

Das Esquinas do Olhar / Looking Both Ways

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“The middle is in no way a “median”; on the contrary, it is the place where things gather speed. Between things does not designate a relation we can localize which goes from one thing to another and then back again, but rather it is a perpendicular, a transverse movement.”



(Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Rhizome: A European Art Exhibition*, The Hague; 1991)

Scramble for Africa, the name of the piece by Yinka Shonibare that leads into the exhibition, was a term invented by *The Times* to refer to the competition between European colonial powers to divide up the resources of the African continent in the 19th century. In his work, the artist evokes a particular incident in that struggle which marks the beginning of a new era in colonial history – the Berlin Conference. After the abolition of the slave trade during the first decades of the century, Africa seemed to have been relatively forgotten; yet after 1870 colonial expansion was re-launched at full steam, and in a few short years the dominions of each empire were defined. The consequences of this parceling out are still felt by Africans today and contribute to the present state of the African continent. One can find a complex array of reasons behind the renewed interest in colonial expansion: economic, geo-political, technological, demographic, ideological and intellectual. A series of treaties and bilateral agreements, namely between Portugal and Great Britain, were systematically brought into question and rendered ineffectual by the signatories themselves, above all by Germany, Belgium and France. Thus, on the 15th of November 1884, at the initiative of the Berlin Government, an international conference began in that city with the purpose of regulating naval activity and commerce in Africa, as well as seeking to define the necessary steps to render the new occupations official. Attending were the plenipotentiaries of fourteen countries, the same number as the characters represented in Shonibare’s installation. Aside from the five countries mentioned above which were directly involved, Austria, Denmark, Spain, the United States of America, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden and Turkey also participated. Signed on the 26th of February of the next year, the final written resolution of the conference gives rise to a new principle of international law that had serious and long-lasting consequences for Portuguese aspirations in the region. Portugal’s “historical right” as a discovering nation and most long-standing frequenter of the African coast is superseded in the judicial arena by the principle of “*de facto* territorial occupation”. This marked the beginning of the Bragança dynasty’s discredit, which would lead to the instauration of the republican regime in 1910, but it was also the start of the construction of a colonial ideal, of a politically fertile imaginary universe that would bring together nationalism and the imperialist agenda: “the elaboration and diffusion of theories that represented Portugal as an organic whole, ethnically or racially, bearer of a specific spirit or “genius” dating from the beginning of time” ^[1]. As Yves Léonard wrote ^[2], Portugal rediscovers its own 15th century discoveries, transforming the past into a powerful myth, which, like all myths is fiction but is

also an explanatory scheme and a mobilizing message that, as we all know, would be dominant in Portugal until 1975. The Empire defined as a sacred heritage to be maintained at all costs, makes up for the country's subordinate position in the framework of international relations.

Yinka Shonibare's piece is a particularly intelligent elaboration on the inevitable interdependency between Africa and the West, on the inseparability of their stories, of which the Berlin Conference is a remarkable episode, and also on those elements from the past that come into the present. All the artists represented in the exhibition comment on these cultural and social exchanges between the one side and the other, which went both ways. Rejecting all the reigning stereotypes about "African art" – the sterile use of images and traditional signs, or of images that evoke a "real", imagined Africa, as well as the use of crude materials, refuse or "typically African" colours- what is on view here are the connections of contemporary artists to Africa, and to the West simultaneously, and the ways in which they relate to contemporary art itself, showing up its parochialism from a diverse, polycentric view point. Some, like Shonibare, but also Ghada Amer, Oladélé Bamgboyé, Kendell Geers, and Hassan Musa revisit canonized versions of history and history of art, undermining and making fun of the assumptions that sustain them. Others delve into more or less ironic, more or less direct commentary on the global situation we live in; it is from this perspective that we can view the work of Fernando Alvim, Allan deSouza and Wangechi Mutu. Even when the focus on issues of identification and personal identity are strongest, as in the work of Moshekwa Langa, N'Dilo Mutima, Ingrid Mwangi or Zineb Sedira, the global political perspective is always present. And, in a time of intense global conflict, of growing migration and xenophobia, this is certainly an important lesson contained in the exhibition. The title makes it clear that we are dealing with artists of African origin living in Diaspora, spread around the world. All have the experience of living in two worlds or more, which they have managed to link at a very high standard in different ways, be it at the level of thought or of artistic work. Whereas colonial discourse was, and still is, posited on a dichotomy between *us* and *them*, here, as in post-colonial theory, the emphasis is on hybrids and integration. What is sought here is not to put side by side two different experiences or two different cultures: it is not a fertile approach to look at these works and take delight in identifying what is African, American, Belgian, and Portuguese or western. Nor is it helpful to search for a more or less harmonious fusion, a "median" in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari meant it in the epigraph. What is sought is rather, something that matches Homi K. Bhabha's definition of "hybridity" – neither one nor the other, hence a double negation which sees the possibility of many futures which are forged from memory (what the mind keeps) and experience (what the eye sees), but not necessarily dependent on them or imprisoned within them. This hybridity does not take "the other" to be an agent, but rather reinvents him as a space in the middle, which innovates and interrupts what is going on here.



It seems to me that these strategies and these notions are undoubtedly very interesting tools for examining and questioning "the West", and for changing the way that people perceive themselves is very important in our times. In doing so, these



artists observe us which, for those who have always been watching them, is, at the very least a healthy change.

In *Scramble for Africa* by Shonibare, fourteen mannequins surround a large table etched with a map of Africa. They are speaking excitedly – one points accusingly to another, who is standing up, angry, being soothed by yet another standing next to him. What we observe is a verbal argument, in a rare convergence of concept and form, since the actors have no heads or facial expressions. Decapitated mannequin-characters appear in many of his work whenever situations involving authority come up, says the artist in the Okwui Enwezor published in the catalogue ^[3], reminding us of what happened to the aristocracy in the French Revolution. However, we can also view them as characters who have lost their heads because they are devoid of individuality –an individuality they never recognized in their victims. Alternatively, we may also think about the absence of intellectual life that Africans at the time were perceived to suffer from. On the other hand, these western characters are wearing suits cut in 19th century European style but made from a kind of fabric that we think of as typically African. The inclusion of these fabrics has been a personal signature of Shonibare's. He started using them in the 1980's when he was training as a painter at a British art school. In the same interview the artist says:

"In order to talk about this, I have to go back to my childhood in Nigeria and then move forward to my adulthood in Europe. In Nigeria I was exposed to many different kinds of experiences: I lived in Lagos, a modern society, and I could watch American TV shows and above all be a citizen of the world, be interested in many things at the same time – I didn't have to choose. Then, to my surprise, when I came to Europe, I was forced to choose. I think my blackness started when I stepped off the plane in Heathrow. I had come to study painting... One of my teachers came to my workshop and said – 'Well, you're African aren't you? Why don't you make authentic traditional African art?' Obviously, given my background, I was shocked at the idea that I had to understand the concept of a pure African authenticity, that that was expected of me. It negated my commitment to modernism and modernization. So, I decided to play with the notion of authenticity and of what it might mean. It was then that I concluded that the notion of loyalty or faithfulness is always imposed upon us by others; it comes from the outside." (p. 166).

He decided to use these fabrics, not as naïve expressions of his Africanness, but rather conceptually, to carry a highly complex cultural significance that allowed him to question ideas about authenticity and African identity. What everyone, even Africans themselves since the 1970's, consider to be typically African fabrics, are in fact a Dutch product inspired by Indonesian *batik* from Java, which the Dutch and British started to produce industrially for export to Africa in the 19th century. A privileged symbol of colonial intermingling, the "African" fabrics in Shonibare's work are a particularly effective means of dealing, whether conceptually or formally, with his condition as a contemporary artist of African origin and the dilemmas this presents.



"I think it was during art school that I realized that it would not be possible to be a universal artist, to be anonymous, if there is such a thing; yet that was my utopian vision. It was a great revelation to understand that no matter what my inner feelings might be, the way that I was perceived would be very different. I also understood that I was facing a dilemma. If I produced work about my condition as a black, I would simply be considered an artist working on blackness; but if I did not produce work about being black, people would refer to me as a black artist who does not work on blackness. I understood that in this particular European context, priority would never be placed on what I actually did but rather on my race... So I decided, OK, my way of dealing with this will be to create confusion. I will place myself on the side of confusion, because confusion is in fact more honest on my part, it expresses something closer to my real position. And I don't mean 'confusion' in the negative sense." [4]

Other artists, as Laurie Farrell mentions in the Introduction, have reservations about participating in collective "African" exhibitions, for fear they will be trapped in a stereotyped category or that they will have to carry the burden of representing Africa to the West, both of these being genuine risks. Unlike them, Yinka Shonibare chose to take these risks and has managed to circulate and move



between different spaces in international contemporary art without being embarrassed by his roots, which he expresses with a pride that is never overly zealous. Like other artists in this exhibition, he does not see himself as a dispossessed "African" or as an incomplete "westerner". Such artists position themselves as citizens of the world, with a great variety of allegiances and preferences. The paths they take are not binary or linear – they sit at a corner, looking one way and the other and all around. This is a flexible position that is surely creatively stimulating, but the flip side of the coin should not be forgotten; skin colour and African origins can also be used defensively as a strategy for entering a western market that still appreciates exoticism and the racial or ethnic authenticity of its non-western participants. This only demonstrates the permanence and the recurrence of the colonial or neo-colonial attitude.

We need also remember that the condition of diaspora is not characteristic of the marginalized groups or communities of colour residing in the West and that migration is nothing more than a backlash to the expansion of European people and ideals during the colonial era. Robin Cohen writes that in the period between 1500 and 1914, 60 to 65 million Europeans emigrated, versus 15 million Africans and Asians. Even between 1945 and 1975, while wealthy Europe became a host country for migration (this was not the case for Portugal, which remained a country of emigration), the number of people leaving Europe still constituted half the total number of intercontinental migrants^[5].

Furthermore, it is interesting to understand this notion of "Diaspora" in a wider sense, as did the painter R. B. Kitaj in his Diaspora manifesto^[6]. We should understand that this condition of "Diaspora" might be the best description for the universal human condition, particularly as we live in a world of increasing cultural intersections. "A diffuse, de-centered condition, in a world with a diversity of systems of meaning, a way of experiencing and observing culture simultaneously..."^[7].

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois, referring to African-Americans, spoke of the "double consciousness", and saw it as the state of affairs that would define the 20th century. He was not wrong, but we speak of the same phenomenon and extend the time-frame, apply it to culture, and say that it is in fact not a double consciousness but a multiple consciousness. The constant dialogue between local and global, familiar and foreign, has become the basic condition of our modernity. We all often feel that we are between cultures. Aside from a series of shifts which occur in the discourse of modern awareness of Marx and Althusser, of Freud and Lacan, of Saussure and of Foucault, this loss of a stable "sense of self," which Stuart Hall calls "dislocation of the subject," [8] is also connected to changes in the world, such as decolonization and the more and more rapid circulation of increasingly large numbers of people, images, symbols and capital, which we have come to call globalization. The loss of the stable "sense of self" also has to do with what have been called the "new social movements" emerging everywhere from within modern society since the 1960's, such as the black civil rights movement in the United States, women's liberation, the sexual revolution, the search for regional and environmental empowerment.

Art is surely, by definition, the best arena for this opening up of political, social and cultural representations that are made necessary by our experience of the world. Ever since Marcel Duchamp and the "creation of new thinking" for the urinal, the role of art has been to destabilize and then rebuild the meaning of images and everyday objects. If the arts can be considered a dynamic element in contemporary culture, this is because artists perceive their work as developing outside the boundaries of the familiar, in a space in constant flux and located outside established cultural positions, a permeable area where the most common-place and the strangest notions cross and interrupt each other, where our meetings and near misses find the potential for a new way of knowing.



If since 1990 the showing of contemporary African artists has become more frequent in other places, in Portugal it has been rare or practically non-existent. The untimeliness of Portuguese colonialism and decolonization, in the words of Boaventura Sousa Santos [9], are reflected also in the art world. We, in fact, were still colonizing when the decolonization process was already underway all over Africa, and we also decolonized late in the day. This exhibit may serve as an opportunity for us to revisit the imaginary universe of Portuguese national identity, in which the loss of empire was, on the surface, assuaged by the obsession with Europe. It may also challenge some commonplace assumptions.

* This text was originally published in the catalogue "Looking Both Ways - Das Esquinas do Olhar. Arte da Diáspora Africana Contemporânea" on the occasion of the exhibition with the same name that took place in 2005 at the headquarters of Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

* The images reproduced are views of the exhibition at Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

- [1] Valentim ALEXANDRE, "Nação e Império", in F. Bethencourt and K. Chauduri (orgs.), *História da Expansão Portuguesa*, vol. 4, Lisbon, Temas e Debates, 2000, p. 133.
- [2] Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 526.
- [3] Okwui ENWEZOR. "Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnavalesque and Power: The Art of Yinka Shonibare", in Laurie FARRELL (org.), *Looking Both Ways. Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, New York, Museum for African Art, 2003.
- [4] Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 167.
- [5] Robin COHEN, "Prologue", in *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995 (cited by John PEFER, "The Diaspora as object", in L. FARRELL (org.), *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.
- [6] R. B. KITAJ, "First diasporist manifesto", in N. MIRZOEFF (org.), *Diaspora and Visual Culture. Representing Africans and Jews*, London, Routledge, 2000 (1989)
- [7] James CLIFFORD, *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1988, p.9.
- [8] Stuart HALL, *A Identidade Cultural na pós-Modernidade*, Rio de Janeiro, DP&A, 2004 (1992)
- [9] Boaventura de Sousa SANTOS, "Entre Prospero e Caliban: Colonialismo, pós-colonialismo e inter-identidade", in M.I RAMALHO and A.S RIBEIRO (orgs.), *Entre ser e estar. Raízes, percursos e discursos da identidade*, Porto, Edições Afrontamento, 2002.