

Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Cheri Samba/MATRIX 117
February 9 - May 17, 1992



Discourse aux affames (Speech to the Hungry), 1991
Photo: Courtesy of Annina Nosel Gallery, New York City.

MATRIX is supported by funds from
Aetna Life & Casualty, the Lannan Foundation,
and by a grant from the National Endowment
for the Arts, a federal agency.

Cheri Samba/MATRIX 117

I don't paint only for Africans. Africa can inspire stories that are also relevant for Europeans.

Cheri Samba, 1989

Cheri Samba was born Samba Wa Mbimba N'Zinga Nurimasi Mbombasi in 1956 in the southern Zaire village of Kinto-M'Vuila. The son of a blacksmith, Samba at age sixteen was apprenticed to a sign painter in the capital city of Kinshasa. Today, the 35-year-old painter still lives and works in Kinshasa, maintaining a successful shop on Avenue Kasa-Vubu, but has grown to be admired internationally as an artist whose work, though deeply rooted in contemporary Zairian culture, speaks to a global audience. Says Samba, "I paint for humanity, I paint for everybody; and if I spoke all the languages in the world I would put them in my paintings."¹

As a *griot*, or storyteller, who paints modern-day morality tales, Samba makes colorful, dynamic, and sophisticated paintings, always framed with a signature white border and occasionally adorned with glitter. They are jam-packed with incidents, actions, and texts, usually in French, French patois, or the artist's native Lingala. The paintings often have an immediate appeal for the viewer, reflecting Samba's early achievements as a commercial sign painter. The focus of Samba's work usually has been his own community. Frequently the sources of his subject matter can be found in articles from local newspapers. *La Rue des Lacs* (*Street of Lakes*, 1990) comes directly from a flurry of editorials on the negligence of street maintenance in Kinshasa. From this Samba spins not only a critique of governmental performance in general, but also an exhortation for citizens to take more personal responsibility for the care of their immediate environment.

The history of art is, in part, the history of cross-cultural transmissions. The impressionists were influenced by Japanese prints, and the cubists were influenced by African sculpture. Samba's style, likewise, reflects many influences of the local vernacular culture which, in turn, derive from graphic forms which came to Zaire (once the Belgian Congo) from the West during colonial rule. These include everything from billboards and movie posters to commercial packaging and comic strips.

Samba and many other artists working in post-colonial environments have practiced an ingenious strategy of cultural survival. They have taken these initially Western idioms (as well as the quintessentially Western convention of paint applied to a stretched, rectangular canvas) and adapted and transformed them

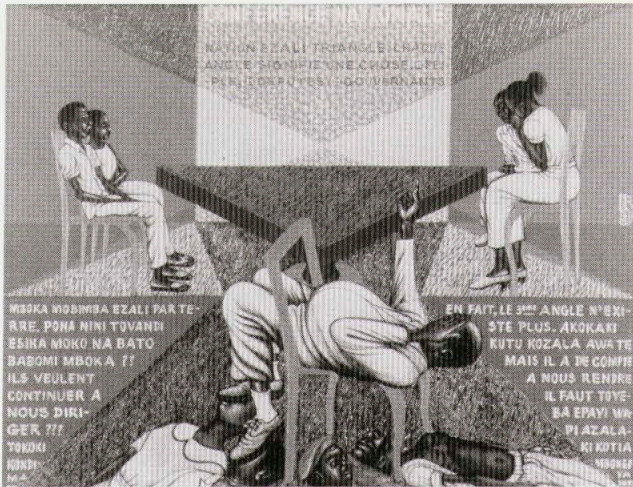
into innovative and vital new expressions. For some of these artists, appropriating such influences is a conscious decision to "cash in on resources of Western mass culture to express their own identity and values."² Their noteworthy results directly challenge the "important prejudice that lies in the denial that African creativity could absorb and digest the colonial shock."³

A member of a group of Zairian artists who call themselves "Popular Painters," Samba proudly considers himself "a people's artist" and chooses language and imagery with particular audiences in mind. Often referred to as a moralist and a teacher, his work has a special resonance for his fellow citizens. *Salongo*, a weekly newspaper in Kinshasa, called Samba "an authentic artist, in touch with the depths of his people's souls, and with their most unpronounceable dreams."⁴ Samba's recent work must also be seen in the context of the political and economic chaos and violence that currently plague Zaire.

In the spirit of a *griot*, Samba is interested in communicating lessons for our time: "I paint with a moral to educate the general public about art and ideas."⁵ He sees his paintings as a teaching tool. "My project is a critical one. I play with humor of course, but the real point is to give a critical portrayal of the way people live. . . . First I try to demonstrate the way not to do things and afterwards, especially in my texts, I show the way I think it should be."⁶ Even in their embrace of local Zairian issues, Samba's paintings usually address issues that concern us all. Through a complex weaving of details that are often specific and colloquial, Samba raises themes that are universally understood, such as conflict between the genders, abuse of power, and exploitation of the poor. His work repeatedly explores the ancient dichotomies of human experience: industry and indolence, honesty and dishonesty, wealth and poverty, youth and age, life and death.

Despite his tenacious commitment to preserving the integrity of his work in the context of Zairian traditions, his subject matter is often provocatively unorthodox and has caused considerable consternation in his own country, where social and political taboos usually discourage open discussion of many critical issues. Samba's paintings focus, sometimes satirically, on such controversial topics as political corruption, AIDS, and promiscuity.

Samba takes the liberty to incorporate, ostensibly by way of illustrating a problem, visual images that are socially prohibited. It is the texts on these paintings that are the corrective element, indicating unambiguously what is amiss in the image and advocating social and political improvement. In *Les Capotes utilisées* (*The Used Condoms*, 1990), for instance, Samba ignores prevailing custom by showing a young girl's thighs and underwear, an image that is shocking by Zairian standards. Here



Conférence nationale (National Conference), 1991

Photo: Courtesy of Annlna Nosel Gallery, New York City.

he raises not only the subject of safe sex in the age of AIDS but also issues of public hygiene. He strengthens his point by introducing the innocence of children into the center of his work. (Ironically, there seems to be little prudence at the Hotel Prudence.) Yet, Samba reclaims the situation with his text, which expresses righteous indignation about a critical public health problem.

Samba readily acknowledges the paradox of his playing both the provocateur and a crusading moralist at the same time. That he finds these two roles compatible (and, in his estimation, necessary) reflects the complexity of Zairian society at this tense moment in its history. While Samba's images often taunt the boundaries of propriety and illustrate controversial situations with explicit detail, it is always his texts that make clear his intentions of social satire and political criticism. The tension he purposely breeds by combining such images and texts seems to be a metaphor for Samba's resistance to the forces of repression and corruption that have dominated Zaire during his lifetime.

His tableaux often include self-portraits. **Condamnation sans jugement** (*Condemned without Trial*, 1990) describes the dilemma he faced when returning from a trip abroad with a little extra money. We see the painter packing his bags and his airborne return flight. Samba portrays himself upon arrival, accosted by "The Flatterers Association" and "The Local Committee of Beggars" whose motto is "SO-PE-KA" (*Buy me, give me, share with me*). Soon he is mugged in his own bed. Tears appear frequently in Samba's work. Here they convey the profound sadness the painter felt when betrayed in his own land.

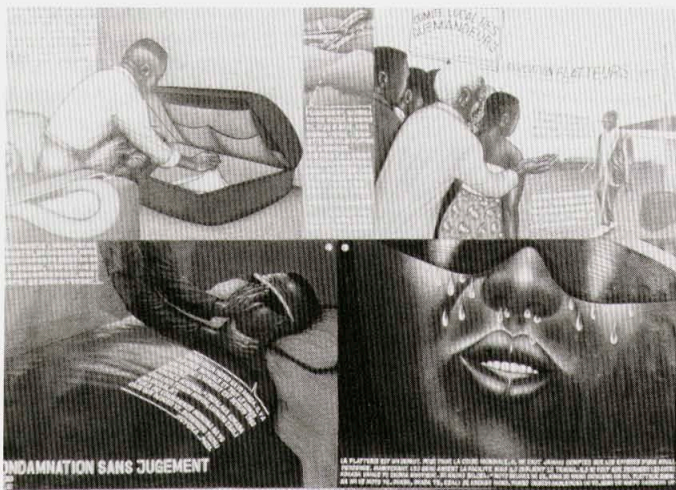
Samba uses written texts in his paintings inventively and exuberantly. They are integral to his artistic sensibility and to his thinking, animating the surfaces and communicating his message. Visually, his texts embellish the compositions with neatly patterned areas and appear in a range of colors selected to indicate different voices and either contrast or blend with the ground on which they are written. Most texts are painted within a rectangular format in Samba's now-familiar and straightforward block letters. He routinely omits all accents. Sometimes he ingeniously uses these blocks of text to shape space. In **Condamnation sans jugement**, the text of Samba's reply to his mugger (in panel #4) gently curves over the artist's blanket-covered body, giving his figure an enhanced volumetric presence. Occasionally, his texts are written in reverse or in mirror-writing to indicate spatial relationships. This occurs, for instance, in **Discourses aux affames** (*Speech to the Hungry*, 1991). Here a politically threatened President Mobutu Sese Seko reads a wily, self-serving proclamation from a scroll. Our view of the text (seen backwards) places us, by implication, on one side of the text and Mobutu on the other. This device cleverly suggests multiple points of view within the painting through deductive logic rather than by visual design.

Discourses aux affames portrays the impossible financial burdens that face average citizens when school tuition (350 F) far exceeds a wage-earner's income (52 F). Citizens are shown weak from hunger. The beauty of the corrugated tin roof (brown from one angle and silver from another) and the exquisitely drawn feet are just a few of the many indications that Samba's strengths as a painter are growing along with the new opportunities coming his way. But Samba is preoccupied with problems outside of his paintings. Desperate poverty continues to crush the spirit in Zaire. In **La Famille Mr. Pauvre** (*The Family of Mr. Poor*, 1991) Samba portrays the almost endless line of tattered, barefoot poor, soliciting help from more fortunate relatives. Illiterate, their requests are written for them by a professional scribe.

Samba has received increasing notice in the West since widespread acclaim greeted his work in the landmark 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth), an international survey of significant contemporary art organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Most recently, his participation in last year's *Africa Explores: African Art in the 20th Century*, currently circulating in the United States, brought him to the attention of museum visitors in this country. Even today, after widespread success, whenever Samba closes his business for trips to Paris or New York, he still hangs a hand-painted sign outside his shop explaining his absence to clients and neighbors.

Broader recognition has had its impact on Samba's work. Following his extended visits to Paris (His first was in 1982 when he was invited to decorate the office walls of the stylish French magazine *Actuel*.) and New York, his subject matter has expanded to include issues of global significance. **Les Années 90** (*The Nineties*, 1990) describes how Western powers readily choose to distribute considerably larger sums of monetary aid to alleviate suffering in Eastern Europe than to Africa. Here the white man stands, attaché case in hand, with his back to Africa and its empty coffers. While living in Paris for several months he painted a few works addressed directly to Parisians. **Paris est propre** (*Paris Is Clean*, 1989) (not in this exhibition) insists that the city owes its cleanliness to the underpaid labor of Africans who clean the city's streets at night. This, he points out caustically, even includes cleaning up after the dogs of the wealthy.

In 1984, an exhibition of Samba's paintings was nearly forbidden by the government because it included controversial material. Sometimes Samba voluntarily withholds certain paintings from public view in Zaire. These are works that he feels will offend his neighbors but are acceptable in the West.



Condamnation sans Jugement (Condemnation without Trial), 1990

Photo: Courtesy of Annina Nosel Gallery, New York City.

Issues surrounding freedom of artistic expression, intensely debated here in the United States in recent years, are more covertly discussed in Zaire. During the past several decades, Zairian artists have been under pressure from Mobutu to make works of art that looked "authentically African." For some artists, Mobutu's official "ideology of authenticity" in Zaire has had a negative impact, similar to the state-imposed restrictions that Soviet artists faced, until recently, to conform to traditions of social realism. In any case, because Zaire's "Popular Painters" come primarily from the world of commercial sign painting and their imagery comes mostly from popular culture, they never have been held in high regard by officialdom. Samba, himself, is additionally suspect for the outspoken social and political criticism that is increasingly central to his work.

It should be acknowledged that there is much in Samba's paintings that remains inaccessible to most of us viewing them here in Hartford, a small New England city more than 7,000 miles from Kinshasa. While we can offer rough translations of the texts, we have only superficial knowledge of the customs, traditions, history, and current events in Zaire that are familiar to Samba's fellow citizens. This means that there is much in these paintings we are missing. Nevertheless, in acknowledging this gap in our understanding we simultaneously recognize the need to respect local cultural identities even as these same cultures come together to address shared global concerns.

Samba's reception in the West has been interesting to watch. Our habits of cultural imperialism might have us greet him as an exotic or ornamental icon. But the self-assured and ambitious Samba resists being interpreted as an ethnic subject. Instead, his work turns the viewer into the object of his gaze. And many Western cultural consumers sense a healthy change in this shift.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art



*Son Eminence, Dessinateur Samba
(Samba, His Eminent
Draughtsman), 1990*

A Postscript:

International cultural exchange means many things, some obvious and others less predictable. In the instance of the Atheneum's small MATRIX exhibition on the work of Zairian artist Cheri Samba several factors have arisen. One is the realization that most of us know very little about the history, culture and politics of Zaire. Some of us do not even know it's geographical location on a map of Africa. The second is that, as we were in the process of organizing the exhibition and as has been reported in the international press, the violence and disorder now prevailing in Zaire has directly interfered with our ability to secure certain paintings for this exhibition. We think this is a strong presentation, but it is a different presentation than might have been, had recent political events in Zaire not taken the course they have.

Since Cheri Samba's work is so directly related to the culture and politics of his country, we have taken the unusual step of including a selection of recent news articles and posting them here in the gallery for those who might welcome easy access to a little background information.

¹ Jaquemin, J.P. and W. Van den Bussche. *Cheri Samba A Retrospective*. Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostend and Institute of Contemporary Arts (London, England), 1991, p. 8.

² Rosen, Miriam. "Cheri Samba, *Griot* of Kinshasa and Paris," *Artforum* (March '90), p. 140.

³ Jewsiewicki, Bogumil. "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self," in *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, edited by Susan Vogel, The Center for African Art, (New York, NY) 1991, p. 139.

⁴ Jewsiewicki. "Painting in Zaire", p.142.

⁵ Rosen. "Cheri Samba," p.138.

⁶ Jaquemin. *Cheri Samba*, p.8.

PLEASE NOTE:

Robert Farris Thompson, Professor of African and Afro-American Art History at Yale University, will give a MATRIX Lecture on *Cheri Samba: Afro-Atlantic Satirist Extraordinaire* on Sunday, March 29, 1992 at 2:00 p.m. Attendance is free with museum admission.

Special thanks to Will Wilkins, Director of Real Art Ways, Hartford for help in selecting the taped music heard in the gallery. It features the sounds of Franco and Rochereau, two of Cheri Samba's favorite Zairian performers. (Franco, an internationally admired artist, died of AIDS several years ago.) Samba often listens to such music while painting. The music features Tabu Ley Seigneur Rochereau and Afrisa International Orchestra on *Babeti Soukous* (RealWorld Records, Ltd., Virgin Records) and Franco Et le T.P.O.K. Jazz en Colère on *On Entre O.K. On Sort O.K.* (Makossa, Makossa International Records, Inc.).

Works in MATRIX:

Les Amis de cemonde (*Friends of this World*), 1989, acrylic on canvas, 42 1/2" x 55". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Robbins, New York City.

La Fidelité (*Fidelity*), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 43" x 57". Lent by Annina Nosei, New York City.

La Rue des Lacs (*Street of Lakes*), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 44" x 60". Collection of Martin Sklar, New York City.

Les Années 90 (*The Nineties*), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 59" x 77". Lent by Annina Nosei Gallery, New York City.

Les Capotes utilisées (*The Used Condoms*), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 59" x 78". Lent by Annina Nosei, New York City.

Condamnation sans jugement (*Condemned without Trial*), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 59" x 78". Collection of Evan Tawil, New York City.

Conférence nationale (*National Conference*), 1991, acrylic on canvas, 26" x 32". Collection of Freda and Nathan Neuwirth, Wayne, New Jersey.

Discours aux affames (*Speech to the Hungry*), 1991, acrylic on canvas, 55" x 77". Lent by Annina Nosei Gallery, New York City.

La Famille Mr. Pauvre (*The Family of Mr. Poor*), 1991, acrylic on canvas, 26" x 32". Lent by Annina Nosei Gallery, New York City.

Pouvoir et opposition (*Power and Opposition*), 1991, acrylic on canvas, 20" x 30". Lent by Annina Nosei Gallery, New York City.

Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

Galerie Jean-Marc Patras, Paris, France '89, '90; Annina Nosei Gallery, NYC '90, '91; Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostend, Belgium '91; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL '91; Miro Foundation, Barcelona, Spain '91; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England '91; Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany '91.



Les Capotes utilisées (The Used Condoms), 1990

Photo: Courtesy of Annlna Nosel Gallery, New York City.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Academie des Beaux-Arts, C.I.A.F., Kinshasa, Zaire *Art Partout* '78, '81; Berlin *Horizon* '79; Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France *Visages et racines du Zaire, Sura DJI* '82; Espace City 2, C.E.C., Brussels, Belgium *Zaire: Art Populaire* '84; Kulturhuset, Stockholm, Sweden *Folkkonst fran Zaire* '84; Centre Internationale des Civilisations Bantu, Libreville, Gabon *Biennale of Contemporary Bantu Art* '85; University of Montreal, Canada *Popular Painters of Zaire: The Living Art of Central Africa* '85; Festival d'Avignon, France *Arts Africains: Peintures Populaires du Zaire* '86; Maison de la Culture de Sud-Luxembourg, Arlon *Peintres Populaires du Zaire* '88; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris *Magiciens de la Terre* '89; Rooseum-Center for Contemporary Art, Malmo, Sweden *Transmission* '91; Atlantic Center of Modern Art, Las Palmas, Canary Islands *Displacements* '91; The Center for African Art and The New Museum of Contemporary Art NYC *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* '91; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA *Devil on the Stairs* '91.

Selected Bibliography about Cheri Samba:

Ayerza, Josefina. "Chéri Samba," *Lacanian Ink*, Fall '90, p. 72+
 Martin, Jean-Hubert et al. *Magiciens de la Terre*. Musée National
 d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou
 (Paris, France), 1989.

Rosen, Miriam. "Chéri Samba, *Griot* of Kinshasa and Paris,"
Artforum vol. 28 no. 7 (March '90), p. 137+.

Brenson, Michael. "Chéri Samba, Annina Nosei Gallery," *The
 New York Times* April 27, 1990, p. C29.

Levin, Kim. "Morality Tales," *The Village Voice* May 1,
 1990, p. 111+.

"Art," *The New Yorker* May 7, 1990, p. 12.

Mahoney, Robert. "Chéri Samba," *Arts Magazine* vol. 65
 no.1 (September '90) p. 100.

Avgikos, Jan. "Chéri Samba, Images That Color the Whole
 Ethnic Question," *Flash Art* vol. 23 no. 154 (October '90), p. 150.

Jacquemin, J.P. and W. Van den Bussche. *Chéri Samba A
 Retrospective*. Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostend
 and Institute of Contemporary Arts (London, England), 1991
 (published previously in French, 1990).

Spiegelman, Art and Françoise Mouly. "Memories of an
 African," *RAW: High Culture for Lowbrows*. Penguin Books (New
 York, NY), 1991, p. 12+.

Vogel, Susan et al. *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*.
 The Center for African Art (New York, NY), 1991.

Nittve, Lars. "From 'Implosion' to 'Trans/Mission'," *Kunst &
 Museumjournaal* vol. 3 no. 1 ('91), p. 3.

Guenther, Bruce. *Options 40: Chéri Samba*, (exhibition
 brochure), Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, IL), 1991.

Vidali, G.G. and R.. "Chéri Samba" *Juliet Art Magazine* no.
 51 (February-March '91), p. 44+.

Tarantino, Michael. "Chéri Samba," *Artscribe* no. 87 (Summer
 '91), p. 80.

Thompson, Robert Farris. "Afro-Modernism," *Artforum* vol.
 30 no. 1 (September '91), p. 91+.

Levin, Kim. "Best Bet, Chéri Samba," *The Village Voice*
 November 26, 1991, p. 79.