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On: 02 December 2014, At: 12:48

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:  
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## Third Text

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctte20>

## Reviews

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Published online: 10 Feb 2009.

To cite this article: Anthony Downey , Christine Eyene , Amna Malik , Lize van Robbroeck , Theresa Avila & Alyssa Grossman (2008) Reviews, Third Text, 22:6, 787-803, DOI: [10.1080/09528820802652573](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820802652573)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820802652573>

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## Reviews

# What Was Lost Manifesta 7 and the Soul of Modernity

Anthony Downey

Following on from the faddishness surrounding the critical uses and abuses of the term ‘postmodern’ in the 1980s and 1990s, a singular and somewhat disconcerting question came to light, one less involved with the apparent ‘post’ of modernity as it was with finding out whether we were indeed modern or, perhaps more gnominically, whether we were even premodern. A significant part of this project found purchase by enquiring into that which modernity had elided along the way, namely, the disavowed alter-modernities that consistently threatened to usurp any univocal global claim to postmodernity. It was with these and other issues in mind that Manifesta 7, with a firm eye on the so-called ‘residues’ of modernity, set out its latest curatorial stall. Taking place over four different locations, all in the shadow of the South Tyrol Dolomites in Northern Italy, and employing three curatorial teams (made up, in turn, of six curators), Manifesta 7 included over 200 artists and collaborators, not to mention 100 off-site projects. It was, in fine, ambitious. Travelling north to south, the first venue on the itinerary was Fortezza, an impressive fort which is also known locally as Franzensfeste, the latter being its original Austrian name. Since its completion in 1838, the only forces to have breached its defences are a road, two railway lines and a motorway. There is certainly a moral to be had in this tale and the curators, all three groups in this instance, set out to exploit it: a fort that had never been overrun subsequently becoming a white elephant of sorts and eventually a venue for an international exhibition of contemporary art – that had to be worth a curatorial gambit or two. However, and despite the size and the uniqueness of the location and its legacy, this

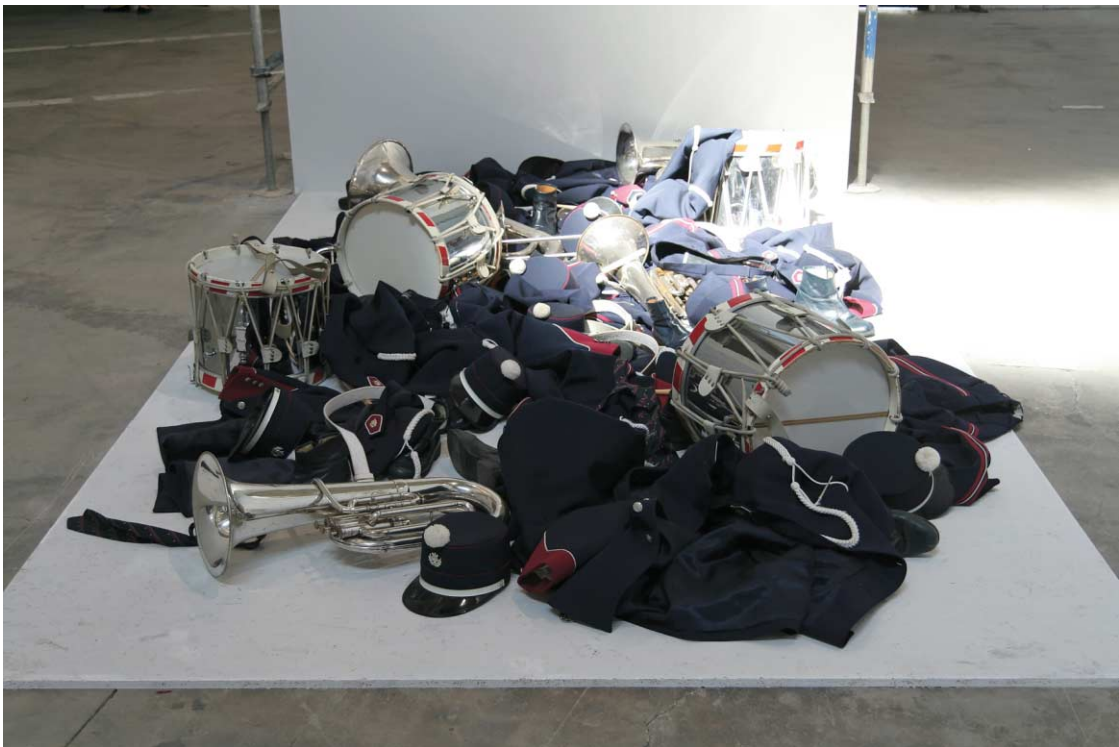
section of Manifesta, entitled ‘Scenarios’, was the least interesting, and not only because there was so little to actually see.

Opting to install sound installations throughout the building, in both the cavernous vaults and along the ramparts of the fort, the collective curators of Manifesta 7 – Adam Budak, Anselm Franke, Hila Peleg, Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta) – solicited texts from ten writers, including the novelist Arundhati Roy and artist Renée Green. These texts were in turn translated into English, Italian and German and replayed throughout the building in specially constructed sound stations. The fact that most of the respondents to this remit ruminated upon the notion of a fort, in its functional, theoretical, metaphorical and architectural embodiments, merely gave rise to a considerable and perhaps unsurprising amount of repetition in the final texts. A fort is built, attacked or not, overrun or not and eventually becomes a symbol of insularity, hubris or defeat. And that can be employed as a metaphor for any aspect of the economic, cultural, historical, social and philosophical order that you care to enlist. To the curator’s credit, they did acknowledge that the building itself was the focus of much that was going on and to put material objects in it would have detracted from building and work alike. This could indeed be true; however, on the basis of this showing I am not so sure. The ‘accent on immateriality’, moreover, merely left me wanting something to engage with.

In Bolzano/Bozen, further south, we had the second instalment of the show. What becomes clear after a very short time in this region, which is ostensibly Italian, is that most place names have counterparts in the Austro-Hungarian lexicon. This is still, despite national boundaries, Mitteleuropa and its significance had an undeniable influence on the curators. The venue for the show, for one, was a former aluminium processing plant, the Alumix factory, built as part of a broader plan by Mussolini to rid the area of its German-speaking peoples and replace them with Italians – in effect, a form of economic ethnic-cleansing. Again, Alumix was as impressive as Fortezza, albeit for very different reasons. As a model of Italian rationalism, it is highly reminiscent of the

Bauhaus style and much was made of both the venue's architecture and function in a show entitled 'The Rest of Now', including the sense that we need a spectral archaeology of sorts that unearths not so much what happened in the last century but that which didn't quite happen. Curated by the Raqs Media Collective, 'The Rest of Now' sought to address the sense of desuetude and disuse that pervaded the building and the legacy of modernism; in particular, the bacillus of utopian musings on speed and progress – the latter personified by the Italian artist, ideologue and poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Opting for an examination of the 'residue that lies at the heart of contemporaneity', and deploying the Alumix factory as a 'repository of the residual', there were many works here that both answered to the curatorial remit and yet generated their own individual areas of discourse and interest, including but not limited to Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska's *Post-Production*, 2008, which presented films made by amateur film clubs in Poland during the Socialist period. These films were quirky and stylistically adventurous, and screened in a stand-alone movie theatre of their own were all the more engaging for it. Elsewhere, Latifa Echakhch's elegiac *Sans Titre, Fanfare*, 2008, presented the dusty uniforms of a marching band complete with aban-

doned instruments. Once a mainstay of villages and towns, the fanfare brings to mind obsolete forms of community-based activities and the hubris associated with military marching bands. In *Moon Calendar*, 2007, Hiwa K tap-danced to his own heartbeat, relayed to him via a stethoscope, in various locations including one of Saddam Hussein's former security buildings in Iraq. Recursive and bound to fail, this performance had its own internal logic: in tap-dancing to one's own heart-beat, it is inevitable that the dancer will lose control of his feet as his heart rate increases. In a room slightly removed from the main space, a work by the inestimable Teresa Margolles left a literal residue in the form of water from a humidifier that encircled the room. Apart from the barely audible sound of the makeshift humidifier and its valves, the only other evidence of a work in this room was the puddles of water coagulating on the floor. As with all of Margolles's works, this is a deceptively simple interjection into a building or space until, that is, we read the accompanying text and realise that the room has been humidified with water brought from a morgue where it had been used previously to wash the bodies of unidentified corpses prior to autopsy; the very same water, moreover, that now feels moist against the viewers' skin as they look over what appears to be an empty room.



Latifa Echakhch, *Sans titre, fanfare*, 2008. Courtesy of Manifesta 7. Photos © Wolfgang Träger.



Stefano Graziani, *The Museum for Franco Basaglia*, 2008. Photos © Wolfgang Träger.

The subject of death, and what happens to our 'soul', or our innermost being, formed a bridge of sorts into the third section of Manifesta 7 which took place in the former Palazzo delle Poste in Trento. Curated by Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg, 'The Soul (or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls)', a phrase taken from a drawing by Sergei Eisenstein, reflected on Manifesta's founding moment: the fall of the Iron Curtain and the ensuing expansion of the European project. However, it did so with one eye firmly upon how power is socially mediated and its impact upon the interior being, or 'soul', of the individual. To talk of the 'soul' may seem deeply unfashionable to some, but it is worth recalling that the Council of Trent, held in this city between 1545 and 1563 (and widely considered to be one of the events that was later to define modernity as such), had precisely the salvation of the soul at its ecumenical heart. For the curators, moreover, the point was to examine how the aesthetic dimension provides something of a contested bridge between the psyche and the objective structures of a society. This may appear abstract but was amply borne out throughout this impressive exhibition, most notably in a series of self-styled 'museum' spaces within the exhibition itself. Amongst these were 'The Museum for Franco Basaglia', 2008, curated by the photographer Stefano Graziani. Basaglia was an Italian psychiatrist who

was the promoter of Law 180 (1978) which effectively initiated the abolition of mental health establishments in Italy. Having widely studied phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger, and having read Foucault's work on prisons and asylums, Basaglia announced the closure of an asylum in Trieste and the inauguration of a new therapeutic model that would allow people with psychiatric and mental health issues to engage with the social order as opposed to being ostracised within it. If we consider the curator's focus on the psyche here, Basaglia's work, the precursor to so-called 'care in the community', raises important issues in relation to both the objective structures of society and the subjectivising of the modern subject; or, to gloss Foucault, how the modern subject becomes the object of information but never the subject of communication. Likewise, 'The Museum of Projective Personality Testing', curated by Sina Najafi and Christopher Turner, examined standardised personality tests and their purposes: to access, that is, a patient's innermost motives and impetuses, which could, in historical terms, be a search for the very soul or 'truth' of the individual.

In Rovereto we reached the final destination which turned out, confusingly, to be in two venues, one in the regal-looking Manifattura Tabacchi and the other in a smaller building called Ex Peterlini, a former cocoa factory. After two shows that looked at

our immediate past, its elisions and consequences, 'Principle Hope', curated by Adam Budak, looked towards the future and, paraphrasing Ernst Bloch, a 'being yet-to-come'. Again, there was much of interest here, including Deborah Ligorio's video *The Submerged Town*, 2008, which focused on a town that was flooded when two lakes were conjoined. In Ligorio's work, a lone bell tower protrudes incongruously from a lake, a symbol of submerged hope perhaps. This archaeological elegy found something of a counterpoint in Runa Islam's *The House Belongs to those who Inhabit it*, 2008. Taking its inspiration and title from graffiti found on the former Peterlini building, an anarchist slogan ruing the attitude of local politics to the heritage of post-industrial architecture, Islam's film speaks of both the exigencies of the past and yet a degree of misplaced hopefulness. As a metaphor, finally, graffiti could go some way to explaining the project that was Manifesta 7. From the Italian for 'little scratches', graffiti is a form of both inscription and defacement. It is a vernacular history of sorts and all the more idiosyncratic for it. It also makes manifest another message, one that is not necessarily the accepted version of events; a message that lies beneath the surface of the everyday and gives voice to those voices, be they moderate or extremist, that are, sometimes for good reason, silenced. I could not help but notice, for example, some graffiti as I left Ex Peterlini. It announced that Il Duce, the eponymous Mussolini, was far from dead and long overdue a return, or words to that effect. Over these words, in a form of visual and textual (if not historical) contestation, someone else had scribbled a rebuke to such sentiments. Interpretations of history, as always, are a perilous affair and it is often to the repressed of our modern-day fixations that we look as a starting point for these revisions – precisely the point, it would appear, that was amply and ably made throughout Manifesta 7.

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## Dak'Art 2008 Africa's Mirror or Distorted Reflection?

Christine Eyene

'Artists are the best curators!' This assertion, made by an Inspire Fellow on a Venetian stopover during

his Grand Tour, seems presumptuous.<sup>1</sup> Some have argued that artists should only be creating art. Others have observed the opportunism of artists/selectors 'who have a particularly distasteful habit of including themselves in their own exhibitions'.<sup>2</sup> It is an old debate<sup>3</sup> but, whatever one's position, one has to acknowledge that artists should play a central role in what remains the longest established event of contemporary visual arts in sub-Saharan Africa: the Dakar Biennale. A failure to do this lay at the heart of the major flaws in its most recent incarnation.

In a way, to review Dak'Art entails a degree of redundancy in that any biennale contains its share of shortcomings: one expects last-minute installations, technical issues with video material, handwritten labels, missing artworks, etc. However, putting to one side the unsurprisingly disorganised setting, one is compelled to find other levels of appraisal of this event, because Dak'Art remains a coveted platform for emerging artists seeking international exposure. It also serves to reinstate the status of established practitioners. Begging the question of its importance and relevance to the Senegalese, African and international art scenes, what makes it worth the attention of the international art community? How has it managed to last for sixteen years despite its obvious lack of professionalism and funding uncertainties?

The mirror is an interesting prism through which to look at Dak'Art 2008. The official theme of the biennale, 'Africa: Mirror?', whether approached literally or metaphorically, is the reflection of a process that determines the mapping of Africa on the international art scene. The mirror as a theme seems to have emerged from the proposals sent in by artists. In November 2007, just six months from the opening, a call for participation was launched by the biennale office. The application pack gave no indication of a curator, which signalled a huge leap back to the days when the organisers had not measured the key importance of artistic direction or curatorship. Neither was there a thematic frame on which artists could base their proposal and those who were fortunate enough to access this information had less than two months to act.

The outcome was disclosed in March. In the meantime, the secrecy of the biennale administration over the programme and, dare I say, their disdain for non-partner press and art professionals, gave grounds for questioning the biennale's pan-African claims and its representativity (or mirroring) of the African and Diaspora art community.

Representation was also an issue in the international exhibition. With only thirty-two African artists from thirteen countries (compared with more than eighty in 2006), out of a continent that encompasses fifty-four countries, the selection was nowhere near Dak'Art's representational target.<sup>4</sup>



But one should not jump to conclusions too soon; as the old saying goes: less is more! A reduced line-up of artists might have helped the organisers make a sharp selection and enabled them to create a focused display, with a strong emphasis on the chosen theme. Unfortunately, the formulation of the latter, in the catalogue, was in itself the indication of an ill-advised curatorial decision.

The news of the appointment of Maguèye Kassé, Lecturer in German Literature at Cheikh Anta Diop University (Dakar), as curator of Dak'Art 2008, came as a surprise. In his essay entitled 'Africa and the metaphor of the mirror', Kassé tried his hand at defining the purpose of 'contemporary African art' in terms that raised a number of problems.

His assertion, at the beginning of the text, that art is 'a product designed to address... the needs that societies identify'<sup>5</sup> and is necessarily conceived to 'engage with an audience',<sup>6</sup> denied artists ownership of the creative act and their licence to subjectivity. He then coalesced the recognition of the contemporary status of African art with the process of decolonisation without delving into the complex and contentious histories around the dissemination of African art, notably in the West. Nor did he look into the intricacies of the art market. There was no attempt to deconstruct the notion of 'contemporary African art'; rather it was conceived as something homogeneous which he argued was in need of being 'open[ed] up further by asserting a certain specificity [that makes] its identity'.<sup>7</sup> Whatever this specificity and identity, clarification might be needed.<sup>8</sup> Finally, his advocacy of Senghorian universalism<sup>9</sup> is problematic because it does not acknowledge criticism raised by African thinkers such as South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile and Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka.

What I aim to point out is not so much the fact that the 'curator' had no background in visual arts, even though the lack of art historical knowledge displayed in his essay discredits him in this role. Most art historians and critics acknowledge the benefits of interdisciplinary perspectives. As art historian Ernst Gombrich once suggested, 'all the social sciences from economics to psychology should be ready to serve as handmaidens of Art History',<sup>10</sup> and indeed Kassé's interpretation of the symbolical meanings of the mirror is enlightened by his use of psychoanalytic theories. He quotes Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage',<sup>11</sup> for example, as a means of denoting the consciousness of the image of the self, the formation of identity, the process of identification, the illusory nature of the specular image, etc. Sigmund Freud, Robert Musil and J W von Goethe's writings complement his thoughts. However, the problem arises when discourses over art are superseded by another discipline altogether, to the extent that the mirror as medium, a tool in the process of

image-making and the basis of *mimesis* in the visual arts, is completely overlooked.

The metaphor of the mirror has been extensively explored in Western art theories, but it also finds numerous resonances in African and Diaspora aesthetics. It would not be superfluous to highlight the fact that Egypt was one of the first civilisations to make use of the mirror.<sup>12</sup> Its representation in Egyptian iconography, its association with female beauty, the ornamentation of the eye, the mythical eye of Horus, and the various notions of the implied gaze are important African references. Likewise, the idea of the mirror-image, of doubles, twins, reminds us of the Dogon (Mali) myth of the creation of the world. In Nsiki (Congo) traditional sculptures, a fragment of a mirror is used to highlight the eyes or to block ventral cavities containing sacred medicines. Closer to our time, the Greek myth of Narcissus understood through Freud's theories can help us examine portraiture, the self-portrait, the mask and performativity in the work of African and Diaspora artists. Self-representation has been a key theme in African photography; consider for example Moataz Nasr's prize-winning video *The Water* (Dak'Art 2002) featuring the natural mirror; or Yinka Shonibare's *Odile and Odette* (2005) that materialises a subjective mirror conveyed by the 'inverted image' of two ballet dancers performing face to face. These are just two iconographical metaphors among many inscribed in the history of contemporary African art practice.

'Africa: mirror?' made no case for the mirror in African art either in the editorial focus of the catalogue or as a curatorial impetus. One wonders, then, what criteria were applied by the Dak'Art jury. The prizes were awarded on the opening day, amidst rumours of the near-resignation of the president of the jury, Sithabile Mlotshwa, who objected to the nomination of the 'usual suspects'. The Senghor Great Prize was awarded to Senegalese artists Ndary Lô and Mansour Ciss. Other prize-winners included South Africans Nkosikhona Ngcobo (Senegalese Ministry of Culture and Listed Heritage) and Johann Van Der Schijff (European Union), Ivorian Jems Kokobi (International Organisation of Francophonie, OIF) and Cameroonian Guy Wouete (CulturesFrance).

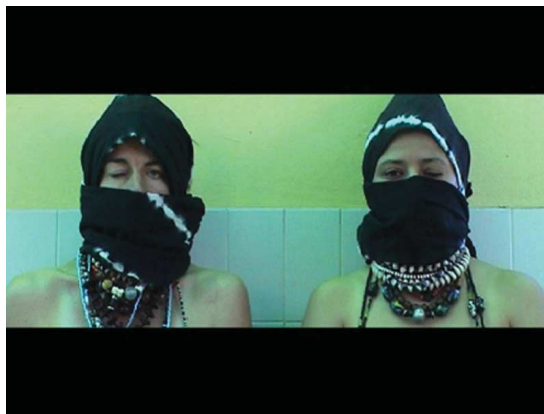
Overall, the exhibitions at the Musée de l'IFAN and Galerie Nationale, the two official venues, were uneven.<sup>13</sup> The loose approach to the theme meant that the works exhibited broached a variety of topics. Highlights were mainly in video installations. These included Malian Mohamed Konaté's conceptual piece *Attraction* that explored the phenomenon of attraction and repulsion in human relationships; Senegalese Armin Kane's animation *Yaatal Kaddou*, dealing with power cuts; Egyptian George Fikry's *Kolo Tamam* on the absence of freedom of speech

and the manipulation of the media; South African Vuyisa 'Breeze' Yoko's *Biko's Children* on the dual commodification and political legacy of the student leader in South African urban culture; Burkinabe Saïdou Dicko's *Histoire d'Eau* (in collaboration with Senegalese artist Piniang) on the scarcity of water in Sahel, his region of origin, as well as his three-day installation in a classroom of the Alliance Française. The latter was displayed in a tent, in which a video presented the shadow of a woman pounding to the sound of a traditional song performed by Dicko. This work pushed further the artist's experiment with shadows and textures. The tent, re-created out of hand-dyed cloth, its floor scattered with straw, furnished with a couple of stools and supplied with bowls of peanuts, addressed all five senses and offered a quiet retreat from the crowded biennial.

Other works made obvious political statements. These revolved around the neo-colonial nature of globalisation, migration and the memory of slavery but, in my view, were unconvincing. Very few of the works, if any, were visually or conceptually challenging. Blaise Bang's painting *ADN*<sup>14</sup> was reminiscent of Faith Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon, Die Nigger* (1969). The scrolling of words on a screen to a point of illegibility, with a human figure in the background, in Guy Wouete's *La liste est longue* resembled an aesthetic device developed by Mona Hatoum in *Measures of Distance* (1988), albeit on a different theme. The versatility of Soly Cissé, renowned for his powerful large-scale drawings and paintings, was somewhat unsettling. His 3D animation *Union Européenne* playfully blended a smiley face with the European flag. The suggestion, at one point in the video, that Europe would welcome Africa in the Union was so ludicrous one could not tell whether it was ironic or a publicity stunt.

The effects of globalisation in Africa and the restrictions on the freedom of movements for African passport-holders were recurrent topics, as shown by Kan Si's video *Lu et Approuvé*, Ousmane Ndiaye's photograph *Sacré-Cœur/Niary Talli* and Blaise Bang's installation *Egalité*. In numerous instances, the West was directly incriminated in the various crises that have arisen in Africa, but what about the accountability of African leaders? Where did it feature in the art exhibited? Apart from Kokobi's prize-winning sculpture *Darfur* the mirror appeared pretty hazy in this respect. It seemed artists had nothing to say about the situation in Zimbabwe, for instance, let alone longstanding issues that still affect the continent. Moreover, with only four female artists in the biennale, women's voices were completely marginalised.<sup>15</sup>

Self-congratulatory 'official' reviews cannot distract from the fact that Dak'Art 2008 allowed very little scope for a cutting-edge avant-garde,<sup>16</sup> but



Sonya Rademeyer, *Babble*, 2007, video 9 min/45 sec. Courtesy the artist

this is not surprising given that the biennale is an instrument of the Senegalese government. While most African artists deplore the fact that local governments do not support the arts, Dak'Art pays a heavy price for being state controlled. It is not managed by art professionals but by civil servants, and so the shortcomings of the eighth edition are attributed to the belated ministerial decision to host the biennale. Dak'Art took second place to president Abdoulaye Wade's twice postponed Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (Fesman), in his bid both to revive the 1966 event for which Senegal was hailed as the nation at the forefront of Africa's cultural scene, and to make history as Senghor did with the Festival and Abou Diouf with Dak'Art.

In his article on the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, French historian and anthropologist Eloi Fiquet observed that the Festival was 'modelled on



Grace Ndiritu, *Civilizations Part 1*, 2006–2007, video 7 min 42 sec. Image courtesy of Grace Ndiritu

the European Great Exhibitions of the industrial and colonial era'.<sup>17</sup> The Dakar Biennale still bears the legacy of the Festival, and the question today as to whether Western-type biennials are the right model for Africa is still debated.<sup>18</sup> It is all the more relevant when one looks at how Dak'Art is funded. Of the fourteen partners, only two were African. In other words, without the EU, OIF, CulturesFrance, the French Embassy and Prince Claus Fund, to name but a few, Dak'Art 2008 would not have existed. Of course, such funding comes with strings attached, but I would not go as far as to say that Dak'Art caters only for a Western audience. The African and Diaspora attendance is significant and can only increase with the number of emerging African artists and art professionals. Besides, it is legitimate for any artist to aspire to recognition beyond national and continental borders. The question is: how do we get a sense of agency and self-determination when our arts are heavily subsidised by the West? How does that empower Africans? What message does it send on the eve of the celebrations of fifty years of 'independence'? It is not that Africa cannot raise its own funds. The African Pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) proved it could.

I can only reiterate what my predecessors have written before me, particularly Bryan Biggs, with his suggestion 'to give artists a central role in shaping and participating in the event'.<sup>19</sup> One must not forget that the Dakar Biennale was created at the request of Senegalese artists. They should have a say in its organisation and be allowed to contribute their creative vision to the exhibition's concept and design. Art students should also be involved, so as to gain skills in the organisation of exhibitions, interpretation and art criticism. They are the future generation of artists, art teachers, critics, curators and cultural managers who will be able to devise programmes that engage with local audiences.

Finally, there are many skills in Africa and the Diaspora, but it is paradoxical that while the continent has produced a number of internationally renowned curators, art critics and historians, after sixteen years of existence, the eighth biennale was so poor. Dak'Art is part of African cultural heritage and should continue to exist, but as long as it alienates the artists to whom it owes its existence, as long as it fails to engage with, and galvanise, the African and Diaspora art community, the Dakar Biennale can only be a shallow 'mirror' of the art scene it has made it a mission to represent.

1 This comment was made during an informal conversation between me and an Inspire Fellow at the end of a presentation at the International Curators Forum held during the Venice Biennale in June 2007. A legacy of Africa 05, the Inspire Fellowship programme was initiated by the Arts Council England in an attempt to increase the number of curators from

ethnic minorities in mainstream institutions. Most Fellows are practising artists and, although I do not totally disagree with this statement, the views expressed by this person were biased by his position as artist/curator.

- 2 Eddie Chambers, 'Mainstream Capers: Black Artists White Institutions', in *Annotations 5 – Run through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers*, eds Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke, inIVA, London, 1999, p 17. Article initially published in *Artrage*, autumn 1986.
- 3 See Liam Gillick, 'Curating for Pleasure and Profit', *Art Monthly*, no 167, June 1993, p 17. For a discussion on the blurred line between artists and curators, see Michael Brenson, 'The curator's moment', *Art Journal*, winter 1998, 57:4, p 18.
- 4 One of the declared objectives of the biennale includes 'the representation of the various regions in the continent'. See International Exhibition, selection page on <http://www.biennaledakar.org>
- 5 Maguèye Kassé, 'Africa and the Metaphor of the Mirror', *Dak'Art 2008*, p 24
- 6 My translation from the French version, *ibid*, p 19
- 7 *Ibid*, p 26
- 8 Kassé's distinction between 'art', 'Negro-African art' and 'African art' is no clearer. *Ibid*, p 24
- 9 *Ibid*, p 26
- 10 Ernst Gombrich, 'Art History and the Social Sciences', *The Romanes Lecture for 1973*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p 6
- 11 Kassé mentions the moment where a child identifies with its own image but he also refers to the developments in Lacan's conception of the 'mirror stage' whereby the latter not only refers to the infant stage but also applies to the relation between the ego and the body, illusion and reality. Although his intention may not be to infantilise Africa, his approach (or view) of contemporary art equates with that of a first encounter. This is made evident by his observation of 'new components' (emphasis added) in visual practices such as video and digital arts, as well as in his anachronistic comment that 'some forms of media, such as photography and cinema, have acquired the status of artworks in their own right', p 25.
- 12 Art historian and archaeologist Eric Gubel writes that the mirror was 'attested in Egypt since the dawn of pharaonic civilisations', ie, circa 3000 BC. Eric Gubel, 'Miroirs et reflets de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance', in Geneviève Sennequier, *Miroirs: jeux et reflets depuis l'Antiquité*, Editions d'Art Somogy, Paris, 2000, p 18.
- 13 The same applies to the fringe exhibitions that were scattered all over Dakar and not always easy to find. Worth mentioning though, were the Eiffage and Librairie des Quatre Vents exhibitions.
- 14 French for DNA in relation to the test imposed on immigrants to prove they have relatives in France when they apply for a visa of more than three months. This law was approved by the Sarkozy government in September 2007.
- 15 These were Pélagie Gbaguidi, Angèle Etoundi Essamba, Grace Ndiritu and Sonya Rademeyer. Nandipha Mntambo's work was unaccounted for, having disappeared between South Africa and Senegal.
- 16 See *Dak'Art Actu*, the Dakar Biennale newsletter.
- 17 Eloi Fiquet, 'L'impacte durable d'une action artistique: le Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres de Dakar en 1966', *Africultures*, no 73, June 2008, p 20



18 See for instance the forum on ASAI about Cape Africa Platform and its vow not to replicate the mistakes of the second Johannesburg Biennale: <http://www.asai.co.za/forum.php?id=22>.

19 Bryan Biggs, 'Dak'Art 96', *Third Text*, no 36, autumn 1996, p 83

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## The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting

Amna Malik

The return to orientalism as a curatorial strategy at Tate Britain appears somewhat puzzling, if not completely insensitive, given the rather fraught political conditions of Britain's invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, that is, unless we consider the wider discursive framework in which it is placed, or rather its attempt to refute an existing framework. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, seems all the more pressing now, after the events that have unfolded in the Middle East, and yet the upsurge in the art market in that part of the world, a new Christie's in Dubai for example, the new Louvre designed by Jean Nouvel, or the frenzied art collecting of David Khallil in Britain, has inflated the art market to an extent that might financially support an exhibition of this kind and justify its overturning of Said's writings. This overturning is conducted on two fronts: first with the support of 'Islamic' commentators such as Yasmin Alibhai Brown whose trivial responses to individual paintings are dotted throughout the exhibition as a legitimisation of the curators' strategies, and second by recourse to the rather simplistic assertion of the primacy of the aesthetic object. For an explanation of this shift one has to look to a rather different aspect of geopolitics: the recent Documenta 12 and its unsuccessful attempt to promote the art object as somehow free of theoretical analysis and debate must surely lie behind the timing of this particular exhibition. Like the curatorial justification for Documenta 12, the discussions and debates around 'The Lure of the East' are based on an old modernist assumption: that the art object can somehow 'speak' unaided, a position that continues to fuel a rather romantic view of contemporary art. However, whilst the art press would be more than happy to let its fiercest critics attack Documenta 12 as regressive, as indeed it was,

the broadsheet response to 'The Lure of the East' has tended to ameliorate criticism rather than exercise it. Consider Jonathan Jones's unusually short review acknowledging that most of the artists on display were Europeans travelling to the so-called Middle East and not 'Muslims'. He identifies Frederick Lewis's painting of the bazaar as a great painting of urban space because of its evident love of and interest in Islamic architecture and freedom from 'imperial disdain'.<sup>1</sup> Jones's confident assertion that 'None of these painters is a great artist, and yet the exhibition is full of great art' appears to be based on the criterion that the images convey a Victorian love of the 'East',<sup>2</sup> which also seems to be the intellectual fuel justifying the exhibition, although it remains tainted with exoticism.

More to the point, the limitation inherent in requiring the object to speak unaided becomes apparent if one considers Mary Roberts's recently published study *Intimate Outsiders, The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (2007) which draws attention to the wider political context of Cairo, in the mid- to late 1800s, where Lewis made his home for ten years. She carefully contrasts Lewis's 'sartorial masquerade' as an 'Orientalised gentleman', described by the novelist W M Thackeray in his *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846) in an account of his visit to the Lewis home, with the dress of Muhammad Ali Pasha, the ruler of Egypt represented in a portrait by Lewis. Thackeray's detailed description of Lewis as someone at the heart of Ottoman administration, 'venerable and Bey-like', suggested his complete assimilation into Egyptian culture and painted a much more appealing picture than the adoption of European costume by 'dandified young Agas'.<sup>3</sup> Lewis's *Portrait of Mehmet Ali Pasha* (1844), which shows him wearing traditional dress and cross-legged on a divan, implied apparent similarities in costume between them and would ostensibly reinforce Thackeray's view of Lewis's assimilation, but this would be misleading. The Pasha's appearance is a refusal to conform to a piece of legislation introduced by the Sultan Mahmut II 1829 that made the fez, Western jacket and trousers compulsory for civilian men throughout the empire, an extension of the clothing reform introduced earlier to the Ottoman military. As Roberts persuasively points out, Pasha's dress conveyed his desired independence from Ottoman rule and reflected his powerful position as leader of Egypt, even though his position depended on continuing allegiance to Ottoman sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> One cannot possibly know the complexities of this shift without an understanding of a historical world beyond the image. On the surface, both Lewis and Muhammad Ali Pasha would appear to represent an 'authentic' Egypt but it is only Lewis whose choice of



Frederick Lewis, *Harem Life, Constantinople*, 1857, © Laing Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear Museums

dress signals a rejection of European culture, while Pasha, on the other hand, continued to institute large-scale modernising reforms and technologies adopted from the West.<sup>5</sup>

Other contradictions emerge from the exhibition. If one accepts the view that the visual translation between the so-called 'Orient' and British artists should be understood through other criteria than what Said refers to as 'Orientalism', it seems odd that of the many 'Islamic' commentators, present in the exhibition in the form of numerous plaques offering contemporary responses to these paintings, very few are actually artists, art historians or art critics. If one takes a different slant, for example, by considering Hassan Khan's review of

the exhibition 'Word into Art' at the British Museum a couple of years ago, published in *Bidoun*, then a somewhat different perspective might emerge. Khan's analysis of the exhibition correctly pointed to the narrow set of choices, determined primarily by the availability of work in the British Museum collections, largely calligraphy, which then determined the kinds of contemporary examples of prints on show.<sup>6</sup> Khan's position as a Cairo-based artist removed from the cultural pressure to seek out his identity in such examples of affirmation offers an important lever for identifying the cultural location of 'The Lure of the East'. One has to acknowledge that despite some key examples of important works of art, most of the paintings in

this exhibition can only be justified on the basis of the rubric 'Oriental', but are otherwise mediocre, kitsch in form and banal in content. What seems to be contested is a rather worn idea to do with 'the politics of representation', symptomatic of art historical scholarship in the early 1980s when post-colonialism and feminist discourses first made themselves felt, and which is precisely the initial basis for the impact of Said's *Orientalism*. This rather misguided attempt to address that discursive framework from within the terms of self and other, without acknowledging the power relations that informed them, is precisely the reason why postcolonial critiques were first formulated. If anything 'The Lure of the East' suggests that other terms are urgently needed to engage with this complicated cultural history, and hence the later popularity of Derrida's writings on translation that offered a useful critical framework for the complex work of cultural trafficking that admittedly moved in both directions. The role of photography is conspicuous by its absence and suggests an important missing link that would enable us to navigate the kinds of works of art and cultural positions on offer. In some ways it may be all too familiar because of its centrality to anthropological analyses of colonial images of the colonised, yet its significance to the history of European painting cannot be overlooked either. The emergence of cross-cultural scholarship in recent years in art historical scholarship was urgently needed to rupture Eurocentric art history by examining the aesthetic conditions that brought about the emergence of art and artists beyond the Euro-American context. However, it seems that in this exhibition it has been taken up to justify the same centre-periphery relationships, the European view of the 'East', and to underpin an apolitical and weak scholarly position.

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*The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, Tate Britain 4 June–31 August 2008

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- 1 Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian Arts*, Wednesday 4 June 2008
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Thackeray *Notes of a Journey* (1846), reprinted 1991, introduction by Sarah Searight, cited by Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Literature*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2007, p 26
- 4 Ibid, pp 26–7
- 5 Ibid, pp 27–8
- 6 Khan Bidoun Hassan, 'Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East', *The British Museum* 18 May–3 September 2007, *Bidoun, Art and Culture from the Middle East*, autumn 2006, pp 114–15

## *In the Name of All Humanity: the African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba*

Lize van Robbroeck

*In the Name of All Humanity* deals with the life and art of the South African artist Ernest Methuen Mancoba, who died in 2002 after a long and remarkable artistic career. Born in 1904, Mancoba grew up on the gold-rich Witwatersrand, where his father was employed as a mine clerk. As a product of the small emerging African petite bourgeoisie, Mancoba received a missionary education and qualified as a teacher, after which he studied art at Fort Hare University College where he was exposed to the most dynamic and influential members of that generation's black intellectual elite and their emergent African nationalist politics. In 1938, Mancoba left the repressive political climate of his homeland to pursue an artistic career in Europe. Upon the Nazi occupation of France, Mancoba was imprisoned for four years in a camp for hostile aliens near Paris, where he married the Danish artist Sonja Ferlov. After the liberation of France, Mancoba and Ferlov were involved in the CoBrA movement. Mancoba then developed the distinctive, ethereal abstraction that would characterise his work throughout his long artistic career. Mancoba – along with his most famous peer, Gerard Sekoto – had until quite recently been relegated to obscurity in his native South Africa. *In the Name of All Humanity: the African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba* is one of a few publications that aim to put this pioneer Modernist back on the South African and global art map.

For the past decade or so, the need for a radical revision of the white-dominated canon of South African art history has been growing increasingly urgent. While moves are currently afoot to rewrite the history of South African art, there is an acute shortage of viable research material. Because most available primary research on South Africa's historical black artists is limited at best or severely biased at worst, a number of researchers have been taking it upon themselves to do the footwork for such a revision, conducting interviews and combing archives to resurrect these artists (and particularly the 'pioneer' Modernists) from obscurity and neglect. This process



was started in the late 1980s with the landmark *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition, and was sustained by a handful of researchers during the 1990s, gaining momentum in the new millennium with a number of monographs on key artists and histories of the major art centres that gave much South African art its particular character.

Among the monographs that emerged during the 1990s, Elza Miles's *Lifeline out of Africa* (1994), accompanying the exhibition *Hand in Hand*, which featured Ernest Mancoba and his Danish wife, brought home, literally and figuratively, the remarkable oeuvre and even more fascinating life-story of this artist. In 2005, *Third Text* featured a debate on African modernism in which Ernest Mancoba featured prominently and in which his pre-eminence in the development of an advanced and singular African Modernism was recognised.<sup>1</sup> In 2006, an unusual exhibition on the work and life of Mancoba (recently deceased) opened at the Gold of Africa Museum in Cape Town. In this exhibition, Mancoba's strikingly contemplative brand of abstraction was juxtaposed with artefacts and pieces drawn from the wide array of eras and cultures that influenced him. *In the Name of All Humanity: the African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba* is the catalogue of this exhibition.

The editor of the catalogue and curator of the exhibition is film-maker Bridget Thompson, who first encountered Ernest Mancoba in the course of filming documentaries about activists Govan Mbeki and Jane Gool Tabata, both of whom referred to Mancoba as a friend and influential presence in their lives. Included in the catalogue is a text by Thompson which details her experience of Mancoba and her decision to film him. The resultant documentary, *Ernest Mancoba at Home*, was screened at the exhibition and, perhaps more than any other feature, touchingly brought to life the measured and wise man behind the art.

The catalogue is a 123-page publication incorporating a medley of voices. Inputs range from the scholarly to the intensely emotional, with Bridget Thompson's three essays making up the bulk of the text. Contributions such as Wonga Mancoba's funeral oration to his father, Elza Miles's short and poignant narrative about her friends Mancoba and Ferlov, and Thompson's very personal 'Memories of an Encounter', in which the artist's profound spiritual impact on the writer is recounted, makes it clear that this is not meant to be an academic publication, but rather a tribute of sorts. As such, the book vacillates between the very intimate and emotional, the factual and analytic.

South African Minister of Arts and Culture Dr Pallo Jordan's introductory essay provides a valuable historical account of the sociopolitical and,

more pertinently, the intellectual context of the early twentieth century in which Mancoba found his artistic calling and his voice. Another contextual contribution, Professor Ntongela Masilela's essay on the New Africans, provides an informed historical overview of the disillusioning and divisive socio-political context of the Union years and in particular of the diverse array of theories and debates that characterised black intellectual life at the time. The New African Movement is historicised by situating its particular approach within a line of preceding and subsequent intellectual and cultural movements. Because Masilela veers sharply between three interlinked historical intellectual 'movements', the essay tends, at times, to be confusing, but it is packed with insights that serve to decode not only the complexities of Mancoba's intellectual and artistic frame, but the subtleties of the theoretical heritages that characterised this period.

The bulk of the text is written by Bridget Thompson. Apart from the almost confessional account of her personal experience of Mancoba (through which one can garner a sense of his stature as a spiritual mentor and guide), she wrote two other essays which deal with aspects of the work in the exhibition. Perhaps because Thompson is not a qualified art historian, these two essays elicit a mixed response from one trained in the field. Thompson tends to embrace the Modernist utopian ideals that informed Mancoba's art (and life philosophy) without the critical distance that time and historical perspective usually afford. The humanism and universalism of High Modernist ideology, which is, in Mancoba's case, syncopated with African 'ubuntu' (a Zulu word loosely translated as 'humanity'), is rediscovered by Thompson with such enthusiasm that one longs for a more subtle unpacking of the complex subjective modalities that must underpin Mancoba's internalisation of these ideals. On the other hand, there is something to be said for Thompson's fervent advocacy of Mancoba's beliefs. As an art theorist who comes from a theoretical background of extreme cynicism about the Grand Narratives underlying universalism and humanism, it is good to be reminded that some enduring ethical principles can be gleaned from these ideologies, regardless of their provenance. What is clear from Thompson's text is her commitment to bring home Mancoba's unshakeable principles and compassionate worldview, which survived intact, despite racist rejection, war, Nazi persecution, poverty and exile. Thompson's account of Mancoba's enduring faith in humanity puts the cynical art historian to shame.

Thompson is inclined to take interpretational liberties that most qualified art historians would

shy away from. Putative connections between Mancoba's 'colour symbolism' and traditionalist beadwork are suggested on very scant evidence. Such assumptions about the existence of a fixed code of 'meaning' underlying Mancoba's aesthetic choices belie what one knows about High Modernist art practices and aesthetics, which usually stress the intuitive and momentary over and above the carefully calibrated establishment of conscious semiotic systems.

Aside from these academic concerns, I felt that the book suffered from a measure of overkill. There are simply too many voices, too many approaches, too many typological and grammatical errors. In addition, there is a surfeit of images, which makes for a degree of visual overload that is exacerbated by the use of variously coloured pages. The end result is rather overwhelming and clamorous. In a sense, all my criticisms can be summarised as a lack of sufficient editorial control.

But these academic and aesthetic concerns do not seriously detract from the value of the book. This is an enthusiastic and emotional publication, rather than a scholarly one. As such, it must be regarded first and foremost as a tribute to Ernest Mancoba, the man, the mentor, the father, the husband and the artist. Indeed, the enthusiasm and respect with which this book has been produced is compelling and I found it a thoroughly enjoyable and infectious read. I closed this catalogue with a sense that, perhaps, I garnered more insights into the makings of the man, Mancoba, than I could possibly have gained from a purely academic text – and that, I suspect, was Bridget Thompson's intention.

I have no doubt that this book will play a valuable role in the current effort to rewrite the history of South African art.

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*In the Name of All Humanity: the African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba*, ed Bridget Thompson, Art and Ubuntu Trust, Cape Town, 2006

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1 See Rasheed Araeen, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Africa's Place in the History of Art of Our Age', *Third Text*, 75, 19:4, July 2005, pp 411–17

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## Leopoldo Méndez and Post-Revolutionary Art of Mexico

Theresa Avila

Publications on Mexican art typically focus either on pre-Columbian objects or post-revolutionary murals produced by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. Two publications that concentrate instead on Mexican graphic art have recently been published: *Mexico and Modern Printmaking: A Revolution in the Graphics Arts, 1920 to 1950* (2006) edited by John Ittmann and *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print* (2007) by Deborah Caplow. These two books emphasise the significance of Mexican graphic art and more importantly are major contributions to art history which traditionally has been ignored or omitted from discussions on the topic. Anchored in the print collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the McNay Art Museum, *Mexico and Modern Printmaking* is an exhibition catalogue that devotes its essays to the history of graphic art in Mexico during the Spanish Colonial period and the 1950s. Deborah Caplow's book, on the other hand, is a monograph dedicated to Leopoldo Méndez (1902–1969), a Mexican artist who is primarily recognised for his graphic work. Each book is invaluable for its original research and contextual discussion surrounding significant graphic artists of Mexico.

The book on Méndez is organised into an introductory essay and nine chapters arranged around crucial stages of Méndez's career.<sup>1</sup> Caplow provides a chronological presentation of Méndez's life and graphic work which allows for a methodological understanding and appreciation of his artistic development. The first chapter begins with the artist's life as a youth and his artistic training, thus providing insight into important political and cultural developments in Mexico both during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Chapter 2 provides a good historiographic overview of *Estridentismo* or the Stridentist Movement, a self-proclaimed avant-garde group of writers and artists active between 1921 and 1927. Chapter 3 addresses a variety of issues related to the development of Méndez's artistic techniques and signature style connected to European artistic developments and Mexican graphic artist Guadalupe Posada, as well as his growing commitment to social and political issues. Chapter 4 examines the



Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR), a group active between 1933 and 1937 or 1938. Chapters 5 to 8 concentrate on the period when Méndez was affiliated with the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (Popular Graphics Workshop) or TGP, a graphic art collective founded in Mexico City in 1937. The final chapter of the book discusses Méndez's important contributions to the publication of numerous books on Mexican art and culture and the last years of his life.

The first half of the book provides substantial information indicative of intensive research on Caplow's part. In particular, chapters 2 and 4 draw together resources and material on two important political and artistic groups of Mexico, the Stridentists and LEAR, about which very little has been written in either Spanish or English.<sup>2</sup> However, aside from providing vital resources on these important groups, there is little critical analysis of the complexities linked to political stands and artistic ideology, whether for the group or the individual. For example Caplow presents the print *Calaveras del Mausoleo* and identifies it simply as a representation of Méndez's support of LEAR's position and its critique of, among other issues, the inauguration of the Palacio de Bellas Artes, an event and building the group considered elitist.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the Palacios de Bellas Artes was the site for anti-Nazi lectures in 1938 for which Méndez and other members of the TGP created eighteen lithographic posters.<sup>4</sup> This point of contradiction regarding the building's identification as elitist at one point in time and its appropriateness for use at another illuminates the reality of the situation that artists were negotiating in regard to their group affiliations and personal ideologies. But Caplow does not address these types of inconsistencies. Equally problematic is the author's disregard for LEAR's sectarianism in relation to the Communist Party. Conversely, Alicia Azuela made this point very clear in her essay on LEAR.<sup>5</sup> Another observation with regard to Caplow's limited examination of LEAR is her failure to address Méndez's conscious choice to engage artisanal, preindustrial artistic techniques rather than mechanical techniques. As such, she misses the political and social significance of mechanically produced imagery versus non-mechanical images.<sup>6</sup> Caplow completely overlooks the shift in aesthetics between LEAR's image production and that of the TGP, founded by Méndez and other founding LEAR artists including Pablo O'Higgins and Luis Arenal immediately following their departure from LEAR.<sup>7</sup> The scope of Social Realism in Mexican art, also addressed within chapter 4, is limited by Caplow to subjects related to adverse social conditions, class conflicts and the rise of fascism.<sup>8</sup> In actuality, a discussion of Social Realism demands an in-depth examination of the general

history and meaning(s) of the term, the author's definition and meaning when applying the term, and how it was engaged by LEAR as a whole.

The four chapters dedicated to the period of Méndez's affiliation with the TGP are structured consecutively: 'The Early Years', 'The War Years', 'The Middle Years' and 'The Final Years'. The highlights of this section are the discussion of *El Libro Negro* in chapter 6 and her examination of prints related to films in chapter 7. The commentary on *El Libro Negro* is one of the first times in print that any scholar has addressed the relationship between graphic work by German Expressionism and Mexican artists. The material presented on the prints by Méndez related to film brings together a set of images that are seldom discussed as a whole.

Caplow's discussion of the TGP describes the general organisation of the workshop and the group's official philosophy, as well as the prickly political problems that eventually led to Méndez's departure. Limited information and space is dedicated to the work of the group as a whole or members other than Méndez, even when group projects are mentioned. The abbreviated discussion of Méndez's work within the context of the TGP tends to divorce Méndez from the overarching narrative of the TGP.

The brief reference by Caplow to the TGP's 1947 portfolio entitled *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana*, contained within chapter 7, is a prime example of how limited her discussion of projects by the TGP actually is. The portfolio was produced by sixteen artists and consists of eighty-five prints, accompanied by explanatory text, that illustrate Mexican history from the late nineteenth century up to the 1940s. The version of history presented in the portfolio is directed by the prevailing ideologies of the collective, commemorating as it does the tenth anniversary of the founding of the workshop. Therefore, the album can be read as significant to the history and legacy of the group, exemplifying the group's multiple principles and varied efforts, as well as its undeniable contradictions and internal conflicts.

Rather than solely depicting a one-dimensional, linear narrative of the Mexican Revolution, as is typically assumed, the portfolio actually highlights multiple competing narratives. Beyond the armed conflict of the Mexican Revolution, revolutionary demands yielded ongoing national programmes that promised to address and fulfil the demands of the Revolution's ideologues. As a result, an institutionalised national narrative of the Mexican Revolution emerged, but it was altered by the individual interests and ideologies of each succeeding post-revolutionary presidential administration. Many of these perspectives both informed and were incorporated into the

pictorial production of the portfolio. Nevertheless Caplow writes that it was ‘artists and intellectuals in Mexico that still held to the idea of the continuing revolution’.<sup>9</sup> This statement undermines the significance of the continuing revolution as a divergent national programme, which is clearly outlined by the work of scholars such as Thomas Benjamin and Ilene V O’Mally.<sup>10</sup>

The re-visioning of the national past and present by post-revolutionary leaders and the TGP is made obvious in the sequential relationship(s) of individual prints and the interventionary presentation of the portfolio, which brings to light the juxtaposition of conflicting themes. Unfortunately, Caplow restricts her truncated discussion of the eighty-five portfolio images to a mere six of them, four of which are by Méndez.<sup>11</sup> Nor is the portfolio considered in terms of its relevance to the complexities of the social and political history of Mexico, which never really surfaces in Caplow’s book. More importantly the opportunity is also missed to examine Méndez’s impact on the TGP as a whole through an examination of images within the portfolio, which could have been compared and contrasted with earlier work by the artist. Instead of considering the bulk of material offered in the *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana* portfolio, chapter 7 primarily focuses on individual graphic projects, often selected at random, that were undertaken and produced by Méndez.

A misleading element in Caplow’s examination of Méndez’s life and work is the lack of attention to his relationship with Pablo O’Higgins, an equally significant graphic artist working in Mexico who was also a principal figure in the leadership of the TGP. The two artists began working together as early as the 1920s and were equally involved as founders of LEAR and the TGP, yet Caplow suggests it is Méndez alone who founded the TGP.<sup>12</sup> The author identifies Helga Prignitz-Poda’s monumental work on the TGP as the best source for information concerning the group, but ironically Prignitz-Poda contradicts Caplow when she notes that it was through a series of meetings and discussion that the TGP was founded.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in Caplow’s book O’Higgins’s role in the TGP is minimised and his relationship with Méndez and the interplay that took place between Méndez and other artists of the Taller are hardly acknowledged, all of which minimises the collaborative component of Méndez’s graphic productions and political work. This unduly narrow approach to the TGP results in a diminished comprehension of Méndez’s work within the period of his membership in that organisation.

Caplow asserts that what distinguishes her book from those previously published on Méndez is ‘new material on [and insight into] Méndez’s work in Mexico political art’. Yet, in general, her comments

on the political issues and groups in Mexico are superficial. Political issues and competing ideologies are merely introduced briefly, and at times she focuses her attention on the political positions and ideas of a few artists, as if these represented all the possible scenarios of the current situation. Caplow delves into the history only in a shallow sense, something that is particularly evident in her inadequate two-page summary of Mexican history from the early nineteenth century to 1970.<sup>14</sup> The Mexican Revolution is presented as a struggle between unified forces against Porfirio Díaz and those in support of him. In fact, the Mexican Revolution was a complex series of events between multiple factions that each had a distinct agenda.<sup>15</sup> Ignoring the multifaceted and at times contradictory ideas and demands of Marxism and Communism in Mexico results in an oversimplified, if not uncritical, discussion of political ideologies and political art of the time. For instance the author interprets the notion of opposing art for profit as a Marxist position.<sup>16</sup> Yet, in fact, Marxism is not against labour making money from the fruits of its efforts; it is against capital using labour to make profits. Caplow’s book does end on a high note, though, in her tribute to Méndez when she documents his involvement in establishing the publishing house Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana and his efforts to publish high-quality books on Mexican art and culture, a little discussed or known aspect of the artist’s many contributions to Mexican art.

*Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and The Mexican Print* will be useful to anyone interested in the history of Mexican art, and specifically the history of Mexican graphic art. The book makes available in English little-known or previously inaccessible information and resources about the Stridentist Movement, LEAR and Méndez in general. It will be a helpful reference to scholars working to develop a more comprehensive study of Mexican graphic art in general and the Taller de Gráfica Popular in particular.

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Deborah Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and The Mexican Print*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2007

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- 1 Deborah Caplow, ‘Introduction’, in *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and The Mexican Print*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2007, p 6
- 2 Although Caplow’s research efforts are evident, the originality of ideas and text is difficult to discern. For instance chapter 2 seems primarily to consist of direct and indirect quotes.
- 3 Caplow, op cit, pp 95–7, 135
- 4 In his essay on Leopoldo Méndez, David Craven addresses this same print, although it is identified as *Concierto sinfónico de calaveras* (*Symphonic Concert of the Skulls*), and he notes that

- what it reveals is the contradictions of the Comintern and the Mexican Communist Party, as well as Méndez's negotiations in association with these groups. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, ed, *Blanton Museum of Art: Latin American Collection*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2006, pp 273–4.
- 5 Alicia Azuela, 'El Machete and Frente a Frente: art committed to social justice in Mexico', *Art Journal*, 22 March 1993
  - 6 The relationship between audience, political ideology and mechanical versus pre-industrial images has been addressed by David Craven in 'Agrarian Aesthetics in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Walter Benjamin According to the Taller de Gráfica Popular', in *La Imagen Política: XXV Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte de 2001*, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Mexico City, 2006, pp 413–28
  - 7 Issues no 4 to 12 of *Frente a Frente* featured primarily photographs and photomontages, as opposed to the first three that primarily included prints.
  - 8 Caplow, op cit, p 101
  - 9 Caplow, op cit, p 197
  - 10 Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución: Mexico's Great Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000, pp 137–9 and Ilene V O'Mally, *The Myth of the Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920–1940*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986
  - 11 The images include *Plutarco Elías Calles es deportado por órdenes del gobierno del General Lázaro Cárdenas* (figure 4.6) by Alfredo Zalce and Méndez, *Chóferes contra las Camisas Doradas en el Zócalo de la Ciudad de México, 20 de noviembre de 1935* (figure 6.16) by Alfredo Zalce, *Francisco I Madero* (figure 7.7) by Jules Heller, *El embajador Lane Wilson 'arregla' el conflicto* (figure 7.8) by Méndez, *El hambre en la ciudad de México, 1914–1915* (figure 7.9) by Méndez, and *Entrada de Madero a la ciudad de México* (figure 9.3) by Méndez. Two of the images, figure 7.7 by Jules Heller and figure 9.3 by Méndez, discussed by Caplow as part of the portfolio, are not found within the complete portfolio set that I am familiar with in the collection of the University of New Mexico Art Museum collection. This raises questions as to which particular portfolio set Caplow refers, whether there are multiple versions of the portfolio, and/or whether it is possible that Caplow has misidentified these prints as part of the portfolio.
  - 12 Caplow, op cit, p 123
  - 13 Helga Prignitz-Poda, *El Taller de Gráfica Popular en México, 1937–1977*, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, México, 1992, p 55. James M Wechsler also contradicts Caplow when he asserts that it is Méndez, Luis Arenal and Pablo O'Higgins that 'left LEAR... to form their own collaborative printmaking studio', which became the TGP. James M Wechsler, 'Propaganda Grafica [sic]: Printmaking and the Radical Left in Mexico, 1920–1950', in *México and Modern Printmaking*, John Innmann, Yale University Press, 2006, pp 66–7.
  - 14 Caplow, op cit, pp 8–10
  - 15 Carlos Fuentes observed that the 'Mexican Revolution of 1910–1921 was at least 3 revolutions' in one, at roughly the same time, that involved an agrarian insurrection, middle-class revolt, and a proletarian or industrial workers' revolution. Carlos Fuentes, *Nuevo tiempo mexicano*, Mexico City, 1994, Chapter 4. David Craven is the first scholar in art history to discuss Mexican art in relation to competing revolutions and multiple narratives. See David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist*, G K Hall, Boston, 1997 and David Craven, *Art and*

*Revolution in Latin America, 1910–1990*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2002, pp 59–61, 69.

- 16 Here I refer to Caplow's assertion, p 2, that 'For Méndez, the true value of art was in its social utility, rather than its value as a commodity' and her examination of Méndez as a political artist. Later, pp 57–8, she connects the above with a discussion of Méndez's adherence to Karl Marx's dictum.

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## *Appropriation as Practice: Art and Identity in Argentina*

Alyssa Grossman

In *Appropriation as Practice: Art and Identity in Argentina*, an ethnography of the contemporary 'artworld' of Buenos Aires, Arnd Schneider makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature that addresses the social and cultural processes of artistic creation. By analysing non-indigenous artists' practices of appropriating indigeneous cultural forms, Schneider examines how artists are constructing new discourses of Argentinian identity, and thus contributing to wider frameworks of 'cultural globalisation'.

Schneider specifies that both 'culture' and 'appropriation' are terms with a shifting contextual significance which cannot be interpreted as bounded or finite notions. His elaboration of the concept of 'appropriation' provides a key theoretical tool for examining particular artistic strategies as individual practices of identity construction. While all types of cultural contact or exchange involve techniques of appropriation, many earlier anthropological interpretations of cultural 'diffusion' neglect to acknowledge its politics, and the accompanying unequal relations of power, as well as the role of individual agency within the process. By explaining appropriation as involving 'brokering practices' between 'co-existing cultural contexts' (p 23), Schneider rectifies this imbalance, demonstrating how individuals and cultural elements may both influence and be influenced by one another, and even challenge or subvert pre-established meanings and forms. By focusing on the hermeneutics of appropriation he analyses the social and cultural relations implicit in its strategies, emphasising how visual artists mediate between local and global levels, using these techniques to

reposition themselves against existing hegemonic national ideologies of Argentine identity.

The book is structured into eight chapters, beginning with descriptions of Buenos Aires' political, social and cultural climate, and explanations of the theoretical paradigms to be used in his analysis. The data is taken from fieldwork done over the course of a year from October 1999 to September 2000, and a month and a half in November to December 2001. Schneider's methodologies are remarkably varied. As he himself observes, there is no straightforward path for following entire processes of artistic creation, let alone for mapping out the less tangible discourses of identity construction. But his combination of conducting unstructured interviews, studio and home visits, accompanying artists on their field expeditions and actively engaging in participant observation, provided him with a wide range of contacts with craftspeople (potters, graphic designers, textile artists), photographers, film-makers and other multimedia artists to inform his research.

Particularly distinctive in Schneider's fieldwork approach is his insistence on the anthropologist's technical participation in the very processes of artistic production being studied. His enrolment as a student in a Buenos Aires pottery workshop specialising in pre-Columbian ceramics, his contributions to a textile-making class and his involvement as part of the crew in a feature film production shot on an indigenous reservation all gave him special access to the perspectives of the other participants in these activities. But they also enabled him to engage in social interactions extending beyond merely verbal ones. Schneider notes that his own bodily engagement with his informants' activities led to a deeper understanding of both the process and the significance of their work: he argues that 'new forms of research and (re)presentation could be possible in such collaborations, especially in order to capture the enormous wealth and variety of sensorial data gathered during fieldwork' (p 185). Actually experiencing the material time and space of artistic production, as well as the related activities of sharing food, personal encounters and day-to-day discussions with his colleagues, gave him a means of accessing other issues embedded in the routines of everyday life, such as family dynamics, gender roles, politics and economics. Valuing such tactics in his own research process underlines Schneider's advocacy of anthropological study *with*, as opposed to simply *of*, artists and artistic practice.

His findings on how different artists have appropriated indigenous elements into their work, as well as the political, cultural and ethical implications of these appropriations, are mixed. As Schneider notes, "becoming indigenous" is not a uniform artistic practice' (p 164). While he finds different artists engaging to varying degrees and in a range of ways

with indigenous people, and using different spaces and media to create and transform messages about indigenous 'others', he ties together certain tendencies or 'trends' that he has observed, relating them all to the larger process of diffusing local images and meanings among global networks of communication.

Such artists, Schneider argues, are part of a broader trend of renewed interests in indigenous themes and general perceptions of the current period as a new era for identity formation in Argentina. Searches for new identity, he notes, usually occur at moments of 'crisis'. In the wake of Argentina's adoption of neoliberal policies, privatisations and investments in the 1990s, followed by the severe economic crash in 2001, non-indigenous Buenos Aires artists began to draw upon and reclaim indigenous forms in their work. Such practices have been geared towards exposure to the international artworld in particular, as Argentinian official ideology (in contrast to that of other Latin American countries) does not deem 'indigeness' representative of 'typical' national culture.

Both Argentina and the city of Buenos Aires are socially stratified, with a unique combination of inhabitants from immigrant backgrounds, mixed Spanish colonial origins and indigenous roots. While the term for such mixtures, *criollo*, is used in positive, negative and neutral ways, and does not indicate a fixed or static ethnic or class status, it still reinforces the old paradigm depicting Argentinian national identity as a 'melting pot'. Schneider suggests that the search for a 'new Latin American identity' defies this paradigm. For many individuals, cultural capital is more readily gained through emphasising cultural acquisition over biological descent, through *creating* rather than merely finding roots. Schneider critically examines a number of artists engaged in such appropriations in this capital city who practise this 'traffic in culture' by adopting local and indigenous art forms and bringing them into global contexts.

In his investigations of training courses for potters, graphic designers and weavers, Schneider finds that people using indigenous objects as stylistic models do not merely attribute naive ideas of authenticity to these objects. Instead, they employ a range of material 'technologies of appropriation', such as copying, displaying and performing with the objects in innovative ways, thereby creating new 'originals' with new meanings. He suggests that to a certain extent these practices can be compared to the Western tradition of novices copying and appropriating works from the established canon. However, Schneider finds that with situations of non-indigenous appropriation of indigenous motifs the issue of power differentials is rarely problematised and fails to address related ethical considerations.

Schneider further explores such ethically ambiguous appropriations in his study of a commercial photographer's project portraying non-indigenous models in indigenous-like apparel for a fashion calendar. The calendar's contributors, he argues, come to play on sexist and idealised stereotypes about indigenous people without being critical of how such images have been used in past political, academic and historical discourses, ironically because they wanted publicly to demonstrate the 'origins' of the Argentine population in a 'positive' way. The commercial success and publicity of the project conveying these specific messages about national identity were viewed as more important than questioning or directly challenging these stereotypes.

Similarly, in his research on the production of a film about indigenous people on a Mapuche reservation, he found that the largely white urban Buenos Aires crew ended up imposing their own visions of 'Indian' identity onto the indigenous participants of the film. Schneider maintains that the politics and ethics of representation during the shooting process were 'problematic', with the white director scripting and shaping the 'real' native experiences portrayed in the film. The lack of serious dialogue with the indigenous participants about the development of the film, as well as the economic imbalances implicit in these interactions, is a result of the director's search to find indigenous roots and *make* them his own.

Another multifaceted example of an artist's interpretations of indigenous identity emerges in the work of Teresa Pereda who uses anthropological methods of field work, interviews and photographic documentation as part of her data-gathering and research preparation for creating artists' books. Pereda is explicit about her goal of adopting and re-interpreting her country's *mestizo* heritage. Accompanying her and her assistants to various field sites, Schneider observes the 'problematic and complex negotiation

between indigenous expectations and the agenda and practice of Teresa Pereda's team' (p 144). Despite her attempts to engage in dialogue with her informants, to 'respect' and compensate them by 'giving back' certain images as she takes others away, as well as the indigenous people's own active re-appropriations of her photographic equipment and other Western depictions of indigenous cultures, Pereda's work retains fundamental imbalances of power. Her practices still involve attempts to incorporate indigenous cultures into a new conception of Latin American identity, firmly rooted within the Argentine nation-state.

Although Schneider's discussions tend to focus mainly on artists who are firmly situated in 'artworld' circuits, thus neglecting accounts of those who by choice or by default are not as deeply implicated in institutionalised networks of artistic production, he draws on a wide range of examples to show how and why various individuals utilise images and discourses of indigenism in their art to situate and reconfigure their own identities. His analyses are all situated within the broader context of the 'artworld' of Buenos Aires, involving the producers and recipients of art objects, the institutions that legitimise and disseminate them, as well as the objects and artworks themselves. They point to larger issues about artists' roles as conveyors of local discourses to international frameworks, and about their positions in the processes of cultural production on community, national and international levels, all critical matters for those involved in studies of art, anthropology, globalisation and identity.

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*Appropriation as Practice: Art and Identity in Argentina*, Arnd Schneider, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006

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