

an investigation of polemical intentions

It is very easy to define: an incursion into terra incognita. The crystallization of a desire, the expression of dissatisfaction. To show what is rarely able to be seen. We have fought against topology and established meanings in order to arrive at this show that is very subjective. I don't know whether exhibitions are the best medium for revealing art, and I wonder if the museum isn't really a promoter of exclusions. I only know that initiatives such as this should proliferate because museums do exist, because there is a public and money for such purposes. And quite frankly, humbly, in order to popularize.

What an artist wants when he exhibits is usually something subtle and confused. The role of a curator in a show like this is to respect the complexity of identities (there are twenty-five artists and eighty-one works) so that the art works may "meet", interactions be reinforced and differences underlined.

Africa and the Caribbean are in essence pluricultural lands. This means that the mythical and the real ingredients are inseparably mixed.



ROOTS AND DERIVATIONS: THE KIDNAPPED OTHER

BY ANTONIO ZAYA

You can't comb anybody in their absence.

(From the wise African oral tradition quoted by Ery Camara)

Africa is a continent as close as it is distant from Europe, unknown and consequently disdained and feared, colonized and exploited. This fundamental premise is, not surprisingly, to be assimilated when one decides to follow the contemporary artistic activity of Africa. It is no surprise either that the attention paid by the media to this

continent is tendentious, imprecise and manipulated. Yet African visual arts stimulated European curiosity from the very beginning of the colonialist process, and that pseudocourtly fashion—as characterized by Antonio García Ysabal—begins at the end of the 15th century and culminates at the start of the 18th century, "being substituted, —he writes—, by the lucrative commerce of slavery", whose criminal and devastating dimension greatly surpassed the tragedy of Auschwitz or Hiroshima, according to the investigations of Malcolm Cowley, submitting during four centuries African nations and their most prominent cultures to a cruel, destructive process.

However, this interest in African art reappears in Europe at the beginning of the present century, represented by artists of such prestige as Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck, that would be followed by many more later on. Despite all of this, the majority of European African art scholars have judged it on simplistic and superficial tenets, determined by the characteristic of their culture, not penetrating the complex ideological codes that govern the life and the art of its cultures and tribes. The conclusions reached have been so disparate, as they have been prejudiced and demerital. We mustn't forget that till recently this continent was considered to be the homeland of barbarity. Following the GrecoRoman tradition, early medieval Christianity called the Mediterranean region of the African continent Barbaria, and considering the influence of Arabs (Berbers) called it Berbery, according to Isacio Pérez Fernández. Yet, as García Ysabal says, "Lacking the necessary sensibility, and frequently honesty, they were not able to appreciate the value of the cultural heritage of the African people, nor its backwardness and primitivism as a paradoxically contemporary phenomenon, for Africa's decadence begins with the incursions of slavery, that Europe was principally responsible for".

Yet could we establish parallels between the artists that made up the exhibition, "Another Country" and their contemporary Western colleagues, or have we not understood anything? This is the question that has been put to me on different occasions with respect to the

various African art shows that have recently toured Europe and America. We can safely state that African art is part of life and not something "different" to it, and that to a large extent it is the consequence of a culture and a society that generates it and represents it and where the spirit still protects and shelters the meaning of experience. However I'm not sure how many of the artists included here are in agreement with me. Africa continues to be as attractive a name and as enigmatic, as profound today as it was one hundred years ago.

This exhibition is surprising both for its geographical characteristics and for the fact that it assumed a lack of knowledge as to what was really happening in oblivion. "I have often thought that between them and us there is a whole world," said Magnin a few years back, "They are not immobile things, they are actions completely oriented towards life", and he recalled Duchamp, for whom "art is a secret one has to share and transmit like a message among conspirators".

This meaning foreign to the commodity goods which the residual artistic objects in Europe and America has become, as an offshoot of the entertainment industry, already has probably become an appreciating value for our decadent culture. Is the return of magic its immediate consequence?

However, it is equally foreseeable a parallel development of fundamentalism and the orthodoxy of mainstream creeds, guaranteed by the "integration" of "peripheral" cultures in the great capitals of Europe and America, where xenophobic and racist symptoms are quickly being accelerated given the state of "defenceless" permeability of our innocent democratic culture.

"The damned of the earth", as Fanon called them forty years ago, are the same people. Their names, their signs, their images take us back to the obscurity of their origins. That protects them from sacrilegious plunder. However it also makes the relation with this vision of the world and the eurocentric vision a continuing mirage. In this sense the European preoccupation with "the other" is more a consequence of the terminal condition of our blocked culture than a desire to communicate

with the true nature of difference, with "hell", as Sartre termed the others.

Exhibitions like "Another Country" make the urgency evident and inevitable of considering the art of Africa from within African cultural reality that motivates it, and not from our commercial and aesthetic concerns, derived from a defunct model that only reveals the wrecked state of our culture.

In this sense, this exhibition evokes the convulsions that this strange continent has suffered and suffers: hunger, AIDS, war, emigration and death, the gods, nature and the world environment, the world of domestic manipulation, colonization and misery that generate these works and to which they come back with answers.

Nevertheless it isn't an isolated world, although it may be a victim of oblivion, and where art, —as we think of it in Europe, separate from life—, loses all meaning if it rejects its sacred condition. Africa is at our doorstep, and although we turn our backs to it and behave as if we didn't hear anybody, its destiny is our own.

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré analyzed the character of these African works with a lovely description. "in my country, (Ivory Coast), there is a tortoise much appreciated by us, on whose extremely beautiful shell a certain bird deposits its excrements. We ask ourselves which of the two animals is the artist".

That exhibition reminded us that, in the long run, the inevitable interaction between culture and nature is the indispensable condition for approaching and comprehending these works; also, probably, a revelatory journey that will make European art recover its mystery and transparency.

However, as Simon Njami says, "It is risky to talk about African art in general terms, when this abstract definition no longer reveals concrete reality, for nationalist and individualist demands have become stronger progressively. It is also risky to talk about a common heritage shared by Caribbeans and Africans, for mankind's history is not linear and the strength of man lies in his ability to create his own references, his own legacy".

In any case, we can't forget what Ery Camara states: "That the man of our

creations is connected with others and with invisible forces". Let us neither forget Ouza's saying, also quoted by Camara: "Whoever lends you his eyes will make you look where he likes".

Probably cultures are nothing other than remote constructions, whose signs, vestiges and tracks live on in specific genetic memory or in the collective subconscious and are transmitted from one generation to the other as living bodies, that grow, develop and sometimes disappear when other constructions are superimposed, tumbling down to become a layer until the process of sedimentation creates geological strata.

This crossing of different sediments that archaeology has discovered and studied during recent history, as an unfinished mosaic, occurs instantaneously in the vertigo of cultural contemporaneity, without the hegemonic traits of dominant cultures being able to stand out and protrude for a long time, but simultaneously, in communion with the roots from which stem the sign of the differences that compose the multiple character of our modern life's identity, or what is the same, the symbols of the wreckage of our identity.

This intercultural, multinational, universal scene, belies the uniformity and the globalization that the "new global order" apparently suggests, and which isn't ordered or new, but dictated by the Western North, although it also propitiates a transnational dialogue, beyond frontiers, continents, languages, religions, races and ideologies, at the centre of our poetic origins, a common yet plural centre, beyond aesthetic styles, formal rhetoric and the principal tendencies of the market and Western trends. A dialogue that concerns our territorial doubts and fears, our migrations, emigrations and syncretisms.

It is therefore not simply a question of returning to the origins and substituting the past for the future, but of setting out and returning and then setting out again and to acknowledge the simultaneity of parallel yet divergent reasonings, diverse yet integrated, that tend to be known for their differences and not for their identities, more for their affirmations than for the fact of

their marginal integration as a peripheral appendix of the dominant hegemonic trend.

To some extent "Otro País: Escalas Africanas" explores, in its own terms, those roots, its re-locations and differences, that, eventually signify the plural, métis, open character of universal artistic discourse, for we are analyzing a living, fully developing culture that refuses to be set down and fixed as a written, dead culture.

As far as the selected artists are concerned, these are not representative, as indeed is the case when we consider art; their value lies in who they are, in their individual ideas, that are self-sufficient and significant. However, what links these artists, their re-locations, derivations and fusions, at the same time differentiates them, for each one of them is an example of singularity and exceptionality, as other artists from here or from elsewhere can also be. This apparent contradiction makes the whole of their work as dialogue, reveal the new conditions of contemporary artistic work, beyond the Western market and its consumers.

In any case, this exhibition expresses, somehow, not only the individual desires of its creators but signs and mythical evocations, the visions of the communities that use those signs, solutions and new enigmas. In this sense, it is not a question of a confrontation between roots and their Atlantic diaspora but of a cultural plurality in an unknown environment nonetheless already immediate.

In their own way these works also talk about defending the frontier, the limits within which they continue to exist as unknown. After all, for the other, the present situation is a reflection of the crisis of a project that was presented as a culture of emancipation. What is precisely lacking in globalism today, is a project to cope with the demolition of critical conscience.

Moreover, the repression, omission or inhibition of an identical universal language certainly establishes a promiscuity in which the children stop seeing the world through the lens of one unique language, and therefore, through an historical experience restricted to the conditions of their original culture, such

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

