

Functionality and Social Modernism in the Work of Untrained South African Artists

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In one of the most shocking examples of radical Othering, in 2008 Jean-Loup Amselle launched a consummate review of perceived predominant Western perceptions of Africa, and although describing these derogatorily as ‘intellectually degenerate’ goes on to list them using the following terms: being so Other as to constitute a ‘sublime’ in the Kantian and Burkean sense; ‘underdeveloped’; ‘synonymous with poverty’; ‘cursed’; Africans as the ‘descendants of the Old Testament Ham’ and his ‘cursed and blood-infected progeny’; the vicious circle of ‘poverty-corruption-disease-tribal wars’; ‘emaciated bodies’; ‘genocide’; and ‘racism’.¹ In short, Africa is described as ‘a continent of utter horror, a theatre of primitive cruelty’,² the very reason why ‘we’ (the West?) think of Africa in a ‘libidinous and viral’ way, generating a line of thought so deep and wide that it ‘permeates the economic, social, cultural and religious domains’.³

Such genderisation and polarisation of the relationship between the West and Africa – deeply ambivalent and postulated as the attraction of opposites and ‘sexual intercourse’ – positions Amselle slap-bang in the middle of Othered hate speech towards Africa.⁴ Whilst posturing to redeem the primitiveness of Africa, as

... no longer to be traced in ancient local artifacts alone; it is increasingly becoming a master of reviving techniques or outdated European items whose regeneration is possible through their passage through the prism of African newness,⁵

his statements provide an example of the deep and wide divide between the West and Africa which still undercuts Africa as a secondary role player and displays a modernist binary view of history.

This example reflects but one such view in the continuing exploration of the relationship between the West and Africa in terms of the modalities of modernity. Theoretically, African art production has been explored in terms of many different constructs, mainly related to Western postulated ideas of modernism, such as postcolonialism, Post-Africanism and neomo-

1. Jean-Loup Amselle teaches at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Jean-Loup Amselle, ‘Africa’s Repulsive Charm’, R Baldinelli, trans, *Critical Interventions* 2, spring 2008, pp 11–18

2. Ibid, pp 12–13

3. It is a view that reflects the stereotypical view of the West as the Apollonian rational intellect and Africa as its Dionysian inferior and irrational body-counterpart.

4. Ibid, p 11

5. Ibid, p 15

dermism. Such modernist and subsequent postmodern constructs have been theorised within the context of the mainstream 'high' art domain; the term 'neomodernism', for instance, has been generally applied to indicate a re-
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6. In the editor's foreword, 'Interrogating African Modernity: Art, Cultural Politics and Global Identities', in *Critical Interventions* 3/4, spring, 2009, p 5, Sylvester Ogbechie states that the term 'neomodernism' is generally described as a return to formalist modernism in art and design, but that his own use of the term refers to the political implications of the modernist sublime in relation to African discourses of modernity in art. The term is generally used by contemporary African scholars; in *ibid*, p 5, Ogbechie identifies an early use of the word that appears in VA Grauer, 'Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism', *The Downtown Review* 3, 1981–1982, pp 1–2.

7. Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Globalization or the Age of Transition? A Long-Term View of the Trajectory of the World-System', *International Sociology*, vol 15, no 2, 1999, available at <http://www.iwallerstein.com/wp-content/uploads/docs/TRAJWS1.PDF>, last accessed September 2012

8. Cited in Penny Florence and Nicola Foster, *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy and Feminist Understanding*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2000, p 102.

9. Rik Pinxten and Koen de Munter, *De culturele eeuw*, Houtekiet, Antwerp and Amsterdam, 2006, p 81

10. *Ibid*, p 79

11. *Ibid*, p 82

APPROPRIATION AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Over the past decade and a half, globalising processes and their ever-increasing expansion of the media in social, televisual and telecommunication networks have resulted in more and better knowledge, as well as new opportunities and an increased pace of transformation in many cultures. Immanuel Wallerstein (1999) maintains for instance that:⁷

The deruralization of the world is on a fast upward curve. It has grown continuously over 500 years, but most dramatically since 1945. It is quite possible to foresee that it will have largely disappeared in another 25 years. Once the whole world-system is deruralized, the only option for capitalists is to pursue the class struggles where they are presently located. . . Even with the increased polarization of real income not only in the world-system as a whole but within the wealthiest countries, the political and market sophistication of the lower strata continues to grow.

Francis Fukuyama's notion of contemporary capitalism as a 'system perpetually founded on a present maintained through promises of a better future' is nowhere more apparent than in the rural post-apartheid art industry.⁸ The global ubiquity of capitalism's teleological pledge to prosperity and wealth has found a superior abode in a context where even clean drinking water and a virus-free society have become perceived as cloud-cuckoo-land. That it is purely human to aspire to better circumstances is sustained by Rik Pinxten's argument that cultures are forever voluntarily hybridising and continually adapting a part of their 'ownness' to new circumstances and new offerings, which entails losses.⁹ With reference to views on conditions in the globalising world such as Fukuyama's and Wallerstein's postulations on the levelling effect of capitalism, Pinxten argues that a McDonaldising of the world provides too superficial and simplistic an answer to growing cultural uniformity.¹⁰ Of seminal importance to him is that the claiming of an identity should go hand-in-hand with the understanding that identity is synonymous with habitual change.¹¹

In her account of the matrixial borderspace, Bracha Lichtenstein Ettinger's idea of metramorphosis describes the transmutative process

of interacting worlds impacting on identity as ‘both action, perception, inscription, and memory of borderlinking and of distance-in-joining’.¹² This matrixial sphere allows for ‘partial-subjects’ and ‘partial-objects’ as well as their linkage.¹³ Similarly, subjectivity in the African modernist context is neither stable nor fixed, and the corporeality of the artist-as-body and the artwork-as-process in this specific world context henceforth produces liminalities where matter and process become utopianistically premised. In many parts of Africa, there has been a modernist cultural ‘makeover’, and artists have been facilitated in their processes of letting the world know who and where they are and what they are doing.

Although modernism has been deconstructionist in many respects, binary and stereotypical views such as that of Amselle are still encountered and somehow there remains a hierarchical separation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art that defies a position of ‘metramorphosis’. The work of untrained artists, not reflecting the same orientations and awarenesses as the international arena, are easily ignored or dismissed as ‘low’ art. Contrary to Amselle, Nicholas Bourriaud deflates hierarchical positioning and argues pragmatically:

What’s an artwork? Any artwork materializes a relation to the world; if you see a Vermeer or a Mondrian, it’s concretized, materialized, visible in relation to the world that they had. You can decode and interpret for yourself and use it for your own life. Or for your work if you’re an artist. It’s a chain of relations. History of art is about that – a chain of relations to the world. So, any artwork is a relation to the world made visible.¹⁴

Over the past few decades, the social institutions of modernity, as well as institutions schooling ideas of modernity, reflected a wide range of structural and ideological differentiations. In the Western context, cultural cross-fertilisation and motivation by institutions have been commonplace. Reverting to a century earlier, the development of stylisation and flatness in Picasso’s ‘high’ art – instrumental in influencing a large portion of other modernists – has been ascribed to the formal and stylistic appropriation of ‘low’ Oceanic and African art exhibited at the Trocadero Museum of Ethnology in Paris since 1878. Yet, considering Picasso’s conversation with André Malraux on his views of African art, Moyo Okediji argues that Picasso appropriated:¹⁵

... weapons of mass protection from the body of African images, to fight his own personal demons, and to confront the diabolical forces hovering over the West... Picasso began to explore African art for spiritual fortitude... it was thought that Western art was entering into an intense phase of ‘art for art’s sake’. Nothing was further from the truth... Picasso’s anamnesis is recovered mainly in the women he painted. These may be regarded as his Mamiwata figures, his ‘spirits, the unconscious’, his weapons... [used] to exorcize himself and interact with his culture...¹⁶

It would thus seem that Picasso appropriated a cultural stylism for the purposes of his *own* artistic development and psychological catharsis.

Echoing these sentiments at the time of the exhibition ‘Picasso and Africa’ (2006), jointly curated by the Musée Picasso in Paris and the Iziko South African National Gallery, curator Marilyn Martin proposed that although Picasso’s love for African art never left him, he never *copied* African art; this was the reason why the show did not match a specific African work with a Picasso.¹⁷ The appropriation of pictorial and stylistic

12. Cited in Florence and Foster, *op cit*, p 176.

13. *Ibid*

14. Nicolas Bourriaud and Karen Moss, ‘Part I: Interview at the Walter McBean Gallery at SFAF, Gabrielle Thormann, trans, in *Stretcher: Visual Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area and Beyond*, 2002, available online at http://www.stretcher.org/archives/i1_a/2003_02_25_i1_archive.php

15. Tom Phillips, ed, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, Prestel and Royal Academy of Arts, London and New York, 1995, pp 28–29

16. Sylvester Ogbechie, ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, Mamiwata, and African Modernity’, *Critical Interventions* 3/4, spring, 2009, pp 51–52

17. Andrew Meldrum, ‘Stealing Beauty: How much did Picasso’s paintings borrow from African art?’, *Guardian*, 15 March 2006; available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/mar/15/art>

18. Rosalind E Krauss, *The Picasso Papers*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1998
19. Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p 269, p 27
20. Ibid, p 329
21. Ibid
22. In Steven Sack, ed, *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930–1988)*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 1988, p 17, the art centres created during the resistance period with the purpose of supporting and promoting black artists are listed as: 1972, Johannesburg Art Foundation, Johannesburg; 1977, Katlehong Art Centre, Katlehong; 1977, Community Arts Project (CAP), Cape Town; 1978, Fuba Academy, Johannesburg; 1979, Nyanga Arts Centre, Nyanga; 1970s, Mofolo Art Centre, Soweto; 1983, African Institute of Art (AIA), Funda Centre, Soweto; 1983, Community Arts Workshop (CAW), Durban; and 1986, Alexandra Arts Centre, Alexandra. This list shows clearly that in the greater Pretoria area and Limpopo a milder form of social commentary developed.
23. John Pepper, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2009, p x
24. 27 April 1994 is a significant date in the modern history of South Africa as the day when the African National Congress (ANC) was democratically elected to power and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (as the leader of the ANC) elected as President.
25. Pepper, op cit, p xi

features – such as mask-like figuration, a ‘designed’ look and detail such as eyes and genitals placed strategically for impact without real concern for naturalistic representation, observed clearly in Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* of 1907 – can never reflect anything of the thinking and cultural philosophies behind the origin of the simulation. Similarly, neomodernist African influence on Western modernists should be viewed as nothing more than a cross-cultural instance induced by nineteenth-century industrialisation, fourth-dimension physics and emerging cosmopolitanism experienced by turn-of-the-century Paris, a view more adamantly argued by Rosalind Krauss, who accuses Picasso of pastiche in *The Picasso Papers*.¹⁸

As long as the Other remains exotic and desirable – even when steeped in ethnocentrism – intersubjectivity as an everyday occurrence will synchronously flow into various forms of social agency as an after-effect,¹⁹ leading to new and hybrid agencies and articulations: ‘the racial, gendered minority positions stage the symbolic form of self-identification represented through fragmentation and occlusion of the sovereignty of the self’.²⁰ Homi Bhabha cautions that it is too easy to consider the discourses on minorities as symptoms of the postmodern condition, since the narratives of minority communities – including smaller rural communities – substantialise ‘cultural difference, and constitut[e] a “split-and-double” form of group identification. . . [illustrated] through a specifically “anti-colonialist” contradiction of the public sphere’. Being ‘minor’ in the globalised space often elicits exploitation and domination, yet also threatens disappearance and a need for refuge.²¹ This sense of being a minority can be applied to the situation of the untrained rural artist within the context of globalisation; and it is these narratives of difference that cannot be ignored in a consideration of African modernism. The ‘split-and-double’ concept manifests clearly in rural areas where artists are untrained in an institutional sense, but self-taught in many other respects, especially in terms of the use of technology and new media.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

Irrespective of the impact the West had on South African modernists who had contact with Western-oriented institutions, such as the Polly Street artists, Sydney Alex Kumalo, Durant Sihlali, David Koloane or Gerard Sekoto, key features of Western modernism (the avant-garde, the break with naturalism and traditional formalism, and the role of the institution) become mostly irrelevant when considering modernism in the context of Africa.²² Rather, John Pepper remarks, the modernist reception of indigenous approaches to art should be considered within the context of the local and, in South Africa, in terms of:

... the struggle for a nonracial aesthetic practice in South Africa, the draconian racial policy of the apartheid state, a culture of militancy and street violence, and the bipolar polemical discourse of the cold war.²³

Art practice in the pre-1994 period pushed in a direction that most politicians only caught up with later,²⁴ since in general the black art scene was a multiracial juncture where different economies and identities mixed and formed small power platforms to resist, challenge and create new socio-political paradigms.²⁵

The situation of the Northern artists, that is of the Gauteng and Limpopo provinces, is significant in the study of African modernism, since they were in close proximity to Pretoria and its politics, and therefore arguably more prone to indoctrination and subjugation by institutional dogma. Pre-1994, when Pretoria as the administrative capital was the gathering place of numerous white Nationalist supporters, no resistance groups of serious mention formed in this area. The investigation of the 'non-contaminated' position of untrained rural black artists in South Africa provides a more authentic tracing of African modernism, since they have been virtually untainted by any institutional influence and can therefore be considered within their own social

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Jackson Hlungwani, *Bowl and Spoon*, 1987, leadwood, 300 x 400 mm, photo: Elfriede Dreyer

and aesthetic contexts.²⁶ In the 1980s, self-taught artists were most strongly represented by the new kind of sculpture that was being produced, such as that of Jackson Hlungwani of Mbhokota who exhibited at 'Africus '95', the first Johannesburg Biennale. What struck me when I visited Hlungwani as a final year Fine Arts student in 1987 at his village (the self-styled 'New Jerusalem') was the absence of a distinction made by him between his functional objects and his larger pieces or 'art-works'. He presented me with a bowl and spoon as a gift from his one-room studio at the foot of the hill and led me up the hill to his other studio where he still held large works such as *The Archangel* before their move to the Johannesburg Art Gallery and other venues. Within this artistic perspective, the *function* of the object accorded its value, meaning and significance: a bowl and spoon were considered equally as valuable as conceptual work, such as the tall apocalyptic *Flag*, which Hlungwani (in his words) created for God to descend with when He returns to Earth at the end of time. Such a notion of functionality has always been central to the material culture produced in ancient, modernist and postmodern African art.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the processes of globalisation and internationalisation, augmented by postcolonial vigour, forcibly induced nationalistic ideologies and visions of power that left Africans grasping at new technologies and the lure of Western fashions and lifestyles. Many Northern artists, although uneducated in terms of Western art histories, make use of social media and technologies. Globalisation has seeped into most rural areas in Africa; internet cafés are easy to find, most artists have television and many utilise computer technology. In the onslaught of new technologies and the antagonism of urban territories, untrained artists from rural African communities experienced intimidation and coercion but, as history has shown, many of these artists choose to embrace Otherness and the advantages of the capitalist globalising world. In the global market, art production is a matter of trans-cultural co-dependency where appropriation features prominently. In the Altermodern manifesto, Nicolas Bourriaud extrapolates this relationship as follows:²⁷

More generally, our globalised perception calls for new types of representation: our daily lives... depend now on trans-national entities, short or long-distance journeys in a chaotic and teeming universe... Artists translate and transcode information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history.

The problem arises when, as Zygmunt Bauman argues:

The real powers that shape the conditions under which we all act these days flow in *global* space, while our institutions of political action remain by and large tied to the ground; they are, as before, *local*.²⁸

The harsh realities of dystopian everyday life in South Africa are evident in phenomena of people on the move, homelessness, violence and xenophobia. Such conditions are depicted in the work of untrained artists who originate from remote areas and the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) towns outside cities and, as a rule, are unaware of Western art trends.²⁹ Most of these rural untrained artists employ art to find ways out of politically and culturally imposed

26. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity, Cambridge, 2007

27. Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Altermodern explained: manifesto', Tate Modern, 2009, available online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explainedmanifesto>

28. Bauman, op cit, p 82

29. RDP is a South African socio-economic policy framework, implemented by the African National Congress (ANC) government of Nelson Mandela in 1994



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Lucas Thobejane, *Tap 1 and 2, Tribute to Jackson Hlungwani*, 2011, photo: Elfriede Dreyer

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restrictions, and most of their works resort to naturalistic forms of representation. 365

Thirty-seven-year-old self-taught Lucas Thobejane from Ga-Nkoana Village in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province, close to Hlungwani, works in the woodcarving tradition. Thobejane's art speaks of the contemporary conditions of living in small provincial towns. Thobejane's form of representation and practice has developed in relation to what 370 Jessica Winegar and Katarzyna Pieprzak describe as a response to '(local) political histories, structures, and struggles'.³⁰ An untrained sculptor, Thobejane creates anthropomorphic animal and technology hybrids in exquisite detail, but consistently conjures imagery that presents the plight of underdevelopment and the lack of clean water and education. 375 His half-man, half-animal creatures are wretched creolised players in a survival game in which the dire necessities of the Third World intermingle with the imposing presence of global technologies and ideologies. The artist depicts the need for water and the potential abundance of it, metaphorically speaking, if good counsel were followed. 380

Thobejane endeavours to admit as much naturalistic detail into his work as possible, which he achieves with a blend of primitive chopper, electric cutter and finer electrical carving tools. His work is driven by a sense of the functionality of the art object in order unequivocally to express and communicate urgency with regard to redressing and alleviating socio-political conditions. As Bauman notes in *Liquid Times*: 385

One of the most bewildering paradoxes revealed in our time is that on the fast *globalizing* planet politics tends to be passionately and self-consciously *local*. . . [L]ocal issues seem to be the only ones we can 'do something about'.³¹ 390

Thobejane's artist's statement for an exhibition entitled 'Games People Play' at Fried Contemporary Gallery in Pretoria speaks of hope for peace and a better future: 395

In the spirit of the 2010 FIFA World Cup the ball (sphere) in *Soccer Player* symbolizes the earth and as such life. The soccer ball becomes a substitute for the globe, all of whom are coming together as one on African soil to compete in this landmark event through which Africa enters the world stage. In celebration we share our diverse heritage and multifaceted culture with the rest of the world. My work is about preserving heritage and identity.³² 400

Thobejane has been subsumed by the gallery system and has succeeded in presenting work at large institutions and exhibition such as ABSA Art Gallery, Johannesburg; Sasol Gallery, Stellenbosch; Sasol New Signatures Competition; Absa L'Atelier Art Award; and Spier Contemporary in 405 2007/2008 and 2009/2010. Such inclusion labels his work contemporary, within the embrace of institutional practice, but also within the conditions of its own social and aesthetic imperatives. Thobejane uses institutions functionally for promotional purposes.

Forms of representation and the categorising and circulating of ideas, 410 objects and images cannot be properly understood without examining the multiple ways that artists engage with marketing agendas, consumer desires and commodity circuits, which do not seem that different in Africa than elsewhere in the world for aspiring artists.³³ In conversation with the internationally established (untrained) artist Titus Matiyane of Atteridge- 415

30. Jessica Winegar and Katarzyna Pieprzak, 'Africa North, South, and In Between', in *Critical Interventions 5*, autumn 2009, p 5

31. Bauman, op cit, p 82

32. *Games People Play*, exhibition catalogue, Fried Contemporary Art Gallery and Studio, Pretoria, 2010

33. Winegar and Pieprzak, 'Africa North, South, and In Between', op cit, p 9



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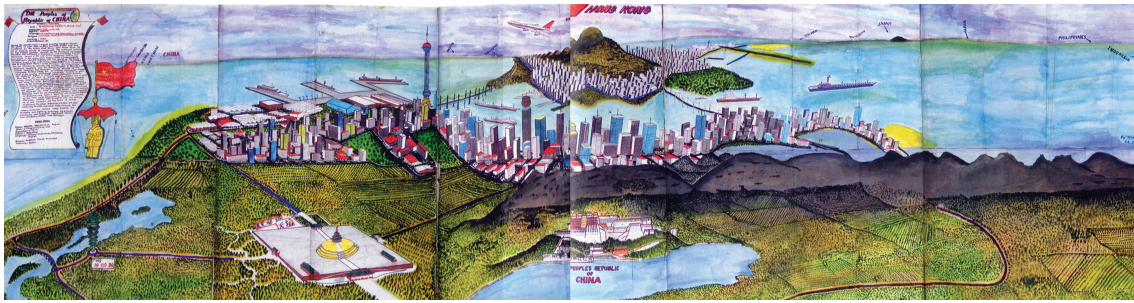
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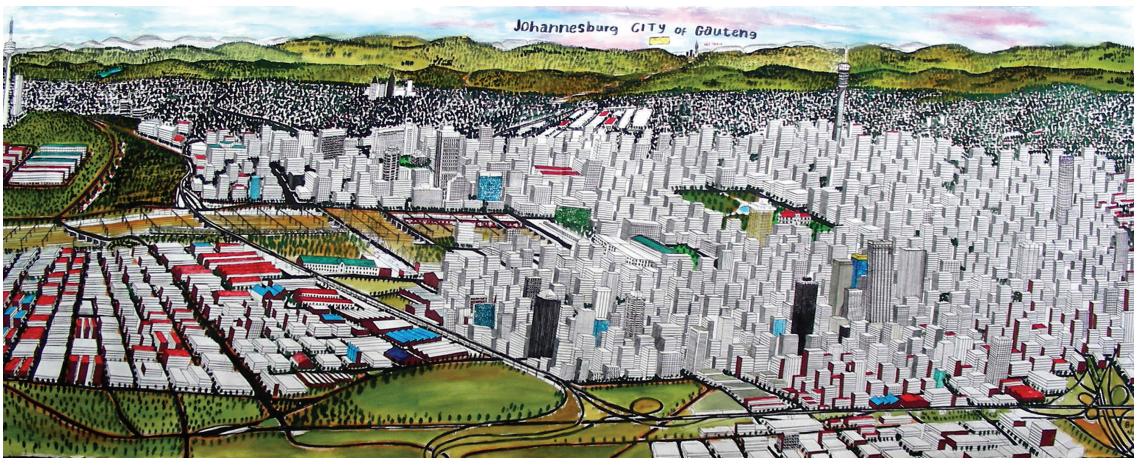
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Lucas Thobejane, *Soccer Player*, 2010, photo: Elfriede Dreyer

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Titus Matiyane, *Hong Kong*, 2007, photo: Elfriede Dreyer



Titus Matiyane, *Johannesburg, City of Gauteng*, 2007, photo: Elfriede Dreyer

ville, a township west of Pretoria and founded in 1939 for black people by the Nationalist government, he stated time and again that he depicts panoramas of major cities of the world because the art collectors from those countries or their embassies will 'like it'. By mostly portraying cities that he has never been to, Matiyane expresses his own longing for the exotic Other; he becomes a displaced and diasporic nomad in pursuit of fame, wealth and global stardom through the fusion with 'famous' and 'successful' cities, seemingly in search of a utopian 'good place'.

Yet Matiyane also represents peripheral places of identity, such as townships like Soweto and Atteridgeville, which entail a kind of tourist's outsider gaze of surface impressions. In a work like *Johannesburg, City of Gauteng* Matiyane includes images of Mandela, the FIFA World Cup trophy, Oliver Tambo International Airport and an inscription reading 'The Fifa executive members who hold our future in their hands' as a stratagem of power mediation to expose the country's instruments of advantage within the global sphere of competition. By including South African cities and townships in his canon of famous cities, the artist suggests a strategy of intervention which deconstructs the stereotypical

representation of marginalised Johannesburg as a ‘Third World’ African city. 520

Matiyane’s gaze on the city is obsessive, and yet somehow detached. He has no studio and works in his tiny lounge area at home, mostly appropriating commercial travel maps of the megacities of the world. He copies in neurotic detail cities like Hong Kong and, in every panorama, the contemporary city’s ontology of mobility and transitivity is traced in images of airplanes, trains and boats. The colonial gaze on the black body, much argued and written about in postcolonial texts, becomes inverted in Matiyane’s art-making process through the artist as ‘black body’ returning the gaze and re-directing it at the world. The artist fetishistically recreates his opulent landscapes of the city as: 525 530



Muralists completing the *Prosperity* mural, Ethekwini Municipal Library, Durban, photo: Elfriede Dreyer 570

... both a focus and a producer of bodily experiences and desires which can touch on each of the senses and combinations thereof in all kinds of unexpected ways... In many urban utopias sensual impulse is reined in – except for the obsessive visual gaze.³⁴

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In a project I managed for the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the ‘Prosperity’ community mural project produced with untrained peri-urban artists, naturalism and functionality prevailed. The mural team consisted of graduate students from the University of Pretoria and self-taught artists from Atteridgeville as project assistants, as well as fifteen untrained black artists-to-be of different ethnic groups and locations. From the beginning I was acutely aware of the challenge of assuming the dual role of referee and player, and how authentically to cross racial and cultural divides. It immediately became apparent that this role was not principally to validate differing artists’ aesthetic ways and forms of expression, but to set up an environment of reconciliation and mediation and to act predominantly as an arbitrator for the conflict and the fractured sense of nationhood within the confines of this small project team. Xenophobia, not racial divide, created adversity and it became clear that ‘unbiased’ information – such as the basics of composition and a subjectively premised understanding of colour – was loaded with cultural determination for the project participants and not a neutral territory for authentication and interaction. The visual vocabulary that emerged reflected differing levels of modernisation, including positions of decolonialisation and a return to ancestral authority, as well as ‘cool’ urban chic.

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Such divergent dimensions in modernism are reflected in the view of seventeen-year-old Tsebo Knowledge Ngema of Sebokeng on ‘traditional African’ versus ‘Western’ ways, one amongst many other interviews included in a study on post-1994 oral histories from three poor communities in South Africa conducted by Dale McKinley and Ahmed Veriava:

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Personally I am not into tradition and stuff because I don’t even believe in this ancestral stuff and everything else. But what I believe is that if you believe in something and you have 100% faith in it, it will work for you. So I believe that everyone should concentrate on what they think is best for them. If you believe that tradition is the way to go, then go with your whole mindset to it; if you believe that the western way is the way to go, go with your whole mindset. But, I pretty much prefer the western way even though I do practice some traditional rituals at home because I come from, not really a traditional family, but we do have rituals like the slaughtering and stuff...³⁵

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34. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Polity/Blackwell, London, 2002, p 111

35. Dale McKinley and Ahmed Veriava, *‘Forgotten’ Voices in the Present: Alternative, Post-1994 Oral Histories from Three Poor Communities in South Africa*, South African History Archive collection, SP Design, Braamfontein, 2008

Although each artist in the ‘Prosperity’ mural project was provided with the opportunity individually to design a section of the mural, once again naturalism was the preferred mode of representation in all the artists’ designs. The ethno-political issues that divided the group and threatened to ruin the entire project became resolved in the shared need to express utopian dreams of prosperity in themes of education, agriculture, tourism and technology. It is precisely such idiosyncratic local forms of modernism created in the face of socio-political adversity that have established the African continent’s identity and have shaped its cultural economy.

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CONCLUSION

Amselle fails in his contention that 'African art, however modern, is nothing but what it has always been, i.e., an annex, a tropical dependency on Western art'.³⁶ Globalisation has no doubt exposed Africans to the lure of Western fashions, lifestyles and technology; yet not in the sense of Amselle's notion of a dependency on the West, but rather as a cultural-consumerist attitude to selfhood. Similarly, Amselle's deconstructive attempt to instate African primitiveness as no longer peripheral and marginalised is not tenable; within the perspective of a continent creating its own cultural economy and histories, the very notion of primitiveness can be contested; it is moreover not the principal characteristic of African art, especially not in the work of trained artists. Simulation and appropriation could never reflect anything of the thinking and cultural philosophies behind the *origin* of the reproduction.

Untrained South African artists pragmatically employ naturalistic modes of expression to make their voices heard, to grant immediacy and directness to their communication of problematic social conditions; to express their own identities, needs and cultural economies; and as an attempt to enter into the global artworld and to forge a 'better' life for themselves. Such artworks are therefore resourceful platforms in the examination of modernity, since they reveal a functional form of modernism becoming instrumental in achieving socio-political, artistic and commercial goals. By following a neo-pragmatist approach in the investigation of (co)dependencies and power paradigms in the relationship between the West and Africa, cultural and stylistic appropriation can be viewed as a functional device in art-making that provides a range of conceptual, formal and commercial benefits and is indicative of various stages in globalisation.

Amselle's Outsiderist view conjures up stereotype and, in essence, reveals once again the power of the televisual media and other communication technologies belonging to the globalised world in creating sensational 'other' worlds premised on the spectacle of the simulated Other. As in other countries, be it in the US, Russia, China or Afghanistan, the realities of the affluent inner circles of African cultures do not converge with the social conditions encountered in boundary and rural territories. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by the selection of South African work tracked down by curator Milan Knížák for inclusion in the 2008 International Triennale of Contemporary Arts at the National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic, all four examples came from Pretoria in the North – politically the most stigmatised city in the country – and thereby demonstrated that modernity and vanguardism have many faces.

It can be contended that untrained artists such as Thobejane, Matiyane and the the naturalist artists are driven by the functional power of naturalist art object in order to expound on the socio-political conditions of underdevelopment. This hypothesis does not corroborate a return to the totalising idea of an 'undifferentiated' Africa investing objects with functionality (and anonymity) through ritualistic meaning, but is instead a mobilisation of the works as resourceful platforms for examining notions of modernity, difference and transculturality. It would then seem more useful to consider modernism in

36. Amselle, op cit, p 17

37. Cited in Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli and Frank Webster, *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi, 2000, p 98

terms of what Ted Benton calls ‘reflexive modernisation’, describing modernity ‘as a list of characteristic institutional forms or “dimensions”’,³⁷ none of which, he argues, should be ‘assigned causal priority’. In the end Africa has always been concerned with its own Afrocentric history.

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