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communication and  
digital department

director  
**Agnès Benayer**  
telephone  
**+33 1 44 78 12 87**  
email  
**agnes.benayer@centrepompidou.fr**

presse officer  
**Dorothee Mireux**  
telephone  
**+33 1 44 78 46 60**  
email  
**dorothee.mireux@centrepompidou.fr**

assisted by  
**Camila Melo**  
telephone  
**00 33 (0)1 44 78 12 49**  
email  
**camila.melo@centrepompidou.fr**

**www.centrepompidou.fr**

Ernest Mancoba  
Portrait 1994  
courtesy Galerie Mikael Andersen  
© Bertel Bjerre

## PRESS RELEASE ERNEST MANCOBA I SHALL DANCE IN A DIFFERENT SOCIETY

**26 JUNE – 23 SEPTEMBER 2019**

**GALERIE 0, LEVEL 4**

The Centre Pompidou continues to shed light on non-Western artists too little known of the general public. After Russian avant-gardes, Polish artists Katarzyna Kobro and Wladyslaw Strzeminski and Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, South-African artist Ernest Mancoba and Danish artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, exiled in Paris for most of their lives, are to be exhibited in Galerie 0 and the Galerie d'art graphique from June 26th to September 23rd 2019.

Married in Paris where they later shared a tiny studio, Ernest Mancoba and Sonja Ferlov Mancoba will be honored by the Centre Pompidou in two different spaces, in order to pay tribute to the breadth of their distinct yet shared practice and life, spent "hand in hand". The exhibition dedicated to Ernest Mancoba is unprecedented, opening up considerable thinking on a landmark figure in the debates on racial marginality and erasure, and more broadly in discourses reframing modernity. It is a unique opportunity for the Centre Pompidou to present a major career that has remained absent from previous exhibitions on these issues in France ("Magiciens de la terre," "Africa Remix"). The museum here boldly asserts its will to highlight non-Western retrospectives and to retrace the historical depth of certain geographic areas.

Ernest Mancoba (1904 – 2002) was a French-South-African artist, writer and thinker whose life spanned the whole of the 20th century. A painter, sculptor and draftsman, he is a fascinating and ungraspable figure. After fleeing Apartheid in South Africa, which prohibited him from pursuing a career as an artist, Ernest Mancoba arrived in France in 1938. In 1940, he was sent to a German labour camp due to his British citizenship. During World War II he married Sonja Ferlov, a Danish colleague whom he met at the Decorative Arts school. After the war, the couple left for Denmark for five years where they joined the CoBrA movement through their friend Asger Jorn. CoBrA combined all of Mancoba's deepest interests since his early years in South Africa: the importance of soliciting the subconscious, the need to "go down down" to society's spiritual roots, and the struggle to make art universal and not just Pan-Nordic. Mancoba did not remain long with the group, however: his carefully constructed abstraction was disputed, and underlying racism relegated him to the status of an invisible man or "black dot" of the movement.

Returning to France, Mancoba and Ferlov opted for a life of solitude, a choice which proved definitive, and moved to Oigny-en-Valois. They infused their artistic practice with political and ethical activism which they hoped to share around them, without ever succeeding. In the early 1960s the couple found a home near Montparnasse where they spent the rest of their lives. A store on the street served as their studio, which was divided in two with a sheet. There, their artistic practices complemented one another and developed mutually. The 1970s witnessed the only exhibitions dedicated to Mancoba during his lifetime in Europe: in Denmark in 1969, at the Aarhus Kunstmuseum and the Holstebro Kunstmuseum and, in 1977, at the Københavns Kunstforening in Copenhagen, the Fyns Stifts Kunstmuseum in Odense and the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum.

After the death of Ferlov (December 17, 1984), the 1980s represented a period of mourning from which emerged in Mancoba's oeuvre an ultimate language that attempted to translate what the artist called "the unspeakable".

In 1983 Elza Miles, a South-African academic, discovered her compatriot's work in the "CoBrA" exhibition held at the City of Paris Musée National d'Art Moderne and attempted to meet him. In 1994, she published the only monograph written about the artist, *Lifeline Out of Africa, the Art of Ernest Mancoba*, and organized a homecoming exhibition in Johannesburg and Cape Town just after the end of Apartheid. In 1999/2001, Okwui Enwezor included Mancoba in the visionary exhibition *The Short Century, Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*. Hans-Ulrich Obrist tracked him down in Paris to lead an interview that was first published in 2003 in *Nka*, journal of contemporary African art, and which has since become famous. It was republished many times, inaugurating a series of major articles on the role of the artist's within modernity in general.

Beyond his long-debated involvement in Cobra, the exhibition is envisioned as a tool to trace back the visual trajectory of the artist as well as his triangular life between South Africa, France and Denmark. The project tries to grasp in a thematic way this century-long journey, parallel to both history and art history, made of discontinuity and erasure. It aims at making space for a spiritual experiment, stressing Mancoba's search for "something lost" through landmarks works (around 50) oscillating between the material and the immaterial, figuration and abstraction. The diversity of his practice, from sculpture to drawing, from line to color, as well as the shamanic continuity of his quest not only artistic but also humanistic and universal will actively shape up the exhibition space.

The show dives into the tension between the intellectual contribution of an artist and writer who shortly hoped to become a journalist, and the parallel implementation of a secret and poetic mode of expression in his work. The project thus operates through the notion of "in-betweenness". The opening room, only filled with Mancoba's voice, proceeds as a threshold translating the "shadow world" he was long confined to, but which he also strived to "activate". A side space is dedicated to his studio/life, hinting at his continuous struggle with space limitations. Archives as well as historical timelines contextualize his life and his slow coming back from oblivion.

The exhibition is divided into thematic entry points focusing on specific moments, as well as caught in an ongoing "dance". "Paint as you feel", digging into's Mancoba's expressive and inner relationship to color, will therefore look at the artist's involvement in Cobra and beyond. "Spirit over matter" will enhance Mancoba's longing for spiritual values that would resist the Western modernist canon, owing to the spiritual responsibility of the artist in Africa and to Mancoba's "Duchampian" fight against the Academy. Starting from his radical ink drawings from the 1960's, another chapter will stress his endeavor to define "Art as survival" and therefore revive society "to the bone". The centre of the exhibition will be dedicated to Mancoba's quest for the human essence through the recurrent matrix of the central figure which inhabited most of his paintings from the 1950's to the 1980's. Mancoba's open-ended quest for an expanded notion of unity will radiate from this centrifugal force, slowly leading the viewer to the ultimate composition of a language based on "reminiscences" echoed in the last room, contemplated as a "memory chamber".

All chapters are however contemplated as motifs belonging to a unified dance. In 1938, when Mancoba arrived in Paris from Cape Town via London, he decided to learn how to dance and bought a manual to practise in his room near Montparnasse. One evening, a friend took him to the Bal Nègre and invited him to go dancing. He replied, convinced : "I shall dance in another society". However, in the Elza Miles book dedicated to the artist, Mancoba evokes dance as the ultimate level of communication. A nod to the rhythmic dance undoubtedly at work in the artist's practice, where the pivotal figure is constantly turning round and round. It is this unresolved tension between historic oppression and humanistic and poetic resistance, between the impossible life and the liberated work of Ernest Mancoba, that the exhibition chooses to address.

A system of contemporary echoes spreads throughout the exhibition. The work of Kemang Wa Lehulere, whose practice has profoundly been infused by the work and engagement of Mancoba, stresses the active role played by erasure and loss radiating from the artist's work. Myriam Mihindou and Chloé Quenum engage further with Mancoba's longing for spiritual unity and for the "unspeakable".

The exhibition is therefore meant to operate as a soundbox allowing different voices: personal archives and writings will be activated (Euridice Kala, Kitso Lelliott, Mo Laudi), while lectures and discussions will also address the complexity of Mancoba's intellectual and artistic journey.

All those experiments will try to communicate with his long- forgotten struggle and unparalleled understanding of art as a tool to « meet man » and reconcile humanity. The research carried out for this exhibition led to revelation of substantial archive material to be gathered in a monographic publication for the fall of 2019.

*"Some people have asked why I did not produce more works during my life that I have. One may well suppose it is due to difficult material conditions or certain natural un-dispositions in me; but the fundamental reason is that I only paint or carve, when a spirit calls on me [...] So because of its lack of material weight, my expression has remained for a long time out of the attention of art-critics and historians, and is mostly absent from the so-called art market. I do not regret that. Because my hope has always been to convey the vision or evocation, as discretely as I could, with the least material means possible. My belief is that once the idea is there, whether the message is heard or not, will never depend upon the intensity of the voice, but on the inner pertinence, the intrinsic coherence and the human urgency of what is said".*

EM interviewed by Obrist.

*« I want to sum up and put in a nutshell the program of our spiritual responsibility as artists. As artists we have followed the national academies, and each is national, and the point of this is political. Each country follows the method by which each country will survive and these countries have never been united. England, Denmark, France. Each country has its different ways of looking. They agreed that in the Occident they constitute the whole of humanity, each other country, the rest of the world are trying in vain to become like Europe. In my memoirs I am trying to show my struggle to get the rest of the third world included in part of all humanity. The third world has to be taken into consideration as it exists. I want that this separation this apartheid has to be pushed aside and that all human species have to hang together hand in hand that's all »*

Ernest Mancoba.

# PRESS VISUALS



01. *Bantu Madonna*  
1929  
Yellow wooden carving  
86 x 22 x 17 cm  
Johannesburg Art Gallery  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



02. *Mater Christi*  
1934  
Wooden carving  
38 cm de hauteur  
Norval Foundation, Cape Town  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



03. *Composition*  
1940  
Oil on canvas  
59 x 50 cm  
A4 Foundation, Cape Town  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



04. *Painting*  
1951  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 49.5 cm  
Collection privée, Cape Town  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



06. *Untitled*  
1959  
Oil on canvas  
51 x 41 cm  
Johannesburg Art Gallery  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



07. *Untitled*  
undated  
Ink and watercolour on paper,  
46,29,3 cm  
Collection Mikael Andersen  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



08. *Untitled*,  
undated  
Ink and oil pastels on paper,  
50 x 32,5 cm  
Collection Mikael Andersen  
© Courtesy of the Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



10. Kemang WA LEHULERE  
*Does this mirror have a memory (Ernest Mancoba)*  
2018  
Printing of a work by Ernest Mancoba  
(1986, 61 x 45 cm), bois, plumes, vêtements

# PRACTICAL INFORMATION

## THE EXHIBITION

### CURATOR

**Alicia Knock**, curator, contemporary creations and prospectives service, Musée national d'art moderne

Production manager: **Bruno Veret**

## ADMISSION AND PRICES

**Centre Pompidou, 75191 Paris cedex 04**

+ 33 1 44 78 12 33

**Access:** metro Hôtel de Ville and Rambuteau, RER Châtelet-Les-Halles.

**Opening times:** every day from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., except Tuesdays and May 1<sup>st</sup>.

**Admission:** €14, reduced price €11

Free for those under 18. Young people under 26\*, teachers and students at schools of art, drama, dance and music and members of the Maison des artistes may visit the Museum for free and buy tickets for exhibitions at the concessionary rate.

Free admission for Centre Pompidou members.

**Home printable tickets:** [centrepompidou.fr](http://centrepompidou.fr)

\* Nationals of Member States of the EU or the European Economic Area aged 18–25.

Valid the same day for the Musée National d'Art Moderne and all exhibitions.

## PRESS CONTACTS

Press officers:

### **Dorothee Mireux**

+ 33 1 44 78 46 60

[dorothee.mireux@centrepompidou.fr](mailto:dorothee.mireux@centrepompidou.fr)

### **Timothée Nicot**

+ 33 1 44 78 45 79

[timothee.nicot@centrepompidou.fr](mailto:timothee.nicot@centrepompidou.fr)

### **Marine Prévot**

+ 33 1 44 78 48 56

[marine.prevot@centrepompidou.fr](mailto:marine.prevot@centrepompidou.fr)

[presse@centrepompidou.fr](mailto:presse@centrepompidou.fr)

for cross-departmental requests

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27 MARCH – 5 AUGUST 2019

GALERIE DE PHOTOGRAPHIES,  
LEVEL -1

#### **PREHISTORIC TIMES.**

##### **A MODERN ENIGMA**

6 MAY - 16 SEPTEMBER 2019

GALERIE 1, LEVEL 6

#### **DORA MAAR**

5 JUNE – 29 JULY 2019

GALERIE 2, LEVEL 6

#### **BERNARD FRIZE**

29 JUNE – 26 AUGUST 2019

GALERIE 3, LEVEL 1

#### **CAO FEI**

5 JUNE - 26 AUGUST 2019

GALERIE 4, LEVEL 1

#### **SONJA FERLOV MANCOBA**

26 JUNE - 23 SEPTEMBER 2019

GALERIE D'ART GRAPHIQUE, LEVEL 4

#### **TAKESADA MATSUTANI**

26 JUNE - 23 SEPTEMBER 2019

GALERIE DU MUSÉE, LEVEL 4

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#### **THE ADVENTURE OF COLOUR**

MAJOR ARTWORKS

FROM THE COLLECTION

UNTIL 22 JULY 2019

GRANDE NEF

### LEE UFAN

#### **INHABITING TIME**

27 FEBRUARY – 30 SEPTEMBER 2019

GALERIE 1

### **REBECCA HORN**

#### **THEATER OF METAMORPHOSES**

6 JUNE - 11 NOVEMBER 2019

GALERIE 2

### **OPERA WORLD**

22 JUNE 2019 - 27 JANUARY 2020

GALERIE 3

contact

Pénélope Ponchelet

+ 33 1 42 72 60 01

[penelope@claudinecolin.com](mailto:penelope@claudinecolin.com)

[centrepompidou-metz.fr](http://centrepompidou-metz.fr)

### IN MALAGA

### **HENRI MATISSE**

UNTIL 9 JUNE 2019

contact

[presse@centrepompidou.fr](mailto:presse@centrepompidou.fr)

[centrepompidou-malaga.eu](http://centrepompidou-malaga.eu)

### IN BRUSSELS

### **KANAL-CENTRE POMPIDOU**

**A YEAR OF PREFIGURATION**

UNTIL 10 JUNE 2019

contact

[presse@centrepompidou.fr](mailto:presse@centrepompidou.fr)

[kanal.brussels](http://kanal.brussels)

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