

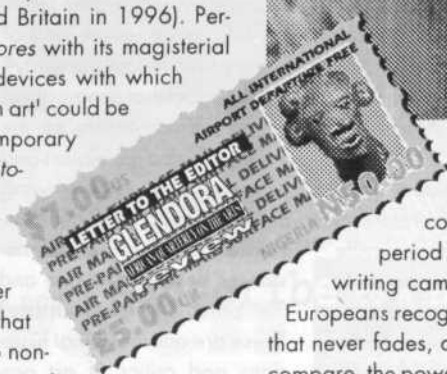
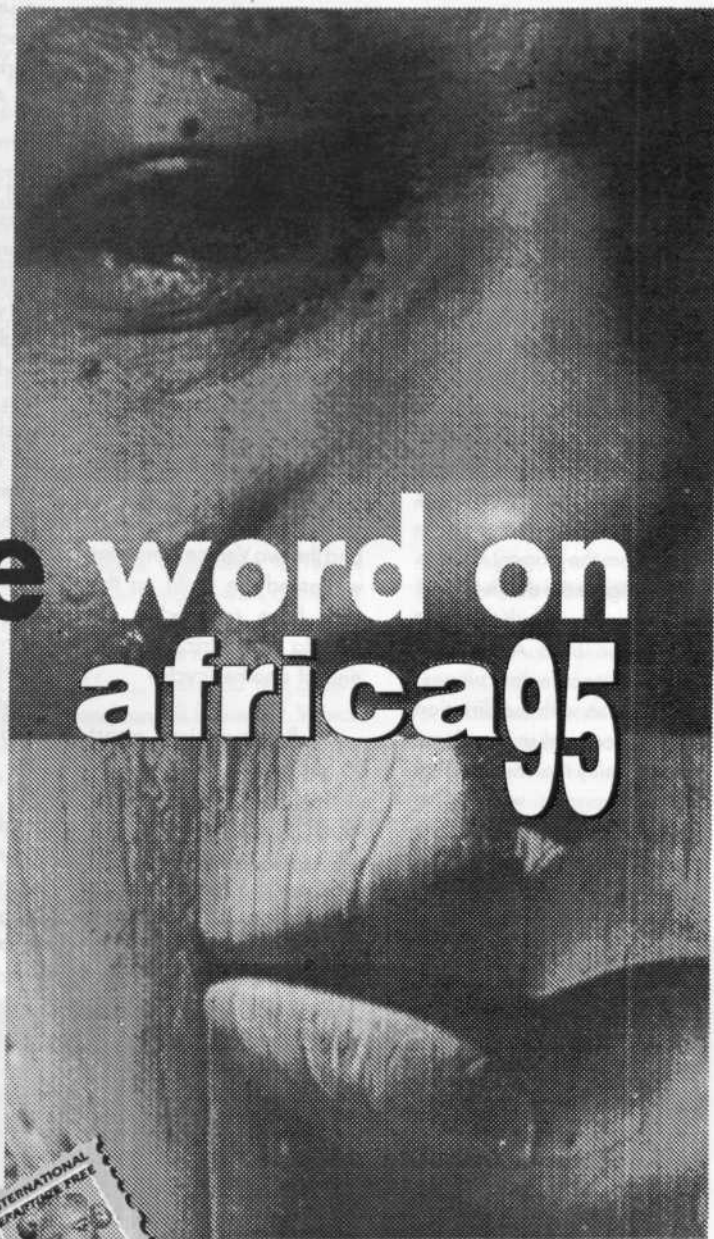
**A**S one who was involved in some of the activities that marked the big 'carnavalesque' festival in England last year, *Africa 95*, and perhaps also as an involved participant in the drama of modern(?) African artistic discourse, my reading of Okwui Enwezor's inspired critique of that event and related issues is in the least thought provoking. There is no doubt that the issues he raised in 'Occupied Territories; Power, Access and African Art' (GR 1:3) bring to the fore, the politics of representation of the cultural productions by African artists in the continent, and the Diaspora.

# One More word on *africa95*

Chika  
Okeke

One recalls also Olu Oguibe's powerful, surgically sharp deconstruction of Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores* exhibit, in *African Arts*, some years ago. Both critiques essentially harp on the problems of articulation, presentation and representation of art and artists from Africa, especially in the latter case, by non-Africans. But the basic difference between the two events is that where *Africa Explores* was one big, high-toned exhibit that travelled around America and Europe for some years, *Africa 95* was a festival of visual, performing and literary arts that unleashed itself on England in a spate of about five months (except for the two exhibits at the Royal Academy and the Whitechapel that toured beyond Britain in 1996). Perhaps also, whereas *Africa Explores* with its magisterial promulgation of classificatory devices with which the seemingly intractable 'African art' could be brought to order, the major contemporary art exhibit in *Africa 95*, *Seven Stories* at the Whitechapel, showed the progress made so far in presenting art from Africa, by not classifying the art. However there is a similarity in the fact that both events were devised by two non-Africans, or as Vogel would term it, 'intimate outsiders', and of course they were essentially organised specifically for Europe-American audiences and spectators. However, *Seven Stories* could not hide the sheathed swords that must be exposed by those who bother about showing cultural productions of Africa, in the West.

The West has always felt it had a duty to understand



other cultures as part of its inherent tendency to conquer and assimilate, on its own terms. From the period in the cultural history of mankind when the art of writing came to Europe from outside, from the moment ancient Europeans recognized the power of the text which Achebe calls the *uli* that never fades, and which Derrida in this century articulated beyond compare, the power to configure existence and the relationship between existences, they have never given up that power. The dictatorship of the written word had yielded for them political, economic and cultural domination of the entire universe. History, art and philosophy belong only to those who have written them down. And for them that have little or no written evidence of these phenomena, like much of Africa, their self enunciation comes against a backdrop of written history and theories of their being non/sub-humans, savages, slaves, freed slaves, colonials and post-colonials who must work hard at convincing the West that they

have really come of age in evolutionary sense. This self enunciation has incidentally been given greater impetus and attention only recently as a result of historio-cultural developments in Africa and, more pertinently, in the West, Multiculturalism.

With the crisis brought about by a logical dissatisfaction with the modernist project, and the ensuing acceptance of multiculturalism and other hitherto 'unacceptable' cultural phenomena, the West has found itself at crossroads. Apart from the exigent need to re-investigate the death-bound Western culture with the right medication from Africa and other non-occidental cultures, there is also with the flirtation with multiculturalism, the dominant morality that the wheel of human progress would turn faster if all cultures in all their diversities should become equal participants in the construction of the Babel. (This attitude is similar to the humanitarianism of the Romantic era in Europe; the period of the noble savage). But it is almost certain that the latter is as fictive as the former is real, and drugs become useless when the patient recovers. So, multiculturalism, or postmodernism and its other manifestations can not be but another great Western project which the West is paying for. Only the West stands to gain. In the current Western cultural fad called postmodernism therefore one sees a widening of the borders of Hamelin; there are more children but the piper remains the same. When then multiculturalist morality demands a rethinking, on the part of the West, in the manner of seeing, articulating and presenting art from Africa, it is bound to expose, once again, the profoundity of entrenched

ignorance, the arrogance which centuries of (written) history bestowed on the West, its institutions, its people. Even here, the postmodernist historian Olu Oguibe cautions that the current interest in Africa and its artists follows a cyclical pattern of repulsion/embrace of the still dark continent by the West, especially in this century. Which suggests, in effect, that the current love affair is another peak in what he identified as a thirty-year cycle. The 1980s, with Africa Hoy, Magiciens de la Terre, *Africa Explores*, and the two Venice Biennales, witnessed the build up that may have reached a crescendo with Africa 95. The end of another cycle?

But cynicism apart. What if the current developments in the Africa-West relationship do not belong to Oguibe's, or any other cyclical theory? What if what is at play is a crude, lateral evolution in the manner in which the West configures Africa? That postmodernist or multiculturalist integrationism defies any doubts about the genuineness of Western intentions to 'understand' Africa? Then we should heave an anxious sigh while the experiment goes on. In this sense, perhaps, *Africa 95*, especially *Seven Stories*, is the latest experiment. 'Occupied Territories' therefore is one sustained, appropriate sigh that, more than any other articulated critique of *Africa 95*, tells how carelessly designed the projects of recent cultural technicians have been, perhaps also, how far they are from achieving any meaningful goal. But besides articulating the failure of either *Seven Stories* or the entire *Africa 95* project, there are a few important issues

raised in that essay that related indirectly to the nature of work produced by artists on the African continent.

It is rather very obvious that Okwui Enwezor's sympathies in terms of who should represent Africa, lies not with artists living on the continent, but with the 'exiles', and those on the continent who produce work that can fit comfortably into the convenience bag of postmodern and conceptual art as articulated by recent Western criticism and theory. Which is why only one of the ten artists he listed as having been excluded from contemporary African art representations, lives on the continent (although five were represented in the various *Africa 95* exhibits). We are told that in the works of these ten artists, the postmodernist discourse makes them eligible for the front seat in contemporary African art. Does this not suggest that the intellectual distance between African exiles and those on the continent is irrevocably stretching farther apart given the fervour with which the new generation of exiles have embraced postmodernism, and the seeming reluctance on the part of home artists to join the party? Does the fact that a majority of young African artists on the continent remain sculptors and painters point to the growing cultural disparities and the dissimilar existential circumstances between the one and the other 'African' artists? These are questions that historians and critics of art produced by Africans must contend with now, and perhaps in the future.

It is the aforementioned shortage of sympathy on the part of Enwezor for the cultural realities on the continent

that influences his decision to confer the genius status on Georges Adeagbo who was deemed a half-sane bricoleur in his native Benin but was discovered by the French curator Andrew Magnin who now presents him to Western spectators as an artist of the first order probably because Adeagbo's 'work' reminds him of the assemblages of Western conceptual artists. Is there much, if any, difference between Adeagbo's circumstance and journey to the Western art world, and that of Body Kinglez, Kane Kwei, Jack Akpan or Cyprien Tokoudagba, who have been presented by Western curators as canonical artists to the chargin of many African theorists, historians and collectors? The ever and present danger of allowing either 'sympathetic outsiders' or privileged other to decide what constitutes the art of Africa, or who its creators are, remains.

A view of the art being made by a majority of artists on the continent may appear at best quaint or sluggish if the viewer is sitting in the 'faster' car of EuroAmerican postmodernism. Which may explain the impatience of a number of emergent African critics in the West when they turn their attention to the work of artists on the continent. This is understandable if, as is becoming obvious, the exiles' only wish is for their kinsfolk at home to jump above their existential, economic circumstances, onto the skateboard of postmodern art as a way of proving their equality with their Western counterparts. But it is hardly convincing that this should be the goal of African, and indeed other non-occidental cultures and artists. If anything they should learn from the mis-

takes of the West. After all, the present declamation of (Western) modernism by postmodernist historians for, among other things, commodifying, and sanctifying the materiality of art, as well as for placing the same exclusively in the domain of bourgeois experience may be in order, but it need not have arisen had the same society not pushed art to such dizzying, nauseating heights in the first instance. The extent to which this post-era has succeeded in correcting the mistakes of modernism, or if, indeed, it ever will, remains to be seen.

Beyond the politics of curatorial dictatorship, any group exhibit that makes pretense at representing the whole (impossible!) or parts of the territory of contemporary art in Africa, and indeed elsewhere, must of necessity (and if it must not run the risk of alienating the people it claims

to represent) reflect the dominant and also prominent artistic manifestations in the given territory. Which is what the Nigerian section, and perhaps other sections, of Seven Stories did in the specific conceptual territories demarcated by each sectional curator. The artists represented in that section may not fit into the constructs of postmodernist criticism, but in the context of the story told by the curator, the selection still stands to be challenged, like all but the most innocuous exhibits.

The lessons of Africa 95 are many, some of which are, from Enwezor's essay, terribly obvious. The West, with its institutions, is unrelenting in its insistence on deciding what constitutes art from Africa. This is evident in the Big City exhibit at the Serpentine. Also, with the mammoth Art of the Continent at the Royal Academy, there is no mistaking the surrogate nos-

talgia for the art that once was in Africa; the art that marked 'the end of art' in Africa. Equally important, but less obvious, in Seven Stories which reaffirmed the danger of relying too much, on the part of Western institutions or native culture brokers, intimate outsiders who become magisterial interpreters of works by artists from the still 'unknown Africa'. Such institutions that are genuinely interested (the anxious sigh again) in showing contemporary art from Africa may discover, as the Whitechapel realised only too late, that total reliance on people who seem to regret the waning powers of the anthropologist, only result in false starts in the race to re-present Africa. The child has grown and can talk for herself. Which perhaps explains why the Malmo Konsthall, having come to terms with this danger decided to rely more directly on the African sectional curators and less on the 'spe-

cialists' when Seven Stories arrived there. By all accounts, Malmo had a much better show. But for taking the initiative in carrying out his latest, arguably most realistic experiment on ways of representing Africa in the West, the Whitechapel's effort is of major historical significance. It may have raised the discourse on the work of African artists (working in modern, even postmodern contexts) to a level where other major Western institutions can, if the will is present, build upon. In much the same way, the Museum of Mankind's Play and Display, the impressive collaborative work with Sokari Douglas Camp, which in itself was a groundbreaking exhibit, remains an outstanding score for those who wish for better and more appropriate visibility for African artists, in the West. These last points are missing in Enwezor's essay.

Nsukka, July, 1996.



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