Bourdieu out of Europe?

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To be unaware that a dominant culture owes its main features and social function — especially that of symbolically legitimizing a form of domination — to the fact that it is not perceived as such, in short, to ignore the fact of legitimacy, is either to condemn oneself to a class-based ethnocentrism which leads the defenders of restricted culture to ignore the material foundations of the symbolic domination of one culture by another, or implicitly to commit oneself to a populism which betrays a shameful recognition of the legitimacy of the dominant culture in an effort to rehabilitate middle-brow culture.¹

The critical analysis of the amnesia inherent in Eurocentrism and the positional superiority manifested in western cultural dominance has been carried on for two decades by, among others, distinguished scholars and authors like Edward Said and Toni Morrison and by scholarly periodicals like Third Text. Whilst the self-absorption of the western cultural establishment remains astoundingly unconcerned, a shameful recognition of the existence of cultures ‘in the periphery’ nevertheless finds expression in prompting exotic middle-brow art like rehabilitated sign paintings and ethnic market products. In contemplating this scenario, I should like to read the observation quoted above from the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as an apposite description of the current international situation.

When Bourdieu states that the definition of what is legitimate culture occurs through exclusion as much as through selection, and when he calls the establishment of a canon in the guise of a universally valued patrimony an act of ‘symbolic violence’, the whole scene of excluded Third World and minority artists comes to my mind. These are wilful misreadings but close to the spirit of Bourdieu’s thought. The cultural domination he refers to is in fact the domination within western society of one class by another. In order to make its mechanisms evident, he nevertheless talks in terms which can lead our thoughts to colonial oppression. He thus confirms the existing parallelism between class domination and inter-national cultural domination.

Central to Bourdieu’s thought, as expressed for instance in the collection The Field of Cultural Production, is the notion of the field of autonomous cultural production. According to the historical analysis he makes, it was ‘invented’ in

the 19th century with, as key figures, authors and artists such as Flaubert and Manet. It managed to create its own laws and rules of the game by the simple fact that authors and writers were producing more or less for each other: "producers for producers". It developed what he calls a "restricted production" as opposed to the large-scale production submitted to the demands of the market. In its extension, it constitutes the world of what we commonly call (western) modern art and literature. As a painter, I will apply his analysis mainly to visual art, although he departs from a study of the literary field and in particular the writings of Flaubert.2

By the construction of fields — as structured spaces and specific worlds-of-their-own, like those of science, education, religious institutions — Bourdieu marks off domains in order to study them and to observe conflicts and interactions within them. The cultural field with its two opposed poles, the autonomous and the middle-brow production, constitutes an integral part of a wider social field. It belongs to its dominant part, to the field of economic and political power. There, it has a subordinate place, mainly due to its lack of economic capital. Nevertheless, it plays an import role thanks to its symbolic capital.

Basically, to Bourdieu, this role is to legitimate the mastery of the dominant class. Without admitting its domination, this class can both legitimize and articulate its domination through the field of restricted cultural production. Bourdieu here talks about "homologies", correspondences rather than casual relations. This is the main aspect he elaborates, which means that he treats modern art and literature in a structural class perspective, as ultimately existing through the conditions of those who dominate.

In a careful reading of Bourdieu, one finds a dialectic counter-perspective. The historical analysis, integral to his method, shows how the field of autonomous cultural production initially was established as a defensive measure, as an answer to a growing bourgeois oppression of culture, to its heavy interference in cultural affairs in the fully developed capitalist French society.3 It was invented as a third alternative. The other two, from which it distanced itself, were, on the one hand, the subservient bourgeois production (the Salon, the Opera) and, on the other, a social art and literature in revolt, appearing around 1848 with figures like Courbet. The field of autonomous production, he writes, was constructed "by a series of breaks, partly cumulative, but sometimes followed by regressions".

The dialectical dimension clearly appears when, concerning this field, he writes that it constitutes "a tradition of freedom and criticism... in the form of a field of competition, equipped with its own institutions".4 In 1989, apparently alarmed by a current regression in autonomous thinking, he delivered an appeal to Europe’s intellectuals.5 He discussed the threat to the autonomy of art and to freedom of speech further in a book of dialogues written together with the artist Hans Haacke, published in Paris in 1994.6 Autonomous culture functioning as a legitimization of class domination and at the same time as a space of freedom to defend!

Contradictions and opposing forces are the generative impetus in the reality he analyses, as in the structure of his thinking, which appears at the same time as holistic and dialectic. This is what makes Bourdieu so stimulating to read for me as an artist. This is more or less how the process of thought functions when a painting is taking shape out of contrasts and collisions between colours and forms.

When I first became absorbed in Bourdieu’s theories of the artistic field, I was hoping to find a method, free from the disadvantages of conventional western art historiography, to narrate the genesis and the situation of modern art in African
countries. However, it quickly proved difficult to apply his method outside Europe. It is bound to, and thus part of, the exuberant wealth of information characteristic of the western society that he describes, to the abundant access to documentation, which in the case of art means exhibitions, catalogues, art magazines, critical reviews, etc. His way of analysing proceeds by continuously returning to detailed examinations of the material basis, by statistical research and sociological and historical case studies. This kind of dense factual foundation is missing, and will most probably remain indefinitely insufficient, in the Third World.

I will not completely give up my tentative explorations. But first and last, Bourdieu’s method enables us to carry out a more precise scrutiny of how the western art world sustains its domination and of the nature of its mechanisms of exclusion. As he dissects the nucleus of what was to become universally the production of modern visual art, related to our time, he offers a setting against which contemporary art structures in the so-called periphery have to be studied.

He deals above all with the autonomous artistic field as established in France and developed in the West. It consists of positions, position-takings and agents. When an individual artist or a group of artists enter the field and manage to position themselves as producers of what is recognised as different and new, this positioning changes the whole field. What was until then recognised as the most advanced avant-garde is pushed back to become passé or classic, and all other positions in the field, which their holders defend with all possible means and arguments, are displaced and changed accordingly.

This struggle constitutes the vital existence of the field as well as its history. The history of the field, as a chain of positionings, is included in every new position-taking more or less in the same way, writes Bourdieu, as the six dialled numbers are included in the seventh when you dial a telephone number. The consciousness of this history is also invested in the reception, that is, in the appropriation and consecration by the habitués and the public of what is accepted as new in the field. Thus, at each moment, the field — by the ‘logic of its history’ — decides which are the possible positions to take.

When one contemplates this play of chess within a group of chosen ones, one suddenly perceives the enormous difficulty, if not impossibility, for outsiders from ‘other art histories’ to enter such a closed game. The idea of progress has permeated the concept of modernity and temporalised otherness, making notions like ‘behind the times’, ‘outdated’ and ‘not-yet-properly developed’ into disparaging arguments of a commonly-held superiority complex handed down from colonial times.

The specific temporalisation of the artistic field, functioning as the metaphor of progressive modernity, turns allegedly ‘allochronic’? modern art producers from alternative cultures into something even more despisable in the eyes of the western players. They are not only accused of being behind or of imitating the West but looked upon as naive and unable to play the game according to the rules; they are thus, from the very beginning, dismissed from the field. Only some miraculous exceptions have happened to fit into existing western positions and been consecrated by connected agents, as for instance Wifredo Lam and Frida Kahlo. In both cases their work was appropriated into Surrealism.

When Bourdieu uses the term agent, he makes the point that it cannot be reduced to the immediate producer, the artist perceived as the first and last creator of art as value. On the contrary, the meaning and the value of the work as art is produced by the field. A whole set of agents contribute and interact in creating it, from the art dealer who as a ‘symbolic banker’ invests his reputation in the

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6 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford, England and Cambridge, Mass., 1993, pp 38-39. "The otherness... was temporalized in a way characteristic of the idea of progress: time stood for hierarchy... Johannes Fabian dubbed this widespread habit ‘chronopolitics’; projecting the contemporary differentiation upon the time arrow, so that cultural alternatives may be depicted as ‘allochronic’ — belonging to a different time and surviving into the present on false pretences, while being merely relics, doomed to extinction."

consecration and defence of an artist, the art critic who, in writing about a work, also claims her/his right to judge it, thus participating in the struggle for the monopoly of legitimation which occurs all over the field, and all the way via gallery directors, curators, collectors, academies and museums, out into the initiated art public.

Here is the symbolic value, the "cultural capital". With the invention of the autonomous field an "economy turned upside down" was introduced. The producers in the restricted field of 'art for art's sake', who distinguished themselves by their disinterestedness and devotion to art from those in the opposite field of large scale production, who were primarily submitted to a market, accepted that the symbolic capital they produced (primarily the prestige they gained in the eyes of colleagues) did not give any immediate pecuniary dividend, so that even the notion of "losers' win" gained currency, quick economic success being looked upon as a sign of lacking seriousness. This reversed economic thinking counts for much of the opaque and crooked way in which the restricted field has followed its unwritten laws "with customs as organized and mysterious as those of a primitive tribe". 8

To what degree the disinterestedness of, for instance, Flaubert was an adopted attitude is difficult to say. But when we look at the more recent developments within the western art world, especially during the boom in the Eighties when the market accelerated, one starts to ask oneself if the analysis of Bourdieu, which is mainly related to the historical genesis of the field of autonomous cultural production, can be applied to the actual situation without far reaching reservations. To simplify, we can say that the restricted production during the "heroic" period meant a symbolic investment with postponed dividend, where the interest in building up a symbolic capital dominated. But a good century after Flaubert, this orthodox disinterestedness was deconstructed by artists like Andy Warhol. And at the same time, an overheated art market reduced to nearly nothing the space between the position taking — now often calculated as part of market strategy — and the economic reward. The economic "upside-down" ended up as a somersault.

Historically, the reversed economical thinking and the field of autonomous production of which it is an inseparable part have nevertheless produced a set of specific functional prerequisites. The subjection to art’s requirements and laws, the insistence on solving artistic problems, the persistence of research irrespective of prompt results or response are part of this spirit as well as the ruthless launching of one’s own ideas and the stubborn defence of a taken position. This aggressiveness, together with the spirit of self-sacrifice and the power to resist the temptations of the market, constitute the strength of what Bourdieu refers to as a "coin de folie", a corner of madness within the field of power. "The only empire is that of truth and reason", he quotes the French 17th century philosopher, Pierre Bayle; nevertheless "war is naively waged against just about anybody. Friends must protect themselves from their friends, fathers from children... In it everyone is both ruler and subject of everyone else." 9

This pattern is generally both ignored and taken for granted in studies of the development of modern art in the West. But when we study a history of contemporary art outside this cultural field, it should be fished up to the surface as a reminder. It is a parameter which is not applicable, at least not to the same degree, when one observes the histories of modern art elsewhere. It is, for instance, easy to see that where a field of autonomous artistic production has not crystallised, those prerequisites cannot be identical. One has simply to look to other structures for other parameters.

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8 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, op cit, p 164.

9 Ibid, p 163.
The struggle of the artistic field as Bourdieu describes it is about the power to consecrate. Art does not exist unless it is received and recognised as such. Until then it is just “a mundane thing or a simple utensil”. The striving for legitimation and consecration produces as a result and a consummation the belief, upon which the whole magical seance of the art business is based. The artistic field is a “universe of a belief”. It was shown in the 1960s how unshakeable this general acceptance is when once established. It is an example that Bourdieu gives with a smile. Attempts were made to break the circle of belief through profanations and mockery, like exposing ‘the artist’s shit’. But the only result was that the art world, the field, converted these ‘sacrileges’ into yet some other artistic acts, thus consecrating them. The belief was sustained.10

It is when we come to the other central notion in Bourdieu’s theory, the notion of habitus, that we are reminded of the dimensions of cultural differences between north and south (differences in a totally other way than what, for example, anthropologists used to call cultural otherness). The cultured habitus is a system of dispositions which enables the agents — the artists as well as the other agents — to enter the field and to act there without even having to elaborate conscious strategies or cynical calculations. The rules of the games are internalised, partly unconscious. It is the habitus that makes the initiated consumers capable of knowing and recognising the work of art as such. It is, writes Bourdieu, the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or a second nature.

He exemplifies this by what he calls the “pure gaze”. This was an invention which broke the ties between art and morality and enabled the beholder to look upon art as an aesthetic reality in itself. But it couldn’t have been invented without the establishment of institutions like museums and galleries whose function it was to get people in the habit of contemplating works of art. In the same way, the habitué can only become a habitué through successive exposures to art, or rather, to successive experiences of appropriating works of art. Because art is individual and cannot be consumed according to manuals.

But, he also underlines, “it is impossible to understand the peculiar characteristics of restricted culture without appreciating its profound dependence on the educational system”. And he refers not only to teaching in the schools, the universities, the art schools but also to the dispositions and cultural needs and training given in the family, without which the individual will be handicapped in further education. Already at this stage functions the brutally efficient class divide.

It is via the habitus, the set of collectively existing inclinations internalised in individuals, that Bourdieu gets his “objectivity of the subjective” to work, that he avoids the dichotomy between internalist and externalist readings of cultural products by introducing into structural hermeneutics the structuring subject without which it has been playing. It means that when one deals with cultures, one perceives producers of art as acting and thinking subjects, not just as ‘bearers’ of some cultural structure. Bourdieu thus places art and artists in a social, relational reality without having recourse to the kind of generalisations which tend to exclude individual experience and human consciousness. To me, at the same time, the striking thing is how rooted the whole social/cultural structure that he describes is in the history of European and western societies and how the complicity it constitutes tends totally to exclude other practices with an equal claim to be recognised as modern art.

Let me try to look at Bourdieu from inside sub-Saharan Africa. I would like to dwell tentatively upon three different situations/sets of works from its history
of modern art, chosen from the first and from the second pioneer generation in western Africa and finally from the pioneering phase in eastern Africa, represented by the sphere of the Makerere University College Art School.

The portraits painted by the Nigerian painter Aina Onabolu (1882-1963), documented as early as 1903 (and for easel-paintings in oil on canvas as early as 1906), are mainly referred to as the first examples of a new art practice ‘adapted’ from Europe. They have often been characterised by western scholars as alien in the African context and as (from a European point of view) old fashioned and academic. But if we look closer, we will find that they were not a colonial implant but an appropriation made in revolt against the imperial masters, who simply thought Africans not capable of easel-painting.11

We will also find that many of the figures in the portraits represented prominent black Nigerian personalities and advocates of African nationalism. They were, like Onabolu himself, part of a modernising Africa which, in the making for centuries, now entered a decisive phase and needed its own symbolic affirmation. They wanted to position themselves within the current of modernising African nationalism.

While there can be no discussion about the Europeanness of the carriers in this pollination process, what was growing out of it was nothing less than a modern African art. Beyond the ‘dated’ stylistic features of the portraits, they represented a daring, revolutionary step. The artistic production of visual objects in Africa had been determined by religious notions and ritual functions and the visual language of classical African art is marked by this fact, as noted for instance by Carl Einstein in 1915. What we generally call ‘traditional’ art continued for decades to have a dominant place in the society, adapting to new forms of patronage (the church, collectors) without changing its structure. The new chapter that Onabolu introduced meant cutting clean from this pre-modern past, establishing a completely new notion of art which is related to the individual and aesthetic contemplation. He consciously built the basis for it by exhibiting and publishing essays about it and introducing it through art education in the schools of Lagos, thus creating an embryo of what Bourdieu calls a habitus.

It so happened that this new start coincided with a pollination in the opposite direction with Picasso and the Cubists being instructed by classical African art and laying the formal basis for 20th century modernism. It is an open question which of the two paradigm shifts was the most radical. There are striking parallels. The relation between the producer of art works and the spheres of power, which according to Bourdieu is rather intricate, becomes often more undisguised when it comes to portraiture. If the Nigerians who commissioned their portraits by Onabolu wanted to pose as modernisers, it was no less a desire to be symbolically connected to modernity than that which, at the same time, made Gertrude Stein commission Picasso to paint her portrait. She wanted to pose as a patroness of modernism.

Onabolu was a self-trained artist. He is said to have picked up portraiture from books and foreign newspapers. Later, in 1920-22, he studied in art schools and academies in London and Paris, widening his repertoire to include landscapes and nudes. I have seen a few reproductions of the latter. And I have noticed in them a slight but extremely interesting deviation from the European scheme of academic study of a model: his nudes have an individual expression and communicate intellectually with the viewer.

The difference illustrates, in my opinion, to what degree the drawing and painting from a model as part of western academic training constitute an exercise in the pure gaze which, according to Bourdieu, was invented as a breaking of

the ties between art and morality, requiring an attitude of impassivity and indifference. To a certain degree, it can be compared with the exercise the beholder is exposed to when accustomed to visiting museums, that is, the training in disregarding other ways of looking at objects exposed than that of the contemplation of consecrated art. The model is conceived as a diagram of forms and shades. A painter from Romania has confessed the shock he experienced as an unsophisticated young man when he first entered a drawing class at an academy and saw a naked woman in the midst of apparently unaffected young men.12 A nude, as an abstraction in the perception coded by academic training, could hardly be thought of as undressed, no more than a circle or a triangle could be imagined stripped. But in an African context, where this code of pure gaze has not been inculcated for generations and where, besides that, being naked or clothed was never conceived as an inflammatory contradiction, the code seems to have had little bearing. At least this seems to be valid for Aina Onabolu who, even when he appropriates the western scheme ‘nude’, keeps his freedom to paint the naked African woman as a human and thinking being, a subject rather than an object.

Kojo Fosu, the art historian from Ghana, writes about what he calls the second generation of pioneers: ‘Immediately following political independence, almost all the (pioneer) artists received large numbers of important commissions to create national monuments for their countries […] As part of the continuous policy of their government to unite the various ethnic groups into single national entities and encouraging a total sense of national allegiance, these artists were mandated literally to create new national consciousness and identities.’13

It is a clarifying perspective. This policy was intimately related to the immediate postcolonial African situation, to the very legitimate urge to replace old symbols of a foreign oppression — from colonial monuments to stamps and coins — with expressions of a new African self-esteem. ‘The new artists functioning as state artists became the new visual communicators of the new image.’14

Kojo Fosu also tries to see the involvement of the new national governments as ‘deeply rooted’ in how traditional royal courts took artists into their service. I guess it is an attempt at ‘Africanising’ history. But the only thing he shows is how easily those kinds of ambitions obfuscate the understanding of a specific situation and its implications. It tells us nothing about the significance of the convergence of political, cultural and artistic stirrings in newly independent Africa. It is as if one would place on an equal footing David’s The Oath of the Horatii, with its patriotism, virtue and civic spirit, and Rigaud’s portrait of Louis XVI, with its sense of autocracy and arrogance, just because the paintings happened to be state commissions.

The art situation Kojo Fosu describes is probably better understood in terms of a progressive element in bourgeois society in mutual understanding with the then modern artists. Which means, in terms of European history, that we look at the stage before the invention of an autonomous art in reaction against growing bourgeois oppression, or, more specifically, the period of Jacques Louis David and early history painting.

More or less in the same way as the French pre- and post-revolutionary artists ideologically/stylistically resorted to Greek and Roman classical antiquity, these African pioneers resorted to traditional art as a revived classical African language. Thus, they simultaneously drew identity from and rehabilitated an African patrimony formerly despised by their oppressors. They combined these elements with others loaded with international modernism, realistic as well as abstract, positioning themselves at the same time in an African tradition and at the edge of a new, modern epoch.
The references to traditional art had a double aim. They were also used, as Kojo Fosu shows, in strategies to promote national integration through crossing borders between ethnic groups. The Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu, for instance, made reference in his work to traditional art of the Yoruba, Haussa, Fulani as well as of his own people, the Igbo.

In this way, the discussion about modernism versus traditionalism, which was the first and which has been and still is the most committed and difficult debate in the African art world, was dissolved before it was solved. Two Ghanaian artists belonging to this pioneer chapter, Oku Ampofo and Kofi Antubam, had, for instance, originally adopted totally opposed attitudes.

To try to apply Bourdieu’s grid to a chapter of 20th century African art takes me far from its chronological order and its strict logic. What it illustrates is, rather, how complex and mixed up things are outside the western field when seen from its perspective. If Bourdieu makes the shift of nomos by the invention of the autonomous field perfectly clear, from the central authority of all consecration, represented by the Academy, to an anomy where consecration was produced by the field and by the struggle between position-taking within it, some basic facts are implicitly understood.

One is that diversity is an aspect and a product of that struggle. And another is that each position-taking must be pointed and precise in order to be able to penetrate the field.15 When Kojo Fosu praises the stylistic differences internal to the artistic practice of, for instance, Ben Enwonwu, and does not even try to problematise them, he only illustrates how a lack of certain criteria tends to place an artist’s work adjacent to a notion of serious commitment in its reception from outside (and not only from the West). “As an artist who ‘could switch from one style to another’”, he writes, “he always remembered that cultural diversity in his country also calls for diversity in its creative representation.”16 To be read as a critical comment, I must admit it makes no sense to me.

There is a long perspective implicit in Bourdieu’s historically based model, even if it builds mainly on observations of the last 150 years in France, Europe, the West. A long course when it comes to the growth of the habitus. And also when it comes to the technical, economic and artistic development of the production of art, extending at least from the Renaissance.

In Africa, we meet this long perspective compressed almost to a simultaneity. Let me take as an example Elimu Njau’s painting Nativity, which Marshall W. Mount reproduced in his African Art, the Years since 1920 as representing a generation of pioneering art in eastern Africa from the Makerere University College Art School in Kampala, Uganda.17

The school was founded by Margaret Trowell in 1937. Important pioneer artists like Gregory Maloba and Sam Ntiro both studied and taught there. The teaching method was clearly instructed by European academic training, including modelling figures and forms with light and shade and constructing space by perspective. It was characterised by a clear and broadminded awareness of what are the prerequisites of being an artist. From the late Fifties, the curriculum also included studies in international modernism.

In its early phase, the school received commissions for its students and graduates to produce murals in Christian churches in eastern Africa. Elimu Njau’s mural series in the Church of the Martyrs in Fort Hall, Kenya, from 1956, is part of those commissions.18 If put into a European chronology, his Nativity, with its wide space of mountainous landscape, firmly constructed, and with the Biblical scene placed in a contemporary setting (here African), could have been thought to belong to the antimodernist ‘back to the quattrocento’ backlash of the 1920s.

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15 Most modern western artists, except Picasso and a few others, have stuck to and developed the style with which they positioned themselves. Changing style after the position-taking has even caused bitter controversies with connected agents, as in the case of Nicholas de Stael.

16 Fosu, op cit, p 29.


18 Fosu, op cit, p 80.
But in a part of Africa where traditional art had prevailed up to his generation, it can be seen as revolutionary. At least in the sense that it represented a drastic break with the principles of religious images in Africa. (I here consciously disregard its obvious place in the cultural transformation carried on by European missionaries.)

A traditional African work of art, produced for practical ritual use and building on the belief in magic, functions through the symbolic presence of the god or of divine forces, which are contained and represented in the forms. If it (exceptionally) is the question of a two-dimensional work, the forms are juxtaposed on the surface, where their visual power is at its strongest.

The construction of an illusionistic three-dimensional space, on the other hand, abolishes the magical sense of presence and replaces it with an illusion of looking into a scene or a vision. If intended for religious contemplation, this visuality can be endowed with a biblical narrative, as here. It might even produce an effect experienced as a 'miracle', simply by breaking the logic of the illusion by, for instance, seemingly annulling the law of gravity. Still, the miracle takes place 'over there' and does not function as a presence in the object of art itself. In short, magic and perspective are incompatible.

In the long run, European artistic representation, the Renaissance heritage and especially geometric perspective, have been dismantled. The principle of juxtaposition has been restored. But this time it has been for purely aesthetic
reasons, for the expressivity of forms and colours, which has nothing to do with magic. In spite of all the theorising about ‘spiritual art’, no one uses modern objects of art for practical magic purposes. In working on establishing the new principle of juxtaposition — a crucial moment of it was synthetic Cubism — European modernists found instruction in traditional magic art, not the least in classical African art. Thus two separate worlds of basically different notions of art, of functionally totally different practices, met in an act of western appropriation which, seen within Bourdieu’s field, was part of a crucial position-taking.

While the last phase (from Manet to Picasso) of this six centuries’ process in Europe took some forty years, the whole process, the successive steps from magical juxtaposition to perspectival space and then to aesthetic juxtaposition, was higgledy-piggledy present simultaneously in the African scene. This overlapping of historical stages has predictably produced misunderstandings and confusion of notions and categories in the reading of the African transition to modern art and of its further development, in African discourses as well as in the western approach. Things have not been made clearer by the continued reference to pre-modern African art within certain western modernist positionings summed up as ‘primitivism’, as it has contained deliberate confusions of ideas around notions like ‘magic’ and ‘ritual’, here used in a rather metaphoric sense and in what I would prefer to call ‘aesthetic masquerades’.

The conclusion to be drawn is that, when it comes to the theoretical work to be done and the critical discourses needed, the challenge is tremendous, in the West as well as in Africa, where the lack of such critical work often has been pointed out as a crucial problem by its scholars and artists. This work cannot be carried out as an internal African affair, disregarding the European genesis of modern art, neither can it proceed by taking over ready-made discourses from the West which often are field-specific there. It has to build on independent analysis and on an understanding both of the African and the western social structures and their interplay and find instruction in comparative studies of other cultures and parallel confrontations between art histories. In this work, it is necessary that African inferiority complexes as well as compensatory wishful thinking be swept away once and for all.

In the western art field, the tendencies we observe today, its closed circuits and the extension of its power structure — an internationalisation which seems to counteract rather than facilitate an opening up to a new inter-cultural internationalism — does not inspire great optimism. Domination and exclusion seem to prevail. But, as writes the American feminist scholar Toril Moi in her paper ‘Conquering Bourdieu’,

20 times of crisis force a redefinition of experiences resulting in new forms of language. Groups in revolt who were once kept out gain power from their capacity to objectify previously unspoken experiences, to make them commonly known — a step on the way to seeing them legitimated. That is the confidence she draws from Bourdieu.

It is a challenge today to Third World intellectuals and not least to the growing multitudes of diasporan intellectuals and artists in western metropolises. The path to change goes, Moi writes, for Bourdieu as for Freud, through analysis and verbalisation of the unspoken rules which guide our behaviours. These rules are not just tacit. According to Bourdieu, their staying in force and an ongoing, functioning cultural domination presuppose a collective unawareness and renunciation. Thus his theoretical intervention, which aims to make the foundations of western bourgeois aesthetics visible, will contribute to its transformation and hopefully to a wider change. It is up to us to follow it up.
