Making Africa
A Continent of Contemporary Design
Olalekan Jeyifous [vigilism.com], Idumota Market (Escape to New Lagos series), illustration for the lookbook of the Ikire Jones Heritage Men’s Fashion Collection, 2013
Cover: Cyrus Kabiru, African Stitches (C-Stunners Series), 2010

* Africa in 50 Years’ Time: The Road Towards Inclusive Growth, African Development Bank, September 2011
It’s time to move on from talk of the so-called »Dark Continent«. A major exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum sheds new light on contemporary design in Africa. On the basis of a wide variety of examples, Making Africa shows how design is accompanying – and even promoting – economic and political change on the continent and engaging in a close dialogue with related disciplines, such as the fine arts, illustration, film, photography, architecture and urban planning. A central role is played by the new media, which made this shift in perspective possible in the first place. After its premiere at the Vitra Design Museum in 2015, the exhibition will travel to a number of other museums.

When media and international organizations discuss the upturn in Africa, they typically refer to the dynamic economy, which is developing at a faster pace on the continent than in the rest of the world. Or they talk about the steeply rising middle class, which should encompass some 1.1 billion Africans by 2060, compared to around 355 million today. Yet the upswing is also evident in the 650 million mobile phones registered in Africa – more than in the USA and in Europe. Most of these devices have at least minimal access to the Internet, and this gateway to the world is fundamental to the economic, political and creative transformations in Africa. Spearheading this development is a young generation of entrepreneurs, thinkers and creators who refuse to be held back by limited resources and possibilities, but use them as a source for inventive and ingenious new solutions. With their confident, self-assured approach to new media, they have attained a presence that provides the world with a wholly new view of Africa. Making Africa embraces this new perspective. Instead of addressing the theme from the angle of recycling, humanitarian design or traditional craft – an approach that typically ties in with the image of a »failed« continent – the exhibition is focusing instead on the role played by design as a tool for a new identity and hence a new future for Africa. With works that often transcend genre categories, a young generation of designers and creative minds is quite literally building a new Africa.

Evidently, a German museum cannot tackle this theme on its own. Early on in the project, Vitra Design Museum convened an advisory body of proven experts: the consulting curator of the exhibition is Okwui Enwezor, director of Haus der Kunst in Munich and director of the 2015 Venice Art Biennale. Additionally, the exhibition’s advisory board is made up of the architect David Adjaye, founder of Adjaye Associates in London and architect of the Smithsonian African American Museum in Washington D.C.; and Manuel Herz, an architect based in Basel and lecturer at ETH Zurich who is currently working with the photographer Iwan Baan on a comprehensive study of late modern architecture in Africa.

An integral part of Making Africa is the process leading up to the exhibition. It entails multiple think tanks in African cities as well as places with important African communities such as Paris or London in which numerous theorists and practitioners from various cultural disciplines are involved in developing the exhibition. A key role is played here by social media. Via Twitter, Facebook and other platforms, the Vitra Design Museum will invite the African public to take part in the curatorial process. Networks are to be established that will remain in place for exhibition-related communication, education and events throughout the entire exhibition tour – and beyond – and forge permanent links between the African design community and the international scene.
Mia Widlake, 12 plate Skeleton series of dinnerware, 2012

Mario Macilau, Alito, The Guy With Style (Moments of Transition series), 2013

Yaw Tony, Lover's Talk, textile printing, 2013
Making Africa is divided into four sections. The first is a prologue that puts the exhibition in context. It will explain what it means when we talk about Africa or African design. At the same time, this preliminary section seeks to confront viewers with their own images of Africa – both negative and positive – and invite them to discover and embrace new perspectives. The exhibition will then turn to its core theme: Making Africa. The thematic leitmotiv is the concept of identity, which lies at the heart of discussions about creating a new Africa. Who or what is this Africa that is to emerge? Which sources feed into the new conception of design, how does it link the big-picture perspective of a continent in transformation with the everyday lives of its inhabitants?

The exhibition contains a wide variety of media and exhibition objects: products, furniture, architectural models, installations, sketches, drawings, plans, posters, illustrations, typography, infographics, photographs, magazines, books, textiles, fashion, smartphone apps, websites, social media platforms, computer games, feature and documentary films, music videos and much more. The breakdown into four chapters makes it possible to juxtapose examples from different disciplines, highlighting intellectual and conceptual parallels and developing a complex narrative structure as befits a theme of this breadth. Along these lines, a computer game could well be paired with a tree house, and a documentary photo series on everyday objects might be placed next to a spectacular one-off textile design.

With this approach, Making Africa is adhering to a current understanding of design that is only peripherally related to conventional definitions of the field. In today’s world – and not just in Africa – design is much more than the creation of industrially manufactured products; it shapes processes, social interactions, urban environments and branches of industry. For the Making Africa project, the definition of design is an open one, less focused on distinctions and demarcations and more interested in the overlap with neighbouring disciplines, such as craft and fine art. »The blurring of categories allows the quality of design to emerge«, wrote the renowned German design theorist Michael Erlhoff. This applies to industrialized nations where the conventional definitions of design have long been questioned in view of growing mountains of waste, the digital revolution and an ever more sizable share economy. And this is all the more true in Africa where neither the production nor the education systems provide the traditional conditions for what Europeans defined as design a hundred years ago.

The cultural history foundation of Making Africa comes from a retrospective look at early postcolonial Africa. Back in the 1960s, photographers such as Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé or the South African magazine Drum showed a continent beyond wars, crises and catastrophes. The architecture produced during those initial years of independence also symbolized the onset of a new era and self-confidence that became lost over the following decades. These historical documents run through the entire exhibition where they will be systematically paired with contemporary works. These comparisons demonstrate how the young generation often consciously refers to this early body of work and makes a link to the positive sentiment of this past era.
1 Prologue

»Until lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunters.«

West African proverb

The first section lays the foundation for the entire exhibition and places the show in context. Traditional preconceptions are called into question and areas of lacking knowledge are identified. This introduction also seeks to demonstrate how the design of information itself is simultaneously an instrument of interpretation and influence and how Africa-related information design tends to fall back on clichés. A new generation of media designers is attempting to address and transcend such stereotypes.

In response to this situation, the Vitra Design Museum is planning a project with the ZIVA – Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Arts (»vigital« for »visual« and »digital«), a college of graphic design in Harare. Infographics will be created especially for the exhibition – some of them interactive – to visualize Africa geographically, historically, politically, demographically, economically and culturally as well as to illustrate the technological change occurring on the continent. In addition, the relationship of design and knowledge about Africa will be highlighted by a wall with numerous screens showing interviews and talks by and with African thinkers and practitioners. The Vitra Design Museum will conduct these interviews itself while also making use of existing material, such as the talks by designers like David Adjaye at the South African conference »Design Indaba« or Francis Kéré at the TED Conference.

The screens and infographics will be complemented by other works such as the map Alkebu-lan 1260 AH by Nikolaj Cyon. It shows what Africa would have looked like around 1850 had it not been colonialized by Europe. In so doing, it literally turns the continent on its head – at least from a western perspective. A similar idea led to a 2001 advertising campaign for the fashion label Diesel. The images document an African jet-set and their lavishly decadent lifestyle, superimposed with clips from the fictional newspaper The Daily African featuring such headlines as »AU agrees on financial aid to Europe«. The work of the Kenyan Cyrus Kabiru will also play a central role. His C-Stunners, glasses made of found materials, are a compelling metaphor for the shift in perspective that Making Africa demands of its visitors.

The many voices, facts and figures are meant to encourage visitors to question the current images of the continent. First and foremost, however, they should emphasize that there is not »one Africa«, just as there is no such thing as »the African« or »African design«. Rather, as suggested by the exhibition’s title, each individual designer makes his or her own Africa, as do the individual speakers presented on the screens. This results in a diversity and complexity that cannot be represented in full within the parameters of Making Africa. Nor does the exhibition have any ambition of doing so. Instead, the show sees itself as a participant in the reinterpretation of the continent – Making Africa makes its own Africa as well.
Architect David Adjaye at Design Indaba, Cape Town, 2013

Kai Krause, The True Size of Africa, 2010

Amunga Eshuchi and Cyrus Kabiru, Sanyo (C-Stunners Photography Series), 2012

Studio Riot, My Africa Is, limited poster series for the eponymous documentary, 2012

Paradiset DDB/Ellen van Unwerth, The Daily African, ad campaign for Diesel, 2001

Nikolaj Cyon, Alkebu-lan 1260 AH, 2011
I and We examines the individual and their social environment and affiliations – and how these themes are reflected in creative work. Where do I belong, where do I want to belong – or not? Who do I consider myself to be and how do I articulate such? This often gets expressed in fashion and styling. Samuel Fosso, Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta documented this in their photography back in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70, as did Drum, the legendary South African magazine for popular culture. The world-renowned portraits only appear private at first glance. The self-evident manner with which the people in the photos saw themselves as part of the modern world and the naturalness with which they made international trends and fashions their own also had a political dimension. It can also be seen as Pan-Africanism, seeping into daily life and seeking a shared cultural understanding beyond ethnic and national boundaries.

A similar phenomenon can be observed today, such as in Botswana’s heavy metal scene or among the Sapeurs, the adherents of the Congolese Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes. Both subcultures avail themselves of Euro-American stylings – studded leather or smart suits – and then superimpose their own filter to create a culture of their very own. The wax textiles of the Dutch company Vlisco are also regarded as authentically African, with the latest collections being hotly discussed in blogs across the entire continent. Hairstyles are a further expression of personality, social belonging and an intersection of politics and daily life, documented among others by the photographer J.D. ’Okhai Ojeikere in the 1970s and today by the illustrator Kabelo Ramasobane. General socio-critical commentaries also have a place in this section of Making Africa, such as the vases by the South African Lucinda Mudge that address the social conflicts in her country or the film collaboration of the Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu with the US pop singer Santigold. And finally this section also looks at gender issues in design, such as in images of femininity in fashion and aesthetic codes or the question of how tensions between men and women are reflected in material cultures. Examples include Billie Zangewa’s textile works and the gender-critical works of the Nigerian designer Alafuro Sikoki.
Alafuro Sikoki, Untitled (ModEv – The Modern Evolution Suit series), 2011

Lucinda Mudge, Time to Drink Champagne and Dance on the Table, 2013

Daniele Tamagni, Untitled (Gentlemen of Bakongo series), 2009
Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou, Untitled (Muscemen series), 2012

Seydou Keïta, Untitled, 1955

Mário Macilau, Untitled (Moments of Transition series), 2013

Wangechi Mutu with Santigold, The End of Eating Everything (detail), animated video, 2013

Visco, Dutch wax fabrics, various collections
Cheick Diallo, Sansa armchair, 2011

Maliyo Games, Mosquito Smasher, 2012

Jean François Lamoureux, Jean-Louis Marin, Foire Internationale de Dakar (FIDAK), 1974

NLÉ, Makoko Floating School, Lagos / Nigeria, 2012

Porky Hefer, Nest Port Jackson, 2009

Places determine identity. In its third section, Making Africa addresses the question of being via the natural and manmade environment. The focus is not only on the world of things, but on design in terms of an intermeshing of everyday objects, living space, urban space and their interaction in daily habits, rituals and needs. The ability of buildings to become a visible expression of identity is demonstrated by Manuel Herz’s study of African architecture from the late modern period. In the 1960s and 1970s, architecture served the purpose of building up the young African nations, and even if many of the buildings erected at the time are slowly becoming dilapidated, they still symbolize the spirit of transformation and optimism of the early postcolonial era.

Contemporary architecture is also able to help define a sense of identity, as shown by the example of the Makoko Floating School by the Dutch-Nigerian architectural office NLÉ. Makoko is an informal settlement in the lagoon of the Nigerian capital of Lagos, largely consisting of houses built on stilts. With its simple flotation principle, the school building responds perfectly to its environment, though the city government of Lagos has other plans for the area. The slums in and on the water are to make way for condos – and as a result, the school has never gone into operation despite its celebrated launch. Instead, it has come to symbolize the inhabitants’ fight for their settlement. As long as the school is still afloat, Makoko too endures.

The interplays of cities, their geographic location and other situational conditions are also examined by David Adjaye’s Urban Africa project, which posited a taxonomy of the African city. Nature has also inspired design on a smaller scale, such as Porky Hefer’s tree houses or in the virtual arena, such as in computer games. A further formative influence are the materials that surround us, whether they be natural like the clay in Francis Kéré’s architecture or artificial like the recycled steel supports in Cheick Diallo’s furniture. And infrastructure that reacts to specific local conditions also serves to shape identity. It is no coincidence that the world’s most advanced mobile payment system comes from Africa and has had more success here than anywhere else. In a society in which only a minority has a banking account, «M-Pesa» fulfils the need for secure money transfers and has meanwhile become a synonym for the financial autonomy of ever-larger segments of the population on the continent.

In a brief excursus, this section of Making Africa also examines the intensive relations between China and Africa. This part addresses facts and figures, flows of goods and migration as well as the associated cultural exchange, which is reflected in African city planning and construction.
Michael Soi, China loves Africa 8 (detail), 2013

Nova Cidade de Kilamba / Angola, built by Chinese companies, largely vacant, 2011

Birsel + Seck, Madame Dakar for the M’Afrique collection by Moroso, 2009

Peter Rich Architects, Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre, Mapungubwe / South Africa, 2002 – 2010

Bodys Isek Kingelez, Kimbembe Ihunga, 1994

Alassane Drabo, Gourde protectrice lamp, 2006

Michael Soi, China loves Africa II (detail), 2013
Imiso Ceramics, Docks Table, 2013

Mikhael Subotzky in collaboration with Patrick Waterhouse, Ponte City 2009

Kéré Architects, Centre de L’Architecture en Terre, Mopti / Mali, 2010

againstallodds, XYZ and JWT Tanzania for Vodacom Tanzania, m-pesa Man, advertising, 2011

I See A Different You, Mozambique Bilene, Africa, 2013
Identity is inextricably bound to humanity’s existential questions of the origin and goal of life – as well as to the privilege of interpretation in providing the answers to such. Where do we come from and where are we going: these ponderings provide the frame of reference for the fourth and final section of Making Africa. The focus is on works that refer to collective or individual history and future, interpreting mythologies and visions and questioning the values and norms transmitted therein.

In the current age of globalization and the World Wide Web, the pre-colonial history and culture of Africa exerts an especially profound influence on the creative activities happening on the continent. Patterns, colours and appearances often evoke traditional tribal cultures, such as on the website of the French-Congolese musician Taali M, which the art director Pierre-Christophe Gam meant to be understood as an invitation to the court of an ancient African kingdom. Buki Akib’s menswear collection »FELA«, Cameron Platter’s graphic work and El Anatsui’s wall tapestries recalling royal Kente cloths likewise play with the insignias of traditional cultures. With his Rock Art Alphabet, Hailey Rogers goes even further back to the cradle of humanity, which of course is located in Africa. The engagement with the continent’s colonial legacy obviously plays a further key role – such as in the work of Yinka Shonibare and Robin Rhode – along with more recent history. Gonçalo Mabunda, for instance, fabricates thrones out of scrapped weapons from the nearly two-decade civil war in his native Mozambique.

Answers to existential questions – and hence an anchor for our identity – can also be found in faith and religion. An invented mythology forms the foundation of Paul Sika’s ongoing series of photographs. The underlying norms and values of the mythological narration are to be encapsulated in a smartphone app in the next cycle. Yinka Ilori’s chairs, by contrast, are rooted in wisdoms handed down among the Yoruba people for generations in the form of parables.

Future visions of the individual or society also tell us something about identity. Frances Bodomo’s short film Afronauts, for instance, whose plot is based on the real-life, unofficial Zambian space programme from 1969, speaks volumes about the optimistic atmosphere of transformation in Africa at the time. And the fact that the short science fiction films of Wanuri Kahu and Phetogo Thsepo Mahasha reach a hopeful conclusion, despite their underlying dystopian sentiment, connects back to this optimism 35 years later.
Robin Rhode, Arm Chair, digital animation, 2011


Frances Bodomo, Afronauts (still), 2014

Phetogo Tshepo Mahasha, Yiy, video for the musician Muhsina (still), 2010

Paul Sika, Marmide Mousso (Lilian's Appeal series), 2012
Yinka Ilori, Osumare (What is acceptable in one place is an abomination in another), 2013

El Anatsui, Fresh and Fading Memories, Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art, Palazzo Fortuny, 52nd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2007

Buki Akib, look from the FELA men’s wear collection, 2011

Pierre-Christophe, The kingdom of Taali M, website for the Parisian-Congolese singer Taali M, 2012

Athi-Patra Ruga, Uzuko (The Future White Women of Azania series), 2013

Yinka Shonibare, How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies), 2006

El Anatsui, Fresh and Fading Memories, Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art, Palazzo Fortuny, 52nd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2007
Michael MacGarry, *The Osuary*, 2009 – 2010


Jungle Jim, issue No. 19, pulp magazine, December 2012

Cameron Plattet, *Fucking Hell* tapestry, 2011

Hailey Rogers, *Rock Art Alphabet*, 2001
Local think tanks and preparatory meetings
To open up the curatorial process to designers, thinkers and everyday users of design on the African continent, think tanks have already been planned for the first half of 2014 in South, East and West Africa whose findings and discussions will be documented and included in the exhibition. In addition, a multitude of individual meetings are to take place all across the continent as well as throughout the world in the most important centres of the African community, such as in Paris and London. These interviews will likewise be used for the exhibition. The Vitra Design Museum’s conversation partners are from universities, galleries, museums, the creative and IT industries, architectural offices as well as design and artist studios.

Online projects
Along with the exhibition’s advisors, the think tanks and the individual meetings with experts, the Vitra Design Museum is planning on using social media to invite the design community and other interested individuals in Africa to take part in the curatorial process. A blog, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram will encourage people to share content, viewpoints, photographs and films. To achieve a maximum outreach, partnerships with established networks and platforms are in the works.

Events programme
During its presentation, the exhibition will be accompanied by an extensive supporting programme of events and activities to encourage public discourse. Talks and workshops are envisioned featuring African architects and designers from the continent and the rest of the world along with other important figures (e.g., Okwui Enwezor, curator, or Ravi Naidoo from the South African platform Design Indaba). Plans also include an Africa film series in cooperation with a Basel (CH) cinema and a workshop with selected African designers to present the guests and their work to a select specialist audience of industry professionals. This event is planned in cooperation with Design Indaba.

Tour
Following its premiere at the Vitra Design Museum in spring 2015, the exhibition will be shown in other museums worldwide. Several renowned institutions have expressed interest in the exhibition, among them the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon. The exhibition is planned to be shown in at least one African city – we are currently in intensive talks with the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) currently under construction in Cape Town. The tour will expose the exhibition to a broad international public over a span of several years.
Gareth Steele, Nelson Mandela 95, 100% moral fibre [detail], Mandela Poster Project by AIGA, 2013

Kudzanai Chiurai, The Minister of Defence (Minister series), 2009

Baruch Gottlieb/Mansour Ciss, Afro 2ème édition (Déberlinisation series), 2006
Jim Chuchu, All Oppression Is Connected, 2013
Contributors

Okwui Enwezor, consulting curator
Born in Nigeria, Okwui Enwezor is an internationally acclaimed curator, essayist, lyricist, critic and co-founder of the US-based journal NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art. His activities are marked by a constant striving for new perspectives on contemporary art, such as in his capacity as artistic director of documenta 11 in Kassel in 2002, which continues to be seen as ground-breaking with regard to the art of non-western countries. Since 2011, Enwezor has been director of Haus der Kunst in Munich and in 2015 he will head the 56th Venice Art Biennale.

Amelie Klein, curator
The Vienna native has been a curator at the Vitra Design Museum since August 2011 where she was most recently responsible for the exhibitions Gerrit Rietveld – The Revolution of Space and Confrontations. Contemporary Dutch Design (then under her maiden name Znidaric). Klein previously completed a master’s degree in design criticism in New York and before that worked as an editor and writer for, among others, the Austrian daily Die Presse, Stylepark, Domus and Abitare.

Members of the advisory board

David Adjaye
London-based architect, founder and principal of Adjaye Associates. Amongst others RIBA Chartered Member, AIA Honorary Fellow and Senior Fellow of the Design Futures Council.

Yelda Bayraktar

Till Förster
Holds the chair of social anthropology since 2001 and is founding director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland.

Pierre-Christophe Gam
London-based art director and curator, development and strategy director of the Fondation Gacha, a social and cultural NGO based in Cameroon.

Porky Hefer
Designer and founder of Animal Farm, a creative consultancy in Cape Town. Previously worked as an advertising executive in Johannesburg, Cape Town and New York.

Manuel Herz
Basel-based architect and researcher, teaches at ETH Zurich, in London, Rotterdam and Cambridge. Currently working on a project on the late modern architecture in Africa.

Odessa Legemah
Fashion editor and theorist. Currently working on a research project on the fashion scene in Nigeria and Africa in general.
Facts

Exhibition area
700 – 1000 m²

Objects
Everyday objects, artworks, architectural models, installations, plans, drawings, sketches, illustrations, graphic design, typography, posters, textiles, fashion, photographs, films, computer games, web and interactive design, system design

Curator
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Consulting curator
Okwui Enwezor, director of Haus der Kunst, Munich, director of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015

Advisory board
David Adjaye, architect and founder of Adjaye Associates, London
Yelda Bayraktar & Porky Hefer, designers and creative advisors in Cape Town
Manuel Herz, architect, researcher and founder of Manuel Herz Architects, Basel, lecturer at ETH Zurich
Pierre-Christophe Gam, art director and curator, London
Odessa Legemah, fashion writer and researcher, Berlin

Dates
Vitra Design Museum: March – September 2015
From fall 2015 to fall 2018 (estimated), the exhibition will be shown in other museums worldwide.

Catalogue
The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with essays by leading experts on current design in Africa, complemented by extensive illustrations.

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Cyrus Kabiru, Spray (C-Stunners painting series), 2013
Vigilism and Ikire Jones, Child Rebel Riot (The untold Renaissance series), 2014
David Adjaye – Buki Akib – Birsel+Seck
Kusznanai Chiurai – Jim Chuchu – Mansour Ciss – Cheick Diallo – Expand
Design – Porky Hefer – I See a Different You – Yinka Ilori – Imiso Ceramics –
Ikire Jones – Cyrus Kabiru – Seydou Keïta – Kéré Architects – Bodys Isek
Cameron Platter – Kabelo Ramasobane Malick Sidibé – Paul Sika – Pierre-
Christophe – Alafuro Sikoki – Studio Number 19 – Studio Riot – Yaw Tony –
Vigilism – Billie Zangewa...