

<Insertions>:

Self and Other in Contemporary African Art

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This essay focuses on a group of contemporary African artists who execute their work using their own images, or inscribe their own bodies into the final configuration. Executed in the installation genre and influenced by ideas of performance art, the works of these artists have been primarily motivated by the quest for self-representation, interrogation of their own existential circumstances, or the negotiation of their identity. Because these artists also live and practice between two or more cultures, their works often investigate the intersections of autobiography, self and the other. Like other contemporary non-white artists active in the West, these artists address the objectification of non-white bodies and question their imaging/imagining in Western culture. In some cases, interrogating the social constructions of the body within their own cultures may take precedence in their work over what has come to be known in contemporary discourse as 'returning the gaze':

The term 'insertion,' used in the title of this essay, embraces the multiple layers of meanings this word can evoke. It refers to the complex manner in which these artists 'insert' images of their bodies into their work. It also refers to the sexual metaphor or pun, often associated with the act of insertion. In the Western imagination, non-Western bodies, and more specifically the Black body, are often objectified, exoticized and viewed with a mixture of fear and desire. As Henry Louis Gates eloquently argued:¹

The Black body has, of course, been demonized in Western culture: represented as ogreish, coarse, and highly, menacingly sexualized. But the black body has also been valorized, represented as darkly alluring—still highly menacingly sexualized but, well, in a good way. And this, historically, is its ambiguous role in the Western Imagination.

Hence, inserting one's self or body into the work may also be an act of counter-penetration, an assertion of one's own subjectivity in response to objectification. Insertion can also be used to assert one's own presence in the face of presumed absence. In some cases, insertion is also a strategy to signify that racial and cultural differences in Western society—or others—are inscribed on the non-white body.

The idea of associating the act of insertion with ^{self-portraiture} may seem far-fetched, since traditional perceptions of portraiture signify objective or literal likeness. As conventionally defined, the term portraiture moves between what Richard Brilliant has called 'the poles of descriptive delineation in the literal sense and a much more generalized concept of representation,' where depiction is assumed to have a tenuous connection with an obvious and identifiable object of reference? It is within this generalized concept of representation that I locate the notion of 'insertion' as self-portrait. That is when the simulacrum of the person portrayed (in this case willfully inserted) functions as a surrogate presence rather than a physical likeness. It is this surrogate presence which allows the—artist's body-image to transcend the conventional boundaries of verisimilitude.

As we shall see in the works of these artists, verisimilitude is a mediated gesture between what Olu Ogundimu has referred to as 'reflection and projection.'³ The essence of verisimilitude here, again to use Oguibe's words, 'is not transparency, but efficacy, the fulfillment of an intent beyond the materiality of the image.'⁴ In that sense, self-portraiture, as argued by Brilliant, can be understood 'as a form of representation, couched in terms either formulated by others, or based knowingly on their expectation.'⁵

This essay introduces representative examples of works by the following four artists: Hassan Musa, Olu Oguibe, Bernie Searle, and Zineb Sedira. The works of these artists engage these ideas and strategies about the body and its manipulation in contemporary African art practice, and hence serve to embody the notion of insertion as self-portraiture. However, before discussing the work of these artists, it is important to discuss the various discourses and theories which inform their artistic production, and to investigate the techniques, media, genres, and visual vocabulary employed by these artists to execute their works and maximize their effect.

The centrality of photography in the work of these artists is a fact that merits special attention. Photography has been highly influential in the most revolutionary transformations of art in the 20th century, (propelling the transition from pictorialism to idea-based-image making. The disruptive techniques of Marcel Duchamp, the Pop Art strategies of Andy Warhol, and Walter Benjamin's critique of originality in art all helped pave the road to the conceptualism which has dominated contemporary art practices since the 1960s. With the rise of post-modernism, photography has provided artists with profound possibilities for experimenting and the greatest means of appropriating reality and critiquing traditional artistic conventions and practices. With the dissolution of boundaries among the different media, photography has come to define our understanding of artistic expression. In more ways than one, photography has become the tool par excellence of contemporary artistic creation.

The fact that all the artists discussed in this essay are well-versed in the discourses of post-modernism and highly competent in the language and techniques of contemporary global art practices is an important consideration. Certainly, their work can only be understood within the parameters of such discourses and practices. Like other post-modernists in the West, the preferred genre of these artists is the multi media installation executed in the conceptualist mode. They share with their Western counterpart disdain for the real and objecthood, and a preference for idea-based art. Similarly, their bodies or images of their bodies have become the preferred medium on which art is created or inscribed into the work. As performance artists they deploy all art activities that incorporate time and motion, often using video, music or theater to emphasize the visual as transitory and responsive phenomena. Like most post-modern artists, deconstruction of cultural mythology, stereotype and accepted social norms of role-playing are central to their art practices. For this reason, acts of appropriation, reproduction and even parody of traditionally recognized masterpieces, icons of popular culture, and mass media have been deployed to challenge modernist's ideas of creative originality and authenticity. Also, like all artists engaged in performance-based art, the body, and other non-object-oriented form of production, these artists share the desire to document their work via photography. In contemporary art practice, photographic records of site-specific installation or of performances involved in the making of artwork become valuable art works or entered into the making of newer works. Finally, visual art practices today, and installations in particular, have created significant sites in which temporal and spatial dimensions can be explored simultaneously. As interventions in time and place, installations create new spaces in which various aspects of the self (imaginary, emergent, or residual) can be explored.

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Given the similarity of ideas and practices between these artists and their Western counterparts, one might ask 'Why focus on these four artists (who happened to be Africans, two of them are females and two are (males) and not just any other contemporary artists?' Beyond familiarity and matters of practicality, one must emphasize that the choice of these artists and the works discussed in this presentation are deliberate. In Africa, and throughout the African Diaspora, the intersection of race and gender, and the role which these play in the lives of many artists today, are perhaps the most striking aspects of the art created by contemporary artists. Given the rapidly changing discourse of race, gender and representation, words such as 'woman' or 'man' are hardly semantically stable concepts, and they also

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fail to take into account such factors as race, ethnicity and class. And all predicate the ways in which gender was and is constructed in any society, hence influencing women's style, meaning, and creative activities.

Most important, there is a special need to focus on the artistic creativity of women of African descent. In the male-dominated field of visual production, it is not just men, but, more specifically white men who have historically controlled the 'gaze,' and consequently the power to shape the images of women. As I have argued elsewhere, within such a system, women of African descent suffer a kind of 'double jeopardy' as the marginalized 'other.'⁷

In this regard, it is important to mention that the most serious challenge to modernist art practice has come from women artists influenced by the feminist discourse of the 1970s. The politics of representation introduced through such feminist discourse has restructured our understanding of artistic production in several ways.⁸ In helping to shift the way meaning is produced in and through art, feminist discourse has brought about a profound change in contemporary art practice. Feminist politics of representation have aided women artists to challenge the spectacularization of the female body as a natural and appropriate register for the gaze of the male artist, the kind that has dominated the representation of women in visual arts across the millennia. For this reason, the very process of 'looking' has become one of the most highly contested issues in the discourse of feminist art history.⁹ To illustrate this we need only cite Griselda Pollock, who has taken John Berger's critique of female representation in art one step further by arguing for the importance of distinguishing between 'women' and the 'images of women' as constructed in art and popular culture.¹⁰ Nor is this attitude limited to the plastic arts. Laura Mulvey, in her now classic essay, has amply demonstrated the hegemony of the 'male gaze' in cinematic representations as well.¹¹ Adoption of such strategies has produced a considerable body of gendered art works that speaks directly to the experience of women in contemporary society. Yet, feminist strategies are rarely highlighted in the visual production of women artists from the African Diaspora. Nor do these artists often receive the same critical attention afforded their white or European counterparts in the international arena. Through the works discussed in this essay, I hope to investigate and define some of the tropes of gender representation and identity as articulated in the works of two contemporary African women artists.

With regard to race, most cultural theorists would agree that it does not denote an innate quality or a given characteristic of a neutral system of classification. Yet, more than ever before, race has become, as Richard Dyer argues, 'critical for organizing our social, cultural, political and aesthetic lives.'¹²

Despite the profound impact of race on our lives today, the art historical discourse on the connection between race, raciality, and visual representation remains minimal and inadequate.¹³ Similarly, Thad Ziolkowski argues in a review of the African American artist, Lesly Saar's recent exhibition:¹⁴

The nightmarishly fascinating thing about race is that it is one real and unreal, social fact and anthropological non-entity. In the United States of course, the issue of race is everywhere, and yet the artworld generally fails to reflect that fact.

In analyzing the works of these artists, we will see that race and gender, -a.o.-with other factors emerge as inevitable determinants of the individual perspective, and of the specific configurations in cultural and artistic production.

Bernie Searle: Color Matters

As a South African of native African and German/English descent, Berni Searle was categorized as 'coloured' during the Apartheid era—a fact which drives much of her work today. Searle's art explores the struggle between the individual and the community, and the formation of identity. In most of her installations, Searle attempts to excavate the neglected history of South African women as a means of recovering from European colonialism and the problematics of race, class and gender which it left behind. As Searle herself notes:

One of the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid has been that the self is or has been experienced, more often than not, as a site of conflict. The testimonies that have emerged, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission glaringly demonstrate this point. [...] Working with images of the self offers a necessary and important stage in the deconstruction of cultural and gendered identity.

Searle's mixed media *Colour Me*, is an autobiographical installation series that both celebrates the rich and overlapping strands of the artist's heritage, and refuses to be bound by it. *Colour Me* features a series of enlarged photographs of the artist's naked body smeared with spices of various shades of red, yellow, white and brown in a way that resists any definition of identity that is static, or delineated into neat categories. In several photographs, the artist gazes directly at the viewer—a confrontational gesture that challenges the viewer's position in terms of the exotic gaze. As the artist herself cites bell hooks' statement:¹⁶

By courageously looking (they) defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality' Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency.

Searle's unique use of spices references the thriving spice trade in the Cape Dutch colony in the 17th century, as well as her mixed heritage. However, there is also the uncomfortable suggestion that the spices have the ability to smother or suffocate.

In *A Darker Shade of Light*, Searle continues to explore the processes and issues in her earlier work, focusing on the body as a site on which various processes are inscribed and mapped. In a series of polaroids, Searle shows the most sensitive parts of her body stained with Egyptian henna. In the images, the darker marks left by the process of staining recall bruises and hints of trauma, while the light boxes on which the photographs are displayed evoke forensic investigative techniques. By darkening her body and inviting scrutiny, Searle interrogates and challenges the racial hierarchy of color constructed by the Apartheid system.

The major concern of Searle's work is obviously mapping relationships of absence and presence, which has been at the forefront of the feminist revolutionary thought. As Rosemary Betterton elaborates, 'the attempt to map a new space for female postcolonial subjectivity has become a central issue within contemporary art practice. Hence, themes of exile, separation and return have provided a powerful means of exploring the self as ongoing process of construction in time and place, through the operation of memory as well as in the present, and in the articulations of loss and desire.'¹⁷

As Searle herself suggested, this is a daunting idea which is compounded by the absence of black women artists who should be writing (in the broadest sense of the word) their histories and thereby 'inserting' themselves as a visible voice within contemporary art practice in South Africa.

Zineb Sedira: Behind the Veil

The art of Zineb Sedira is clearly autobiographical, but not without universal appeal. Born In 1963 to Algerian immigrants, the London-based artist was brought up in the suburbs of Paris following the Algerian liberation from France. The events of this turbulent period and the resulting animosity towards the Algerian community have been a driving force throughout Sedira's work.

Sedira's Self-Portrait I, (1999) is about the veil and the Muslim female gaze. The veil here serves as a metaphor for a 'veiling the mind' whether through censorship or self-censorship; its absence represents a willingness to face dilemmas and to negotiate the multiple layers of one's consciousness. The eyes In Self Portrait i are voyeuristic and powerful rather than compliant. The physical veil in the photographs has been gently effaced to emphasize the eyes, and to let the body merge into t l background, like the walls of the whitewashed houses that become another metaphor for the veil. By escaping their mask, they subvert the role of the veiled woman. 'Open to be gazed at, it is also the part that is free to look, to think without being judged, silent sight, silent witness... to see but not be seen: 'a

In Made in England: Miss Holmes,lggg, Sedira transgresses the traditional codes of dress among North African Muslim women to explore Issues of cultural memory, sexuality and nostalgia. As in earlier works, Sedira uses Islamic geometric designs to re-claim a traditionally masculine art form. By covering the 1g6os' stiletto-style high heels, with Islamic Arabesques, Sedira re-territorializes the feminine, and 'inserts' it into a masculine form. As a fetishized form, the high heels may signal subordination, while emphasizing erotic allure. The repetition of Islamic patterning provides Sedira with a means of continually re-positioning herself, her cultures, as 'it play-wit4eaL.an "nciear, between existing ane disappearing:

Don't Do to Her What You Did to Me I (1998), is a video Installation which reinterprets the tradition o - Islamic healing charms, using a mixed media of ink, water, and passport photographs of a woman's face. The title of the work comes from a phrase uttered a woman on the verge of death, used to exorcise th. conflicts between Western and Muslim cultures, Mothers often use It to protect their young girls from becoming 'too French,' rather than good Muslims.

The art of Zineb Sedira draws our attention to the problematics of cultural appropriation and que: tions our understanding of fixed categories of East/West, and our perception of gender and sexuality i Muslim societies. It questions our ability to sustain a permanent position either 'inside' or 'outside' of place, a culture or a memory.

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Zineb Sedira
Silent Sight, 2000
13 minutes, 16 mn b&w film
Funded by Westminster Arts Council

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Olu Oguibe: Surrogate Presence

The central image in Olu Oguibe's Installation *Brothers II*, 2000 is a double-exposed photograph of a child whose anonymous presence and innocent gaze demand reflection and silent contemplation. Although the photograph depicts the artist himself as a child, it primarily functions as a surrogate presence for Oguibe's younger brother who died more than twenty years ago. *Brothers II* continues the work begun in *Buggy (Memorial to an Unknown Child)*, 1997 in which Oguibe's image serves as a surrogate image for his brother. *Buggy* consists of a pedestalled pram or buggy and the enlarged photograph of a child whose identity is not revealed. The image of the child evokes an anonymous presence whose innocent gaze 'demands reflection and silent contemplation: The pram is antique, and the aim of this, as Oguibe explains 'is to introduce an element of relevance without temporality; a sign of timelessness.' The space around the photograph is framed with red and black drapery creating an ambience of somber dignity.

However, in *Brothers II* the artist's image represents both his own, and his brother's image. Oguibe's work, clearly evokes the unique photographic tradition of surrogate representation, as practiced in certain African societies. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, the tradition provides the living twin with a faux image or effigy of the dead twin, thus anchoring his spirit in the world of the living. Since Oguibe and his brother were not twins, this work extends the tradition beyond its original parameters, and focuses on memory rather than metapsychology.

The central theme is still that of loss and commemoration, and anchoring of memory. As Oguibe

reminisces: It has been over twenty years since my brother died, yet when I think of him as I do each day, I think of the several other million children around the world who have dreams like he had, bright and innocent, oblivious of life's complications and cruelties. Potential doctors and lawyers. Astronauts and physical scientists. Poets and politicians. Inventors. Little ones who ought to bud and flower but who, like my brother, will be claimed together with their dreams by the misfortune of deprivation and disease.

Though *Brothers II* is certainly autobiographical, its universal appeal is clear. The child in *Buggy* or *Brothers II* is every mother's child. Both evoke the lingering presence of the beloved dead and affirm the transition from grief to celebration, an experience all humans can share. As Oguibe himself has eloquently noted:¹⁹

[D]espite the alienation and segregation and desensitization that have today become prevailing parameters of our lives, there is a corner deep inside all of us where we are still able to connect, and to share in one another's moments of rapture and distress.

Oguibe's earlier works evidence this concern such as in *Requiem: Oklahoma*, 1996, where the plight and welfare of children all over the world have become the central theme. Indeed, such universal humanistic concerns are recurring themes in all the facets of work created by this Nigerian-born and New York based artist, whose interests range from poetry to art criticism, and has himself curated a number of groundbreaking exhibitions.

Hassan Musa: Graphic Ceremonies

The critical appropriation of classical Western masterpieces is an ongoing theme in the art of Hassan Musa. Since the early 1990s, Musa has taken on biblical themes popularized in Renaissance paintings, creating his own versions in a critical and satirical style. In his series, entitled the New Testament, Musa deals with biblical themes such as The Last Supper and The Annunciation.

Musa's large paintings are usually executed in textile ink on printed cloth, creatively blending the designs of the fabric with his own painting. Through this he inserts his own presence in a manner that draws attention to the endless possibilities of any work of art, and to art practices outside of Western-sanctioned aesthetics.

In a series of public performances entitled Graphic Ceremonies, Musa deconstructs the idea of exhibition as ritual to expose its theatricality, redirecting the audience's focus to the very processes involved in making the work, rather than the often-fetishized art object.

In Self Portrait as Saint Sebastian, 1999, Saint Sebastian of the Sunflower, 1999, and Family Album, 1998, Musa takes on the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, a central theme in Renaissance art, and processes it into a surrogate image that criticizes the hegemonic presence of Western culture. The ambiguity associated with the images of Saint Sebastian - commonly depicted as a handsome youth pierced by arrows - allows the artist to replace him with such latter-day icons as Che Guevara and Van Gogh, whose lives evoke complex reactions of guilt and blame no less powerful than those created by Saint Sebastian's act of martyrdom.

In The Origin of the Art, 1998, a complex work that references Western art history, Musa attaches the head of the Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa to Courbet's most controversial work, The Origin of the World, 1866. Both works represent the most popular, but diametrically opposed, masterpieces of Western art history. Unlike Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Courbet's work is the most celebrated transgressive image in Western art, which until recently remained hidden (before it was acquired by the Musee d'Orsay in Paris) presumably because of its pornographic quality. More so, Courbet's work zeroed in on the most private part of the female body, while the Leonardo focuses on the face of the Mona Lisa, her mouth and her enigmatic smile. By juxtaposing these popular but diametrically opposed masterpieces of Western art, Musa creates a powerful criticism of capitalist culture, its construction of the female body, and the course of Western art history as a whole.

Contemporary African Art Salah Hassan

- page 43 Hassan Musa
Autoportrait en St Sebastien, 1997
Textile on cloth
215 x 132 cm
Courtesy of the Artist
- page 44 Hassan Musa
Le Martyr de St Sebastien (Tryptique) 1997
Textile ink on cloth
150 x 289 cm
Courtesy of the Artist
- page 45 Hassan Musa
Album de Famille, 1998
Textile on cloth
260 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the Artist

Concluding Remarks

The art practices of the last decade or so have been very innovative and important for the re-examination of photography and the genre of art installations. Through their work, these four artists have extended and enriched the critique of basic picturing practices begun, but left undeveloped, in the work of other conceptual and western feminist artists. In their photographic explorations of the self, one could easily draw parallels between these artists and Cindy Sherman, whose photographs parody an entire culture of role-playing. One could also draw parallels between them and Barbara Kruger, especially in the latter's evocative studies of cultural domination and the graphic vocabulary of advertisement. These artists evoke a multi-layered approach to art by using narrative, autobiography, decoration, ritual and popular culture to maximize the effect of their work. The spectator is left with no single or simple identity through which to analyze the work. The multiple reference and complex identities projected to their work have added new meaning to the concept of representation. A serious re-examination of contemporary art practices can only be possible when the intersection of gender, sexuality and race are brought to the forefront of cultural production. Only then will the narrative of contemporary art be complete. The idea of insertion and self-representation is one of the keys to issues facing the art world today.

Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 'The Body Politic,' In *Thirteen ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997) 61.
2. See Richard Brilliant 'Portraiture' in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 47.
3. See Olu Oguibe, 'Photography and the Substance of the Image' In *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: the Guggenheim Museum, 1996) 231-250.
4. See Olu Oguibe, 231-250.
5. See Brilliant. 49.
6. See Marian Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa* (New York: Saint Martin Press, 1996).
7. See Salah Hassan and Dorothy Desir-Davis, 'Introduction' In ed. Salah Hassan *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary African Women Artists* (New Brunswick: Africa World Press, 1997)
8. See Laura Co-thingham, 'Re-framing the Subject: Feminism and Photography,' in Elizabeth Janus ed. *Veronica's Revenge: Contemporary Perspectives on Photography*. (Zurich, New York: Scalo.)
9. Ibid, 62.
10. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1977) and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988)
11. See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen*, 16, 3, London, (1975):6-18. Reprinted In eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (London: Blackwell, 1995 edition) 963, 44-
12. Quoted In James Smalls, 'Visualizing Race: A Lifelong Process and Training,' *Art Journal*, Fall 1998, 2. See also Richard Dyer, *White*, !, (London: Routledge, 1997) 1.
13. Ibid, z.
14. See Thad Ziolkowski, 'Lesly Saar,' *Art Forum*, April 2000:144.
15. Artist's statement.
16. The Oppositional Gaze: 'Black Female Spectators' In *Black American Cinema* ed. Manthia Diawara (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 288-89.
17. Betterton, Rosemary. *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996) 162
18. Statement by the artist accompanying the installation.
19. Artist's statement.