

Retrospecting africa95



Occupied Territories

POWER, ACCESS & AFRICAN ART

*The isolation of exile is a gutted warehouse
at the back of pleasure streets
- Arthur Nortje, 'Waiting'*

Okwui
Enwezor

THESE lines were written while Nortje's body and psyche lay ravaged by the dissipation of drugs and loneliness wrought by exile in England. Brilliant but troubled, the South African poet - like his Zimbabwean compatriot, the writer Dambudzo Marechera - is emblematic of a generation of African cultural producers whose works are yet to be sufficiently recovered within the canons of 20th century African arts and letters.

The parallel between the uneasy roads Nortje and Marechera both travelled towards artistic fulfilment is eerie. Nortje would succumb to depression and, in 1970, die at 28 of an accidental drug overdose. Marechera would die similarly young, more than a decade later, and not long after leaving England. Do not ask me why England was such an inhospitable place for these two young men. As the nightly news has consistently informed us, nothing makes for a

better story than a prostrate and defenceless African, fixed in that interminable dilemma called death, waiting for a tale that seems forever buried beneath the charm of good intentions. One's naivete or perhaps overdetermined good faith would lead many to believe that curatorial practices in the 90s are too sophisticated to become entangled with the same kind of visual logic that fills our television screens. But how mistaken we all are as we struggle to make intelligible stories of Africa.

Nortje and Marechera are good examples of the way we tell the story of 20th century African arts. Because they both lived in the West and practised in a manner that defied the 'authenticity' test, their work gets deliberately lost in the shuffle. In other words they are tainted material, insufficiently native, contaminated by that virus known as 'contact with the West'. Reflecting his pain, Nortje's words are charged with a plenitude of emotion, an aberrant eroticism, longing, desire and memory. As we know, all exiles live through memory. The act of remembrance makes wanderers of us all, helping us build communities out of skeins of desire and nostalgia, feelings which inevitably succumb to the logic of reality. Forget it boy, your country, continent, and century is gone, long gone, like the blast of a gun to the head. Your memory, just like your body, is now an occupied territory, a colonial commodity bought cheaply and sold dearly.

Dislocated to the west, like many African artists, writers, and intellectuals, and far from the fitful upheavals that tarnish the daily reality of Africans in the continent, I, too, feel perpetually suspended between reveries of unfulfilled desires made more vivid by the frustration of Africa's misrepresentation in the western metropolis. For many of us now, Africa is a memory, not a place. Each attempt at self-recognition inexorably marred by the lack of freedom of self-narration, a state that Olu Oguibe has referred to as 'the legislative code of speech'. This code, however, reveals the limitations of language within discourse. It seems to me that while self-narration has often employed the syntax of signifiers, it is the enunciativ component of text that leaps off the page to embrace difference. In replacing oratory as a more permanent and contestable emblem, text is the necessity towards freedom that is so intricately enmeshed and iterated in the constant contest for possession of one's own voice that is only made plural by the contingency of history. But to face history with a predetermined outcome of events is no choice at all. It is within such a choiceless terrain, where the silenced narratives of those who have borne severely the sentence of history have suffered constant revisions, that the exhibitions and conferences making up the mega festival of African arts called africa95 opened in London.

Billed as a season of events celebrating African creativity, from the visual arts to music, drama, dance, and literature, *africa95* started about three years ago as a loosely organised series of exhibitions managed under one umbrella logo. Aimed at the professionals that make up the cadres of the academy, popular journalists and a general public largely ignorant of the 'true' story of Africa, the festival saw its role as helping to shape debate on issues of artistic practice coming out of Africa and to examine the wide dimensions and dynamism of the African experience, particularly in the 20th century. While one can argue about whether a festival format is the means through which the art of any continent can be sufficiently examined and studied with perspicacious scrutiny, *africa 95* nonetheless shaped up as a unique event in a moment when intolerance toward the non-westerner has been on the rise in Europe. Never before has there been such a concentration of voices (forget for one moment that many were actually engaged in some strange soliloquy). The grand selling point of the season foreshadowed the relative scarcity of any sustained interest in Africa that does not privilege its marginality. What the organisers failed to tell the public was that *africa 95* was unique only because of the West's usual reluctance to address issues of representation that do not place the West on top. In terms of diversity and size, despite all the hype, this festival was never going to come close to the Leopold Sedar Senghor-sponsored 'World Negro Arts Festival' organised in Dakar in 1965. Nor would it approximate or replicate the stupendous ambition and success of FESTAC 77 in Lagos 12 years later. And only recently had the Johannesburg Biennale joined biennales in Dakar and Cairo as venues where the cultural events of disparate African realities are truly given force.

Indeed, on the African continent itself many broad-based festivals celebrating the continent and shaped by the perspectives of Africans have been successfully staged. Since the events of 1965 and 1977, celebrations of Africa have tended to be shaped in the matrix of idealism and hope, signifying the unfettering of the African imagination

from the clutches of the colonial project. But much has changed in the continent. Major artists, intellectuals, and writers pressurised by totalitarian regimes have either fled into exile or have been silenced by censorship. Younger artists, in a climate of apathy and dire economic and political conditions, are no longer indebted to a vision of pan-Africanism which was supposed to be a binder of African consciousness and identity, and have joined the exodus. The unfortunate outcome of this flow of talent has meant that a great many African artist who either once contributed or would have contributed immensely to the debate of Africa's 20th century are no longer resident in the continent. This is a major shift, reversing much of the pioneering work undertaken in the 50s and 60s.

Ignorant, perhaps, of these basic facts, the fatal mistake of the organisers was to assume that the history of 20th century Africa could be sufficiently represented only by those living in the continent today. While some of the participants do live outside Africa, it remains a fact that their contributions to the debate were neither cherished nor totally welcomed, remaining peripheral in all areas, especially in the exhibitions.

Africa is gigantic, one cannot begin to know even the strange behaviour furthest south in my xenophobic department.

- Arthur Nortje²

The organisers' second mistake, symptomatic of most approaches to Africa, was to treat a complex land mass such as Africa as a monolithic structure - in other words like a country. Here again Nortje recapitulates the one fact that has remained a thorn in the side of many would-be historians, which is the provocative yet basic inference of the continent's plurality, its unrepresentability as a mono cultural, socio-political landscape. While lacking in novelty, the inference of Africa's objective reality as plural ought to be an object lesson to all hack historians - beginning with the organisers and participating institutions - of a nascent African art discourse.

Recently, many African intellectuals have taken up the challenge and entered

the conversation that seeks to deny the legislative authority which values Africa only as an idea, a free-for-all zone to be liberally conjured up through a given narrator's imagination, an affective but nonetheless false memory (best described as the Margaret Mead Syndrome). Foucauldian scholar and philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe ironises this concept of Africa as an idea by naming his influential book *The Invention of Africa*, in other words suggesting Africa, as we know it, to be the figment of other people's imagination. Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* that the Orient is not only a career but an invention and locality of Western desire, and to be effective, such a conceptualisation of Africa has to be projected onto the binary logic of the 'self' made more potent through the emphasis of the 'other's' limitations. However, as Mudimbe argues, this division is misleading because between the two extremes there is an intermediate space in which social, political and economic contingencies define the extent of marginality. This observation precisely taxes the dominant notion of the dichotomy which is at the heart of analysis of contemporary African studies. Furthering this illusion, the transition from one state to another is often emphasised by constructing a progressive lineage for African artists.

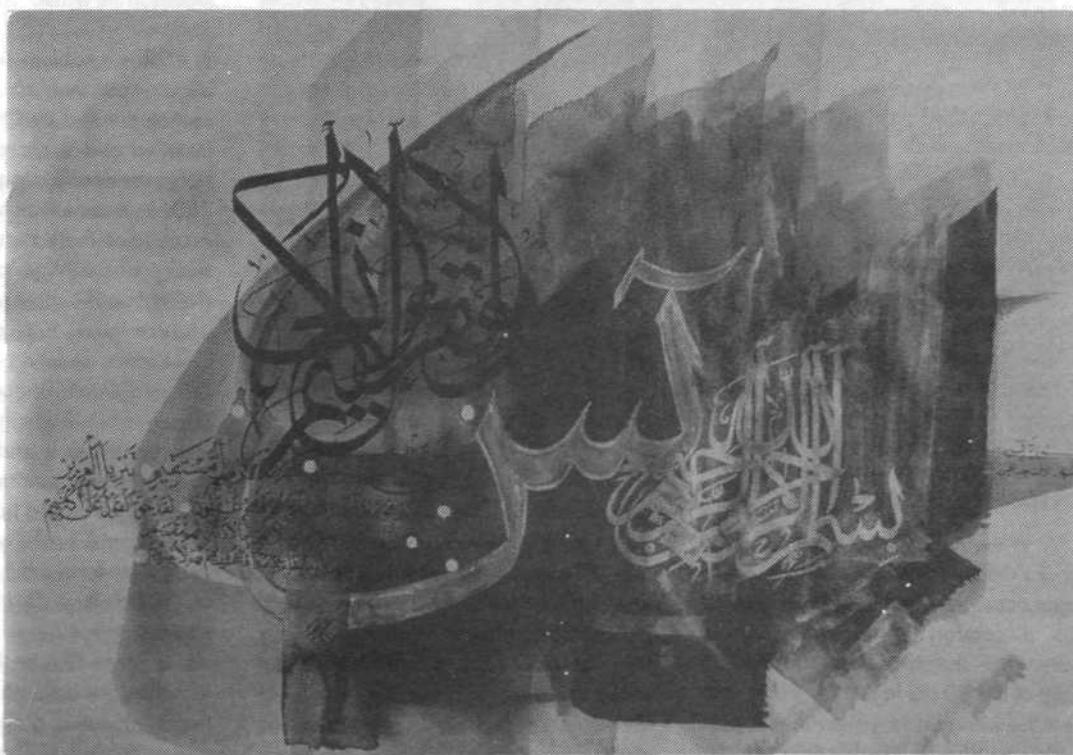
This strategy - buried deep in the core of *africa 95* - has helped institute the fragmentation of discourses around Africa into little-occupied principalities. *africa95* took this imaginary progression like a relay race by micro-managing all the events, jumping from one paradigm to the next: primitive to modern, rural to urban, secular to religious, sacred to profane. Those who no longer have anything to say about African representation were invited as people of the moment. At the opening conference 'African Artists: school, studio and society' at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, a so-called 'celebrated scholar' from Nigeria, to the audience's astonishment, delivered a 30 year-old paper. The conference itself was an endless parade of mediocrity of the most base kind, a retrograde performance that reinforced the erroneous idea of Africa's modernity as essentially fictive and non-existent.

These are the least troubling aspects of what africa95 portrayed. Implicit in its mission is the musty aura of egalitarianism, of equal partnership between the organisers and African artists, curators and scholars. But the evidence revealed otherwise. What seemed lost in all the euphoria was the fact that the encounter between Africa and the West often revolves around the discourse of power - the fraught relations between the dominator and the dominated. And nowhere is this made more glaringly valid than in the historicisation of, and debate around, the contemporary cultural production of Africa.

For Africa's contemporary artists working all over the world, the dismissiveness which precedes their entrance and limited incursions into internationalism is a fiercely institutionalised situation. Strange cargoes are brought to us in the form of voodoo priests such as Cyprien Tokoudagba from Benin; the coffin maker Kane Kwei from Ghana; and KwaNdebele muralist Esther Mahlangu whose wall decorations have been transplanted to canvas, Comme des Garçons boutiques, and BMWs to make consumption of her work more palatable. They are consistently given the sanction of institutional patronage as the pride of contemporary African representation. Conversely, discussion is never elevated to a pitch that allows for even the most rudimentary debates around contemporary Africa's post-colonial enunciation, theoretical strategies, and artistic practice. Neither do such conversations ever consider the deep

implications of Africa's post modernity, the locationary and migratory (mental and physical) disruptions palpably evident in works of artists such as Bili Bidjocka, Ike Ude, Yinka Shonibare, Olu Oguibe, Folake Shoga, Kendell Geers, Antonio Ole, Oladele Bamgboye, Lubaina Himid, and Ouattara, to name just a few. Why do we never consider the achievements of those artists who at great professional cost and individual isolation have not only transcended but have equally transfigured the borders constituting the notion of Africanity? How could anyone serious about contemporary art in Africa overlook the importance of artistic practise that breach

game in a dangerous time, especially if one considers that the pendulum of power between the North and the South seems to be swinging towards a re-conquering strategy of doublespeak and double-dealing undefined by the rhetoric of rational logic. Objectivity, here, is only simulated, hiding a prejudiced institutional subjectivity that suppresses any parity in the distribution of resources, space, and access. While the obvious demand is for an involved and rigorous critical discourse, Westerners instead adopt a strategy of isolation that loses contemporary African culture in the peripheral discourses of power, eventually regarding it as inconsequential.

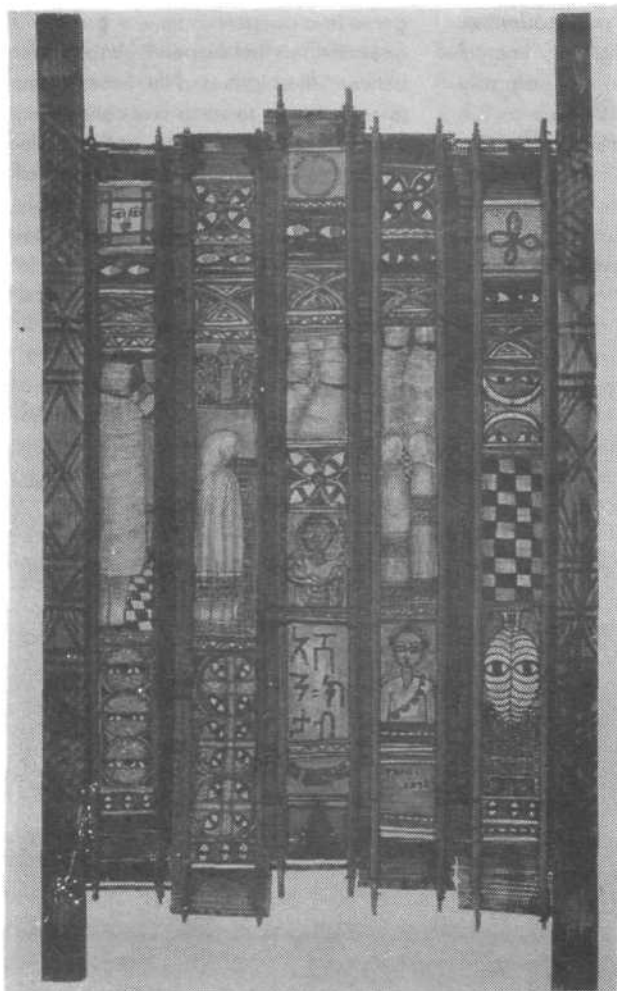


Osman Waqialla, 'Opening of Surat Ya Sin'. Ink and gold on handmade paper. 18 x 23 cm, 1982.

the etiquettes of racial determinism and national origin, of boundaries and territories within Africa?

The evident astonishment one feels in this foray into what is supposed to constitute a delimited African art discourse is that while Africa is in the throes of the most brutal evisceration - politically, socially and economically - africa 95 still adopts the most simplistic commentary to address a very difficult subject. This is a dangerous

Here then is the major flaw of most of the events in africa95. By casting all their chips squarely in contested genres, or discourses of the past, most of the participating institutions missed a great opportunity not only to situate Africa in the present but genuinely to engage and address her future. Historians and curators of Africa suffer incessantly from this obsessive character of a misplaced 'salvage paradigm.'



Zerihun Yetmgeta, 'Scale of civilisation' 1988 mixed media on wooden looms. 100 x 62 cm.

While the Royal Academy's 'Africa: Art of a Continent' was mesmerising and stupendous, my view must be tempered with discomfort at the questionable provenance and controversy surrounding many of the pieces in the show. Of note are those works still very much the subjects of international legal contestation, particularly those expropriated to Britain by British soldiers after the sacking of Benin in 1897. Whatever the ethic (moral and legal) of this show, only limitedly did it, or any of the related contemporary exhibitions push the boundaries of received wisdom to transcend the mediocrity of the prosaic. Search as one might in the africa95 programme, there was little evidence of that slice of sobriety that is the mark of an art exhibition invested with candour, knowledge, daring and inventiveness.

Ingrid Pollard (born in Guyana) evoked ideas of longing, desire and crossing with her magnificent painterly colour photographs. Maxine Walker, originally from Jamaica, explored the ever-present issues of masquerade, passing and altered identities, articulating in a melancholic manner an issue with which diasporan artists must always contend in their search for a home away from home.

Of all the individual exhibitions of africa95, 'Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa' at London's Whitechapel Gallery fared the worst. Much anticipated and heavily proofed, 'Seven Stories' was doomed to fail from the moment of its conceptualisation. Once the list of participating artists began to emerge you knew there was something wrong. Firstly, there were too many artists. Secondly, right to the end, Clementine Deliss, the

A notable exception was 'Self Evident' at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery and its insightful catalogue essay by Kobena Mercer. Co-organised with Autograph, the show brought together the work of two pioneering African photographers - Mama Cassel from Senegal and Seydou Keita from Mali - around whose vintage photographs three contemporary Black British artists were commissioned to make work. Oladele Ajiboye Bamgboye from Nigeria presented a video and slide installation which dealt with issues of loss and return, gender and sexuality. While

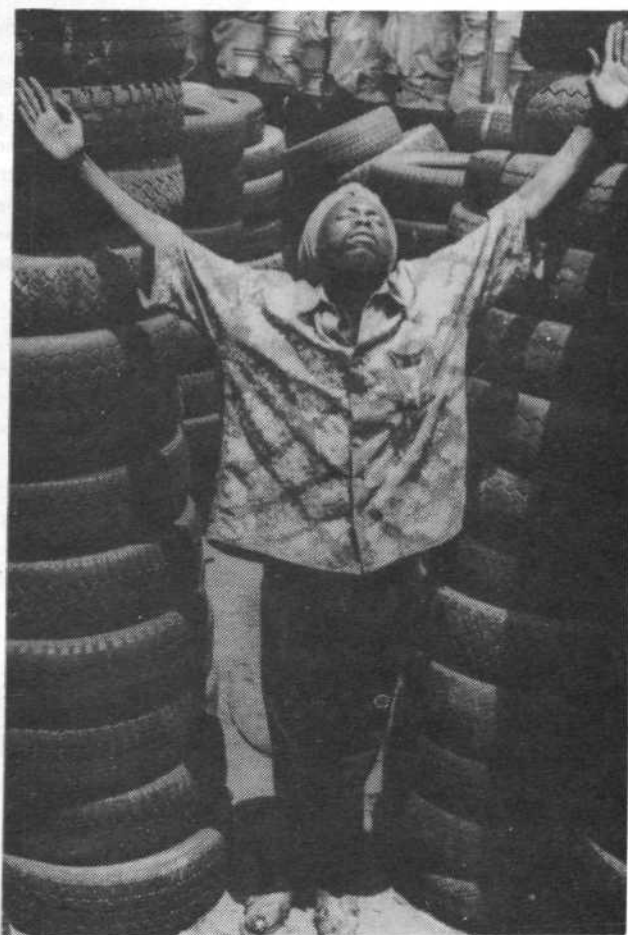
chief architect of the exhibition, could not decide whether what she wanted to tell was one story, her story, five stories or seven. This pas de deux with disaster was the result of a volatile mixture of good intentions, unpreparedness, and blind obduracy. The perpetually changing press releases charted the progress of the project's descent into indecisiveness and confusion. Divided into seven sections representing a total of seven countries, with 62 artists and curated by five people, 'Seven Stories...' was meant to chart the trajectory of artist-led movements within the story of modern African art. To describe it as academic and uninteresting is to be generous and cover up the mark of injustice to modern African artistic expressions it leaves in its wake.

The problem with the exhibition began soon enough with the Nigerian section curated by Chika Okeke. Poorly installed and over-crowded, a coherent story was nearly impossible to make out. If Okeke's sometimes trenchant catalogue essay illuminated and elucidated the sweep of the Nigerian story, his helter-skelter, badly chosen works and artists undermined his efforts. Erhabor Emokpae's painting *Struggle Between Life and Death*, though, had a striking presence. A beautifully worked and impastoed black and white exercise in geometric and minimalist economy, the painting's bisected halves engaged in a push-and-pull tussle with two semicircles that join to form a full circle in the middle of the painting. This work suggested a possibility that never materialised in the story. Bruce Onobrakpeya's attempt at installation art was confusing and inconsequential, a disservice to his regal and unique relief technique of plastocasts, Obiora Udechuku, a master of the elegant line and spatial disruption was under-represented, as was Ben Enwonwu, arguably Nigeria's first major art star. Olu Oguibe's work was hung way too high, almost in the rafters, while El Anatsui's usually majestic sculptures and wood reliefs suffered from the overcrowded ambience of the space.

Perhaps the Sudanese and Ethiopian sections curated by Salah Hassan showed the greatest promise. Two powerful works by the Sudanese

master Ibrahim El Salahi - *The Last Sound* from the early 60s and *The Inevitable* (1984-85), a work of skilful manipulation of line, volume and mass, depth and shallowness - conspired with the enigmatic, girded and circular pictograms of Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq and the calligraphic and aqueous luminosity of Osman Waqialla to make the Sudanese story the lone section to dislodge the stereotypes that plague modern Africa art. The Ethiopian section was a slight disappointment, again owing to limitations of space and the placing of works up against one another. Despite the hanging, Zerihun Yetmgeta's *Scale of Civilisation* (1988) successfully reinvents traditional Ethiopian scroll painting, affecting an attitude of fragmentation and postmodern seriality while still bending the rules that artificially seek to bisect the traditional and the modern. Of additional note in the Ethiopian section were the works of Skunder Boghossian, Wosene Kosrot and Elizabeth Atnafu. If there was any consolation in 'Seven Stories...' it was the surprising way in which Yetmgeta's work dove-tailed with that of Nigerian sculptors Ndidi Dike and El Anatsui in the Nigeria section. This cross-cultural affinity and shared language within modern African art also extended to the calligraphic traces and marks in Salahi, Udechukwu, Rashid Diab in the Sudanese section and Soulemane Keita's work in the Senegalese section.

By the time one got to the Senegalese section, one's patience was already frayed. Curator El Hadji Sy's pretentious, shallow and dunder-headed translocation of the site-specificity of Dakar's Laboratoire Agit-Art's active environment to an enclosed space was simply a travesty. Sy's shameful capacity for self-promotion meant that he had twice as many objects in his section than the other two artists combined. His minuscule essay was even more surprising, given the impressive history of modern Senegalese art. Add to this the unsettling feeling that nepotism played a role in Sy being awarded a section to souvenir T-shirts and we have a very messy affair indeed (no pun intended). Why anyone would believe that Sy's paintings on rice sacks along with Soulemane Keith's mannered canvas confection, Issa Sambi's wire sculptures and other assorted detritus gathered in



Babacar Sedikh Traore, Yorkshire sculpture park

this section represents the 'story' of Senegal, is an enigma to me.

The South African section curated by David Koloane, though well installed, failed to register the volatility of the event (Steve Biko's death) around which the story was woven. Why, for instance, was there no Willie Bester, if the implicit charge was directed at the level of resistance against apartheid's cruelty and hegemony? Rather what we got from most of the artists (including Koloane himself) was distanced and introverted, if not timid. The inclusion of Dumile (Feni) Mhlaba's large charcoal on paper entitled *African Guernica* would have been funny had its reference to Picasso's famous work not made the work seem purely derivative. Sam Nhlengethwa's *It left him cold - death of Steve Biko* (1990) similarly was so literal in its reference that its impact was blunted on contact. One interesting inclusion, though, was Paul Stopforth's dark, brooding triptych No

Title (hand, two feet, foot) made in graphite and liquid wax on paper.

Finally, the Kenyan and Uganda stories, curated by Wanjiku Nyachae, provided an appropriate coda to the dishevelled narrative of 'Seven Stories'. Most of the works here fell into two categories. The first privileges a kind of inverted neo-colonial sensibility and social satire, for example Richard Onyango's work of road disasters, or Sane Wadu and Joel Oswaggao's canvases packed tightly with

grotesque figures doing things which I supposed many would find endearingly African. The second category, represented by the work of Etale Sukuro favours a kind of social realism which is just too earnest to be ironic.

That which the Whitechapel miserably failed to address was poignantly engaged by 'On the Road', a modest show curated by Linda Givon at Delfina Studios with artists from South Africa, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The exhibition took as its theme the migratory indeterminacy of the post-colonial space of Southern Africa, encompassing its shared legacy of violence, dislocation and movement. Working from a premise that is meant to address forcefully, if at times problematically, the wide fissures opened up by apartheid hegemony, 'On the Road' nonetheless took a bold stab at suggesting the direction in which recent art by contemporary artists from Africa is

moving. Contrasted with the elegiac poetry of Antonio Ole's immense rusted boat, Berry Bickle's evocative rustic vessel, Kendell Geers' subversive and self-consciously Duchampian hypertext, and Willie Bester's terrifying machines of carnage, the show's approach seemed more satisfying than anything attempted by either the Whitechapel or the Serpentine Gallery.

For those unaware of the intimate politics and abuses of power evident in the world of African art collecting, the Serpentine Gallery's exhibition 'Big City' would seem ready-made for the kind of revisionism that grants Africa the sanction for authenticity through the sly evocation of the naive artist doing wondrous things in a contemporary manner. My quarrel with 'Big City' isn't with the majestic photographs of Seydou Keita, the odd agglomerations and visual tone poems of Georges Adeagbo (a genius artist who identifies and transforms everyday refuse into profound ciphers of decay, loss, and transcendence), the perverse charm of Frederic Bruly Bouabre's naughty pictures, or the wondrous postmodernity and

utopianism of Bodys Kingelegz. My objection centres around the insistence of curators Julia Peyton-Jones and Andre Magnin that work from one millionaire's collection (Jean Pigozzi) represents the last word in what's interesting from Africa. To put it mildly, their decision to promote work which in the main encompasses one person's taste, is ill advised, inappropriate and offensive.

Pigozzi's imprimatur, here carefully hidden from the public, effectively plays on the access provided by his money and powerful connections. He has used them in an accelerated campaign through alliances with major institutions, publishers and write-ups in important publications to legitimise and valorise many questionable artists in his collection, pushing them to the world as the only 'authentic' artists from Africa. This way debate and criticism is either silenced, foreclosed, or pushed to the periphery. While a sunny carnivalesque, celebratory and ethnographic discourse is woven around the various appropriate artists in his collection, major institutions, in clear violation of their own policies towards

other forms of representation, unnecessarily tow the party-line, allying themselves with what is basically a con game. The Serpentine is no exception here. It is the height of cynicism and lazy curatorship to go to a collector's house, select a few objects, then present them to the world as jewels of a civilisation's material and cultural interpretation of the world.

This was also clearly apparent in the Tate Liverpool

exhibition. As if we have not already been told enough that Africa is a 'country' of shamans, the museum's contribution to the so-called debate on Africa centres around the idea of trance. In the exhibition 'Vita', installed in three airy and sunny galleries, the work of three artists, Cyprien Tokoudagba (another retread from Pigozzi's collection who also showed at the Serpentine), Farid Belkahlia, and Touhami Ennadre strayed dangerously into kitsch. One ceases to be amazed at the capacity for kooky statements around contemporary African art, but the opening line of Abdelwahab Meddeb's essay in the 'Vital' catalogue adds a new wrinkle to this lunacy. Meddeb asserts that 'the originality of the African contribution to art lies undoubtedly (emphasis added) in its relation to trance.' All one can say here is that the only trance one experienced while at the Tate was occasioned by boredom in front of Farid Belkahlia's insomniac tracings on goatskin and Tokoudagba's meaningless affections of what has been described as voodoo imagery. Touhami Ennadre, a Tunisian artist whose deep-hued nocturnal photographic triptychs of isolated body parts (hands, feet, and wrinkled skin), images of death and birth, rapturous celebrants at a religious ceremony, and the traces of the 'exhumed dead of Vesuvius' are the height of exquisite artistry, and made the only contribution worth dwelling on. Yet this potential saving grace was travestied by the gallery's insistence on forcing Ennadre's work into the perverted frame of an Arcadian imaginary by directing the viewer's attention principally towards those of the artist's images that invoked a state of trance. That a major institution like the Tate can afford to be naive or callously indifferent to the basic epistemology of art history, as well as the art they chose to present, is the larger struggle that artists and institutions alike have to overcome. The over-determined readings of critics, curators and scholars who would force a reading like trance into work such as Ennadre's is yet another.

GR

1. Arthur Nortje, *Dead Roots: Poems*. Pub. Heinemann African Writers Series, Oxford, 1971

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