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A Renewed Cosmopolitanism: Specifying Artists, Curators, and Art-writers

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How are artists, curators, and art-writers placed conceptually and culturally today, and how might we make the indispensable but overly general categories that describe them more specific? One way is to challenge one of these placeholders, the assumption that we are all cosmopolitan, that one can simply take on a “cosmo” identity. Discourses as different as those of diaspora and international art fairs share preoccupations with crossing borders. Those of us interested in contemporary art can be lulled into complacency by reports of the effortless global movement and exchange of individual works, artists, ideas, and curators. Commenting on the geographical extension of Documenta 11 in the catalogue to Platform 5 of the 2002 exhibition, for example, co-curator Ute Meta Bauer wrote that any “insistence that the entire discourse must be held at one’s own front door is more than a little surprising, given that the art world is especially proud of being cosmopolitan” (“The Space of Documenta 11’ 2002: 104). Perhaps it is a symptom of this unwitting acceptance that the term is not often used in art-writing. Instead, cosmopolitanism’s priorities and controversies lie concealed behind the more common general notions of “multiculturalism,” “globalism,” and “internationalism.” The ideal of being a “citizen of the world,” as the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope put it in the 4th century BCE, can today be engulfed and perverted by the vocabularies of the multi-national and global. Fungibility is the highest value in an art world in which some national or ethnic identities are more equal than others.¹ Cosmopolitanism supposedly stands *against* nationalism and regionalism, against the particular and possibly parochial interests touted by identity. Once we descend from this ideal plane, however, I am led to ask whether the largely unexamined adoption of a cosmopolitan demeanor in the art world today is a symptom of inanity rather than the application or residue of lofty beliefs. Are we cosmopolitan in meaningful ways?

To triangulate cosmopolitanism as part of the tendency to generalize in the context of contemporary art – to understand why the concept is at once almost a given, largely ignored, and of critical importance – I will look first at one indication of an assumed cosmopolitanism, the notational tick that places artists with the “-based” formula. The hyphen is crucial in the semaphore of contemporary identity politics. For one thing, it brokers the constituencies of multiculturalism. On the other hand, we might say that cosmopolitans are in danger of abjuring the hyphen in favour of generalities. I will then focus on the work of Yinka Shonibare, who uses humour and national stereotypes to explore the ironies and failures of multiculturalism and nationality in the UK.

Tentative Tense, Provisional Place

These days, it is difficult to just *be* a visual artist. Cultural producers need a short-form pedigree that locates them quickly, in the blink of an eye scanning a bio., we might say. The modifier “-based” is widely used to establish coordinates and qualifications. Denotations of a production medium or art world inclination (“photo-based,” “text-based”) are expedient if not always simple. More freighted with implication is the

¹ On the art world’s and art history’s problematic priorities, see Rasheed Araeen, ‘A Very Special British Issue? Modernity, Art History and the Crisis of Art Today.’ *Third Text*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, March, 2008, 125–144.

seemingly required identification of the artist's place of domicile and work. Today, even those from the accredited centres of the art world are habitually referred to as "city X -based." Thus we can read that "Francesco Clemente is a New York-based artist, who exhibits at the Gagosian Gallery." Such labeling also accompanies curators and art-writers. Why does place figure? When asked where he was from, Diogenes countered that what should matter was that he was a citizen of the world. He did *not* say "I'm a Sinope-based thinker." While we cannot effectively learn or communicate without generalizations,² the hyphenated tags that pretend lend specificity to an artist are not innocent. Asking why we use them and what they mean is a step towards what Kobena Mercer calls a critical cosmopolitanism (Mercer 2005: 9), a version more meaningful in today's art world than the generalizations usually deployed under this capacious banner.

To note that artist X is "London-based" or "New York-based" cuts two ways. Locale must be important to be recorded. At the same time, the immediate context is suspended or rejected by the hyphen and its trailer, "based." To claim that one is "X-based" suggests that the artist works here, that this place is a point of reference, but also that s/he could as easily move. A painter I know glosses the connotations this way: "I'm living here at the moment, but I'm really a larger world artist." You might be thinking that some artists instead convey a genuine rootedness in their self-descriptions, claiming with purpose that they are from, or work in, a certain place. Or you might object that the modifier "-based" is not universal, and I would agree. But another common descriptive rubric underlines my reading of "-based" as a significant marker of impermanence, even shiftiness. The Canadian Art Database, maintained on line by the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art (CCCA), uses variations of the tag X "currently lives and works in" city Y for all of its over 500 contemporary artists. Think about the anodyne term "currently." Potential relocation is key because contemporary art typically sees itself as a cosmopolitan discourse and because artists therefore often feel they should be on the move. Who in the art world does not wish to be a cosmopolite? One result is perpetual *anachorism*, being out of place, the spatial correlate of anachronism. Intended as a helpful, descriptive modifier, then, the "-based" formula as often as not leads to a sense of displacement or even alienation. To put the point polemically, if to be provisional is a good thing, one is never anywhere. One is general.

In applying pressure to the "-based" modifier, I assume some degree of purpose in artists' self descriptions. No doubt these sketches are in part only shortcuts even mandated by a gallery or publication. We all use templates unthinkingly. To speculate on what these habitual patterns of place identification and modification say about art and artists in the present, we need to know more of the history of the "-based" formula, both how long and where it has been deployed. A quick survey suggests that the convention is widespread; it is used in *Art in America*, for example. Most likely it is an unspoken paradigm in contemporary art, which leads me to suggest that many contemporary artists are nervous about place as an element of identity, even while they tentatively name their place: they are nervous about too much specificity.

² The neurobiologist Semir Zeki describes the "first step" in the human "acquisition of knowledge" as "abstraction, by which [he means] the emphasis on the general at the expense of the particular.... This process is undertaken continually by the brain." "The Art of Gerard Caris and the Brain's Search for Knowledge" (2007). In *Gerard Caris: Pentagonismus/Pentagonism*, Exh. Cat. Karlsruhe: ZKM, 74-83, 76.

But here lies another contradiction, given that most of today's prestigious, permanent international art exhibitions are identified by city, yet organized by national pavilion and national participation: the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo Biennale, the Sydney Biennale and many others follow this pattern. Even Documenta is properly called the Kassel Documenta to acknowledge its hometown. A fictive suspension of nationality is built into the city-based formula. In fact, the specification of national affiliation is a *faux pas* in the contemporary art world, both informally and institutionally. Being city based is nonetheless as much a dismissal of the local-as-parochial as it is a recognition of the importance of place to identity and artistic production. The “-based” label can dis-place its wearer. Again, it is too specific, not sufficiently cosmo.

Another wrinkle to consider: artists seek grant support from federal, regional, and municipal agencies founded explicitly and exclusively on national and regional affiliations. If these artists gain recognition, they can return to (or aspire to) being placeless or multi-spatial. They can be “Vancouver-based,” that is, cosmopolitan, for consumption in the international market. Just as the assertion of locale can be economically advantageous, so too can wearing the mantle of the cosmopolitan. But though it may be assumed that artists are or want to be cosmopolitan and that this is a good thing, the notion has been hotly contested for the past decade or so, though not especially in the art world. For example, the economic basis of “cosmo” ideals finds a trenchant critic in Timothy Brennan. “What cosmopolitanism unconsciously strives for is a stasis in which the unique expression of the non-Western is Western reflexively and automatically—the local self exported *as* the world,” he writes, building on the critiques of Georg Simmel and Antonio Gramsci (Brennan 2001: 675).³ Brennan also points out the core ambivalences of the notion of the cosmopolitan, notably, that it is “local while denying its local character. This denial is an intrinsic feature of cosmopolitanism and inherent to its appeal” (660). Are artists truly citizens of the world in more than the generalized terms remaindered by the economic imperatives of globalization?

Currents of Cosmopolitanism

I have assumed up to this point that we share an understanding of the term cosmopolitan, starting from the broad sense of “worldly” and “sophisticated,” and moving to a more specific social and political position that values global community over local priorities. The word also invokes an ideal of fundamental humanity, an essence that subtends particulars of character, circumstance, and especially of place. There is a wide range of tone as well as connotation in the usage of this term: we can refer to someone as having “cosmopolitan tastes” in food, for example, or we can use the word to suggest tolerance for cultural differences of many sorts. The idiom can as easily be incendiary, as in debates about the priority of the universal over the vernacular in identity politics, personal morality, or in government. Cosmopolitanism is forever fraught with contradictions, not least because it abuts other complex ideas such as the global, the nation, the postcolonial, hybridity, diaspora, and multiculturalism.

³ See also Brennan (1997), *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.

What we call cosmopolitanism has a 2500-year history, beginning, as far as we know, with the Buddha's resistance to the caste hierarchies of Hindu society and the Stoics' substitution of equality based on a common substrate of humanity for the exclusionary practices of the Greek polis (Dharwadker 2001: 6-7). The meaning and application of the term are not homogeneous over this span of time, despite its frequent appeals to a universal and timeless humanity. Today, we need to think about "discrepant cosmopolitanisms," in James Clifford's resonant phrase (Clifford 1997: 36), those of different times and places, of different genders and classes. We also need to look back at the history of this discourse to determine how it might be useful now. Another critical starting point in cosmopolitanism's theorization and role in world affairs is Immanuel Kant's essay "Perpetual Peace," published in 1795. "Cosmopolitan right," he proclaimed, is "the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory" (Kant 1970: 105). His cosmopolitanism is founded on the term "hospitality." For many today, to be hospitable might seem ordinary, merely a matter of manners. Yet for Kant this prerogative is extended on the basis of universal human reason and freedom. It builds upon analogous rights within one's own state and thus has sweeping implications for our treatment of strangers. It is humanism on the move.

Let me review what a consequential word cosmopolitan is these days. As Jürgen Habermas demonstrates (Habermas 1997: 113-53), Kant's Enlightenment revival of cosmopolitan right remains relevant to today's politics but is also in need of far-ranging revision. Seyla Benhabib (2006: 22ff), for example, deploys his notion of hospitality to grapple with the rights of non-recognized peoples within states and of relationships between states. Kant did not foresee the virulence of European nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries; nor could he have predicted the implications of colonialism when he proposed his cosmopolitan order as part of a formula for peace. In "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitan Freedom in Transnationalism," (Cheah and Robbins 1998: 290-328) Pheng Cheah both elaborates on the failings of Kant's vision of a "rational-universalist grounding" for cosmopolitan exchange and attempts to salvage aspects of the idea through a critique of Homi Bhabha's widely influential notion of hybridity and James Clifford's nuanced vision of discrepant cosmopolitanism. With other scholars these days, Cheah cautions against the temptation to idealize a cosmopolitan freedom of movement over the purported restrictions of the nation-state. Because that state and its attendant "postcolonial nationalism" is all that many people have, it is possible to see cosmopolitanism as elitist. Hybridity theory, Cheah claims, tends to a cosmopolitanism that overemphasizes "transnational mobility," underplaying the fact that there are, and always have been, many people who cannot move. Clifford, on the other hand, has recently explored the expansive limits of the notion of travel, noting that "travelers" are not only those who relocate by choice, not only tourists, but also, for example, indentured workers, or the servants who accompany heroic travelers in the European mould, and of course those who flee political crises. These travelers' divergent experiences make up his discrepant cosmopolitanisms. Others have insisted on the additional differences made by gender. As Andrew Linklater puts it, having equal rights does not mean one has an equal capacity to act on those rights (Linklater 1999: 35-59). Today, whatever the specifics of the negotiation, any right of cosmopolitan movement across state or disciplinary boundaries can no longer be based on Kant's ecumenical

assumptions. We cannot properly ignore the wide range of perspectival initiatives covered by the term “identity politics.”

James Clifford provides a way to think through such issues when describes his emphasis on travel in the cosmopolitan mode as a ‘translation term,’ which he defines as ‘a word of apparently general application used for comparison in a strategic and contingent way... It offers a good reminder that all translation terms used in global comparisons – terms like “culture,” “art,” “society,” “peasant,” “mode of production,” “man,” “woman,” “modernity,” “ethnography” – get us some distance and fall apart’ (Clifford 2006: 39). ‘Cosmopolitan’ is another translation term in this sense.

Several pressing questions arise within the context of the cosmopolitan as general default – a translation term – in the art world. First, does a commitment to this ideal entail turning one’s back on local priorities, on specificity? If so, we must contend with the historical use of the claim that cosmopolitans are rootless. Can one be both local and cosmopolitan; indeed, can the former guarantee the critical authenticity of the latter? If so, what and where would what Kobena Mercer calls “cosmopolitan locales” be? (Mercer 1999-2000: 59). Finally, is the ideal of easy translatability between cultures a worthy goal, and in practice, is it more than a fantasy?

Pageants of Identity

Yinka Shonibare grounds the issues of cosmopolitanism in the politics of representation. With an insistence on the specifics of place and a deployment of wicked humour, his work resists the worn notion that the visual is a universal language. Shonibare turns cultural stereotypes to the business of critique. His batik-clad figures, whether in *Dysfunctional Family* or *Reverend on Ice* (2005)⁴ – in which he riffs on an icon of cosmopolitan enlightenment and “Britishness,” “The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Doddingston Loch” of c. 1795, usually attributed to Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823) – belie the existence of Africaness, Britishness or any other reductive national or racial essence.

Where the Scot Raeburn’s painting playfully performs the inscription of form and reason in a manner calculated to flatter the Scots (such elegant maneuvers are not easy), Shonibare’s sculpture has no head, no purposeful or conventionally recognizable identity. Born in London, raised in Nigeria, and living in the UK since his student days, Shonibare claims to be a citizen of the world. But the batik he buys in London’s street markets only has the *look* of exotic authenticity: the fabrics, originally Indonesian, have since the nineteenth century been simulated in the Netherlands and England, then exported to West Africa, where in the 70s, “progressive Afrocentric political movements” made these bold textiles their own (Farrell 2003: 164). As the artist says about these materials but with wider implication, “at the shop in Brixton Market, they are never quite sure of the origins” (Quoted in Mercer 1995: 41). Like batik, Shonibare is, in his own words, a “post-colonial hybrid” (Shonibare 2004).⁵ In his usual, ironic way, he elaborates: “I watch the same news as everybody else ... I’m a citizen of the

⁴ Life-size fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax-printed cotton, steel. Image may be viewed at: <http://www.yinka-shonibare.co.uk/yinkashonibare-work/reverend-on-ice.html>.

⁵ Talk at Tate Modern, Nov. 3, 2004. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations are from this source.

world.” His work insists on the irreducible complexities of place and on his complex sense of cultural translation. To invoke James Clifford’s phrase again, then, Shonibare lives a discrepant cosmopolitanism, a position that simultaneously recalibrates our understanding of world citizenship, nationality, and locality. If one doubts that Shonibare’s design is to comment in part on the cosmopolitanism of his city, London, and the world, *Global Underground Map* of 2006 should be convincing.⁶ Here he has cleverly applied the famous colours of the London underground lines to the 1974 Peters projection of the world, suggesting the flow of peoples to and from the metropolis.⁷

Shonibare’s self-descriptions are multiple. He sees himself as working out of art history and also taking a place in it by forging an identifiable style. He comments on the politics of being English or British but steps back, too, claiming that his work is about “the politics of representation.” When he was in art school in London in the 1980s, he was encouraged to make work about his African heritage. His response: why would he know any more about that than a typical white “English” student would know about the clichés of Englishness, such as Morris dancing? “I’ve never been to an African village,” he reports (Farell 2003: 167). His point is about race, authenticity, and perceived belonging: these students would never be pushed to explore an essentialist heritage. As Shonibare puts it: “if you are a black artist who chooses not to make work about being black, that’s cool, that’s fine. You will be described as the black artist who doesn’t make work about being black.” We can analyze his exploration of race, Britishness, and a specific cosmopolitanism in the UK in his photo series *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, of 1998.⁸

Casting himself as the dandy in this sequence, Shonibare and a group of actors constructed a series of *Tableaux vivante* in a rented English stately home. Each of the five scenes presents a fantasy of opulence and indulgence for the central character. He rises late, attended by a large and fawning staff. By afternoon, he is the impeccably dressed centre of attention in his library. The dandy seems to dictate a letter, encouraged and supported not only by his many friends, advisors, and servants, but by his impeccable heritage, underwritten by the worthies looking on in the form of art objects. It is in this the second photo from the *Diary* that Shonibare comes closest to his acknowledged art historical inspiration for this series, William Hogarth’s *The Rake’s Progress* from 1735.⁹

What I find most significant about this affiliation is not to be read in detailed parallels between the two series. A dandy is not exactly a rake, and Shonibare substitutes a Victorian setting and allusions for Hogarth’s mid-eighteenth-century London. Nonetheless, both offer moral tales. “Rakewell” – only Charles Dickens can equal Hogarth in his choice of appellations – is similarly surrounded by those who

⁶ Image may be viewed at:

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tfl/corporate/projectsandschemes/artmusicdesign/pfa/largeImage.asp?theartist=Yinka+Shonibare+MBE&artist=shonibare&pic=1>.

⁷ Shonibare’s London Underground project is described on the official Transport London web site:

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tube/arts/platform-for-art/artists/shonibare.asp>.

⁸ See *Diary of a Victorian Dandy 14:00 hours*. Image may be viewed at:

<http://www.iniva.org/dare/artwork/shonibare/shonibare2.html>.

⁹ Engraving on paper. Plate 2 (1735) may be viewed at:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ad/William_Hogarth_-_A_Rake%27s_Progress_-_Plate_2_-_Surrounded_By_Artists_And_Professors.jpg.

would help him spend his fortune: a gardener, musician, dancing master, and jockey. The painting over his shoulder – a Judgment of Paris – announces the theme of life choices, in this case between pleasure (Venus) and wisdom (Minerva/Diana). The flanking portraits of what appear to be roosters may buttress the classical allusion with a vernacular reference to cock fighting, whose main purpose is gambling. We can find other analogies and differences internal to both images. Most important, however, is Shonibare's grand genuflection to Hogarth, that most outspokenly and stereotypically English of artists.

To understand how Shonibare positions himself, let us pause with the final image, which we might call "The Dandy at 3 a.m".¹⁰ In Hogarth's terms, the dandy has by this hour chosen Venus and pleasure over his learned pursuits, a lifestyle out of keeping with the clichéd moral rectitude of Victorian Britain. In part, Shonibare is simply playing the sybarite, a role not unknown to artists, dandies, and even sports heroes. But the purposefully Victorian setting in this series has a more profound set of meanings and references, ones that can lead to a further understanding of his placement in contemporary British society.

Shonibare was one of the very successful group of students at Goldsmith's College in London who went on to relative fame and fortune. Younger than many of the "yBa"s, he nonetheless participated in the notorious "Sensation" exhibition in London and Brooklyn, NY in the late 1990s. I want to suggest that *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* is purposefully Victorian in part in reference to former British PM Margaret Thatcher's now legendary references to "Victorian Values," those of hard work, self-reliance, and resurgent "Englishness." Thatcher was PM from 1979-1990, in other words, throughout most of the time when Shonibare was a student, first at the Byam Shaw School of Art from 1984-88, which is now Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design, and then at Goldsmith's College, from which he graduated in 1991.¹¹

Thatcher's many pronouncements of this creed are relevant to Shonibare's work and to questions of cosmopolitanism and the specifics of identity.¹² *Diary* appeared only a year after the "Sensation" exhibition. The Victorian context of Shonibare's photos is even more resonant when we recall that the full title for this exhibition was *Sensation: Young British Art from the Saatchi Collection*. As Hans Haacke – whose work Shonibare acknowledges as an inspiration – made forever clear in his devastating portrait of Thatcher called *Taking Stock (unfinished)*, 1984, which was shown at the Tate Gallery in the same year, supposedly Victorian self-reliance was in lock step with corporate greed and what certainly looked like corruption.

Costume and décor play as important a role in this painting as they do for Shonibare. The Saatchi brothers, pictured on decorative plates in the top right, are the "worthies" in this context; they were (and are) not only extraordinarily successful advertising executives and art collectors but also lent their abilities to Thatcher's equally triumphant election campaigns. Haacke sets Thatcher in a thoroughly clichéd Victorian interior – there is even a picture of Queen Victoria on the PM's chair – and

¹⁰ Image may be viewed at:

http://www.iniva.org/exhibitions_projects/1998/diary_of_a_victorian_dandy/diary_of_a_victorian_dandy/gallery.

¹¹ <http://www.stephenfriedman.com/index.html>.

¹² <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=105087>.

through this décor, the Victorian picture frame, and her stern attitude, makes her “Victorian” in the most marmy, overbearing way. He also sees the Saatchis as Victorian in the ways Thatcher promoted: “They match the young bourgeois entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century, relatively unfettered by tradition, without roots in the aristocracy, and out to prove themselves in the world,” Haacke claimed (Bois 1984: 24). His clever title, “Taking Stock,” refers not only to Thatcher’s role as arbiter of morality but also to “stock” as a form of exchange. Both the Saatchis and the artists whom they collected saw a tremendous rise in their pecuniary value during the 1990s.

Shonibare’s *Diary* gives him the last laugh about the Thatcher era’s notion of identity and success. It is hard not to notice the letters that Shonibare sometimes records after his name: MBE, or Member of the British Empire, an honour that he received in 2004. As a self-proclaimed post-colonial hybrid, this designation is deliciously ironic. The British Government’s official website explains that the MBE is “Awarded for achievement or service in and to the community of a responsible kind which is outstanding in its field; or very local ‘hands-on’ service which stands out as an example to others. In both cases awards illuminate areas of dedicated service which merit public recognition.” Shonibare, the exception among a long list of mostly military and sports figures, was cited specifically for “services to art.”¹³ In significant measure, then, Shonibare’s *Diary* records his insistent and actual, if ironic, self-placement in contemporary, supposedly cosmopolitan Britain.

I began by challenging the prevalent assumption of cosmopolitan demeanor and competence in the contemporary art world, its tendency to bland generalizations. Artists, artworks, curators and critics may move with relative ease across national and cultural borders; they may have genuine sympathy for difference, or, to recall Shonibare’s tongue in cheek comment, they may just watch the same TV programs. But Shonibare and many fellow travelers insist in their work on a deeper cosmopolitanism, one that I think is at least potentially a vehicle for a revision of the multiculturalism that they resist in its current forms. A rethought cosmopolitanism has the potential to acknowledge not only multiplicity but hybridity and specificity, to mediate affiliations and affinities without a hyphen.

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