Art, Identity, Boundaries: Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art
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In his rather interesting collection of interviews and plates, the postmodernist critic Thomas McEvilley asks Quattara: 'When and where were you born?', to which the temperamental artist responds with barely suppressed irritation. To many, this would seem an innocent and ordinary enough question, especially when the obvious intent is to present to us a, supposedly, relatively unknown artist. Asks the critic next: 'In 1957, was Abidjan a big urban centre, like today?' To which, again, Quattara duly provides the expected answer. On the first page of the interview, there is a picture of the artist, his face is aligned against the text, his brooding countenance attesting most eloquently and visibly to his impatience with the critic's line of enquiry. One can almost sense a building tension within the artist. Reading closely, however, one also notices that McEvilley, to the contrary, is quite relaxed. For him, the chat is going well, and he is comfortable. And when he is comfortable, everyone else is comfortable. As he maps the artist with his eyes, his mind retrieves from its cabinet of tourist postcards an image of an African mummy-wagon with a line of popular wisdom inscribed on its outer board: *No Hurry in Life*. It is the way of these people, he reminds himself: generous, charitable, accommodating. They take life easy. And so his mind drifts back to Quattara's studio, hardly taking notice of his quarry as the artist shifts uneasily on his stool, muttering under his breath. Quite predictably, the white boy fails to read the sign on the native's face. For him the gestures of the native are an invisible sign.

The critic runs his pen across his bushy face, and, as if speaking to a child on his first day at school asks: 'Would you tell me a little about your family?' There! Quattara explodes. But only within. Like a gentleman. The ultimate signifying monkey. He understands – he is brought up to understand, everything in his history and in his experience prepares him to understand and to accept – that in dealing with the power that McEvilley represents, he is engaged in an ill-matched game of survival; a game that he must play carefully if he is to avoid profound consequences; a game he must negotiate with patience to prevent his own erasure, his own annihilation; a game that he must ultimately concede in order to live. Living in New York, Quattara understands too well how, beyond the boundaries of colonial ethnographic displacement, the introduction of digitisation in our time has sanitised erasure and transformed it into a messless act. He understands how the mark of deletion, the ugly sites of cancellation and defacement, the crossing out, the scarred page, the marginal inscription – that which in the past testified to the processes of obliteration and through this testimonial actively subverted it – are now things of the past; and the object of the obliterative act now disappears together with the evidence of its own excision, making erasure an act without trace. This knowledge further underlines the ominousness of his location. Quattara understands how much he needs McEvilley, how much he stands to gain by making friends with him. He recognises, albeit painfully, that the terrain he occupies, the terrain to which he is perpetually consigned, in which he is confined, is one under surveillance, where every utterance, every gesture, carries with it implications of enormous weight for himself as an African artist,
and for his practice. And even more importantly, he recognises this terrain as an outpost, a location on the peripheries of the principalities that the critic represents – a border post at which McEvilley is the control official. This is the locality of the African artist dealing with the West, irrespective of her domicile. This I call the terrain of difficulty.

And so, holding his breath firmly down, gritting his teeth and silently but vigorously crossing out the dozen f-words bombing his brain while warning himself to take it all with calm, Ouattara stakes his final but ultimately futile claim: 'I prefer to talk about my work'.

Well. Not quite. The artist’s polite caution does not wash with the critic. Deftly and firmly McEvilley waves Ouattara’s protest aside and proceeds with his line of questioning. He feels in command; he must be seen to be in command. ‘If he hollers let him go’, reads an old, American plantation saying. But no. McEvilley is not fazed by the native’s protests. This time, the master will have his way. Describing the women of Huxian in About Chinese Women, Julia Kristeva images the native as a silent presence. In reading Ouattara’s moment with McEvilley, we are reminded of a different silent presence, closer perhaps to the obliterated presence that Chinua Achebe identifies in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the native whose silence is an objectifying projection – what we may refer to as significant silence. For though this silence is not literal, it is nevertheless real since, beyond the preferred narrative – that specified rhetoric that reiterates palatable constructs of Otherness – the native’s utterances are not speech. They occupy the site of the gural, the peripheries of sense, the space of the unmentionable where words are caught in a savage struggle and sounds turn into noise, into the surreal mirror-image of language. In this void of incoherence, utterance becomes silence because it is denied the privilege of audience. And without audience, there is no speech.

Sprawled out like Barthes in Tangier, or prowling through a market in Abidjan, the esoteric goulash of native utterance is of course the ultimate locale of Occidental desire, the last place in which to hunt for exotic pleasures. But this is not a pleasure trip. McEvilley has a book in mind and must have his story. Under the circumstances, native aspirations to desire and the dialog (‘I prefer…’), native pretensions to power and sophistication (‘to discuss my work…’), are quickly displaced in a hegemonic withdrawal of audience that re-establishes the hierarchical location of the Self over the Other, of the white critical and artistic establishment over the African artist. On this stage of simulacral dialogue there is only one voice that counts. The Other can exist only as a projection, an echo, as the displaced sound of percussive fracture.

And so McEvilley drives his conversation with Ouattara towards the realisation of his preferred narrative, with questions not intended to reveal the artist as subject, but rather to display him as object, an object of exoticist fascination. ‘How big was your family? What school did you go to? What language was spoken in your home? What religion did your family practice? Did it involve animal sacrifice?’ In the end, his mission fulfilled, McEvilley finally announces to Ouattara:
'I don’t have any more questions, do you have anything more to say?'

For Ouattara, though, the game is already over. It was over before it even began. It was over from the moment he was born, from the moment he was destined to be – designated as – an Other. In answer, he fumbles within for something deep and philosophical to say, something original, something in his and not the master’s voice, some desperate utterance in the narrow passage of sanction accorded him, something that represents his, rather than the preferred version, the master narrative. He struggles to speakify, to repose his body and reinvest it with humanity, with language, with articulation. He struggles at the borders of subjecthood.

Aligned to the text at this stage is another picture of the artist, as if in conclusion. But this time, the strength of determination, even defiance, which we glean from the portrait at the beginning of the text, is gone. Ouattara’s countenance no longer projects a brooding tension; it no longer projects; that is, it no longer aspires. His disposition no longer indicates a willingness to dare, to utter with Frantz Fanon: ‘Get used to me; I am not getting used to anyone.’ Instead, he stares into space, his face sunken and forlorn, his anger turned to despair, his attempts at the contested territory of the voice thwarted by McEvilley’s hegemonic devices. Failed is his effort to displace the critic’s gaze onto his work, to specify the latter as the rightful focus of contemplation, and in so doing, to claim author-ity. Clearly against his will, Ouattara finds himself repositioned in the frame as the object. And though he is coerced to sketch the contours of this object, to narrate himself and to trace the ethnography of his body, he is made to do so within confines defined by another. He is forced to strip for McEvilley’s pleasure.

McEvilley’s interview with Ouattara in many respects defines the limitations of appreciation and expectation, or what we might call the confines of perception, within which African artists are either constructed or called upon to construct themselves. It speaks to a discourse of power and confinement in current Western appreciation of modern African art; a discourse of speech and regulation of utterance, which, by denying African artists the right to language and self-articulation, incarcerates them in the policed colonies of Western desire.

In his Inaugural Lecture at the College de France, Barthes identifies speech as a code of legislation, and notes that utterance, language, that which we speak or write, and one may add, paint or sculpt, all that we produce as a body of text, as a composite of signifiers, enters the service of power upon coming into being. Though this power may aspire to Barthes’ definition as the desire to dominate, ibid al domini, its most fundamental nature, nevertheless, is as a condition for the articulation and definition of the self, as author-ity. When the artist creates or the musician composes, the most fundamental intent is to replicate and reiterate herself as a being, to impact herself upon reality, to assert her author-ness, her authority. When Ouattara paints or sculpts, the primordial intent of the act is to establish on the specific sites of his appointment the contours of his being, his history, his experiences, his existence as a participatory element in the constitution
and cartography of reality. His intent is to imprint on time his being: his loves, his philosophies, his originary or existential circumferences. And if we should agree with Barthes that enunciation is the code of legislation, it becomes clear that its essence is to define the rules of interaction and interrelation between people, to set the limits of intervention and dominatory incursion, of encroachment upon the sites of our individuality and subjectivity, to present ourselves and establish our authority not only our creativity, but most importantly, over ourselves too. It is enunciation that subjectivises us, the ability to reiterate our power over our selves. It is this ability and freedom to enunciate, too, that takes us beyond the dominance of others, takes us, as it were, beyond the bounds of power.

To place enunciation, whether it be utterance, writing or art, under surveillance, therefore, is to impair this code. And once this happens, once the code of legislation and self-cartography is damaged or vetoed, the stage is set for others to infringe those sites of reality in which we define ourselves. To check the creative act, whether through institutional or critical sanction, is to transgress the borders of our autonomy, to return us within the boundaries of subjugation, within the bounds of power.

Autonomy. Self-articulation. Autography. These are contested territories in which the contemporary African artist finds herself locked in a struggle for survival, a struggle against displacement by the numerous strategies of regulation and surveillance that today characterise Western attitudes towards African art. Within the scheme of their relationship with the West, it is forbidden that African artists should possess the power of self-definition, the right to authority. It is forbidden that they should enunciate outside the gaze, and free of the interventionist powers, of others. And it is this contestation of their complete subjectivity and their right to co-legislate patterns of interaction that we find in McElvilly’s interview with Ouattara.

To veto enunciation is to disenfranchise and symbolically incarcerate, because within the contested territories of enunciation reside power and franchise, the ability to elect or assert. The body upon which such a veto is exercised loses self-possession and slips into vassalage. To further confirm this state, this body is often forced to confess to a narrative of self-denigration, to provide the ultimate authority through self-extermination. Thus is Ouattara forced, in the interview in question, to repeat and endorse a narrative of savagery, and thus to wedge his savaged body into that requisite margin between nothingness and subjecthood where he transfigures into the object of his possessor’s desire, into an inert, Polaroid image.

In vetoing Ouattara’s right to self-articulation, in placing a sanction against his preferred site of discourse, McElvilly effects a paradigmatic reiteration of ventriloquy as a structure of reference for Western attitudes towards African artists. This frame has its origins in colonial ethnography and the colonial desire for the faceless native, the anonym. The faceless native, displaced from individuality and coalesced into a tribe, a pack, demands and justifies representation because
she stands for lack. In the event, authority is appropriated and transferred from her, and it is this authority that is subsequently exercised in constructing her for Occidental consumption. The defacement of the native consigns her to the category of the unknown. Displaced to the befuddled corners of obscurity and rudimentary episteme, the native is made available for discovery, and this discovery transforms the discoverer into an authority, their supposed privileged knowledge often translating into the right to represent.

Even more specifically, the imposition of anonymity on the native, of course, deletes her claims to subjectivity and works to displace her from normativity. Not only does this conveniently underline her Otherness, her strangeness, her subalternity, anonymity equally magnifies the invented exoticism of her material culture, which in turn becomes a sign of her constructed exoticism. For some time, in order to emphasise the Otherness of non-Occidental cultures, ethnography applied a different rule of attribution to art from such cultures, effectively denying the identities of artists even where these were known. The figure of the individual genius, that element which more than any other defines enlightenment and modernity, was reserved for Europe while the rest of humanity was identified with the collective, anonymous production.

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pattern that inscribes primitivism. Until recently, works of classical African art were dutifully attributed to the ‘tribe’, rather than to the individual artist, thus effectively erasing the latter from the narrative spaces of art history. In contemporary discourses, critics like McEvilley represent the continuation of this practice whereby novel strategies are employed to anonymise African art by either disconnecting the work from the artist, thus deleting the author-ity of the latter, or by constructing the artist away from the normativities of contemporary practice.

From Ulli Beier’s work on contemporary African art, to André Magnin’s presentation of the neo-native African artist, there is a split between the author and the work that effectively depletes individual credit to the artist. While Beier, like McEvilley, focused on details of biographical difference, others dwell on the peculiarity of the work, often situated in a simulacral ambiance of esotericism and fractious submodernity. In each case, the gaze is deflected onto utopia, onto the significance of the Other. We are directed to the existence of animal sacrifice and voodoo in the backgrounds of Ouattara or Moustapha Dimé, rather than to their contributions to, and discursive place in, contemporary sculpture and installation art. We are confronted with Twins.
Seven-Seven's identity as a spirit child and village chief, rather than with his work as a graphic artist. And rather than find Chéri Samba articulated within the discourses of contemporary satire, he is presented to us as symptomatic of a kitsch mimicry that characterises the disintegration of African contemporaneity. And in each case, these misrepresentations are made possible by first crossing out the subject's ability to self-articulate, not only to enunciate but to expiate also, to exercise their authority.

The effaced African artist, the faceless, anonymous native, is the correlative of Fanon's 'palatable Negro', the tolerable, consumable Other who, stripped of authority and enunciatory autonomy, is opened to the penetrative and domonitory advances of the West. The appeal of the faceless, anonymous native is in the fact that she is also a pornographic object, a docile, manipulable object of desire and pleasure. Pornography as a strategy rests on the localisation of desire and the intensification of pleasure through the effacement of the subject, the detachment of the locality of desire from the web of subjective associations and reality that impinge on the possessor's sense of social responsibility. In other words, its principal device is the objectification of the source of pleasure. For maximum derivative effect, the purveyor as well as the consumer of pornography must detach and frame the object, enhanced through the combined mechanisms of magnification and erasure, filling the frame with only that which satisfies the specifications of desire. Even this is further aided by positioning the object within an appropriate narrative, the right sound, the further from speech the better, all of which, by playing on the extremes of perversion and provocativeness, sufficiently hold it within the frames of the spread. Of course, the erasure of the subject, or her transfiguration into the realms of the fantastic, consolidates the purveyor's fiction of ownership, and thus of power. And power, the ability to possess unquestionably, to exercise uncontested authority and manipulate at will, is the essence of pornography.

Angela Dworkin has described the pornographic object as a colony, the terminal site of the colonised body. In Occidental discourses, African artists and African art in turn continue to occupy this site. Decoupled and anonymised, each is turned into a silent colony, a vassal enclave of pleasure and power. Each is fragmented and projected in close-up sequences and pastiches that magnify pleasure for the all-knowing critic or collector; hence the concept of the intimate outsider who is narrated into a positive relationship with these objects. Each is parcelled and packaged to suit the West's machinations and tastes, to satisfy its desires and to fit within its frames of preference.

Even the pricing of contemporary African art and artists on the international art market positions them within the frame of the cheap, pornographic object. Once, a friend who is an African art dealer received a painting by Gerard Santoni, the Ivorian artist, from one of the leading galleries in New York, with a price tag that would be considered quite modest in a degree show. Santoni is a deservedly well-regarded artist whose work has been shown at the Venice Biennale and other
reputable international and contemporary art spaces. He has practised for several decades and, even with the fragmentation of values that ostentatiously characterises our age, his works would still generally be considered of the highest standard. But Santoni is underpriced because, in the West, he and his work are consigned to the category of mere objects of pleasure and fascination, like pornography. They are positioned on those peripheries of creative genius where the aesthetic experience fails to cohere with great material value. This observation becomes particularly relevant when we consider how little collectors are willing to pay for popular art from Africa, despite the fact that it has remained the focus of Western fascination and attention over the past four decades, and has been vigorously promoted as quintessential contemporary African expression. It is to be noted that collectors spend much more money plugging the pieces in their collections and struggling to generate a discourse around them than they have expended on the artworks themselves. Across Africa, popular artists who are much touted in the West, continue to pursue their careers in conditions that bear no comparison with the affluence of their Western contemporaries.

A good illustration of this perpetual disjuncture between hype and remuneration is the Nigerian graphic artist, Middle Art, whose barber-shop signs were brought to the attention of the world by Ulli Beier and others in the early 1970s. In the 1990s, Middle Art’s signs are still voraciously collected in the West, especially in Germany, where the artist continues to command critical attention and dealers continue to receive orders from collectors. But after over thirty years of selling to collections, it is remarkable to note that Middle Art has remained poor, unable to afford a proper studio or indeed, as a German dealer recently told me, to make a decent living from his work. In twenty years of narration and promotion, Middle Art’s signs have not appreciated in value; nor has the artist come to be regarded as deserving better payment, which would be unimaginable in the case of a Western artist who had been so promoted and collected. Middle Art’s work is cheap because the West does not consider it art ‘as we know it’. As an artist, he compares to his Western contemporaries in the same way that a porn actor compares to a ‘proper’ stage actor. One, though highly desired, is nevertheless dispensable and cheap, while the other, identified with high culture, is appropriately valued and appreciated. Porn is recyclable and its appeal is temporary. For this reason, porn is cheap, and the object of pornographic consumption even cheaper. And both belong not in the great spaces of culture but on the supermarket shelf, on the sidewalk, in the quirky fringes of normative taste. Projected on contemporary African artists and their work, these attributes tether them to the lowest rungs of a strictly multi-tiered contemporary art market from where upward mobility is almost impossible.

The perversion desire for the pornographic manifests itself most significantly, however, in the continued preference in the West for that art from Africa that is easily imaged not as art as we know it, but as a sign of the occult, an inscription of the fantastic. The childlike paintings of the
Beninois, Cyprien Toukoudagba, would not ordinarily represent great creative talent in the West, and would not, conventionally, qualify as art beyond the sixth grade. In fact, the critical acclaim enjoyed over the past few years by the fine draughtsmanship of British child artist Stephen Wiltshire testifies more accurately to contemporary Western standards of even juvenile creativity. But Toukoudagba’s naïve drawings are today preferred in the West to the more sophisticated, more familiar forms that represent the cutting edge of contemporary African art precisely because his works fall below these standards, and thus inadvertently yield to dubious, perverted desires and expectations. As form, they represent a slip from normativity; they signify a coveted distance between the West and the African; they satisfy the desire for the fantastic; they are open to pornographic translation; they are strange. A few decades ago, this desire for the subnormative and pornographic was fulfilled by ‘Outsider’ art: the art of the blind, the autistic, the mentally disabled and clinically insane. Today, that desire is projected on Africa, and it is this perversion that locates works like Toukoudagba’s within the boundaries of preference.

A few years ago, curators at a major museum in Sydney sent out requests for information on artists in preparation for a show of prints by contemporary African artists. Upon receipt of this request, a dealer in New York collected information and images from some of the most prominent figures at the cutting edge of contemporary African practice, artists who also belong at the forefront of contemporary international practice. These were sent off to the curators. After a long wait, however, a response eventually returned from Sydney. Sorry, it said, but did the dealer have anything by Chéri Samba and artists of that kind? According to the curators, those were preferable for their project. And not so long ago, too, a German intellectual decided to venture into art, dealing with specific interest in contemporary African art. After sending out masses of literature on artists he represented – Obiora Udechukwu, El-Salahi, Rashid Diab and others – with the intent to interest German collectors in what he considered the finest examples of contemporary African art, the dealer discovered that his recipients had a rather different desire and expectation. The demand was for sign writers Chéri Samba and Middle Art.

These anecdotes will come as no surprise to those familiar with the issues I have broached here. In its compulsive proclivity to displace and dismiss comparable African art from the spaces of contemporary art and its narration, the West has regularly elected to question the identity of this art, its authenticity, and in doing so to employ its own constructs of this authenticity. Authenticity suggests history, a tradition that forms a frame of reference, a point against which adherence or departure is gauged. To describe the form as authentic, therefore, is to imply lines of similarity with tradition, with a historical or precedent frame of reference. I have indicated in the past, however, the clear distance between the authenticity that the Western art establishment has fabricated for Africa, and the evidence of tradition. It is asinine that anyone should locate authenticity in the graphic art of sign writers whose structures of reference are entirely
contemporary and often Western, or in the new forms of folk art that have emerged in parts of Africa and which have no precedents. Which is not to contest the validity of these forms, but to point out that in constructing authenticities, the fact that they make no reference whatsoever to notions of tradition seems irrelevant to self-appointed purveyors of Africa’s authenticity in the West. On the contrary, it is equally half-witted that anyone should fail to identify the obvious lines of reference to tradition in the works of those African artists whom the West is most vehemently dedicated to banishing from the spaces of contemporary practice and appreciation; those who have been severally dismissed as ‘academically trained’, ‘intellectual’ and so on; those who, because they belong to the same tradition as that which modern and postmodern art has continued to reference, produce work to which contemporary Caucasian art is inevitably affined for reasons of commonality of source.

The issue of authenticity and its attendant anxieties are of course not matters over which contemporary African artists are likely to be found losing any sleep. On the contrary, it is those who construct authenticities and fabricate identities for them who are constantly plagued with worries. And for the precise reason that I have already indicated: such anxieties have less to do with facts of authenticity and the relevance of tradition, as with a desire to force African artists behind the confines of manufactured identities aimed to place a distance between their practice and the purloined identity of contemporary Caucasian art. In other words, the introduction of the question of authenticity is only a demand for identity, a demand for the signs of difference, a demand for cultural distance. It is a demand for the visual and formal distance without which it is impossible for contemporary Caucasian art not to reveal itself as mimic, as a culture of quotations, as a mediated translation of cultures and art traditions other than itself, as pastiche. For, having purloined its form and identity from others, it becomes relevant for Caucasian art to insist on difference in order to obliterate any traces back to the source, to Erase the mimetic trail.

It is for this reason that the charge of mimicry is recurrently levelled against contemporary African artists, their work dismissed as only an imitation of Western art. By employing this device of reversal, it becomes possible for the mimic – that is contemporary Western art – to invest itself with originality and a sense of its own authenticity. In proceeding, then, to displace mimesis away from itself, and to project the same on African artists, contemporary Caucasian art is able through its narratives to reserve alterity for itself, to reserve the right to be the One and the Other at the same time and without sanction. The charge of mimicry becomes its tool for defaming and displacing those who produce from within those traditions which, in truth, it mimics; those whose existence challenges its fictions of originality.

McEvilley’s seemingly innocent question to Ouattara again comes to mind: ‘Where were you born?’ One recognises an uncanny ring to this question, the resonance of mechanisms of
surveillance and regulation employed by the West today to keep Africans outside its geographical borders. We notice a confluence of the political and the cultural. The one-sided contest for authenticity that the West insinuates, its overbearing desire to claim originality as a preserve and to dismiss others as inauthentic and mimetic, in several respects parallels its current paranoia over territory, the anxiety that it is about to be overrun by outsiders. Hence the intensification of border regulations and the redefinition of origins and identities, the recurrence of the question: 'Where were you born?'.

The desire to nominalise the cutting edge of contemporary African art is a methodical mapping of territories, a project of surveillance that is one with the tradition of policing the imaginary borders of civility and progress. The implications of the above for creative practice are numerous and far-reaching. Working within the confines of distorting regulatory strategies, African artists find themselves vulnerable to potentially destructive pressures. The demand is for them to produce to specification, to affect anonymity, to concede the ability to enunciate within the sites of normativity. Even more significant is the fact that, for these artists, access to criticality in contemporary discourses is regulated by this demand for subnormativity, and here lies the importance of Thomas McEvilley's interview with Ouattara. For not only do McEvilley's devices illustrate one critic's incarcerating projections on an African artist, even more significantly, they speak to the segregationist criticality and general ambivalence of white, postmodernist contingents in the so-called discourse of Others, a criticality bounded by an interceptory demand for the identity of the Other, by the query: 'Where were you born?' They speak to the fact that within this discourse, postmodernism remains, to a remarkable extent, a mere rehash of entrenched modernist attitudes and methods, 'a continued reproduction', as Peter Hitchcock has suggested, of 'the logic of Western cultural critique that fosters the “othering” of the so-called “Third World Subject”'.

These are peculiar obstacles, of course, which work outside the perimeters of limitation/transgression. The challenges they pose require of artists resistive rather than transgressive strategies. More importantly, they pose an even greater challenge for contemporary cultural theory, and for postmodernism as a critical culture. To bring its object into crisis is the duty of criticism, and postmodernism must extend this responsibility to contemporary African art, and even more so, to the logic that regulates its contemplation of non-Occidental contemporaneity. To engage meaningfully with the contemporary, a credible postmodernist criticism must place its ambivalence under crisis, and extend the borders of criticality beyond the demand for identity and subnormativity.
Notes


2. New York artist Ouattara was born in Ivory Coast but has lived and worked in France and the US since the 1980s.

