



# West African Artists at the Venice Biennale

Susan Vogel

This exhibition of contemporary African art was originally organized for the 1993 Venice Biennale, where it marked the second occasion in the institution's history on which African countries had represented themselves. The show is intended to contribute to a new understanding of "African art" that will remove it from the realm of the ethnographic, and place it firmly within the framework of the transcultural aesthetic that has become accepted practice among Western artists. The free-ranging references found in contemporary African work may come as a surprise to those who remember it as bound by Africa's great art of the past, or who expect it to be subservient to contemporary Western art. In their melding of cultural codes from their own ancient traditions and from the cacophonous present, contemporary African artists may have independently arrived at their own post-Modern aesthetic.

Dakar and Abidjan, where most of the exhibiting artists live, are quintessentially post-Modern cities-heterogeneous, multicultural, filled with clashing contrasts and mobile populations. In these cities now, culture is reinvented every generation—or faster. Senegalese and Ivoirian artists are familiar with modern and contemporary Western art, but are not particularly preoccupied with it. It is simply one of the multitude of sources of inspiration that surround them.

At a geographic and spiritual remove from Western art movements, the artists presented here share certain assumptions about art that are distinctly their own. The status of the art object—generally easel painting and sculpture—is taken for granted, and the work is expected to refer to the external world in some way. Art concerned primarily with art or with issues of form is virtually never seen in Dakar and Abidjan. And, in keeping with cultural values, the work presents personal emotions with discretion and reserve. Political and sexual feelings are most likely to be veiled, and expressed indirectly, even though the artists exhibited here generally work independently of their official national art establishments. A brief overview of each artist's work demonstrates their wide differences—and their easy use of Western modes of expression for their own ends.

Arguably one of Africa's finest artists working in an international contemporary style, Mor Faye died in 1984, before African artists would be shown at the Venice Biennale. He would in any case have been an unlikely candidate, since, rejected by Senegal's official art supporting organizations, he had refused to participate in exhibitions during the final decade of his life. He was an art teacher and a student of world art though he lived almost

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his entire life in Senegal, struggling to survive. The mental institution in which he spent his last two years afforded him the materials and the freedom in which he created his most fully realized works. A superb colorist who relished the sensuous fluidity of paint, Mor Faye absorbed the vocabulary of a dozen modern European masters, and created work alternately idyllic, erotic, nightmarish, and whimsical, but always his own.

The wood and metal of Moustapha Dime's suggestive figures do not always reveal their origins, and the sculptures signify independently of our recognition of their sources. But they are made almost entirely from careful selections of discarded manmade things- not mass-produced junk, industrial garbage, or the waste of a gluttonous materialism, but the local detritus of Dakar. Worn wooden bowls, mortars and pestles deformed by use, ruined fishing boats-perishable things that have served their time are reshaped and find new life in his figures. All are ordinary, local, handmade, and related to the serious business of feeding people. They can be seen in use in every household and for sale in every market.

These objects bear witness to lives of hard work. Humble but not trivial, the objects Dime selects for his sculptures are timeless, not fleeting in their presence. We know that when they wore out they were replaced by others just like them, part of a long succession of similar objects. Dime's contemporary sculptures are related to history, and suggest that modern men and women are only a recycled version of their ancient but still vital traditions.

In an explosion of creativity, Tamessir Dia developed a new style and created a large number of paintings in the first months of 1993. These new works, painted directly with his hands, were partly driven by the intensity of his feelings about the human misery that he saw about him. The sufferings of women and children are most present in the series Tamessir calls "Cruel Song." The pale pastel colors, not favored in Abidjan, and not usually associated with misery, take on new meaning in the African context. The luminosity suggests the suffering of sick or homeless people unable to shelter themselves from the blazing equatorial sun.

Ouattara is a man of two worlds: he submerges, transforms, and appropriates motifs from traditional African cultures as readily as the materials, techniques, and styles of contemporary Western art. Ouattara prefers to guard a certain mystery about his references to traditional African and Oceanic art, references he does not want the critic to decode and identify. He wants the spectator to be free to dream and to see in his work whatever appears. Ouattara speaks of magic, spirits, and shamanism, and of his desire to infuse his paintings with a numinous presence. Texture, relief, and attached elements are the media of his paintings, which do not depict or evoke realities so much as constitute them. He creates presences, often architectural or monumental in feeling, that become new places for us to visit, spaces in which our minds are free to wander and to encounter spirits both ancient and modern.

For over a decade, Gerard Santoni has been inspired by traditional Baule cloth, which is composed of narrow bands sewn firmly together in parallel rows. But in Santoni's turbulent paintings the bands are unsewn, twisted and flying apart, blasted by a terrible wind. In traditional Baule life, the red stripe, called the "foot," is always at the bottom of the cloth.

Here, in a world turned upside down, it whirls through the middle of the paintings. It is easy to see here a metaphor for the forces of change stirring Ivory Coast, driven by mounting pressure to democratize an uneasy and unstable political system. Santoni's bands, huge, thickly clustered, and close to the picture plane, create a slightly suffocating atmosphere, evocative of the political hothouse of a small tropical country. But his work holds forth the possibility of escape. Light areas suggest deep space behind the bands, openings to an enlightened future.

African art (but not African artists) was at the inception of modern art, and has again become part of the critical nexus of art currents of the twentieth century. Even as Africa seems to be relegated to the margins of global politics and economics, its two-pronged relevance to the wider cultural world is, ironically, more central than ever. Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, traditional African art provided a seminal inspiration for Modern Western art; as the century closes, contemporary African art has reemerged as another possible source of inspiration and new ideas.

African artists today propose new ways of incorporating the inherited lessons of twentieth-century Western art. Like European artists at the beginning of the century who, without subscribing to the beliefs it embodied, seized on African art for the formal ideas it contained, contemporary African artists fluently incorporate whatever they see as useful into their work, and they do this however they like. Regarding the Western art tradition from a distance, and without necessarily agreeing with its underlying assumptions, they are free to handle its vocabulary in new ways. In their art the Africanized (and other) forms of European Modernism return to us, digested, altered, fresh.

## FUSION: Hot or Cold?

Thomas McEvelley

### First Reversal

The first words Moustapha Dime spoke to me in Venice this summer involved his immediate attraction, upon arriving at the airport, to the city's material foundations as substances he could reprocess in his work. Massive, weathered, waterbeaten pilings rise from the lagoon, marking the channel from the airport to the city. Their combination of power and decay—the future and the past—appealed to his sensibility.

For several years now, Dime has made his sculptures from used materials—not used art materials, but everyday substances that had previously been involved in the societal life of Dakar, Senegal. In the importance he ascribes to the past history of these materials, Dime's idea of art refers at least as much to reprocessing as to creation *ex nihilo*. On the one hand there is a sense of replenishment: the past is providing fuel for the future. On the other, a sense of transformation: art is transforming society, and being transformed by it. In terms of Western art ideas, Dime's sense of involvement in community through the materials of his work could loosely be compared with Robert Smithson's idea of urban decay as the seedbed of art, or with Joseph Beuys's idea of social sculpture. "I use material," Dime explains, "that leads people to be closer to their own lives."

There is also a site-specific significance to Dime's designs on the underpinnings of Venice—a heart city of Europe, one might argue, one of the bottom-most foundation stones on which the continent's prestige and fame depend. This jewel box of a place, this incredible concentration of artworks, cultural artifacts, and urban icons, took hold of Dime immediately. It might not be unreasonable to say that he wanted to remake Venice in his image, or in the image of his tradition-of Senegal and, ultimately, of Africa. Perhaps he was motivated in part by a desire to participate in Venice's artistic tradition. But his method went beyond this: in one of the many postcolonial reversals that would emerge in my conversations with four of the five West African artists who had been invited to the Venice Biennale, he wanted to remake Venice as Africa. (The fifth artist, painter Mor Faye, was included posthumously.)

### Second Reversal

As Ivoirian painter Tamessir Dia and I walked along the corniche of the Giardini, the gardens that provide a permanent site for the Venice Biennale, after a three-hour interview session, he cast an eye over the sparkling surface of the water. "As the light gets long over

the lagoon and I gaze over the waters at Venice," he said, "I try to see it as Turner would have seen it. As I walk along here, I try to imagine what Leonardo would have felt like as he walked these streets, what he might have worn, what might have caught his eye. What a wonderful privilege to be in the same city where Leonardo lived!"

We walked along. The water brimmed and gleamed beside us. Venice hovered like an apparition against the horizon in the distance. Dia was surprised, he told me, at the apparent degeneration of Italian culture since the Renaissance: "I keep looking at present-day Italians and try to compare them with the Italians of the past and wonder how they did such great things in the past. When I look around, not only are the architectural monuments extraordinary, but the paintings as well. I don't see any link between the relics of the past and what I see today. I keep wondering, Are these the same people?"

This type of judgment, in which a contemporary culture is judged to have lost the glory of its past, plays a significant role in what Edward Said has called Orientalism: the dismissal, by westerners, of the contemporary peoples of the Third World by denigrating them in relation to their history) For an African to exert such a judgment on the West is a profound reversal of the colonial relationship.

### Digestion

"Digesting the West": so Susan Vogel, curator of the West African show at the Biennale, had expressed it on an earlier occasion. Africa, which had been eaten before-carved into pieces and served up as a banquet entree at the Berlin Conference of 1984-1985-had reversed the relationship at last. This reversal seemed to crystallize in Dia's focused gaze, looking for Leonardo, or in Dime looking at the pilings, the underpinnings of it all, the foundations of the West, and wanting not so much to assimilate himself to them as to assimilate them to himself, to honor them by reprocessing them into himself.

When Ouattara, an Ivoirian artist who has lived in New York for several years, told me, he had attended a French school in Ivory Coast that had taught the history of the West, he added, without apparent resentment, "I was interested in the West." These Africans' interest in the West, how does it compare with the West's interest in Africa? Of course there are economic opportunities in the West, but these artists' gaze is not the same kind of gaze that brought the West to Africa for slaves, gold, and diamonds in the nineteenth century. Rather, a postcolonial gaze is involved, influenced by a sense of global interconnections. As Ouattara put it, "My vision is not based just on a country or a continent. It refers to the cosmos." And Ivoirian Gerard Santoni says, "I don't think it makes sense to have a specifically African painting.... I'm glad to see myself as part of a world tradition."

### Four Phases of Identity

Modernism- here, let's describe it loosely as the ideology behind European colonialism and imperialism--involved a conviction that all cultures would ultimately be united, because they would all be Westernized. Their differences would be ironed out through assimilation to Europe. Post-Modernism has a different vision of the relation between sameness and difference: the hope that instead of difference being submerged in sameness,

sameness and difference can somehow contain and maintain one another—that some state which might be described as a global unity can be attained without destroying the individualities of the various cultures within it.

In terms of the issue of identity, the historical process has shown four stages. First, in the pre-Modern period, cultural identity was simply a given, unquestioned and unrelativized by the insistent intervention of other cultural realities. For most cultures, of course, this stage passed long ago, but it can still play a volatile and provocative role in contemporary thought as an Edenic myth of origin. Second, in the colonial or modernist period, the idea of cultural identity became a weapon or strategy used by the colonizers both to buttress their own power and to undermine the will and self-confidence of the colonized. Thus the cultural identity of the colonizer was claimed as naturally hegemonic, and that of the colonized as naturally slavish or imitative.<sup>1</sup> In art traditions, for example, the colonizer could dismiss the works of the colonized merely by labeling them products of an inferior cultural group.

This strategy led to two reactions among the colonized. One of them was a deliberate imitation of Western standards, an attempt to take on Western, supposedly universal identity. This was often characteristic of the earlier colonial period, before resistance had mounted. In the other, more delayed reaction, which constitutes the third stage in history's identity process, this effort was reversed: the colonized not only negated the identity of the colonizers, but also redirected their attention to the recovery of their own, perhaps abandoned, certainly altered identity. This is the phase of resistance, which leads to the end of colonialism. In Africa it is reflected in the *Négritude* movement, and in the pan-Africanist or Afrocentrist theory most fully articulated in the works of Cheik Anta Diop.<sup>4</sup> In a stunning reversal of the colonial relationship, Diop argues that Western civilization in fact was disseminated from Africa to the Greeks, who then covered up their borrowings. Influential in Africa a generation ago, his view is now favored almost exclusively by African-American thinkers. It is conspicuously not the attitude of the West African artists who came to Venice: "I am not limited to African culture," Dia asserts. "That would be absurd; it would be ridiculous for any African today to speak of Africanity or Négritude."

On the contrary, the attitude of the Venice artists seems to represent a fourth stage. Secure in their sense of identity, formed by whatever blends of African and European influences, they want to get beyond questions of identity and difference and to move into the future. (This fourth stage would seem to require the withdrawal of the colonial occupier, and thus has not yet dawned for, say, black South Africans. African-Americans too face a somewhat different process.) In the interview in this book, Dia illustrates this stage when he denies that anxiety about colonialism or neocolonialism is a significant thread in his consciousness. "I never felt conflicts in that way," he says. "I think people of my generation never had those conflicts." He notes that he and his peers were raised and often born after independence. They approach the future not with a determination to recohere around a long-lost identity, but with a feeling that that identity (along with the identity of the colonizer) is a thing of the past, and that the future holds new, more interesting identities for all.

## Independence

Something like these latter two stages can be seen in the wake of colonialism around the world. In India, for example, artists now in their late forties and fifties were the first to express themselves as unencumbered by postcolonial anxieties.<sup>5</sup> In Africa this is more characteristic of artists 35 and younger, perhaps because independence came about fifteen years sooner in India. In both cases the artists in question were raised or even born under independence, and seem to regard the problems of their parents and grandparents as history.

In the late 1950s, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others abominated colonized individuals who would assimilate to the colonizers' culture, or would split the difference and accept a hybrid cultural identity.<sup>6</sup> In India, such persons were once called Gunga Dins, after the notorious Kipling poem. At the time, perhaps, to condemn those who gave up the identity they had inherited was useful in the anticolonial struggle. But what about Gunga Din's son? Or his grandson? His inherited identity is a hybrid one, and in accepting hybridization he is not selling out his birthright but embracing it. To Indian artists I know, both the Indian and the British heritages are natural parts of themselves, much as two parents create a single offspring. Artists of fifty and under in India today tend to brush off the issue of colonialism-and-identity with some disdain, as a childish problem they have outgrown. To the Francophone West African artists in Venice, similarly, both the African and the French heritages are legitimate parts of themselves. For the most part they see the idea of restoring a precolonial identity as at best uninteresting, at worst preposterously impractical.

In art-historical terms, the four stages of identity might be described like this. First, the precolonial period, in which local visual conventions are passed on in a socially functional way. This is of course the era of so-called "traditional" African art. Second, the colonial period, in which the colonizers derogate the local artistic conventions. "The highly stylized African carvings," as one scholar put it, "were considered curiosities, at best, and evidence of the inability of Africans to represent things 'as they actually are' because they were culturally or racially inferior."<sup>7</sup> In place of inherited tradition, with its connection to ritual function, the Western colonizers held up to the colonized artist the vision of a nonfunctional, autonomous art. During this period, Third World artists who wished to enter the international art discourse had no choice but to turn their backs on their inherited traditions and adopt a School of Paris or, later, New York School style, which would offer no clue whatever to their own ethnicity or nationality. In India, this was the route of the Bombay Progressives in 1947 and after; in Africa, of artists such as Iba N'Diaye, who developed a lush and beautiful School of Paris-based style some fifteen years later.

In the third stage there is a nativist reaction, with the emphasis returning to some inherited tradition that is declared to have been the true one all along, if temporarily submerged by the illusory internationalism of the preceding stage. In India this stage was marked by the so-called Neotantric painting of the generation after the Bombay Progressives; in Africa one could point, say, to the so-called "Shona" sculpture that toured this country a couple of years ago, with its somewhat falsified nativism and artificial references to tradition. The fourth, postcolonial phase is one in which artists self-consciously accept

hybridization and make their work reflect the various forces that have formed them as individuals. Obvious examples include the Indian works of Gulam Sheikh, with their combination of Moghul and Siennese landscape styles; the Taiwanese ones of T. F. Chen, with their conflated quotes of Shinto and post-Impressionist styles; and so on.'

### Hot or Cold?

Of course this four-staged model is not a law of nature. The conflict in Bosnia was mentioned by two of the four artists I spoke with as a horrifying spectacle: "I didn't realize," said Dia, "that civilized countries in Europe could do such terrible things." "Such terrible things" demonstrate that the third-stage emphasis on cultural identity can persist with a pathological singlemindedness, rather than being sublated into a wider arena.

But the question is: in the globalizing project that seems undeniably before us all, are we to be stuck with a slow, demanding attempt to force things together as in nuclear fusion (as in the former Yugoslavia), through a heat so great it might destroy them? Or can we descendants of both colonizers and colonized-acknowledge the colonial karmic debt yet build from it into some more generous, less volatile geopolitical and geocultural fusion, as in the multiculturalists' vision of a global synthesis based on a good will that can arise after the postcolonial adjustment has taken place?

The Greek philosopher Empedocles's idea of the cycles of history seems troublingly relevant. On that ancient model, disparate things gradually merge, under the influence of the force of sameness, until everything is one and the world is united in an Age of Love; then, as the cycle progresses, things come apart again in a gradual ascendancy of the force of difference, until the world is fractured into an Age of Hate. If, at our present moment, the descendants of the previously colonized seek revenge on the descendants of the previous colonizers, the Age of Hate will be at hand in an extraordinary concentration, its outcome unforeseeable.

But the idea that a four-stage process is in play suggests otherwise. The vengeful attitude seems characteristic of the third stage— as in Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961, in the watershed years of African independence. In at least some communities it is being succeeded by a fourth stage, better characterized by Wole Soyinka's recent novel *Aura*, in which African and European realities mix as permeable membranes to one another.

This balance of sameness and difference underlies much of the artists' interviews in this book. On the one hand Dime's creative appropriation of Venice, for example, involved a synthesizing impulse, implying the idea of sameness or assimilation. On the other, it was also felt, I think, as a means to articulate himself, activating difference as well as sameness: he was looking, he explained, for elements "that would articulate my personality ... [that would] show myself, my own personality, what made me different from others." His objectifying gaze at Venice, then, was premised on a view of life that assumed the primacy of sensibility and individuality—essentially a Modernist view. He assumed an assertive self or subject as the primary condition for the knowing of objects. Dime stood and gazed at Venice as a Renaissance merchant king gazed at the globe that seemed to invite his domina-



tion and appropriation. This balancing of impulses toward sameness or conflation and difference or articulation was implicitly post-Modern: he was seeking a greater individuality through fusion.

### **History**

There is a horrifying progression, a kind of Stations of the Cross, to the historical outline of the West's relationship with the rest of the world. In 1442, two years after Donatello's *David*, while Fra Angelico was working on his *Annunciation*, the first Portuguese slave ships raided sub-Saharan Africa. In 1455, as Renaissance perspective was being perfected as a means to objectify the visual realm for possible penetration into it, Pope Nicholas V granted Portugal exclusive rights to make laws and exact tribute in southern Africa, promising "to all of those who shall be engaged in the said war, complete forgiveness of all their sins." In 1509, while Leonardo was working on the *Madonna and Saint Ann*, the first ship loaded with enslaved Africans moored in the Caribbean;<sup>10</sup> and on the sad recital goes, reaching a kind of culmination in 1884--85, one decade before the founding of the Venice Biennale, when the European nations, at the Berlin Conference, divided Africa up like a side of beef, with hungry guests getting shares. The reversal begins to be seen in the 1950s and especially the '60s, as most of the European colonizers pull out; it involves many strange and ambivalent moments, and seems now to be reaching a kind of milestone, in the early 1990s, with such events as the West African artists' appearance at the Venice Biennale.

### **Art History**

In a narrower focus, this reversal is significant in terms of art history, which tends to follow political history with a brief lag. In the wake of the Berlin Conference, African artworks began making their way back to Europe. In fact, "the first examples of African art to gain public attention were the bronzes and ivories which were brought back to Europe after the sack of Benin by a British military expedition in 1897." Soon European artists like Picasso found their visual sense challenged by the African objects that were increasingly coming into their ken, and they began to absorb some of the look of those objects into their own work, in parallel with the European nations' absorption of actual African territories and peoples. Ironically, then, a crucial element in the birth of modernism in the visual arts was a tradition that Europeans called primitive. Today, in the works of the African artists in Venice and others, that relationship is being reversed. Din says that when he went to art school in France he was taking what belonged to him--not simply because Picasso and others had borrowed from Africa, but because his own identity is in part European, having been shaped in part by European forces. "What happens in Europe and America," he says, "belongs to me." Ouattara similarly says that when he saw Picasso's African-influenced work it was like looking into a mirror, but when he saw the paintings of Goya it was also like looking into a mirror.

### **The Biennale**

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in reference to the Biennale itself, as a single thread of art history. The Biennale is the type of cultural event that tends to arise when some form of capitalism is undergoing colonial expansion in pursuit of foreign markets. The cultural consequences of such an economic moment were felt in ancient Greece in the late archaic period, and again in modern Europe, when so much of the Greek experience was replayed in larger scale.

As part of the increasingly dominant free-enterprise competition in both these eras, various competitions developed, signs of the new ideology. It was at this stage in ancient Greece that artists began signing their work, which had previously been anonymous in execution and communal in meaning. It was also at this time that innovation began to be valued in art; until then, tradition had been primary. In the ancient games and competitions, which often mixed athletic and artistic events, the prizes were supposedly based on universals, and the states that competed for and won them were thereby validated as fit to pursue their domination of foreign peoples.

The Venice Biennale was founded in 1895, when the imperial centers of Europe were bonding in mutual complicity around the recent appropriations of Africa and southeast Asia. Italian troops were fighting for dominance in the Sudan that year; in fact Italy's imperial adventure in East Africa, with the dream of restoring something like the power of ancient Rome, set the background mood of the Biennale's first decades. And through most of the Biennale's first century, the institution played a role as cultural backup for colonial policy: only Western nations were invited to participate.

In ancient Greece it was the admission of a non-Greek state, the Macedonian, to a previously closed competition that marked the beginning of the end of this phase of social organization. Around 1990, similarly, the Biennale began showing abnormalities that coincided with changes in the society around it--with what has been called the shift from Modernism to post-Modernism. One sign was the sudden prominence of women: in the 1990 Biennale, Jenny Holzer represented the United States; in 1993, Louise Bourgeois represented the United States and Yayoi Kusama represented Japan. Equally historic was the invitation to two sub-Saharan African nations---Nigeria and Zimbabwe--to participate in 1990. And in 1993, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and South Africa participated.

### Three Souls

At the same time that the Biennale has begun to rearrange its external network in response to changes in the outside world, its internal structure has begun to shift too. The director for 1993, Achille Bonito Oliva, decreed that this year's version would not merely survey recent artwork from the various participating nations, but would be dedicated to cultural nomadism---a dominant theme of recent post-Modernist discourse on shifting ideas of nationalism and identity.

The idealization of cultural hybridization goes back at least to the Roman poet Ennius's apparently proud remark that he had three souls because he spoke three languages. If, in the Modernist period, intense nationalism led to a belief in the single, crystalline cultural identities or essences of peoples or nations, the post-Modern, or post-colonial, readjustment favors the idea that human identity is composite, complex,

ambiguous, and hybrid. In a complex urban society (as compared to a neolithic village), identity is formed by a dizzying plurality of influences; any individual can be regarded as a cultural composite. But the post-Modern idea of hybridization goes beyond this, referring to the fact that the world's populations are now increasingly on the move, settling in each other's inherited territories, where they borrow parts of each others' identities (in clothing, food, philosophy, art, athletics) or survive as embattled fortresses within alien communities. The modern media also diffuse knowledge of different cultures widely. Dim& observes that people from his home town of Louga are now "everywhere in the world," and that he ran into some by chance in Venice. This global mobility, or cultural nomadism, is the underlying cause of cultural hybridization-or of its rejection.

### **Migrations**

Similar processes of intermingling have happened many times before, in the vast migratory phases that have occurred on all continents--most self-consciously or programmatically in the Alexandrian Greek period. Now, however, they seem to be becoming global and irretrievable. Whether individual cultures will lose their separate integrities, or whether they will find some greater integrity from simultaneous local and global engagements, is the crucial question facing the world today. Dim& expressed the paradox when he remarked, "Eves though I was born in Louga, I consider myself as a universal being." I asked him, "Do you ever feel tension between a universal sense of yourself and your desire to make sure that you understand your deep roots in your own culture?" "If I didn't succeed in keeping my own roots," he replied, "I could never be universal because it's on that basis that I can become universal, on the basis of my own roots. Because that's how I've become what I am. The humanity that I am in the process of living today is born in my own roots."

In the Modern period, the wave of cultural nomadism that seems now to be about to crest on a global scale began with the settling of the so-called New World, societies like Canada and the United States being almost completely hybrid, the results of nomadic forces. Subsequently, the wave of colonialism in the age of imperial capitalism brought Western people into other societies around the world, and with the end of colonialism the peoples of the Third World have begun spilling back in great numbers into Western societies. This worldwide tendency toward nomadism both binds the world in a global network of associations and sunders it by the tensions of nativist reactions.

### **Collage**

In Western art, the tendency toward self-conscious cultural hybridization was first clearly encountered in the eras of *japonisme* and primitivism, both of which reflected the European intervention in the non-Western world. The assimilative or conflative tendency next asserted itself under the rubric of collage--beginning with Cubist collage (which, significantly, followed immediately upon the early era of primitivism) and continuing on through the present day. The discourse of collage was the forerunner to the post-Modern discourse of nomadism and hybridization. Developing intensely in the wake of the insistence on purity found in Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting, the stress on collage,

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impurity, and mongrelism was both liberating and prophetic, and foreshadowed impending developments in global culture.'- In 1971, when the post-Modernist discourse was already self-consciously underway, literary critic Ihab Hassan wrote that "post-Modernism ... dramatizes its lack of faith in art even as it produces new works of art intended to hasten both cultural and artistic dissolution."<sup>13</sup> The art in which Hassan found this "lack of faith" was the art of purity and wholeness-what one might call, following Derrida's "philosophy of presence," an "art of presence." In place of it arose an art that was essentially critical, promoting not unity but disjunction, not integrity but mongrelism. A few years later, Hassan would characterize the post-Modern as disjunctive, polymorphous, androgynous, and characterized by deconstruction.

Among the more influential formulations to follow was Charles Jencks's 1981 characterization of the post-Modern as double-coded, in contrast with high Modernism, which was single-coded and based on the positing of absolute truth and absolute identity.<sup>14</sup> But post-Modernism's relativization of truth and identity, its arrival at a sense of slippage or displacement, really leads beyond mere double coding into multiple coding. In 1982, Julia Kristeva wrote of "the abject," meaning "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on collage was revived in Fredric Jameson's 1984 assertion that post-Modernist culture is characterized by pastiche, | "speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.""<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in a sense completed the thought process the following year: |8 they suggest that the underlying condition for a culture of pastiche is nomadism, the movement in which individuals are uprooted from their inherited matrices, and cultures are overlaid upon one another, combined and recombined in unpredictable ways. This process amounts, in their formulation, to "an absolute that is one with becoming itself, with process. It is the absolute of passage."<sup>19</sup>

Thus post-Modernism is fascinated by borders and interfaces between conflicting realities and senses of reality. It does not hold, as Modernism did, that one side of the border is right and the other side wrong; both are understood as right in different ways, and some thing even more right is felt in attempting to embody both truths, or many truths, at one time and in one self.

The category "cultural nomad" applies most clearly to persons who were born and raised in one culture and subsequently migrated into another; to persons who characteristically travel, and have a sense of the relativity of cultures; to people crossing boundaries in a variety of ways, including creative and professional. The situation of African artists at the Venice Biennale automatically involves a degree of nomadism, in that artworks produced in and by one culture are being exhibited and viewed in and by another. The presence of these African artists in Venice itself - an overwhelmingly white demographic area - is at the heart of the post-Modern moment.

### The Four Stages Again

In the Modernist era, with its emphasis on sameness and identity, the confrontation

between cultures was experienced as simply a choice between this and that; usually the culture of one's birth would seem the right choice. The colonial situation both reinforced and confused this assumption. Certainly, as Memmi wrote, "even the poorest colonizer thought himself to be--and actually was--superior to the colonized"<sup>121</sup> Memmi's strange parenthesis, "and actually was," suggests the reversal of self-esteem in the colonized mind (in the second stage). But that reversal is reversed again in the reaction against colonialism (the third stage), when "the negative myth thrust on him by the colonizer is succeeded by a positive myth about himself suggested by the colonized."<sup>1</sup> The pursuit of this positive myth leads the previously colonized to "forego the use of the colonizer's language, even if all the locks of the country turn with that key ... He will prefer a long period of educational mistakes to the continuance of the colonizer's school organization.... He will no longer owe anything to the colonizer and will have definitely broken with him," and so on.---

This is the attitude of the third stage of cultural identity, among the four discussed above. Memmi's powerful expression of it was written in 1959, at the height of the moment of decolonization; but with the generation raised after the colonial period, the third-stage rage about the colonial past seems to have given way to an alert curiosity about the future. Three of the four artists interviewed here express no ambivalence about using the French language or being shaped by the French educational system, and the fourth acknowledges his resentment of these traits but refers to it as a thing of the past. Dia speaks of positive aspects of the interaction between Europe and Africa today even as he reverses the orientaling gaze. And Dime wants to incorporate Venice into his art. The mentality of the colonized, so brilliantly expounded by Memmi, is apparently not theirs.

### **"Multiculturalism"**

As the fourth stage dawns--when the post-Modern succeeds the Modern--the contradictory summonses of two or more different cultures are reconciled by the assumption that neither is true: that no particular cultural stance has ultimate validity. At this moment the multicultural situation can seem to highlight the absurdities of each culture, lending a certain nihilistic air to the space of judgment. Loss and liberation can seem about equal. In other cases, though--and this is perhaps the more completely post-Modern position--the resolution points a more positive way: toward a feeling that each cultural form is inwardly meaningful, and that the project of bringing them together without loss is worth one's while. Anthony Appiah has called such a stance the "capacity to make use of ... many identities without ... any significant conflict."<sup>122</sup> Referring to a conversation with Dime, Dia said, "We talked to each other in Wolof, when I go to see my relatives I speak in my own language, Bambara; when I am with a Frenchman I speak French." The use of French, he says, is "not tied to any conflict."

In this project of getting beyond simple nationalism into a new stage of multiple human identity, the arts play a leading role, feeling out avenues of conflation and comparison. This does not mean the adoption of some neutral international style that bleaches out cultural particularities, as it did in the Modernist period. The post-Modern invitation is not to abandon one's identity in order to become Western but to balance one's identity with the

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various global demands of the moment, including the demand presented by the temporary hegemony of Western technology and pop culture. Today, artists born in India, Korea, Japan, China, Turkey, and diverse Latin American nations are consciously creating styles that simultaneously honor particular cultural identities and make gestures of mutual incorporation with the Western tradition.

This accommodation with the West is desirable not because of some hegemonic assumption that only the Western art discourse defines the reality of art, and hence non-Western artists *should* desire to be included in it. There are artists in India who are working in traditional Indian modes, and artists in China who are working in traditional Chinese modes, with full satisfaction; this is part of the pluralized post-Modern situation. But another part of that situation is precisely that many non-Western artists are knocking on the doors of the Western art system, seeking the advantages it offers: the increased possibility of making a living through art; access to a large, focused audience; and entrance into a lively, even agitated discourse that promises to leave its record in art-history books and museums. The sense of artistic community in the West is intensely attractive to many non-Western artists, who often work in considerable isolation in their native lands. When I asked Santoni how he thought his work would be recorded in art history, he laughed and said, "I don't even think about that. I don't even think I am part of art history." And when I asked Dia, "What is your artistic community?" he replied, "I have never confronted this question." "In Ivory Coast," he explained, "there isn't much of a community of artists. Artists don't sit down together and talk about techniques or issues or anything. They live very separately."

For these artists, freed of the colonial conflicts that confined their parents' generation, it is easy to feel a common cause with Western artists. Dime praised Louise Bourgeois's work, which he saw in Venice, as "full of humanity. I really felt the presence of a human being. It was not just something for commerce, but a kind of gift." Ouattara praised Joseph Beuys for his interest in "liberation through art," and he pursues in his own work the Berrysian goal of "a synthesis of spirituality and technology- -to give technology a more humane quality." When I asked Dia if he thought that artists around the world were engaged in a kind of collaboration with one another, he replied, "That would be wonderful."

Recently the doors to the global art community, once closed and locked, have been opening in an increasing number of urban venues. The spread of Third World biennials, ultimately based on the Venice Biennale but not necessarily subservient to it, is creating new centers from which entrance into the global arena can be navigated. In Africa such exhibitions now occur in Cairo, Libreville, Kinshasa, Abidjan, and Dakar. Pluralism, which Appiah describes as "a fact waiting for some institutions,"<sup>24</sup> is now amassing institutions of its own. Reconceived art museums and refocused international exhibitions are not the least important of them.

The value of participation in this emerging multibranch art discourse is that contemporary art carried out in an atmosphere of global dialogue can accomplish things that a puristically maintained native tradition cannot. Exported from within a culture to the out-

side world, contemporary art is a type of visual diplomacy that introduces the peoples of the world to one another in their living reality. That such an introduction cannot be perfectly lucid is not necessarily a problem. When an object produced by one culture is received in another, there is bound to be a cognitive slippage, an unintended misperception on the part of the receivers. But it is precisely this "off" quality that offers a window of rich openness, through which new options may arise on both sides.

### **African Post-Modernists?**

So, from the point of view of the West, the appearance of these five West African artists in the 1993 Venice Biennale can be seen as a distinctively post-Modern event, a signpost indicating the continued unfolding of the post-Modern idea of globality. But this is not to say that these five artists are post-Modernists. Seen from the point of view of Africa, or of the so-called Third World in general, their significance might seem quite different. Indeed, much of the Third World is concerned with entering Modernism, not with what it sees as the odd concept of post-Modernism. In much of the world, post-Modernism is regarded as strictly a Western idea; in much of Europe it is regarded as strictly an American one. And it is no doubt true that the United States, with its specifically hybrid roots, is among the most dedicatedly post-Modernist cultures. But this doesn't mean that post-Modernism is only about the West, or only relevant to the West. Though post-Modernism marks a shift in specifically Western attitudes, those attitudes concern the West's relationship to the rest of the world. Considering the wealth and power involved in such a shift, it is of deep relevance everywhere. Whether these African artists see themselves as post-Modernists or not, the fact remains that it is the complex of changes called post-Modernism that brought them to Venice.

### **Universals**

In fact, the position these artists occupy on the continuum from pre-Modernism to Modernism to post-Modernism is understandably mixed and fragmented--like virtually everyone else's. Insofar as they have got beyond the various issues of colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism, they may be regarded as post-Modern. Yet their ambitions as artists, and their beliefs about what the significance of artmaking might be, also involve pre-Modern and Modernist attitudes.

All four of these African artists seem to invoke universals as in one way or another the basis of their work. Dia, for example, perceives in art a universal element that seems to arise from a personal sense of transcultural identification with artists from radically different backgrounds, cultures, and eras, as in his exquisite curiosity about Leonardo's feelings walking the streets of Venice on his brief sojourn there. Dime's sense of the universality of art is based on Islamic religious feeling, the conviction that God has created beauty in the world and that artworks participate in this creation. For Ouattara, the transcultural nature of art is guaranteed by the conviction that magical symbols and intentions work across lines of cultural difference--as in the similarity he has found between his initiation symbols and cabalistic imagery. And for Santoni, the universal is rooted in a lonely, intransigent

individuality that sees a path-oriented isolation as fundamental to any moment of life, regardless of cultural conditions.

### **The Autonomous Artist**

A second major sign dividing the pre-Modern, the Modern, and the post-Modern is the definition of the artist's role in society. In pre-Modern societies the artist was socially contextualized as an artisan; the Egyptian sculptor was on the same socioeconomic level as the Egyptian cobbler. With Modernism, a cultural epiphenomenon of early or market capitalism, the fine artist gets separated from the cobbler, becoming a sensibility in competition with other sensibilities for the discovery of innovative options. Underlying this separation is a belief in the artist's connection with aesthetic and spiritual universals. The pre-Modern artist, often working in religious contexts, may also have been connected with universals, but more communally-without the imperative of individual discovery.

The difference devolves upon the question of autonomy. The idea of the artist's autonomy, essential to Modernism, is in part based on the idea that the artist transcends social mores, being in touch with a reality that is prior to them, that is in fact their true archetypal meaning or source. Recent Western discourse has made much of the unnaturalness of this idea, pointing out that in traditional or pre-Modern (or merely non-Modern) societies, the profession of artist usually isn't separated from social matrices--from craft, from religion, from communal bonding. In fact it has often been suggested that the separate and so-called autonomous role "artist" may be an unhealthy sign of the alienation and reification of late capitalism.

My conversations in Venice do not support such thoughts, for these non-Western artists have all embraced the Western idea of the artist as following an autonomous path of self-realization and self-expression-though one supported by communal sympathy and cultural collaboration. They all feel pretty alienated from society; but at the same time, a bond of concern with it pervades their art. In the traditional or pre-Modern social setup, the artist was deeply embedded within culture, like the shoemaker. The situation of the African artists in Venice is more typically Modernist: they are separated from the body of culture, even alienated from it, yet they feel themselves as its heart and soul, its essence yearning for its body, and so on. In this they recall the essentially Orphic spirituality that pervades Modernism.'

Dime, in the remarkable story that he tells in my interview with him in this book, seems to say that his life and sanity were salvaged after long travail by his full realization of the role of autonomous artist. Furthermore, this realization came to him in stages not entirely unlike those that traditional mystical texts ascribe to the discovery of spirit- the ascent of Mount Carmel, say, or the penetration into the Interior Castle. As he looks back over his life now, "I feel," he says, "I could never have been anything but a sculptor." Speaking of himself and other young Senegalese artists, he describes the path of art as a path of self-realization: "Each wanted to create his own originality, his own style." And Santoni remarks, "What I do is entirely personal... I use painting to express myself." He sees the artist's autonomy as constituted by the irreducibility of individual sensibility, and



the unquestionableness of one's solitary life-path. Action is regarded as inevitable, conditioned by the reality of one's sensing of one's path, and sufficient in its visual embodiment of that sensing. "I am following my way, my path," he says, "and I don't know where this path is going to take me."

For Dia, the role of artist involves both autonomy and communality. His work penetrates realms of feeling associated with the social suffering around him; his individual selfhood catches the vibration of the communal and reflects it back, like radar signals in a visual semaphore. Thus he feels that his work, though brought into being in almost hermetic isolation, is a direct response to his community. Dime too, while pursuing his individuality through his work, directs it at the communal distress of "social outcasts" in Senegal. Ouattara holds to a more traditional sense of art as a magic of "the elders." Yet his homage to tradition is offset by deliberate multicultural mixing, and by a sense of art as future-oriented, even as a driving force in human progress, specifically in the reconciliation of technology with nature or spirit.

The pre-Modern artist, contextualized as an artisan, was discouraged from pursuing a path of formal development. For the Modernist artist, on the other hand, development of vision, and of that vision's formal realization, is of the essence. Those of Dime's boyhood friends who went into traditional woodworking may be making the same types of objects twenty years later, whereas his work has gone through several stages in a twenty-year quest. The intensity and peculiar satisfaction of such a quest suggest that it is a process of making oneself into something fuller, greater, or clearer - a kind of self-articulation. Thus the four or five stages of Dime's sculptural practice may be seen as four or five stages of his personal quest for wholeness. All four of these artists see their work as path-oriented, as a thread they follow through their investigations of form and material, a thread leading not merely to some formal and material end, but to a combined sense of autonomy and responsibility to group.

## **The Future**

Self-consciously post-Modernist art sometimes tries to function as a benign promoter of the balance of sameness and difference, as a facilitator of a certain kind of future.

Sometimes it interprets the mandate of the pastiche, or the double coding, as a combination of iconic signs from different cultures, a combination that would once have been called inappropriate. Chen and Sheikh are two artists who make this kind of conflation; the hilarious postironic Russian-American pastiches of expatriate Russian Alexander Kosalopov, and the media-conscious global confluences of the Zairean artist Trigo Piula, are two more. The works of all these artists can be interpreted, in one aspect, as highly self-conscious instruments of both analysis and prophetic vision. While they analyze selfhood into various factors, they also prophesy a future in which these factors collaborate harmoniously.

The works of the five West African artists in the 1993 Venice Biennale are less self-consciously theoretical than the post-Modernist pastiches of Chen, Kosalopov, Sheikh, and others who are consciously working on a synthesis of Western and non-Western modalities. But they exhibit a comparable sense of permission in regard to the cultural attributes of

cultures other than their own as well as their own--a permission that in the Modernist period was available only to the cultural agents of colonial powers.

Picasso's famous remark, haughty in its offhand imperialism, "All I need to know about Africa is in those objects"--meaning, evidently, in the look of the objects--now represents the attitude these African artists turn back upon the Western tradition. They are adopting elements of the look of Western artworks--elements of style, iconography, and materials--from aesthetic appetite alone, not much caring about the conceptual issues or culture-specific contents that we think saturate them. When they do appreciate specific borrowed elements conceptually, these include the Western idea of the autonomous role of the artist, and along with it the belief in art as a liberating spiritual force in relation to society and its problems. Untroubled by hybridization, armed with elements from both Africa and Europe, they are ready to move into the future.

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1979).
2. Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores*, (New York: Center for African Art, and Munich: Prestel 1991), p. 14.
3. This oneupmanship transpired in ways analyzed by Albert Memmi in his book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, (1959 expanded ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).
4. See Ellen Conroy Kennedy, ed., *The Négritude Poets* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1975) and Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974), and Chikanda M. Barham, *An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).
5. For more on these Indian developments, see Thomas McEvelley, "The Common Air: Contemporary Art in India," *Artforum* 34(10) (Summer 1986). Reprinted in an abridged version in McEvelley, *Art and Othello's: Crisis of Cultural Identity*. Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson and Company, 1992.
6. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, with preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, 1961 (reprinted. New York: Penguin Books, 1983).
7. William Bascom, *African Art in Cultural Perspective* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), p. 4.
8. For discussion of Gulam Sheikh's work, see McEvelley, "The Common Air"; for T. F. Chen, see McEvelley, "The Post-Modern Art of T.F. Chen: Images of a Global Humanity." in T. F. Chen's *Pony-Modern Art, Neo-Iconographic* (Tainan, Taiwan: Tainan County Cultural Center, 1991).
9. B. Davidson, *The African Slave Trade* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961), p. 10.
10. Arturo Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico, and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean* (San Juan: University of Puerto Rico, 1952), p. 5.
11. Bascom, p. 4.
12. In 1961, when the process of decolonization was progressing headlong, Thomas Hess wrote about what he called "impure art" in an essay entitled "Collage as an Historical Method," in *Art News* 60 (November 1961):70. The following year Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh traced the gradual ascent of collage practice through the late-Modernist period in *Collage: Personalities, Concepts, Techniques* (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton, 1963). The year after that, Allan Kaprow, one of the practitioners of impure art, wrote about collage as "impurity [meaning] a secondhand state, a mongrel, in 'Impurity,' *Art News* 61 (January 1963):31.
13. Ihab Hassan, "Postmodernism: A Paracritical Bibliography," *New Literary History* 3(1) (Autumn 1971): 5-30.
14. Charles Jencks, "Post-Modern Classicism -The New Synthesis," *Architecture* 5/6 (1980), and *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy, 1991).
15. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror or Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 4.
16. Fredric Jameson, "Post-Modernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984):59-92.
17. Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 18.
18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Nomad Art," *Art and Text* 19 (October- December 1985):1 > 24.
19. Deleuze and Guattari- *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 494.
20. Memmi, p. xi.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
23. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In the Father's House: Alma in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. ix.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
25. From Orpheus, the way of Pythagoras, to Plato to whom, as Alfred North Whitehead said, all Western philosophy is a series of footnotes.