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CONTEMPORARY. Modern. Postmodern. The art world is full of class and pigeonholes invented by the West. Since the impressionist period and early modernism, art generally has moved from ism to ism following the fleeting whims and caprices of the Western avantgarde. After the dismantling of colonialism in the politico-social arena in Africa, art, science and technology quickly became the next available keys to the heart of Africa, the veritable tools for neo-colonialism. Consequently, African culture, whatever it was, has gone through a series of effacement, arriving at a stage where what is left of it is, I am afraid, less than a hybrid. Contemporary African art is a classic example of that situation.

Encumbered by the ethos of Western education and the dictates of internationalism, the African artist in these times is a victim of a paradigmatic dilemma, torn between the need to remain African and international at the same time. In a general sense, African artists are all faced with this problem as art in the 'contemporary' era cease to be fully integrated with society, becoming more elitist than ever and its institutions more highly policed than in pristine times. Art in Africa is no longer life; nor

Krydz
Ikwuemesi

is life art. The two are severed, only occasionally touching each other with long poles. This is a function of Western academic influence.

It is a fact that no society can remain stagnant culturally. A society that is alive must have a past, a future, a history. Its artists will dream dreams. And in the process of concretising those dreams, which is the creative process - the very riddle of art, they may be affected by other perceptions, of other things, other trends, traditions. But in internalising and manifesting these influences, does the receiving culture have to snuff itself out? Does it have to choke itself on mores which it believes would rescue it from the periphery of the global village?

Perhaps the anthropological binary of the 'Self' and 'Other' contributes to this situation. African artists want to be heard. They want to be seen as artists just like Picasso or Hockney were, without necessarily being pigeonholed into a geo-paradigmatic signifier. Olu Oguibe, in the catalogue to the just concluded Uli exhibit at the Smithsonian, argues that he is not necessarily an Igbo (African) artist or Uli artist, but an artist like any other'. By this, Oguibe wishes to situate himself, to my mind, within the centre of the global village which Western hegemonic scholarship would readily reserve or arrogate to its artists and critics. But in doing that, does Oguibe, indeed the African artist, have to jettison his heritage? Even if he had to heed Caya Makhele's call that he should cease to be immutable *magicien de la terre* and creator of masks and fetishes, does the African artist have to give up that Africanity - that inner essence - which has continued to save his art, at all times and places, from becoming counter-art, in spite of the glaring curse of postmodernism and the nihilist *zeitgeist* known as techno-art? Whether the geo-political origin of an artist is highlighted or not does not really matter to me. All art are, in my opinion, as parochial as they are international. In the effort to exorcise the 'neo-primitivising' ghost of the Western anthropological construct of 'otherness', African artists must not lose their Africanity - that inner philosophico-cultural essence that saves it from

the kind of emptiness and whimsicality that has befallen Euro-American art in the dying years of the present century.

I make the above assertion because it is obvious that the era of the scramble for identity by African artists is over. The crass Westernisation which pervades the art of living in most parts of Africa has crept into the art scene. African artists consciously bother about jargons and trends churned out - in good numbers - from the mill of Western artistic imagination. They engage in the endless debates of new internationalism, instrumentalism versus formalism, all those empty isms which characterise and calibrate the movement of contemporary art. A very ridiculous enterprise. Especially for an artist who has a confirmed tyranny at home or one whose town has neither electricity nor portable water, not to mention one whose national consciousness is defined by corruption and other vices. An Igbo proverb avers that a man whose house is on fire does not chase a rat. African artists have enough issues and problems to address at home with their art rather than the bamboozling rhetorics of postmodernism. Even if one contended that African artists should be involved in verbalising their activities and creativity on internationally acceptable modes, one should concede that the audience for such theorisation is either unripe or non-existent inside much of Africa.

But I must hasten to add that I do not preach auto-isolation of the African artist. One is only saying that he should not allow the burden of neo-colonisation to weigh too heavily on him, that he should not allow his psyche to be beclouded by a complex of inferiority. As Gavin Jantjes put it, '...we cannot challenge (Western artistic hegemony) by acting on the continent alone. We have to bring our challenge (to the West). This does not mean that we need to, or have to, train and practice in Europe, or the West, but that we have to bring our work and our ideas into this arena. For Europe will not come to us to engage in genuine cultural reciprocity. When it does come, it will come to appropriate, to take charge, to take over, to take away'.

It is in this light that one must view some of the major exhibitions of African art that have happened in the West, on its terms, in the last few years: Africa Hoy, Africa Explores, Les Magiciens de la Terre, Africa '95, The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, CROSS/ING: Time, Space, Movement. etc. With these the West does not only validate its claim to having or



Tola Wewe, 'Community Project', Oil on Canvas 45" x 54"

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being the 'international market place', it is also seeking, in the words of Jantjes, the 'authentic otherness'. Unspoilt, uncontaminated originality, signalling a re-discovery of Africa by Europe yet again.

True, it is the era of the neo-expedition. As was the case in the last century, the West is culturally and artistically bankrupt and it is searching for new challenges, new catalysts. Cezanne, Braque, Derain, and Picasso found such a catalyst in Africa about a century ago, and the art of the West breathed a new breath that culminate in modernism. Today post-modernism and techno-art, in spite of their relationship to modern man's quest for truth and unidealised reality, are a synecdoche of the death pangs of mainstream Western art. No doubt, Africa holds the recipe or ingredients for a possible regeneration. The Vogels, Delisses, and Ottenbergs thus become the fore-runners of an impending invasion.

Without being uncomplimentary to the West's efforts at propagating Africa art, it is noteworthy that its interest in African art places a lot of demands on the

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African artist. The African artist has recently begun to question his own authenticity; there is the tendency to pander to the rather crazy taste of the West, not only to be able to remain relevant but also to remain contemporary. Anti-art forms, like installations, have caught the fancy of African artists and there, I think, lies the curse for 21st century African art.

I say so because installation and all its sister paradigms have exhibited the capacity to negate the principles of art, including art's role of surviving man and society. They signify, in their very essence, and in their marriage to science and technology, modern man's appetite for self-destruction. When I am confronted by some postmodernist creations I feel terribly lonely and shaken; I wonder what would form the basis of tomorrow's archeology, tomorrow's anthropology, tomorrow's history.

I am not unaware of 'how important money is to the research, the creation, publication and dissemination of visual art.' I am also aware that whereas such funds are almost non-existent in Africa, it is easily available in the West. I am equally aware that the West possesses a more responsive art market. But we must be wary, as we approach the next century, of a full scale colonisation of African art. For if, as Everlyn Nicodemus has stressed 'we uncritically accept (the desire and power of the postmodern West to curate the rest of the world), flattered by being at all paid attention to, we will soon find ourselves in new, even more sophisticated forms of cultural colonialism.' The imperative now for African art then becomes, in the words of Jantjes 'to gain a voice in the mainstream on its own terms... (by constructing and arguing) a case with the manifestations of our visual practice and through the installations of those works as relevant to

the discourse and development of a contemporary mainstream.

It is in the light of this logic that the PACA Biennale was conceived in 1995 not only as a response to 'Western cultural monotheism' but also as one of the many needed voices inside Africa. This year, the exhibition is at its second edition and it parades works from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and the United States of America, numbering about 60. In all the works, there is the tendency to remain contemporary 'on our own terms'. There are no installations here. Nor will the audience be treated to fleeting techno-performances and happenings. What the artists have done is to interpret the present through the reality of their cultural heritage, thus providing posterity and history some cud to chew. The present collection may not easily find a place in the West's definition of the avantgarde, but they are African art par excellence. And I hasten to add that at the end of the tunnel when time wears out the prevailing anti-art, it is to this paradigm that we may all turn. **GR**

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