The Artist as a Cultural Salmon
A View from the Frying Pan

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Our desire for perpetual progress is like being in a vehicle with four forward gears, no reverse gear, and no brakes. One becomes a projectile fired from the cannon of modern history. The inevitability of the journey as one races toward the millennium makes one watch the past in the rear view mirror, with head transfixed and eyes focused on the on-rushing future. One understands the interpretations of Western writers that the 21st century is like a ride on a roller-coaster. Some ride it for the fun, others because they have to and many just sit there in sheer terror, with eyes shut tight. Blind to the on-rushing present, the journey is experienced through its emotional peaks and troughs.

The image of the modernist artist fits well into this scenario of projectiles and man, and it leads one to wonder if the struggle for modernity in the visual art of Africa, by which one means its place within the mainstream, has made it become another passenger on that roller-coaster. Are African artists, particularly those who have sought to practice in the West and outside their cultural homes, looking at their past through rear view mirrors, with their gazes fixed on an unknown future? I have to answer this question with an ambiguous Yo! — a combination of yes and no. One’s life is often tranquil, filled with periods of deep reflection about the cultural histories of Africa. Then there are times when a creative adrenaline surge makes life run away with time. One is not always on a roller-coaster.

My ambiguous answer is however not an avoidance of the question, but a reflection of the conditioning of one’s life as an artist. Like most other African artists in a similar position, my emigration to Europe happened in the period of late modernism. The modernist centres of the art world were attractive, they were visual and intellectual provocations to my generation. Today’s critical readings make clear just how ambivalent modernism was as an art historical movement, particularly in its dealings with otherness and cultural difference. For an African artist to enter this cultural arena without being ambivalent about it, was tantamount to relinquishing his or her identity, and to accepting unquestioningly the evaluations and definitions modernism gave to the culture of Africa.

The scenario in which I would much rather see the contemporary African artist placed is therefore not that of the roller-coaster, but analogous to a more rural
setting; where the thrills and the spills do not come blind, but result from calculated risks, where the millennium signals a station at which African artists get off the roller coaster, and cut their own historical inroads into the jungle of art history.

In the catalogue to The Other Story* exhibition, I stated that I did not feel like a fish out of water when I got to Europe, but just the opposite. I did not qualify that statement by specifying just what kind of a fish I thought I was. Not a common mackerel or an omnivorous shark and certainly not a red herring. I would choose to be none of those. The species of fish I believe I am, is the salmon. It is an intriguing and ambiguous fish, at home in both fresh and salt water. It migrates thousands of miles to regenerate itself; it swims against the current rather than with it; risks leaving the water to climb up rapids and thereby exposes itself to the greedy eyes of the bears on the banks, hungry for rich pickings. And after doing all this, it still has the energy and cunning to spawn something personal and new. Its intention is to return to the wild and salty ocean, knowing that it has left behind something of value, and learnt something new on each journey.

Some may find my image of the artist as a cultural salmon amusing. Yet it is a metaphor close to the truth about the lives of many African artists. We have had to become this kind of adaptable, ambitious and determined all-rounder, surviving by our skills and through a familiarity with the cultural environs we traverse. The salmon’s journey upstream is synonymous with the migration of African artists to the centre; a transgression of cultural borders; an alteration of their physical, geographic and intellectual positions. It is a dangerous journey which will have many casualties. The reasons for travelling are numerous, but one is sited as central by those who looked in on our lives. It reads: African artists, through colonial circumstances, developed a Western/modernist consciousness. This made them realise that they practised their art in a ‘peripheral and un-modern’ location, and made them conclude that the centre held some form of salvation from it. The dominant mainstream was something Africans had to emulate if they wanted to participate in the mainstream.

The reasons from the inside were more open-minded, less paternalistic, and aligned to the thesis of modernity; which was to question the world and the art produced in it. The artists had assessed whether their cultures could provide them with a vehicle which would carry the ideas of their critical enquiry into the international arena, and had concluded that at that time it could not. Their investigation of an African modernism sought a development of their cultures through a generative engagement with the ideas of Western modernism, which would expand their traditions, particularly those traditions which had collapsed under the weight of colonialism.

Tradition was the word used to encapsulate the art of Africa. It had become a portmanteau for wrapping around anything African when other descriptions failed. Even today the contemporary art of Africa is expected to be bound by tradition and not just rooted in it. The emigre artists set out to undo this bond, not to break it, but to limit its constraints. They had come to the conclusion that the centre held not salvation but the most dynamic challenge to their modernist beliefs in a critical alternative, because within it they could create an interface for reciprocal cultural exchange in the visual arts, and display the possibilities of their alternatives. It was a form of exchange that was already a part of their everyday lives. It made Africa’s urban centres different to the rural; made the children so different from their parents; and the authorities of old so weak against the colonial institutions. In short, it was Africans dealing with the legacy left them by years of European colonial domination. The artist believed that the pointers
to cultural progress would emerge from this exchange, and in so doing acknowledge syncretism, diversity and difference as important facets of modernism.

This second reading is the most overlooked interpretation in the discourse on contemporary African art. What the visionary courage of these lonely individual artists had fashioned as a logical, honest and intelligent response to their cultural reality, was interpreted as if they were performing a cultural Harakiri. They were seen to be not only sacrificing themselves, but also putting to the sword the cultures they represented and from which they were emigrating. The essential ambivalence of their position was ruled out. There was no acceptance of their attempts to make a syncretic art that mirrored their lives. The trust that modernism was a truly international movement displayed an honesty and innocence on the part of Africans which bordered on the naive. They were expected to be projectiles, not intelligent and adaptable fish. They had to fit into a suit cut and styled for them by others and swim with the tide not against it. In such a situation they were constantly being asked to take on the expected and special exotic role the modernist mainstream tried to force upon them. Their attempts to develop new, syncretic forms in their art constantly collided with the modernist expectation that their work had to have a single, ‘African’ root. The dominant notion that all cultural growth was tap-rooted, excluded the possibility of rhizomatic growth;* of cultures having multiple origins instead of just one. The history of Western modernism located its tap root in Athenian classics — a belief Martin Bernal has questioned successfully in Black Athena. It therefore wanted to see Africans do likewise and locate their cultural histories in single-rooted growth systems, such as the terracotta sculpture of Nok, the wood sculpture of the Senoufo or the bronzes of Benin. The manner in which colonialism claimed it once ‘discovered’ African art was the way modernism expected Africans to remain: unchanged and unchanging, trapped in the past, locked into static, even dead, traditions. A change to canons of African art was not expected and certainly not desired. Change was a privilege of the European mainstream. It was the dynamic element in its cultural growth, yet in the domain of the extra-European it was considered detrimental. In short, the denial of change to African art was the denial of its modernity.

Perspectives on a contemporary and modern African art taken from Africa were occasionally not dissimilar. From there these syncretic manifestations were considered too detached to be spiritually related. Made in what was a remote outpost — even though it was usually a European city — the work seemed suspended between the poles of tradition and modernity. It had become a free floating agent, in a no-man’s land. Yet its apparent rootlessness did not deter its (arrogant) makers from claiming status everywhere. In Africa it was expected that traditional roots were respected and that, to some, meant they were not be tampered with. There were ways certain things were done and indulging in

* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Rhizome — Fragments, catalogue to exhibition, Haag Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland, 1991. The authors have taken the principle of biological (plant) growth and applied it to philosophy. (A rhizome is a rootstock, like a ginger root, that grows in a multiple pattern.) They set out six principles which outline the characteristics of a rhizome. The key difference between centred or tap root logic, and rhizomatic or adventitious logic, is that the first works within fixed rules of growth, arising from a traditional core of knowledge, while the second is a form of map-making, a process of creative and novel description of knowledge as it arises. Applying this to cultural development, there are tap-rooted cultures and rhizomatic cultures. The first uses knowledge from a fixed or centred source, the second develops cultural knowledge through experimentation.
'foreign' alternatives was considered a form of capitulation to the dominance of Europe.

The artists were caught between two polarised positions; they were either infringing on mainstream territory, or ignoring their origins. What was overlooked yet again was the artists' ability to straddle two worlds, to swim in salt and fresh water, to hold a free and ambiguous position that prevented them being trapped in either. It was a position many modernist painters were quite happy to be in. Liberated from the dogma of politics and culture, they could traverse indeterminate spaces between fixed principles, to discover new domains in which their work could grow.

These forms of opposition to the work of African artists have made the discourse about their relevance to the progress of art focus more on artforms from the past; on the classical, the imitative, and on the phenomena of tourist art. The construction of that discourse was led by anthropologists, ethnographers and historians of general African history — Ulli Beier, Frank Willet, Henry Drewal, Frank McEwan are examples that spring to mind — all of whom had little if no experience with the discourses of modernism as conducted in the fine art of the West and Europe. African artists in the Western metropolis struggled to define their position in the mainstream. They were being called lung fish when they wanted to be salmon. They were not lying dormant in the mud, hibernating from an intellectual drought, as lung fish do, waiting to be dug up by scientists. They were part of a developing and modern world, feeling the pulse of its movement.

Postmodernism's embrace of difference, one is told, allows for a greater acceptance of the African artists negotiating their position in the mainstream. The bears on the bank have withdrawn, and it is safe for the salmon who keep coming back. All the world has become a safe spawning ground. The salmon can re-create itself anywhere. Yet I have my fishy doubts about the possibility of these expectations being made manifest. Theorists speak of a new postmodern space as if it exists, as if there is a harbour in which we could all draw up beside one another and weigh anchor, despite our differences; believing that there is now a discourse which alters radically that which modernism had constructed. The old fish are sceptical, their trust had been beaten thin, and they take only what they see. What is visible in the clear waters of postmodernism, is that it continues to avoid making the ambiguity in African art a part of discourse.

We cannot rush into a definition of contemporaneity which simply includes every African artist who is alive. It is not how the word 'contemporaneity' is used in discourses about the art of the Western/European mainstream. Such a strict sociological definition cannot be applied to the reading of our art because it would exclude a debate about the dynamism of politics, history and culture, and assume that African art avoids the shifts and ruptures such dynamism creates, thereby denying the fact that some artists are more successful in their interpretation of the essence of this dynamism than others. I stress dynamism, and not tradition.

The absence of these issues from current debates displays the shallowness of postmodernist discourse. Its surface, look and style outweigh its substance and it is indifferent to reciprocity. However, fishes may be deluded by surface but depth is something they can measure.

We've got a big one here, Jack!