

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

been revealed. Was it an “accident” or was it a “crime” involving a brutal, *undercover.criminal repatriation gang?* Some weeks ago, near where Fofana was found, the Police evicted the illegal tenants of a derelict, tumble-down ship, some African men who were using the inhuman premises as a boarding place.

At the time I avoided saying it directly in a newspaper article, but it was like accepting and rejoicing over aesthetics and African culture while rejecting and destroying the physical body. The royal roads of cultural exchange were all festooned for an intercontinental exhibition and there was one unclaimed African body floating in the water. The Immigration Laws in Europe are now tougher than ever, and with illegal immigrants, once caught and tried, no exceptions are made. Repatriation is the bitter fate of those who don't make it. Nations and counties maintain cruel frontiers and barriers, because the interests of race are powerful.

Such precedents lead me to a kind of systematic distrust, or to severe doubt concerning the implementation of multiculturalism, or cultural pluriraciality in the islands. Not due to prejudice nor disdain, not at all. The mixing of bloods is a possible way out to the dead-end of the North-South divide. Our Canarian self-awareness as community and our ideas of self-definition, only timidly and superficially incorporate Africa, even less now that we are fully integrated in the economic community of Europe, and that the commercial independence that had brought in thousands of millionsof pesetas in trade benefits, with Mauritania, to give one example, is no longer there as it used to be. In exchange we have important infrastructural financing via different European programmes. On the one hand we demand a Canarian foreign policy dictated by our cultural and geographical identity, (within the limitations of the Spanish constitution as we are Spaniards), on the other we fear the effects of immigration from Africa, interracial marriages, the fusion of cultures and the Africanization of cosmopolitan society.

Can we therefore say that the

multicultural fails in Canarias owing to purely racist motives and to the *distortions of prejudice?* Exclusively *no*, although the fact of being such a non-mixing society creates considerable *barriers*. *Multiculturalism is an “inside” achievement of a society, it just doesn't happen as a direct consequence of geographical privilege, as tricontinentality would have us happily believe: neither is it an exciting option in the catalogue of fin.de siècle plurality, though sometimes it is sold this way, given our tendency to commercialise intellectual innovations. Multiculturalism is found in university departments, in town councils, in an alternative, sometimes radical interpretation of contemporary European ills: social integration and marginalism, unemployment and the linguistic identity of complex communities. It implies a tacit though not necessarily stable balance between the culture that officially receives and the new accepted culture, and it can't be organized or turned into political gain, nor can it be a programmed item of party politics.*

There was a kind of suspicious europeanist orchestration about the whole of “Africa Today” , a smug reception of the exotic in new guise, of up-market African tailored art. “Otro País”.(Another Country), has been a recent exception at the CAAM, and it began to undo part of the fallacious first reception of Africa. “Another Country” juxtaposed parallel worlds and different latitudes, and so thanks to this axiomatic idea of an aesthetic community sharing coherence and influences, opened up a new perspective. Now we have to go one step further, and throw together the African and the European, the national and the regional, the ethnic symbol and dramatized primitive impulse, (the latter is European), searching for deeper themes, avoiding the localist criteria of “art from” which is the final flickering of European collectionism, of the well stocked cabinet of curiosities that boasts its African trophies.

One of the strengths of multiculturalism, in what seems to be the critical theorizing of Cuban critics writing for “Atlántica”, is the appropriation of isms and centralist

styles, in order to mix them and transform them with the art production of *non-central, poor and peripheral countries*, (or the “Third World”, whatever that may mean), that *nevertheless are culturally potent*. This kind of of appropriation is undoubtedly the emblem of militant global periphery, united in its struggle against an ever weaker centralist world, whose contemporary art exhibitions, biennials and events are more often than not structured by “weak” thought. This model of opposition between the Centre and the Periphery, in art terms,(given the mobility of art in the world), is becoming dated, and perhaps as a theory it is a bit dead-end, as all confrontational modes of analysis that pit one side against the other.

Multiculturalism is on the right road to overcoming confrontational frustrations, it is getting rid of propagandism. Now, we are expectant, awaiting the results of coexistence and polyracial solutions to old problems. Will multiculturalism in art and in thought in communities, solve certain problems? (Jamaicans in London), will it move Portuguese society to legalize the status of illegal immigrants that society has accepted with ease, (of course, they do not have relevant jobs), will it alleviate the tensions of moderate moslems facing extreme compatriots in Paris? Perhaps so. Yet it will not eradicate what moves young Europeans to burn Turks or drown Algerians.

The category of being peripheral and the fact of living in a periphery have to be revised seriously, for being “peripheric” does not immediately presuppose “cultural difference” with Europe, (in such peripheral status we can list the Canaries, Madeira, Cyprus, Sardinia, Corsica, and other new “affiliated” European Union members ex-Warsaw Pact). Perhaps, difference only exists in subtle shades and not as substantial identity.

In Canarias we are Africans geographically and genuinely peripheral, and our status in the European Union specifies these facts in administrative and political documents that exist to lessen and compensate the disadvantages of distance. However, in aesthetics and in art, *Canarias can hardly be thought*

of as a multicultural platform acting in the European periphery with a clearly different sensibility; it tends to include, tangentially, the African and the Latin American in a tricontinentality that enables it to belong to a virtual and plural community, that isn't exclusively Spanish or national.

In the city of Las Palmas we have a hindu community that is almost one hundred years old, that has maintained its traditions and kept them alive, but that has never really wanted to share them with a society that by day is their client for cheap radiocassettes. Perhaps because they have not produced artists, thinkers, poets, as they are merchants. Commerce can kill anything remotely multicultural. There are floating populations of Coreans, Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, who are posted here to attend their fishing fleets. There is a palestinian community, a jewish one, a moroccan. These different nationalities have their residence permits in order. And then, there are the Africans, who have not settled in the islands, who come and go, legally or illegally, who we watch in the streets selling bad tourist art.

On the plus side of our evaluation we can put the exceptional cultural and historical relation that we have with the Saharai people, an intensely emotional link, who are beyond doubt the africans we best accept. Despite all of this we are not a multiracial society. Why? In part due to the fact that the racial groups and communities in Canarias don't tend to articulate and project cultural messages, nor do they manifest their differences in a intellectual and artistic dimension. This limitation of multicultural dialogue is unhappily compensated by a series of diplomatic cultural initiatives, "weeks of", "the cuisine of...".

Furthermore, the canarians are living through a belated phase of self-definition and self government, that implies the development of decentralization contemplated in our autonomous charter. A great deal of energy is employed in long and difficult state negotiations, and in the drawing up of legal documents and administrative surveys necessary for the creation of organic local, regional laws. All natural conditions theoretically favour a

multicultural flourishing in the islands yet creative energy has been displaced to more pragmatic ends. For the time being, the multicultural is merely another option on the agends of that vaguest of finisecular realities announced in european cultural centres: "cultural plurality".

The relation between the islands and the central administration has never been easy, and frequently the historical peripheral marginalism of the islands brought semi-colonial rule. Besides, the geographical and cultural distance of european peripheries breeds strange hierarchies with peculiar tendencies.

Cultural and ethnic difference becomes an obsession, and this creates a certain "identity-mentality" that often ignores other more fertile possibilities of self-definition. Tricontinentality is a paradigm of all the contradictions found in the defense of multiculturalism in our atlantic world. It has a blinkering effect on our idea of the reality of relations between Canarias, Africa and Latin America. They are sporadic, infrequent and belong more to history than to actual time.

One of the major problems lies in our condition of "perpetual colonials", of a society that is submitted to certain markets that force us to produce certain specific goods to the detriment of commercial, economic stability. We lack the stamina and the serenity as a race to open the gates confidently to multiculturalism, for we have been decimated by emigration, the devastating succession of monocultural regimes in agriculture, and now, we are the semi-willing victims of a kind of subliminal colonization enforced by the tourist industry. We are not on equal terms with Europe, and we can't reject certain offers made to us. These determinant forces drastically interrupt any process of self-definition, and generate a syndrome of dispersion. There is an environmental sensibility presently gaining momentum that may be able to redress the balance of tourist trends in favour of greater canarian quality control, yet its effects won't be appreciable till the next century.

Our free evolution towards Africa has been curtailed initially by adherence

to the European Union. We have lived in a culture of moral and spiritual survival, even up to this day, colonized as we still are by multinational economic interests that have created a hybrid tourist culture. Tourists do not come to know us, not even to visit. They buy and consume a vacation package. If we hardly have cultural communication with the germans, scandinavians and english that come to us by millions yearly, how are we going to have it with Africa?



**BRANCUSI
IN THE WORK OF
PLÁCIDO FLEITAS**
SUGGESTIONS, INFLUENCES
AND CONFLUENCES

BY ÁNGEL SÁNCHEZ

Few of those interested in the local tradition of Canarian twentieth century Fine Arts would doubt the fact that Plácido Fleitas, (1915-1972), should be considered the first abstract sculptor of Canarias, although his abstract sculpture only occupied the last two decades of his life. His chisel had the power, and the pioneer's submission, to perform the journey from classical sculptural volume to the new avant-garde values of imaginary forms.

In an artistic milieu hardly at all devoted to sculpture, and where tradition crowned as great master the figure of the religious image-maker, Luján Pérez, we must acknowledge the fact that Plácido Fleitas had a rough time. Despite the lack of opportunities, of a certain credit that he enjoyed in the mainland, of publicity coverage, and perhaps, owing to the isolation that marked his character, as indeed happens to the archipelago, it has not been easy to establish his reputation as a famous sculptor, having become resigned all of us to accepting him as a peripheral figure. This lack of fame was also something Fleitas assumed, when he