

as we have experienced until now. Once this limitation has been overcome the alliance between culture and nature is unavoidable in this cultural re-location that we are embarked on.

In any case the cultural permeability, and the stimulus of fusions and interbreedings that African culture has produced in the Caribbean could be extended even further to other ex-slavery active areas, mainly Brasil and United States, where African minorities have managed to transmit up to the present cultural and religious elements of enormous complexity and development, through music, and the arts, principally. Yet we must make it clear that in many respects Africa is still an unknown proposition, a mystery on its way to extinction, due to a process of syncretism, (as García Ysabal points out), without anyone having ever discovered its secrets.

The European and Arab human debt with Africa is from this perspective immense, though the chances of future investigations are inversely proportional to the pillage committed. Together with the devastating action of climate and pests, the historical sources are scarce, the documents written in African languages as exceptional as they are precious, and there is a further complication: official considerations account for some six-hundred languages and dialects, while in reality there are around six thousand.

This exhibition, because of its title and the elements that compose it is not product of a new phase of normalization, beyond racism and apartheid. To the contrary, it makes such a process invisible, it is part of the habitual state of things in an artistic ambience.

"Another Country" only stands up to the analysis of the other.

In another country the implants, the absences, the exclusions, the abdications, the fusions and interbreedings of those who resist arise. No journey exists without the other, and no history. The other is outside the journey and outside history. There are multiple aspects, singularities, diversity. Yet is there really such an other? Haven't we all kidnapped him?

A MAN, A MOON, A FRUIT,
A SMILE, A TEAR-*

**EL SY:
AN ARTIST'S
VISION
AND PRACTICE**

BY CLÉMENTINE DELISS

For ten years, between the late 1970s and 80s, the Senegalese artist El Sy painted with his feet, entering into the economy of the composition with his body and kicking out the ideals of negritude once proposed by President Senghor as a foundation for art and independence in Senegal. He inverted the frame, turning the work inside out and revolting against the hegemony of the Senegalese state which sought to create an art infrastructure unparalleled in Africa at the time [1]. The imprints of his feet, which appear like tracks in the tar-stained blacks and murky whites of the canvas, place the artist in the position of witness and actor of a drama.

El Sy's drama is about repositioning the body into the heart of painting and sculpture. Essentially a visual artist, El Sy has worked in experimental theatre for over twenty years [2]. The performances he created with critic and artist Isaa Samb, alias Joe Ouakam, in the space of the Laboratoire Agit-Art in Dakar sought to combine the practice of painting with a theatre of action and gesture, an alternative to the literary emphasis proposed by Léopold Sédar Senghor for whom poetry was ultimately the soul of painting.

On the open stage of the Laboratoire, objects rather than words become operational within a temporary setting and actors take their cue from cloth mannequins, wire sculptures, paintings and banners hung on trees. This 'theatre without the verb' suggests a realism rooted in mediatic action, a masquerade of on-going recuperation which, in 1974 when the Laboratoire Agit-art was formed, was still closely tied to the role of the artist as nation-builder. For El Sy, his early theatre work was an example of the on-going

use of his body as a prop, clothing himself with his art and creating signals of visual understanding from his most immediate environment. El Sy's work as an artist is about mediating the visual recollection of memories stored in his person through actions in paint, shape and gesture without recourse to the intervention of language. He believes that with the growing movement of people across borders, language barriers will dissolve and a proliferation of modes of expression which are visual and gestural will help articulate zones of contact between individuals and cultures.

The most poignant and literal extension of this idea is a piece he made in early 1991 called the Stretcher from Gorée. A significant object, it is made from the only human stretcher available on the ex-slave island of Gorée with which pregnant women were carried to the ferry and hospital on the mainland of Dakar during this century. El Sy found it in a rubbish tip on the island whilst visiting the painter Souleymane Keita. Intrigued by its form and the weight of its associations, he took it with him, cleaned it and stretched a new cloth over it, much to the horror of his friend.

The Stretcher from Gorée has two alternative shapes depending on how it is opened up: one a tripod-like sculpture of wooden legs and rice sacking, the other a painted stretcher no more than eighteen inches wide and the length of an average man. Folded out, the sacking reveals a composition of blues, whites and pastels with a distinct design, almost art nouveau in its curved lines and use of contrasting orange and black. This highly decorative element has been a characteristic idiom in Senegalese painting since the late 1950s which El Sy enlarges through the association with the stretcher's human bearing. The coarse material of the rice sack which covers it is strong enough to carry the weight of a person and signifies nourishment, the home environment, a cycle of exchange and the regeneration of art as well as life. Here El Sy interpellates his most immediate environment in Dakar, to then cast out both its memorable as well as its mundane values into a wider field. His



work softens the pace of global consumption by constantly testing the ability of a visual language to transfer its sets of references onto different support structures. His interest as an artist lies in the sculptural and spiritual body, weight and textures evoked by these everyday objects rather than their functional references to life in Senegal.

For this process to remain fertile, El Sy enacts, through his person, the same stylisation of space as he gives to the figures and symbols he paints. He translates his immediate reactions to everyday life through a 'humanising' alchemical process which is painting, experiencing this process first through movement and social interactions before he shapes it back into a form or an object. In Dakar, a city rich with strong artistic personalities, El Sy achieves invisibility by disguising his appearance from day to day, never the same person, never the same expression or style. This to and fro from his person to his painting is what gives the question of stylisation in his art such mediatic and dramatised power. El Sy, a person of intense moods, is like the recurring, yet unpredictable patterns created by currents of water or air. He moves closer only to react against what he touches and throw a new set of perceptual conditions into play [3]. Similarly his work responds to itself at regular intervals, often through the perpetuation of a language of signs and symbols which rebound off one another when viewed together.

His studio lies in an old part of Dakar, a district called Niayes Thioker caught in between the elegant sea front of the Corniche and the busy street stalls of Sandaga market. It is a part of central Dakar which does not belong to Lebanese traders but where Senegalese families live and run small businesses. His studio is above a tailor's. From time to time, a young boy knocks at the door, an apprentice bringing a pile of sacks or the latest virgin canvas: three narrow panels of kite silk with loops fastened at either end to carry wooden poles. The door closes and in the calm El Sy continues painting, this time on the floor. The wall is covered with densely layered edges of paint, points of contact between the jute sacking and brush

strokes. A bettered radio-cassette recorder sounds out Augustus Pablo and the Inner City Griots.

The studio is not large but gives an extraordinary sense of space which El Sy manages very carefully. To show his work, he collapses the scale of walls, testing notions of distance and division between individual pieces. He places rice sack painting on the floor, hangs them off the wall, layers oil paintings over their coloured surfaces and thereby dispells the standard border of white neutrality around a discrete work. A group of 'trapped objects' made of blocks of wood caught in sacking, draw the wall hangings out into the open space of the room, extending volume, colour and line. It is at moments like these that his paintings and sculptures become operative and part of a conscious move to decenter our vision of art. His body is never far away such that to photograph them is to frame not only a juxtaposition of different works but the figure of El Sy as part of the act. This is more than installation: it does not reply predominantly on the frame in which the work is shown but on the object itself becoming an extension of the person's own space.

The material support for this dual stylisation of person and work is in itself a transforming commodity. Senegalese households are familiar with the jute sacks which carry the rice into their kitchens. No sooner empty they are collected by one of the many roving traders. El Sy buys the bags, takes them apart at the seams and stitches them by hand into whichever format he wishes to paint on. Using a plastic kettle he first drips water onto the jute, moistening the thread and merging the panels of sacking. He paints with sweeping strokes using pastel or earthy-coloured acrylics and tar in a gestural language of circles, loops and chains compelling you to follow his line with your hand. Dancing with grace, his paintings hover between figuration: feminine sigas of mythical queens, the aquatic world of sea creatures and plants, and the dissolution of these morphologies into emblems, curves and traces of colour. Many of the works he has made over the last twelve years contain recurring coded signs such as the looped square, hooked stick,

trapeze and oval. Although Islamic symbols and influences from Dogon symbology could be read into these, the visual language in El Sy's work has a consistency of its own.

His scale as a painter finds its source in his work as a muralist which he has practised for over twenty years. His painting is about gesture over a wide plane, a wall rather than a stage, yet with a similar approach to volume and movement. Each stroke of colour has transparency within it allowing for a layering of line, tone and depth of field. The rice sack, a material which carries the texture of paint without difficulty, alternatively becomes the basis for a canvas, a tapestry and a theatrical backdrop.

The association of these paintings with tapestries is not incidental. When in 1966, President Senghor of Senegal set up the 'Manufacture Nationale de Tapisserie', a tapestry production based on the French Gobelin method in the town of Thiès forty miles outside Dakar, he created alongside it a committee to select designs by artists which, once woven, could be displayed in state buildings. Senghor's respect for art and culture as a foundation stone within state politics came from his personal commitment and passion. However, with the increasing institutionalisation of negritude artists were in danger of becoming court lap-dogs, playing to the needs and vanities of the government. Although the Thiès tapestry centre continues to exist, and one can still purchase select designs, all produced in limited editions of eight at the price of 375.000 CFA per square meter (£ 4500), the legacy of this genre of woven painting continues to affect the second generation of artists in Senegal.

El Sy, whilst demonstrating respect and admiration for Senghor whom he knows personally, has always refused the easy option of state patronage. He has no pretensions for his paintings to be woven at Thiès, a comission once synonymous with artistic knighthood. The rice sack could not be a more appropriate medium with which to subvert and surpass the tapestry with all its connotations of art, class, colonialism and state politics. The format of the stitched panels which hang from a pole

and the emphasis on staged composition refer back to the tapestry whilst introducing a novel texture: the rice sack from Malaysia or Africa, a shifting container of nourishment which once empty returns into the home to feed the eye as art. The materiality of El Sy's work is rooted in essential ingredients of the culture and survival of Senegalese people. Whether hung in a modest home or from the walls of an international museum, this work succeeds in evoking the sensibilities of generations and returning the creative curve of art back to Africa.

The question of whether and how his work relates to traditional art in Senegal is answered through the very nature of the earlier expressions. Ephemeral constructions made of basketry, straw, wood and cloth, the art of Senegalese peoples, especially those who have led nomadic existences crossing into Mali and the Gambia (Wolof, Peul, Toucouleur, Bambara...), can be widely seen as an art of movement, a masquerade of the eye and the soul which the artist embodies in person or through objects in order to resolve. The activities of the Laboratoire Agit-Art in Dakar, in particular the theatre performances which El Sy created with artist and critic Issa Samb in the eighties and which sprung from painted rather than written scenarios accentuate the notion of a collectivity of actors with a transformational, almost spiritual role. In the hands of the aesthetic cosmographer or marabout, the human body, material object, painting or carving become part of a theatre of interaction. Although the moment of communication and empowerment is operational only for a temporary moment, the tactility and texture of the performance is intense.

Issa Samb recognises the earlier social role assumed by the artist in the post-Independence period of the 1960s and 70s in West Africa. 'Today', he suggests, 'the issue is no longer that of the political position of the artist in the urban environment of the new nation-state, but revolves instead around making work and the discussion and interpretation of it. There has been a fear of returning energy back to objects in Africa and all experimentation in

creating new object relationships has been diverted. Museums have emasculated the social power of objects and whereas international investment in African music is desired, the value of the material object is still muted' [4].

With this in mind, the Laboratoire overflows with recuperated junk from the city, rewired but never un-plugged from the life which one gave it a meaning. El Sy carries this environment beyond the art frame of the Laboratoire into the labyrinth of streets and alley ways which surround his studio in Dakar. He speaks of his own reality, his life as well as his art, as both the tracing of and the imprint of a landscape. "La réalité qui m'intéresse est celle qui naît de la matérialité, de la physique des corps, des matériaux que le toucher de l'aveugle perçoit et identifie. Je veux dire –la réalité est une trace, une empreinte réelle d'un paysage" [5]. The rice sack paintings are earth-bound in their materiality and in the physicality of El Sy's manipulation of them but the signs and figures he paints onto them are clues of a more volatile environment.

Recently he has begun painting on fibre-glass cloth used for making kites and sails. The material is midway between a tarpaulin and silk with a weave that is neither textured nor moulded. It has a strange, synthetic weight and catches the wind at every moment. El Sy treats it like paper-cloth and lets the light break through the painted surface, through dark, sombre greens and browns and fluorescent yellows and blues. The effect is somewhat reminiscent of painting behind glass or 'suwer', a method which reached Senegal in the late 1950s from North Africa and is now a popular form of tourist art. Although El Sy paints over the front of the kite silk, the translucent effect is similar as the wind and light shine through the liquid membrane of glass.

The format of these new works resembles the patchwork of the rice sacks and the kites he made recently for a pop-promo of Youssou N'Dour. Working with Patrick Nassogne, the producer of the video and an enthusiast of kite-flying technology, El Sy created five kites measuring approximately six by two meters painted in golds, blues,

green and reds. Whilst Nassogne played with balance and tweaked an elaborate set of strings, El Sy watched and waited to see if the paintings would fly. As the cowrie shell and totem drums rose into the sky, he saw a new space for the gaze, a 'mise en ciel' of art, without walls, spotlights, shiny floors or white walls. Instead, the paintings appeared against a depth of blue light and air, shrinking as they moved further away, visible only as far as the eye can see.

'L'Armoire', a sculptural painting exhibited recently in the show 'Escalaes Africaines' at the Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno in Las Palmas [6], combines both the free floating insubstantial feel of the kites with the grounded texture of sacking. 'L'Armoire' is an object which works between textures and gravities. It is neither solidly constructed to give benefit to the coarse weight of the jute which hangs from it, nor light enough to lift itself into the air easily. This rectangular open cupboard made of wood poles and painted sacking has taken up the volume of his studio in Dakar like a store within a store. Installed recently as part of the exhibition 'Escalaes Africaines' it became operative the moment one walked through it, engaging the body of the spectator with the body of the floating painted frame. 'L'Armoire is the memory of the passage, of the movement between sea and the heavens, a strange container of human experience, suspended in the man-built space of a modern art gallery.

The Malian philosopher Amadou Hampaté Ba, born of a marriage of similar Toucouleur and Fulanyi heritage as El Sy, write about the memory of his people which he claims was prestigious: 'C'est que la mémoire des gens de ma génération et plus généralement des peuples de traditions orales qui ne pouvaient s'appuyer sur l'écrit, est d'une fidélité et d'une précision presque prodigieuses. Dès l'enfance, nous étions entraînés à observer, à regarder, à écouter, si bien que tout événement s'inscrivait dans notre mémoire comme dans une cire vierge. Tout y était: le décor, les personnages, les paroles, jusqu'à leurs costumes dans les moindres détails. Quand je décris le costume du premier commandant de cercle que j'ai vu de près dans mon enfance, par

exemple, je n'ai pas besoin de me 'souvenir', je le vois sur une sorte d'écran intérieur, et je n'ai plus qu'à décrire ce que je vois. Pour décrire une scène je n'ai qu'à la revivre' [7].

El Sy's sensibility derives from his personal experience of the nomadic routes of art, the movements of people, ideas and actions, both across countries and cultural histories. Before he travelled to the USA in the early 1980s, he had covered fourteen African countries, spending time in Mali and Niger where he shot over one thousand photographs. His work recaptures the memory of a practice of spiritual fervour, an ability to look, listen, observe and mediate the aesthetics which surround one. Whether working from his studio in the rue Madeleine Ngom in Dakar, or passing through Johannesburg, El Sy never loses touch with the environment which surrounds him. He wears his life through the texture of his painting, an artist's vision of human contact and experience. In the context of Africa, El Sy's work engages as it shifts perceptions, offering possibilities for a new dramaturgy of artistic practise performed, mise en scène by artists, not as lonely action but as a celebration of the *métissage* of people, practises and art codings.

El Sy has a solo show at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 11th February-4th March 1995.

* Léopold Sédar Senghor in 'Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century' in *The African Reader: Independent Africa*, Vintage, Random Century, London, 1970, pp. 172-92.

- [1] The institutions set up during the Senghor period include, for example, the Maison des Arts (1960), the Institut National des Arts, the Manufacture des Arts Décoratifs (1964), the Musée Dynamique (1966), the Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar in 1966, and the Salons of Senegalese Artists (1973). 'The role of the state as a patron of the artists since independence who has bestowed more than 25% of its budget for education and culture should not be forgotten', L. S. Senghor, Preface to 'Anthology of Contemporary Fine Arts in Senegal' 1989 edited by F. Axt and El Hadji Sy, Museum fuer Voelkerkunde, Frankfurt.
- [2] El Sy worked with Seyba Lamine Traore and the theatre group Nouveau Toucan

on the play 'Choix de Madior' written by Ibrahima Sall in 1972-73.

- [3] Amadou Hampaté Ba writes of the Peul notion of personhood: 'La notion de personne est donc, au départ, très complexe. Elle implique une multiplicité intérieure, des plans d'existence concentriques ou superposés (physiques, psychiques et spirituels à différents niveaux), ainsi qu'une dynamique constante. (...) A aucun moment, la personne humaine n'est donc considérée comme une unité monolithique, limitée à son corps physique, mais bien comme un être complexe, habité par une multiplicité en mouvement permanent. Il ne s'agit donc pas d'un être statique ou achevé'. From A. Hampaté Ba, 'Notes sur la notion de personne dans les traditions peule et bambara' in *Aspects de la Civilisation Africaine* 1972, Présence Africaine, Paris pp. 11-13.
- [4] From a conversation with Issa Samb in the Laboratoire, Dakar, 9/12/93.
- [5] El Sy in a personal communication to C. Deliss in 10/4/94.
- [6] The exhibition was 'Otro País. Escales Africanas' curated by Simon Njami and Joelle Busca for the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, November 1994.
- [7] Amadou Hampaté Ba in 'Amkoullel. l'Enfant Peul-Mémoires' 1991, p. 13.



**SECOND RATE
PERIPHERIES:
VIRTUES AND
CONTRADICTIONS
OF REGIONALISM**

BY JONATHAN ALLEN

When the CAAM inaugurated that magnificent exhibition. "Surrealism between the Old World and the New", the ideology of tricontinentality resounded triumphantly. More than a genuine body of thought or workable intellectual creed it is a compilation and synthesis of tenets borrowed from Canarian-African and Canarian Latin American studies that have behind them two solid decades of academic history, seminars and hundreds of specialised publications. To deny an African connection in canarian history would be foolish, for we have a de facto geographical relation with Africa,

although the relation that we do have with this continent is paradoxically unacceptable to pure tricontinental theory that presupposes the existence, when not the active presence of cultural interrelations. However, between us and Africa, there has only been commerce, (at best), economic colonialism, exploitation, and right at the beginning of such a fertile story, brazen slavery. The unpleasant truth is that our cultural relation, past and present, with Africa, has been feeble as creativity and production go. We can only find certain formalist borrowings from African art in some of our local artists, and in certain aesthetic movements such as "indigenismo". Formalism, that is, and hardly ever real penetration in the history and psyche of a country. Lots of vague promises of "cooperation", (culturally speaking), mutual interests declared, art and craft and tourist fairs, trade and more trade. Africa is hardly anything more for us, and even less so in the mind, as there are no serious African studies offered in Canarian secondary education, and African Studies departments are still "taking shape" in both universities. Can someone please create such a department once and for all! Do please have the necessary vision!

Such lack of forethought makes it impossible for us to present the African or Africa in Europe, though we claim, vainly, that we are "Africans", and that our ancestors were ethnically related to the Berber-Libyan race, (This is no lie. The guanches were dark-skinned North-Africans).

We confuse, dangerously, geographical location with spiritual brotherhood and cultural reality. The simple geographical fact of being "African" is used as a ticket to participate in an African reality that is non-European. I can never forget a tragic, ironic circumstance that took place when the exhibition "Africa Today" was being put up, that glossy collection of African art curated by André Magnin, which was controversially received. In the waters of the Puerto de la Luz appeared the lifeless body of one Mohamed Fofana, an African nobody knew that had wanted to enter Canarias illegally. The facts surrounding his death have not officially