

This article was downloaded by: [University of Pretoria], [Elfriede Dreyer]

On: 10 December 2012, At: 03:29

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Third Text

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctte20>

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

Elfriede Dreyer

Version of record first published: 22 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Elfriede Dreyer (2012): Functionality and Social Modernism in the Work of Untrained South African Artists, *Third Text*, 26:6, 767-779

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2012.732288>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

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

Elfriede Dreyer

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Ibid, pp 12–13

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

4. Ibid, p 11

5. Ibid, p 15

dermism. Such modernist and subsequent postmodern constructs have been theorised within the context of the mainstream 'high' art domain; the term 'neomodernism', for instance, has been generally applied to indicate a re-visitation of Western formalist modernism in art and design, and its application by Sylvester Ogbechie refers to the political implications of a modernist 'sublime' (again) in relation to African modernity discourses on art, which is equally a doppelgänger in orientation.⁶

Considering the statements of Amselle in the context of art production in previously marginalised sectors of South Africa where artists have been mainly untrained, several matters are of interest: African social conditions; perceptions of Africa; the character of African modernism; the relationship between the West and Africa; and especially appropriation, postulated not as an attraction of oppositional entities but as intersubjectivity. Subsequently I contend that a large portion of contemporary art produced in South Africa – especially in the rural areas – is still driven by neopragmatic African notions of the functionality of the art object.

APPROPRIATION AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10. *Ibid*, p 79

11. *Ibid*, p 82