

CHÉRI SAMBA: ART AND COMIC BOOKS

Chéri Samba is probably the most well known African artist of the contemporary period, with the possible exception of the sculptor El Anatsui. Born in 1956 in the Congolese village of Kinto M'Vuila, Samba initially worked as a sign painter in the 1970s. Samba soon started making fine art paintings, which he would hang outside of his studio for the local Congolese population to see. Samba is known for his signature brand of painting, mixing photorealism, comic book caricature and text into one hybrid style with which he addresses the condition of being a contemporary Congolese artist, and of being Congolese period. After being featured in the famous 1989 Pompidou Centre exhibition 'Les Magiciens de la Terre', Samba rose to international prominence in the 1990s, and today his work is collected and shown all over the world; he currently resides in Kinshasa and Paris.

Samba's painting style comes directly out of comic books. Comic books are a 20th century phenomenon that has traveled across the globe, touching every genre of storytelling, from love stories to horror to the comic book invention of the superhero. Samba himself was heavily influenced by the Belgian comics, like *Tintin*, that were imported to the Congo, the Congolese comic books that were produced in reaction to *Tintin*, and his previous career as a sign painter; both comic books and sign painting could be included in the larger category of *popular art*. In a review of V.Y. Mudimbe's influential 1994 book *The Idea of Africa*, Dennis Essar summarizes Mudimbe's analysis of African popular art:

According to Mudimbe's conception (161-62), self-trained popular artists, using inexpensive and readily available materials, imitating non-artistic models as disparate as those of the comic strip and billboard advertising, create works for ordinary African people, portraying and commenting upon realities that are immediately perceptible to their public, and often specific to a particular locale and social milieu.

The model Mudimbe describes could be attributed directly to Samba, down to the use of "comic strip and billboard advertising" "non-artistic models". Samba's work is representational, another important factor in its universal appeal. Unlike an abstract piece, representational work can be understood by anyone, since we all have been unconsciously trained to see the world since we were born, and representational work imitates this inherent visual vocabulary rather than trying to establish a completely new one. Not only does Samba utilize the inherent vocabulary of representational painting, but he is also playing with the visual vocabulary of the comic book. In Scott McCloud's classic 1993 work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, a 215-page comic book

volume that breaks down the history and art of comic books, he describes the comic book tool of the icon¹:

...I'm going to examine cartooning as a form of *amplification through simplification*. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential "meaning," an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't.

As we see in Samba's 1993 painting *Une peinture à défendre (A painting to defend)*, fig. 1, he is well versed in the art of the icon. Here the painter, presumably Samba, is rendered photorealistically, while the white men grabbing him appear far more cartoonish and two-dimensional. Samba uses the low culture and crass view of comic books to reinforce his point: the photorealist rendering of himself gives off an air of dignity and elegance, while the less-rendered white men seem unrefined, in all senses, in comparison. Samba even further cartoonizes the African figures in the painting he is protecting (the painting within the painting), in order to clarify its status as an object within the image, as it contrasts with Samba's photorealistic face directly in front of it. Rather than be a literal window to another world, this painting within a painting, and the Africans depicted in it, becomes an icon; the Africans in the painting become a symbol of Africa itself. Samba is using the twin strategies of realistic painting and comic book icons to elicit a quick response from the audience about the figures portrayed, rather than to have them focus on the art of the painting itself. Samba's painting, like comic books, uses images as a path towards a social meaning, a far cry from the "art about art" of Abstract Expressionist paintings. Samba's painting is a social painting, which is what makes his use of comic book style so fundamental: Samba has appropriated the most direct, instant and culturally well known medium for the transference of a complex social statement (as McCloud writes², "as the twenty-first century approaches, visual iconography may finally help us realize a form of universal communication"). By mixing the comic book with representational painting, Samba is taking two universally understood visual vocabularies and is using them to appeal to the largest audience possible.

If Chéri Samba can be said to be a popular artist, meaning an artist concerned with reaching not the elite, but the majority of the population, the unique use of text in his paintings must be examined. An essential part of comic books, and Samba's paintings, the relationship between image and text in comic books is what, to most people, sets them apart from other mediums; image and text alone both exist as their own art forms, and the subject matter in comic books is often seen in other media, such as films. What makes comic books unique is their ability to illustrate meaning through text (the primary way we receive our information, aside from oral communication) and image ("a picture is worth a thousand words") *simultaneously*. They draw both the eye and the mind to them at once, creating an extremely powerful tool for the dissemination of ideas (even more

¹ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Print. Page 30.

² McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Print. Page 58.

powerful when considered in conjunction with their mass-produced nature). This is a combination that is understood from childhood; McCloud describes how “as children, we ‘show and tell’ interchangeably, words and images combining to transmit a connected series of ideas³”. Samba himself said of the addition of text to his work⁴:

I had noticed that people in the street would walk by paintings, glance at them and keep going. I thought that if I added a bit of text, people would have to stop and take time to read it, to get more into the painting and admire it. That’s what I called the ‘Samba signature.’ From then on I put text in all my paintings.

Samba clearly sees the use of text in his work as a means of drawing a wide audience into the work. The way that text is mixed with images in his work is distinctly similar to the “word bubble” style seen in almost all comic books; he draws on the language of comics in order to reach an audience that would traditionally not associate with the art of painting. 1990’s *Pourquoi ai-je signé un contrat? (Why did I sign a contract?)*, fig. 2, is a prime example of this; Samba uses narrative boxes and word bubbles to comment on the image he has presented, creating a large-format version of a single comic book panel. Without text, the rope around the neck would have been ambiguous, possibly referring to a variety of things; with text, it is clear that the rope (which the signs tell us are being pulled by curators, dealers, critics, artists, etc.) is a metaphor for painful contracts, and the pressures that come with them, that the artist has signed in order to help his career. McCloud describes how, in comic books, “If the words lock in the ‘meaning’ of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off⁵”. In Samba’s work, this manifests itself in a freedom to create increasingly symbolic works, as in fig. 3. Text is a way of combating ambiguity in his work, allowing the visual side of his work a freedom that would not be maintained were Samba to attempt to make his meaning clear through images alone.

Few can be said to have been as vocal a detractor of Samba’s work as fellow artist Olu Oguibe. Oguibe, born in Nigeria and educated abroad in England, is known for his abstract installations, and besides being an artist also works heavily as a writer, critic, teacher, and curator. In *Art, Identity, Boundaries*, Oguibe describes two separate occasions in which collectors (in one case, a German man entering the art dealing game; in the other case, curators for the Australia Museum putting together a show on African prints) sent out information asking for the best contemporary African artwork, only to later clarify that they were really only looking for work by Chéri Samba and similar artists. Understandably upset over this, Oguibe writes⁶:

³ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Print. Page 152.

⁴ “Chéri Samba.” *CAACART: The Pigozzi Collection*, 2011. Web. <http://www.caacart.com/pigozzi-artist.php?i=Samba-Cheri&bio=en&m=46>.

⁵ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Print. Page 159.

⁶ Oguibe, Olu. “Art, Identity, Boundaries.” 1995. Web. <http://www.camwood.org/identity.htm>.

In its compulsive proclivity to displace and dismiss comparable art from Africa from the spaces of contemporary art and its narration, the west has regularly elected to question African art's identity, its authenticity, and in doing so to employ its own constructs of this authenticity.

Oguibe sees Samba's success not as an admirable accomplishment that shows that it is possible for African artists to be legitimate players in the global art market, but rather as symptomatic of the Western desire to qualify African artists as "naïve primitives". To Oguibe, Samba represents an unschooled and popular approach to art, the antithesis of modernist and postmodernist academically trained art production. Artists like Oguibe represent this trained and educated sect, largely the standard for the European and American artists that artists like Oguibe want to be seen on the same level as. Oguibe sees Samba as a threat, as he does not want Samba to be the poster child for African art, fearing that Westerners will think that all African artists make work like Samba's. Oguibe was very critical of the heavy inclusion of Chéri Samba pieces in the 1991 Center for African Art and New Museum co-organized traveling show *Africa Explores*, Susan Vogel's infamous monumental exhibition of 20th century African art. In his review of the show, Oguibe writes specifically about Samba⁷:

Loud denunciations of "Vogel's Bible do not help matters, since they rarely venture toward the fundamental flaw of this work, namely that it rests on a model that belongs not in art history but in colonialist ethnography. This, more than anything else, explains even such little points as the number of Chéri Sambas in the exhibition and book, and the absence of Enwonwus, for instance. An essential dimension of colonialist ethnography is the inclination to suppress that which falls outside its frames. And at its most exalted, those frames only glean the funny ways of the "savage."

Oguibe takes offense to Samba's uneducated style, seeing Samba as uninformed about almost everything, from the art discourse to the stakes in defining what African art is, and even worse, referring to him as a "savage" (which seems like a strange claim considering the impressive use of text that is central to Samba's work). Oguibe relegates Samba's success to nothing more than the West trying to identify all African artists with Samba (meaning identifying them all as uneducated, and thus not serious artists), which he attributes to fear of legitimate competition by African artists. In this, we see that Oguibe is very much in dialogue with postcolonial writing, such as Franz Fanon, and sees the situation of the colonizer and the colonized to still be in play.

Oguibe's downfall is his intense desire to categorize the African art scene as only one thing, one kind of art. Africa is made up of vastly different countries, with different artists, interests and traditions; the notion that African art should be defined as one thing at all seems ridiculous. Oguibe is thinking in a very Modernist way, following the logic of Clement Greenberg; he approaches the situation with the idea that there is one pure form of art that can be arrived at through a process of eliminating everything that does not

⁷ Oguibe, Olu. "Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art, reviewed by Olu Oguibe." *African Arts*, Jan. 1993, Vol. 26, No. 1: page 22.

belong in the definition of, in this case, “African art”. Oguibe’s model seems outdated, as the same thing happened at the height of American Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s, which ultimately led to an implosion (how far can you go painting the almost-identical, almost-blank canvases over and over?) and the advent of countless different styles (Minimalism, Pop, Postminimalism, Neo-expressionism, etc.), which is the situation we have today. Oguibe also seems to feed into the colonial system, defining African art *against* Western art instead of approaching African art as its own thing. As much as he writes about how “African must narrate themselves and not be more stagehands in a ventriloquist’s show”, Oguibe is extremely concerned by how Westerners will define African art, which seems to point to their authority and superiority over African artists. His assertion that Samba’s success is due solely to Westerners, and not to Samba himself, is evidence of this. In *On The Matter of Whiteness*⁸, Richard Dyer describes how whiteness has become the norm, and blackness (and the conditions of being any other race) is defined *against* whiteness, while whiteness largely remains undefined. Oguibe is playing into this by attempting to define “African art” *against* Western art, and for Westerners. Samba, on the other hand, seems unconcerned with identifying an “African style” and more content with exploring the style he has created as an individual. This ultimately, ironically, seems to be the more progressive attitude towards African art: to treat each artist as a unique individual, rather than simply as the result of the continent they were born on. In this way, we can see Samba as the far more postmodern, and thus contemporary, artist of the two. Oguibe and Samba represent the two polarities of contemporary African art in seemingly every way: high art vs. popular art, modernist vs. contemporary, abstract vs. representational, educated vs. uneducated, anti-colonialist vs. individualist. Oguibe is interested in globalized art, while Samba is interested in art that shows the issues of Samba’s art can be seen as biographical, since it is not about global issues but rather issues specific to him; Oguibe reads this as defining himself by his Africanism rather than as an individual. How would Oguibe then explain figures like Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer, whose bodies of work address particularly German issues, and discuss the specific local condition of growing up as post-WWII Germans?

Oguibe also fails to see the complexity in Samba’s paintings, and seems to show serious myopia in automatically dismissing Samba’s popular art tendencies as a legitimate part of a contemporary art discourse. Comic books have been embraced by artists in the postmodern period, and Samba is far from the first artist to be influenced by and use comic books in his work. The obvious example of a 20th century artist using comic books in his work is Roy Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein’s most famous and critically acclaimed work (fig. 1 for example) were paintings in which he directly appropriated comic book panels, mixing the popular style (Lichtenstein even would copy the cheap halftone printing style of the comics) and content of newspaper and magazine comic books with the air of class and refinement that comes with the gallery space, creating an innovative mix of high and low culture. While Lichtenstein is an obvious example of an artist using comic books, two less straightforward but equally useful examples might be

⁸ Dyer, Richard. "On the Matter of Whiteness." In *Chapter in Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. Edited by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. 300-311. New York, NY: Harry Abrams, Inc, 2003.

Andy Warhol and Mike Kelley. Warhol, along with Lichtenstein and others like James Rosenquist, made up the Pop Artists that rose to prominence within the New York art scene in the 1960s, appropriating elements of popular culture that had been excluded from the definition of “art” by the Abstract Expressionist generation before (in his 1939 essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Clement Greenberg declared that all “kitsch” elements, taken to mean popular media like comic books, and other formats like movies and television, were unfit to be considered art because they were not political or serious enough, thus creating the dichotomy between high art and low culture) into their gallery work. Pop Art recast these kitsch elements in a positive light, exploring America’s cultural relationship to pop culture, the definitive works of the period being without a doubt Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe paintings (fig. 2), as well as his Campbell’s Soup (fig. 3) and Elvis (fig. 4) works. Warhol and Lichtenstein appropriate a popular style in order to both interest and involve a larger audience, and to question the audience’s relationship to the popular symbols they use. Samba is appropriating a style, but is not directly appropriating actual images; he works with the style of comic books, but does not copy a comic strip or a photograph of a celebrity directly. It would be a stretch to say that Samba is questioning his audience’s relationship to comic books, but he is turning a frowned upon element of popular culture into a high art form while also democratizing painting. He is pulling high art to the street, and at the same time raising a low culture form to a critical level.

Mike Kelley’s artistic practice centers around working with elements that he was told in art school were not supposed to be a part of fine art (like Greenberg ruling out all kitsch in art). Kelley’s work explores these limitations, and by extension all the ways that society limits its members. Of these off-limit elements that are manifested in Kelley’s work, comic books and cartoons are very prevalent. Kelley often utilizes comic book and cartoon style images into his work; for instance, *Shock*, fig. 5, is a group of framed comic book style drawings hung salon-style as a part of Kelley’s 1982-83 installation *Monkey Island*. In *Shock*, Kelley is appropriating the definition of high art presentation (18th and 19th century salon-style hanging) and mixing it with the traditional definition of low culture (comic books), to make an anti-Greenbergian, pro-kitsch argument about the boundaries of art (namely, that there should not be any). Kelley is not alone in his generation in appropriating comics and cartoons into his work; Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami would also be prime examples of this. Samba, in his use of comic book form in a high art setting and tradition, is, like Kelley, exploring the limits of painting as a medium. It is no accident that Samba has been so successful: his paintings are extremely accessible, precisely for the reason that Oguibe’s work is not. You do not need an MFA to understand what Samba is trying to discuss in his work; in a stroke of simple brilliance, he writes what he is trying to say on the canvas, making it immediately understandable and facilitating a universal (not only involving educated intellectuals, but common people as well) dialogue on important issues. The comic book format is popular for a reason, and instead of shunning this, Samba picked up on it and embraced it. His work is not simply illustration as Oguibe would imply, but rather an amalgam of comics and traditional painting that uses the best parts of both to reach everyday people, which is the audience that Samba has consistently shown he is really interested in addressing and interacting with; this is the same appeal that the work of Koons, Murakami, Kelley, and other contemporary artists has (or at least hopes to). In attacking Samba’s popular art

methods, Oguibe seems to be attacking the shifting postmodern audience of art more than the art itself.

What all of this points to is the problem of defining art. Oguibe is intensely concerned with defining what it means to make art as an African, as Greenberg was concerned with what it meant to create art at all. Artists like Samba and Kelley represent a nonchalance towards this, less concerned with making “capital A Art” than making work that is interesting and speaks to them and their audience. This seems to be the general postmodern attitude towards art, a reaction against the Modernist preoccupation with defining and categorizing everything. The problem with defining all art to a precise and specific point is that the definition leads no room for anything different or new. In 1921, Rodchenko thought he had found the limit of painting, and in so the definition of it. He tried to end painting, and maybe art entirely, by making the last painting (fig. 6); in his own words he said “I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: this is the end of painting.” He failed; paintings continued to be made. A lack of narrow definitions will ensure that art will continue to change and grow, and will never become stagnant or boring.



Fig. 1: Chéri Samba, *Une peinture à défendre* (A painting to defend), 1993



Fig. 2: Chéri Samba, *Pourquoi ai-je signé un contrat?* (Why did I sign a contract?), 1990



Fig. 1: Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*, 1963, oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 67 5/8" x 66 3/4" (171.6 x 169.5 cm), the Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 2: Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962, acrylic on canvas, 80.88" × 114" (205.44 cm × 289.56 cm), Tate Gallery, London



Fig. 3: Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, synthetic polymer paint on thirty-two canvases, each canvas 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm), the Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 4: Andy Warhol, *Double Elvis*, 1963, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 6' 11" x 53" (210.8 x 134.6 cm), the Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 5: Mike Kelley, *Shock*, 1982-83, Acrylic and mercurochrome on paper, three bottom works: 47¾" x 37½" each; top work: 24" x 19", The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

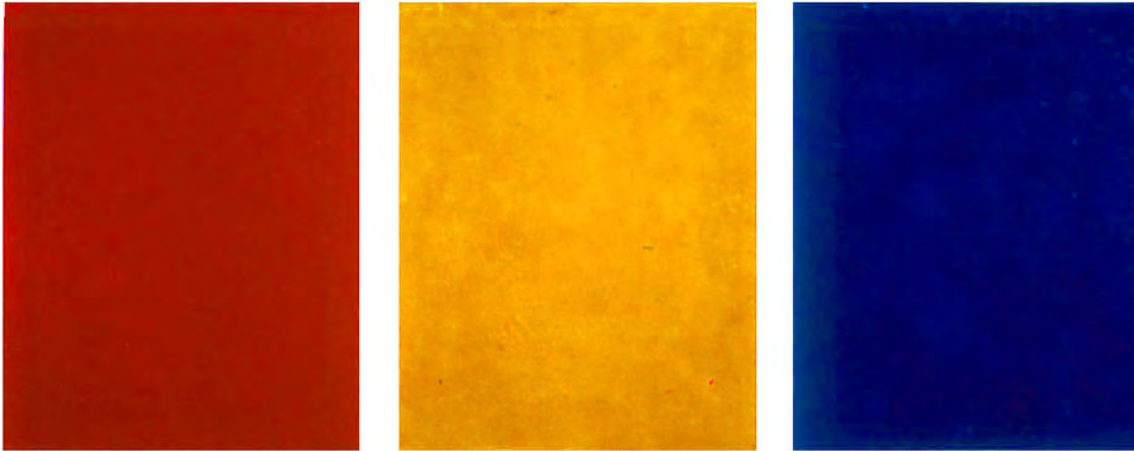


Fig. 6: Aleksander Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, 1921, oil on canvas, each panel, 24 5/8" x 20 11/16" (62.5 x 52.5 cm), A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow