

The City in the Blue Day

– Simon Njami

It is impossible to speak of Africa. It is impossible to speak of Africa in conventional terms of the art world or the Academy. Because Africa, since the dawn of times is fantasy. A fantastic vessel within which everyone deposits his or her own neuroses, angst, fear, or anger. How then may we tell the tale of this contradictory space, how can we speak of its history and geography without reexamining its past and questioning what we thought we understood? It's crucial to unlearn Africa. To rebuild it with new tools. And these tools depend upon contemporaneity. Only the contemporary can attempt to render the multitude of dimensions of an obscure territory through its transparency. Transparent because obscure. The East and West have danced there together for thousands of years while the great North and South have led a merciless battle. Contemporary creation incorporates its own contradictions. It is the ultimate and its opposition. The thesis and the antithesis.

Africa is an integral part of contemporary creation, when we recognize the fact that contemporaneity is a generational phenomenon. Contemporaneity defines a fluid and indefinable space. An infinite territory. And the very notion of space is both physical and mental. It spans a field of investigation that extends far beyond simple geography, surfing the limits of psychology and psychoanalysis. Grasping its application across the African continent, and more specifically that of contemporary artistic practices brought to the light of day becomes a matter of deconstructing various implications via an historical approach. A history that is quasi-immediate since it roughly covers approximately twenty years, combining space with its essential corollary which is time.

Colonial times defined the frontiers of an artificial African space, since the contours of the latter had been defined externally, determined by politics which had little to do with the concerned populations. As such, geographically-speaking the continent displayed a tectonic unity, given its parceling out according to the interests of the “occupying” powers during the conference of Berlin, contributing to this dividing up or “balkanization,” using Léopold Sédar Senghor’s expression of a space without a center. Whereas there is no space without an established centrality, as Homi Bhabha underlines: “If in our traveling theory, we are open to the ‘metaphoricity’ of peoples from imagined communities—migrants or metropolitans—we discover that the space of a modern people-nation is never simply horizontal. Their metaphorical movement demands a sort of ‘duplicity’ in writing, a temporality of representation that moves from cultural formation and social processes in the absence of a central causal logic.”¹ The notion of metaphoricity sends us back to virtuality of fact. Contemporary Africa distinguishes itself precisely in this impalpable immateriality of imagined Community—as an intellectual construction of sorts, which politicians have attempted for some fifty years, with little success, to transform into a concrete and tangible reality. Africa in the wake of independence is the result of an exogenous negotiation between colonial powers. Thus, paradoxically, this continent has been confronted with a plethora of exogenous centers conforming to a colonial cartography. The centers find themselves outside the continent and are labeled “Metropolises.” Doubtless this appropriation from outside Africa’s heart has contributed to the structuring of chaos which would become the primary mode of functioning for one and another. Decisions made by the Metropole had no real materiality, because those for whom they were intended found themselves incapable to discern and even less likely to debate about its logic.

This then, despite the new breath of hope emerging from liberation, gives rise to a certain confusion—a direct result of the sixties when numerous countries saw their independence, and were given an opportunity to define what Africa might become. This stumbling block concerning

the continent remains current today, despite a debate that has largely evolved and many endeavors set in practice. Politically, this African space has been transformed into a virtual space, in terms of the force of the dream of a new tomorrow developed in the minds of the first continental leaders. An organization such as the Organization of African Unity, now the African Union, finally had for its sole function bringing to life a reality without consistence. Diverse politicians in charge failed to model what Fanon had termed the “new man,” for this man in reality had merely acquired new-found liberty:

Decolonization never goes unnoticed for it involves humankind, it fundamentally modifies humans, it transforms powerless, non-essential spectators into privileged actors, caught up in a quasi grandiose manner by the range of History. It introduces its own special rhythm into the human, a formula of new (wo)men, a new language, a new humanity. Decolonization is a true creation of new beings. But this creation does not obtain its legitimacy by way of a supernatural means of power: The colonized thing becomes (wo)man through the process of freeing itself.²

Has the “thing colonized” become veritably human by proposing and inventing a new way to approach the world? If we have doubts (despite the real work of re-appropriation) concerning the result of what politicians have to offer, convincing definitions of these aspirations can decidedly be found in the intellectual and artistic domains. We shall further examine several strategies they have used to arrive at a true *post-colonial* state, meaning a state freed from the weight of the past.

The Invention of Africa

The prerequisite of this new humanity born in the sixties arose first and foremost through the reinvention of a strong and radiant Africa, a rich, fascinating Africa at all costs, longtime echoed through the first steps initiated by those who had conceived the idea of Negritude. This creation, often political and didactic could not exist otherwise. It was necessary to breath life into it, a lyricism consolidating freedom and a unity forever mythical. Aesthetic questioning caught up in an extreme demonstration of the vitality of the continent focused around an attempt to define an African aesthetic—an impossible wager. Perhaps this is why this period left no vestiges of major work that survived the passage of time and an opening of space in which the individual prevailed over the collective. And, more importantly *verba volant*, there is no solid literature to document the approach of these precursors timidly pushing their way forward. It wasn't until the eighties, and in a visible way the nineties, that we see the development of another strategy in this quest of freed humanity. Indeed, paradoxically globalization did not incorporate the massive scale of space, to the contrary, it welcomed fluidity and individualization. Rather than attempting to define themselves as a group wherein a same dynamic was at work, Africans, led by artists, entered into a phase leading them to explore a personal quest centered on self. Notions of identity alteration, nomadism, cross-culturalism became key words in an endogenous definition that had quite naturally the primary objective of deconstructing perceptions and preconceived notions.

The constitution of an endogenous space cannot be elaborated through the aid of “foreigners.” It is an ontological matter for Africans who must be both its subjects and designers. Of course in the eighties in London the question had already surfaced around post-colonialism as a central axis for all deciphering and unveiling. But the limitations of postcolonial studies were confined to analyzing the relationship between the former colonized and the former colonizer, as Frantz Fanon pointed out. The space opened as this dichotomy atrophied, unable to move beyond interdependence between colonizer/colonized. It was as if to conceive of an idea of Africa it was necessary to endlessly

refer back to the West, leading one to believe that modern Africa, and by extension, contemporary Africa was nothing more than an exclusive construction of the West.

I do not deny the fact that contemporary Africa had to adopt a position, create an intervening period, but it would be fallacious to suggest that it played only a passive role in its own history. There has always existed an inherent dynamic about the continent which has contributed to what it is today. And because the resilience and particular dynamics have not been sufficiently analyzed, at times we find ourselves at an impasse. Since the nineties then, initiatives have come to light, whose object has been to explore it from the inside, or at any rate to explore it in another way. Africans who had been content to remain subjects (But did they truly have the tools to be heard?), have become actors of their own neuroses, explorers of their own territory, cartographers of a geography that would quickly break apart the formal framework of geography. The creation of the *Revue Noire* magazine constitutes a headstone in the redefinition of the subject of African art beginning in the nineties.

Then came “Africa 95” with Clementine Deliss in London, when the curator decided to reach out to specialists or artists from the “homeland.” This was followed by the creation of the *НКА* magazine in 1996 in the United States. Exhibitions henceforth began to resemble thinking machines, manifestos built around an attempt to seize upon the elusive African in all his/her complexity: “El Tiempo de Africa,” “Unpacking Europe,” “The Short Century,” “Africa Remix” to name just a few, were not solely exhibitions but manifestos, essays, in the literal sense of the term. There were also bienales: Dakar, Bamako and Johannesburg, contributing to the emancipation of the African voice. The outline of this new space drawing itself out remains blurry twenty years later, but the machine has been set in motion and the contradictions among African specialists is ripe and ready for a debate of whose outcome we are yet uncertain, while we are convinced of one thing: this new space contradicts the preceding one (that of African unity), in terms that firstly it confirms and pleads a cause for its virtuality, and secondly, consequence of the first claim, struggles against fragmentation and the infinitely diminutive. The goal is to make each artist an autonomous space. Thus it becomes obsolete to pursue Africanism by way of a group, but rather through the singularity of each individual who would therefore become an Africa in him/herself. This return of situation and questioning around outdated standards does much to quell established systems, proof being the controversy around the African Pavilion in Venice in 2007.

Questions of Identity

The quest for a referential *We* remains the prime mover of conceptual and esthetic revolutions. A *We* that, rather than locking the individual into a categorical compartment liberates and emancipates. We are still in the early stages of an attempt to answer what the German philosopher Ernst Bloch put forward as the essential question: the question of self in *We*. The complex problematic of *We* refers to two notions without which self-determination becomes difficult in essence: the group and the individual. The group, this *We* that Bloch evokes is a series of interdependent groups forming what Deleuze calls “contact surface,” in other words, the “field of appearance.” The familial, ethnic, religious, national, continental, etc., represent a number of groups within which each individual must find his or her place. Identity, for this is the issue, becomes the synthesis of these different categories in a unique and singular actualization. If being is thinking for Descartes, we must also add that our thoughts determine the way we appear. Alongside the exogenous image of ourselves threatening to squeeze and lock us into archetypes, there is an endogenous image which must flow forth in order to express what Delacroix called the “chaotic world of sensation.” For if language and art contain meaning, it is indeed this one.

But how to translate such a world through the reality of an image? How do we transform chaos into an organized and balanced whole? This is the challenge in the hands of contemporary African artists. The question of *We*, their prime preoccupation appears to be a boundless enigma.

Tangled in this double knot of the local and the global, it is a matter of inventing a hybrid capable of solving the grievances of both groups at once. For contemporaneity is necessarily universal and must come to terms peacefully with its colonial past:

For this implies that in popular black culture (here, African)³ there are, strictly speaking, ethnographically, absolutely no pure forms. These forms are always the by-product of a partial synchronization, a dedication crossing borders, a confluence of different traditions, negotiations between dominant and subordinate positions, underlying strategies of recoding and trans-coding, critical intention and processes of intention. All these forms are impure; all are, to some degree, hybrids of a vernacular base.⁴

What Stuart Hall describes here is the experience of foreignness that each former colonized individual necessarily experiences. A rich foreignness creates a salutary duality.

Being a foreigner, in itself, is common to all those who have experienced the yoke of colonization. But while colonized, they feel duality only as loss, an absence of a part of themselves. They acquire after independence, this force which, according to Fanon's words, allows for the hope of a *new (wo)man*. Exercising this new talent, after all the mastery required, is no minor endeavor. It is first a matter of unlearning how to see oneself as an unchanging schema defined through the eyes of the other. Afterwards, it becomes vital to devise one's own approach and fill it with meaning, thereby finding one's self-value. This transformation implements itself on two levels. The first is through medium-ship, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the power of clairvoyance, which, if we are receptive, can be likened to a mystical experience: "My body sees and is seen. He who observes all things can also observe self, and recognize in what s/he sees the 'other side' of his or her clairvoyance."⁵ The second, something Jean-Paul Sartre calls *dédoublement*, is of a psychological nature and to be taken in its two-fold meaning. In this text, which treats the immanence of the de-colonization and the emancipation of people who had been victims, or at least objects in the eyes of the other, Sartre underlines the act of seeing, in other terms, the capacity to judge or form one's own opinion as a fundamental element of freedom.

But if the philosopher henceforth demands humility on the part of the West, he has omitted the fact that this shock also has repercussions on the seeing subject. It is as if delivered from a long night of blindness. Little by little it was opening up to the world and the magic of discovering itself in such a way it had never imagined—"it no longer coincides with itself."⁶ No longer coinciding with self is a traumatizing and inventive psychological experience. It becomes an open invitation to question in a permanent fashion all fixed notions of identity. The most active image of this transformation and raising of consciousness is doubtless the physical embodiment by which the other views us. By considering our body as foreign object, it is easier to reconstitute it in the totality of its signification. Therein lies the quest in which African artists have embarked, a language corresponding to their interior world and the truest expression of their discourse. This translation, whose only object, paradoxically, is the quest for an intimate truth, about which we have only an intuition, is a condition *sine qua non*. This dividing up implies mastery of the parameters by which the world is ordered. The act of creating is no longer a given to be taken lightly as some may be led to believe and describe, but rather a commitment extending beyond the simple individual, transforming the artist into a living illustration of singularity. Creating is bringing ultimate duality to light. That of art itself:

Aesthetics suffers from a harrowing duality. It designates on one hand the theory of sensitivity as a type of possible experience; on another hand the theory of art as a reflection of real experience. For both ends to meet up, it is essential that the conditions of the experi-

ence in general become conditions of real experience in themselves; the work of art, for its part, thus emerges as experimentation.⁷

The experiment is an observation of the evolution of phenomena whose profound nature is uncertain by definition. The African artist becoming thus his or her own field of study, must surrender him or herself to a scrupulous, uncompromising analysis in order to regain the depth of this time which, according to Merleau-Ponty: “remains the same because the past is the former future and a recent present, the present a near past and a recent future, the future being finally a present and even a past to come, meaning each dimension of time is felt or intended as something other than itself, in other words, because at the heart of time we find a gaze approach (...)”⁸

Perceptions et réalité (reality)

The key word here is *gaze*. Imagine for an instant the human being capable of being assimilated to time and that the different phases of this multiple present Merleau-Ponty refers to is nothing other than the essence of his/her humanity. As such, in a sort of eternal return of same, according to Nietzsche's famous concept, we are seeking to define an object and freeze it, whereas its nature is changing. How to define the future, if not by way of an extrapolation of the moment lived and a projection that takes on meaning only through the force of its subjectivity, by force of the approach highlighted. Every approach is fragmentary and we are but the isolated elements of a puzzle whose general contours escape us to no end—wherein lies the necessity, at times, to experience an incarnation. Contemporary art, generally speaking, cannot exist without an incarnation of some sort. The body becomes the place for narration. The intimate body, but also the social body, the other's body. In this representation made possible through video and photography, the layout of self allows us to express, in a tangible manner, an emotion that is anything but abstract. The slightest landscape becomes a manner of self-portrait and *takes on body*. This duality we have evoked becomes an instrument we can play over and again. The body thus ceases to belong to its owner, becoming a metaphor of *We* for the “voyeur” to grasp. It becomes matter. Paradox: its incarnation transforms it into idea, as we have been reminded by Henri-Pierre Jeudi: “Images of bodies do not figure around the body as isolated entity, they simultaneously appear as images of the world. And language only permits us to organize arbitrary classifications rendering the meaning of interpretation closer and closer to illusion. In a certain manner, this collision of images of body teaches us that there is no real body language. Our way to speak of the latter already implies a negation of image through the objectifying of meaning it has been given.”⁹

By taking back one's own body, or inventing an idea of self, the African artist wipes away all the clichés transforming them into an experiment on the real. The *exotic* body is merely exotic because it is asserted as such. Thus, it is not carnal matter alone which becomes meaningful, but the way the artist will stage it. The body, like landscape (and this is no accident) becomes metaphor—empty canvas upon which the artist transposes his/her vision of our humanity. Instrument of mediation by which the artist speaks to the other, the observer and cannot help but qualify, the body is the primary concrete element by which we are perceived. It is the siege of permanent conflict because through it the contradictory question of perception plays itself out. On one hand we have the image that we convey to others and on the other, the one others capture of us. An image that inscribes itself on the order of appearance. Mastering this double image comes down to straightaway giving up soul. What then is this body offered, if not the revised incarnation of myths and cultures marked with the seal of contemporaneity? The body would then be the intercessor between ourselves and the world we are unconscious of. In a kind of trance, which must lead us to explore the limits of our being, we swing back and forth between animal incarnation and spirituality, meaning, the

conscious staging of ourselves. It is in this clairvoyant operation that we are divided by duality an ultimate time.

This act of division was set in place by those who had dreamed of African independence. The World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar in 1966 and the Pan-African Festival of Algiers in 1969 are examples of concrete attempts to create platforms of endogenous reflection on African soil. Their manifestation in Algiers and Dakar is the sign of an imperious necessity. But perhaps we should give ourselves the means of transforming this necessity into reality. That is the important issue for the future of creation on the continent: finding an autonomy that frees it from the narrow forks of large mercantile capitals which are all situated in the West. It is a matter, according to Senghor's words of a brighter future of the First Congress of men of black culture, to "see the people of Africa assert their personality to participate in a meeting place of give and take. It is henceforth a matter not only of revalorizing cultures, but also bringing them to life on a daily basis."¹⁰ These words addressed to Guélowâr by Senghor: "Your voice tells us of the Republic, that we erect the city in the blue day / in the equality of a brotherhood of people. And we answer, 'Present, oh Guélowâr!'"¹¹

Those who answer to the call will be those who, without shame and modesty, dare to call themselves Africans to all the world, ignoring all prejudice and preconceived notions about the continent. They move forward by evoking the hurt, errors and experimentation, surging forward to assert the ingenuity of their land, overlooking the mocking of professional skeptics. For, at the risk of appearing scandalous, I assert that one is not born African, one becomes African. "Becoming" is birth and discovering oneself in the world. It is implementing existential choices to determine the direction our lives will take. The only way to appreciate this Africa, whose definition everyone seems familiar with, is by assembling the scattered pieces of this puzzle over and over. Becoming boils down to expressing one's point of view to the world. And there is no expression without language. Understanding so-called African artists means being capable of decoding the original language in which each in his/her own manner claims his/her place in the world. For belonging to a territory and attempting to define contours should never cause us to lose sight of the fact that each territory is first a metaphor.

By way of a conclusion, I will leave the last words to Achille Mbembe:

Having set out to discover what remains, at this turn of the century, of the African quest for self-determination, we find ourselves thrown back on the figures of the shadow, into those spaces where one perceives something, but where *this thing* is impossible to make out—as in a phantasm, at the exact point of the split between the visible and the graspable, the perceived and the tangible.¹²

- 1 Homi K. Bhabha, *Les lieux de la culture* (Paris: Payot, 2007), 226.
- 2 Franz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Decouverte, 2002), 40.
- 3 Author's note.
- 4 Stuart Hall, *Identités et cultures* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008), 306.
- 5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
- 6 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée Noir," *preface to the Anthology of New Black and Madagascan Poetry* (Paris: PUR, 1948).
- 7 Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).
- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
- 9 Henri-Pierre Jeudi, *Le corps comme objet d'art* (Paris: Armand Collin/Masson, 1998).
- 10 Léopold Sédar Senghor, *l'émotion et la raison* (Saint-Maur-des-Fossés: Editions Sépia, 1995), 136.
- 11 Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Guélowâr ou Prince," *Poèmes*, (Paris: du Seuil, 1948), 72–73.
- 12 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 241.