

Critical Imperatives

NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY ART CRITICISM AND AFRICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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A social and historical critique which does not consider the conflictual structure of its own discursive operations will only produce the constraints it is seeking to displace. (Weber 111)

'Africa Remix', the recent showcase of African art at the Hayward Gallery in London, prompted a number of mixed but largely positive critical responses. In the *Observer*, Emma Lindsey extolled the 'ground-breaking and electrifying work' (26) on show and encouraged everyone to see it. Elsewhere, and in a more mixed response in the *Guardian*, Jonathan Jones was impressed by the art in the show but equivocal about his own reaction to it. Towards the end of his article, Jones wrote 'but that's enough criticism. In the end, this is a subject I probably shouldn't even be writing about. What do I know? Racism is limitless' (22). The sense of bemusement in Jones's article is worth dwelling on here, not least for the fact that its disposition reappears in more 'critical' reviews of 'Africa Remix'.¹ In *Art Monthly*, Sally O'Reilly's review of the same show started with the above quote from Jones's article and went on to engage in its own series of caveats. 'It was not my idea of fun to review "Africa Remix" either,' O'Reilly wrote, 'and the idea would be horrifying, I imagine, to most European art critics especially those from European nations' (27). For O'Reilly, this ostensible conundrum is made manifest in a number of 'double binds' including, but not limited to, the manner in which postcolonial liberalism can often translate into 'colonialism itself when applied to interpretations of "the other"' (27). In the subsequent issue of *Art Monthly*, O'Reilly was taken to task on the letters pages for both an 'unreflexive' response to the show and the reiteration of a view of African art as somehow culturally (and hence critically) other (Jelinek 14). To *Art Monthly's* credit – being one of the few journals in this country, alongside *Third Text*, to consider the question of art criticism and its purpose to be worthy of any enquiry at all – it allowed this discussion to continue into the following issue where Jones's take on the show was criticised for being

'intellectually cowardly' – a response, in sum, that merely re-codified a number of obstacles to formulating an effective critical response (LaFuente 17).

What Jones's periphrastic bout of rhetorical hand-wringing (perhaps inadvertently), and O'Reilly's equivocations, accentuate here is a nominal but all too systematic assumption that returns with tenacious frequency in debates about contemporary African cultural production: namely, African cultural production, because of its distinctive otherness, produces a critical response that is ultimately incommensurable with the object of its enquiry.² This incommensurability – the lack of an integral and categorical critical register – has been often rearticulated in terms of incommiscibility: Western art criticism and contemporary African cultural production do not necessarily mix well. To the extent that the latter point has a critical purchase, there is a need here for a qualifying distinction: hermeneutic incommiscibility does not equal incommensurability; on the contrary, it is precisely the difficulties involved that provide the imperative basis for enquiry. To argue otherwise is to not only abjure critical responsibility but coextensively rehabilitate a hierarchical economy of otherness that merely reinscribes the very tropes that critics – particularly those steeped in postcolonial theory – have been at pains to debunk. That we should have to note this at all is a further source of hermeneutic anxiety insofar as it belies an additional concern: if we have managed to identify (or at least engage with) the inequitable economy of difference that posited *inter alia* Africa as the 'other' of the West, and the African 'other' as the touchstone for the development of Western humanism, then to what degree have we engaged – if indeed at all – with the issue of how the apparent 'otherness' of contemporary African cultural production is the substantiative rather than interrogative prelude to critical responses. To what extent, that is, do we need to talk about how we talk about the art object. In the reviews noted above, my own included, I would suggest that what is being expressed, however nebulously, is the need for a series of critical imperatives: the demand, that is, that



Yinka Shonibare (UK/Nigeria), *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour*, 1996–97, mixed media (furniture and objects of different sizes), dimensions variable. Collection Eileen Harris-Norton and Peter Norton, Santa Monica, California.

criticism questions its own discursive function when it comes to writing about contemporary African cultural production and develops, in turn, a metacritical approach to the subject of art criticism.

Why, you may ask, does any of this matter? All art criticism should have a metacritical component to it and enquire into, however extraneously, what a critical response does to the art work and future interpretations of it. This observation is as valid for African cultural production as it is for cultural production elsewhere. However, the stakes are higher, I would suggest, when it comes to critical responses to African cultural

production. When Edward Said articulated the structural and discursive mechanisms by which the West insinuated itself into the so-called East, he listed, amongst others, the practices and practitioners of literary, historical, philological, psychological, anthropological, and philosophical study as precursors to actual material exploitation. The 'East' had to be discursively produced if it was to be exploited, and the West's 'imaginative command' over that imaginary realm had to be secured through the production of knowledge. The tenacity of a view of the other as voiceless spectacle and entertaining exoticism – the corroborative object of enquiry rather than the

subject of communication – was the manifest consequence of the West's 'imaginative command' over its (in this instance, African) others. In light of these historical incursions (not to mention their consequences), art criticism about contemporary African cultural production needs to be both critically conscious of its 'imaginative command' over cultural output and, perhaps more importantly, mindful of the sociopolitical and hermeneutic ramifications of such critiques.

Art criticism, as always, confers its own exegetics of inclusion and marginalisation — a discourse of containment that needs to be understood within the context of how the rhetoric of legitimisation and marginalisation subsidised discussions about the West and its 'others'. It is with these points in mind that the following article will offer an overview of the problems associated with articulating a critically commensurate response to contemporary African cultural production. In doing so, I will suggest some preliminary notes that seek to further encourage critical engagement without reifying concepts such as critical incommensurability, heuristic incongruity, and irreconcilable otherness. This is to imbricate contemporary art criticism within a wider sociopolitical discursive realm that indexes the concurrent impact of globalisation, multiculturalism, postmodernity, and the over-arching discourse of art criticism *per se*. This is not, however, a proposal for a methodological approach – a proposition that would be in danger of further prescribing the terms of debate – as much as it is an attempt to methodically outline the issues that would affect such a methodology. How, in sum, do we explain the apparent otherness of African art without reinstitutionalising an analogous rhetoric of otherness that merely trades on its neo-liberal conviction, multicultural sentiment, postmodern (dis)ingenuity, and the periodically triumphalist postcolonial recuperation of otherness.

Global Mandates: Art Criticism and Globalisation

Often viewed in terms of the sinuous lines of exploitation by which new markets are opened up, the extrinsic influence of globalisation is frequently theorised as a force acting upon the art network — a 'cause' of which the global reach of the art network is an 'effect'. In its avaricious and often rapacious appetite for the 'new', globalisation is consequently figured in negative terms whereby its exacting effect is understood to be not only producing the art object as a commodity fetish – that which must be had – but also reconstituting the 'local' and its indigeneity in the name of 'universal' appeal. The hermeneutic effect of this process is that cultural distinctions are being inevitably elided in the name of a strategic inclusiveness that thrives on the commodification (and inexorable elision) of difference itself. Despite the apparent indifference of globalisation to differences *per se*, other than in the activity of producing the other as a commodifiable (and therefore closely controlled) object in a free-market, neo-liberal economy, there is a distinction to be made in

this minatory vision of globalisation as a rampant and indifferent spectre.

In their discussion of the 'new world order', Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have persuasively argued that the sovereignty of nation states, contrary to the greatly exaggerated news of their demise, has taken on a new form under the guise of national and supranational institutions — a new global form that they sum up in one word: Empire. Within this new imperial order, communication systems not only legitimate the new world order but supply the very channels by which globalisation operates. Hardt and Negri write:

communication not only expresses but also organizes the movement of globalization. It organizes the movement by multiplying and structuring interconnections through networks. It expresses the movement and controls the sense and direction of the imaginary that runs throughout these communicative connections; in other words, the imaginary is guided and channeled within the communicative machine. (32–33)

Contemporary art criticism, in this context, could be seen to be complicit with globalisation inasmuch as it transcribes the 'local' into a 'universal' – and therefore empirically 'available' – frame of reference. It is a process that, in its critically abbreviated manifestation, effectively 'flattens out' cultural distinctions. Art criticism – whether it be in the form of academic critique, commentary, or the belletristic – could be seen to produce one of the very channels by which the art market accesses 'other' artists. If we accept, for now at least, that globalisation is characterised by a programme of homogenisation, the question remains as to what methodology can iterate difference in the face of such an apparently consummate process without reducing difference to a series of essentialising and exoticising poses.

Admittedly, this is to perhaps place too much importance on the consequences of art criticism — the proliferating worldwide biennials are just as responsible for bringing heretofore 'unknown' artists to the attention of Western institutions. However, art criticism, and nowhere more so than when it is deployed in the service of lifestyle commentary, is all the more understandable today as both a form of communication and part of the vocabulary of the 'communicative machine' that Hardt and Negri identify. 'Language, as it communicates,' they continue, 'produces commodities . . .' (33). Rather than rehash the notion that art criticism is no longer either critical or consequential, having long since been superseded by the marketing machines of commercial galleries, this is to suggest that it is indeed *critical* in the sense that it plays a role in an increasingly globalised art market: art criticism, that is, discursively produces the 'other' artist who is subsequently subsumed within the art market; it opens up, however tentatively, the very markets by which globalisation is sustained. To this end, both art criticism and globalisation could be seen to, on the most basic level,

foster, regulate and administer difference – be it cultural, racial, social, or political – in order to further define mutual channels of influence.

This is not so much to make either a qualitative or indeed quantitative judgement about such criticism, as it is to accentuate my initial point: how we write about African cultural production has to be considered in a metacritical framework whereby the ethics of art criticism itself is put under the hermeneutic spotlight. Globalisation, and its sinuous lines of transaction, further accentuates the a priori need that we address how, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, newness enters the world (212–35). This is all the more essential when the art market for African art, alongside the market for contemporary art as a whole, shows all the signs of continuing to grow exponentially, not least after substantial exhibitions such as ‘Africa Remix’ which, alongside London, took in venues in Dusseldorf, Paris and Tokyo. And this is but the latest manifestation of an increasingly prevalent theme in contemporary curating in the last two decades that must also include ‘Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art’ (1985), ‘From Two Worlds’ (1986), ‘Perspectives: Angles on African Art’ (1987), ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ (1989), ‘Contemporary African Artists: Changing Traditions’ (1990), ‘Africa Explores’ (1991), ‘Out of Africa’ (1992),³ ‘Seven Stories about Africa’ (1995) and ‘The Short Century’ (2001). This abbreviated list, moreover, does not take into account solo

showings of African artists and their worldwide appearance in biennials and seminal exhibitions such as Documenta 11.

Whilst the politics of multiculturalism – a discursive framework, in one sense, for legitimating differences in a globalised world economy – has for the most part represented a favourable force for change, there is an increasingly prevalent view that reads the grand narrative of inclusion represented by multiculturalism as yet another increment in the institutionalisation of ‘good’ (legitimate) difference and ‘bad’ (illegitimate and therefore threatening) difference. It is against this backdrop that the discursive channels of influence traversed by multiculturalism can be seen to intersect with globalisation. To suggest as much is to invoke what Slavoj Žižek proposes to be the fundamental problematic that usurps multiculturalist claims to inclusivity: the apparent universalism, paradoxically, that lurks beneath its premise:

The ‘real’ universality of today’s globalization through the global market involves its own hegemonic fiction (or even ideal) of multiculturalist tolerance, respect and protection of human rights, democracy, and so forth; it involves its own pseudo-Hegelian ‘concrete universality’ of a world order whose universal features of the world market, human rights and democracy, allow each specific ‘life-style’ to flourish in its particularity. (41)



Zineb Sedira, *Mother, Father and I*, 2003, 3 DVD video projections, dimensions variable. Commissioned by Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis, Missouri. Courtesy of The Agency, London, and Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris, © the artist 2005.



Hassan Musa (Sudan), *Great American Nude*, 2002, ink on textile, 204 × 357 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Multicultural inclusiveness does not, Žižek argues counter to popular belief, challenge the cultural logic of global capitalism; on the contrary, multiculturalism, and its implied corollary, liberal tolerance, strategically produces the ‘other’ as a marketable form of identity-formation. Žižek further argues that, ‘[l]iberal “tolerance” condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance — like the multitude of “ethnic cuisines” in a contemporary megalopolis; however, any “real Other” is by definition “patriarchal”, “violent”, never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs’ (37). In other words, the pronouncement of multicultural inclusiveness – its claim to realise a more progressive representational space that is legitimated by a non-totalising form of politics – is the disavowed, inverted, and self-referential assertion of superiority and should be seen as such. And herein lies the corrosive rub: how do you (re)write the terms of a critical debate, in conjunction with the re-territorialising urges of globalisation, that avoids merely repackaging difference within the neo-liberal, and invariably empty, wrapping of multicultural inclusiveness? In what could be seen as a form of rhetorical epenthesis, whereby an idea or caveat is inserted into the middle of an argument, there is a consistent demand for a metacritical approach in critical responses to contemporary African cultural production in light of both the politics of multicultural representation and the exigencies of globalisation — both of which intersect with one another, however inadvertently, in the presentation of ‘otherness’ and difference.

If we enquire into the nature of the discursive institutions that multicultural discourse instigates, then we must similarly enquire into how art criticism, in an attempt to answer to multicultural priorities, effects a similar institutionalisation of difference. This concern revolves around not so much how we write about culturally ‘other’ work as to what hierarchical structures such writing sets in place. Whereas multiculturalism, in respect of the visual arts, is largely concerned with how the other is represented, this is to investigate how the other (the art object) is translated into the rhetorical schema of art criticism. John Picton has put it thus:

the anthropology of the colonial period promoted a way of writing about Africa characterised as the Ethnographic Present. This, in effect, denies both history and contemporary reality while encouraging the invention of a ‘traditional’ Africa that privileges certain social, ritual and visual practices at the expense of others. (118)

We return here to the valorisation of the local in the critical name of the universal and its corollary: the dehistoricisation of cultural production. As a critical observation, this is perhaps an obvious one to make in the context; however, we need to consider the obverse to this comment: the critical and habitual dehistoricisation of African cultural production has been subsequently refracted through a critical approach (postcolonial theory and criticism) that seeks to not only

re-historicise but politicise such production – a process, as we shall see, that is not without its own distinctive challenges.

Postcolonial Theory and its Discontents

The tenacity of a view of the other as voiceless spectacle and entertaining exoticism was the manifest consequence of the west's imaginative command over its 'others'. Postcolonial theory was a productive, necessary, and indeed provocative intercession into this relatively uninterrupted empirical field. The hermeneutic benefits were many and do not need reiteration on these pages. However, it is worth noting that one of the foundational questions of postcolonial theory, addressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, was relatively simple: can the subaltern speak? The attendant concern here is what happens when we speak for the 'other' and, in the context of my immediate discussion, how art criticism, in its inevitable schema of legitimation, speaks for the apparent otherness of African cultural production. The problem is squared, so to speak, if we address the fact that in speaking

for the other, or otherness in general, we are inevitably engaged in a process of prescribing meaning and – nowhere more so that when it emanates from Western institutions – a further hierarchisation of discourses about Africa. The connotative reverberation here is that the need to interpret otherness for a Western audience reinscribes the trope of African passivity that is often rolled out in defence of such interpretative incursions in the first place. We move here – albeit in tentative and highly provisional terms – towards an ethics of addressing and speaking for the other, whereby the other (a corporeal being) can be seen, admittedly with some conceptual leeway, in the objective terms of contemporary African cultural production.

The categorical dilemma here continues to rotate around the otherness of African art and who gets to speak for – categorise – and interpret that otherness. In this context, the authenticating voice of the critic can often result in a misplaced significance on the ostensible 'authenticity' of the artist or artwork in question. For Linda Martin Alcoff, the



Bodys Isek Kingelez (Germany/Congo), La ville de Sète en 3009, 2000, paper, cardboard, paint, sequins, glue; covered by polyester in wooden frame, 210 × 300 × 89 cm. Collection Musée International des Arts Modestes, Sète, France.

problematic of speaking for others generates a further misleading emphasis on the notion of authentication to the extent that 'persons from dominant groups who speak for others are often treated as authenticating presences that confer legitimacy and credibility on the demands of subjugated speakers' (Alcoff 9). The trope of authenticity, needless to say, has been much used and abused in discussions of both art and identity. The concern here, however, addresses the broader philosophical anxiety of interpreting the other and how African artists have often been made to wear, so to speak, their identities on their sleeve in a manner that would be both reductive and condescending if applied to a Western artist. The politicisation, or situating, of African cultural production, whilst preferable to its depoliticisation (and hence homogenisation through dehistoricisation), is nonetheless not without its own distinctive pitfalls. Although writing with literary production in mind, Robert J C Young's reading of the political mandate in cultural theory is integral to any consideration of the critical fact that African art be understood in a political, historical, socially-specific, and economically nuanced context – a context, in sum, that prevails against globalisation's apparent indifference to difference itself. Arguing for a more rigorous understanding of the trend towards political interpretations of cultural production in the last twenty years, Young notes that such criticism seeks to re-establish a connection between action – inflected in the context of this essay to specify African cultural production – and 'the world'. There is a similar tendency, I would argue, in contemporary critical – not to mention curatorial – approaches to African art: the latter, that is, must be seen to answer to both history and political (postcolonial) interpretations of the work. Young writes:

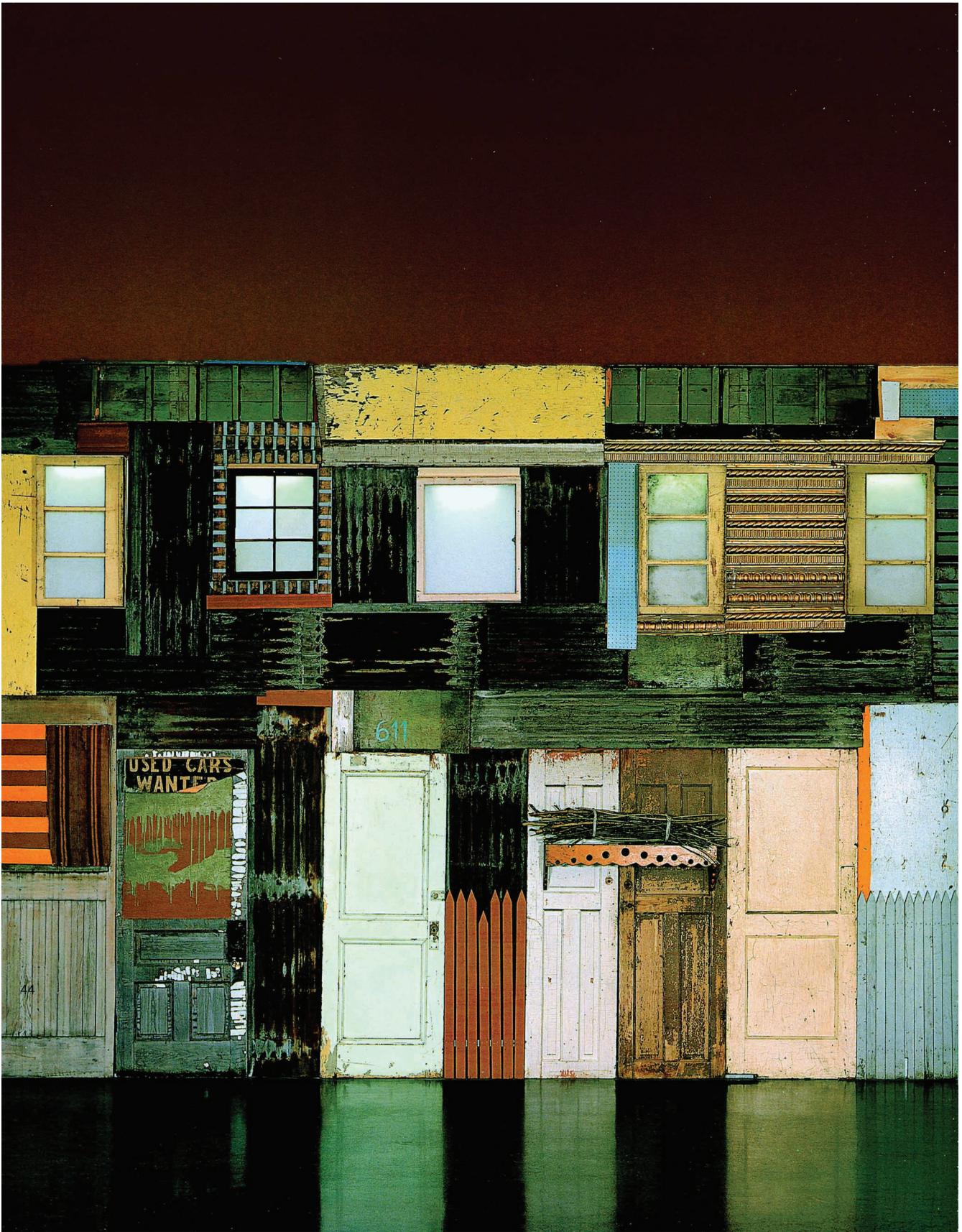
Perhaps the current pressure for theory to deliver a politics itself constitutes a response to the reformulation by theory of the concept and operation of the political. As with the call for 'history', it can be used to reintroduce the very formulations that theory has been concerned to recast: the call of the political in itself seeks to reinstitute or regroup the link between representation and reference that has been questioned by the semiotics of the past twenty years. If the representation of the literary text to the world becomes problematic, then the link can be reinvoked by the introduction of political criteria in criticism which re-establish at a stroke the supposedly lost connection with ethics, action, and 'the world'. (85)

This is to return to the discussion above and how the advent and development of postcolonial theory – in the promotion of a more critically rigorous and ethical approach to interpreting the otherness of the other – sought to mitigate the disjunctive correlates used to define African cultural production in ahistorical and depoliticised terms. However, the methodology that sanctioned such an undertaking was largely underwritten by so-called continental theory. The issue here is relatively straightforward: what, if any, are the

problematics of deploying poststructuralist theory and its stress on the displaced and destabilised subject of modernity – a subject void of agency – in a debate concerning the need to historically and critically re-instate postcolonial subjectivities and the agency of African art(ists)? For Linda Hutcheon, the conjugation of poststruturalism and postcolonialism provokes a form of ideational retrenchment whereby

the current post-structuralist/postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject have to be put on hold in feminist and post-colonial discourses, for both must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity: those radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses. (151)

I have no doubt simplified the issue here and it is equally possible to argue that the radical enquiry into the contingencies that endowed the Western subject produced precisely the epistemological conditions needed for the emergence of its 'others'. If I can nonetheless generalise for now, and pace Hutcheon, it is possible to argue that poststructuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory, far from calling for a relativisation of value, truth, history, identity, agency, and the subject were addressing another issue: the ethics of representing otherness and the contingent responsibilities involved in speaking for others. The misgiving here is that for postcolonial studies this was a political, as much as a conceptual or theoretical, ideal. And this is where we run into problems. Whilst the thorny issue of art's relationship (representation) to the world (that which is re-presented) can be traced back to the tenebrous depths of Plato's cave, it has a further immediacy to it in a neo-liberal, globalised market where the mantra of 'freedom of choice' and a concomitant break with traditional cultural affiliations is the predominant ethos within contemporary art. In such a rubric a continuous break with the past is advocated through a series of ironic gestures and a (formal) freedom of expression. The 'political' in this paradigm is not so much frowned upon as it is adumbrated by commercial modes of exchange and a mode of critical engagement that flirts with commentary rather than engagement. The political is not only seen here as a maleficent spectre waiting to bring the cogs to a grinding halt, but it is often seen as the realm of, for example, the African artist who has yet to make the postmodern leap into the vacuum of self-referentiality and the free-for-all 'play' of signification. In this context, African artists are made to answer for, or address, African history and be political in a manner that we would not necessarily expect of a 'Western' artist. Ontological insecurity is effectively replaced by an ontological determinism and this is just as reductive, I would argue, as the dehistoricisation of African art. Contemporary African artists and art, in this instance, are in danger of becoming a sounding board (or test-case) for critical theory — forever the object of information rather than the subject of



Antonio Ole, *Townshipwall No. 10*, 2004, 16 parts, mixed media, (found materials), 180 × 120 cm each. Courtesy of the artist, photo: Lothar Milatz.

communication. Art criticism is equally in danger of being enmeshed in a hermeneutic tautology, producing in art works the very concerns it set out to 'discover' in the first place. The attendant issue here entertains a simple and decidedly paradoxical paradigm: to what extent has African cultural production, rather than challenging our expectations and the critical cohesion of contemporary critical and curatorial theory, come to represent a reductive obligation to both?

Cultural Incommensurability and the Myth of the 'Ineffable'

One of the key issues that needs addressing when we consider how the 'other' – be it in cultural, literal or metaphorical terms – is re-presented is the extent to which categorical imperatives effectively prescribe rather than encourage discussion. There are two ways in which this is done: the general, though largely unstated, idea that the exigencies of African cultural production are largely 'unknowable' and, closely associated with that point, that any such writing must somehow have a privileged 'insider' knowledge of African art. These two points open up a veritable plethora of associated issues. To suggest, for one, that we cannot write with perspicacity in respect of African art, because of its supposed otherness, is to merely reinstate the scenario of Africa's irrevocable 'otherness'. This is indeed both a reprehensible and singularly shoddy response — an effective abnegation of critical responsibility that misses the point: the so-called ineffability of the experience of an art work and the concomitant difficulty of transcribing that which is (at least nominally) a visual experience into a literal language, is the *a priori* obligation of art criticism. This is indeed a hoary and decidedly capacious chestnut and it is beyond the remit of this discussion to fully explore the genealogy of such debates. However, it is suffice to say that the very notion of 'ineffability' in and of itself would appear to be yet another apotropaic (and highly nuanced) strategy for not engaging with the object — a process of 'turning away' from the responsibility of a response. Pierre Bourdieu, commenting on the issue of ineffability, has pointedly asked 'why so many writers, so many philosophers take such satisfaction in professing that the experience of art is ineffable . . . and why they are so eager to concede without a struggle the defeat of knowledge' (xiv). As in so many cases where the ethics of criticism *per se* is an issue, Bourdieu is principally concerned with the remit of the literary field; nevertheless, his point focuses a distinction that needs to be made here: following on from the poststructuralist proposition that literary criticism is written in the same language as the object (literature) of its enquiry, there is ultimately no absolute distinction to be had between literary and critical discourse. This is obviously not the case for the so-called visual arts, where art criticism is not, for the most part, expressed in the form of visual art — although such a development might sharpen the minds of some commentators.

These remarks take us away from the original question and yet engage a similarly inflected point: why are so many critics

ready to concede conceptual defeat in the face of interpreting and criticising contemporary African cultural production, and, in turn, resort to a version of its inherent 'unknowability'? Furthermore, the claim of 'unknowability' can be readily countered by simply noting the vertiginous propinquities involved in contemporary African cultural production and so-called Western art production. In its deconstruction of the discursive ploys by which Western humanism and colonial discourse constructed the African 'other' as the apparently irrevocable (and ultimately irredeemable) other, postcolonial theory has made a significant and lasting impact on how we consider not only Africa, but the 'West' and its categorical compulsions. However, if we have (however successfully or unsuccessfully) deconstructed the discursive economy of otherness that subsidised colonisation, then there is an ongoing demand that African cultural production is seen for what it is: imbricated with, and at times predicating, Western art history and its 'modernity'. It is with such points in mind that Rasheed Araeen has observed that part of the conundrum surrounding identity politics can be addressed 'when we accept the fact that the other is no longer Other'. For Araeen, this acceptance is recognition of how the West's so-called 'others' permeated 'modernism and have redefined it through its own logic of innovation and historical breakthroughs' (7; see also Hassan). Many African artists are as much a product of the Western academy as they are of African institutions and a significant number of artists in 'Africa Remix', for example, live in the West; however, the ostensible incommensurability of African art production has been often premised upon the misplaced idea that African artists are somehow atavistically joined at the hip to Africa in both conceptual and geographical terms. It is a notion, Okwui Enwezor has observed in respect of African artists living in the so-called Western metropoli, that effectively excludes African artists from the 'sites of normativity' which, in turn, produces a far from satisfactory critical response when it comes to their output (245). Where a response is forthcoming, it is articulated in terms of how the artistic production of these 'displaced' and diasporic artists is figured as an 'aberrant production of a denativised imagination or to an inferior mimetic exercise in futility' (245). Enwezor's remarks, and Araeen's, are preliminary observations in two provocative essays that further signpost the fundamental problematic with which we started: what method, to paraphrase my epigraph, can we employ here to analyse the object of our criticism that concomitantly avoids reiterating the critical configurations that we are attempting to repudiate. How, in sum, do we explain the apparent otherness of African art without reinstitutionalising an analogous rhetoric of otherness that merely trades on its neo-liberal, multicultural and critically informed (and periodically mis-informed) credentials? To ask such a question is to evoke yet another: how does the West negotiate its colonising tendencies, engendered in a new global imperial form that Hardt and Negri have termed 'Empire', and repudiate the predictable co-option of non-Western art into a self-validating discourse in which it becomes yet another derivative footnote to Western art

history? And how, in sum, can the critical imperative of art criticism both agitate for and instigate such a seismic shift without reinscribing the very tropes that engaged criticism has been at pains to debunk? How we interpret African art, finally, is an ethical undertaking riven by the politics of criticism and the demand that we rethink how we engage with ostensible difference, the otherness of the 'other', and the critical imperatives implicit in such an undertaking.

Notes

- 1 In reading broadsheet reviews against more 'art critical' responses, I am not setting up a hierarchy of response between the two — both have an obligation to responsibly acknowledge the object of their enquiry. It is arguable, however, that a broadsheet — with its sizeable readership — is more 'influential' in the sense that its discursive influence is more widespread.
- 2 I should also, at this point, put my cards on the table and note that I reviewed 'Africa Remix' in the pages of this journal, and I too engaged in a similar bout of rhetorical and critical throat-clearing. See 'Curating Africa: 'Africa Remix' and the Categorical Dilemma'. *Wasafiri*. No. 46, 2005.
- 3 The latter was the final incarnation of a show that began as 'Africa Hoy' in 1991, which became 'Africa Now' before finally settling on 'Out of Africa' for its final showing at the Saatchi Gallery in 1992.

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