

Negotiating Africanness: A Response to Sylvester Ogbechie

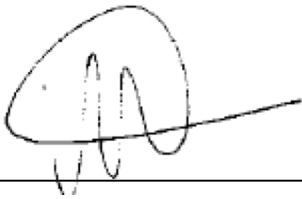
For the completion of an MA in the History of Art

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Declaration

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'S' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Art History, by course work, in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Stacey Vorster

On the day of 27 May 2011

Introduction

Fundamental to much research, across fields, are questions of identity, if not in content then in approach. Our understandings of the world and our positions within it seem to be inescapably linked to our own perspective, our understanding of ourselves, and of our place within that world. Africanness, as a discursive category of identity, which has a particularly contested history, seems to be especially negotiated, transacted, manipulated, and even protected in our day-to-day interactions as well as in our research initiatives. In an article entitled 'The Curator as Culture Broker' (2010), published in contemporary South African art journal *Art South Africa*, the author, Sylvester Ogbechie, seems to participate in exactly this kind of negotiation in the arguments he presents.¹ On the surface, these arguments are about curatorial practice in contemporary African art, and I propose that they consistently draw on Ogbechie's own understandings of Africanness as a key marker of his own identity and, more importantly, the ways in which this identity is contested through curatorial practices in contemporary African exhibitions. In the article, he draws a number of conclusions that, I argue, are indicative of a limited conception of Africanness in general, and because of these limitations, the claims made and approaches to the subject of contemporary African art are compromised. I propose that Ogbechie's approach to Africanness, and by extension contemporary African art, in 'The Curator as Culture Broker', is located in relation to spatio-temporal constructs; spatially in terms of a physical continent and temporally in relation to a construct of African culture as pure, fixed, and unchanging. Through a consideration of Africanness as presented in the paper I consider whether this approach to culture and identity are useful frameworks for the study of exhibitions of contemporary African art and whether they are relevant in a postcolonial society.

Ogbechie, who is a Nigerian-born art historian, academic, and critic living in California, is concerned in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' with the role of the curator in creating as well as legitimising discourses and understandings. His focus in the article is fellow Nigerian-born curator and author, Okwui Enwezor, who has been responsible for, or at the very least involved in, many exhibitions of contemporary African art, including a number of 'blockbuster' exhibitions that have become the seminal instances on which some of the discourse of contemporary African art has arguably come to

¹ The article was originally presented by Ogbechie at a conference in 2010 entitled *The Task of the Curator* held at the University of California Santa Cruz. It is also published online on Ogbechie's blog, *Aachronym: Global African Arts with a Focus on Art-Equity and Cultural Patrimony* at the following url: <http://aachronym.blogspot.com/2010/06/curator-as-culture-broker-critique-of.html>.

be based.² Ogbechie argues that, as an influential curator in the European and North American based (or 'western' to use the art historical paradigm) contemporary art community, Enwezor has particular agency in shaping the discourse of contemporary African art and is promoting a kind of contemporary African art, and by extension Africanness, that Ogbechie finds problematic for its spatial and temporal implications.

In the article Ogbechie raises a number of shortfalls in Enwezor's practice and by extension the construction of the discourse. I focus on the two main components of the larger argument; one in which he primarily problematises time in relation to contemporary African art and one in which he shifts his focus to problematise space. These two frames form the basis of my exploration into the ways in which Africa is exhibited, constructed, and transacted.

Space and time, it seems, are fundamental constructs in our ordering and understanding of the world; we systematically divide our realities up, spatially and temporally, to aide, or perhaps even enable, our understanding of and approach to our existence. This is an act of ordering, of rationalising, and of organising experience into manageable and understandable parts. In this sense, I am using time and space as elemental concepts to consider in relation to identity insofar as they order and determine our place in the world as much as they do the world itself.

The concepts upon which the study of the histories of art is built are similarly affected by organisations of time and space. History, for instance, as a method of organising and classifying events, often relies on linear conceptions of temporal development to make sense (though this is being challenged in contemporary practice). As a concept, history becomes rather complex when one considers the limits and constructions of time as one dimensional and linear. And while many of us are quick to recognise history as particularly positioned or biased, we do not, however, always approach the implied developmental nature and linearity of history with the same level of suspicion. Our understanding of history necessarily affects our understanding of identity insofar as we construct our identities by differentiation to past ways of thinking, making, and working. History, in this sense, is an integral part of the study of identity and, as is clear in Ogbechie's arguments, becomes an important issue in relation to the negotiation of Africanness.

Culture, too, is a concept that is used in relation to the histories of art, which is particularly spatially and temporally enacted and defined and is also closely linked to identity. The extensive system of

² I admit that Ogbechie's argument in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' is largely a (emotive and personal) dialogue between him and Enwezor and this makes it difficult to negotiate the arguments.

taxonomy that has actively categorised cultures and subcultures into manageable portions has made use of time and space as organisational frameworks, perhaps even directly resulting in contested discursive concepts like Africanness. Beyond the organisation of African culture around a spatial location, the subculture of the African diaspora, for example, is a striking instance of identity being defined by a dislocation from that original defining space; making diasporic Africans decidedly un-African, spatially speaking. Through the interrogation of Ogbechie's arguments it becomes clear that the issues he raises are unavoidably linked to the negotiation of concepts like 'history', 'culture', 'Africanness', as well as the 'diaspora' and that these concepts are necessarily dependent on the ways in which time and space are imagined, manufactured, and transacted.

My aim in this paper is to treat terms like 'contemporary African art', 'culture', 'history', 'postcolonial', 'diaspora', 'Africanness' and the like with a certain level of scepticism. Through their construction and often-uninterrogated application, it is these terms over which many claims are argued, and on a secondary level in this paper, my assertion is that taxonomic constructs need to be identified and negotiated in such a way as to highlight their contradictions, complexities, and shortfalls.

Approach

In order to examine and discuss Enwezor's curatorial practice I focus on two specific exhibitions in which he has been involved; *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* held in 1996 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and *Snap Judgments: New Positions in African Photography*, held ten years later, in 2006, at the International Centre of Photography, also in New York. While Enwezor was the sole curator for *Snap Judgments*, he was only part of the curatorial team for *In/sight* along with Claire Bell, Danielle Tilkin, and Octavio Zaya. However, many authors posit *In/sight* as Enwezor's debut appearance in the contemporary art community and he is almost always closely associated with the show in the secondary literature. I draw on these two exhibitions as case studies through which to consider and discuss Ogbechie's claims in relation to the ways in which Enwezor frames African photography and by extension Africanness.

In/sight was advertised online as "the first museum exhibition ever to explore the achievements of photographers from Africa in the years that marked the emergence of independent African states" (Woods, 1996:np). In so doing, the curators of the exhibition aimed to provide a space to show images of Africa by Africans, which was a marked shift from the ways in which Africa has been

historically depicted and constructed by non-Africans. The selection criteria for the exhibition limited participants to those who were born in Africa, immediately locating the working definition of Africanness as a spatially configured concept. However, the spatial location of the artists was complicated temporally insofar as it limited spatial occupation to the moment of the participants' birth; in other words they were considered African as long as they were born in Africa, the curators did not however stipulate any other temporal conditions such as needing to live in Africa for a certain period of time. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter One, the ways in which belonging is configured in terms of birthplace is a common approach to locating identity, but is often problematic in its formation and implications, and because it is often left uninterrogated, thereby breeding assumptions.³ By only allowing artists that were African by birth on the exhibition, the curators of *In/sight* created a space in which Africanness was legitimised, in some sense, for diasporic Africans; those who had been born within the confines of the continent but who had since relocated abroad. The conditions of selection placed no explicit limits on the subject of the photographs. These curatorial choices are fundamental to Ogbechie's concerns in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'.

The exhibition included one hundred and thirty nine artworks by only thirty artists in total. This limited number of artists has been criticised for being non-representative of Africa⁴, which, as one of the largest continents with over fifty independent nations and exponentially more cultural groups, is an extensive subject to represent. Claiming to show artworks by artists from across the continent, the exhibition also focused on a selection of photographs commissioned as part of the South African based magazine entitled *Drum*, which was published in the 1950s and 1960s, thereby slanting the weight of the exhibition to photographs by South Africans and of South Africa. While not explicitly intended as a representative exhibition of African photography, the title of the show seems to imply this intent insofar as it claims "African Photographers, 1940 to the Present", which could imply an attempt to summarise the history of contemporary African photography. In this sense, it is the wording of the title that implies an aim to provide an historical overview; that is to say it is implicated as a show that should be spatially as well as temporally representative.

Additionally, the exhibition was organised in terms of historical coherence; placing artworks in chronological order as the viewer moved through the space. This curatorial strategy reinforced a reading of the exhibition as an attempt to present history as a developmental narrative and invoked

³ While I problematise the ways in which identity is linked to birthplace here and in Chapter One in more detail, I also recognise the practicality of describing people as African or Nigerian-born.

⁴ See Pepper, 1997.

the construction of time as a conceptual framework. However, curator Bell states outright in the introduction to the catalogue:

While this exhibition is focused on the work of African photographers, its subject is not relegated to Africa. Indeed, all the artists in the presentation were born there. Some have spent their entire careers in the countries of their birth; others, whether by exile, relocation, or personal choice, moved away, to locales either within the continent or abroad. If this fact of birth accounts for any similarities, it is also the site at which they scatter. Just as it is wholly impossible to sum up the experience of a single individual, it is absurd to try and formulate the ideological constitution of a continent. Nor is it possible to compress fifty years of photographic creativity into a monolithic survey. Taking cue from writer and philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's words that "Africa is a 'multiple existence,'" we selected photographers who have left their mark in varied genres, approaches, intervals, spaces, and milieus (1996:11).

Through this statement, which openly and overtly denounces the ability of an exhibition to provide a summative overview, it is apparent that the curators of *In/sight* were not attempting to be representative or give an overall picture of Africanness and African experience. Similarly, in their essay 'Colonial Imagery, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers' Zaya and Enwezor note:

In considering the work of the thirty photographers selected, who were all born in Africa but may have lived within or outside the continent, and who are diverse in nationality, ethnicity, race, and religion, we are attempting to explore the critical issues that underpin their practices, identities, and experiences as Africans. In one way or another, Africa as seen through this exhibition is not a monolithic supposition, nor is it merely an idea that can be bent to our wishes and desires (1996:21).

That Zaya and Enwezor set out the limits of what and who they imagine as African in this statement is noteworthy. Clearly, the curatorial team of *In/sight* imagined Africa as something in between being monolithic and totalising and something that is completely arbitrary; while they self-admittedly cannot adopt an approach that motions towards either extreme, they can, however, use the curatorial framework of Africa to explore the limits and enactments of Africanness in their selection.

Located in the Robert Mapplethorpe and the Thannhauser Gallery in the distinguished Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the exhibition became a much-cited early instance of an exhibition of contemporary African art and ran for four months, between May and September of 1996. The

Guggenheim, which shows primarily modern and contemporary art, is located in the upper east side of Manhattan and holds substantial symbolic capital as an institution in the western art community. From June of 1996, simultaneous with *In/sight*, another prominent exhibition was on display, entitled *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. Curated by British painter, academic, and collector of African Art, Tom Phillips, the exhibition presented approximately eight hundred objects. Initially shown at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1995,⁵ the exhibition was imagined by Phillips as a kind of survey of the artistic traditions of Africa that covered spatial range and temporal depth (1996:24). The reading of these two exhibitions in relation to each other leads one to question the extent to which *In/sight* was intended as a kind of footnote or supplement to *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. For the Guggenheim Museum, which is positioned as a museum of contemporary and modern art, *Africa: The Art of a Continent* was located in a significantly historical approach and was also only the third exhibition in its history to focus on non-European and American art. It was substantially larger than *In/sight* and, unlike the curatorial strategy adopted by the curators of *In/sight*, the show was arranged regionally, splitting the African continent up into seven primary areas. Cornel West, an American philosopher, notes in the introduction to the catalogue that accompanied *Africa: The Art of a Continent*:

The homogenous definitions and monolithic formulations of “African art” have been shattered... Instead, we are in search of new ways of keeping track of the fully fledged humanity of Africans by seriously examining their doings, makings, and sufferings under circumstances not of their choosing. By taking their humanity for granted, we are in danger of being neither apologists for European colonialism nor romantic celebrants of African achievements. Rather we take Africans seriously by taking African history seriously – an ambitious endeavour still in its embryonic stage in the West (1996:1).

What this statement seems to imply is an aim to construct and legitimise African history through organising its objects into regions and time periods. It is difficult not to be sceptical of West’s claim here insofar as it seems to continue existing power relationships between western and African paradigms and through his choice of words assumes a legitimising role of western institutions. The implications and assumptions that are raised by *Africa: The Art of a Continent* inform the positioning of *In/sight* insofar as the smaller exhibition can be read through the same lens of “taking African history seriously”; one that uses spatial and temporal organisation as a means to construct a history and thereby an understanding of Africanness.

⁵ The exhibition also travelled to the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 1996, before it was exhibited for a full three months at the Guggenheim Museum.

Slightly larger than *In/sight*, *Snap Judgments* took place at a museum and school dedicated solely to photography, the International Centre of Photography, from March until the May 2006. While *Snap Judgments* exhibited the work of thirty five artists (not many more than in *In/sight*) most of the photographs were taken in a much more recent time frame, mostly after 2000, and crossed genres of fashion photography, photojournalism, and fine art. Enwezor's self-declared aim in the exhibition was to provide alternative imagery of Africa and Africans to the mainstream photographs that he claimed dominated western imaginations: "*Snap Judgments* brings together some of the most forceful propositions by contemporary artists and photographers on how to look at Africa. In so doing, it seeks to demonstrate how artists can use photography as a tool to trace the arc of different social realities" (2006:np).

In her review of the exhibition, published in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African art*,⁶ academic at the University of Toronto, Elizabeth Harney, describes South African artist Hentie van der Merwe's *Trappings* series (2002 -2003) of blurry military uniforms:

These lens-based works served as reminders of the shared ontological status of museum exhibitions and photography. Both are concerned with the "organization of the view;" both rely upon the manipulation of time and space to achieve meaning (often suggesting timelessness and spatial distancing from the site of the viewer). Van der Merwe's pieces, like many others within *Snap Judgments*, questioned our inherent practices of viewing and our reliance upon the visual to shape our understanding of the "realities" of the world around us (2008:28).

Harney's reference here to the organisational effects of the constructs of time and space is perceptive and telling insofar as it speaks to the ways in which this is enacted in the exhibition through artworks such as van der Merwe's. In addition it begins to hint at the ways that space and time are linked to the construction of Africanness through the visual. The impetus of the exhibition, as invoked by the title, to disrupt judgements that are made too quickly, is both reinforced as well as undermined by the conceptual framework of the exhibition, within constructs of space and time.

Snap Judgments was accompanied by a catalogue in which Enwezor presents three essays on contemporary African art: 'The Uses of Afro-Pessimism', 'Contemporary African Art and Globalisation' and 'The Analytical Impulse in Contemporary African Photography'. Through these,

⁶ *Nka* is a biannual journal dedicated to discourses related to contemporary African art. It was founded by Enwezor in 1994 as a means to increase the visibility of African artists. In light of Enwezor's involvement, the journal, as well as the articles published therein, are complicated when they present critical writing on Enwezor's practice.

Enwezor unpacks the theoretical framework of the exhibition and interrogates the ways in which African photography is transacted. His emphasis in the essays is on the archive of images built up by the western gaze that he argues has created and enforced ways of seeing and imagining Africa, and the ways in which contemporary African photographers are challenging this through their own photography practices.

In/sight and *Snap Judgments* are neatly organised as case studies. For one, they are held exactly a decade apart, allowing a reading that gives enough time to consider the shifts in the discourse as well as in Enwezor's career (especially since *In/sight* is posited as his debut appearance and *Snap Judgments* is as his first independent blockbuster). Harney, writing in relation to criticisms of *Snap Judgments* posits that the exhibition seems to be envisioned as a natural sequel to *In/sight* (2008:30) and this is affirmed by the essay in the catalogue to *Snap Judgments* entitled 'After *In/sight*: Ten Years of Exhibiting Contemporary African Photography' by assistant curator Vanessa Rocco. Rocco notes: "Enwezor sees crucial shifts taking place from the preponderance of studio and documentary photography shown in *In/sight* to the way photography is used at this moment by artists in *Snap Judgments*" (2006:350).

The exhibitions are further suitable because they were both located in what is arguably a centre of the art industry, New York, giving them equal access to large audiences and critical response and in that way becoming seminal exhibitions that have engendered a discourse in the form of secondary texts. Furthermore, they are specifically located as African, both within their titles, as well as in their curatorial mandate. In this sense they are the types of examples that Ogbechie may have imagined in the formulations of his arguments.

That the exhibitions focus on photography rather than all media of art-making is an added level of complexity, particularly in relation to the history of photography in Africa and of Africans. Photography as a medium of representation was imported into Africa around the same time as colonisation and as a result has played a central part in producing the ways in which Africa is imagined and represented.⁷ As Enwezor discusses in detail in the essays published in the catalogue to *Snap Judgments*, existing photographic imagery of Africa and Africans has created particular tropes:

...either showing us the precarious conditions of life and existence, in which case the African subject always appears at risk, on the margins of life itself, at that intersection where one is

⁷ See Geary, 1991; Geary & Webb, 1998; Geary, 2003; Mack, 1991; Maxwell, 1999; Pieterse, 1992.

forced to negotiate the relationship between man and animal. Or we are confronted with the heartbreaking beauty of its natural world, where man is virtually absent except on the occasion when the land is left to the whims of tourists and researchers with dollars and fat grants (2006:11).

Additionally, the use of photography by Africans in an attempt to self-define, as well as the ways in which photography has been integrated with 'traditional' rituals, practices, and belief-systems in Africa has complicated the nature of photography, which is often imagined in opposition to Africa; as a technologically-advanced, 'modern' medium⁸.

Furthermore, photography's precarious relationship to time and space make it a particularly interesting medium to consider in relation to the construction of Africa. As literary theorist and political activist, Susan Sontag, explains in her seminal text entitled *On Photography* (1977), which was one of the first books dedicated to the conceptual interrogation of photography as a medium, the photograph is imagined in relation to the ways in which we understand (or misunderstand as it may be) space and time:

The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time. In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders ("framing") seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else. All that is necessary is to frame the subject differently. (Conversely, anything can be made adjacent to anything else) (1977:22).

That the photograph captures, merely, a small selection of time and space; a particular view and moment, and that we then, as the viewer, assume the rest of the picture, or even the containment of the scene, is the characteristic misconception that undermines the ways in which we use photography as evidence, as fair representation. In relation to Africa, a concept that is itself as trapped in time as it is in space, photography has an especially complex task, which enforces, undermines, and complicates the ways in which time and space are manifested.

In addition to the medium of photography and the artworks in themselves, however, it is also the exhibitions of artworks in themselves and the curatorial choices, which form them, that are becoming more central to discussions around discourse and meaning production. Chika Okeke, an academic who has been actively researching in the field of African and African diasporic art since the early nineties, explains in his contribution as editor of an edition of *Nka* in 2008:

⁸ See Bigham, 1999; Coombes, 1994; Geary, 2003.

The role exhibitions have played in the growth of contemporary African art as a field within the discipline of art history, and as an important part of the global contemporary art is, undoubtedly, immense. And the reason for this is not far fetched. When properly conceived, art exhibitions provide unique opportunities to engage with important questions, issues, or debates pertinent to our understanding of, or approach to, the work of one individual or that of a group of artists. In the field of contemporary art, perhaps more so than in other fields of art history, exhibitions constitute primary sites and processes of knowledge production in the sense that, apart from the critical import of the conceptual problems motivating show, they make art works available to their established and potential critical and popular spectatorships and thus insert the art, regardless of the curator's intentions, into new discursive horizons in which knowledge is propagated, contested, and reevaluated (2008:8).

Exhibitions, and perhaps more importantly the body of critical texts they produce (through catalogues and reviews for instance) and the publics they call into being (audiences, reviewers, critics, and participants), allow for a particular development of dialogue that often informs the creation and negotiation of larger discourses. Ogbechie recognises the importance of curatorial practice and the relationship between exhibitions and discourse in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' insofar as he attributes the shaping of the discourse of contemporary African art to Enwezor who is primarily a curator.

Additionally, a category of exhibitions that are often called 'blockbuster exhibitions' or 'mega shows' has emerged to encompass the instances of exhibitions that are received as seminal. As academic, curator, and art critic, Salah Hassan, notes⁹ the proliferation of exhibitions themed around group identity, such as Africanness, has resulted in an outcry from critics who call these attempts reductive and stereotyping, resulting in increased dialogue around the role and scope of these types of identity exhibitions (2008:154-155). In 'The Curator as Culture Broker', Ogbechie calls for an interrogation of blockbuster exhibitions which imply or claim group identity, of which *In/sight* and *Snap Judgments* are examples, for the reasons that Hassan notes, that they are exclusionary, reductive, and problematic.

My aim in this research has been to use close readings of 'The Curator as Culture Broker' in order to draw out and understand Ogbechie's various positions in relation to Enwezor's practice. The particular choice of words used, the ways in which Africa, Africanness, the diaspora, and the like are

⁹ In his introductory text to 'The Twenty First Century and the Mega Shows: A Curators' Roundtable' (2008), also published in *Nka*, which takes the form of a written discussion between leading thinkers in the field of African art (including Enwezor).

described, inform the approach and positions presented in a way that is not always overt in the statements that are made. In this light, I present, along with this close reading, a summary and analysis of Ogbechie's positions as they have progressed through his career in Chapter Two. This genealogy allows a reading of the ways in which his positions have shifted and developed, as well as providing a background to the positions advocated in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'.

Additionally, I have approached the exhibitions through the primary texts that exist in the form of the catalogues. The essays presented in both volumes, and most significantly in *Snap Judgments*, provide key insights into Enwezor's positions and are, perhaps, what form the basis of the discourse insofar as they engage and inform responses, debate, and further research. I have approached these pieces of writing with the same intent as in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'; to consider close readings that may reveal the fundamental principles and positions that Enwezor mobilises in his role as curator. I have also considered the secondary texts that have arisen from the exhibitions, of which Ogbechie's is certainly part, considering the dialogue that they have engendered and the ways in which they echo or contradict Ogbechie's position.

The underlying principle of this approach is one set out by American social theorist Michael Warner in his book, which combines public sphere theory with queer theory, *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), where he interrogates the principle of 'the public' as an unhelpful and totalising concept. Warner's argument is, in short, that the ways in which we consider 'the public' as a conceptual tool is misguided. His view is that publics are called into being by the creation of texts; that is any film, artwork, letter, or speech, for instance, mobilises a particular public around the way in which that text addresses a group of people. In this light, we may consider the extent of a public in relation to the ways in which the text that mobilised it into being is read, extended, and responded to. For the study of exhibitions, which are texts (albeit layered ones) that have easily identifiable publics (audiences, reviewers, participants) that follow or engage them, this notion is particularly useful insofar as it allows us to consider the kind of publics that are mobilised by the exhibitions, as well as the ways in which discourses are engendered by these publics. *In/sight* and *Snap Judgments*, for instance, have mobilised a particular public that includes Enwezor, Ogbechie, and myself as I write this as well as anyone who reads my responses to the exhibitions.

While the careful consideration of the publics mobilised by the two exhibitions are not central to my research focus here, I am conscious of the ways in which these publics negotiate and even transact the term African. This particular construction of discourse, which relies on Africanness as a concept, is ideal for revealing those negotiations and implicit suppositions. In this sense, my primary research

question is: in what ways do Ogbechie's arguments in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' reveal underlying assumptions about Africanness?

In Chapter One I consider the terrain of contemporary African art as a discourse and explore the ways in which time and space are constructed as notions that inform our understandings of culture. I discuss, specifically, the temporal notion of contemporaneity, an understanding of which not only shapes our perception of the age in which we live but also the ways in which contemporary art and by extension contemporary African art is defined. I have made a point of considering contemporaneity in relation to Africanness in order to begin to grapple with what the discourse of contemporary African art might include, entail, and imply. Furthermore I consider temporality in relation to spatiality and the implications this entanglement has for our understanding of Africa and Africanness. In so doing, I begin to grapple with notions of belonging, identity, and culture through a reading of Africanness as something that is located beyond spatiality and geography.

In Chapter Two I discuss the ways in which Ogbechie has positioned himself in relation to the discourse of contemporary African art. Through this task I give an overview of some of the articles and reviews Ogbechie has written, but I focus on his review of *Documenta XI* (2002) entitled 'Ordering the Universe: Documenta XI and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze' (2005), perhaps the most well known and much talked about exhibition for which Enwezor was curatorial director. Also in Chapter Two, I give a detailed overview of Ogbechie's argument in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' exploring the general concerns about curators, Enwezor, and contemporary African art presented, as well as voicing some of the concerns I have with the style of argument as well as the content.

I move on in Chapter Three to tackle what I have chosen to call Ogbechie's 'Argument for Ahistoricism' in which he claims that Enwezor legitimises a discourse of contemporary African art that is ahistorical. I consider the argument through a close reading of the text in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' and compare these positions in relation to the exhibitions as well as my consideration of contemporaneity as discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Four is dedicated to Ogbechie's second primary argument, which I have chosen to call Ogbechie's 'Argument for Africa Itself' in which he claims that Enwezor's alleged focus on cultural producers from the African diaspora in his exhibitions has negated the validity and relevance of the African continent itself. The plausibility of this claim lies in Ogbechie's understanding or

communication of Africa as a concept; that is that Africanness is spatially located or geographically manifested. I interrogate this conception of Africanness in relation to the spatial implications discussed in Chapter One and consider the extent to which Ogbechie has a point as well as the extent to which that point, if valid, is valuable for an understanding of art history as well as society at large.

Chapter One

Towards a Definition of Contemporary African Art

As is often the case with the results of taxonomic endeavours, the term 'contemporary African art' has become a widely used and accepted phrase without much consensus on what exactly belongs to the vastly broad category. In one sense, it seems quite simple to identify what is meant when one invokes the grouping, as is obvious in its comprehensive use; however, the term has caused much contestation about what (or perhaps who) qualifies, when, and under which circumstances. The complexity of the term means that the unpacking of contemporary African art does not simply rely on the clarification of contemporaneity and Africanness as singular concepts in and of themselves, but rather on those definitions as well as the shifts and ruptures caused by the marrying of the two. In light of this, I begin with an overview of the definition(s) of contemporary African art, not only in the established discourse, but also through the component concepts and the ways they meet, combine, intersect, and congeal.

Hassan notes, in an article published in 1999, that most scholarship on African art still tends to use German writer, Ulli Beier's, 1969 definition of contemporary African art; Hassan explains this definition through the following characteristics:

Like modern art elsewhere, 'contemporary' African art – meaning the art of Western-trained artists – is recognised as individualistically oriented rather than communally-centred. It is also perceived as less subservient to dominant socioreligious structures than 'traditional' art forms. In other words, 'contemporary' art becomes a category reserved for the works of those African artists who are mostly urban-based, produce work according to the norms of western modern art, and exhibit in galleries, museums, or foreign cultural centres (1999:218).

While Beier may be writing from a position that assumes the fixity of traditions and the isolation of Africa as a timeless and immutable space, I would agree with Hassan that Beier's early definition still has some currency in surface level definitions of contemporary African art. I propose that the reason for this is not only because of the complexity of the term, or the legacy of anthropology in Africa, but because the term's very foundation is based in two rather unsteady concepts; time and space.

It is evident from the titles of the exhibitions *Snap Judgments: New Positions in African Photography* and *In/sight: African Photographers from 1940 to the Present* that both exhibitions are organised through the concepts of time and space; namely contemporary or 'new' as a temporal category and

African as a spatial category. While this curatorial strategy is fairly common as a way of creating an overarching structure to create a link between the selected artworks exhibited, it also points to the particular ways in which contemporary African art, as a category, is conceptualised and enacted.

When considered simplistically, the term 'contemporary African art' refers to two broad categories. Contemporaneity invokes a time period, namely the very present moment, and is, in its most basic form, a temporal category. Our understanding of Africanness, on the other hand, is rooted in a spatial location; the geographical Africa, and, above all, refers to place. In other words, the concept of contemporary African art is largely conceived through, and dependent on, our understanding(s) of time and space. Thus, the assumed simplicity of the phrase 'contemporary African', especially in terms of 'when' and 'where' questions, belies the complexity of time and space and points to our general misunderstanding of the inherently constructed nature of these concepts. After all, the ways in which space and time are divided up are not necessary, a priori truths, nor natural happenings, but rather decisions (however logical, appealing or practical) that we could imagine to have been formulated differently. It is reasonable to imagine, for instance, that territories could have been divided up according to their height above sea level. In this way we might have demarcated particular spaces according to altitude rather than the (often uninterrogated) standards that are in use in our current situation; landmasses, natural dividers like rivers, ethnic, cultural, and religious groupings. We might even imagine a situation where spatial divisions like the borders of countries could cease to exist at all.¹⁰ The ways in which the current system of space allocation is complicated by contested claims of ownership, as in Palestine for instance, is proof of the inherent construction and of the abnormality, of the lines that divide us.

Time, too, is organised according to a 'collective' decision; we implicitly agree that a minute is a standard measure of time and that a year is made up by twelve months. The celebration of birthdays, for instance, is nothing more than an agreed marker of age that has been constructed out of the ways in which we understand our experience of the world, as opposed to a natural phenomenon. The ways in which our understanding of history is divided up into decades is just such an example; styles, attitudes, and ways of living are often quite neatly packaged into groups of ten years at a time.

That these constructed concepts are at the very base of our understanding of contemporary African art necessitates that the category be interrogated with a consistent awareness of this complexity,

¹⁰ See Anderson, 1991.

because, as is demonstrated in considering Ogbechie's argument (as will be discussed in later chapters), we tend to forget just how unnatural and over-simplistic divisions of time and space are.

On the other hand, similarly spatio-temporally formulated categories, like contemporary American art and even ancient Greek art for example, while still relying on constructed concepts of time and space are not nearly as controversial as when the same strategy is applied to Africa. A detailed comparison of these terms could begin to evaluate this. For instance it seems that contemporary American art covers a far smaller geographical range as a country rather than a continent. Similarly, as a time period that we examine retrospectively, ancient Greece might seem easier to set the boundaries of, but perhaps this is only because it is not as near to as many people's hearts. My sense here is that the particular positioning of Africa in relation to the world and the legacy of colonialism and its effects has caused us to consider the implications of terms like contemporary African art in ways that we might not have noticed with similar, less controversial terms. The lack of debate for these other terms does not undermine the principle, which applies to all categories founded in constructions of time and space, but rather should initiate reflection into their use, implications, and assumptions.

Contemporaneity and Temporal Constructs

The over-simplification of time divisions is exemplified in the arrangement of the history of art (as opposed to the 'histories of art') in what is often referred to as periodisation.¹¹ Meyer Schapiro, an American-born, Lithuanian art historian presents periodisation in an article published in 1970:

As historical classification, it is an instrument in ordering the historical objects as a continuous system in time and space, with groupings and divisions which bring out more clearly the significant similarities and differences, and which permit us to see a line of development; it also permits correlation with other historical objects and events similarly ordered in time and space, and thereby contributes to explanation (1970:113)

As an instrument that is central to the ways in which we understand history (from a western perspective), periodisation is a controversial topic that extends across fields and, importantly, affects the ways in which education is formulated. While there are some people that are strongly against

¹¹ See Green, 1992; Fowler, 1972.

the use of the system for the ways in which it breeds assumption about clear-cut narratives,¹² it is the developmental implication, one of progression from one period to the next, that I propose is a danger to be considered.

Contemporary, as an art historical 'period', needs little introduction as a term bound up in constructed notions of time. On one level, contemporaneity seems to have been, and continues to be, invoked to describe a category of artworks being made in the present and the period closest to the present time. In Renaissance Italy, for instance, Michelangelo would be an example of a contemporary artist. Necessarily, the class of artworks that fall under this broad temporal category, which we can perhaps call 'soft contemporaneity', is dependent on perspective and can perhaps be thought of as a loose term that can be applied with a large degree of relativity, but one that refers, primarily, to a selection of time above anything else. In this light, even though a painting may be reminiscent of Michelangelo, if it is temporally dislocated from the Renaissance it will not be contemporary from the perspective of Renaissance viewers. Certainly in the western construction of the history of art, many will agree with African art historian, Sidney Kasfir, in noting that this soft contemporaneity, from our current perspective, may include artworks made after the advent of modernity; that is modernism and postmodernism (to invoke the system of periodisation), or, perhaps, in an outright temporal sense, the work of the last century or so (1999a:10).

However, as Australian-based artist, art historian, and critic, Terry Smith, argues in an article entitled 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity' (2006): "Contemporary art, might, somehow be losing touch with time" (2006:682). What Smith is referring to with this enigmatic and seemingly paradoxical statement, are the ways in which current art historical discourse has adopted and adapted the notion of contemporaneity to describe not only a temporal period in art making, but rather, and more importantly, a particular kind of art making in particular contexts. Contemporary, in this sense, is a far more intricate and complex kind of category than the soft contemporaneity that is used simply to denote a time bracket. What Smith argues is that there seems to be something more of a requirement, or even set of requirements, for artworks or artists to be classified as contemporary other than to simply be made in the now.

Smith posits that two requirements are valuable for an understanding of contemporaneity and its complex relationship with time. One is the evidence in the artwork of an awareness of the greater progression of the history of art (from a western perspective) (2006:692). In addition to this, there is

¹² See Calvin Seerveld, 1980.

a requirement of evidence of an awareness of postcolonialism and the effects of globalisation on the world at large, but, more specifically, on the ways in which art is made and understood (2006:692).¹³

From Smith's arguments, what seems to be the most important measure of contemporary art is the artist's ability to recognise and acknowledge, through the content or form (or a combination of the two), the timeline of the history of art; what has come before and what has changed the ways in which we think about art.¹⁴ This recognition seems to be the key factor in locating art as 'contemporary art' rather than as craft, as commercial art, as art made contemporarily, but is not, however, contemporary art. Contemporary art as a category seems to, thereby, depend on the same notion of progress that is implied in the periodisation of the art history timeline – in acknowledging and moving beyond past enactments, boundaries, and theoretical frameworks of art; contemporary artists, as in the sense of modern art geniuses, are seen as improving, developing, evolving an original and ground-breaking body of art.

It is no surprise then that contemporary has become a kind of stand in for the term 'avant garde', which dominated the vocabulary of critics and theorists in late modernism and early postmodernism. However, contemporary does not necessarily mean cutting-edge, original, or boundary-breaking in the same straightforward and self-reflexive way. Rather, it is complicated and veiled by a vague sense of needing to 'keep with the times', as is explicated when Smith calls it an art "which emerges from within the conditions of contemporaneity... as an art of that which actually is

¹³ In his analysis of a selection of what has been labelled 'contemporary art', Smith argues that these sets of requirements that seem to identify the more-than-temporal-contemporaneity can be split into two overarching themes, both of which he admits are somewhat ambiguous and fairly fluid; they are what he calls the "new modern" (2006:688) as well as "that which emerges from the conditions of contemporaneity" (2006:692). While Smith is only one of the authors that attempts to pin down what exactly contemporary art is today, his organisation of the requirements points to a particular way of thinking about art that is deeply entrenched in the ways in which time, also, is understood. In the sense of "new modern", Smith argues that beyond their postmodernist stylistics and complex structures, contemporary artworks seem to share many properties that categorised modern art. He lists these qualities as: "at once extraordinary and banal", as art that shows a search for some sense of belonging, what he calls a "narrative quest", as well as art that engages a very specific relationship between the work and the viewer (2006:688). In this sense he postulates that "contemporary art, as a movement, has become the new modern or, what amounts to the same thing, the old modern in new clothes" insofar as it touches on similar themes and is presented in similar ways (2006:688). Smith describes his second postulated theme as follows: "...that which emerges from within the conditions of contemporaneity, including the remnants of the cultures of modernity and postmodernity, but which projects itself through and around these, as an art of that which actually *is* in the world, of what it is to *be* in the world, and of that which is to come. Its impulses are specific yet worldly, even multitudinous, inclusive yet oppositional and anti-institutional, concrete but also various, mobile, and open-ended" (2006:692).

¹⁴ He states this when he claims that contemporary art is that "which projects itself through and around these" cultures of modernity and postmodernity (2006:692)

in the world, of what it is to *be* in the world, and of that which is to come" (2006:692). Contemporary in this sense equates time with development, with progress.

In feminist scholar, Anne McClintock's, discussion of postcolonialism as an 'ideology of progress', she criticises doctrines like postcolonialism, postmodernism, and post-feminism for being self-congratulatory in the sense of moving beyond colonialism, progressing past modernism, and developing out of feminism (1992:93). She notes that there is an inherent problem around the:

...orientation of the emerging discipline and its concomitant theories and curricula changes, around a singular, monolithic term, organized around a binary axis of time rather than power, and which, in its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism, runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power (1992:88).

Similarly, contemporaneity, as the condition, which is post-postmodern and post-postcolonial (which, ironically, undermine the ways in which the 'post' doctrines have been posited as the metanarratives to end all metanarratives by influential French philosopher François Lyotard), is still embroiled in ideologies of progress; in linear conceptions of the passing of time as equivalent to evolution.¹⁵

In 2000, American curator, Lauri Firstenberg (who worked with Enwezor on *Documenta XI*) explores the term contemporary African art, and its problematics, in a review of Sidney Kasfir's book, *Contemporary African Art* (1999), entitled 'Negotiating the Taxonomy. Contemporary African Art: Production, Exhibition, Commodification'. As a way of framing the review, Firstenberg confronts the taxonomy of the term contemporary African art, which she calls "a category of Western reception rather than African artistic intention" (2000:108). The review commends Kasfir's approach in *Contemporary African Art* for the ways in which it admits the difficulties in approaching the visual culture of Africa "defined and divided by over eight hundred languages and comprising over fifty national identities" (2000:110). Three years later, Firstenberg builds on this review in an essay entitled slightly differently: 'Negotiating the Taxonomy of Contemporary African Art - Production, Exhibition, Commodification' which is published in the catalogue to the 2003/4 exhibition *Looking Both Ways: Art of the African Diaspora* at the Museum for African Art, New York, curated by Laurie

¹⁵ British cultural theorist Stuart Hall moves away from this way of thinking when, following Peter Hulme (1995), he posits postcolonial as a descriptive term rather than an evaluative one, noting that it is not a celebration of being past, above, or beyond colonialism in some grand way, but merely that it marks the (necessarily uneven) shift from colonialism to postcolonialism (1996:246). This approach to terminology is perhaps an answer to the ways in which terms like postcolonial and contemporary African art become problematic in their application and negotiation.

Ann Farrell. The essay picks up on the underlying question of the review and builds an argument around the use of contemporary African art as a category 'invented' for use by the (western) academy, museum, and market (2003:37).

Her argument in the paper is that the western understanding of 'traditional' African arts "as representing collective cultural identities is similarly restated in the reception of the work now called 'contemporary African art'" (2003:37). Her argument posits here the reception of the artworks, as opposed to artistic intention, in the formulation of the category. Through a discussion of particular exhibitions including Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 blockbuster, *Magiciens de la terre*, Firstenberg claims that the choice of artists, which represented the links or similarities between western and African aesthetic practice, allowed a representation of modern Africa that was not coterminous to western modernity but rather presented them in a hierarchy that where "European and American modernisms were defined against African art, as evidenced by a history of primitivism" (2003:38). The implication here is that the reception of African art has been constructed in such a way as to posit progressional development.

African Time

Contemporary art, in all its complexity, is complicated further in relation to African art, because, as is the case with many art historical concepts, what is true for the west is not necessarily true for Africa; that is African art does not subscribe to the same conceptual definitions or requirements, most especially in the temporal sphere. This is most obvious in constructed notions of the valuing of African art in relation to constructs of authenticity and primitivism. Because African culture, and by extension its art, has been arguably conceived and constructed in terms of a closed, timeless system, built on immutable traditions, which had no conceivable coevality to European and American societies, contemporaneity, as a temporal concept, is something that is far more complex when used preceding 'African art', or even 'Africa' for that matter.¹⁶ Contemporaneity is a 'new' term for African art that has been applied only in the last couple of decades, and if used in the temporal sense, Africa's 'now' seems far younger than the 'now' applied to the western art world. The limits of temporality in the discourses of African art imply that perhaps with Africa, more than with the west, contemporaneity is losing touch with time; that is, as a term, contemporary is more outwardly and openly a signifier of recognition by western institutions and patrons as belonging to the (western)

¹⁶ See Trotman, 2002; Coetzee & Roux, 1998; Lazarus, 2011.

category of contemporary African art. As Ogbechie rightly notes, this way of conceiving African art is explicitly problematic, especially in relation to work that falls outside of this constructed bracket but still, temporally falls under the category of contemporary, for instance indigenous African art that is being made in the present time but “whose contemporaneity remains to be theorised” (2010:35). Underlying the crux of this issue is surely the sense that for African art to be recognised as contemporary it must first ‘progress’ in line with western values and constructs of art-making – for Africa to be contemporary it must first be more western. It is in this sense that ‘contemporary African’ is a temporal juxtaposition.

Additionally, our experience of time and space are very closely linked to each other and this is particularly clear when it comes to thinking about Africa. In the catalogue to *Snap Judgments*, Enwezor quotes cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian from his book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1993):

When modern anthropology began to construct its other in terms of topoi implying distance, difference and opposition, its intent was above all, but at least also to construct ordered Space and Time – a cosmos – for Western society to inhabit rather than ‘understanding other cultures...’ (2006:14).

Fabian refers to this phenomenon as a “denial of coevalness” (1993:21) and explores this approach to studying cultures through concepts of space and time. He posits “evolutionary Time” as the reason for the naturalisation of our understanding of “Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization”; the ways in which chronological, linear events are posited as progressionary and thereby how different societies are placed on different “temporal slopes” (1993:17). For Africa this is especially so because of the colonial enterprise. In this way, the African subject, an Other for the western world, is denied the recognition of sharing the same world as the western subject, if not spatially then temporally.

African Space

As Kasfir notes in the preface to her book, *Contemporary African Art* (1999), one of the most challenging issues when it comes to defining contemporary African art, and by extension Africa itself, is what she calls “the continent’s extreme cultural diversity” (1999b:7). This diversity is not simply limited to a wide range of cultural beliefs and practices in art making, but rather encompasses a vastness of enactments of African identities, a multiplicity of experiences of Africa and Africanness

as a particular positioning in relation to the rest of the world, in addition to the obvious geographical spatial extensiveness. In this sense, she posits Africanness as an innate quality of experience, a transcendent cultural link that is shared by all Africans alike. Indeed, the random grouping together of an entire continent of people is a largely unhelpful exercise, but, more than that, it relies on the same assumption of static, 'pure', African culture whose immutable traditions stemmed from the beginnings of time.

What complicates this is the constructed notion that the perception of Africanness is often rooted in a marked visual difference: in the form of blackness. Africanness is often constructed in such a way as to be signified by blackness.¹⁷ This construct is part of the imagining of Africa as one nation, one culture, one ethnicity, one race¹⁸ and is contradicted by many Bedouins, Egyptians, the Tuareg, white settlers, and Asian settlers and the many other people who identify as African. This marked difference complicates the spatial configuration of Africanness: for non-black people occupying African identities spatially, for diasporic people identifying as African in ancestry, for mixed race people. These types of considerations call into question the very concept of cultural identity itself. Does one become African by birth? If not by birth, then by ancestry? How many generations should one count backwards? If not by ancestry then, by race? By ethnicity?

Adding to this already complex sense of Africanness is the spatial dispersion of Africans around the world. This transnational migration is usually formulated and conceptualised around the notion of the diaspora(s), which has been adapted from the Greek biblical term "denoting the captivity of the Hebrews in Babylon and, latterly, the worldwide dispersal of Jewry" (Sinfield, 2000:101). In its most common forms 'diaspora' is used in relation to both Jewish and African people who settle outside their 'motherland' (a questionable construct in and of itself). Often, in discussions of the African diaspora, especially in art historical contexts, the group being implicitly referred to are African-born intellectuals who have moved into 'centres' of the west to gain access to the economic and political opportunities that are more abundant than those in Africa. But, as Hassan notes in his editorial note in *Nka*, African migration is a far more complex process than it is made out to be. It can also be thought of in terms of the trade of African persons as slaves, and also as a result of less organised, voluntary, and involuntary dispersions of Africans much earlier (2009:7). As discussed by John Pepper, in an article entitled 'Notes on African Art, History, and Diasporas Within', 2005, diasporas often represent "a historic and traumatic migration, or series of migrations, into the lands of another,

¹⁷ See Hintzen & Rahier, 2003; Gabriel, 2007; Hintzen, Rahier & Smith, 2010; and Torres, 1998

¹⁸ See Adesanmi, 2011.

which later coalesce into communities self-defined in resistant relation to the host country” (2005:74). In this article Pepper argues that the abundance of publications on the notion of the African diaspora has mostly referred to the experience of Africans in centres like America and Europe and have excluded other “mutations” of the diaspora (2005:76). His solution is to follow people like Stuart Hall (1980), Edwards (2003), and Enwezor (1997) who bring complexity and depth to readings of what may be known as a diaspora: an “intervention”, an “articulation”, a “wedge” that “retains the possibility of a critical stance in relation to essentialist ideas of nation, ethnicity, and race” (2005:77).

It is because of the ways in which the term diaspora is constructed that contemporary art critics and academics, Soraya and Derek Murray, note the following:

Especially in relation to the notion of an African diaspora, inherent is a sense that this categorical grouping of people share a cultural link. The reality lies elsewhere, and it is certainly not a given that such disparate, globally strewn subjectivities should necessarily identify with each other, nor share an affinity (2008:88).

Therein, Murray and Murray acknowledge the sense that Africanness is perhaps assumed to be inherently experienced by all Africans, including diasporic Africans, in all their variations. Opening up a reading of the diaspora as a space in which African identity is negotiated rather than assumed allows us to work beyond the essentialising imperative that is claimed through Murray and Murray’s reading.

In this light, the very notion of diaspora(s) seems to depend on questions of belonging and identity that plague claims to Africanness (or any culture for that matter). For instance African-Americans, as people born in America but of African ancestry, do not seem to count as part of the African diaspora in strict readings of the term. Similarly it would be strange to talk about Americans as the diaspora of Europe. Again, the very notion of diasporas implicitly depends on constructed notions of a fixed and timeless culture that is inherited in its purest form via birth in a particular spatial location.

Once interrogated, these constructs of society tend to present themselves as absurd and, yet, it is birth within the continent’s boundaries that the curatorial team of *In/sight* considered as the defining factor in selecting artists for a show about African photography, as is noted by Thomas Krens in the preface to the catalogue when he claims that *In/sight* is a turning point in the Guggenheim Museum’s history in that the thirty African-born photographers were informed by African and not European constructs (1996:6). These African constructs are not named nor

discussed; however, in the introduction to the catalogue curator Bell discusses notions of geography and spatial relationships at length:

In Western art history, the use of place to connote geographical boundaries is as common a concept as it is dubious. There is no shortage of exhibitions devoted to surveying the cultural production of particular countries, regions, and locales. Yardsticks for gauging collective ideologies, their function is often that of an agent of consensus, inscribing, reading, and seeking to make visible a homogenous thread within the culture under examination. Like a tourist, art history often encounters differences only to sum them up with the most convenient terms at its disposal. Multiplicity poses a difficult hurdle because it carries with it a sense of ambivalence and instability that disrupts the bedrock of fixed preconceptions previously rendered immutable by the rigors of geography (1996:9).

From this statement it is apparent that the curatorial team was aware of the tendency of these types of geographically based exhibitions to become totalising and homogenising. Similarly, Bell goes on to say that:

Geographical considerations and their relationship to identity and culture have been subsumed into an insulated dynamic that privileges one point of view over another. This is made apparent by the existence of First World mentality, which, through its connotation of hierarchical status, promotes the idea of a Third World. Territory thus becomes a distancing device that authorizes Western representations by marginalizing or impeding those it seeks to regulate... Of course, perceptions of difference are by no means limited to considerations of geography, since they seep into every fibre of identity, whether it be gender, race, class, sexuality, or religion. The relationship between art history and terrain, however, becomes increasingly problematic when the discourse of Western art is focused upon non-Western cultures. Under these circumstances, cultural relativism habitually abounds, and inconsistencies and fictive narratives routinely stand in for “truth”. In the case of Africa, in particular, the sanctioned division of land has served to define and promote the oxymoronic myth of a unified subjectivity (1996:9).

But, it is this very “oxymoronic myth of unified subjectivity” that is assumed in choosing a spatially determined group of photographers by birth, and tends to subvert the curators’ goal to “attempt to broaden the parameters of the notion of place, thereby revealing the operations that contribute to the Western myth of Africa” (Bell, 1996: 10). Ten years later, when Enwezor writes in the catalogue for *Snap Judgments*, he acknowledges this problem in a far more complex and nuanced way by stating that:

As the artists in this exhibition remind us, postcolonial identities are neither fixed geographically nor limited by ethnicity. They range widely in their geographic locations and geopolitical formations – from continental to diasporic – and are diffused through temporal networks that defy locality and self, community and nation. Whether the artists live and work in Africa or elsewhere, one essential characteristic that unites them is the cosmopolitan nature of each of their localities... As such, the quest for an essential contemporary African art immediately confronts the limit placed on such an essentialising process by the multiplicity of contemporary African discursive formations. The task of *Snap Judgments* is therefore a dialectical one. The exhibition is keenly aware of the limitations of place (Africa) as its organizing framework. Yet it enthusiastically deploys it to give substance to ethical positions from which the artists address their audiences, and also to foreground the multiplicity of identities, discursive formations, and itineraries each artist taps or constructs in his/her quest to map the diffused lines contemporary global culture (2006:23).

However, while Enwezor acknowledges that essentialising processes are limited by various multiplicities he still attempts to locate an essential characteristic of African artists in the form of cosmopolitan localities (which is questionable in that it is something that is surely not unique to African artists). My sense here is that Enwezor, through his engagement with notions of diaspora, is sensitive to Africanness as an experience rather than as physical geography, and through this sensitivity is able to articulate a questioning of what it means to be African through his curatorial practice rather than to attempt to work with existing definitions. His selection of artists echoes this, insofar as Africanness is not attributed to them via birth within the continent but rather in multiple ways that are far more complex. Artists included in the show like Yto Barrada, an artist born in Paris but living and working in Tangier, Morocco, and Lara Baladi, a Lebanese artist by birth who has Egyptian ancestry, complicate and question the boundaries of what it means to be African.

It is this type of questioning that is at the heart of the problem in defining contemporary African art. Without an interrogation of our inherited notions of time and space, our concept of culture and, more specifically, our enactments around concepts of culture, will more often than not present themselves as problematic. As is evident in *In/sight* and *Snap Judgments*, when limiting the framework to contemporary African art, negotiations of time and space, as well as their intersections, tend to become caught up in the intricate web of concepts dependent on these constructed terms. The entrenchment of the normality of our understanding of time and space as organisational frameworks, often, ends up leading us to perceptions that are just as problematic as the issues we are criticising and questioning.

Enwezor's practice as a curator of Africanness, as an extension of contemporary African art, works within these normalities as well as against them. By challenging the boundaries of spatially and temporally manifested Africanness through the inclusion of 'strictly' speaking non-Africans, if anything, he shows an awareness of the blatantly constructed nature of Africanness. Additionally, by participating in and creating spaces for the discourse of contemporary African art, as contemporaneous to western contemporary art, Enwezor is forging a way for Africans into the validating and progressional claims of contemporaneity that otherwise would be closed spaces.

Chapter Two

Ogbechie: A Genealogy of Advocating for Africanness

In this chapter I give a genealogical account of Ogbechie's critical positions over the last decade or so in order to position him within the discourse of contemporary African art as well as to give a background to his ways of thinking about contemporary African art. I focus on an article he wrote in response to blockbuster exhibition, *Documenta XI*, in which he begins a substantial interrogation of Enwezor's curatorial practice. Following this in-depth look at Ogbechie's various positions, I have given a detailed account of his argument in 'The Curator as Culture Broker', which is the basis from which I have drawn my conclusions about his negotiation of Africanness as a concept.

Ogbechie, who has a doctoral degree from Northwestern University in the United States of America, has positioned himself within the discourse of contemporary African art as a self-declared advocate for the active promotion of African art as well as African ways of knowing and thinking. He studied an undergraduate as well as a master's degree in Nigeria focusing on African and African-American art. His doctoral degree was supervised by distinguished African arts author Ikem S. Okoye, in which Ogbechie focused on the history, theory, and criticism of twentieth century African art as well as theory and methodology in art history more broadly. Ogbechie completed his undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Nigeria finishing in 1992. He is currently an associate professor in the field of African art history at the University of California Santa Barbara. While he is known mostly for his writing, especially on Nigerian art, he is also a practicing curator and has assembled exhibitions both in Nigeria and in the United States.

The majority of his writing is centred on the inequalities in the representation, construction, and inclusion, of contemporary African artists in international art discourses. His critical positions, thus, are predominantly informed by a need to address imbalances in the construction and presentation of African art. As such he has focused his attention on contemporary African art both inside the African continent as well as in the diaspora. Recently, he has written a book on the work of fellow Nigerian, Ben Enwonwu, entitled *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (2008) and has written a number of articles for the seminal journal, *African Arts*, over the last decade. Ogbechie's focus has been on Nigeria, rather than Africa at large, and the ways in which he approaches art, artists, exhibitions, and curators is through a lens that focuses on the ways in which the writing of art history has taken place and affected the construction of discourses. For instance, in an article

entitled 'The Historical Life of Objects: African Art History and the Problem of Discursive Obsolescence' (2005) published in *African Arts* Ogbechie considers the *Mbari* architecture of the Nigerian group of peoples, the Owerri-Igbo. In this article, he discusses the ways in which the occidental gaze has affected and continues to affect the writing of African art history. His concluding question in the article affirms his critical position in relation to African art in general: "How does this desire to examine 'indigenous knowledge systems' escape from the Eurocentric gaze, with its hegemonic discourses?" (2005:69).

Similarly, in a piece of writing entitled 'Are We There Yet?' (2002), published as the 'First Word' also in *African Arts*, Ogbechie champions the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago for presenting what he calls two landmark exhibitions of African art in 2001, noting: "As someone who regularly complains about modern African art's lack of visibility in contemporary exhibitions, this dual presentation was a balm for the spirit, a hint of better things to come" (2002:4). One of these exhibitions was a retrospective of works by South African artist, William Kentridge, and the other an exhibition of modern art entitled *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, the latter of which was organised by Enwezor.

Ogbechie situates *The Short Century* and the Kentridge exhibition as landmarks in the discourse of art history for the ways in which they locate African art within contemporary practice, what he calls the "historical, social, and cultural context of our time" (2002:4). He goes on to note that "They also inadvertently revealed the scope of art history's effacement of this context of practice" and illustrates this point through an anecdote where a colleague was intrigued as to why she had never heard of a particular African artist that was on show there (2002:4).

While the overtone of the article is celebratory, Ogbechie is careful to balance this with his concerns for the construction of African art history and he problematises how Kentridge's visibility needs to be equally attributed to black South African artists (2002:7). He also questions the ways in which South Africa is positioned as the cultural gatekeeper for the continent with Enwezor selecting a large number of South African artists to include in *The Short Century* (2002:6).

Ogbechie's interest in Enwezor continues with *Documenta XI*, which manifested as a number of different platforms taking place from early 2001 and culminating in a formal exhibition in 2002 in Kassel, Germany. In an article reviewing the exhibition, entitled 'Ordering the Universe: Documenta XI and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze' (2005), Ogbechie gives an overview of the critical

objectives set out by Enwezor and his team and goes on to give an account as well as a rebuttal to some of the criticisms of the exhibition.

The discussion is framed through a rebuttal to a criticism that he attributes to German art critic Georg Imdahl among others:¹⁹ "Critics claimed the exhibition pandered to an ethos of identity politics and multiculturalism by its overwhelming focus on non-Western spaces" (2005:81). This complex claim is somewhat ambiguous. It implies that the critical momentum of the exhibition yielded to, or perhaps even illicitly mobilised, the recent tendencies towards political arguments over the self interest and perspectives of social minorities through its inclusivity of non-Western artists and spaces. That an international exhibition should be accused of engaging in a political debate through the inclusion of international artists is both a little obvious and inevitable, but also problematic insofar as it is implied as a negative aspect.

In response, Ogbechie argues, however, that only about twenty percent of the artists shown in the exhibition were actually non-Western and that Enwezor's selection of artists and artworks were not hinged on ethnicity (2005:81). The particular choice of the word 'ethnicity' here by Ogbechie, in place of identity perhaps, shifts the focus very subtly towards Ogbechie's primary position, insofar as it references ethnology and by extension perhaps tribal Africa. Ogbechie also contends that the ethnicity of the artist was not manifest in the subject matter of the artworks (ibid.).

While the statistical premise undermines a construction of *Documenta XI* as solely focused on non-Western artists it, however, does not undermine the claim that the exhibition invoked identity politics. Ogbechie, also, gives no evidence in the article for Enwezor's alleged attempt to avoid selecting artists by their ethnicity. The claim that ethnicity was not evident in the subject matter of the artworks is quite a strange response: is Ogbechie implying that Enwezor's selection avoided artworks whose engagement was with identity politics? Or, is he claiming that non-western artists often encode their ethnicity in particular ways?

Ogbechie's conclusion to this sub-argument declares that the accusation made by Imdahl and other critics is the result of, and also encourages, a misunderstanding of the curatorial intentions; what he calls its innovations and "its challenge to the continued dominance of occidental paradigms in the discourse of contemporary art" (2005:81). As is evident in this statement, Ogbechie is arguing the value of the inclusion of non-Western artists and spaces: advocating the necessity of inclusive practices in contemporary art. This celebration of the inclusion of twenty percent of non-western

¹⁹ He does not mention the other art critics he is responding to.

artists does not, however, answer or refute any claim about the pandering of identity politics, it simply argues, that inclusivity is a positive aspect and not a negative one. This is confirmed by Ogbechie's admission that Enwezor's curatorial project is necessarily implicated in identity politics insofar as his curatorial prerogative was to focus on "circuits of knowledge outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism" (2005:81). Thus, the issue, for Ogbechie in this particular article, is not whether or not *Documenta XI* invoked identity politics, but, rather, whether this invocation through inclusion is a negative or a positive phenomenon.

That Ogbechie celebrates Enwezor's curatorial prerogative in *Documenta XI* is made evident in the ways in which he writes about it. For instance, he describes the attempt made by Enwezor and his team to decentre the *Documenta* exhibitions, from Europe geographically and Euro-America conceptually, as a "brave effort" and that this type of practice engenders a truly international discourse for contemporary art (2005:82). Additionally, he concludes the article by stating that:

Enwezor's pioneering effort deserves commendation for focusing on this struggle and for using *Documenta XI* to shoulder the exorbitant expectations of both the mainstream art world and its marginalized constituencies. Only time will reveal the true intent and impact of his intervention (2005:89).

It is apparent from Ogbechie's choice of words that he holds Enwezor's curatorial practice and strategies in high regard. The picture he paints is one in which Enwezor is a hero battling against a system, which Ogbechie thinks is inescapably problematic. The subtitle of the article, 'Documenta XI and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze', claims that the exhibition series is inextricably linked to the ways in which the west has constructed art itself and therein is always going to be the ideal point of reference unto which all other cultures must submit.

His further remarks about the exhibition all continue in this way; that is arguing for the interrogation of the self-referentiality of the occidental gaze. He argues, for instance, that previous *Documenta* exhibitions were not recognised as celebrating 'white' or European identity despite their exclusion of non-western artists:

Critics of this exhibition who raised the charge of identity politics refused to acknowledge that the current American imperium (and the European colonial world order that preceded it) uses various strategies to maintain and sustain white privilege (2005:85).

This type of response is at the core of Ogbechie's position. He is primarily concerned with visibility for African artists. Additionally, his position often dissolves into binaries of African/ western, black/ white.

The Curator as Culture Broker

In 'The Curator as Culture Broker', however, Ogbechie's position on Enwezor's practice is shifted. Firstly, he argues that contemporary curators act in the same way to art, and the discourses that surround it, as hedge fund managers do to financial investments and the market; he uses this metaphor to demonstrate the agency that he claims curators have in determining types of knowledge in art historical discourses. Secondly, Ogbechie uses Enwezor as a case study to determine to what extent he has affected the discourses on, as well as the knowledge around, contemporary African art in his role as a curator. The overarching thesis presented is that Enwezor has added to the construction of and, more importantly, the legitimisation of a contemporary African art discourse, that Ogbechie claims negates both contemporary African art from Africa itself; that is continent-bound Africa, as well as "indigenous forms of African art whose contemporaneity remains to be theorised" (2010:35). According to Ogbechie's arguments, Enwezor's curatorial practice has constructed a sense of contemporary African art that is not only separate to the African continent itself, but rather denies it all together (2010:36). In this sense, the argument deals directly with the two concepts – contemporaneity and Africanness – both of which are implicated in the term contemporary African art; and I propose that his claims about the construction of Enwezor's contemporary African art are bound up in the notions of time and space as discussed in Chapter One.

The ways in which Ogbechie sets up his argument in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' are often difficult to negotiate because of the length of the paper – there are many statements that are not fully clarified. In one sense, the criticisms come across as specifically directed at Enwezor, while the findings seem to point to a larger community of practitioners, including Ogbechie himself, who perpetuate the construction, and in a sense exploitation, of Africa. The position that Ogbechie presents is largely an overview of some of the issues within the discourse and the arguments that are put forward are not always sufficiently illustrated with specific detailed examples. As a result, my presentation of his argument here is a starting point, where I am forced, as the reader, to expand, explore, and reflect on the statements made. However, the task that Ogbechie sets in considering

the affect of Enwezor's curatorial practice is worthwhile; it points to the entrenchment of our understandings of time and space and is evocative of the corruption of the foundations on which concepts like contemporary African art are built.

Before I deal with time and space specifically, however, I explore the facets of Ogbechie's argument in detail. Structurally, the argument is based on two broad discussions. The first is the metaphor of the hedge fund manager, which is employed to situate the conclusion that Enwezor has a substantial and measurable effect on the discourse of contemporary African art. Ogbechie's second undertaking in the article is to use Enwezor's curatorial practice as a case study to prove not only that curators, in general, affect the discourses in which they operate but more specifically that Enwezor is responsible for the distortions and contradictions that Ogbechie claims are at work in the discourse of contemporary African art. There are four particular claims that Ogbechie identifies which in many senses overlap and feed into one another. The first is that Enwezor's practice legitimises and reinforces an ahistorical approach to Africa in the discourse of contemporary African art (which have both temporal and spatial implications) (2010:34); that there was no contemporary African art prior to the advent of postcolonial theory (2010:34) and that more specifically there was, and is, no contemporary African art on the African continent itself (2010:36). The second claim that is mobilised is that Enwezor's practice is self-referential; that is it is situated in his own experience rather than being broadly contextualised (2010:37). The third and fourth claims in the paper are closely linked, the third accuses Enwezor of presenting an essentialist or negritude perspective of Africa, which is mounted on the back of criticising Enwezor's positioning of the diaspora as the centre of contemporary African art (2010:35).

Curatorial Brokerage

Little time is spent in the paper justifying the metaphorical comparison between the role of the curator and the role of the hedge fund manager, but Ogbechie's argument follows German curator Beatrice von Bismarck's article 'Curatorial Criticality: On the Role of Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art' (2007/ 2011)²⁰ in which she argues that the curator has taken over in the role of "constituting meaning" (2011:19) from art historians, academics, critics, as well as artists themselves, through which their practices create a new kind of installation art (2011:21) where the

²⁰ First Published in ICE Reader 1: Curating Critique (Revolver Frankfurt am Main, 2007); Anatomy Acts (Birlinn Edinburgh 2006). Subsequently the entire reader was published in *On-curating* Issue 09 2011

authority of the text and, more importantly, its interpretation largely rests on the shoulders of curators. In this sense, the curator, who selects works to be included in exhibitions, decides where and in what relation to other artworks they should be configured and, in this way, champions particular interpretations through inclusion, exclusion, and relational strategies. Von Bismarck's metaphor for explaining this process is to compare the curator to priest insofar as "the priest possesses an authority in the capacity of his office and by means of his belonging to the church exercises control over the access to the means of production, reproduction, and distribution of sacred goods" (2011:20). Ogbechie adjusts the metaphor to compare the role of the curator to that of a hedge fund broker: where meaning and symbolic capital in art markets is 'brokered' in the same way as an economic broker would situate or champion particular financial investments (2010:34). Accordingly, the hedge fund manager and the curator function in a symbiotic way to the market: one that not only reflects the market but also influences it. For instance, if a particular artist is popular with collectors, his or her inclusion on a blockbuster show will not only feed off of this, but also heighten and increase this popularity at the same time. Again Ogbechie uses a metaphor to explain the political aspect of curatorial practices:

In the information age where content aggregation is the primary mode of data management, curatorial practice reconfigures artworks as data and constitutes the curator as a supremely powerful search engine that ranks artists and artworks according to rather opaque algorithms, in the process rendering specific forms of cultural practice visible or invisible according to its self-referential autonomous logic (2010:34).

The critique of curatorial practice, here, is twofold: not only are the processes that determine the inclusion or exclusion from exhibitions often opaque, unclear, and underexplored, they also rely on a logic that is based largely on said curators own, personal experience, and to a lesser extent on a broad, external context.²¹ Ogbechie is arguing here that the role of the curator has far more influence over discourses in contemporary art; their choices resulting in a heightened visibility of some artists and or artworks over others as well as giving an authoritative interpretation of the meaning of artworks, and hence that curators should be held accountable for these choices. This requirement rests on the assumption that curators' practice can be anything other than self-referential and autonomous. The task that Ogbechie's claim expects from curators, then, is to provide some sort of clear and accessible reflection on their choices as well as a consideration of the

²¹ In some senses, this is often an acceptable process for artists, who are in some ways expected to act self-referentially. Perhaps the reason we expect this is because of the way we have conditioned art history in the past as well as presently to rely on biographical linkages between artists' lives and their works.

political effects they have on critical discourses. While we may argue that this vision is idealistic, insofar as choices are not always made consciously, it is clear that the choices curators make in their practice are in no way random, divinely-inspired, neutral, nor obvious, and the current interest in the politics of display seems to encourage a call to critics for reflection on the processes of curatorial practice.

The idea of the role of the curator as being a mediator in value-creation is also not an altogether new one. As early as 1996, curator and academic Mari Carmen Ramirez called the curator a broker of value and noted that curators are emerging as value creators more than artists and critics (1996:23). Additionally the idea of the curator as the sole producer of value is unravelled by the complexity of the art market and art historical discourses.²² For one, the metaphor does not take into account the various roles of artists, critics, authors, and institutions who each have their own priorities and agendas; while the curator may be a part of this complex power-play it is unreasonable to consider them as outside or above the multiplicity of dynamics that are at work in determining value.

While Ogbechie's claim regarding the practice of curators is in reference to a more general context of curatorial practice, the critique in relation to Enwezor relies on this metaphor holding true. If, indeed, the curator has substantially less agency in the negotiation or transaction of meaning and value, then Enwezor cannot be held responsible for building an entire discourse around what he selects for display. At the same time, this does not make Enwezor's choices and actions meaningless. Ogbechie's critique of Enwezor, specifically, is broadly rooted in the metaphor of curator as search engine, too; that his curatorial practice relies on autonomy, self-reference, and opaqueness. These critiques are broad and the statements are not explored overtly in the scope of 'The Curator as Culture Broker'. Rather, they are driven through a number of more particular claims, which, for our purposes are the key issues.

Ahistoricism

Ogbechie's first claim charges Enwezor with legitimising and validating a form of contemporary African art that is ahistorical: "His [Enwezor's] curatorial work thus produces ahistorical interpretations of contemporary African art in general..." (2010:34). This statement is not unpacked or clarified directly within the paper. What Ogbechie does discuss, however, which I propose is at

²² See Appadurai, 1988, Kopytoff 1986, Schildkrout 1992

the core of this claim, is the concurrent emergence, or at least concurrent increase in symbolic capital of, contemporary African art and what he calls the “postcolonial African subject” (2010:34). I suggest here that Ogbechie’s claim is: that the simultaneous emergence of the contemporary African artist and the postcolonial African subject is not a coincidence, but, rather, that the symbolic capital of postcolonialism as a discourse has had a direct effect on the symbolic capital of contemporary African art, pushing contemporary African artists into the ‘global’ limelight. The claim asks the following question: would contemporary African artists be operating with the same level of success if the discourse of postcolonialism did not exist or at the very least did not have so much symbolic capital in current cultural studies?

While this may not seem overtly problematic in itself, it has a number of implications for the ways in which contemporary African art is constructed and understood. For one, there is an implicit logic that denies the existence of any contemporary African art before the advent of postcolonialism in the mid 1950s, hence the ahistoricism. However, Ogbechie’s position is unclear as to whether he is claiming a denial of the existence of contemporary African art or the non-exhibition of this category of works. Either way, the implication is that any African artists working in Eurocentric centres of the west before this time have been constructed as either not contemporary enough or not African enough. Additionally, and perhaps in a more nuanced sense, that contemporary African art should be so firmly located within the discourse of postcolonialism is troubling in that focuses the arrangement of African history around the impact of contact with European history. Even in a far more simple way, that art should be ‘periodised’ in this way, in relation to such sudden ruptures and shifts in time is problematic.

The other facet of the ahistoricism that Ogbechie claims is held within a phrase that is repeated three times in the article: that Enwezor fails to engage with “Africa itself” (2010:34,35). Operating mostly in Europe and North America, Ogbechie argues that Enwezor is dispensing with the continent, the ‘geographical’ Africa by focusing his attention on diasporic African artists (2010:34). This exclusion means a denial of the existence, or relevance, of contemporary African artists living and working within the African continent who have a clear understanding of the western construction of art and, also, contemporary African artists working with indigenous forms of African art that operate external to understandings of western art. These two classes of contemporary African artists meet the categorical requirements of contemporaneity and Africanness, perhaps even more completely than any diasporic African artist, but, according to Ogbechie’s argument, are not

only often excluded from consideration for exhibitions of African art, but also through this process denied in existence altogether.

Dislocated Africa

Enwezor's preoccupation with African diasporic experience and art that engages with the surrounding issues is also part of the reason why Ogbechie claims that Enwezor's practice is self-referential (2010:34). Ogbechie quotes Swiss artist and curator, Marianne Eigenheer's, criticism, also published in 'Curating Critique' (2007), where she explains how curators are:

...perpetuating the automation of self-reflexive autonomous systems within closed 'contextualizations', or in other words, of advancing a very self-referential narrative of contemporary practice using a limited number of artists recycled in closed-loop exhibitions (quoted in Ogbechie, 2010:34).

Being a diasporic African himself, Enwezor's own experience is grounded in the diaspora and there is some evidence for his preoccupation with artists and artworks that engage with boundaries, transnationalism, hybridity, and exile, which I will deal with in more detail in the last chapter.²³ While Ogbechie's argument does not extend to account for the problem of self-referentiality in curatorial practice, we can assume that his concern lies in two things. One is the general misconception that the practice of curating is both objective and neutral; an assumption that cultural theorists are actively engaging with and undermining.²⁴ In this sense, it seems that in contemporary practice curatorial strategies can be, and are, justifiably self-referential in a way that is not problematic as long as it is noted and explored as part of the constitution of meaning. The second issue is the curator's, and thus Enwezor's, authority in the discourse of contemporary African art – a premise which relies on the validity of the curator as a broker of meaning. In this sense, Ogbechie's claim is that the more Enwezor champions the diaspora, the more it becomes the centre of the discourse. Ogbechie highlights this when he describes how Africa has become a non-location; essentially everywhere and nowhere simultaneously; everywhere in the sense of the diasporic and nowhere

²³ It is interesting that Ogbechie does not adopt the same sort of approach to his own identity as an African living abroad. One might question whether his own diasporic location denies him the right to engage in African art as a self-defined African voice. Additionally themes as listed here are not particular or limited to diasporic experience in one form but rather speak to many experiences of migration within Africa and within other continents as well as the global situation in which national and continental boundaries are being renegotiated in ways other than physical 'crossings'.

²⁴ See Brenson, 1998, & Hassan 2008.

through the denial of the 'spatial' continent itself (2010:36). The practical implications of this, according to Ogbechie, are vast. For instance, Ogbechie claims that "Africa-focused" research, in "Africa itself", within American academies has significantly declined in favour of research on diasporic Africans (2010:36). Similarly museum collections of contemporary African art are dominated by artworks made by African artists working and living in the west (ibid.). In this way Ogbechie's argument is contending that Enwezor's practice is highly influential in constructing and perpetuating not only an academic discourse but a market as well.

It is herein that Ogbechie's primary concern lies: that Enwezor is opaquely constructing and perpetuating a particular type of knowledge about contemporary African art and by extension Africa. Through his predilection for diasporic African art, Ogbechie claims, Enwezor has supported:

... a transfer of cultural equity from African producers to Western collectors, in which the curator operates mainly as an information broker who makes African cultural resources available for appropriation (2010:37).

In other words, while 'continental Africa' or 'Africa itself' is perhaps at the centre of theoretical positions, like postcolonialism, its rendering as a non-location, through the emphasis on the diaspora, allows western centres not only to engage with Africa and Africanness in a safe and non-threatening way, but, in this sense, to appropriate and claim Africanness for the symbolic capital that it holds in contemporary theoretical positions. This transfer of power, where the non-centre functions only within the centre, is a subtle form of political control, that Ogbechie argues Enwezor is not only allowing but also encouraging through his practice.

Ogbechie also makes a number of claims against the ways in which Enwezor uses transnationalism and globalisation to reinforce the relevance of the diaspora, noting the following:

Globalization has become a one-way flow that enforces locality on African artists by narrating their contemporary practice as a moribund context of cultural engagements while validating Western contemporary art as a universal rather than local context of production. It also participates in a relocation of African cultural patrimony to Western ownership by enhancing Western authority in defining the value of African cultural production (2010:35).

The concern here, for Ogbechie, is that globalisation is assumed to be a neutral phenomenon that operates with equal measure all over the world – which is clearly untrue. Ogbechie notes that the idea of globalisation and transnationalism works on the principle that all people, all over the world, have the opportunity to move freely across national borders, while in fact it is only a limited number

of mostly western people who experience this (2010:35). In this way, globalisation is not necessarily something that happens on the African continent. This type of construction seems to cause a power shift where the 'politically-correct' periphery is moved to the centre, allowing western centres to still be at the forefront of theoretical trends while not relinquishing any political control over the discourse. Additionally, in line with Ogbechie's thinking, this serves to reinforce binary oppositions of self and Other; the postcolonial African subject can only be constructed in a safe and controlled way if it is merged with the constructed self of the west; that is in the form of one type of African diaspora.

Through this claim, Ogbechie implies that Enwezor's practice encourages the appropriation of African culture by the west:

Rather than reflecting an identity politics that empowers marginalised societies and structures, their demand for recognition, his [Enwezor's] curatorial practice to date constructed the conditions for a new appropriation of the 'other' by the west, in a manner similar to modernism's appropriation of African and other 'non-western' arts at the beginning of the twentieth century (2010:36)

Through the mobilisation of the diaspora, the 'pure' and 'primitive' continent can be left untouched, unspoiled, unscathed by the corruption of the west.

Ogbechie's argument in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' is, in this way, another example of advocacy for Africanness and, as will be explored in the chapters to follow, as much as Ogbechie argues that Enwezor mobilises a particular type of Africanness, the claims and arguments he presents reveal assumptions around definitions of Africa. In this way, Ogbechie's arguments participate in a similar appropriation of African culture insofar as his negotiation of Africanness is limited to a particular understanding that is fixed in spatial and temporal conceptions.

Chapter Three

Ogbechie's Temporal Concern: The Argument for Ahistoricism

As is shown in the general overview of Ogbechie's argument presented in 'The Curator as Culture Broker', contested and problematic definitions of contemporary African art seem to be at the very centre of the claims against Enwezor's curatorial practice. Particularly in Ogbechie's argument around ahistoricism, there is an underlying sense that the formulation, or limits, of contemporaneity in contemporary African art are problematic. In this sense, I investigate the ways in which Ogbechie's arguments and how they are communicated reveal a way of thinking around contemporary African art and how these approaches to the discourse are plagued by unstable and constructed notions of time. Additionally, I have considered the ways in which this distortion of time affects our understanding of space. I begin with a close reading of what I have chosen to call Ogbechie's 'Argument for Ahistoricism' and consider its premises, its conclusion, as well as the implications of this conclusion, in turn.

Early on in the paper, Ogbechie makes his Argument for Ahistoricism with the following statement:

Enwezor's curatorial focus is devoted to radical notions of contemporaneity built mainly on the practice of African artists who live and work in the West, and an unfailing interest in defining contemporary African art as a context that emerges with the postcolonial African subject. His curatorial work thus produces ahistorical interpretations of contemporary African art in general... (2006:34).²⁵

The argument has the following structural logic. The first premise is that Enwezor's curatorial practice is focused on, what is termed, "radical notions of contemporaneity", a phrase which is not clarified directly. The second premise is the claim that Enwezor has an "unfailing interest" in defining the context of contemporary African art as necessarily related to and perhaps dependent upon the emergence of postcolonialism.

²⁵ He continues to say "and echoes Marianne Eigenheer's criticism (in *Curating Critique*, 2007) of curators as "perpetuating the automation of self-reflexive autonomous systems within closed "contextualizations", or in other words, of advancing a very self-referential narrative of contemporary practice using limited number of artists recycled in closed-loop exhibitions."

Radical Contemporaneity

In the first premise, the term “radical contemporaneity” is the first indication that Ogbechie’s argument is rooted in temporal complications. As discussed in the first chapter, contemporaneity in the sense of contemporary art is a contested and under-examined concept and Ogbechie uses it without clearly stating his position on its parameters. However, from the choice of the word ‘radical’ I propose that there is some sense of disruption with what may be a more ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ contemporaneity, which is identified in Enwezor’s practice. I suggest that this disruption, this break from the accepted use of the term, is situated in the ways in which contemporaneity has become somewhat dislocated from time, to use Smith’s phrasing. The radical sense of contemporaneity that Ogbechie is describing is surely the one in which time is less a factor than progress or development in line with western values. What that means for contemporaneity in African art is that for an artwork to be deemed worthy of classification in the category of ‘contemporary’ it must fulfil the requirements that are currently being theorised by critical thinkers like Smith. In this sense, for African art to be contemporary, it should demonstrably show an awareness of modernism and postmodernism, the greater art world, and the western canon, thereby somehow negating or abandoning (some of) it’s Africanness. As I have discussed earlier, these binary-style approaches to culture are inherently problematic, however, one could argue that the ways in which contemporary African artworks show knowledge of (historical and continuing) African art systems, histories, and traditions is irrelevant or at least less relevant to their significance as part of the experience of being contemporary and their classification as contemporary art.

On a close examination of the article it is evident that this is the core of Ogbechie’s argument against Enwezor, as is manifest in statements like:

The plethora of work done by modern and contemporary African artists directed to legitimizing Africa as a viable location within the global art world is mostly dismissed as irrelevant to Enwezor’s discourse, which suggests all are welcome as long as they come naked and ready to be clothed in Western styles and prescriptions (2010:36).

He adds to this by saying: “For the few ‘contemporary African artists’ that are recognized within this field, the closer their practice is to the norm of New York art, the higher rated they are” (Ogbechie, 2010:36). And, again: “The visual field of Western reception demands that contemporary African art conforms to established Western paradigms of art making” (2010:36). This juxtaposition of the terms ‘contemporary’ and ‘African’, as discussed in Chapter One, are central to responses like Ogbechie’s.

It is not difficult to understand, when phrased this way, why one may find fault with a set of requirements that foreground western values for acceptance of African art into discourses, markets, and the like. Ogbechie interprets this as an unfair exertion of power and control of Africa by the west; that is as a denial of the worthiness of Africa, and as a denial of Africans' ability to be contemporary without necessarily being westernised (2010:37).

In recognising and problematising the sense that 'ideologies' of progress in contemporary African art position western values and traditions as the norm, the ahistorical claim being made by Ogbechie in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' calls into question concepts of culture and tradition. Because, while Ogbechie's conclusion may be correct insofar as he recognises that western ways of knowing continue to have overarching cultural authority, the arguments he presents buy into a process of drawing boundaries between 'us' and 'them': between stark binaries of western/ African. There is neither a sense in the arguments of a fluidity of cultural values, nor are there any references to the concept of 'western' as an art historical paradigm. Ogbechie challenges our understandings of globalisation by saying that "no one lives in a global space: we live in Cotonou, Kathmandu and Copenhagen" (2010:35), but does not apply the same level of scrutiny or scepticism in using terms like African and western. In this sense, I propose that Ogbechie's claims, or at least the way they are presented, rest on assumptions about the nature of Africanness as something that becomes contaminated or bastardised when it meets, intersects, and combines with western, or other, traditions, values, and histories. Ogbechie's argument relies on the same notions of cultural authenticity that have been so broadly dismissed for their ignorance of the constructed, fluctuating, and inconsistent nature of traditions and cultures themselves.

Additionally, Ogbechie's arguments do not consider the extent to which contemporary African art retains some sense or quality of Africanness or some transfer of African value systems in their production and reception. For, while contemporary African art may be engaging with western histories and western ways of thinking to be classed as 'contemporary', it is still however framed as African art for the ways in which it possesses or presents some link to Africanness. This link might manifest in subject matter, or medium, or title, or perspective, or even insofar as the artist identifies as 'African'. Additionally, while western art history may be called so for its extended past in creating and enforcing the west as the cultural norm, there are African art histories within the multiple and conflicting narratives of art history.

Enwezor, on the other hand, who is the focus of Ogbechie's argument, seems to promote a far more nuanced and complex view on the ways in which histories are constructed, manipulated, and

adapted. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Snap Judgments*, Enwezor dedicates much of the second essay, entitled 'Contemporary African Art and Globalisation', to unpacking the phrase contemporary African art, stating, quite frankly, that much debate exists on the definition of the category (2006:22), admitting that contemporary African art is dialectical in nature and that essentialising it down into one definition and scope would limit the multiplicity of contemporary African discursive formations (2006:23). He also admits that: "Contemporary African artists, like their counterparts in Asia, South America, and various diasporas, produce their work in critical dialogue with that of artists in Western Europe and North America" and that the encounters between Africa and Europe in the form of colonialism, postcolonialism, and globalisation have shaped part of the project of contemporary African art (2006:22). Enwezor's views are not, in this sense, about affirming Africanness as a fixed concept but rather about questioning and challenging its limits and parameters: exploring the flexibility of its reach rather than protecting its boundaries.

In this sense, then, I propose that, though Ogbechie may be correct in his first premise, to the extent that he recognises the persistence of western cultural authority as a measure over the value of African artworks, traditions, and ways of knowing, it is, however, a far more complicated situation than is communicated in the scope of 'The Curator as Culture Broker'.

The use of emotive language and the lack of clarity in the Argument for Ahistoricism tend to present African art as if it were made in a closed system, a timeless and isolated place in which outside influence is constructed as a de-authenticating process. Ogbechie's position, in this sense, acknowledges the ability of the western culture, as a construct, to transform, evolve, expand, and 'progress', however problematic in its ideological enactment, but denies the same temporal allowance for the construct of African culture, freezing it in time and space; allowing it no contamination or miscegenation. Additionally, the position fails to account for or legitimise the extent to which contemporary African artworks have elements, themes, styles, and readings that are firmly located within an African frame of reference. The argument Ogbechie makes leads to a situation where one might assume that Africanness can be measured in relation to the extent to which an artwork is within western values and perimeters.

I propose that Ogbechie's arguments may fall into a trap of exerting a kind of new authenticity test on African art and African culture. Authenticity, as a measure of value that has dominated discussions of African art over the last century, has been revealed as a notion that relies on a falsely constructed conception of culture and traditions. In their article 'On Art and Contamination: Performing Authenticity in Global Art Practices' (2008), Murray and Murray discuss curator and critic

Gerardo Mosquera's writing as revealing the ways in which diversity programmes are in fact ideological machines that normalise and give authority to western values:

Opposed to the spectralization of Otherness through the highlighting of difference, he points to the ways in which a dominating "metaculture" such as (but not limited to) that of the United States reinstantiates itself as contemporary and international— as the universal standard by which all other cultures are comparatively more provincial and ahistorical. This gives rise to the interpretation of more marginalized cultures as more ethnic and in a sense more "authentic" based upon their limited contamination by Western influence. This politically correct anti-Eurocentric influence, ironically, perpetuates another set of strictures that limits cultural expression by imposing upon it the rule of authenticity as a demarcation of value: "An anti-Eurocentrism like this freezes all African cultures, relegating them to a museum without understanding that they are living organisms which need to respond actively to the reality of their time" (2008:91).

That Murray and Murray describe anti-Eurocentrism as politically correct is fitting in relation to Ogbechie's position; the need to preserve, protect, and promote Africanness in African art ironically reaffirms "the rule of authenticity as a demarcation of value" revealing either a miscommunication of the position or a misunderstanding of the ways in which cultures necessarily change, adapt, and adopt.

Ahistoricism and the Postcolonial African Subject

Similarly, the second premise in Ogbechie's Argument for Ahistoricism tends to oversimplify, not only, the relationship between postcolonialism and contemporary African art, but also the notion of postcolonialism in itself. By criticising Enwezor for "an unfailing interest in defining contemporary African art as a context that emerges with the postcolonial African subject" (2010:34), Ogbechie is, on one hand, acting in resistance to the tendency of 'global' history to be organised around western-related or western-centred events and, on the other, finds the very implications of postcolonialism in relation to Africa problematic.

On a literal level, Ogbechie's second premise could be interpreted as a temporal observation; that is, temporally, contemporary African art emerges at the same time as postcolonialism begins to gain international ground as a discourse. Enwezor's words reflect this literal reading when he states in the *Snap Judgments* catalogue that:

Until the early 1990s, contemporary African artists, though not completely unknown, were relatively unfamiliar to the international public. Although African artists had been exhibiting in international venues for the better part of the post-World War II period... many of them remained marginal in the discussions and exhibitions of contemporary and modern art (2006:21).

While, on the surface, this interpretation seems to be fairly simple and easy enough to test, it is a far more complex implication than it seems. Ogbechie's position is ambiguous; insofar as the argument he presents claims that Enwezor's definition of contemporary African art could imply any number of alternatives. For instance, the definition could allow that no contemporary African art exists before postcolonialism begins to happen, or alternatively that contemporary African art only exists once the theory of postcolonialism emerges in the mid 1980s, or, that it exists as a category but is not widely exhibited or critically acclaimed until postcolonialism happens, or until postcolonial theory finds popularity. Even more so, for whom does contemporary African art exist, the west or Africa?

In considering Enwezor's writing on contemporary African art it is, however, apparent that, at least at surface level, Ogbechie's claim is correct; Enwezor does situate contemporary African art as necessarily related to the postcolonial moment. For instance, in the catalogue to *Snap Judgments* he claims the following:

Historically, the terms for defining the identity of African art have been generated from inside the continent. These attempts have been pursued in a number of directions. One of these focuses on the parameters of cultural encounters between African and Europe; here the concerns of artists informed by the experiences of colonization and the reception of modernism in Africa shaped part of the *aesthetic* project of modern and contemporary African art and continue to dominate the perspectives of most Western observers. Another takes up the legacy of colonialism to address the radical prioritization of African aesthetics within the discourses of postcolonialism (2006:22).

That these two positions around the definition of African art are valid or not is irrelevant to my concerns here, however, what this statement shows is that Enwezor's positing of these two positions reveals his own consideration around the relationship between Africanness and postcolonialism as, merely, that it has shaped *some* part of the experience of *some* Africans, that it has affected *some* of the aesthetics of African art, that it dominates the reading of African art by western audiences, and that it has resulted in a reactionary prioritisation of African aesthetics in African art. Enwezor's position here is, again, far more nuanced than Ogbechie's arguments make it out to be. It is reasonable to posit the effects of postcolonialism on African art in the ways that

Enwezor does in his selection of artists for the *Snap Judgments* exhibition as well as in his discussion around the discourse of contemporary African art. Most notably, Enwezor is aware that it is the reception of African artworks in the west that determines their meaning in discourses of art criticism and art history (because of the western domination of these fields) and that this reading is going to be necessarily located within a framework of postcolonialism.

It seems that Ogbechie's ahistorical argument is not merely concerned with the ways in which Enwezor positions contemporary African art in relation to postcolonialism but rather with the very notion and implications of postcolonialism itself. These formulations and implications have been thoroughly interrogated from as early as the 1990s by authors like McClintock, Ella Shohat, Arif Dirlik, and Kwame Anthony Appiah.

My sense is that the surface level reading of postcolonialism's relationship to contemporary African art exemplifies the temporal ambiguity of postcolonialism and questions the very nature of the organisation of postcolonialism around what McClintock calls a "binary axis of time rather than power" (1992:88). That postcolonialism is an instantaneous moment in which colonial power is relinquished and previously marginalised subjects suddenly become enlightened and intellectual (and recognised on international stages of contemporary art), is a common misconception. The following passage by McClintock seems to sum this up cogently:

Metaphorically, the term "post-colonialism" marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from "the pre-colonial," to "the colonial," to "the post-colonial" - an unbidden, if disavowed, commitment to linear time and the idea of "development"... Metaphorically poised on the border between old and new, end and beginning, the term heralds the end of a world era, but within the same trope of linear progress that animated that era. If "post-colonial" theory has sought to challenge the grand march of western historicism with its entourage of binaries (self-other, metropoliscolony, center-periphery, etc.), the term "post-colonialism" nonetheless re-orientes the globe once more around a single, binary opposition: colonial/ post-colonial...Moreover, theory is thereby shifted from the binary axis of power (colonizer/colonized - itself inadequately nuanced, as in the case of women) to the binary axis of time, an axis even less productive of political nuance since it does not distinguish between the beneficiaries of colonialism (the ex-colonizers) and the casualties of colonialism (the ex-colonized) (1992:85-86).

In this sense, McClintock's reading of the term situates postcolonialism in the same way I have attempted to situate our understanding of contemporaneity – as a term that is reliant on a constructed notion of time as linear and developmental, caught up in ideologies of progress;

situating the 'end' of colonialism in a neat catch phrase as a way of marking progress in temporal form. Similarly, the term postcolonial creates binaries out of the colonised and the colonisers, which, as McClintock notes, is far too simplified a position for a nuanced and complicated situation.

Similarly in her seminal article entitled 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"' (1992), cultural theorist, Shohat, explores how 'postcolonial' has terminologically replaced the much-problematised term 'Third World';²⁶ in this sense 'Third World' intellectuals become postcolonial intellectuals, 'Third World' discourses become postcolonial discourses (1992:100). This shift in terminology, she argues, points to a shift in political agency as well, noting that there is much more of a "professional prestige" and "theoretical aura" attached to the term postcolonial (1992:100).

Her most widely shared criticism, however, is the ambiguity implied in the spatio-temporal limits of the term, which tends to imply a universally shared and equal situation rather than a number of specific, disparate, and conflicting situations (1992:102). Spatially the term seems to geographically collapse "very different national-racial formations – the United States, Australia, and Canada, on the one hand, and Nigeria, Jamaica, and India, on the other – as equally "post-colonial" (1992:102). This slippage, which implies that most, if not all of the world is in some way postcolonial, which in a broad sense it may be, but in a way that equates the situations of former colonies, that the term 'Third World' does not seem to share:

The term "post-colonial," in this sense, masks the white settlers' colonialist-racist policies toward indigenous peoples not only before independence but also after the official break from the imperial centre, while also de-emphasizing neocolonial global positionings of First World settler-states (1992:102.103).

The universal reach of the term 'postcolonial,' in this sense, falls short of being politically correct in its all-encompassing sense and blurs and disorientates the boundaries of what can be called postcolonial.

This ambiguity implies a similar thing in terms of temporality; that there is an equally universal sense of the prefix 'post' implying after – after colonialism (1992:103). This, as Shohat emphasises, undermines "colonialism's economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces in the present" (1992:105). Additionally it negates places that are still directly affected by colonialisms or neo-colonialisms, like "the oppression of Palestinians and Middle Eastern Jews by Euro-Israel (1992:105).

²⁶ The term 'Third World,' Shohat explains was developed out of the term 'third estate' used in France in the 1950s to denote commoners (1992:100). More recently it has become binarised through its comparative use in naming 'First World' versus 'Third World' countries.

Similarly to Shohat, historian, Dirlik, situates the postcolonial intellectual at the centre of the aura of postcolonialism as a discourse:

The popularity that the term *postcolonial* has achieved in the last few years has less to do with its rigorousness as a concept or with new vistas it has opened up for critical inquiry that it does with the increased visibility of academic intellectuals of Third World origin as pacesetters in cultural criticism (1994:329).

This claim resonates in a number of ways and deserves some close reading. For one, Dirlik is inciting a chicken-egg debate – asking: who came first, postcolonial intellectuals, or postcolonial discourse? He does admit that his claim is a facetious one, if only partially, because a mere positioning of intellectuals before the discourse then demands a reason for why this particular group of academics' concerns are worthy of the popularity and respectability that they have since accorded (1994:330). What is notable about Dirlik's wording in this particular claim, however, is the description of the group of academics – he does not call them postcolonial intellectuals nor 'Third World' intellectuals but rather "academic intellectuals of Third World *origin*" (my italics). This is an important distinction – he is highlighting a specific phenomenon here – because to call them postcolonial intellectuals would be to demonstrate Shohat's claim; that is that postcolonialism is spatially ambivalent. On the other hand, to call the group 'Third World' intellectuals would situate them, very specifically, in a 'Third World' location. What Dirlik does, however, is he highlights the tension between these two terms by noting their 'Third World' origin – that they have been born in 'Third World' countries – as well as their participation in the discourse. Indeed, Dirlik clarifies this position a few pages later when he explains that:

... postcolonial as a term is ambiguous when contrasted with the earlier term Third World which is firmly located in a geographical sense whereas postcolonial seems to be simply a participation in the discourse: "Now that postcoloniality has been released from the fixity of the Third World location, the identity of the postcolonial is no longer structural but discursive. Postcolonial in this perspective represents an attempt to regroup intellectuals of uncertain location under the banner of postcolonial discourse (1994:332).

What he does not come right out and say, however, is that these intellectuals of uncertain location have used postcolonial discourse to occupy the non-geographical location that is the diaspora. In this light, the sense that Ogbechie resists the identification of the postcolonial moment with contemporary African art begins to make some sense in relation to Ogbechie's concerns around the diaspora.

It is philosopher and cultural theorist, Appiah, who interestingly was born in London but was raised mainly in Ghana, who begins to grapple with the diaspora as a symptom of postcoloniality. Speaking specifically about Africa and the African diaspora he questions the relationship between African intellectuals and Africa itself, finding that at best these intellectuals, most of whom are not living in Africa itself, have some sort of ambiguity when it comes to the African continent (1992:153). Although he makes this particular claim in relation to African literature in general and in response to Zaïrean novelist, Vumbi Yoka Mudimbe's, book *Le Discours, L'Écart et L'écriture* (1988) in particular, it seems that this ambiguity, this ambivalence towards geographical Africa in its actuality rather than as some abstract construction is central to the way in which many postcolonial intellectuals mobilise their claims. Indeed, Appiah notes how postcolonial intellectuals in many ways construct an Africa that is something different to Africa itself:

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa (1992:149).

This complex statement has a number of implications. Appiah notes, first, that postcolonial intellectuals are, for the most part, working within a largely westernised set of conceptual frameworks; they are trained in universities either in the west itself or in ones based largely on the western system with predominantly western curricula. Also, he suggests that the small group not only construct a discourse but also more importantly exert some sort of influence or control over the market in African cultural property; they mobilise publics in other words. He then goes on to name three senses of Africa that postcolonial intellectuals construct or mobilise – an Africa they construct for the West's appetite, an Africa they have 'invented' for each other, and an Africa they have invented for Africa itself.

In Chapter Four I build on the implications for spatiality with reference to the diaspora and Ogbechie's position thereon, but in terms of postcoloniality, I propose that Ogbechie's argument is rooted in the temporal and spatial ambiguity of the term postcolonial. The claim that "... the postcolonial African exists as an autonomous subject whose cultural history is not relevant to our understanding of his or her own contemporaneity" (2010:35) reiterates that Ogbechie's primary

concern lies in the exertion of western cultural authority through paradigms of progress as enacted through temporal and spatial constructs.

Thus, I have argued in this chapter that the two premises of Ogbechie's Argument for Ahistoricism are firmly located in temporal and spatial constructs of progress and development that position Africa in a binary relationship to the west and the use of language and ways in which the argument is formulated reveals a conception of cultures and traditions as closed systems that identifies the sharing of values as a contamination of a pure, essential, and innate Africanness. The concern for the historical value of Africanness as a relational measure for the value of contemporary African art relies in a small way on assumptions about the construction of history as well as culture and in this sense are at fault for the ways in which Ogbechie too participates in the same process of inventing Africa that Appiah points out.

Chapter Four

Ogbechie's Spatial Concern: The Argument for Africa Itself

The second primary facet of Ogbechie's paper is concerned with spatiality. Through the argument presented in 'The Curator as Culture Broker', I propose that Ogbechie presents a particular view on how Africanness is determined and defined and this view is built on the ways in which space and place are understood in relation to identity, belonging, and the idea of home. In the Argument for Ahistoricism, which is concerned primarily with issues around temporality, it is apparent that temporal constructs are bound up in spatiality and one cannot escape their entanglement. In this sense, the Argument for Ahistoricism is inevitably linked to Ogbechie's argument about the diaspora, which I have chosen to call the 'Argument for Africa Itself' and which I explore in this chapter. I begin by revisiting and linking Ogbechie's position in earlier pieces of writing to this fully formed argument around the links between geography and identity. I have also introduced the argument through the second premise of the Argument for Ahistoricism, using it as a starting point to discuss the Argument for Africa Itself. Again, I have approached Ogbechie's position through a close reading of his text in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' and have considered both the validity of the argument as well as the ways in which they reveal the constructed nature of our understandings around spatiality, belonging, identity, and culture.

The genealogy of Ogbechie's positions, as presented in Chapter Two, reflects a particular kind of activism around the visibility of Africa on the global stage of fine art, and is particularly revealing about the ways in which African identity is configured. For instance the celebratory stance on the solo exhibition of South African artist William Kentridge (who was both born in South Africa and continues to live and work there) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago is countered with a position that begs the same visibility for black South Africans. Ogbechie, I would argue, is not simply being politically correct here, a perspective that would necessarily push him to question the lack of female South African artists in the same vein. Rather, Ogbechie's positions are focused on the visibility of particularly African Africans – that is black Africans – especially in relation to the colonial enterprise of apartheid in South Africa. Similarly, he tends to use terms like identity and ethnicity interchangeably, prioritising a racial reading in his reviews. The genealogy of Ogbechie's writing reveals not only the ways in which he imagines the west's control over the transaction of African art, and by extension Africanness, but also the very particular ways in which he imagines Africanness. The set of characteristics, as discussed in depth in Chapter One, which are imagined as necessary for

the definition of Africanness are evident in Ogbechie's early writing, but it is in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' that he formalises them within an argument.

In this argument the primary conception of Africanness is around the occupation of space and the thesis presented is directed overtly at the validity of the African diaspora as African. It is clear in the other primary argument that this is the focus of his paper; Ogbechie notes this position on the diaspora both in actual words, when he says: "Enwezor's curatorial focus is devoted to radical notions of contemporaneity built mainly on the practice of African artists who live and work in the West" (2010:34), as well as through the implied position that successful contemporary African artists are more western in their practices than they are African. This is reaffirmed in the second premise of the argument when he appeals the falsity of the postcolonial moment. I have suggested in Chapter Three that, following the likes of Appiah, Ogbechie imagines the diaspora as a symptom of the postcolonial moment and envisions Enwezor's control of the discourse in terms of Appiah's three senses of Africa that the postcolonial intellectual presents; that is an Africa they construct for the West's appetite, an Africa they have 'invented' for each other, and an Africa they have invented for Africa itself (1992:149). What is significant, however, in Appiah's argument around Africa are the ways in which he enforces its invention, and or construction, rather than an assumed a priori nature or normality. In this sense, for Appiah, Africa as a concept may be constructed and transacted in a number of different ways for a number of different publics, but at a fundamental level it is always an invented concept as opposed to a natural one. In light of Ogbechie's Argument for Africa Itself, I propose that Ogbechie's position comes across as the opposite of Appiah's; that Africa is a natural concept that is essential, immutable, as well as fixed in its geographical location and it is Enwezor's version of Africanness that is limited.

Ogbechie states the following in 'The Curator as Culture Broker', which is the central formulation of his Argument for Africa Itself:

Enwezor's curatorial intervention is also built on a notion of globalization that assumes the free flow of cultural producers: however, this notion is patently false since the global context enforces the locality of contemporary Africans with increasingly authoritarian protocols by preventing their movement across international borders. Also, there is an estimated 2500 contemporary African artists who live and work in the West. This estimate is extremely generous: it is possible there is quite less. How valid is a discourse that uses that limited number of artists to stand in for "contemporary African art" in general? In this regard, I propose that the curatorial regime of

Enwezor can be faulted for legitimizing a notion of Africa that dispenses with the continent itself as a historical theater of contemporary art and visual culture engagements (2010:34).

In short, Ogbechie's thesis, in this particular article, is that Enwezor's inclusion of diasporic Africans in exhibitions of contemporary African art largely dispenses with geographical Africa; that is the use of diasporic Africans to represent Africa is mostly a false representation of the concept (or what he would perhaps call the continent) of Africa and Africanness. We can infer from the implied problematic around this issue that the position Ogbechie is arguing posits the definition of Africa as strongly rooted in its geographical or spatial manifestation rather than as a concept that can be formulated around an experiential- or identity-based Africa. The repeated use of the phrasing *Africa itself* and the continent *itself* reinforces this position throughout the article.

Ogbechie's first premise is located in the formulation of globalisation and transnationalism, which is often used by Enwezor, and others, to motivate for the relevance of diasporic experiences; that is because of technological transformations, the contemporary world has become a 'global village' insofar as people are more freely able to move between and exist beyond national boundaries. Ogbechie's claim here is that globalisation is assumptive in relation to the actual mobility of African cultural producers, which he claims is far more limited than it may seem, and that this assumption undermines the validity, relevance, and prioritisation of diasporic experiences, which is limited to only a few Africans.

Ogbechie's second premise is the claim that a small number of artists (which he claims are all, or mostly, diasporic) cannot viably stand in for the entire practice and discourse of contemporary African art; that is that Africa, in its extensiveness, cannot be represented by a small number of geographically dislocated cultural producers.

Defining the Diaspora

Enwezor does tend to foreground the relevance of the diaspora as evident in an excerpt from the catalogue for *Snap Judgments*:

Along with this expansion in artistic and cultural priorities, there must also be an acknowledgement of the fact that contemporary African art exists both inside and outside the continent. In fact it is unreservedly international. This inside/outside dialectic owes much to the broad range of complex postcolonial shifts, especially the increasing participation of diasporic

and expatriate African artists located in the heart of European and American art centres... The relationship between Africa and the Western metropolis is set in dramatic tension, producing a lively array of arguments and counter-arguments, texts and counter-texts, to narrate the differing social temporalities (between modern and contemporary) and cultural perspectives (between African and diasporic) that are reshaping contemporary Africa (2006:22-23).

Enwezor's position here is one that allows for the relevance of both diasporic and continental Africans. His emphasis though, at least in this paragraph, is on the complexity of the diasporic in relation to the continental African; his claim celebrates the complexity this brings to the concept of Africanness. And, while we may test Enwezor on the ratio of his use of diasporic artists in relation to his use of continental Africans in the exhibitions of *Snap Judgments* and *In/sight*, that test would be dependent on somewhat strict definitions and limits of what it means to be diasporic or not. Zaya and Enwezor invoke this exact question in the catalogue to *In/sight*:

The Africa of the twentieth century eludes fictions of origin. Where on the map might we locate Zarina Bhimji, a Ugandan artist of Asian origin who lives in London? Or Bleach, a Zimbabwean of British origin living in the United States, or Iké Udé, Oladélé Ajiboyé Bamgboyé, and Fani-Kayode, three relocated Nigerian artists who grew up in the United States, Scotland, and England, respectively? Or even, Goldblatt, whose parents, escaping from czarist oppression in Russia, settled in apartheid South Africa? Or those North African artists who live in the dreary shadows of France's return to racial essentialism? Such are the actively lived contradictions of the African experience (1996:40).

As explored in Chapter One, through the concept of Africanness, our prescriptions for what defines a group of people are always imagined, but also often vague and inconsistent. If Africanness is defined by a random combination of race, birth, ancestry, and spatial occupation, each of which can be questioned in relation to extent (as in the case of miscegenation for instance), and thereby revealed as constructed and mostly immeasurable, then what are the ramifications for qualification as diasporic? Is there a time limit for living abroad, for instance, which justifies a person being diasporic? Can a person be both diasporic and continental simultaneously, as may be the case for people who live half of the year in Africa itself and the other half in some other location abroad? What if a diasporic African returns to Africa? Do they lose that diasporic status? Can a person be diasporic if the movement or migration takes place within the African continent and not only to western centres? Questions like these reveal the ways in which these terms are often immeasurable and loosely formed, which is something that Ogbechie's arguments begin to critique in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'. But the problematic formulation of the term diasporic also makes an exercise of

counting the number of diasporic artists in a show about Africa somewhat irrelevant. Similarly this approach takes no account of the ways in which African locations themselves are not strictly African as a result of colonialism and cosmopolitanism.

Beyond the ability of diasporic Africans to represent Africa is the question of whether any exhibition could be representational in the way that Ogbechie's arguments require in the assumption of the second premise, or even that the intention of the curatorial team was to be representative. In a review of *Snap Judgments*, Harney defends Enwezor's choices against critics who find the attempt to exhibit Africa in all its expanse and complexity a reductive, totalising, and stereotyping enterprise. The aversion to the use of Africanness as a framing mechanism for exhibitions is something that has come under much fire for curators and is, in a way, linked to what Ogbechie professes.²⁷ Harney's position in relation to Africanness is complex and nuanced for the recognition of Africa as a concept and experience that is not fixed in its geographical manifestation; that cannot be located on a map:

However, its [Africa's] role as a designation of identity rather than geography—an identity that is claimed, constantly renegotiated, and contested— can lead to productive discussions about the shifting links among visual practices, understandings of their social and political functions, and the discursive structures, at global and local levels, that interpret them. To suggest that by taking Africa as its frame, this exhibition attempts to present an anthropological picture of the state of African photography is to advance a critique that essentially misses its underlying critical agenda (2008:30,31).

Harney's approach to Africa and Africanness extends beyond the spatial configurations of belonging that inform the positions of the critics of *Snap Judgments* and Ogbechie alike. The exploration of Africanness through these exhibitions, in this sense, can be read beyond an attempt to show, or illustrate, or exemplify the essence of Africa; that is, rather, as a metaphysical exercise in interrogating the concept of Africanness as experience, as social construct, as signifier, as discursive category of self-identity. Importantly, Harney notes that while the exhibition may open up possibilities of commonalities between Africans, no matter their spatial location, or the extent to which they are 'legitimately' African, it does not, however, claim a commonality between them. Rather, the inclusion of diasporic Africans in a show themed around Africanness questions and extends the boundaries of what it may mean to be identified as African, or even, what it may mean to claim an African identity.

²⁷ See Hassan, 2008.

In this light, Ogbechie's second premise that claims the incapability of two thousand odd artists to accurately and fairly represent the entire concept of Africanness is misguided. In reality Enwezor's use of Africa as a conceptual framework should not necessarily be read as an attempt to represent or illustrate an innate and natural concept, but rather might begin to question the limits of a concept that is so clearly constructed. By including both diasporic Africans as well as continental Africans, it seems like Enwezor's intention is to question the limits of Africanness rather than to illustrate it. On a basic level, even, Ogbechie's second premise implies a strange kind of claim, insofar as he puts a particular number to the under-representation of Africa, which begs the question: how many artists would be sufficient to represent Africa?

More and more, curators, critics, and art historians are considering the role of exhibitions such as *Snap Judgments* and *In/sight* as not limited to representation but rather as a kind of argument or position taking. This approach is debated in the curator's roundtable 'The Twenty-First Century and the Mega Shows'. Okeke notes the following:

It seems to me, however, that in dealing with the question of representation, the work of the curator must first and foremost be seen as an argument, as position taking, which implies a conscious decision to ignore—in the context of a show, by not including—aspects of a subject irrelevant to the argument/position, rather than as an anthropological enterprise meant to show the way things generally are, how artists live and work in a particular place; in other words, that it is impossible to talk about representation (of African art and artists through contemporary art exhibitions or other similar narrative procedures such as published studies) as a neutral, nonpolitical, or nonideological gesture or process (2008:168).

Ogbechie's position on the role of the curator as a broker of culture and value are in essence arguments that point to this non-neutrality of curators; he recognises that by selecting particular kinds of Africans that Enwezor is participating in a process of defining what it means to be African. What his second premise claims, however, is that representation could be more neutral or natural if it made use of a larger pool of artists that were spatially more African.

Still, however, critics and art historians tend to misunderstand the aims and purposes of exhibitions. Swiss born, contemporary African art curator, Simon Njami (who curated the blockbuster *Africa Remix*) noted as late as 2007 that "The exhibition *In/sight*... was the first attempt at summarising the history of African contemporary photography" (2007:235). It is clear that comments such as this are what begin to cause reactions like Ogbechie's; presented as a summary of African photography rather than a positioned selection does make it questionable in terms of representation. On the

other hand, some reviews recognise the implausibility of representation, such as in the following one, which was published online by editor and photography critic Bill Kouwenhoven:

Although *Snap Judgments* presents more than 200 works by 35 photographers from more than 12 countries, it is necessarily a snapshot of contemporary photography from Africa, a continent of more than 70 countries and more than 800 million people. Still, Enwezor has done a remarkable job by bringing a wide range of perspectives, “platforms” or “positions” in art-speak, on photography ranging from concept art to political journalism and documentary photography while exploring issues of race, nationalism, globalisation, and daily life (2006:np).

Kouwenhoven recognises in this statement the implication of the title *Snap Judgments* insofar as thirty five photographers are physically unable to represent the diversity of eight hundred million people who simply happen to share the same land mass (even though he seems to over-estimate the amount of countries located on the African continent). Furthermore, he notes the ways in which Enwezor’s selection of artists was not an attempt to portray Africa as a resolved and simple concept, but, rather, based his choices of artists and artworks on the ways in which they extended and complicated the notions of Africanness.

Globalisation and Cultural Space

Globalisation, as a term, is used throughout ‘The Curator as Culture Broker’ and is one that Ogbechie discusses in some depth. He also makes a number of claims against the concept of transnationalism, sometimes using the two interchangeably. However, his use of these concepts in the article is, again, limited to, and entrenched in, notions of spatiality:

The ability of African artists to participate in this global context is dependent on political forces largely outside their control, and they remain peripheral to its unfolding ethos. Besides, no one lives in global space: we live in Cotonou, Katmandu and Copenhagen. The ideal of a transnational global culture assumes a free flow of people across borders in a context where Western countries (who control an outsized portion of global wealth) work furiously to limit the international mobility of Africans (2010:35).

His emphasis here is on actual mobility, the physical crossing of borders, rather than what can be understood in a more loose and abstract way as to mean the heightened interconnectivity between people and cultures. This is evident in the phrasing of “we live in Cotonou, Katmandu and Copenhagen”, which immediately locates his argument in terms of a geographical and spatial

manifestation. While we may not have the ability to be in two places at once physically, however, the ways in which the argument is communicated does not consider that we may live in Copenhagen while watching events in Katmandu on television and speaking on the phone to a relative in Cotonou and travelling later to Beijing. While it may be valid enough that Africans have limited 'actual' or physical mobility between national and international borders, it seems that, at the very least, new technologies like television, internet, and the like have made it more and more possible to see, interact, and communicate with people and cultures that are vastly different from our own. It is possible, in some sense at least, to be in many places at once; to experience from global, or globally-informed, perspectives.²⁸ And, while some may argue that these technologies are inaccessible to some or many Africans that does not necessarily imply that Africa is not experiencing the effects of globalisation in other, more subtle, ways.²⁹

In his essay 'Hélio Oiticica's Parangolés: Nomadic Experience in Endless Motion' (2000), Brazilian artist and art historian, Simone Osthoff, quotes French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, explaining that the nomadic, or diasporic, experience does not necessarily involve geographic displacement:

Some voyages take place *in situ*, are trips in intensity. Even historically, nomads are not necessarily those who move about like migrants. On the contrary, they do not move; they stay in the same place and continually evade the codes of settled people (Deleuze quoted in Osthoff, 2000:224).

What Deleuze grasps here, in such simplicity, is the constructed nature of our ways of considering culture. His claim is a reversal of the ways in which Ogbechie's arguments present the diasporic; inverting, negating, and undermining our spatially-entrenched ways of knowing and disrupting the constructed nature of culture itself as a manufactured concept. For Deleuze, the mutability of cultures and traditions make redundant the notion of the cross-pollinating migrant that travels from place to place contaminating 'pure' cultures. When closely considered, the concept of a migrant could apply to anyone who evolves, adapts, or changes beyond the confines of cultural acceptance. And, since cultures are constantly shifting and clearly constructed, anyone and everyone could be migrants of culture in some sense.

²⁸ Interestingly, it is arguable that the medium of photography was perhaps one of the first technological breaks that allowed this type of exchange to be possible.

²⁹ There is a subtle difference here between place-based and place-bound. The two concepts are closely connected and the shift between them is an important one to note; place bound implies that we are unable to move and place-based implies that we are physically located in space. I do not propose that Ogbechie's argument is claiming that we are place-bound creatures.

As discussed in Chapter One, our many misconceptions of the concept of culture and the deep entrenchment of constructs around time and space seem to be to blame for the ways of thinking that are expressed in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'. Aline Brandauer, a curator and writer based in Santa Fe, in the same volume on diasporic studies as Osthoff explains this misconception of culture in relation to the Jewish and African Diasporas:

Diaspora, more than nomad or certainly exile, is... based on the idea of "a fragmentation and scattering of a once-unified people." A people once unified by what? Race, perhaps, but culture certainly – and culture is a term that is increasingly under fire in a shifting semantic universe. The word, so deeply invested with the progressive modernism of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century has itself accrued connotations of monolithic and often primitivizing intent (2000:255).

That our understanding of culture has been rooted in notions of immutability and essentialism has undermined the extent to which we can understand the actual state of the world. That cultures are innate to a group of people, that they bond particular groups together despite spatial dislocation, or that they are innate to a particular occupation of place, are the misconceptions that underlie Ogbechie's two main arguments. One may argue, in this light, that the spatial dislocation between the cultures of the northern-most and southern-most places of Africa may be enough space to break the cultural connection between the people of a particular group in the same way that being outside of the borders of the continent arguably does. Nonetheless, the assumption that people are unified by culture relies on the conception of culture as an innate and essential phenomenon, which has been thoroughly discredited as a primitivising approach, especially in relation to Africa.

While, then, Ogbechie may be correct in arguing that transnationalism and globalisation are, spatially, ideals but not actualities for all, his presentation of the terms are limited to their physical enactments, which denies the greater sense of migration and movement that is not physical; that relies on an assumptive notion of culture. Additionally, even beyond the conceptual faults in Ogbechie's argument, is the sense that however undiplomatic or politically controlled the physical crossing of borders is, a large number of Africans have nonetheless moved and or relocated throughout the world. This movement, while not available to all Africans has still however seen the relocation of millions of people, and not simply in recent times, through postcolonialism, globalisation, or transnational aspirations, but also through a number of less recent and more subtle and complex events like slavery and exile.

Ogbechie goes on in 'The Curator as Culture Broker' to note that:

Globalization has become a one-way flow that enforces locality on African artists by narrating their contemporary practice as a moribund context of cultural engagements while validating Western contemporary art as a universal rather than local context of production. It also participates in a relocation of African cultural patrimony to Western ownership by enhancing Western authority in defining the value of African cultural production (2010:35).

Ogbechie's sense of globalisation here is reminiscent of the position on the ahistoricism of contemporary African art. The concern seems to be that the effects of globalisation are causing African traditions in visual culture to become largely replaced by western ones. As discussed in Chapter Three, this type of approach, which sees African culture as an immutable closed system that is contaminated when combined with other cultures, is, again, a result of a misunderstanding or a miscommunication of the nature of culture. It is telling that Ogbechie's arguments present this as a one-way flow, one in which I imagine he would not consider the possible 'contamination' of western culture by African visual traditions.

Brandauer notes that this approach to culture and the contamination thereof is evocative of the politics around cultural belonging:

Diaspora, the nomad and the foreigner all are stories of *interpenetration* – that most feared and *gendered* enemy of formulations of "modernism" and the nation state. The coexistence and inevitable cross-pollination of "cultural traits" and values are often viewed as threatening to both the diasporic group and, for lack of a better term, the "host" group (2000:257).

The fear of interpenetration, cross-pollination, miscegenation, it seems, are factors that influence the position that is communicated through Ogbechie's arguments in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'. Fundamentally, understandings of belonging and identity are based on inclusionary and exclusionary principles, creating a kind of violence in their existence as well as in their transformation; to belong to a particular group necessarily implies that circumstantially some people do not belong. Disrupting the boundaries of belonging and identity are thereby understandably threatening to both our group identity as well as our own individual identities. The fears around a loss of African identity seem to be central to the type of approach that Ogbechie is taking in the Argument for Africa Itself.

Conclusion

Sylvester Ogbechie's article, 'The Curator as Culture Broker' is a particularly persuasive and telling example of the ways in which our understandings of Africanness are entrenched in the imagined enactments and limits of time and space. Additionally, the presentation of the curator as the dictator of meaning in art historical discourse is a revision of past thinking around the subject and fails to recognise the nuances of the negotiation of meaning and value in art historical discourses. The criticisms of Enwezor, who consistently shows an awareness of the complexities and contradictions both in the greater discourse as well as attempts to engage these in his curatorial practice, is mostly unjustified and when valid should be directed at the greater situation of cultural practice and not at any one single curator.

However, Ogbechie's call for critical research into curatorial practices and exhibitions of African art is worthwhile. Considering *Snap Judgments* and *In/sight* as well as the types of discourse they have engendered allows us a reading of the ways in which contemporary African art is being negotiated and defined and, through the secondary literature they engender (as in 'The Curator as Culture Broker'), underlying frameworks, assumptions, and constructs are revealed, allowing us to critically engage them.

Ogbechie's two central arguments exemplify this process. In the first argument, in which temporality is the primary concern, Ogbechie claims that the type of African art Enwezor selects is ahistorical insofar as it is primarily concerned with the recent history of postcolonialism as well as because of its likeness in form and content to western styles of art making, which Ogbechie describes as "radical contemporaneity". As discussed in Chapter One, the formulations of contemporaneity as a concept are entrenched in paradigms of progress and development, resulting in a temporal ambiguity around the term. While it may be presented as that concerning the new, the modern, or the avant-garde, the understanding of this is reliant on the assumption that each stage in history, and specifically in art history, is an improvement on the last. This 'ideology of progress', to use McClintock's phrasing, is entrenched in our understanding of time as a linear and developmental. Additionally, the conception of contemporaneity is built largely around histories established in western paradigms, prioritising a particular kind of narrative, approach, and perspective. Hence, when Ogbechie describes Enwezor's practice as devoted to contemporaneity, his concern lies in the ways in which the configuration and value of contemporary African art are located in western prescriptions and systems of value.

Similarly, Ogbechie's concern around the configuration of contemporary African art in relation to postcolonialism is located in the temporal and spatial ambiguity that it engenders. As McClintock explains, postcolonialism is a term that is also trapped in paradigms of progress and, at the same time as being pre-emptively celebratory, it seems to reduce the nuances of colonialism in its many manifestations to one past event that is global in its reach, insofar as the term applies to both colonisers as well as the colonised in the same way. Ogbechie's position sees the prioritisation of postcolonialism in the discourse of contemporary African art as a means to deny Africa's coequality to western spaces, unless it is presented in a narrative that has western historical events at its centre.

In response to this argument, I have suggested that Ogbechie's perspective, while valid in a number of ways that recognise the cultural authority of the west and the resulting political disadvantages for Africa, is nonetheless reliant on a misconception of the concepts of tradition and culture. I have argued that Ogbechie's claim depends on an understanding of Africa as closed and timeless, with no room for the adaptation of traditions and cultural values. This way of approaching culture was at fault in early anthropological studies that saw the establishment of the 'authenticity' of African art objects. In this way Ogbechie's desire for contemporary African art to remain pure and free of western 'contamination' is an enactment of a new kind of authenticity. Additionally, while I agree that postcolonialism is a flawed theoretical framework for its many spatial and temporal ambiguities and reductions, these rely on our constructed notions of time and space. In this sense, before we can recognise the extent to which theoretical frameworks are critically inept, we must first re-evaluate the constructs that inform them, like those embedded in notions of culture and history. Ogbechie's position – against the denial of the relevance or precedence of African histories, traditions, and ways of knowing in contemporary African art – may be justified and convincing at face value. However, his failure to recognise or foreground the fluidity, mutability, and constructed nature of culture and history limits an ability to identify the ways in which contemporary African artists are adapting African traditions and the ways in which exhibitions like *Snap Judgments* and *In/sight* are challenging constructed notions about what it means to be both contemporary and African, simultaneously.

Similarly, in his *Argument for Africa Itself*, Ogbechie advances a thesis that relies on a conception of Africa that is located in a solely spatial understanding. His argument denies the existence of globalisation, an oft used reasoning for the validity of the diasporic experience, on the basis of increased limited physical mobility of Africans across international borders and contends that a small number of mostly diasporic African artists are not sufficient to be representative of contemporary African art in general. Using these two premises, his claim is that Enwezor's prioritisation of artists

from the African diaspora mobilises a perception of Africa and Africanness that negates Africa as a continent, or what I have identified as the spatial manifestation of Africa.

Through a close reading of his choice of words, as well as the primary and secondary literature around *In/sight* and *Snap Judgments*, I have explored the extent to which globalisation and transnationalism exist in forms beyond physical movement, revealing Ogbechie's reliance on spatial understandings of and approaches to Africanness. Additionally, I have considered the ways in which Africanness as well as what may be imagined as 'diasporic-ness' are constructed in terms of spatiality and have demonstrated the ways in which these terms are overtly manufactured and mostly used without careful consideration of the assumptions on which they are reliant. I have pointed out that Africanness as an experience and as an identity, extend beyond the limits of geography. Engaging these constructs, I have revealed the ways in which exhibitions of contemporary African art are not only incapable of being representative of Africa and Africanness but also that they are, in Enwezor's case at least, not intended to be. Through the interrogation of Ogbechie's premises I have followed existing thinking around the diaspora and questioned the extent to which our imaginings around identity and belonging are based on exclusionary principles that cause feelings of fear and loss when threatened by interpenetration.

As a concept that forms the basis of almost a billion people's identities, the negotiation of Africanness is a subject that is understandably complex. Also, as a concept that has been negotiated and defined by non-Africans for much of our recent history, it is reasonable that it would be held as dear for many: as precious and in need of protection. The underlying features and implications of Ogbechie's argument reveal this type of need to control and defend the limits of Africanness and in so doing tend to repeat the same sort of assumptions and misconceptions that characterised the perspectives of the west in creating notions of authenticity and primitivism.

While Ogbechie's approach is, in this sense, understandable, it is limited insofar as it negates the allowance of complexities in the various enactments and manifestations of Africans. As an approach to understanding the construction of the histories of art as well as other cultural concepts and studies, the reductive effects of spatial and temporal constructs as organisational categories tend to be unhelpful. The construction of the histories of art, it seems, continue to be ideal discourses through which to analyse the types of debates that ensue around identity, ownership, belonging, and the construction of history and culture. Surely, the contestation over exhibitions of contemporary African art, and ownership of culture, points to the need for continued negotiations around the concept of Africanness.

As quoted by Harney, Appiah notes: “. . . we can choose, within broad limits, set by ecological, political, and economic realities, what it will mean to be African in the coming years” (2008:36). This ability to renegotiate the limits of Africanness beyond temporal and spatial frameworks is surely what Ogbechie’s position is missing; that Africans are no longer relegated to a spatial location, an ancestry, or a skin colour, but rather have the ability to self-define and enact their Africanness through their own choices.

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