

Debate

Jean-Michel Basquiat, please do not turn in your grave, it's only TENQ

Yinka Shonibare

I am in a club like any other in London, the only difference is that I am gyrating to the music of Youssou N'Dour in this embarrassing domain emphatically described as a discotheque. As an Anglophone, this terminology for a dance space in the '90s seems to me a little bit dated but nevertheless using the word makes me feel very groovy indeed. I am here in Saint Louis, four hours away from Dakar as a participant in an art workshop billed as the first event of 'Africa 95' known as TENQ(articulations) with twenty-four other artists mainly from Senegal and different parts of Africa. In the background I can hear Latin American Salsa blending into Ragga-style Reggae and Alpha Blondie. I might as well be in New York, London, Paris or Nigeria. Modernism seems universal — the same, contextless, but is it though? The *discotheque* experience is *déjà vu*, its familiarity very comforting, but the over-familiarity of the art of my colleagues is despairing to say the least. I am not in search of difference or the exotic here, I merely crave a questioning of the bourgeois colonialists' legacy in painting by my African colleagues. I cannot even begin to embark on this question until the relationship between economic independence for the African artist and patron has been touched on. The critical space is not a financially profitably space.

I must begin by describing the beauty and the charm of my atelier. The workshop took pace at a school in Saint Louis: the Lycée ElHadj Oumar Foutouyou Tall (ex-Lycée Faidherbe) where the present President of Senegal had been educated, a true monument to the legacy of colonialist education in Africa. Like every other colonialist edifice in Saint Louis, the school is in a state of disrepair although its once opulent past can be felt and is evident in its marble floors. The contradiction between my daily journey to the atelier and the number of beggars in the street after my western

opulence is, shall we say just a little uncomfortable because of the way in which my reality in that context is entirely divorced from the life and immediate culture of Saint Louis.

The entire exercise of TENQ-The Workshop is impressive. Artists are flown in from the UK, South Africa, Namibia, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Zimbabwe and Zambia, all here to go forth and create like good homogeneous Africans or, on a more positive note, to make contact and exchange ideas and possibly create opportunities. The exchange of ideas, alas, was non-existent due to a little technical difficulty. Our organisers, bless them, fell in and out of passion too often. This matter, worth only a passing mention, did have a bearing on this historical event — the marriage of modern African Artists, or is it Heroes, being currently groomed for the next season in next year's Art collection: Basquiat please do not turn in your grave, it's only TENQ.

The best metaphor for our foreignness in this setting is the level of gastronomic adaptations our foreign stomachs would allow us in the first instance. From the moment that we were given keys to our ateliers, it became evident that we were there to create. As the days went by our various approaches to the subject, Art, emerged. I cannot overlook the language barrier since we were a mixture of both Anglophone and Francophone artists. The cutting edge of critical discourse amongst us went something like: "Sculpteur?" or "Peintre?" That is, by being there we have already passed the modernist test. WE ARE ARTISTS. The only legitimate question to ask is the formal one. It is this particular issue that must be examined, the very thing I would like to describe as cultural jetlag. Senegalese painters like Amedy Kre Mbaye, El Hadji Sy, Souleymane Keita have an uncanny affiliation to abstract expressionist strategies. The sculptors involved in the workshop were mainly

plinth sculptors; they make Sir Anthony Caro's work look positively avant-garde in the '90s. Dany Thera from Mali is a sort of neo-primitivist sculptor; Agnes Nianhongo from Zimbabwe, produces stone sculptures akin to glorified porcelain figurines; Flinto Chandia from Zambia is a sort of reluctant Henry Moore. I do not wish to go over the well known cliché that modern African art is derivative. What astounds me is the unwillingness of these artists to begin to locate or question the origins of their adopted strategies. What we must realise as we sing the praises of multiculturalism in art is that there is not modernism, there are modernisms, which cannot be divorced from the social and economic context of any given modernism. Perhaps what is universal is what seems like a consensus towards a notion of existentialism, the acknowledgement of individuality, the notion of progress. My own conclusion from this project is that the modernist Esperanto is a myth. We remain very provincial in our interpretation of this grand phenomenon that is modernism.

Contemporary Senegalese art, or more appropriately art made in the geographical area known as Senegal, as it moves from the realms of function to form, is manifested in the creation of over enthusiastic new abstract expressionists. This politically safe category can also perhaps be interpreted within Africa's repressive political regimes as a means of escape from political content, therefore a guaranteed way of keeping some semblance of liberty. The universality which forms the basis of exhibitions like Centre Georges Pompidou's 1989 'Magiciens de la terre' and the New York Museum of Modern Art's 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art' seems to be the same *spirit* in which this farcical exercise has been orchestrated. The only context remains the WE ARE ARTISTS context. It was made known to us at the outset that every artist was expected to donate a piece of work to the sponsors at the end of the workshop.

The irony of all this is that as a participant in this workshop I had made a piece of work which was not easily collectable. The work in question is *Ecole de football* (The School of Football). This work raised a fundamental question about the status of the art object and the economic significance of the non-critical approach to art which seemed common to the participating TENQ African artists. This work was made in response to the signs of modernity I encountered in Senegal. There is a very high level of unemployment in Saint Louis, the sleepy town that was the setting of TENQ. This town is full of young men with high aspirations of becoming famous footballers. Football here is synonymous

with utopia, a possible means of escape. The installation *Ecole de football* was made in a classroom at the Lycée ElHadj Oumar Foutouyou Tall. African fabric bought from the local market was tacked to the three walls corresponding to the blackboard area of the class. The fabric on the left hand wall was the ubiquitous hand-print which has its origins in Holland; on this fabric I painted images of popular Senegalese culture on round football-shaped blocks over the fabric. These blocks featured the very visible Marlboro logo in Senegal, the title of a Youssou N'Dour song known as 'Live TV', visible miscalculations written as $2+2=5$ and various parodies of the expressionist brush mark. The fabric spanning the facing wall, with a more mannered, organic, African fabric pattern, carried an animated image of a bouncing football which bounced off the image into actual footballs on the floor of the classroom. The six footballs stopped at the base of the end wall corresponding to the blackboard. This wall carried a strip of African fabric with a check design of the repeated image of a peacock. Over this background, I painted my own check pseudo-expressionist gesture. The text on the blackboard read 'école de football', while the teacher's table carried a horse whip and an open book. The difficulty which arose with this piece of work was that, as the classroom is an intrinsic part of the piece, I had suggested offering a photograph of it as opposed to a single saleable object. The organisers of TENQ became visibly alarmed by this, a reaction which still leaves me baffled. I eventually settled for donating the piece of work detached from the classroom for their troubles.

I write here as a participating artist in 'Africa 95's first event, TENQ. I must add that my initial participation in this affair was inspired by a genuine belief that the participating artists would be empowered. My own discovery and subsequent conclusion is that 'Africa 95' is currently dominated by one person who seems to have all the power, power that is only in relation to the artists. I hear you say, but what is so new about that? Well I sense, shall we say, historical *déjà vu* in this one. I do not have to embark on the usual 'heart of darkness' cliché: all I can say is *steady, my friends, steady*. I think that it is imperative that the organisers of TENQ should take note of this. At present I have very little confidence in the relationship between the participating artists and the organisers of 'Africa 95' and I wish to say so publicly in the hope that the organisers will take appropriate steps before 1995 to restore confidence in the event.