

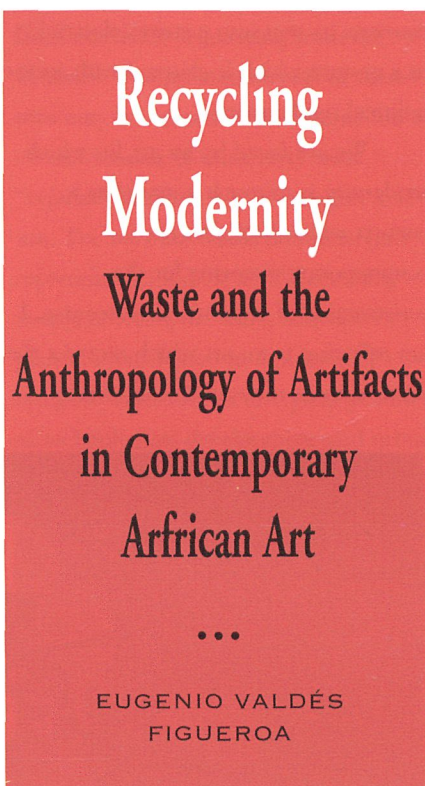
TERRITORIES

"What's good for nothing is always good for something."

Jean Baudrillard.

Man makes machines in his own image. Every creation carries within it something of its creator. The perfection of the creation reaffirms the creator's worth. Modern society sought for its confirmation in an industrial universe which aimed to achieve the extension of humanity through the machine. The industrial society assigned a space to the mythology of the mechanical and the automatic. Industry initiates a cycle of reproduction and the replacement of reality, which also contains a destructive impulse. Consumption, as Baudrillard stated, also implies the "annihilation" of objects [1]. But the annihilation of an object does not mean the destruction of its human content. There is a certain aesthetic idea in this anthropological persistence, for the machine always seems to have an anthropomorphic tendency which is not nullified by its uselessness.

The anthropological part of a machine is associated with its function, but is also a question of meaning. As in art, the anthropological sense of machinery provides them with a field of inactivity, of a non-practical sense from which stems their beauty and spirituality. Something of this idea could be sensed in modern European art. The fascination for the *objet trouvé*, for the ready-made and for the machine as a form and as a model, was not just the response to an interest in renovating styles and artistic approaches. I would say that it had an interest in *humanising* more emphatically the artistic object. Industrial reality began to form a part of



the artistic-aesthetic reality within the modernistic impulse to unite social and aesthetic experience. The first step was already taken in the mechanical world with the discovery of the aesthetic content that can be found in Man's relationship with the machine.

In post-industrial society this aesthetic content would be modified by the artificial acceleration of the life-cycle and death of objects. Immersed in a synthesised existence by the rhythm of consumerism, humankind in these societies has few opportunities to appreciate the spiritual value of an ephemeral objectuality. Compared with these societies, African cultures of today would appear chaotic and aberrant in their persistent tendency to preserve objects which have been made to be disposable.

On the threshold of the 21st

century, African cities behave as though they were a kind of museum for the storage of the evidence of an outdated modernity, which is only accessible to the postmodern world by the imitation of the old-fashioned.

The recycling culture which is generated by underdevelopment, tends to extend the life of objects, and to their use in ways contrary to consumer logic and the premature wearing out of things common to developed societies. This tendency uses artistic methodologies to recycle the remains of industrial production -after they have been used and then thrown away- and transfer them to the area of social life, from which they have been displaced.

The introduction of this methodology in Zimbabwe, for example, entailed the use of a different attitude with respect to local artistic tradition. In this country, sculpture in stone became a form of artistic expression which alternated with the liturgical, functional and operative symbolic production of the rest of the continent. But unlike these, stone sculpture was designed according to a Western concept of the artistic object as an independent entity, using the criterion of the artist and as a single work.

One of the most interesting contributions made by the stone sculpture of Zimbabwe was precisely that, the material used. In Zimbabwe there was no strong tradition of sculpture in stone, or even in wood as in some other African regions. This made even more radical the strength of the break which the use of metal in sculpture entailed, as introduced by some artists in recent years. The change in aesthetic attitudes brought with it the

appearance of other implications. It would be difficult to determine if Zimbabwe sculptors began working with recycled metal in a search for less orthodox subjects, or if the material itself provided a new field of sculptural meanings. However, it is obvious that when an artist like Paul Machowani works on the subject of the hunter (see his work *Vadzimba*, at the 1992 *Zimbabwe Heritage*, an annual visual arts exhibition organised by the Zimbabwe National Gallery), using an assembly of metal sheets, the figure acquires new implications. The coincidence of a traditional theme and an original medium forms part of the classic contradiction of modern Africa: the development of a survival culture at the crossroads between the industrial and the “primitive”. The scrap metal in the works by Machowani gives a spirit of deprivation and poverty to the human figure. If in *Vadzimba* this concept is expressed allegorically, in works such as *Refugees* the allusion to the misery and suffering of the individual is more literal. Another good example of this realism is the work *Thinking about the Drought*, by Joseph Chanota, which also refers to the living conditions of the African people.

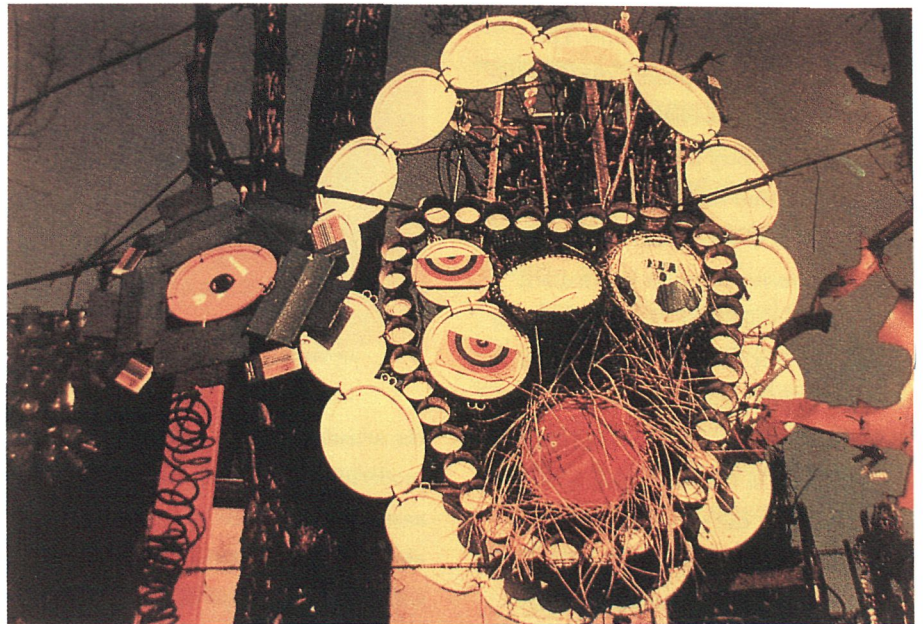
It is undeniable that together with technical innovations there have appeared new thematic procedures, more strongly linked to the African social reality of the 20th century and which shake the aesthetic standards established by sculpture in stone. Alongside realist themes, worked in the style of Machowani or Joseph Chanota, a fantastic figuration has developed which takes advantage of the “inventive” possibilities provided by assembling, as can be seen in the works of Victor Madzima or the *Hot Seat* of Adam Madebe. This last work is an example of

the direct appropriation and re-functionalisation of an object. Madebe uses a factory-made metal chair and converts its seat into a stove (electric?) in a gesture which is charged with socio-political implications.

We are faced by an art for which modernity is as much a model as a context which furnishes the contemporary elements for the construction of an aesthetic discourse. I am referring to an art which *recycles* the modern in its materiality and the

the contrary, move within the “marché” and the gallery, reproducing the networks of production and circulation of African aesthetics in its double game of authenticity and sham.

The work of the Beninese artist, Romuald Hazoumé (Porto Novo), made with plastic knobs and things he has found, mixed with craft objects and approaches, is a way of reproducing ritual masks on an artistic level while violating all the conventions that would make them useful within the magic-



Mo Edoga (Nigeria).

traditional in its content. This art distances itself from the idea of a “school” which was held by stone sculpting, but its most interesting difference is based on its search for sources in social areas, within a basically urban cultural context. In Zimbabwe, the most evident assimilation of the modern in stone sculpture was to be found in the areas of technique and formal criteria, but its idea of aesthetic creation as a self-sufficient activity stemmed more from perceptive experience than from social experience. The models of the art of recycling, on

religious system. Hazoumé recycles and re-semanticises not only industrial waste, but also traditional manufacturing together with ritual iconography. Although his work does not seem to have any parodic intent, the fact is that he de-consecrates the object in a modernistic sense, whereupon he is only reproducing at an artistic level what has already happened at “marché” level. It was the demand for the mask as the symbol of the African which converted it into a commodity par excellence. Among so much merchandise the mask is a fetish. Its value for ritual

use is supplanted by its exchange value, its role as a tourist souvenir. Now de-consecrated in the “marché” dynamics and turned into the archetype of the African, its symbols were modified for the buyer: the mask becomes a fetish, but only for Western customers.

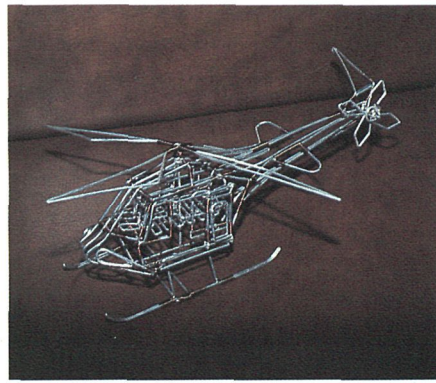
The market has been converted into the space where the tourist symbolically satisfies his illusions. The tourist seeks the authentic African as a re-affirmation of the authentic West, by means of a process of comparison -or better still, through a system of position and opposition relationships- , but also through the discovery of those modern aesthetic paradigms which have been assimilated by the African people.

The traditional mask represents the real African in a “pure” state, while a mask by Hazoumé signifies the authenticity of the modernist aesthetic, superimposed on the traditional [2].

The visual universe of the African artist is marked by the eclecticism of the market, where the mask and the souvenir coexist. It is a paradise of the sham authentic but also of the authentic sham. Not only in the markets but also on the streets of Dakar, for example, the tourist is pestered by vendors offering briefcases made of beer and coca cola cans. In 1992, these same briefcases could be seen at the *Encounter with the Other* exhibition, supposedly organised to criticise the Eurocentric and elitist vision of the Kassel Dokumenta. Who is most deceived, the tourist who buys the case as a souvenir or the curator who exhibits it as evidence of authenticity?

Something similar has happened with the tendency among international critics to judge the African toys made of wire as artistic objects with ethnographical value, while at the same time they are bought basically as curiosities. These toys are not produced

for artistic circles, and locally fulfil all the parameters of craftwork, without reference to the fact that they are made from materials originating from the factories. The present success of these toys may be related to the interaction of certain models of modernity with “typical” methods of presentation and use. The toys are based on archetypes representing modern life (specifically means of transport: cars, helicopters, planes, motorbikes) in a process of symbolic substitution of typical products of technological development and urban



Juguete de alambre.

vision. This same phenomenon has already been seen in the undertakers’ sculpture of Ghana, where the coffins are made in the form of planes or cars which refer to the “user’s” profession , or a world of social aspirations and class and status symbols. The toys also have this childlike feeling, and, ironically, the fantasies of the Europeans and non-African critics. It would seem that the Western world has been called upon to extend the majority of the myths of marginal cultures by inserting them within Western mythology itself, ranging from the consumer society to the art world.

In the streets of the city of Benin the moped is the means of transport par excellence, and instead of petrol stations there are street vendors who carry their own cans which they constantly refill.

These form part of a “landscape” in which the African artist seeks his raw materials as naturally as he would in a forest. This is an urban landscape in which factory-made consumer goods abound. By resorting to these elements to construct art objects, the sculptor recuperates and re-uses worn out objects which have been consumed and stamped by man. This is what stands out in the sculptures produced by the brothers Théodore and Calixte Dakpogan, made with assembled and soldered motorcycle parts, and many of them with Yoruba or Voodoo mythological themes.

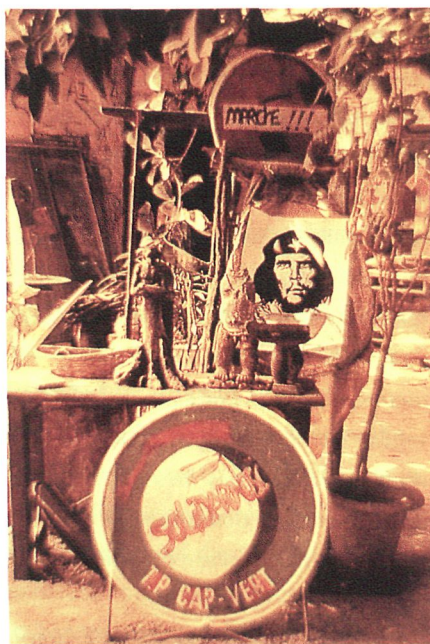
These artists belong to a family of ironworkers attached to the royal court and who make objects for Voodoo rites. For the curators of the “Another Country” exhibition, where some of their works were shown, this is “...a world reconstructed from the junk of our laughable modern fetishes” [3], but perhaps for the Beninese the motorcycle is *not* a fetish, at least *not* in the way it is for a European. Neither do these “men-machines” refer to the idea of the robot, which belongs to societies which face daily the growing automation of production and the conflict between human beings and machinery. At least, what stands out in these works is the *humanised content of junk*, which is fused harmonically with the anthropomorphic nature of sculpture. In a way, the Dakpogán brothers conduct their own excavation into Benin’s visual and productive worlds, since the motorcycle works both as a utilitarian vehicle and a status symbol. It is an accessory that society uses and that the artist recycles so that it may be used again. It is in this sense that the useless can be useful.

The Ugandan artist, John Edward Odoch-Ameny re-uses bells, pistons, chains and typewriters. Elements taken



Peace Park, 1985. Oukasi Township, Brits, Sudáfrica.

from the world of transport and communication. He depicts human beings, like the Dakpogán brothers, but his female figures serve as symbols of fertility and the special place of women in African society. It is an image of women as mythical beings, linked to the origin and continuation of the species. The relationship between this image of women and the use of elements from the



Peace Park, 1985. Oukasi Township, Brits, Sudáfrica.

world of communication is reinforced by the concept of the female as a key factor of civilisation. “She is like a wheel in which Man moves” says Odoch-Ameny, “She is the transmission.” [4]

Unlike the Dakpogan brothers, Odoch-Ameny received no training in a traditional family trade. He studied and worked in North American and European universities, and therefore his approach to waste is much more conceptual. During his high school studies he worked in machine shops, with motors and old car parts. There, he developed an anthropological concept of machines, not only their content, but also their form and design, which gave him a link with the ideas of modernity, which proposed the machine as a symbol of progress and human development.

The Nigerian artist Mo Edoga, who took part in the fourth Kassel Dokumenta, worked throughout the event on the construction of works using recycled material. The exhibition of the work as a process referred both to industrial production and the reproduction of waste. Thus, waste is the material and the subject of the work. In this material, Mo Edoga seeks the individual aura and also the social significance. He tries to recuperate the human that endures in garbage, and produce a metaphor on its accumulative process. For this reason, his spherical installations give the impression that they will continue to increase while his towers will carry on growing endlessly.

The way in which Mo Edoga conceptualizes the anthropological content of waste is by no means removed from ecological beliefs. *Although this artist does not aim to produce a militant discourse on environmental damage, he does construct his aesthetic discourse with elements extracted from the margins of*

the ecosystem, to reflect on the logic of the production and expansion of these margins. With these elements he is able to make constructions which “order” the chaotic world of garbage. This order reproduces the order and rhythm of industry which is parallel to the pace of the growth of waste.

It is the vision of an artist who has had close contact with the Western aesthetic tradition; but his perception of the anthropological also has to do with his own African origin. Therefore, if Mo Edoga (who presently lives in Germany) has observed that his prism ranges “from Da Vinci to Joseph Beuys,” he does not mention the importance to him of coming from a society where “one can eat with one’s hands, symbol of absolute human liberty.” [5] To eat with one’s hands is also symbolic of a society where the machine has still not replaced the individual. In some ways, the work of Mo Edoga could be a warning about machinery’s invasive presence in the post-industrial world.

When an artist like Sokari Douglas Camp (Nigerian, resident in London) constructs her sculptures from scrap iron, she is assuming a similar perspective towards industrial waste. For her, this waste does not denote modern decadence (the debris of a fetish), but rather the permanence of the anthropological aura of machine wastes. By “portraying” the English through this medium, Douglas Camp is ironically superposing an African idiom and world view upon the image of a Westerner. [6] At the same time Sokari Douglas imposes a contemporary mentality and a heterodox attitude as an alternatives to the clichés of the genuine.

Like the materials themselves, the procedures can be transferred from one sphere to another, without loss of their organic natures. For instance, the work

that Norman Catherine (South Africa) began in the mid-1980s was inspired by the methods used by African children to make toys from wire. Using the same materials (metal, wire, empty cans, etc.) Catherine made a series of “portraits” of typical characters representing the repressive South African bureaucracy. This system includes not only whites, but also a sector of blacks who took part in the machinery of racist control and repression. The works are caricatures



Norman Catherine (Sudáfrica). *Boss*, 1986.

and poke fun openly at the people holding power and at the middle-level people who carry out the orders.

These sculptures also retain something of the playful nature of the production of wire toys. They seem fragile, and at the same time appear to be made for handling. Generally speaking, they are works on the borderline of art, play and politics. For one thing, they recover and enrich the contents of marginality that wire toys already possess; non-institutional production, that recycles scrap. *Appropriating the procedure*, Catherine recycles a language of the periphery. All

this sharpens the protest inherent in his work, since it has recourse to a materialness which in a way already belongs to a social context, and this belonging is a part of the cultural memory of junk.

Norman Catherine’s work has the archaeological sense visible in the work of other South African artists, such as Willie Bester and Sue Williamson, who recover an objectuality in which an ideological content and a historical circumstance endure. If we consider the relation between the latest works by Williamson with the demolition of District 6, in Cape Town, or that of Bester with the places where there were confrontations with the police, we will note the marked interest of these artists in underlining the temporal and spatial signs of identity in artistic concerns.

This circumstantial and contextual factor can be seen in other cultural phenomena arising from the suburban slums of Africa. In her book *Resistance Art in South Africa*, Sue Williamson herself collects testimony of the aesthetic-political activity carried out in Johannesburg in the middle of 1985, when the State of Emergency interrupted garbage collection in the city. Township youths organised groups to collect the garbage in the street, to clean up open spaces and make them into parks, where they planted trees, painted murals and installed sculptures made from items found amongst the rubbish. The connotations of this activity were expressed by a 15-year-old boy, quoted by Sue Williamson: “They can kill us or arrest us, but they can never take away the pride we feel in caring for our environment. [7] The construction of these “Peace Parks”, as they were called, was quickly interrupted by the police, who argued that these places were used to hide

weapons caches. Thus the garbage which had been turned into protest art was returned to the rubbish heap, fulfilling an ironic destiny.

On visiting the studio of the artist Issa in Dakar, I could not help but think about the chaotic and informal look that such South African “Peace Parks” had. There were mounds of junk that looked like installations, *objets trouvés* making up sculptures, graffiti on the walls, flags and photographs of revolutionary leaders, as well as oil painting. The site had been used for meetings of the Laboratoire Agit-art in the 1980s. This was a group of intellectuals (painters, poets, filmmakers and others), involved in collective and ephemeral artistic productions, mainly installations and performances. From an aesthetic point of view, they were opposed to the *Ecole de Dakar*, which, although playing an important role in its day, had degenerated into a sort of academy under the sway of President Senghor, and a symbol of the official ideology of Senegal.

Issa Samb refused to take part in the first Dakar Biennial, the 1992 Dakart, during the Abdou Diouf presidency [8], which tells us something of the quality of protest in his art. His works today, like his attitude, continue to evidence the spirit of Agit-art. His opposition to the *Ecole de Dakar* was not merely formal: it implied a different way of understanding and assuming modernity in art, not as a congeries of visual schemata to be repeated, but as a trend that acknowledges the possibilities of social and political impact of the art work.

The work of Issa Samb recycles symbologies and emblems, along with found materials. He concentrates not on the original use of junk, but rather on its political origin and its ideological use.

The constant use of political symbols wears them out and semantically annihilates them, just as the consumption of factory products trial wears out the objects of modernity. In this category Issa Samb includes the African mask, bearing in mind the political use that Senghor's government made of the "authentic" and his ideology of negritude. The artist plays with these disguises (these second-hand masks) which make up rhetorical formulas. According to Ima Ebong, for artists like Issa Samb and the other members of the Laboratoire Agit-Art, the mask and traditional sculpture are not simply ready-mades, but fragments of identities which reach them from the contingencies of history, so as to critically re-organise the internal dynamics of Senegalese modern culture [9].

This idea is applicable to the artists and cultural expressions that I have mentioned here. Their recycling of modernity is in many cases linked to the recycling of local tradition. Always with the intent of renewing. The modern appears in these work, either as a model which is appropriated, transformed and re-inserted into the African cultural framework, or as productive and communicative material reality, to which it alludes through its remains. Scrap becomes proof of modernity, and paradoxically can be used as raw material to re-modernise local artistic traditions. This is made evident in the areas of African art which took advantage of the experience of contact with machinery. The artists who enter this mechanised universe make a double use of this proof of modernity. First, because they work with a methodology already used in the field of art; and second because they use a substance marked by modernisation. The fact that

these African artists work from scrap lessens the contradiction which leaps to the eye, between the industrial world and the "primitiveness" attributed to the African continent. In short, these artists recycle the marginal area of modernity. But, even so, this art gives rise to a deconstruction of the typical African. In this sense, rubbish can function with respect to artistic tradition -and typical craft work- in the same way that high technology functions within the Western painting and sculpting tradition: as a means of renewal and criticism, which introduces new languages and production codes.

NOTES

- [1] See Jean Baudrillard, *El Sistema de los Objetos* (The System of Objects). Siglo Veintiuno Publishers, Mexico, 1992.
- [2] A computer carved in wood by the artist Koffi Kouakou, for example, was a commissioned work. The European or North American tourist no longer wants a portrait of himself and his family, but rather a display of the technology that he worships and which sustains him. (Author's note).
- [3] Catalogue of the *Otro País* (Another Country) exhibition. African Ranges. Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1995, p. 67.
- [4] Quoted by Paolo Bianchi, John Edward Odoch-Ameny. In: *Kunstforum International, Afrika-Iyalewa*, N. 122, Berlin, May-July 1993, pp. 296-297.
- [5] Quoted by Nadja Taskov-Köhler, Mo Edoga. In: *Kunstforum International, Afrika-Iyalewa*, N. 122, Berlin, May-July, 1993, pp. 254-256.
- [6] African artistic tradition already contains examples that lend a historical character to that glance towards the metropolises. It is enough to mention the polychromatic wooden sculptures knowns as "Colons", which depict the European colonists, and which can still be found today from Northern Nigeria and Camerún to the Ivory Coast (Author's note).
- [7] Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa*. David Phillip publisher (Pty) Ltd, Cape Town & Johannesburg, 1989, p. 88.
- [8] It was Abdou Diouf who in 1983 violently turned the artists out of the Village des Arts, an old colonial quarter where they lived and had their studios, and who also closed in 1988 the Musée Dynamique, site of the First Festival of Pan-African Art in 1966. Said festival set a direct precedent for the Bienal of Dak-art, which Diouf tried to manipulate for political reasons in his electoral campaign of 1992 (Author's note).
- [9] See Ima Ebong, "Negritude: Between Mask and Flag — Senegalese Cultural Ideology and the Ecole de Dakar". In: Catalogue of the exhibition *Africa Explores*, 20th Century African Art. The Centre for African Art, New York and Prestel, Munich, 1991, p. 208.



Suitcases. Exhibition: "Encounter with the Other".

