitled 'Encounters at the crossroads', curator Wouter Welling tells the story of his journey towards the realization of *Roots & More*.²⁹ He invites the reader to travel with him to different artists and their artworks, many of which are included in the exhibition. His account also provides information about the religious aspects of the objects and their use, and about the slavery period in the history of the African diaspora. Furthermore, Welling deals with the questions 'What is art?' and 'How can I (re)present the other?' In answering them Welling frequently uses the word 'animate' (or 'inspired'), referring to objects 'that are perceived by the viewer as possessing inner vital force, and personalities of their own'.³⁰ He considers the art in religious terms, good art being animistic. 'Basically, *mana* is what we always seek in art, Western or non-Western', says Welling; for him, *mana* refers to 'the substance of the soul, vital force, an invisible dimension that is found both in people and objects'.³¹ He also states: 'Good art – i.e. art that 'works', that has an autonomous reason of its own for existing and does not simply refer to art history or socio-political problems – is an excellent medium for conveying *mana*. Such art can never be wholly captured in words, but can only be approximated'.³²

On his journey, Welling introduces the different artists whose art he collects in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil and the United States to the reader. Certain themes are frequently found in the works of these people who feel close to the African diaspora. Subjects like politics, ethnicity, identity, contact with another world, death, spirit possession, black women's bodies, social positions, the journey of the African slaves to America, slavery, healing and protection often come up. These themes are expressed with symbols in which African and African diaspora influences are recognizable: the seemingly random collections of items typical to *vodou* altars, inspired objects, bottles, mirrors, the power-items common to the Congo *nkisi*-statues, figures and the attributes of spirit-beings and gods, brushes for ritual cleansing, fetishes, crosses, metal, boats and so forth.³³ These themes and symbols cross borders and are found in all four countries discussed here. Welling ends his guided tour with a story about his trip to the fetish market in Dakar. He is back in Africa, the place where the slaves' cultures originate. On his way back home he realizes that he has found that what the international art world is lacking: art from within, art that makes the other world visible, art that shows the inner world of Africa.

²⁹ W. WELLING: 'Encounters at the crossroads', in HÜBNER & WELLING: *Roots & More* 65-179.

³⁰ WELLING: 'Encounters at the crossroads' 70.

³¹ WELLING: 'Encounters at the crossroads' 72.

³² WELLING: 'Encounters at the crossroads' 70, 72.

³³ See also R.F. THOMPSON: *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy* (New York 1984); and D.J. COSENTINO: *Vodou things: the art of Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise* (Jackson, MS 1998); S. PRICE & R. PRICE: *Maroon arts: cultural vitality in the African diaspora* (Boston 1999); M. NOOTER ROBERTS: 'Does an object have a life?', in NOOTER ROBERTS & VOGEL (eds.): *Exhibition-ism* 37-55.

Assumingly, readers were supposed to identify with the author who had made not only a journey in space but also had made a spiritual pilgrimage. This liminal condition of a ritual nature could be relived in the experience of reading and drawing on resemblances with one's own spirituality. The book in a way, in which Welling also refers to Harry Potter, expressed the 'museum magic' in clothing the singled out works with narrative, bringing near the spiritual underpinnings of the art encountered in the African diaspora. Bridging that world with the one of the visitors, materials on a betwixt-and-between Dutch *vodou* priestess are included in the catalogue. It seems to serve to kindle the visitors/readers' imagination of the potential to entering the spiritual contact zone.

Besides the chapters of Hübner and Welling, the catalogue contains two poems by Dutch poet and *mambo* (*vodou* priestess) Maria van Daalen: the first about the spirit Eleggua, the second about the spirit Ogou. The catalogue, in addition, includes an interview with Maria van Daalen by Wouter Welling. Maria van Daalen relates how she got in touch with *vodou* and eventually became a *vodou* priestess. After that she tells about her experiences with *vodou*, as far as she is allowed to, since *vodou* is a 'mystery religion'.

4. The ritual enactment of the journey in the museum, selected works and visitor responses

In the catalogue Hübner invites the readers onto a "journey" along the former slave colonies of Cuba, Haiti and Brazil'.³⁴ In the museum, this journey, as it has been set out in the *Roots & More* exhibition, is housed in two different rooms (exhibition rooms 3 and 4). For the purpose of this exhibition, the first of these rooms has been divided into several smaller rooms by thin, dark grey curtains from ceiling to floor. These drapes give the room a dark, mysterious sphere. Mostly, art works from the same artist were displayed in the same room. Accompanying the works, there were information boards on the walls, which provide some information about the artists and some of the works on display. For every work, the title, the name of the artist, materials and/or technique(s) used and the date are given. The design and limited lightning set the stage for the visit as a ritual performance. Moreover, a number of visitors commented on a measure of unease in what they perceived as presence of spirits.

The exhibition combines artworks from mostly Haitian, Brazilian, and Cuban artists. These works, however, seem to be placed at random: a rationale for their particular arrangement and order in the exhibition we found hard to notice. Art works from all three countries are desultory located en route, and some of the smaller exhibition spaces include works from more than one artist and more than one country. It seems as if the art works are arranged on the

³⁴ HÜBNER: 'Always on the move' 20.

basis of logistic considerations, since some of the works – e.g. *Alali Aru* (Sokari Douglas) or *Carribean Night* (Pascale Monnin) – are much larger than others, and spots were chosen that could accommodate work of these dimensions. Because of the seemingly unsystematic arrangement of the art works, it is at times hard to grasp the outline of the exhibition and combine the art works at a more conceptual level. The sporadic placement could possibly represent the idea of diaspora, but if so the idea has not been developed with great clarity. Also, surprisingly, the exhibition starts with art works from respectively Curaçao, the United States of America, Angola and Nigeria – other countries with members of the African diaspora, instead of the three countries Hübner writes about in the catalogue. Irene Hübner, however, explained to us that the exhibition makers had purposefully placed the respective works by Geraldo Steven Pinedo (Curaçao) and by Renée Stout (the United States) at the beginning, because these works of art explicitly refer to Legba. Legba namely is the mediator-god ‘opening the road’, in this case opening the road to the exhibition.³⁵ In this way visitors thus passed the threshold from the hallway to the exhibition room, while this territorial rite of passage was symbolically expressed. Furthermore, both artworks had a large number 3 in red in front of them on the floor: the number indicated exhibition room 3, but simultaneously the number 3 and the color red, as Hübner pointed out to us, stood for Legba. The museum staff happily made use of this coincidence. Following the logic of the museum as a ritual site, the works concerned were aptly situated at the entrance to the exhibition. The work by Renée Stout from which the title of the exhibition was derived was for that reason also located at the beginning. The same accounts for her *Fetish no. 2* that could be easily linked to the ‘power sculpture’, *nkisi nkondi*, from Angola, one of the most stunning pieces in the collection of the Afrika Museum.³⁶ Especially the works by Stout, according to Hübner, were well suited to demonstrate to visitors the connection between art from the diaspora and the original African forms and images as represented elsewhere in the museum.³⁷

Curious about the reception, we asked various visitors what they thought of the exhibition. Our findings confirm the suggestion by Bouquet and Porto, mentioned earlier, that these responses to the museum ritual are diverse rather than uniform. The *Roots & More* exhibition called up different reactions from different people. We distinguished two groups of visitors. The first group felt they could not ‘connect’ with the pieces presented, and, therefore, they went home feeling unsatisfied. They said they saw something but could not attribute any meaning to it. They would have liked to have had some more information. Detailed information can only be found in the catalogue, which usually will not

³⁵ For further information on Legba (Eshu-Elegba), see THOMPSON: *Flash of the spirit* 18-33.

³⁶ See also HÜBNER & WELLING: *Roots & More* 157-158.

³⁷ Irene Hübner, personal communication.

be read by most people before their visit to the exhibition. The second group, however, felt they sensed the intended or unintended meaning of the works. For them additional information would have been unnecessary. They said they liked the possibility to read little bits here and there, while being at liberty to find their own way through the museum and experience their own process of interpretation. More information would have taken this freedom away. For those preferring more direction towards the understanding of the art presented, especially school classes, the museum decided to provide guided tours. There was even a special guided tour for children with Baron Samedi (spirit of the dead from Haiti) as the leading actor.

We chose to select seven art works exhibited in *Roots & More*,³⁸ and to relate them to the different visitor reactions they elicited. The selection is based on geographical origin: one piece from the United States, two from Brazil, two from Haiti and two from Cuba. The first to be described is from the United States: *The House of Obeah*, which is made by Renée Stout. On a canvas square, a wall with one window is depicted. It is as if an actual piece of an outside wall is hanging onto the museum wall. Several things are attached to the wall and the windowsill, such as a spider, a bottle, a little white head, a fish and the number nine. A random visitor could see this without realizing the intended symbolic meaning. The person in question could be able to accord a personal meaning to the work or to create one's own opinion about the beauty or ugliness of this work. The information board offers some information about Obeah and the relation Renée Stout had with New Orleans. Further details about the symbols had to be found in the catalogue (available elsewhere in the exhibition space). Stout made this artwork with the disaster caused by hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in mind. Originally, the work had been intended as a homage to the Jamaican spirit Obeah. The spider on the wall reflects Stouts deepest fears and also the fears and uncertainty of the people in New Orleans at the time Katrina struck the city. It also represents spiritual guidance and hope as seen in some African cultures. On the roof is a trickster figure, Elegba, who is the guardian of the crossroads. The bottle represents magic and mysteries. The fish beneath the window recalls the flood that swept over New Orleans. The number 9 is used as the number of power and change. Some people did not need this information to appreciate the painting or to connect to it. There were also people who had a basic knowledge of *vodou*, and who therefore were able to decode some of the symbolism and to interpret the work. One of the visitors, for example, recognized the bottle and the window as objects used to attract ghosts. Other ones found it a pity they did not grasp the full intentions of the artist or they felt ignorant about the symbolism employed. Hence, they struggled to decipher this work, remaining undecided what to think of it.

The next two pieces are from Brazil: an untitled installation made by Félix Farfan and the *Wet Nurse* installation by Rosana Paulino. For most visitors the

³⁸ All are illustrated in the catalogue.

installation of Farfan caused a feeling of unease. The meaning of bottled, plastic baby dolls hanging from the ceiling was conceived of as hard to get. Several people expressed their inability to understand what it meant, but a considerable number also did not like the sight and preferred to walk further. A few people were intrigued by Farfan's work and paused to watch carefully the bottled babies; they wondered what this work was about. Some people, who knew bottles are used to attract ghosts, tried to apply this pre-knowledge to the 'caught' babies. The catalogue gives somewhat more information about this installation. Farfan tattooed the babies and gave them earrings, to make them look 'scarred' even before life really started. The bottles recall the African tradition of storing spirits in bottles.

The installation *Wet Nurse* by Paulino reminded us of the black wet nurse, a slave woman who took care of the babies of her mistress. This tradition contradicts the overall idea that black people were less intelligent and had other bad qualities, which could be passed on to white people by means of physical contact. The black silhouettes represent wet nurses from the slave era. These figures are based on photographs, which can be found in the bottles. The white ribbons between the figures and the bottles represent milk. The most heard remark on this work was that the fact that the bottles were placed on the floor made it very hard to actually see the photographs in the bottles, thus the link between the bottles and the pictures in the installation was lost. This work, as most of the others, also evoked different visitor responses, ranging from self-reported total understanding to visitors indicating to be left in completely in the dark. The obvious political meaning of this installation made it comprehensible to people who could not understand or relate to other, more spiritually inspired exhibits.

The two chosen pieces from Haiti are next: *Poto Mitan* by Patrick Vilairé and the so-called *Haitian Night Watch*. In the middle of a chamber formed by black curtains – which also shape the walking path through the museum – stands a pillar. This artwork called *Poto Mitan* was, for most, easier to understand. A few lines of information were enough for visitors to feel like they understood the work, although they might not have fully grasped its meaning. For most, the connection between another world and this world was not so strange. This work did not cause an alienating feeling as strong as the strange feeling certain other pieces in this exhibition did cause. But then again, this work did not always get the most excited reactions either. A *poto mitan* is a pillar that stands in the middle of a *vodou* temple. *Lwa* use the *poto mitan* to descend to earth. The *poto mitan* can be seen as an *axis mundi*, a world axis. Vilairé's *Poto Mitan* shows a pillar consisting of three parts, which - with great effort - are held in place by human hands. At the bottom of the pillar human feet are sticking out. Vilairé shows us that people try so hard to establish a link with the spirit world, that at the same time they are the reason this relationship is so unstable.



'The Haitian Night Watch'. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal

The last first floor room of the *Roots & More* exhibition is much larger than previous spaces. Here, thirteen *lwa* (spirit beings) statues are displayed (see photo above). The information board called this group the *Haitian Night Watch*. This title (in Dutch: *de Nachtwacht van Haïti*) refers to one of the most famous Dutch paintings, namely the *Nachtwacht* (Night Watch) by Rembrandt van Rijn. The title, given by the curator, may be seen as an attempt to bring the exhibits closer to the visitors and to stress the importance in art terms. It is unknown who made the statues, partly because they were intended for a secret society. *Lwa* are said to go out to support people in distress or punish people when they deem punishment necessary. The heads of statues like these are often made of real human skulls. The many mirrors remind one of the Kongo *nkisi* sculptures. These mirrors are used to summon the *lwa* into the statues. This collection of statues figured prominently in the advertising campaign held for *Roots & More* and can be seen as its main attraction. The hall in which the thirteen statues stand is dark and the positioning of the statues makes them look like an army. Spotlights are placed at their feet and big shadows on the dark wall behind them make the sight imposing. Reactions on this work are similar. People who enter the room are impressed and sometimes even utter words of awe. They lower their voices. As for *Poto Mitan*, here too it is easier for visitors to understand the meaning of the works. Even though they don't always know what the mirrors really do and why human skulls are used, they can recognize different characters. Figures that can help people in distress and punish people who have done bad things are not an unknown theme in our Western culture, either.

The last two pieces we selected are from Cuba: *Nllo* by Belkis Ayón Mansa and *Amarrado al recuerdo yo vivo esperando* by José Baulio Bedia Valdés. In *Nllo*, the last piece of the exhibition, visitors recognized the mourning apparent in the painting. Some people thought the white figure lying down in the painting was not dead but subject to a ritual. Looking closer however, they found many

signs of mourning. The painting is thought to be very sad and several people found it very intriguing because it expressed so much emotion. The critique of some people was that the work should have more light. The way *Nlloro* was exhibited made some parts of it hardly visible. You had to sit down to discover certain details. (Similar remarks were made about other works we do not discuss here.) In the catalogue we can read more about *Nlloro*. In *Nlloro* the central themes are sacrifice and death. The white figure has passed away and is now entering another realm. The others are mourning him. While the painting is about death, which seems an end, Belkis Ayón shows us that death is only a stop on the way, not the destination itself.

Another painting from Cuba is *Amarrado al recuerdo yo vivo esperando*. The title of this painting by Bedia Valdés can be translated as *Tied to a memory I live on waiting*. It shows the migrants' longing for his native land. The large figure is sitting on Havana's Malecón Boulevard, gazing into the distance. He longs to be elsewhere. The small figure is holding on to a kite string. This represents a memory of what once was. The painting shows many stars. They have a trickster role. Do they guide mankind or do they mislead them? The painting reflects the ever-returning decision to let go of something you would rather hold on to. But this could be seen as authoritative readings, whereas the show offered ample room for visitors to consider the works open for interpretation, whether directed by clues or of their own accord.

5. Museum space: a ritual arena

Non-Western art might still be taboo for major art institutions in the Netherlands because curators and art critics find this art hard to comprehend. The conventional accompanying label, relating only the title, the artist's name, the materials used, and the dimensions of the art work probably will not do.³⁹ Much more information needs to be provided to allow visitors to get a better grasp on the artist's intentions. Yet, an improved understanding might also be possible, as *Roots & More* suggests, when people get the opportunity to become acquainted with the work, to experience it, to relate to it, and attribute meaning to it, on the basis of their own spirituality. The makers of *Roots & More*, we argued, made use of the museum as a ritual site to create a spiritual contact zone. The re-invention of ritual space was mostly taken for granted and remained unchallenged in a direct way. David Kertzer notes that this is precisely what explains the success of ritual: it 'creates an emotional state that makes the message uncontestable because it is framed in such a way as to be seen inherent in the way things are. It presents a picture of the world that is so emotionally

³⁹ See also C. HERMER: 'Curatorial authority and postmodern representations of African art', in E. VENBRUX, P. ROSI & R.L. WELSCH (eds.): *Exploring world art* (Long Grove, IL 2006) 357-370.

compelling that it is beyond debate'.⁴⁰ Although some visitors sensed a presence of spirits and the exhibition due to the lightning and shock value of certain objects, and it thus appealed to the senses, the responses were diverse. The ritual was of a kind that was open to subjective experiences and interpretations. This complied with the makers understanding of their constituency's spirituality, and contributed to the efficacy of the spiritual contact zone. The reinvention of the museum's ritual space in these terms was to convince the visitors of the value of contemporary art from the African diaspora. In this ritual arena, the makers also communicated, as Duncan would put it, their values and beliefs, and what they perceived as the central meanings of the museum.

According to Welling, within the mainstream contemporary art world there is still a taboo on art 'that explicitly refers to non-Western spiritual or other sources'.⁴¹ The Afrika Museum, however, persists in labeling the diaspora art as religious art, also because religion still plays an important role in the current West – we are all looking for a 'spiritual bond' that we are supposedly missing.⁴² However, the larger art museums generally call religious art works just 'art', without emphasizing their religious aspects. The courageous attempt of the Afrika Museum to change the (inter)national art world includes a greater appreciation of the spiritual underpinnings of art. With *Roots & More* the Afrika Museum made a statement in the ritual arena of the national art world, seeking to redefine its own position and the one of African art from the diaspora.

The difficulty however does not solely rest in the indistinctiveness of the art world – it also has to do with the fact that the diaspora-art works are non-conventional – strange – in our Western eyes. Because the works were made in another context, visitors to the museum miss a certain feeling of familiarity with what they see, a feeling of understanding. This feeling can only grow if the claim of Hübner and Welling, that Western individuals are on a spiritual quest, is true. Only if 'we' are on such a quest, we can find connection to the art works and the spiritual claims made by the artists.

While visiting the exhibition, some visitors become aware of a certain ritual repertoire in conjunction with a common symbolism displayed in the various works of contemporary artists from the African diaspora. In this way, in a ritually constructed spiritual contact zone, the journey through the exhibition space of the inner museum can be understood as a journey through the inner world. Simultaneously, it is a journey of discovery, allowing visitors to freely establish connections between the known and unknown. Texts on labels and the exhibition's design support this discovery by the senses, gradually making the strange familiar. In other words, *Roots & More* did not change the art world much, but interest in the art from the African diaspora has been created. And for these achievement curators Hübner and Welling have to be congratulated. As Dun-

⁴⁰ D.M. KERTZER: *Ritual, politics, and power* (New Haven 1988) 101.

⁴¹ WELLING: 'Encounters at the crossroads' 78.

⁴² HÜBNER: 'Preface' 6.

can notes, 'Whatever their limitations, however large or small, and however peripheral they often seem, art museum space is space worth fighting for'.⁴³ The ritual enactment of *Roots & More* did tell what the museum is about, and positioned it in the broader arena of the art world. Furthermore, the re-invention of the ritual space within the museum brought visitors in a spiritual contact zone, experienced in manifold subjective ways.

Eric Venbrux is a professor of Anthropology of Religion and principal researcher of the research programme *Refiguring Death Rites: Post-Secular Material Religion in the Netherlands* (www.ru.nl/rdr), supported by NWO and housed at Radboud University Nijmegen. Together with Meike Heessels and Sophie Bolt he edited the volume *Rituele creativiteit. Actuele veranderingen in de uitvaart- en rouwcultuur in Nederland* (Zoetermeer 2008). E-mail: e.venbrux@rs.ru.nl

⁴³ DUNCAN: *Civilizing rituals* 134.