

Frank Bowling: Negotiating independence as an artist through the Black Arts Movement within a quest for a global arts regime.

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This essay aims to discuss the correlation between the Black Arts Movement within the 1960s, and the possibility and developments of a global arts regime, whilst acknowledging that the movement focused upon extending an artist's recognition beyond that of a purely racial influence. The work of Frank Bowling shall be exemplified as an example of an artist whom through developing his personal style, sought to precede the primitive style of narration of black artists, and to progress towards an abstracted style that cohered with an international aesthetic of larger schemes of production and quantities of audiences. Bowling's practice arguably negotiate between both the discussion of the Black Arts Movement, and of internationalism - and therefore can be utilised to examine the success and the theorisations surrounding each. Also, as a theorist whom has written upon the topics of both - Rasheed Araeen's theorisations around such shall be discussed and applied to the work of Bowling to present an example of the ideological pursuit against the forces of oppressive segregation within art practices. Continually, Araeen's discussions of the movements is significant due to his negotiation of both, reflecting the selection of Bowling's practices containing relationships to each.

Okwui Enwezor acknowledges that traditionally, the 'negro became an object of fetishistic fascination and disturbance to both the spatial and temporal order'¹ which led to the display of images of dual identities and separation and of primitivism to be displayed within the major art establishments of the western cultures. Whilst having to acknowledge that the globalised perceptions of

¹ Enwezor, Okwui. "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation. in *Changing States: contemporary Art and Idas in an Era of Globalisation*. Gilane Tawadros. (ed.) London: Institute of International Visual Art, 2004. p. 83.

contemporary art have been heavily promoted by major museums² - the inclusion of such relics within the museums influenced the general public's opinion of the east's culture. In *Totem and Taboo*³, whilst discussing the oppositional views on primitiveness, Sigmund Freud argues that the eastern cultures are often considered to be the radical opposition of civilised culture in Enlightenment, repetitively contrasted against the other; it is arguable the eastern cultures were presented within institutions to legitimise the west's own culture. Continuing however, Freud states that such representations of culture 'could function as a medium of understanding the irrational and the unconscious: the mental life of "those whom we describe as savages or half savages."' Such, Freud argues, has "a peculiar interest for us if we are right in seeing it as a well-preserved picture of an early stage in our development."⁴ Focusing upon that statement, Freud acknowledges the possibility of development within these cultures, which can be related to the process of black artists attempting to extend beyond such an idea of restrictive practice due to developments in artistic process and a withdrawal from the narrative of otherness.

Through identifying that whilst typically black artists were judged in terms of their ethnicity rather than their artistic output, and acknowledging that the Black Arts Movement aimed to subvert such assumptions - Raseed Araeen discusses the ideological stance of equality across the racial divide of nations within "The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement."⁵ Exemplifying the obligation and ability of the "black arts" to respond critically to the social and political forces of the

² Smith, Terry. "Contemporary ArtL World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalisation" in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddenseig, and Peter Weibel. (ed.) Cambridge, Ma and London: The MIT Press, 2013. p.186.

³ Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1913.

⁴ Gikandi, S. "Race and the Modernist Aesthetic" in *Writing and Races*. T.Youngs (ed.) London and New York: Longman, 1997.

⁵ Araeen, Rasheed. "The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement." in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*. David a. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce. (ed.) Durham and London: Duke university Press, 2005. pp. 21 - 34.

time, firmly setting an ideological framework for a militantly radical arts movement⁶; the movement within Britain during the 1980s responded to the consciousness and awareness of the struggle against racism, and racial discrimination within both society, and the arts.

Initiated by colleagues Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, the Black Arts Movement participated within the larger historical context of the cultural processes of decolonisation⁷ and was based on dialects of change and transformation⁸, whilst celebrating the demise of fixed identities and signalling the end of stereotypes of black people.⁹ Continuing, Araeen identifies the Black Arts movement as opposing the 'idea of confronting the system'¹⁰; through the main success of the black arts movement lying within its ideological commitment and its agenda to change the prevailing system and achieve full humanity¹¹ - to include a practice of inclusion. Proposing a radical transition to an artistic language that will possess the ability to destruct and transform the racial connotations attached to black artists - the premise of achieving a globally relatable language of self-expression was practised by those invalid within the movement, each of whom went beyond what was known to be already defined by traditions, both old and modern.¹² Seeming to contrast against traditional modes of artistic production, the concept of a global art juxtaposes both the modes of production involved within such, and the final results of traditional artistic practices. Whilst in western culture, for the romantics, art was a production of the intuitive and solitary genius of an individual, whilst the internationalist practices extend beyond the singularity of an artist, and aim to include a broader scale of relations.

⁶ *ibid.* p.21.

⁷ *ibid.* p.28.

⁸ *ibid.* p.25.

⁹ Doy, Gen. *Black Visual Culture, Modernity and Postmodernity*. London and New York: L.B. Tauris, 2000. p.22.

¹⁰ *op cit.* Araeen. p.25.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.* p.35

Attempting to move beyond a traditionalist and primitive representations of the ethnocentric practices within contemporary art, the Magiciens de la Terre exhibition in 1989 sought to replace the traditional Paris Biennial with more universal examples of contemporary art. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, the exhibition is acclaimed to be first global exhibition in art¹³, and through such, Martin deliberately didn't select participants based upon their nationality or cultural functionalities - this had been the practice of the Paris Biennale and it had resulted in an arguably "disaster of official and officious culture."¹⁴ Whilst, according to Martin, the focus of the Magiciens de la Terre exhibition was the intention to encourage the sharing of reciprocal exoticisms, as an alternative to the Paris Biennale, Martin argued that "since we are dealing with objects of visual and sensual experiences, lets really look at them from a perspective of our own culture. I want to play the role of someone who uses artistic intuition alone to select these objects which comes from totally different cultures."¹⁵ Such clearly supports the premise that the Black Arts movement negotiated simultaneously with the discourses surrounding an ideological global arts discourse.

Magiciens de la Terre was reviewed by Jeremy Lewison for *The Burlington Magazine* in August 1989, and within such Lewison examined how the curation of Western artwork with the "margined" art creates cross-currents which impacts a viewer's perception of the Western artists' attempts; such adheres to the previously stated notion made by Gikandi, that through including specific items within an art institute, the attitudes attached to it can be controlled. Continually, whilst discussing the controversy attached to the exhibition, and the misrepresentation of Africa through the selection and provenance of the works shown is exemplified and criticised. Assisted by Andre Magnin, who had to training in this field at the time, Martin looked for artists who would gratify the Western longing

¹³ Picard, Denis. "Liberte, Egalite, MAgie" in *Connaissance des Arts* 450. 1989. p.57.

¹⁴ Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "The Whole Earth Show: An interview with Jean-Hubert Martin" in *Art in America*. Vol. 61. May, 1989. p. 152.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

for the authentic, and leaving aside many artists who by then had left the domain of traditional arts and crafts¹⁶, despite the aim to subvert such assumptions and portrayals - Martin's selection of artists to include within the exhibition is argued to have contradicted such a crucial concept.

Seeming to contradict present distinctions between the practices, and continuing to state the continual presence of a new internationalism, and for artists to continue to struggle against the dominant forces¹⁷ - Araeen argues, within *New Internationalism or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans*¹⁸, the capabilities of international art to eradicate racial and social distinction. Whilst acknowledging a persistent support of the aims encumbered within the Black Arts Movement, Araeen intends to generate support and acceptance of a nationalist agenda within visual culture practices. Putting such into question, Araeen begins to theorise a definition of internationalism, through stating that it is a 'global projection of the idea of cultural pluralism, or multiculturalism'¹⁹; although when examining such a level of cultural pluralism, complications arise with defining and legitimising such a study. Never the less, when working around a predetermined framework, a re-digested westernised agency is inevitable - so working within completely new fields, internationalism needs to hold a level of neutrality. Commenting upon such, Araeen states that there is an 'underlying concern with accepting artists of other cultures, particularly those who are not of our own society, who we think have been excluded from the discourses of art of our time.'²⁰ As mentioned, accepting coloured artists into an already established agency raises issues of neutrality and legitimacy, and through such Araeen

¹⁶ Belting, Hans, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel. "Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel. (ed.) Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. pp. 10 - 25.

¹⁷ *op cit.* Araeen p.5.

¹⁸ Araeen, Rasheed. "New Internationalism or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans" in *Global visions towards a new internationalism in the visual arts*. Jean Fisher (ed.) London: Kala Press, 1994. pp. 3 - 11.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 4

²⁰ *ibid.* pp. 4-5.

states support for a new system by writing that “we” do not need a change in the system²¹; stated already, it is argued that a new field of study is required for the success of internationalism within art. Araeen continues to assert that it is not enough to set up a separate organisation to deal with the question of internationalism or discuss the issues in an international symposium comprising an exclusive audience, but that there should also be a debate within the mainstream field of study as part of its overall development.²² Such a statement continues to exemplify the inability of internationalism within a global art to be formulated whilst western and eastern practices are separated, and developing simultaneously.

Writing within *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*²³, Hans Belting further provides a definition of global art as a new territory of art that had an unclear set of boundaries due to the inter-relatedness of the subject of study. Stating that global art is recognised as the sudden and worldwide production of art, that did not exist or did not garner attention until the late 1980s - by its own definition ‘*global art* is contemporary ... it is guided by the intention to replace the centre and periphery scheme of a hegemonic modernity.’²⁴ When discussed in connection to the exhibitions within Paris, it is clear that the intent of the Magiciens de la Terre adhered to an internationalist concept. Continuing to state that global art did not only accelerate contemporary arts departure from the guidelines of a linear art history, it also flourishes in parts of the world where art history has never been practiced or where it only followed colonial models²⁵ - which further precedes the limitations of a nationalist artistic agenda. Continuing to draw distinction against the art within a bounded nation,

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.* p.10.

²³ Belting, Hans. “From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama.” in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddenseig, and Peter Weibel. (ed.) Cambridge, Ma and London: The MIT Press, 2013. pp. 178 - 185.

²⁴ *ibid.* p.128.

²⁵ *ibid.* p.184.

international art, Belting argues had been an affair of the modern age and that the term no longer covered a polycentric map where culture took over the former distinctions of nations²⁶; global art by contrast crossed the boundaries and demanded acceptance as a contemporary practice on an equal footing with western art²⁷ and did not allude to the forceful nature of the enlightenment as a movement of domination and territory, liberating art from its colonial baggage and restrictions.²⁸ Situated within discourses and boundaries of a westernised art history however, negotiating boundaries between global art history and local environments are reliant upon the acceptance of such within institutions, and the acceptance from other artists.

Whilst identifying that artists were attempting to precede the quintessence of the imperial gaze, and the hierarchal ordering of twentieth century artists; Frank Bowling's later practices can be used to present an artist whom negotiated discourses within a global art regime, whilst identifying with the Black Arts movement through his heritage. With the aim to present an interpretation of human concerns within his early practices - whilst being directly influence by Francis Bacon, Bowling's personal style developed through his career, visible within his first purely abstract work. Bowling explored painterly means, becoming a contemporary idiom through his realisation that a concentration on the processes of painting allowed subtle explorations of feeling leading to an unpredictable revelation²⁹ of the optical effects that are created by the combination of pigments and structural elements that interfere with ambient light in a complex interaction of absorption, refraction and reflection.³⁰ Describing such a style change, Mel Gooding comments upon Bowling's thin -wash

²⁶ *ibid.* p.182.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.* p.183.

²⁹ *op cit.* Golding. p.25.

³⁰ *ibid.* p.8.

acrylic fields, translucent, diaphanous having the quality to evoke pictorial space and induce mood.³¹ Painting within the ambit of the current developments of post patiently abstraction³², in which objective effects were interested in the expressiveness of the paint itself³³; Bowling's technique presented a level of unpredictability, where by the paint would be poured onto the canvas and allowed to naturally form on the canvas. Whilst painting within this style, the poured paintings divested Bowling's style of any referential thematic or implicit emotive or political intent. Gooding states that the paintings are 'celebrations of their own dynamic paint-colour fusions; they present us with opaque colour as the representation of light, colour as liquid master in motion; they are themselves of and in the world, spectacular phenomena.'³⁴ With such, the neutrality within Bowling's later practices is clear, and the abandonment of a primitive narrative is eradicated through the neutrality of the composition that is presented.

Clearly working within the field of abstract expressionism, Bowling's practices were similar to those of Jackson Pollock, connected to the premise that abstract art was not a continuation of that modern tradition, but a movement that demonstrated the rejection of mannerisms which have become by now rapid brush or knife handling³⁵, cumulating in the importance and emphasised capacity of colour to act through the contrast of pure hues in relative independence of light and dark design³⁶. Whilst the unrestricted structure of the paint is prevalent, Gooding argues that Bowling demonstrated a mastery of the drama of colour combination, and a virtuosic command of the dynamics of flow, density and contrast³⁷. However, despite being involved within the practices of abstract expressionism, and

³¹ Gooding, Mel. *Frank Bowling*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011. p.76.

³² *op cit.* Gooding (1989). p.22.

³³ *op cit.* Gooding. (2011) p.72.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 79-80.

³⁵ Greenburg, Clement. "After Abstract Expressionism" in in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood. (ed.) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. p. 785.

³⁶ *op cit.* Gooding. (2011) p. 77.

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 84.

moving away from a narrative of colonisation and african culture - Bowling still endured prejudice against his artistic endeavour and was not permitted to exhibit alongside his fellow artists. Even though the term 'internationalism' became a "buzzword" in London during the 1950s and 1960s, it is arguable that black artists were still restricted to exhibiting in the commonwealth institute, and confined within limited studies of multiculturalism. Whilst studies of internationalism aimed to create and dismantles cultural hegemonies, offering the possibility of naked allegories of the national³⁸, corresponding to the diversity of the public in an attempt avoid the interference of language, and related distinctions of civil status and colour³⁹ - examining Bowling's practices in relation to global arts is both necessary and prevalent to this discussion of a global arts system. Acknowledging his participating within the discourses of new internationalism, whilst observing the generalised theorisations surrounding the developments of a global art, and looking at the specifics of Frank Bowling - an acknowledgement is made that his practices adhere to the notion of a global art.

However, through stating that Bowling was not involved within a multitude of exhibitions and combining such with the - and the knowledge that as a consequence of his failure in British art, Bowling moved to America where the movement of abstract expressionism was most prevalent - the success of Bowling managing to be involved within a global art is questionable, despite presenting pieces of an international nature. Of course, it us unknown whether or not such is due to the style of Bowling's painting, or predominantly due to his race - but through examining his pieces within this pattern of study, it is arguable that it is due to the latter. Of course, if concluding such, it is interesting to examine the reception that Bowling's earlier pieces received - being directly relatable to the pieces

³⁸ Kapur, Geeta. "A New Inter Nationalism: The Missing Hyphen" in *Global visions towards a new internationalism in the visual arts*. Jean Fisher (ed.) London: Kala Press, 1994. p.48.

³⁹ Nicodemus, Everlyn "The Centre of Otherness" in *Global visions towards a new internationalism in the visual arts*. Jean Fisher (ed.) London: Kala Press, 1994. p.93.

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by Francis Bacon, they portrayed images of pain and anguish, and aligned with the idea of a primitive narrative that was typically displayed within institutions when showing the dichotomy of east and west. Arguably then, Bowling's earlier pieces would hold a place within the major museums within Britain, exemplifying typical images of eastern irrationality. Such is thus obviously considered as controversial when considered within the contexts of this essays, as it is situated within a discussion of black artists extending their practices beyond such into practices of internationalist art, but supports the thesis that a global arts regime was not sustained throughout this period.