INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition
Author(s): Okwui Enwezor
Source: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 57-82
Published by: Indiana University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4618328
Accessed: 08/08/2010 14:33

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=iupress.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Research in African Literatures.*

http://www.jstor.org

The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition

Okwui Enwezor
University of Pittsburgh

The Proper task of a history of thought is: to define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live.
—Michel Foucault (*History of Sexuality 2: 10*)

This flood of convergences, publishing itself in the guise of the commonplace. No longer is the latter an accepted generality, suitable and dull—no longer is it deceptively obvious, exploiting common sense—it is, rather, all that is relentlessly and endlessly reiterated by these encounters.
—Édouard Glissant (*Poetics of Relation* 45)

1

It is a commonplace of the current historical thinking about globalization to say: There are no vantage points from which to observe any culture since the very processes of globalization have effectively abolished the temporal and spatial distance that previously separated cultures.[1] Another way this thinking has been expressed is in the idea of globalization as the mode and ultimate structure of singularization, standardization, and homogenization of culture in service of instruments of advanced capitalism and neoliberalism. After such totalization, what remains of the critical forces of production that throughout the modern era have placed a strong check on the submergence of all subjective protocols to the orders of a singular organizing ideology, be it the state or the market? What may immediately follow this spatial and temporal reordering is to ask: If globalization has established, categorically, the proximity of cultures, can the same be said about globalization and art? Here, what marks the critical division between culture and art is that for centuries art as such has waged a fierce battle of independence from all cultural, social, economic, and political influences.

Unlike the apotropaic device of containment and desublimation through which the modern Western imagination perceived other cultures, so as to feed off their strange aura and hence displace their power, the nearness today of those cultures formerly separated by their distance to the objectifying conditions of modernist history calls for new critical appraisals of our contemporary present and its relationship to artistic production. I start with these observations in order to place in proper context the current

Research in African Literatures Vol. 34, No. 4 Winter 2003: 57–82

conditions of production, dissemination, and reception of contemporary art. Contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but in a more critical sense, from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism. It is this geopolitical configuration and its postimperial transformations that situate what I call here "the postcolonial constellation." The changes wrought by transitions to new forms of governmentality and institutions, new domains of living and belonging as people and citizens, cultures, and communities, define the postcolonial matrix that shapes the ethics of subjectivity and creativity today. Whereas classical European thought formulated the realm of subjectivity and creativity as two domains of activity each informed by its own internal cohesion, without an outside, such thought today is consistently questioned by the constant tessellation of the outside and inside, each folding into and opening out to complex communicative tremors and upheavals. Perhaps, then, bringing contemporary art into the context of the geopolitical framework that define global relations—between the so-called local and the global, center and margin, nation-state and the individual, transnational and diasporic communities, audiences and institutions—offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation. The constellation, however, is not made up solely of the dichotomies named above, but can be understood as a set of arrangements of deeply entangled relations and forces that are founded by discourses of power. Such discourses of power are geopolitical in nature and by extension can be civilizational in their reliance on binary oppositions between cultures, which in a sense are inimical to any transcultural understanding of the present context of cultural production. Geopolitical power arrangements are defined along much the same *ligne Maginot* in the artistic context. With a terrible tear at its core, evidence of such a *ligne Maginot* in the artistic context lends contact between different artistic cultures an air of civilizational distinctions predicated on the tension between the developed and underdeveloped, reactionary and progressive, regressive and advanced, avant-garde and outmoded. Such a discourse, however, is a heritage of classical modernity, which, through these distinctions, furnishes the dialectical and ideological agenda for competition and hegemony often found in the spaces of art and culture.

What follows is a response to my initial assertions that the current artistic context is constellated around the norms of the postcolonial based on the discontinuous, aleatory forms, creolization, hybridization, etc. with a specific cosmopolitan accent. From the outset, the assertions are not relativistic, even if they attempt to displace certain stubborn values that have structured the discourse of Western modernism and determined its power over other modernisms. Édouard Glissant, whose classic work *Caribbean Discourse* made us aware of the tremor at the roots[2] of the postcolonial order, interprets current understanding of global modernity as essentially the phenomenon of creolization of cultures, wherefore he permits us to see in global processes of movement, resettlement, recaliberation, changes and shifts, modalities of cultural transformations that by necessity can neither

by wholly universal nor essentially particular. Contemporary culture as such, for Glissant, is cross-cultural, reconstituting itself as a "flood of convergences publishing itself in the guise of the commonplace." In this statement, there is an intimation that instructs our notion of the modern world, one that carries the echo and the guise of the commonplace, the social universe that produces the content of all modern subjectivities—that is all subjectivities that emerge directly from the convergences and proximities wrought by imperialism and that today direct us to the postcolonial. The current history of modern art sits at the intersection between imperial and postcolonial discourses. Therefore, any critical interest displayed towards exhibition systems that takes as its field of study modern or contemporary art necessarily refers us to the foundational base of modern art history and its roots in imperial discourse, on the one hand, and, on the othe,r the pressures that postcolonial discourse exerts on its narratives today.

From its inception, the history of modern art has been inextricably bound to the history of its exhibitions both in its commodity function through collectors in the economic sphere and in its iconoclasm evidenced by the assaults on formalism by the historical avant-garde. Both the commodity function of modern art and the avant-garde legacy have played strong legitimizing roles through exhibitions. In fact, it could be said that no significant change in the direction of modern art occurred outside the framework of the public controversies generated by its exhibitions.[3] To phrase it differently, fundamental to the historical understanding of modern art is the important role played through the forum and medium of exhibitions in explicating the trajectory taken by artists, their supporters, critics, and the public in identifying the great shifts that have marked all encounters with modern art and advanced its claim for enlightened singularity among other cultural avatars. For contemporary art, this history is no less true, and the recent phenomenon of the curator in shaping this history has been remarkable. There have occurred, however, a number of remarkable mutations in the growing discourse of exhibitions and in the public representations of art as something wholly autonomous and separate from the sphere of other cultural activities that must be studied very carefully. Exhibitions have evolved from the presentation of singular perspectives of certain types of artistic development to the frightening *Gesamkunstwerk* evident in mega-exhibitions globally that seem to have overtaken the entire field of contemporary artistic production. If we are to judge correctly the proper role of the curator in this state of affairs, then the exhibition as form, genre, or medium, and as a communicative, dialogical forum of conversations between heterogeneous actors, publics, and objects needs further probing.

2

Today most exhibitions and curatorial projects of contemporary art have come under increasing scrutiny and attack. More specifically, they have been called into question by two types of commentary. The first type is generalist and speculative in nature. To my thinking such commentary lacks

critical purpose and can, therefore, be dispensed with rather quickly. The response to exhibitions by this type of commentary is sensationalist; and its chief interest is its fascination with contemporary art as novelty, consumed by affects of reification as a pure image and object of exhibitionism, i.e., with spectacle culture. This means that it tends to equate the task of an exhibition with entertainment, fashion, new thrills and discoveries that seasonally top up the depleted inventory of the "new" exhausted in the previous season. The so-called mega-exhibitions such as *Documenta, biennales, triennales,* festivals, along with commercial gallery exhibitions of a certain type are normally the haunt of this kind of appraisal. Such an appraisal easily grows bored with any exhibition that lacks the usual dosage of concocted outrage and scandal. Impatient with historical exegesis, it contents itself with the phantasmagoric transition between moments of disenchantment and populist renewal of art.

The second type of commentary is largely institutional, divided between academic and museological production: it is one part nostalgic and one part critical. It usually takes the approach of a buttoned-up, mock severity, based, as it is, on a pseudocritical disaffection with what it sees as the consummation achieved between art and spectacle, between the auguries of pop cultural banality and an atomized avant-garde legacy. For such commentary, art has meaning and cultural value only when it is seen wholly as art and autonomous. That is, any encounter with art must relate to that art scientifically, not culturally, in order to understand the objective conditions of the work in question. To the degree that it reflects the inner logic of the work of art, art's removal from the realm of the social-life world that introduces it as an object of high culture comes with a price imposed by the formal constraints won through its autonomy with regard to any accreted social or ideological baggage. For such critics, the curator's task is to maintain the greatest fidelity to a restrained formal diligence as derived from values inculcated and transmitted by tradition, which can only be interrupted through a necessary disjuncture marked by innovation. The paradox of a disjunctive innovation that simultaneously announces its allegiance and affinity to the very tradition it seeks to displace is a commonplace in the entire history of modernism especially in the discourse of the avant-garde.

For curators and art historians the central problematic between art and the avant-garde begins when there is a breach in the supposed eternality of values that flow from antiquity to the present and the autonomy of art that suddenly has to contend with the reality of the secular, democratic public sphere that has been developed through a concatenation of many traditions.[4] This is all the more so when such a breach appears, for instance, in the very conditions of artistic production. One example of such a breach in the concept of art addressed in the very facture of artistic production is what has been called elsewhere as the "Duchamp Effect" (see Buskirk and Nixon). Another view comes from Walter Benjamin's much referenced essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which announced the changes in the medium of art that transform and question traditional notions of originality and aura. Yet another view is based upon

a spirit of "mutual" recognition of substantive development in other traditions that then feeds into new models of practice: the most obvious example is the encounter between modern European artists and the African and Oceanic sculptures at the turn of the twentieth century that gave birth to Cubism. The Duchamp Effect is the most traditional view to my thinking, because what it purports to do is delineate the supremacy of the artist: the artist not only as a form giver, but a name giver. It is the artist who decides what an object of art is or what it can be, not simply the progressive, formal, transformation of art inside of the medium of art. With Duchamp, it is not tradition, but the artist who not only decides what the work of art is but also controls its narrative. For most of us, this idea found its final culmination in the tautological exercises of conceptual art whereby the physical fabrication of art could ostensibly be replaced with linguistic description. Artistic genius emerges, then, from a subjective critique of tradition by the artist, against all other available data, not from an objective analysis of the fallacy of tradition. For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction expands the field and horizon of art, freeing it from traditional biases of originality and aura.

Let me invoke another example, within the "contact zone"[5] of cultures, that of the confrontation with African and Oceanic sculptures by European artists. What this confrontation did was to transform the pictorial and plastic language of modern European painting and sculpture, hence deeply affecting its tradition. What is astonishing in this story of encounter is the degree to which the artistic challenges posed by so-called primitive art to twentieth-century European modernism have been assimilated and subordinated to modernist totalization. Therein lies the fault line between imperial and postcolonial discourse, for to admit to the paradigmatic breach produced by the encounter between African sculptures and European artists would also be to address the narrative of modern art history. We should also remember that the non-Western objects in question first must shed their utilitarian function and undergo a conversion from ritual objects of magic to reified objects of art. The remarkable import of this conversion is that its historical repercussion has remained mostly consigned to formal aesthetic analysis.

I cite these examples because they are material to our reading and judgment of contemporary art. The entrance into art by historically determined questions in terms of form, content, strategy, cultural difference, etc. establishes a ground from which to view art and the artists' relationship to the institutions of art today. Thus, this breach is visible, because it no longer refers to the eternal past of pure objects or to the aloofness from society necessary for autonomy to have any meaning. In his "Theory of the Avant-Garde," Peter Burger makes this point clear:

> If the autonomy of art is defined as art's independence from society, there are several ways of understanding that definition. Conceiving of art's apartness from society as its 'nature' means involuntarily adopting the *l'art pour l'art* concept of art and simultaneously making it impossible to explain this apartness as the product of a historical and social development." (35)

The concept of *l'art pour l'art* as part of the avant-garde formulation of artistic autonomy was described by Benjamin as a *theology of art* that "gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of 'pure' art, which [. . .] denied any social function of art [. . .]" (24). It is based on this denial that Burger's analysis advances a claim for a socially determined theory that stands at the source of two opposing traditions of art historical thought found among certain practitioners today. Not surprisingly, the two opposing traditions furnish the content of the rivalry discernible in the second type of commentary on curatorial procedures. It is the domain most struggled over by conservative (traditionalist) and liberal (progressive) groups, both of whom have increasingly come to abjure any social function of art, except when it fits certain theories. Two recent examples will demonstrate my point here. In the first, I refer to the recent debate in a round table discussion on the state of art criticism published on the occasion of the 100th issue anniversary of the influential art journal *October*.[6] I had read this issue of the journal with a heightened sense of alacrity, especially at the reductiveness of the panelists' critique of the state of art criticism today. Though the attack against certain populist types of criticism was indeed cogent and necessary, I could not help but detect a tone of condescension in the voices of the *October* critics who appeared merely concerned in their irritation, with a certain type of popular criticism identified solely with American-based critics.

The second example highlights the ideological tension within the academy between the progressive ethos represented by *October's* brand of art history and the conservatism of the traditional museum of modern art as it concerns modernism. In the case of the traditional museum, we can apply a similar scrutiny to a museum like the Tate Modern in London. For at this museum we recently see so visibly rendered an overarching curatorial overview, straddling over a large expanse of historical developments in modern art. Central to the Tate Modern's curatorial overview is the relationship between modern art and the European tradition and between contemporary art and its modernist heritage. To demonstrate these relationships and at the same time transform the methodology for rendering them in a public display, the museum needed to move between a synchronic and diachronic ordering of its message. Upon its opening two years ago, much discussion appeared in the press about the Tate Modern's "radical" attempt to break with the outmoded chronological emphasis of modernist art history. This break would inaugurate something far more dialectical, hence the discursive approach in the permanent collection's display, which was arranged according to genre, subject matter, and form affinities. In this manner, the history of modern art and the transformations within it would be ready at hand for the general public, particularly if it is demonstrated and relayed to them that a Monet landscape, for example, can be understood as an immediate ancestor to the stone circle sculptures and mud wall paintings of Richard Long.

Divided into four themes: *Still Life/Object/Real Life, Nude/Action/Body, History/Memory/Society, Landscape/Matter/Environment*, the *decisive* idea was to break with a conception of modernist historiography long entrenched

at the Museum of Modern Art in New York since its founding more than seventy years ago. Never mind that many professional visitors—namely, curators and historians—whispered that the *decisiveness* of Tate Modern in breaking with the traditional historiography of the modern museum owed more to the lack of depth in its collection of modern art than to any radical attempt to redefine how the history of modern art is to be adjudicated and read publicly. But let me return to the galleries proper and the displays. As mentioned already, one of the most memorable rooms in the new installations that seeks to connect modern and contemporary art, hence the continuity of an uninterrupted tradition, is the one that combines one of Richard Long's typical mud wall paintings and one of Monet's water lilies paintings. What are we to make of this pairing? It certainly shows us that both Monet and Long are deeply interested in nature as a source for their art. The pairing could also evoke for the viewer that aspect of spirituality and the metaphysical often connected to nature, as well as in the conception of landscape as genre of art from which artists have often drawn. That this pairing is a curatorial gimmick is not so difficult to see. Yet it is an interesting enough proposition for the unschooled, average museum visitor. For the rest of this exercise in dialectical and discursive historiography, rooms were divided like stage sets into the four themes that read much like a textbook. The chilling unmessiness of art's undisturbed progression in a newly founded museum of "modern" art without contradictions, frictions, resistance, and changes that confound and challenge conventional ideas of modernism (beyond the textbook lessons, which we all know so much by heart) is in itself a historical conceit. Every possible position that could challenge this most undialectical of approaches has been sublated and absorbed into the yawning maws of the Tate Modern's self-authorizing account.

One example, and by far the most troubling, of the curatorial reasoning behind this account will suffice. Typical of the cynicism towards any socially and historically determined analysis of the object of discourse in a museum of modern art is a room in the *Nude/Action/Body* section. What this theme suggests is a series of transformations in the manner that the body has been used in modern and contemporary art. The series of passages from *nude* to *action* to *body* suggest an image of contingency, internal shifts in the development and understanding of the human form and subjectivity as it moves from modern to contemporary art. The image that presides over this shift is both corporeal and mechanical, symbolic and functional, artistic and political, from the *nude* as an ideal to the *body* as a desiring machine.

The first gallery serves as a sort of introduction and opens out to an eclectic selection of paintings by Stanley Spencer, John Currin, Picasso, and others. This is not an auspicious introduction. The selection and arrangement of the works in the gallery is striking, but more for its formal sensibility than in authoritatively setting out any radical thesis of the nude and the body. So we walk through the first gallery into the second gallery where we come upon two imposing large-scale black and white photographic works—one by Craigie Horsfield and the other by John Coplans—facing each other. Horsfield's picture *E. Horsfield (1987)*, 1995, is in the tradition of the classical modernist reclining nudes reminiscent of Cézanne's bath-

ers and Matisse's odalisques. It is an outstanding ponderous picture, heavy like fruit, with the graded tones of gray lending the mass of flesh a stately presence. Coplan's *Self Portrait (Frieze No. 2, Four Panels)* (1995) is typical of his performative and fragmentary, multipaneled serial self-portraiture, often representing his flabby, aging body. In a typical Coplans manner, the seriality of the depicted parts reveals a body seemingly laying claim to its own sentient properties. Here, it should be said that the position of the contemporary nude, in relation to the classical modernist nude, finds formal echoes in the other. But what distinguishes the contemporary nude from its early modernist antecedents–as far as one can make out–can best be summarized as the difference between the self-conscious subjectivity of the former and the formal idealization of the latter. The former recalls Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the desiring machine (see Deleuze and Guattari) consumed by expressing itself, while the latter is more a force of nature trapped in classical culture.

But what are we to make of what immediately follows this initial encounter with the body in the next gallery? When we enter this gallery, what do we find? We find a small ethnographic vitrine embedded into one of the walls of the room. To the left of the wall is a discreetly placed LCD monitor playing extracts from two films, one by Michel Allégret and André Gide, *Voyage to the Congo* (1928), and the other an anonymous archival film, *Manners and Customs of Senegal* (1910). The two extracts evince a theme common to travel documentary. Though temporally and spatially apart, we can group these two films within a well-known genre, a system of knowledge that belongs to the discourse of colonial, ethnographic film studies of "primitive" peoples. (We already know much about the Western modernist fascination with "primitive" peoples' bodies, along with their orientalist correlatives, that is to say that the concept of alterity was not only important for Western modernism but was necessary as well as a focus of allegorical differentiation.) But Allégret and Gide's film and the more structurally open archival footage provide us with much to think about with regard to modernism, spectacle, otherness, and degeneracy. In each of the two films, we see the setting of the African village and its social life: villagers self-consciously working on their everyday chores such as grinding grain, tending fires, minding children, or participating in a village festival of dance and song. What is most striking about Allégret and Gide's film, however, is that it mostly highlights nakedness—the nakedness of black African bodies under imperial observation. Here, nakedness opposed to the nude yields a structure of critical differentiation between the primitive and the modern, between the savage and the civilized, between nature and culture.

To be sure, the method of the camera work is to be objective, to show primitive peoples as they are, in their natural space. While this may be the film's purpose, one could still detect that part of its conscious structure is to show the degree to which primitive man is not to be confused with the modern man. If this differentiation lends what we are viewing not exactly a quality of empathy, it "underlines," in the words of James Clifford, " a more disquieting quality of modernism: its taste for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image, for discov-

ering universal, ahistorical 'human' capacities" (*Predicament* 193). This observation taken *in toto* with modernism's relationship to otherness, the primitive and the savage bears on what the discourse on the nude says concerning the distinction between the nude's formal, aesthetic status within Western modernist art and that of simple nakedness that has no redeeming aesthetic value commonly found in ethnographic discourse.

If, however, the Tate Modern were an institution working beyond the smug reflex of Western museological authority, it would have found right in its own context work of artists like Rotimi Fani-Kayode, the Nigerian-British photographer whose work—formally and conceptually—involves a long, rigorous excursus into the distinction between the nude and nakedness as it concerns the African body. The analytic content, not to say the formal and aesthetic contradictions that Fani-Kayode's photographic work introduces us to about the black body in contrast to the modernist nude, is quite telling. More substantial is its awareness of the conflicted relationship the black body[7] has to Western representation and its museum discourse. This makes the absence of works like his in the *Nude/Action/Body* section of the Tate Modern the more glaring. We can substitute Fani-Kayode with any number of other practitioners, but he is important for my analysis for the more specific reason of his Africanness, his conceptual usage of that Africanness in his imagery, and his collapse of the fraught idea of nakedness and the nude in his photographic representation. Fani-Kayode's pictures also conceive of the black body (in his case the black male body with its homoerotic inferences) as a vessel for idealization, as a desiring and desirable subject, and as self-conscious in the face of the reduction of the black body as pure object of ethnographic spectacle. All these critical turns in his work make the Tate Modern's inattention to strong, critical work on the nude and the body by artists such as Fani-Kayode all the more troubling, because it is precisely works like his that have brought to crisis those naturalized conventions of otherness, which throughout history of modern art have been the stock-in-trade of modernism. Whatever its excuses for excluding some of these artists from its presentation, we should discount Tate Modern's monologue on the matter of the ethnographic films. Accompanying the extracts, which also manifest a characteristic double-speak, the label expounds on the matter of the films' presence in the gallery:

> European audiences in the early 20th century gained experience of Africa through documentary films. Generally these conformed to stereotyped notions about African cultures. An ethnographic film of 1910, for instance, concentrates on the skills and customs of the Senegalese, while *Voyage to the Congo*, by filmmaker Marc Allégret and writer André Gide perpetuates preconceptions about life in the 'bush'. However, the self-awareness displayed by those under scrutiny, glimpsed observing the filmmakers subverts the supposed objectivity of the film.

The Tate Modern in this supplementary discourse imputes both the manufacture and consumption of the stereotype to some past European documentary films and audiences, which is to say that the business of such

stereotypes lies in the past, even if it has now been exhumed before a contemporary European audience for the purposes of explaining modernism's penchant for deracinating the African subject. But if the discourse of the stereotype as implied is now behind us, is its resuscitation an act of mimicry or is it, as Homi Bhabha has written, an act of anxious repetition of the stereotype (in "The Other Question") that folds back into the logic for excluding African artists in the gallery arrangement? Does the repetition of the stereotype caught, if you will, in a discursive double-maneuver posit an awareness of the problem of the stereotype for contemporary transnational audiences or does the museum's label present us with a more profound question in which the wall text causally explains and masks what is absent in the historical reorganization of the museum's memory cum history? One conclusion can be drawn from this unconvincing explanatory maneuver: more than anything, it entrenches European modernist appropriation and instrumentalization of Africa in its primitivist discourse to which the Tate Modern in the twenty-first century is a logical heir.

Still, as we go deeper into the matter, our investigation has much to yield as we look further into the ethnographic desublimation (an uneasy conjunction, no doubt, between colonialism and modernism) taking place in the museum. Inside the vitrine, we find, casually scattered, postcards with the general title "Postcards from West Africa" (the subject of which relates to that of the two film extracts), and an untitled, undated small, dark, figurative sculpture, identified simply as *Standing Figure*. The label informatively tells us of the sculpture's provenance: having come from the collection of Jacob Epstein, which thus conveys to us through the synechdoche of ownership the sculpture's aesthetic aura. What is implied is this: the ownership of such a sculpture by one of Britain's important modernist artists means that he must have appreciated the sculpture first and foremost as a work of art with important aesthetic qualities that recommend it to the modern European sculptor.[8] But if this is so, why then is the sculpture not more properly displayed along with other sculptures installed in the gallery? Or is its namelessness and authorlessness unable to deliver it into the domain of aesthetic judgment necessary for its inclusion as an authoritative work of art?

It is no use speaking about the lyrical beauty and artistic integrity of this powerful sculpture so pointlessly compromised by the rest of the detritus of colonial knowledge system crammed in the vitrine. The sculpture's presence is not only remote from us, it seems to connote not art, above all not autonomous art, just artifact, or worse still, evidence. Nearly a hundred years after the initial venture by Western modernists (and I do not care which artist "discovered" what qualities in African or Oceanic art first), it would have been clear enough to the curators at Tate Modern that in terms of sheer variety of styles, forms, complexity, genres, plastic distinctiveness, stylistic inventiveness and complexity of sculptural language, and conception, no region in the world approaches the depth and breadth of African sculptural traditions. Let's take for example the Congo from where Gide and Allégret gave us the deleterious impressions of their *voyage*, as a point of illustration. In just this single region we find distinct traditions of sculpture

such as Yombe, Luba, Mangbetu, Kuba, Teke, Lega, Songye, and Dengese. These traditions of sculpture and many others are as unique as they are historically different in their morphological conception of sculpture. The expressive and conceptual possibilities in the language of artists working within each group have produced sculptural forms of such anthropomorphic variety and complexity, whether of the mask or figure, the statue or relief, that simple comparative study between them yields such an active field of artistic experimentation and invention that many a modernist recognized, understood, and appreciated. But this is not communicated at all in the lugubrious gathering at the museum. It should also be noted that what this installation communicates is neither a history nor even a proper anthropology of modernism; rather, the task of this "historical" instruction is more a convention that has often been repeated in a variety of museums of modern art. To my thinking, such types of instruction more or less obfuscate than enlighten. In fact, along with museum collections, most Western modernist museology is predicated on the repetition and circulation of disparate apocrypha and objects connected to this obfuscation.[9]

As for the African conception of modernity in this depressing tale of museology, that would be for another place and time. Meanwhile, what remains on view inside the rest of the vitrine is not the basis for a system of knowledge according to which the relationship between Western modernist artists in correspondence to their African contemporaries exists in the affiliative spirit of mutual influence and recognition. Instead, the vitrine posits a method, a mode of instruction on what is modern and what is not. In the method and instruction there are Carl Einstein's well-known book *NegerPlastik,* Marcel Griaulle's accounts of the Dakar-Djibouti expedition published in the journal *Minotaure,* which is contemporary to Michel Leiris's famous book *L'Afrique fantome,* all performing a pantomime of the modern opposed to the primitive that the Tate Modern has now upgraded to the most astonishing form of ethnographic ventriloquism. Having emptied and hollowed out the space of African aesthetic traditions, the rest of the gallery was filled in—with customary care and reverence—with carefully installed "autonomous" sculptures by Brancusi and Giacometti and paintings by the German expressionists Karl Rotluff and Ludwig Ernst Kirschner. A Kirschner painting of a cluster of nude figures with pale elongated limbs and quasi-cubist, conical, distended midsections is noteworthy and striking in its anthropomorphic resemblance and formal correspondence to both the sculpture in the vitrine and what we had been looking at in the film of the naked Congolese women and children in Gide and Allégret's film.

Given the large literature on the subject, one should take Tate Modern to task by asking whether it could have found African artists from whatever period to fit into their dialectical scheme? The evidence emphatically suggests they could have. The result is they did not. Not because they could not, but most likely because they felt no obligation to stray from the modern museum's traditional curatorial exclusions. This laid open to question the dialectical assumption of the museum's display. However, what was concretely conveyed was an attitude, a point of view, a sense of sovereign judgment.

We should nonetheless concede the fact that Tate Modern is merely operating on a well-trodden ground. For example when Werner Spies reinstalled the galleries of the Centre Pompidou in 1999, he applied a curatorial flourish to the museum's cache of modernist paintings and sculptures, mixing them with postwar and contemporary art while assigning classical African sculpture and masks a garishly lit vitrine wedged into a hallway-like room. A more serious example of this sort was the Museum of Modern Art's scholarly, superb, and curatorially important and influential "Primitivism in Modern Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern" exhibition in 1984/85, which treated the African and Oceanic works as it would any highly refined modernist object. But even this treatment of the works as autonomous sculptures was achieved through a sense of reification that all but destroyed the important symbolic power of the objects and the role they played in their social contexts.

In 1989, Jean-Hubert Martin curated Centre Pompidou's still controversial exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre," which set a different course in its response to the question that has vexed the modernist museum from its earliest inception, namely, the status and place of non-Western art within the history of modernism and contemporary art. To evade this conundrum, Martin elected to eliminate the word artist from his exhibition–mindful of the fact that such a designation may be unduly burdened by a Western bias–choosing instead the term *magiciens* as the proper name for the object and image makers invited to present their art. If the MoMA and Centre Pompidou exhibitions—in New York and Paris respectively, two bastions of the history of modern art in the world—responded critically to the controversial and unresolved aesthetic and historical debates within modernist accounts concerning art and artists from other cultures, Tate Modern, in its own attempt to further the rewriting of modernist reception of the other and non-Western art, proved both unevolved and unreflexive. There is a sense of the entire set-up being ahistorical, bearing no semblance to the critical content of what Habermas calls the "the philosophical discourse of modernity."[10] After this encounter, I contented myself with looking at the rest of the collection without troubling further with its justifications, its subjugation of historical memory—in fact, its savage act of epistemological and hermeneutic violence.

3

If I have dwelled on elucidating this particular view it is only to frame what is at stake for artists and curators who step into the historical breach that has opened up today within the context of contemporary art. As regards modernist historiography, that is another matter. But we do know that modernism has many streams that do not all empty into the same basin. Equally evident is the fact that the rising tide of institutional interest in other accounts of artistic production will never lift all the boats into the dialectical position of tradition and continuity so beloved by museums like Tate Modern. And there is the nub of the current skepticism towards a globalized reception of contemporary artistic practices from far-flung places

with little historical proximity to the ideas transmitted from within the legacy of the Western historical avant-garde.

With regard to the complex conditions of production today, the legacy of Western historical avant-garde seems inadequate to do the job of producing a unified theory of contemporary art. Because of its restless, unfixed boundaries, multiplicities, and the state of "permanent transition" within which it is practiced and communicated, contemporary art tends to be much more resistant to global totalization. Yet the last two decades have witnessed an exponential rise in the fortunes of curators, who, with their portmanteau of theories neatly arranged—befitting of their status as the enlightened bureaucrats of modernist totalization—travel the world scouring for new signs of art to fill the historical breach.

Current enthusiasm for deftly packaged multicultural exhibitions aside, there is a sense that such exhibitions are mere responses of convenience and strategy to keep at bay certain social forces that demand greater inclusion that reflect the complexity of societies in which museums exist. To be sure, the responses by museums and academies to the troubling questions of inclusion/exclusion have a historical basis, particularly imperialism and colonialism. The rupture in continuity that imperialism and colonialism subjected upon many cultures continues to have contemporary repercussions on matters such as taste and judgment, giving many artists an important dispute as well as capacities for figuring new values of truth within the field of contemporary art. It is the fields of modern and contemporary art that have given us the view of the utter disability of the one true judgment of art, however authoritative such judgment may be.

It has been long recognized that postcolonial processes have increasingly highlighted the problematics of Western judgment over vast cultural fields in the non-Western world. Many curatorial practices today are direct responses to postcolonial critique of Western authority. What I am trying to foreground here is the fact that the conditions of production and reception of contemporary art evince a dramatic multiplication of its systems of articulation to the degree that no singular judgment could contain all its peculiarities.

The curatorial responses to the contestations initiated both by postcolonialism and expanded definitions of art seem directed at assimilating certain historical effects that became clear only in the last three decades, especially in the 1980s and '90s, and have accelerated since the late 1990s. I will thus delineate five effects that, to me, are the most salient. The effects address not so much the value system of the old world of modernism but the postcolonial conditions of the contemporary world as such. Because modernist formalism has tended to respond to contemporary culture with hostility, the effects I am speaking of are therefore not so much marked by the speed of their transposition into networks and teleologies of organized totality (or as the theology of universal history as is common with all modernist effects), but rather founded on the impermanent and aleatory. Impermanence here does not mean endless drift and evacuation of specificity; rather, the structure of contemporary art's relationship to history is more transversal, asynchronous, and asystematic in nature, thereby reveal-

ing the multiplicity of cultural procedures and countermodels that define contemporary art today.

The first effect is the proliferation and mutation of forms of exhibitions—such as blockbusters, large-scale group or thematic exhibitions, cultural festivals, biennales, and the like, all of which have significantly enlarged the knowledge base of contemporary art in museums and culture at large. This enlargement is crucial, because it has created new networks between hitherto separated spheres of contemporary artistic production–both in the everyday engagement with the world and its images, texts, and narratives and what I have called modernism's dead certainties. Even if this phase is still in a developmental stage, it has oriented the transmission of contemporary art discourses towards a deeper confrontation with what Carlos Basualdo has called the "new geographies of culture." Basualdo's "new geographies of culture" confront curatorial and exhibition systems with the fact that all discourses are located, that is, they are formed and begin somewhere, they have a temporal and spatial basis, they are read synchronically and diachronically. Furthermore, the located nature of cultural discourses, with their history of discontinuities and transitions, confronts curatorial practices with the fragility of, universalized conception of history, culture, and artistic procedures.

The second effect first appeared as an allegory of transformation and transfiguration, then subsequently as a mode of resistance and repetition. It is easy to underestimate today the force of the dissolution of colonialism on art and culture until we realize that, not so long ago—barely half a century—the majority of the globe (covering almost two-thirds of the earth's surface and numbering more than a billion people) consisted of places and peoples without proper political rights. Now, with postcolonialism and the decay of the postcolonial state structure, it is again easy enough to mock the utopian aspirations of self-determination, liberation from colonialism, and political independence that began to see off the imperial discourse that distinctly marked global modernity in its early phase. Similarly, global modernity, in the guise of the modern nation-state that has furnished the political identity of the modern and contemporary artist, intercedes on behalf of a plethora of fictions that found the idea of a national tradition in art and culture. As such, decolonization and national identity represent the bookends of two concomitant projects of late global modernity. On the one hand, decolonization portends to restore sundered traditions to their "proper" pasts, while national identity through the state works assiduously to reinvent and maintain them in the present and for the future. This is what has been called the roadmap to nation-building and modernization. Decolonization, qua the postcolonial, transforms the subject of cultural discourse, while the nation-state reinvents the identity of the artist and transfigures the order of tradition for posterity. If the mode of the postcolonial is resistance and insubordination through transformation, that of the nation is consolidation and repetition through transfiguration. Out of each, the figure of the new becomes the emulsifier for either tradition and restoration, or tradition and continuity. In each, we also can locate the antinomies of the modern and contemporary. No doubt, contemporary

issues of curatorial practice are keenly aware of the uses (and make use) of the fictions of a sundered past and tradition to produce narratives of various invented histories of the modern and contemporary.

Nowhere is this discourse more palpable than in the fiery debates centered around cultural identity, such that representation is not merely the name for a manner of practice, but quite literally the name for a political awareness of identity within the field of representation. Therefore, the making of the new in the context of decolonized representation was as much about the coming to being of new relations of cultures and histories, practices and processes, rationalization and transformation, transculturation and assimilation, exchanges and moments of multiple dwelling as it is about the ways artists are seen to be bound to their national and cultural traditions. Here the political community and cultural community become essentially coterminous. But beyond nationalism and national cultures, decolonization is more than just the forlorn daydream of the postcolonial artist or intellectual, for it has, attached to it, something recognizable in the ideals of modernity: the notion of progress.

The new in art, then, has a self-affirmative content in its postcolonial guise. But how was this view received in the much lamented art that is derogatively referred to as identity-based or multicultural art? Notice the conflation of the terms: identity and multiculturalism. The weakness of all identity-based discourse, we were told, was in its self-contradiction, in its attempt to conflate the universal and the particular, self and other into the social site of artistic production. Another analysis sees identity-based practices as presiding over cultural and political grounds that are too reductive and simplistic, specific, and limited, and, because of their incapacity to deal with abstraction, incapable of transcending that specificity that leads to universal culture. Concerning the fragmentation of modernist totalization introduced by postmodernism, art historian Hal Foster posed the following questions:

> Is this fragmentation an illusion, an ideology of its own (of political "crisis," say, versus historical "contradiction")? Is it a symptom of a cultural "schizophrenia" to be deplored? Or is it, finally, the sign of a society in which difference and discontinuity rightly challenge ideas of totality and continuity? (139)

Are we to then argue, based on Foster's questions (and of course putting aside for the moment that identity-based discourses have been eviscerated) that identity discourse from the standpoint of its oppositionality, contingency, and discontinuity is the specter that haunts modernism? To take it further, was there a false consciousness in the belief that identity-based discourses, along with their multicultural correlatives, in alliance with postmodernism's critique of grand narratives and universal history (including those elaborations on paradigms of asymetrical power relations unleashed by postcolonial studies), could bring about the possibility of a decentered global cultural order? Certainly, global culture is thoroughly decentered, but its power can hardly be said to be contained. Foster does offer a view that can allow us to think a bit further on this question, through an unsentimental reading of Marxism and cultural ideology, writing of how

> new social forces—women, blacks, other "minorities," gay movements, ecological groups, students . . .—have made clear the unique importance of gender and sexual difference, race and the third world, the "revolt of nature" and the relation of power and knowledge, in such a way that the concept of class, if it is to be retained as such, must be articulated in relation to these terms. In response, theoretical focus has shifted from class as a subject of history to the cultural constitution of subjectivity, from economic identity to social difference. In short, political struggle is now seen largely as a process of "differential articulation." (139)

No museum or exhibition project, even if it wishes not to address the consequences of this "differential articulation," can remain critically blind to the importance of multicultural and identity-based practices, however wrong-headed and regressive they may appear. One guiding reason for this vigilance among cultural institutions has to do with both the politics of enlightened self-interest and the changing of the cultural and social demographics of many contemporary societies due to large scale immigratios of the twentieth century and postcolonialism. In the case of the United States and Europe, the Civil Rights movement, antiracist movements, and the struggle for the protection of minority rights have increased the level of this vigilance. There is also the recognition of the role of the market in the institutionalization of national identity in recent curatorial projects, especially in exhibitions designed to position certain national or geographic contexts of artistic production. What is often elided in the excitation of these new national or geopolitical spaces is the politics of national representation that recommends them through various national funding and promotional boards, cultural foundations, and institutions.[11] Increasingly, curators have become highly dependent on the patronage of such institutions. The critic Benjamin Buchloh, in relation to the neoexpressionist market juggernaut of the late 1970s and 1980s has analyzed a similar curatorial symptom that trades on the morbid cliché of national identity:

> When art emphasizing national identity attempts to enter the international distribution system, the most worn-out historical and geopolitical clichés have to be employed. And thus we now see the resurrection of such notions as the Nordic versus the Mediterranean, the Teutonic versus the Latin. (123)

The third effect concerns the explosion of and the heterogeneous nature of artistic procedures immediately at variance with historically conditioned, thereby conventional understanding of art within the logic of the museum. Such procedures have been theorized, quite correctly, as neo-avant-garde, rather than as a true ruptures from their academic obverse. However, it can be said that institutional canniness has often found inventive ways to absorb the energies of even the most insurrectional positions in art. The emergence of new critical forces has all too often become cashiered as another instance in the positivist ideology of advanced art's claim of *engagement* set forth by the institution.

The fourth effect is connected to the mediatization of culture, especially in the transformation of the museum form into an extension of the culture industry of mass entertainment, theatricality, and tourism. The most fitting expression of the passage of museums into the concept of mass culture has been achieved through the fusion of architectural design and the museum's collection whereby the collection and architecture become one fully realized *Gesamkunstwerk* and understood as such.[12] Here, the fusion of the collection with museum architecture is as much a value-supplying feature as any other purpose, such that out-of-town visitors can either go to visit the Frank Lloyd Wright designed Guggenheim Museum in New York or Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao as unique works of art in their own right or they may travel to see the buildings and visit the collections at the same time. Despite their universalist aspirations, most contemporary museums exist with the dark clouds of nationalism or ideologies of civic virtue hovering over them. For, even if the aspiration of the museum is not specifically nationalist, in order to attract funding and state support, its discourse in today's competition between global cities is decidedly nationalist in spirit.

Finally, the fifth effect, which I believe ultimately subtends the previous four, is the globalization of economic production and culture, and the technological and digital revolution that has fused them. Two things underscore the points about globalization that make it fascinating in relation to this discussion: its limit and reach. While the compression of time and space is understood as one of the great aspects of this phenomenon of modernity, there still appears within globalization of art and culture a great unevenness for many artists in terms of access..

Having abandoned the strictures of "internationalism," there is now the idea that the globalization of artistic discourses opens the doors to greater understanding of the motivations that shape contemporary art across Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, and South America. Paradoxically, it is globalization that has laid open the myth of a consolidated art world. Rather than a center, what is much in evidence today are networks and cross-hatched systems of production, distribution, transmission, reception, and institutionalization. The development of new multilateral networks of knowledge production—activities that place themselves strategically at the intersection of disciplines and transnational audiences—has obviated the traditional circuits of institutionalized production and reception. These emergent networks are what I believe Basualdo meant by "new geographies of culture." By emergent, I wish, especially, to foreground not so much the newness of these territories (many of which in fact have extraterritorial characteristics) but their systematic integration into mobile sites of discourse, which only became more visible due to the advances in information technology as a means of distributing, transmitting, circulating, receiving ,and telegraphing of ideas and images.

5

If the foregoing is so far incontestable, the direct question to be asked is this: How does the curator of contemporary art express her intellectual

agency within the state of "permanent transition" in which contemporary art exists today? How does the curator work both within canonical thinking and against the grain of that thinking in order to take cognizance of artistic thought that slowly makes itself felt, first in the field of culture, before it appears to be sanctioned by critics and institutions? I do not have specific answers to these questions. But I do have a notion or two about how we may approach them.

From the moment exhibitions of art assumed a critical place in the public domain of social and cultural discourse amongst political classes—within the bourgeois public sphere that first emerged actively in Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution (see Habermas)—exhibitions have been constituted, *pace* Foucault, within the field of "a history of thought." The field of a history of thought, however, is a field of institutionalized power and systems of legitimation. Even though institutions of art have moved, inexorably, from the private, courtly domain of the feudal state to the increasingly public domain of the salon of the democratic secular state, fundamental instruments of power were still disproportionately held through patronage by the bourgeois elite in alliance with the aristocracy. Today, this process of social differentiation has entered another sphere dominated by capital and contested by forces of the so-called avant-garde. As Pierre Bourdieu writes:

> The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominated the field economically and politically (e.g. "bourgeois art") and the autonomous principle (e.g. "art for art's sake"), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise. (40)

Such a struggle between the strategic utility of failure or success also confronts curators and their judgment. For contemporary artists the adjudication of success or failure–the principle between academicism and avant-gardism, between tradition and innovation–by curators remains a key factor in public and institutional legitimation. Therefore, historically, the emergence of exhibitions as a cultural activity of public institutions is defined within a general field of knowledge. It is informed and governed by aesthetic criteria, disciplinary and artistic norms that designate the historical relationship of the public to all of art. While all aesthetic criteria, disciplinary and artistic norms are said to derive from nothing less than the ontological facture of art as an autonomous drive of artistic creativity—hence the universal dimension of our grasp of art's meaning, and supplementarily its history—we do know that the constitutive field of art history is a synthetically elaborated one, that is, a man-made history. Nonetheless transcategories of art, or works that seek to highlight this synthetic elaboration and as such obviate its foundational principle, still come under the putative influence and exertion of epistemes of historical thought. Even the most radical exhibitions are constituted in this general field of knowl-

edge and define themselves within or against its critical exertion, which is both historical and institutional. Within contemporary art exhibitions, the horizon of art in a dispersed, fragmentary, and asymmetrical state of economic capitalization endemic to all global systems, is foreshortened by these historical and institutional forces. And here, the radical will of the curator is no less compromised. As such, all exhibition procedures today call for a new kind of assessment grounded in the historical reality of the general field of knowledge. This is all the more so if we view the task of an exhibition and the work of the curator as fundamentally contiguous. And what exactly do exhibitions propose and curators organize if not the alliance of historically and institutionally ordered experience governing the reception and relations of art and its objects, concepts, forms, and ideas by a heterogeneous and culturally diverse public? The avidity with which critics seek to define the task of the curator and the curator's relationship to the one true history of art makes this imperative very necessary.

6

With this in mind, I want to call attention to the fact that all curatorial procedures as grounded in the discursive mechanisms of "the history of art" have an optics, that is to say a lens, a way of looking, seeing, and judging art and its objects, images, texts, events, activities, histories, and the intermedia strategies that define the artwork's public existence through institutions, museums, galleries, exhibitions, criticism, etc. The almost Orwellian dispensation towards constructing a viewpoint that is overarching in terms of its conclusions about certain artistic skills and competencies, concepts, and meaning represents a node within which the discursive field of the postcolonial constellation has been formed, namely, to limit the power, if not necessarily the import, of such judgment. For the judgment from which the "history of art" as a specific discipline of the Western academy oversees all artistic matters tends to surreptitiously adopt and incorporate into its discursive field a bird's-eye, panoptic view of artistic practice, which in turn appropriates and subverts subjective judgment into a sovereign assessment of all artistic production. However, if the curator is not quite the sovereign we have made her out to be, she nonetheless operates (with the unambiguous sanction of historical and imperial precedent) like a viceroy among the nonbelievers to be brought over to the sovereign regard of the great Western tradition. It is the sovereign judgment of art history, with its unremitting dimension of universality and totality, that leads us to question whether it is possible to develop a singular conception of artistic modernity, and whether it is permissible to still retain the idea that the unique, wise, and discriminating judgment of curatorial taste, or what some would ambiguously called criticality, ought to remain the reality of how we evaluate contemporary art today. Foucault's call for the problematization of the concept of thought in relation to critical praxis is therefore instructive. The fields of practice in which relations of production, acculturation, assimilation, translation, and interpretation take place confront us immediately with the contingency of the contemporary norm of curatorial procedures that

spring from the sovereign world of established categories of art inherited from "the history of art."

Therefore, the museum of modern art as an object of historical thought has a social life, as well as a political dimension, and its function cannot be dissociated from the complex arena of society and culture within which its discourse is imbricated. To that end, then, it is of significant interest to see in the curator a figure who has assumed a position as a producer of certain kinds of thought about art, artists, exhibitions, and ideas and their place among a field of other possible forms of thought that govern the transmission and reception of artistic production; to think reflexively also about museums. Interestingly, it is artists who have interrogated the institution of the museum and its categorical exceptions of greatness with such rigor. Even if "institutional critique" that inaugurated this critical intervention into the discursive spaces of the museum has made itself redundant in light of the parasitic relationship it developed within the institution, it nonetheless opened up a space of critical address that few curators rarely attempt.

7

Another way of approaching the discourse on curatorial practice is to understand the work of the curator as a mode of practice that leads to particular ways of aligning thought and vision through the separation and juxtaposition of a number of models within the domains of artistic production and public reception. This can tell us a lot and show how the curator reflexively produces an exhibition: allowing the viewer to think, see, appreciate, understand, transform, and translate the visual order of contemporary art into the order of knowledge about the history of art.

Meanwhile, if we were to attempt a definition of the status of the artwork in the current climate of restlessness and epistemological challenges, it would not be a definition, but the artwork understood and recognized as being produced and mobilized in a field of relations (Bourdieu 40).[13] A field of relations places contemporary art and its problematics within the context of historical discourses on modernity. Such a field elucidates the possible challenges of curatorial work today. On such challenges Foucault's splendid definition of the idea of "work" provides a true flash of insight: "that which is susceptible of introducing a meaningful difference in the field of knowledge, albeit with a certain demand placed on the author and the reader, but with the eventual recompense of a certain pleasure, that is to say, of an access to another figure of truth" ("Des travaux" 367, qtd. in Rabinow xxi).

Across the line from which the public faces institutions of legitimation, how does one reach this other figure of truth, especially in an exhibition context? With what aesthetic and artistic language does one utter such truth? And in what kind of environment? For which public? How does one define the public of art, particularly given the proliferation of what qualifies as public? Finally, what truth, in the circumstances of the contemporary upheaval of thought, ideas, identities, politics, cultures, histories? The upheaval that today defines our contemporary assessment of events is an

historical one, shaped by disaffection with two paradigms of totalization: capitalism and imperialism, and socialism and totalitarianism. If the disaffection with these paradigms did not shift significantly the axis and forces of totalization, it did shape the emergence of new subjectivities and identities. However, the context and the reception of the news of this emergence have crystallized into a figure of thought that is radically enacted in oppositional distinctions made on civilizational and moralistic terms: such as "the clash of civilizations" (see Huntington), "the axis of evil,"[14] the "evil empire."[15] During the late 1980s and early 1990s the culture wars in the United States were waged equally on these terms, which in time cooled the ardor of those institutions tempted to step beyond the scope of this limiting argument.[16] I will not rehearse here the anguish of these debates, for they are well-known. Suffice it to say that my conception of the postcolonial constellation comes out of the recognition made clear by the current upheaval evident (see my essay "The Black Box") in a series of structural, political, and cultural restructuring since after World War II and which include movements of decolonization, civil rights, feminist, gay/lesbian, antiracist, movements. The postcolonial constellation is the site for the expansion of the definition of what constitutes contemporary culture and its affiliations in other domains of practice, the intersection of historical forces aligned against the hegemonic imperatives of imperial discourse. In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm the importance of postcolonial history and theory in the understanding of the social and cultural temporality of late modernity. If I recommend the postcolonial prism as the lens that can illuminate our reading of the fraught historical context from which the discourses of modernism and contemporary art emerged, it is only to aim toward the maturity of the understanding of what art history and its supplementary practices can contribute today towards our knowledge of art. Therefore, the postcolonial constellation is an understanding of a particular historical order that configures the relationship between political, social, and cultural realities, artistic spaces and epistemological histories not in contest but always in continuous redefinitions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Muna el Fituri-Enwezor for her crucial editorial advice and comments; Terry Smith and Salah Hassan for reading this text with care; and David Wilkins, Phillip Johnson, Carlos Basualdo, Henry Louis Gates, and Iwona Blazwick for inviting me to deliver parts of it as lectures during visits in Pittsburgh, Providence, Buenos Aires, Cambridge, and London.

NOTES

1. Fernand Braudel's discussion of the structural transformation of the flow of capital and culture by distinct temporal manifestations, i.e., the paradigmatic and diagnostic attribute of historical events in relation to their duration. Such flow and unfolding Braudel calls "temporalities of long and very long duration, slowly evolving and less slowly evolving situations, rapid and virtually instantaneous deviations [. . .]" (qtd. in my essay "The Black Box" 44).
2. See Glissant. Much like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari with their idea of the rhizome, Glissant employs the prodigious spread of the mangrove forest to describe the processes of multiplications and mutations that for him describe the tremor of creolization as a force of historical changes and ruptures brought about by changes in the imperial order.
3. Admittedly, the advent of mass culture has all but made mute the ability of exhibitions to be truly seminal in a wider cultural sense in the manner in which the salons of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, or the Armory Show of 1917 in New York. Much of what is known and important about Dada was through its many exhibitions and happenings that helped define it as a new artistic movement. Today the mini-scandals of the art world, such as the lawsuit brought against the Contemporary Art Center of Cincinnati upon its exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs or the controversy surrounding Chris Ofili's painting of a Madonna with elephant dung used as one of its breasts in Brooklyn Museum's exhibition *Sensation*, show the degree to which exhibitions of art remain culturally significant in the narratives of art historical writing.
4. The Nobel economist Amartya Sen in *Civilizational Imprisonments*, gives the example of the cross-pollination of ideas between cultures that has continued unabated for two millennia. He distinctly argues the fact that "what is often called 'Western Science' draws on a world heritage. There is a chain of intellectual relations that links Western mathematics and science to a collection of distinctly non-Western practitioners. Even today, when a modern mathematician at, say, Princeton invokes an 'algorithm' to solve a difficult computational problem, she helps to commemorate the contribution of the ninth century Arab mathematician Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the term 'algorithm' is derived. (The term 'algebra' comes from his book, *Al-Jabr wa-al-Muqabilah*.) The decimal system which evolved in India in the early centuries of the first millennium, arrived in Europe at the end of that millennium, transmitted by the Arabs." In the arts, a typical typological casting is the importance assigned to influence and when such a term demonstrably involves relations of power, there occurs a remarkable modification that denotes influence in a singularized incubated form and substitutes it with affinity, as we have seen in the cases involving so-called tribal art and modern art. From scientific to philosophical concepts, translations, economic to cultural exchanges, architecture, art, literature, music, what may appear to many a Western mind as the singular progression of heritage has come through to us via so many paths. Rather than continuity, what above all defines relations of arts and sciences to tradition is contiguity.

5. See Pratt; see also Clifford, *Routes*, where he especially adapts Pratt's term in a specific treatment of discourses of contact in the art and museum communities. According to Clifford, relations between art of different cultures are often shot through with complex intentions when they meet: "These are perspectives that do not see 'culture contact' as one form progressively, sometimes violently, replacing another. They focus on relational ensembles sustained through processes of cultural borrowing, appropriation, and translation—multidirectional processes" ("An Ethnographer in the Field" 63).
6. See *October Number 100: A Special Issue on Obsolescence*, particularly the round table on art criticism. The composition of the speakers of the round table is instructive in the way in which the modes of elision and discrimination that are recurrent in most mainstream institutions and conservative academies pervade even this self-styled progressive intellectual organ. It is, of course, universally known that this journal, despite its revolutionary claims, remains staunchly and ideologically committed to a defense of modernism as it has been historically elaborated within the European context and updated in postwar American art. There is nothing inherently wrong with such commitment, if it were not its elevation of that discourse to the height of universal paradigm for the uneven, diachronic experience of modernity. That there is very little acknowledgment of the radical political strategies and the social and cultural transformations developed since the decolonization project of the postwar period outside the West, which have equally shaped the reception of modernism in the work of artists outside of Europe and North America, is a grave error, which cannot now be ignored after 100 issues of continuous publication.
7. For a thorough account and brilliant analysis of this issue, see Thelma Golden's groundbreaking exhibition catalogue *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art.*
8. The appreciation of the "aesthetic" sophistication of so-called primitive sculptures by modern European artists such as Picasso, Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice Vlaminck has aften been cited as one reason for the serious transformation of such sculptures from being merely fetish objects to their being recuperated as serious examples of artistic quality within museums of art.
9. The same holds true for most museums of contemporary art in Europe and the United States. I have often found it curious how exactly identical contemporary museum collections are irrespective of city. The unconscious repetition of the same artists, objects, and chronology both in museums and private collections should make curators sanguine about the independent role of their judgment in connection with art and artists who may not fit easily in this logocentric logic of seriality.
10. See Habermas for an extensive development of the discourse of modernity, modernization, and the artistic and aesthetic corollary of modernism, particularly from the point of view of surrealism. Habermas, in his thorough treatment, especially in the essay "Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance," pays close attention to Max Weber's contention that the concept of modernity arose out of a peculiarly "Occidental rationalism." According to Habermas, "What Weber depicted was not only the secularization of Western *culture*, but also and especially the development of modern *societies* from the viewpoint of rationalization. The new structures of society were

marked by the differentiation of the two functionally intermeshing systems that had taken shape around the organizational cores of the capitalist enterprise and the bureaucratic state apparatus [. . .]. As that continent of basic concepts bearing Weber's Occidental rationalism sinks down, reason makes known its true identity—it becomes unmasked as the subordinating and at the same time itself subjugated subjectivity, as the will to instrumental mastery."

11. Some of the most active institutions are extensions of the foreign policy of the given countries. British Council (UK), AFAA (France), Danish Contemporary Art (Denmark), IFA (Germany), Mondriaan Foundation (The Netherlands), and Japan Foundation (Japan) are perhaps the most well funded of these national organizations and employ the export of artists and exhibitions as an active tool of cultural diplomacy. These foundations and cultural export institutions often organize curatorial tours in their respective countries, fund artists for overseas projects, support exhibitions in highly visible international cities, and organize and tour exhibitions of art from their national collections to other parts of the world.
12. The Guggenheim Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry; Centre Pompidou, Paris, designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano; Milwaukee Art Museum, by Santiago Calatrava are examples of this conjunction whereby the architecture is understood as much as work of art in its own right to be enjoyed on its merits independent of function as the collections of art contained within it. The objective reality of this effect is that discreet architecture no longer serves the purpose of the museum as a destination of culture. The clearest example of this tendency is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Gehry's phoenix-like sculptural form that rises into view like some mythological creature against the backdrop of the city's postindustrial landscape emphasizes the idea that architecture is as much an object of the spectator's observation as the pieces of art scattered in the cavernous spaces of the museum's interior. No other museum, however, achieves this fusion more thoroughly and with such audacious rhetorical panache than the Jewish Museum by Daniel Liebeskind in Berlin. Liebeskind's architectural narrative is so forceful and complete that any visit through the museum is nothing less than an architectural guided tour, in which the experience of the displays is always mediated by the stronger narrative of the building.
13. My idea of field of relations recapitulates Bourdieu's own assessment of the artistic sphere as one enmeshed in a field of activities in which various agents and position-takers collaborate in an ever expansive set of relations that define, conceive, conceptualize, and reformulate norms and methods within the field of cultural production.
14. See George Bush's speech before the US Congress where he outlined the new US doctrine of preemption and also laid the policy grounds for the stark distinction between states that belong to the moral universe of the civilized (sic) world and those others, especially Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, who exist in the pool of darkness marred by evil intentions against the peaceful, civilized world ("State of the Union Address").
15. This is in reference to Ronald Reagan's congressional address that gave us this classic characterization of the Soviet Union, towards the end of the Cold War.

16. Conservative critics such as Hilton Kramer, Allan Bloom, and others made fodder of any cultural form or concept seen to want to relativize the obvious categorical and empirical truth of the great Western tradition with a cultural insight that deviates from the superiority of the Western canon. Postmodernism, and latterly postcolonial theory, became the easy route to show that the emperor of multiculturalism has no clothes and must be exposed as such with the most strident ideological attacks. Political subjectivity or social awareness of the dimension of multiplicity in any creative work was not only seen as fraudulent but also anti-Western. The culture wars destroyed any vestige of dissent within the intellectual field and exposed the weaknesses of the liberal academy. Part of the terrible legacy of this civilizational discourse is a return to consensual opposition between the left and the right, each pitched in its own historical bivouacs. Today, to speak a measure of truth about art that contradicts the retreat back into the rampant academicism is indeed a dangerous occupational hazard.

WORKS CITED

Basualdo, Carlos. "New Geographies of Culture." Statement written for a flyer accompanying a series of public seminars organized by Basualdo at Jorges Luis Borges National Library, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2002.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechnical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.* New York: Shocken, 1969. 217–51.

Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question." *Location of Culture.* London: Routledge, 1994. 66–84.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature.* Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.

Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting." *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. Ed. Brian Wallis. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: D. R. Godine, 1984. 107–35.

Burger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde.* Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

Bush, George. "State of the Union Address" Jan. 2002. <http:www.whitehouse.gov>

Buskirk, Martha, and Mignon Nixon, eds. *The Duchamp Effect.* Cambridge, MA: October Books, 1998.

Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century, Ethnography, Literature, and Art.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.

———. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Twentieth Century.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.

———. Interview. "An Ethnographer in the Field." *de-, dis-, ex-* . Vol. 4. Ed. Alex Coles. London: Black Dog, 2000. 52–71.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.

Enwezor, Okwui. "The Black Box." *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition, Catalogue.* Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002. 42–55.

Foster, Hal. *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics.* Seattle: Bay P, 1985.

Foucault, Michel. *Dits et écrits.* Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

———. *The History of Sexuality.* Vol. 2: *The Uses of Pleasure.* New York: Pantheon, 1985.

Glissant, Édouard. *Carribean Discourse: Selected Essays.* Ed. A. James Arnold. Ed. and trans. Michael Dash. Charlotteville: U of Virginia P CARAF, 1992.

———. *Poetics of Relation.* Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.

Golden, Thelma. *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art.* New York: Whitney Museums/Abrams, 1994.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance." *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity, 1987. 1–4.

———. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* London: Polity, 1992.

Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order.* New York: Simon Schuster, 1996.

October Number 100: A Special Issue on Obsolescence. Cambridge: MIT P, 2000.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

Rabinow, Paul, ed. *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Vol. 1.* New York: New P, 1997.

Sen, Amartya. "Civilizational Imprisonments: How to Misunderstand Everybody in the World." *The New Republic* 10 June 2002: 28–33.