

Thinking Out Loud

Contemporary African Art—Language, Dialect or Accent?

Antawan I. Byrd



One of the most challenging aspects of my Fulbright project concerned my efforts to understand, on the one hand, the present conditions of contemporary art practice in Nigeria, and on the other—to figure out the

best way to deploy such knowledge. The impetus for my project was borne out of a different, yet inextricably related, set of concerns about the field that we call contemporary African art. Prior to beginning my research in Nigeria, I was completely overwhelmed by the abstract ways in which the field had been—and still is, in many ways—engaged. This abstraction I speak of is quite similar to the abstract characteristics of a language when compared to the particularity of its dialects or even more, the specificity of its accents. (Consider for example the relationship between English as a language, American English as a dialect, and a southern accent.)

I wondered about how this dynamic plays out in terms of contemporary artistic production, and how it might enable me to develop new ways of conceptualising the challenges related to my areas of inquiry.

Let us accept, for example, that the sphere of contemporary art, with its international exhibitions and transnational art practices, constitutes a global language. Then we might consider contemporary African art to be a dialect of this language not unlike other regionally specific fields like contemporary Asian art. Therefore, following this hierarchy, contemporary Nigerian art can be thought of as an accent—one that, at least for me, requires direct engagement with local speakers in order to be properly comprehended and coalesced into larger conversations on contemporary (African) art practices.

My research was precisely about talking and listening—about having conversations with artists, curators, writers and other individuals in the cultural sector. These conversations took on various forms, ranging from the many projects I worked on at

In this recurring section we invite artists, critics, curators, and other cultural professionals to contribute their thoughts and/or comments on specific aspects of contemporary art that interests them.

the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos to independent writing, doing studio visits, conducting interviews, interacting with art students, visiting exhibitions, giving presentations, and traveling in the country. Many of these projects were also extended and framed by trips to other African cities such as Accra, Bamako and Johannesburg.

Considering the logic of linguistics, it follows that dialects and accents are typically concentrated in particular geographic regions. And while dialects can be defined by certain vocabularies and syntaxes, accents are, however, rooted in the particularities of pronunciation. The dialect of contemporary African art is spoken by artists all over the world who are united, in one way or another, by their affinities to the continent. Yet how are we to deal with the reality that every artist speaks with a different accent—even when they're in the same en-

vironment, let alone in different regions of the world? Surely, this is a concern related to the field of contemporary art generally.

Thus there is a need for more attention to individual and specific artistic practices. And it is this concern that informs my current research, as I attempt to organise

data, reflect on my experiences and plan for future engagements with contemporary art practices in Nigeria.

Jelili Atiku, *Agbo Rago* (Performance) Ejigbo, Lagos, 2009. Atiku's *Agbo Rago*, the first performance piece I saw during my time in Nigeria, is a precise example of an artistic project that cannot be understood properly without a locally inflected reading—one that prioritizes an understanding of the complexities of Nigeria's present sociopolitical climate. Photo: Antawan I. Byrd

The Library

CCA, Lagos has set up one of the fastest growing independent libraries in Africa, particularly in Nigeria by specialising in the visual arts and the creative sector in general. The library contains over 2500 books, catalogues, magazines, journals, as well as a growing collection of art and artists videos. It is gradually developing into an important artists archive and educational facility for artists and specialised students, especially at graduate, post graduate and doctoral level. It is also proving to be a invaluable resource for local/international researchers and other professionals in the cultural sector.

The amount of materials that have been added to the library through purchase and donation has grown in leaps and bounds over the years, making the CCA, Lagos library a veritable treasure trove. In our efforts to encourage membership and promote readership, we have restructured and reduced our membership fees. These gestures reflect our profound commitment to knowledge—despite adequate provision by local statutory bodies.

CCA, Lagos Library is a reference resource only and unfortunately does not have the facility for lending materials. Library resources are available only through membership. Additionally, members are also required to pay daily usage fees.

Membership Levels

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StudentN3,000 per year.....plus daily rate N100
(I.D card required)

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Frequently asked questions:

Where is CCA, Lagos Library?

CCA, Lagos library is centrally located on the mainland. We are 5mins from the foot of the 3rd Mainland Bridge and 10mins from Ikorodu Road when you turn onto Herbert Macaulay Street. We are about 5mins from the Alagomeji junction. Use the Domino Diner as your point of reference. The library is located on the 4th floor of 9 McEwen Street.

What do I need to join?

Joining the CCA, Lagos Library is easy – all you need is a passport photo, a completed registration form, and payment of membership fees. We have a variety of yearly membership options ranging from full membership at N5000 to student membership at N3000 to N1000 a day for casual members. See more information above.

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Can we order books from you?

No, we do not sell or order books on behalf of our members. However, members can request books to be ordered for the library – these requests are subject to approval and available funding. We are looking into the possibility of partnership with one of the premier bookshops in the country to provide an appropriate book ordering service to our members.

Do you have only art books?

While the majority of our books focus on art, art history and critical theory, we do have a limited selection of books dedicated to architecture, fashion, textiles, design, and other related cultural areas. New books are constantly being added to our collection so do frequent the library to discover our recent arrivals.

When is the library open?

We are open from 10am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, and Saturday by Appointment only. The library is not open to the public on Sundays and on public holidays.

Cosmolocalism: The Audacity of Place

Ruth Simbao



Art that is gathered together under the 'international' rubric of 'Contemporary African Art' is generally art that nods towards the continent, but simultaneously registers a certain distance from the place of Africa. Due to the fact that the discourse is still largely driven by the cosmopolitan art centres of the world (which persist in the West), any link that aligns itself too closely with the continent of Africa (the actual continent), runs the risk of being stigmatised as parochial or as a regressive attempt to reterritorialise culture in a transnational age. In the discourse of contemporary art, it is audacious, these days, to suggest that Africa is an actual place!

A characteristic of a cosmopolitan is to maintain a certain amount of distance from, for example the natal or the national. A 'true' cosmopolitan preserves a dismissive edge when it comes to the concept of 'national culture' or culture of a specific African region. A certain amount of detachment is required. To be cosmopolitan or to be transnational (at times there is an overlap) means that one must not affiliate too strongly with any particular place.

Even if, theoretically, an affiliation with place might be viewed, in today's world, as regressive, politically place does matter, for there is an incompatibility between

Western-driven theories and day-to-day engagements with the vulnerable places of national borders, refugee camps, immigration offices and certain spaces of living. While 'the local' was once the small place (the 'little here' as opposed to the grand everywhere else), it now becomes the everywhere else passing through, touching upon, effecting and transforming the 'here' until its 'hereness' almost disappears, and it becomes a cosmological space. It is not just the diaspora to the West that engenders transnational and transcultural attitudes, but it is also the new diasporas within Africa, as well as the diasporas to and from other places, such as China and spaces within

the Global South. These movements to smaller places (for example Chinese people moving to Lesotho) mean that cosmopolitanism is no longer simply the domain of the large city, for in a globalising world the potential of cosmopolitanism in 'small' places forever increases. I say 'potential', for there is always the tension between positively engaging with newness and resisting it in the form of xenophobia. (As we know from the example of Johannesburg, the small mindedness of xenophobia or Afrophobia exists in cosmopolitan cities too).

This is the political edge of the new cosmological spaces in Africa. While it is a struggle, it is also a positive time of redefining 'the local' for it is (theoretically and practically) no longer tenable to suggest that 'the local' (the 'small place' with a supposedly strong 'hereness') is necessarily parochial, for its 'hereness' is constantly being touched. Conversely, it is no longer tenable to suggest that cities monopolise cosmopolitanism.

Whilst rejecting the static, parochial notions of place, cosmopolitanism, in a context in which grassroots political affiliation cannot be ignored, also rejects the aloofness espoused by elite forms of cosmopolitanism in which distance is valorised. Art hubs of the world with an interest in quote-unquote-Africa can no longer justify an aloof attitude towards real places in Africa—even the 'small' places. Transnational and transcultural art events that are based in these cosmological African spaces are critically important, for such is an audacious approach to place.

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Maurice Mbikayi's performance "Voices" at the Spier Contemporary in Cape Town (2010) speaks of vulnerability in the face of xenophobia as well as excitement and possibility in a new, potentially cosmological space. Photo: Ruth Simbao.

Now Available!

Publications from the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos

Like A Virgin... Lucy Azubuikwe & Zaneli Muholi, 2009

This fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the two-person exhibition of photographs by Lucy Azubuikwe and Zaneli Muholi. Curated by Bisi Silva.

The idea of "Like A Virgin..." came before the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos became a reality in 2007. It was the appropriate catalyst in a context in which few, if any

platforms exist for artistic practice that strays from the conventional and the conservative. In an intransigent patriarchal culture in which sexism is prevalent and in which homophobia is legalised, few if any artists have presented complex, provocative works on the body and sexuality the way Azubuikwe and Muholi have. Two young African women working on the continent, pushing boundaries, confronting taboos and challenging stereotypes, in essence expressing themselves and their lives in a way few of their predecessors have done before. The exhibition catalogue features essays by Bisi Silva and Christine Eyene. **N1,500 or \$15.00 (excl. p&p)**

Identity: An Imagined State, 2009

This fully-illustrated colour catalogue accompanies the first video art exhibition to be held in Nigeria. Identity: An

Imagined State is an exhibition that brings together for the first time works by twelve established and emerging artists of different cultural, geographic and social backgrounds from Nigeria, Africa, and South America.

Participating artists include Jude Anogwih, Lucy Azubuikwe, Uchay Joel Chima, Luc Foster Diop, Bouchra Khalili, Vanessa Padilla, Thando Mama, Grace Ndiritu, Emeka Ogboh, Berni Searle, Aicha Thiam and Kemang Wa Lehulere. Curated by Jude Anogwih and Oyinda Fakeye.

The publication features insightful texts, both in English and French, by Krydz Ikwemesi, Miguel Petchkovsky, Godday Leye, Solange Farkas, an introduction by Bisi Silva and an afterword by Antawan I. Byrd. **N2,000 or \$20.00 (excl. p&p)**

