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Modernism without Borders

This disorientation of a world civilization is hardly new to us today. In 1962 Ricoeur argued that to survive in it each culture must be grounded in its own indigenous tradition; otherwise this “civilization” would be domination pure and simple. Similarly, in our own time Jürgen Habermas has argued that the modern West, to restore its identity, must critically appropriate its tradition—the very project of Enlightenment that led to this ‘universal civilization’ in the first place. Allegories of hope, these two readings seem early and late symptoms of our own postmodern present, a moment when the West, its limit apparently broached by an all but global capital has begun to recycle its own historical episodes as styles together with its appropriated images of exotica (of domesticated otherness) in a culture of nostalgia and pastiche—in a culture of implosion, “the internal violence of a saturated whole.”¹

Hal Foster, 1985

The imperialist era is over but its culture of modernism again holds our interest. The new postcolonial arrangements of power have left us wondering about a possible non-Western history of modernism and what it might mean. In this revisionism, how do we distinguish one modernism from the other? In the main, this is a question of epistemology. While the old imperialist modernism might not yet be an entirely foreign country—it too had much to say about capitalism and globalism—the space and tempo of the world has changed radically in the heterogenous order of postcolonialism. Globalism and capitalism now ap-

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¹ Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October*, 34/Autumn (1985), 45-70 at 69.

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pear differently. “The distinct colours of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended”, said Hardt and Negri, and today, we must learn to decipher the “rainbow glow” of postcolonial globalism.² This is why, in the 1960s, mapmakers redrew the world, giving it a completely new look.

However, the postcolonial remapping of the artworld is taking longer. In 1997 Okwui Enwezor hoped that those contemporary artists who are “mobile and itinerant”, unattached to national identity or other bordered projects, “could serve as primers for mapping new incarnations of the world”.³ Since then new artworld mappings have begun to appear under the name of “the contemporary”.⁴ Terry Smith, its first substantial cartographer, insists that its epistemological frame should not be reformulated in terms of modernism: “Classic conceptions of modernity and modernism”, he warns, “cannot be stretched and patched to carry this degree of spinout.”⁵ Instead of the clear differential of the Western metropolitan mainstream and its peripheral eddies that structured modernism, he argues (like many others) for a wholly new post-Western epistemology capable of delineating the heterogeneous borderlessness of the contemporary.

This new epistemology is re-ordering the world to such an extent that even the past now appears differently. For example, we see more clearly the modernisms of those who had been othered by the discourse of Western modernism. On the other side, those with the most investment in Western modernism—the major museums of modern art—are seizing the opportunity to recast its racist Western-centric discourse of cruel otherings into a happy inclusive multi-cultural carnival that opens to the postcolonial future.⁶ This seductive redeeming revisionism conceals more than it reveals. A good example is the radical rehang at the Pompidou Centre’s Musée National d’Art Moderne’s (MNAM), an ambitious project called *Modernités Plurielles 1905-1970*, which opened in 2013. In the company of

² Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000 at xiii.

³ Okwui Enwezor, “Introduction,” *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997*, Johannesburg and Den Haag: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and Prince Claus Fund, 1997a, 7-12 at 12, 7.

⁴ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

⁵ Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry*, 32/4, Summer (2006), 681-707 at 706.

⁶ For example, see Catherine Greiner, “An Upside Down World?,” in *Multiple Modernities 1905-1970*, ed. Catherine Greiner, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2013, 14-31 at 15-18.

familiar and unfamiliar Western modernist works, it shows how a good range of non-Western artists engaged with the modernity of imperialism, as if, surprise, a new world of modernism had suddenly been discovered (more than 1000 works from 41 countries). Yet this rehang has not changed one defining aspect of the old modernism: indigenous art only appears in the guise of the primitive and never as modernism. Even in this new redeeming revision of global modernism, indigenous art is condemned to only (dis)appear as the primitive other. Can modernism appear without primitivism?

Primitivism and the End of Modernism

Primitivism has in some form been a trope in many if not all cultures well before it was made into a science in the late nineteenth century. So it should be no surprise that while the anthropological inventors of this science had discredited it by the mid-twentieth century—thus leaving modernism without a credible leg to stand on—primitivism remained a potent artworld trope. For example, in their postmodernist critique of William Rubin's "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* exhibition, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss and Thomas McEvilley seemed like a cheer squad for the old surrealist days, when, as a figure of negation, primitivism provided a mythic justification, as well as much needed torque, for an already waning modernism.⁷ According to them, Rubin's failure was the insipidness of his primitivism: his whitewashing of the primitive with the aesthetic gloss of modernism had denuded it of its subversive potential.

Foster, however, did intuit a connection between the simultaneous crises in primitivism and modernism evident in Rubin's exhibition. Despite being about beginnings—Rubin displayed classic examples of Western modernism against their supposed indigenous sources—the exhibition had Foster musing about endings. Feeling caught between "the ruins of (mostly) dead cultures", both "tribal" and "modern", he couldn't help thinking that "against its own intentions, the show signaled a potentially postmodern, post-tribal present", to the point, that "this present seemed all but posthistorical."⁸ If such complex thoughts left Foster adrift between the twilight of a once powerful but flawed

⁷ Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art"; Rosalind Krauss, "Preying on 'Primitivism'," *Art & Text*, 17 (1985), 58-62; Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," *Art Forum*, November (1984), 54-60.

⁸ Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," at 55.

civilization and a vague premonition of a dawning postmodern world in which the critical negations of the other might yet save us, he also sensed a dawning globalism in which the “politics of otherness” by which the West knows itself “had reached its limit”. Perhaps, he suggested, modernism—which he (like nearly everyone then) equated with the Western avant-garde—had done itself in, devoured by the agenda of its own offspring, “global capital”.⁹

A more likely culprit emerged around this time when postcolonial critics focused on the agency of those that Western modernism had othered, and their hybrid relations in the contact zones of global empires. This postcolonial critique established the ground for the new epistemology of “the contemporary” that came fully into view in the new millennium. Hardt and Negri grasped its epistemological significance in their description of it as a “passage from the dialectic opposition [of modernity] to the management of hybridities [of global modernity]”.¹⁰ This is the blueprint for *Modernités Plurielles*, which aims to recalibrate modernism in Hardt and Negri’s image of “decentred and deterritorializing [...] hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges”,¹¹ even if it means ignoring their historical analysis. Its curator, Catherine Greiner, dubbed modernism an “art without borders”, a time when “art became globalized to a truly extraordinary degree”.¹² Why do modernism and contemporary art now appear in this borderless way? Is it because the most striking feature of the twilight of modernism is the withering of its otherings—that “there is no longer an outside”?¹³ Or, in the penumbra of this disappearance, are we unable to see that invisibility which now organizes thought?

Hardt and Negri’s influential diagnosis was published shortly before 911. Shortly after 911, in 2003, Arif Dirlik saw a very different landscape, though one that equally challenged “modernity’s ways of knowing”.¹⁴ His claim that “global modernity unifies and divides the globe in new ways”¹⁵ might echo Hardt and Ne-

⁹ *Ibid.*, at 69. Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October*, 34/Autumn (1985), 45-70 at 69.

¹⁰ Hardt, *Empire* at 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, at xii.

¹² Greiner, “An Upside -Down World?,” at 26-27.

¹³ Hardt, *Empire* at xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, at 189.

¹⁵ Arif Dirlik, “Global Modernity? Modernity in an Age of Global Capitalism,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6/3 (2003), 275-92 at 278.

gri's qualification that what "seems to be" the undifferentiated "smooth world" of globalism is really "a world defined by new and complex regimes of differentiation and homogenization",¹⁶ but Dirlik's emphasis is very different. He saw a new raft of recalcitrant otherings that defiantly insist on, rather than disguise, their differences:

[...] not the dissolution of cultural essentialism but the hardening of cultural boundaries that accompanied the revival of cultural fundamentalisms around the globe [...] rather than disappear, they have been proliferating, as new claims to ethnic and cultural identity produce demands for new sovereignties.¹⁷

The artworld also has become a place of proliferating differences, but instead of cleaving the world into alterities, they appear, like Hardt and Negri's smooth globalism, as multiple currents and differences for crossing—a state of being that Greiner's revisionist account of modernism backdates to the age of imperialism. Yet, like an uncanny reminder of some forgotten transgression, an unreconstructed primitivism interrupts the display (as well as the catalogue essays) of *Modernités Plurielles*, as if the revision of modernism from the perspective of the contemporary need not touch indigenous art. Even here, as the former differences between the West and the Rest are loosened, indigenous art remains outside, its contemporaneity unseen.

Modernity and Modernism

The real politics of modernity took shape as European states became world powers, enabling them to literally go out into the world and mix it up in unprecedented ways. However, it was metaphysics that made modernity a figure of the universal and Europe its home. Enwezor aptly calls this metaphysics West-ernism—Stuart Hall had earlier dubbed it "the West and the Rest"—though we still generally know it as modernism.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁷ Hardt, *Empire* at xiii.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *The Formations of Modernity: Understanding Modern Societies an Introduction Book 1 (Introduction to Sociology)*, eds. Stuart Hall, and Bram Gieben, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, 276-89. Okwui Enwezor defined "Westernism" as the West's "insistence on the total adoption and observation of its norms and concepts" as "the only viable idea of social, political, and cultural legitimacy from which all modern subjectivities are seen to emerge." Okwui Enwezor, 'The Black Box,'

Like all ideas, modernity appears in terms of its otherings. The modern is made (visible) through imagining the unmodern: *modernism maps the imaginary borders of the modern and unmodern*. In the process of providing a rich field of otherings through which Western modernity appeared, Western imperialism established a dense network of relations across the planet in which the most incommensurable differences that had accumulated over the ages were, by the momentum of transculturation, forced into translation. In 1848, in the first glimmer of Western modernism as a distinctive sensibility of this new age of industrialization and world empires, Marx and Engels (in the Communist Manifesto) had a compelling vision of its consequences: a decentred interconnected smooth globalism of strangers and diasporas in which the ground of all existing socialities and patterns of thinking are “swept away”. They even envisaged a post-ethnic world and “world literature”. Modernity’s (i.e. capitalism’s) “cosmopolitan character to production and consumption”, they wrote, draws “all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization”. For Marx and Engels, such is the power of modernity that even the indigenous, the most barbarian, are drawn into it.

Like Marx and Engels, Charles Baudelaire—who at this time was also giving shape to this new sensibility, which he called *modernité*—was particularly interested in the potential de-borderings of the sharp differences of gender, race and class that organized knowledge in the nineteenth century. They were the ground that he turned in order to spin out his irony, thus establishing that modernism would be a border poetics. Where is the indigenous in his ironic formulations? And what are its movements in the age of imperialism?

Border Poetics at the Dawn of Modernism

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Because it is a border poetics, modernism is at its sharpest in the ironic mode, twisting the inside out and the outside in. Exemplary in this regard is Negritude, the African surrealist movement that emerged in Paris during the 1930s, when Westernism was mainstream. As if recognizing that Westernism’s otherings were its Achilles Heel, these black colonial poets inverted modernity’s slur of “Negro” into the rallying cry of “Negritude,” thereby plucking modernism from its Western tongue and making it their own: a black post-Western modernism. It

Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002, 42-55 at 46.

inspired a generation of African modernists in the wake of postcolonial national independence.¹⁹ An example is the incoming Director of the National Theatre in postcolonial Kampala in 1967, the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. Replacing the British Council's grand piano with an indigenous drum post, he reportedly exclaimed: "Our national instrument is not the piano—tinkle, tinkle, tinkle—but the drum—boom, boom, boom!"²⁰ This ironic twisting of a colonizing primitivism into anti-colonial indigenism effectively opened to the African indigene, or more accurately, the new Ugandan citizen, what colonial modernity had previously prohibited: the spectre of an African modernism.

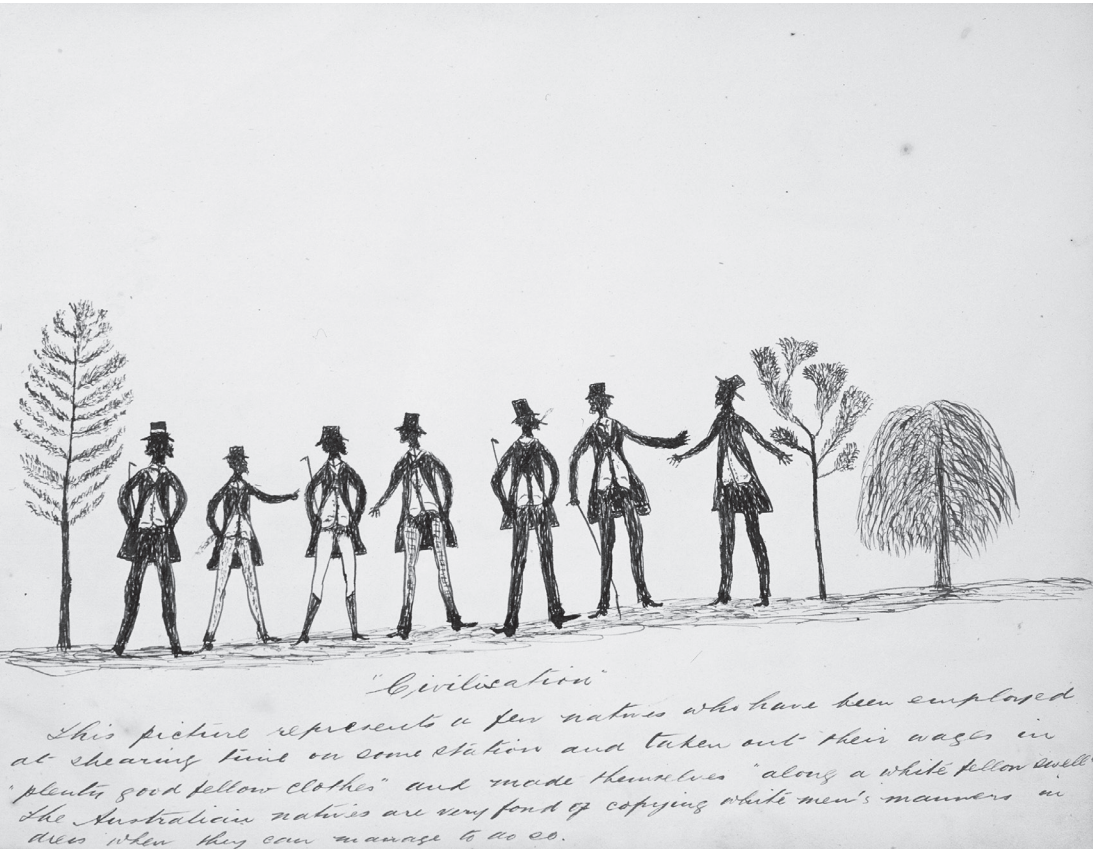
If the lens of modernity is better focused through the inverted mirror of its otherings then the most knowing modernists are its imaginary unmoderns, those made modern negatively. Arguably (and Franz Fanon argued this most powerfully) they most deeply feel, in their very bodies, modernity's epistemological cuts—though even some who were made modern positively, like Baudelaire, had ears for its dialectic beat. Raised in the lap of bourgeois privilege, his agitated soul preferred the other side. In his treatise on the journalistic sketcher Constantin Guys, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1860)—modernism's first manifesto—the taste of his declared hero of *modernité* is compared to that of "savages", children and women. However, the cartographers of Westernism quietly substitute Guys with his follower, Manet (as did the curators of *Modernités Plurielles*²¹), as if correcting a misreading that Baudelaire had made in his surveys of the borderlands. They also tend to overlook Baudelaire's enthusiasm for the 1855 *Exposition Universelle*, as if it was merely some fanciful monster that his fervid imagination had sketched in the margin of his surveys.

The 1855 *Exposition* was the first attempt to exhibit world art and industry in Paris. Regularly thrown up in Europe's capitals between 1850 and 1950, these world expositions proved readymade haunts for the aspiring *flâneur* and connoisseurs of *modernité*. If now they have a bad name as spectacles of imperial-

¹⁹ See Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

²⁰ Cited in Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, at 166.

²¹ See Michel Gauthier, "A Brief History of Modernism," in *Multiple Modernities 1905-1970*, ed. Catherine Greiner, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2013, 32-34 at 32.



Tommy McRae, *Civilisation* (1986.0052.0001)
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ism, Baudelaire saw in them “the divine grace of cosmopolitanism”.²² While the emphasis of these expositions was the innovations of modern industry, Baudelaire, who despaired of this “americanization” of taste (as he dubbed it), was in 1855 most enchanted by the Chinese pavilion. He either did not see or felt no need to comment on the displays of indigenous art, which were in the halls of industry amongst the exhibits of various colonies. Perhaps his distaste of Americanization kept him away from this part of the Exposition.

²² Charles Baudelaire, “The Exposition Universelle 1855,” in *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon, 1965, 121-43 at 122.

Baudelaire might have pronounced the taste of unmodern savages and other aficionados of fashion a sophisticated *modernité*—this is the ironic way of modernism’s primitivism—but he is silent on the taste of those reformed or modernized “savages” who, like his “black Venus” and mistress Jeanne Duval, had crossed to his side. Take the example of Tommy McRae’s pen and ink drawing titled *Civilization*, made sometime in the latter decades of the nineteenth-century on the Australian frontier. Baudelaire suggested that the most cosmopolitan critics lived in these “faraway countries” that the exposition had folded into Paris.²³ If he were such a critic on the Australian frontier, would he have recognized in *Civilization* the *modernité* that he ascribed to Guys?²⁴

Civilization depicts seven dandies, dapper and dressed to the nines—a favourite Baudelairean subject—though these dandies are all black. McRae was born into a hunter gather economy near the present-day Australian city of Albury, at about the same time that Manet was born into a very advantaged household in Paris. Such is the throw of the dice. The frontier, that unforgiving hard cutting edge of modernity, decimated McRae’s people at the same that young Baudelaire was finding his way around that softer contact zone of bohemian Paris. With his inheritance swept away—though for different reasons than Baudelaire’s—McRae was pushed into the modern pastoral industry that provided raw material for England’s wool mills. His drawing of the good times after shearing, cashed up and ready for the perks of civilization, has an ironic note typical of modernism as it puts into play the signs of modernity and its otherings. McRae may have experienced the hard edge of modernity, but he depicted its softer fraying borders of transculturation.

While McRae’s art has always attracted interest, it has been as curios and not as examples of modernism. Such hybrid art forms from the frontiers of modernity did not enter the frame of modernism until *Magiciens de la terre*, the exhibition curated in 1989 by Jean-Hubert Martin, then Director of MNAM. At the

²³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon, 1995 at 32-33.

²⁴ I recently addressed this question in a much fuller way: Ian Mclean, “The Mysterious Correspondence between Charles Baudelaire and Tommy McRae: Reimagining Modernism in Australia as a Contact Zone,” *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 13 (2013), 91-103. Ian Mclean, “The Mysterious Correspondence between Charles Baudelaire and Tommy McRae: Reimagining Modernism in Australia as a Contact Zone,” *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 13 (2013), 91-103.

time, *Magiciens*' display of multiple modernisms from across the world seemed inconclusive. Poorly attended, scathing reviews and victim of rumour and innuendo, Martin lost his job. Now the most discussed exhibition of the late twentieth century, it is remembered for its foretaste of the borderless globalism that MNAM now seeks to make, in *Modernités Plurielles*, the normative condition of modernism.

In 1989 *Magiciens* "was perceived by many [...] as [...] indistinguishable from the universal expositions of the last century". However its critics were not thinking of its Baudelairean pedigree—which could be traced rather directly through Martin's enthusiasm for surrealism—but that it was "an act of 'colonialism'".²⁵ Is this why indigenous art generally remains taboo in the contemporary unless retailored in the dress of the diaspora? Despite it getting a berth in *Magiciens* as well as in Smith's mapping of the contemporary, it remains the last unmodern. It is not just its invisibility (its disappearance as the primitive other) in *Modernités Plurielles*. You will not find it in other influential museums making concerted efforts to globalize their content, such as Tate Modern or the Guggenheim and MoMA, as if its presence is taboo, blasphemy.²⁶ Where then is indigenous art located in the smooth veneer of postcolonial globalism?

Modernism without Borders: Enwezor's Global Modernism

Enwezor announced his prime objective in the opening sentences of his editorial for the first issue of the journal for African contemporary art, *Nka* (which he founded in 1994): to neutralize "the specious assertion by many in Western art establishments, that there is really, no such thing as modern art from Africa."²⁷ To achieve this he developed a postcolonial theory of modernity that outflanked primitivism and at the same time secured the place of African art in the contemporary artworld so that it is not just a fixture of the African scene but also a *poetics*, by which he means a universal expression that inherits the historical promise of modernity. His task, and indeed his great achievement as a curator,

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ There is the rare exception that proves the rule, such as two paintings by Emile Kame Kngwarrey being included in MoMA's exhibition *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, in 2011.

²⁷ Okwui Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries: Towards a New African Art Discourse," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 1 (1994), 3-7 at 3-4.

has been to thwart what he called: “the current [artworld] skepticism toward a globalized reception of contemporary artistic practices from far-flung places with little historical proximity to the ideas transmitted from within the legacy of the Western historical avant-garde.”²⁸

In seeking to inscribe African art into the Western canon, Enwezor necessarily brings into question the conventional Westernism of modernism, including accounts of its origins and ends. Thus, as well as setting the future agenda of contemporary art Enwezor also recalibrates its past, as if there can be no new future without a new past. In this respect the scope of his thinking makes him one of the most visionary curators working today. However, much like Rasheed Araeen who in many ways precedes him, he at the same time leaves untouched some of modernism’s assumptions.²⁹

²⁸ Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 207-34 at 222.

²⁹ Araeen’s determined attack on the Eurocentrism of Western modernist discourse was never anti-modernist. Instead he proposed a revisionist modernism that in many ways foreshadowed current notions of multiple modernisms, in which modernism is recognized as a global rather than purely Western phenomenon. Ahead of his time, Araeen’s call for Third World and black European and diaspora modernists to be given equal recognition with Western modernism is now becoming policy in mainstream Western museums of contemporary art. However, his enthusiasm for non-Western art that engages in the discourse of Western modernism has difficulty accommodating non-Western art that is indifferent to this engagement. Like many critics of *Magicians of the Earth*—an exhibition in which he had work—he criticized its focus on contemporary non-Western art that played to this cultural difference. “Why,” he asked, “is there such an obsession with so-called primitive societies?” And why, he also asked, is Western “folk” or “traditional” art ignored, “as if Western culture alone has passed from one historical period to another”? (Rasheed Araeen, “Our Bauhaus Others’ Mudhouse,” reprinted in Lucy Steeds et al, *Making art global (part 2): ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ 1989*, London: Afterall Books, 2013, at 239, 245.) While Araeen fully understands that no culture is outside modernity, his framing of these questions in this way tends to endorse the binary thinking of Western modernity. This is also evident in Araeen’s skepticism of non-Western art that didn’t engage with Western modernism. He argued it was a new form of primitivism designed to sideline non-Western modernism, and a “celebration of cultural difference” that “masks the exploitation and oppression of a people”. (Rasheed Araeen, “Come What May: Beyond the Emperor’s New Clothes,” in *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, ed. Nikos Papastergiadis, London: Rivers Oram Press, 2003, 135-55, at 136. If this criticism rings true in the promotion of this art, it misses a nuanced understanding of how modernity and modernism appear in the most oppressed Indigenous communities of the world.

A child of postcolonial Africa, Enwezor belongs to that first generation of Africans who crossed the threshold from indigenes beholden to customary law, to citizens subject to the abstract civil law of modern sovereignty as constituted in the nation state. Today only about 5% of the African population is officially counted as indigenous. In this respect Enwezor's acclaimed exhibition, *The Short Century* (2001), which traced the escape of African art from an ethnic indigenous category to a post-ethnic art engaged in global modernity, is autobiographical. He embodies in his very person and thinking, the new postcolonial African order in which words like indigenous, native and tribe are unspeakable relics of colonialism best destroyed in case they contaminate the future.

In his catalogue essay for *The Short Century*, Mahmood Mamdani argues that postcolonial African "nationalism was a struggle to be recognized as a transethnic category,"³⁰ and would succeed only if it challenged "the idea that we must define political identity, political rights, and political justice first and foremost in relation to indigeneity."³¹ In a similar spirit, Enwezor's instinct is that the demonstration of African art's modernism requires it to be unindigenous. If for Enwezor postcolonial African art has a grand narrative, it is one of diaspora not indigenosity. Indigenous art is off Enwezor's radar. It is not that the art of the San or so-called "Bushmen" do not appear in his and Chika Okeke-Agulu's recent survey of African contemporary art³²—which in its scope is typical of books on African contemporary art—but that Enwezor avoids engaging with Indigenous contemporary art from Australia, New Zealand and North America that for over thirty years has been making claims on the contemporary artworld in the name of postcolonialism. The reason for their invisibility is not just due to his African experience, but is also found in his ambivalent allegiance to the idea of modernity.

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Like Smith, Enwezor grasps that globalism "marks a radical new condition for the reception of art" (and not just for African art).³³ However, unlike Smith, Enwezor is not in a hurry to ditch the idea of modernism in toto. In this he is closer

³⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, "Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism," in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Munich: Prestel, 2001, 21-27 at 22-23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, at 27.

³² Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, Bologna: Damiani, 2009. Okwui Enwezor, And Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, Bologna: Damiani, 2009.

³³ Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, at 6.

to Nicolas Bourriaud's project to "create a form of modernism for the twenty-first century".³⁴ This is not at odds with Enwezor's vehement rejection of Westernism and the politics of the nation state.

For Enwezor the project of modernity will remain incomplete until it has moved beyond its otherings—an idea that resonates with the aesthetic premises of Greenberg and Adorno, and also with Jürgen Habermas's notion of the incomplete project of modernity.³⁵ On these grounds Enwezor takes particular issue with the primitivism that underwrote twentieth-century Western modernism, in which indigenous art, previously invisible in Western art, had gained visibility as a returning figure of the repressed. Thus he does not warm to the postmodernist suggestion, made by Foster (and also Krauss and McEvilley) in the wake of Rubin's "*Primitivism*" exhibition, that "the otherness of the primitive might be thought disruptively," so that it can open "the very field of difference in which the subject emerges—to challenge Western pretenses of sovereignty, supremacy, and self-creation".³⁶ To give him his due, Foster did not have in mind the resuscitation of "a lost or dead other," which he believed tended to occur in postmodern theory—he named Baudrillard, Deleuze and Derrida—but instead proposed a turn towards "vital others within and without—to affirm their resistance to the white, patriarchal order of Western culture," such as [echoing Baudelaire] "feminists [...] 'minorities,' [...] 'tribal' peoples".³⁷

Enwezor is surely right to be suspicious of this burden to perform negation thrust upon the other, whether dead or alive. He prefers to purge the very figure of the other, and especially the indigenous other that had long plagued African art and indeed African humanity. "There are," said Enwezor, "no ancient riverbeds to excavate in order to find continuing traditions [...] there is no need to revivify expired authenticities, nor to mourn the death of autochthonous traditions."³⁸ Thus he is (as is Foster) particularly dismissive of identity-based discourses as a way to navigate the postcolonial condition of globalism. "Wrong-headed and

³⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Altermodern," *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, London: Tate Publishing, 2009, 11-23 at 12.

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—an Incomplete Project," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, London: Pluto Press, 1985, 3-15.

³⁶ Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," at 62, 70. See also Krauss, "Preying on 'Primitivism'".

³⁷ Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," at 70, 69.

³⁸ Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, at 13.

regressive,”³⁹ they are “incapable of transcending” the reductive specificity of their cultural and political essentialisms and “aspiring to universal culture.” He instead champions the postcolonial art of “decolonization,” which “more than just a forlorn daydream” or the longing for some lost identity, has “attached to it, something recognizable in the ideals of modernity: the notion of progress.”⁴⁰

This is about as close as Enwezor gets to directly rejecting the figure of the indigene, for generally he ignores it, even if it means accepting that blindness of art history which forecloses indigenous art entirely, as if its place is out of sight in the ethnographic museum. In this respect Indigenous art is not so much an oversight but the absent other that Enwezor must expel in order to make his case for African contemporary art. He excludes indigenes as a theoretical object, as if the very concept stands in the way of thinking the global. Whether he has completely succeeded in foreclosing it is a moot point, because in the bruises of repression that occasionally discolor his discourse we sometimes glimpse its shadow—as in his scathing criticism, in 1997, of contemporary art that reinvests in “the so-called endangered Bushman.”⁴¹ Any sign of nativism seems to strike a raw nerve in Enwezor. Perhaps this echo of the familiar Enlightenment antinomy between indigenous and modern lifeworlds is one reason why the Western artworld has been extraordinarily receptive to his exhibitions, as if he has created the semblance of a post-race criticism without dislodging the deeper metaphysical borders that secure Western hegemony.

Enwezor’s theory of the contemporary is now familiar enough: whatever the contemporary artworld’s neo-primitive machinations, the real world underwent dramatic transformations in the second half of the twentieth century. In colonial times distant places were elsewhere; now they have collapsed into one networked world in which the “empire’s former ‘other’ [is] visible and present at all times.” From this postcolonial space of “terrible nearness” the former colonized “lay claim to the modernized, metropolitan world of empire.”⁴² This “global modernity,” said Enwezor (citing Édouard Glissant), is “essentially a phenomenon

³⁹ Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” at 226.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, at 225.

⁴¹ Okwui Enwezor, “Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation,” *Third Text*, 40/Autumn (1997), 21-40 at 28.

⁴² Enwezor, “The Black Box,” at 44-45.

of the creolization of culture.”⁴³ “Transnational, transurban, transdiasporic, transcultural practices,” he declared, “are transforming the ways in which we understand the world.”⁴⁴ The artists who inherit this global modernity belong to the “displaced” multitude, as they are best placed to imagine a new cosmopolitan “sovereignty, which in its deterritorialized forms, is no longer defined by the conservative borders of the old nation state scheme” but composed as “a collage of reality from the fragments of collapsing space.”⁴⁵

As one of the displaced multitude, Enwezor is also a bricoleur, his theory collaged from fragments of various influential theorists of modernity and the contemporary. In the above quote we glimpse Hardt and Negri’s account of transnational globalization referred to earlier. However, Enwezor is more sanguine than Hardt and Negri. He leans towards Habermas’s central idea of modernity as an unfinished project—unfinished because reason is yet to realize its freedom in the form of “rational communicative action.” In a furious attack on Tate Modern’s inaugural hang (in 2000) that included colonial representations of Africa but no African voice, Enwezor suggested that the curators read Habermas: “the entire installation was ahistorical, with no semblance of the critical method of what Habermas calls ‘the philosophical discourse of modernity [...] in fact it was marked by a savage act of epistemological and hermeneutic violence.’”⁴⁶

Rational communicative action, said Habermas, is the active engagement of critical thinking: an “inter-subjective” self-critical reflexivity that empowers “the interpretative accomplishments of the participants themselves,”⁴⁷ as opposed to the passive reiteration of social norms in tradition-bound societies. Closer in spirit to what Enwezor actually envisages are the sort of inter-subjective processes that define Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. They underwrite Enwezor’s postcolonial conception of contemporary art and curation. His most influential achievement, *Documenta 11*, was not just about de-Westernizing this “astonish-

⁴³ Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” at 209.

⁴⁴ Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo and Others, “Introduction,” in *Créolité and Creolisation: Documenta 11 Platform 3*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo and others, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003, 13-16 at 16.

⁴⁵ Enwezor, “The Black Box,” at 45.

⁴⁶ Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” at 222.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols., 1; Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 at 70.

ingly Western institution”⁴⁸ but also aimed to “deterritorialize” the experience of art and “redistribute its accumulated cultural capital” through relational practices.⁴⁹ Claire Bishop noted that it was the first Documenta to promote the “collectivist, activist and documentary practices” championed by Bourriaud—which take their cue from post-conceptual practices that flowered in the twilight years of modernism just prior to the advent of postmodernism.⁵⁰

Enwezor’s attachment to the ideals of modernity is most clearly spelt out in his contribution to Bourriaud’s Tate Triennial *Altermodern* (2009), where he locates African contemporary art in a category he calls “Aftermodernity,” in contrast to the “Supermodernity” of canonical Westernism. In Hegelian fashion, he argues that African contemporary art is not a postmodernist “rejection of modernity and modernism” but, on the contrary, the result of modernity’s “teleological unfolding.”⁵¹ In this way Enwezor establishes a bloodline between African and European modernity in which Africa, as the site of *Aftermodernity*, is the ultimate recipient of *Supermodernity*’s inheritance after its postcolonial fragmentation—an argument he had made earlier in *The Short Century*.

Enwezor’s Hegelian logic means that modernity cannot be disavowed, it can only be worked through. Like Habermas, Enwezor retains a utopian or idealized notion of modernity’s potential despite being acutely aware of its failings. The Western system, he complains, continues to maintain its boundaries, between, for example, “tribal and modern,” “theocratic [...] and democratic.”⁵² This boundary maintenance, he says, explains the “double bind” of an avant-garde artworld, which “in its attempt to negotiate both its radicality and normativity”—the perennial ambivalent double-bind of the dialectic—has proved “surprisingly conservative and formal.”⁵³ It might also explain Enwezor’s own double bind. His postcolonial theory surprisingly exhibits its own “boundary-

⁴⁸ Okwui Enwezor, “Okwui Enwezor—Interview by Pat Binder & Gerhard Haupt” (1997). http://universes-in-universe.de/car/africus/e_enwez.htm (Accessed April 30, 2014.)

⁴⁹ Okwui Enwezor, “Interview with Okwui Enwezor, Part 1,” *BaseNow* (2009). <http://www.basenow.net/2009/03/27/interview-with-okwui-enwezor-part-1/> (Accessed May 1, 2014.)

⁵⁰ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012 at 194.

⁵¹ Okwui Enwezor, “Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence,” *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, London: Tate Britain, 2009, 27-40 at 40.

⁵² Enwezor, “The Black Box,” at 47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, at 46.

maintaining systems” as if he has absorbed more of Habermas than he bargained for. Habermas meticulously constructs a theory of modernity in terms of a dialectic in which “archaic societies [...] present an antithesis to the modern understanding of the world.”⁵⁴ No wonder indigenous art only had a token presence in Enwezor’s postcolonial *Documenta* despite its significant role in postcolonial discourse.⁵⁵

Enwezor’s dismissal of indigenes as a viable modern lifeworld buys into the very trope of primitivism that he disdains, his distinction between diasporic and identity-based discourses reiterating the classical distinction between modernism and primitivism that Habermas recycles. Habermas’s sociological evidence for the primitive lifeworld of indigenous societies is sourced from classical anthropological literature that, in tautological fashion, constructs indigenes in the negative image of modernity as a rational ideal.⁵⁶ Such anthropology is cooked and has no place in contemporary accounts of indigenous society. The fieldwork of contemporary anthropologists such as Fred Myers, Howard Morphy and Eric Michaels, the anthropological histories of James Clifford and Nicholas Thomas and the cultural analysis of Marcia Langton, Nikos Papastergiadis and Stephen Muecke—to name just a few—has revealed Indigenous cultures to be dynamic, cosmopolitan, diasporic and transcultural. Their engagements display, as Enwezor claimed of creole and diasporic texts, “the ability to invert and convert the logic of the hegemonic sphere into the symbolic capital of cultural difference.”⁵⁷ Moreover, in settler colonies most indigenous people suffered massive and often violent dispersals, though usually within rather than without the nation state (thus not meeting the standard definition of diaspora). This led Clifford to conclude that “the older forms of tribal cosmopolitanism [...] are sup-

⁵⁴ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, at 44.

⁵⁵ There are only two indigenous exhibits in *Documenta 11*, a suite of polaroid chromogenic prints by the Melbourne based Kuku and Erub/Mer artist Destiny Deacon and a collaborative video with fellow Melbourne artist Virginia Fraser, and videos by Oglolook Isuma Productions, co-founded in 1990 by the American-born Canadian film director Norman Cohn and the Inuit Director Zacharias Kunuk. Both bodies of work had the documentary feel of relational art.

⁵⁶ For a much closer analysis of Habermas’s “neo-primitivism,” see Victor Li, *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture and Modernity*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006 at 153-217.

⁵⁷ Enwezor, Basualdo et al, “Introduction,” at 15.

plemented by more properly diasporic forms.”⁵⁸ At issue for Enwezor, it would seem, is not the transcultural and diasporic forms of indigenous art (to which he seems blind), but the memories that its very name evokes.

Conclusion

How do these two bookend moments—these early and late symptoms of modernism—one at its dawn and the other at its twilight, help us map the course of this imaginary figure we call “modernism”? If we place Baudelaire at the dawn, he saw himself inhabiting the twilight, contemplating those “great extinct civilizations” in which “a new aristocracy” emerges amongst men “rich in native energy”, and focused “on the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow”. These “dandies”, as he called them “all spring from the same womb; they all partake of the same characteristic quality of opposition and revolt ... of combating and destroying triviality.” Baudelaire was talking of his fellow bohemians, but he also had in mind their indigenous cousins, “the type of dandy discovered by our traveller in North America”: “those tribes which we call ‘savage’”. In them, and in those other continents of alterity that the Enlightenment and its bourgeois offspring sought to free from the chains of ignorance—such as women and children—he saw not just the fate of Western civilization but also that spirit he dubbed *modernité*.

In the spirit of Baudelaire, avant-garde modernism held dear indigenous art and all that was being swept to oblivion in the currents of modernity. They held it above the tide in the company of their own art, but as repressed objects, fetishes of a lost paradise returned to haunt modernity. In this way they bound indigenous art, in a deep metaphysical sense, to modernism. This left these modernist connoisseurs of the repressed blind to the undertows and eddies where its ideal savages, those quintessential dandies, were busily making their own modernity, warming to its promised sovereignty.

This insight is the starting point of Enwezor’s thinking as he seeks to appropriate the project of modernity for Africa, peering from the side-eddies into the mainstream, hungry for its bounty at the very moment that its promise is dis-

⁵⁸ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997 at 254.

appearing before his eyes. Looking at modernity through the lens of its otherings—in this case African art—he made his major discovery: that African art’s redemption required looking beyond Africa, beyond its indigenism, and towards a post-Western (and thus post-indigenist) theory of art—a new epistemological frame that could accommodate both the legacy of Western and African modernisms. But in leaping over indigenism he left it unchanged as a metaphysical construct, thus effectively leaving in place what he wished to move beyond. From here, on the outside, it threatens to pull his reimagining of post-Western modernism back into the mythic frame of Westernism. It is a lesson that critics of indigenous art, including Enwezor, would do well to learn if indigenous art is to be prized from its confines in that promised land of the other—as if a relic we dare not touch for fear of sacrilege—and takes its place in the everyday rough and tumble of not just the contemporary but also, retrospectively, modernism. Otherwise it seems destined to remain in that special place that the metaphysics of modernity constructed for its abode, the *terra incognita* of the unmodern, as if even the contemporary, in all its seamless exteriority, can only appear through what it disappears.