

Oladélé Bamgboyé's installation *The Unmasking* is quite unlike his prior provocative photographic exhibitions that usually were explorations of body and identity with his own self as the model. *The Unmasking* is, instead, a digital exploration of objects, reproducibility, and a Fred Wilson-esque mining of the museum. However, this apparent shift from issues of cultural identities to original/copy dichotomy may not be a topical or paradigmatic at all. Both tendencies in Ola's work are bound by the photographic medium as he literally reframes earlier photographs in this installation. Furthermore, both photography and digital technology are concerned with issues of reproduction. Ola speaks of digital technology advancing the gains made with the lens-based media in the 1980s: 'digital imaging has finally been able to free photo-media practice from the copy and model bind that has defined and confined its possibilities since the invention of photography, allowing the photo based imaging to finally shed its relationship to the object being photographed'.¹

On a more theoretical level, the two tendencies of Ola's oeuvre are bound by a *structural* similarity revolving around Benjaminian theories of the social potential of reproductive media. According to Hal Foster, these theories have been reincarnated in 'ethnographic' work of the latter 20th century. In Foster's genealogy, artists reworking Benjamin's ideas of solidarity with the proletariat in the 1980s shifted the historical subject 'from a subject defined in terms of *economic relation* (italics his own) to one defined in terms of *cultural identity*'. Thus artists attempted to ally themselves with the racially, ethnically, sexually deprived members of society as a challenge to hegemonic structures. This shift, according to Foster, was structurally similar to the old Marxist paradigm and both models were based on three assumptions: 'the site of political transformation is the site of artistic transformations as well', that 'this site is always *elsewhere*, in the field of the other', and that 'if the invoked artist is *not* perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this transformative alterity'.²

Foster attributes this shift to the increasing global privatization of the 1980s coupled with the rise in cultural studies that introduced anthropological techniques into the humanities. This is the precise decade which Ola locates the advancement of lens-based media. No surprise then, that there is also a recollection of photographic theories, especially that which stressed socio-economic relations. However, since ideas of inter-class political solidarity leading to an eventual social revolution was anything but feasible as capitalism seemed to shift shapes, the new 'ethnographic' turn in art was equally fallacious both in terms of the above assumptions, but also for restoring a historical subject, for assuming a productivist position, and for opposing hegemonic systems from the outside rather than subverting the system in its own field of authority.

Ola, too, sees the ethnographic or anthropological position as problematic, but he not only criticizes the participating artists for eliding Marxist theories or assuming fictitious roles, but he also implicates the cultural institutions in which artists practiced for being anthropological in the very basis of their practice. Thus, when museums were able to subsume the oppositional works of the 'ethnographic' artists it wasn't simply a recurring bad dream of modernism returning long after modernism had long been laid to

¹ Bamgboyé, Oladélé Ajiboyé. *General Artist Statement-March 2000*.

² Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real...*

rest. But perhaps the ethnographic turn in art was problematic not only because it was singular, limiting, and monolithic in its approach to cultural 'others', but problematic because it imitated the very modes of dominant institutions by: first, designating an 'other' and, then relegating those 'others' to a sub-cultural tradition to then be explored but never included. Perhaps then, the ethnographic turn in artistic practice was less of a structural repetition of productivist theories, but a process by default as even before it became an aesthetic category to be appropriated by the museum.

Ola then has a two-pronged objective in his work: 1) to critique the copy/original myth from a non-materialist and non-productivist notion and, 2) critique the anthropological practice of cultural institutions without relying on notions of otherness and alterity even though he has been labeled as a racial and ethnic other in his given cultural context. In a sense, Ola's work deals with both productivist tendencies—the original Benjaminian theories on reproducibility as well as its latter-century structural counterpart.

However the work reverses the prior tactics of artists working with issues of alterity—instead of bringing the 'other' into the museum, he's presenting museum artifacts outside of their prescribed context. But this presentation is not in terms of bringing the original, nor a copy, outside of the museum, but in terms of the proliferation of infinite and manipulatable originals. In that way, Ola allies himself less with artist taking an ethnographic approach to cultural identity and more so with a pop tradition both formally in terms of multiples as a product of technological methods and ideologically in the sense that he wants to take on Benjamin Buchloch's challenge 'for art in the aftermath of the critical movements of the 1960s encouraged a "transposition of Warhol's (now re-stabilised) destabilization of the art object onto the framing conditions of representation."³

Foster also sees pop as the movement that ultimately took art from its hermetic and qualitative dimensions of media specificity to a further development of its social and cultural dimension—a move, according to Leo Steinberg, that was inaugurated by Rauschenberg's combines, but furthered by pop's engagement with cultural issues outside of and beyond institutions. However, Foster poses pop as a form of *realism* in the Lacanian sense. Pop, for Foster isn't merely a symbolic attempt at representing the *real*, but rather a 'traumatic' representation that points toward the *real* at the points of rupture in the screen the separates the *real* from the viewer. Any attempt at representing the *real* would automatically be psychotic as the *real* is exactly that which cannot be represented.

It is this turn to psychoanalytic theory and its subjects that informs Foster's reading of cultural production. The subject in Lacanian theory is one that is formed and necessarily split in the symbolic realm through language. Thus, identity in itself is non-situated and the representation thereof is, by default, critical—or formed as a product of crisis. Ola, while acknowledging this fragmentation, asserts that it need not be a crisis; 'Simplistic definitions of Self and Other are not easily applicable [yet] the idea of home and identity remains for me one of fragmentation, yet without the confusion that often arises out of a purported "crisis of identity".⁴ In fact, Ola believes that though the notion of identity is fluid and in constant flux, it is possible for a subject to assume a positional

³ Bamgboye, *The Aesthetics of Mistaken Identity*, Jornal de Exposicao #32, Cultergest, Lisbon, 1998. pp. 3-7.

⁴ Ibid.

stance at certain necessary points and this view moves away from ideas of identity being the product of trauma. Such ideas are integral to such theories put forth by many postcolonial cultural critics, such as Homi K. Bhabha, who purports that the fragmentation of identity creates 'liminal' spaces in which the colonial 'other' or subject of alterity, is given agency.

Donna Haraway, historian of the sciences, voices similar affirmation, if not delight, in what she calls 'the relentless *historical contingency* of experiencing yourself'.⁵ But, whereas Bhabha's theories, and those of his colleagues whose approach extend from Edward Said's notions of colonial difference, are still dependent on notions of psychoanalytic development and, often, sexual difference, Haraway is offering another perspective based on 'diffraction' as 'another kind of critical consciousness'. Diffraction, studied via optics (a branch of physics), offers what Haraway calls a 'worldly' metaphor for critical studies, or one that uses physical phenomena as a basis for formulating theory rather than using theoretical approaches as the basis of explaining social and political phenomena. Diffraction is, in a sense, a product of the scientific method of observation preceding postulation, but as a metaphor, it tackles both issues of identity and the copy/original bind.

Diffraction, first and foremost, is not the same as reflection and reflexivity. These notions, Haraway argues are deeply connected to 'tropic systems' that privileged vision and the visual. Such systems created the hierarchy between the original and its reflective mirror copy and became, in and of itself, a system of power primarily problematized and critiqued by feminist theories. Diffraction preserves the visual metaphor, yet offers a different manner of 'seeing' an image:

When light passes through slits, the light rays that pass through are broken up. And if you have a screen at one end to register what happens, what you get is a record of the passage of the light rays onto the screen. The "record" shows the history of their passage through the slits. So what you get is not a reflection; it's the record of a passage.⁶

Thus Haraway sees the passage of light as a metaphor for the movement of history, minus 'the metaphysics of identity and metaphysics of representation... It's not about identity as taxonomy, but it's about registering process on the recording screen.'⁷ This 'process' is always one of 'interaction, interference, reinforcement, and difference,' thus offering us a way of approaching identity not as a product of trauma or reflective of any particular historical or psychical event as does psychoanalysis, but as an ongoing interactive process that can be recorded in a non-traumatic manner. Furthering the screen parallel, for Foster, the rend in the screen represents a glimpse at the unattainable and unknowable. For Haraway that very same rend becomes a tool for investigation.

Ola's work is concerned with very notions of agency in terms of identity and representation. And his work, and that of many artists concerned with the same issues,

⁵ Haraway, Donna J. *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*. New York: Routledge, 1998. p. 133. Further into the same topic on the interview Goodeve quotes Haraway's 1985 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' in which Haraway called 'for the *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and the *responsibility* in their construction.' (Ibid) Whereas Goodeve and Haraway are primarily speaking of interdisciplinary theoretical developments, they are equally discussing the formation of identity is both, and neither wholly a product of social construction or biological determinism.

⁶ Haraway, p.103.

⁷ Ibid, pp 103-104.

work through and challenge established theories of identities and representation. At some point, I feel it becomes necessary to both work within theoretical problematics, while simultaneously working around, or even away from, such institutionalized theories in order to find those points where identity can be represented not as a product of events, but as an enabled process of situations.

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