Temporality

Place-Making or in the "Wrong Place": Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Condition

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To reconstitute the discourse of cultural difference demands not simply a change of cultural contents . . . It requires a radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written, the articulation of the 'sign' in which cultural identities may be inscribed.

— Homi K. Bhabha, "The Postcolonial and The Postmodern: The Question of Agency," 1994

The 1990s inspired a putative sense of global affirmation and renewal. Apartheid ended in South Africa. The Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union was dismantled and splintered into multiple nation-states. The European Union expanded to the edge of the Warsaw Pact countries in the east. Europe launched a new currency. China maintained its communist identity, but only in name. On the cultural field, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao became the totemic icon of a new museum boom, launching all manners of destination architecture.[1] Biennials were launched in Istanbul, Gwangju, Johannesburg, Santa Fe, Berlin, Dakar, and Lyon. But there were also major hiccups: global wars and massacres; internecine warfare between and within nations; the killing fields of the Balkans, Rwanda, Chechnya, Congo. These wars served as the revisionary portents of the future,

pointing to mass killings earlier in the twentieth century. These events gave the 1990s a slightly contradictory cast, which in a short spell would be swept aside for the more positive story that the rapid economic growth of the Internet age would tell of an emergent new reality.

With the Internet communication revolution emerging as the single most radical force in the ordering of modern relationships and subjectivity—"between the net and the self"[2]—the 1990s also represented the full emergence of globalization as it is currently understood. It marked the radical technological transformation that finally afforded the fusion of once-segmented global public spheres and the transcendence by capital of national boundaries (accompanied by the stagnation of labor within them). Yet, the decade was equally characterized by millennial anxiety and a sense of anticipation, even if it still reflected a certain type of world-changing giddiness, especially in the positivity of globalization as a transformative force in world-cultural domains.

Key to the 1990s was the significant emergence of contemporary art from postcolonial sites of production into the global network of artistic production, dissemination, markets, media, and institutional reception that would force the reconsideration of the context of artistic activities. The temporary, large-scale exhibition would become the leading place for enunciating the pluralistic activities of contemporary artistic forms and strategies. These sorts of exhibitions created a new network without the traditional regulations of the Western museum and art market. They pierced the shield of this institutional authority. Through them, artists from postcolonial societies and transnational artists would play a broad role in the refashioning of contemporary art at large.

But while the late twentieth century provided a window into a potentially positive future, the twenty-first century has fulfilled none of its utopian anticipations. In the beginning of the 1990s, it turned out that the twenty-first century would be marked by the process of undoing the legacy of another failed utopia: the conclusion of one of the grand illusions with which the previous century began and ended, namely the spectacular rise and ignominious collapse of communism. It also brought about a broad reconsideration of the nature of globalism to the project of modernity. The failure of the communist utopia is part of the crest of many other such failures: grand schemes of modernity announcing, if not exactly anticipating, new futures, new man, new subjectivity, new society, a new race of workers subordinated to ideology. With historical regularity, these schemes seem to presage and anticipate their own striking moments of utter betrayal of the utopian ideal: fascism, Nazism, socialism, colonialism. The doubt harbored by some about the efficacious potential of utopia as the proper name for the dawn of a new age gave millennialism at the end of the twentieth century a strikingly pallid cast, and a sense of past more than future.

Yet, the dawn of the twenty-first century did in some sense point a way forward by promising a type of new beginning. However, this future was not bargained for, nor was it anticipated. While the end of communism did bring about structural and political changes in the societies it marked deeply, many of which are still ongoing, the same cannot be said for many societies repressed and subordinated by the exorbitant politics of Western hyperpower.

This evident contradiction in world political formation and its continuing realignment returns again and again in the harsh circuitry of the looped images of the crashing Twin Towers. In the pale light of its aftermath, what our senses can properly apprehend is not the utopian promise of millennial transformation, but its betrayal. It is ushered in by the sense of urgency announced in the gloomy, sooty blackness that overcame that scene of Armageddon on 9/11. The image of the falling towers is a sobering one, not least because, in light of the current state of world affairs, the assumption of many in the late 1990s that the twenty-first century would be another age of spectacular progress—naturally overseen and dominated by the forces of Western hegemony—appears either increasingly remote or on the verge of permanent deferral. This owes much to the major conflagrations around the globe today, and to the complexity and heterogeneity of global cultural circuits. In the twenty-first century, we all find culture and politics illuminated only in the half-light of permanent transitions rather than triumphs.

I start with these examples and competing narratives of our global present as a tentative step toward an analysis of the role of *place-making* in the work of contemporary artists. If place-making is the name for a type of active grounding of the potent marks of differenced artistic practices, then we must examine the balance in which the equation of the resistance to being placed on margins hangs. We must examine this balance as it appears on the ledger of motivated exclusions, and the apologies that accompany them. In this way, we can observe that the effects brought on by transnational cultural formations against the discriminatory practices of exclusion are the direct results of the politics of contestation that are now part of the routine events of globalization. There are other forces that have brought about this examination of the ledger, which go beyond the field of art and its institutions. These are what comprise the heterogeneous events of globalization. Rather than impose limits, to erect *cordons sanitaires* on and around economic, political, or cultural speech, they seek to rupture those obstacles and barriers. Some of these events have been positive in the sense that they force a rethinking of the planetary totalization that twentieth-century forms of modernity once embodied.[3] They also provide object lessons for those forces of globalization that saw global resources as the spoils of predatory, multinational capital. The rejection of this version of globalization, in which very few rule and enjoy access to the benefits of economic and cultural liberalization, offers fresh insight into the fact that the global struggles that face us today—immigration, environmental worries, ethnic conflicts, terrorism, etc.—recast, in the direst terms, the fundamental historical implications of the twentieth century as the high point of the logic of empire. These are today being

replayed as continuations of the unfinished political, social, economic, and cultural struggles of the last century.

I raise these issues, in a time in which it has become *de rigueur* to erect a ghostly silence around notions of global equity in artistic participation, to point to the alarming complacency and weakness of recent curatorial thinking. In enumerating the impact on art and culture by some of the foundational and important events of the twentieth century and how they continue to play out into the twenty-first century, I wish to point out also the degree to which contemporary art in Western institutions—despite the purported radicalism of the neo-avant-garde—has been complicit in maintaining strong rejectionist cultural politics, while employing Eurocentrism as an advance guard in institutional policies of exclusion.

While mainstream museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, Centre Pompidou, and Tate Modern continue to "denationalize" and de-emphasize the European attributes of their canons, they have done so only on a limited basis, and for the most part, only in regard to recent acquisitions. While the major museums have improved over the last 60 years in including contemporary art and artists from postcolonial societies in these museums—in collections, monographic surveys, group exhibitions—these efforts have not markedly transformed the complexion of contemporary art within institutions overall. Temporary exhibitions have been the places where some of the key arguments of global artistic discourse are being staged. The increasingly transnational character of many of these exhibitions does provide a productive basis to explore the importance of postcolonial modes of contemporary art. Here, postcolonial theory is an indispensable tool with which to examine and take measure of the state of contemporary art and culture.

We have heard so much of how one must excise from the language of critical art discourse any reference to ideas like postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and identity. Except, of course, when they are being treated as historical subjects belonging to the past, as if the conditions those references helped initiate in the criticisms of artistic practice have disappeared. Art historian Hans Belting makes a key point when he observes two tendencies that have been part of this situation of critical disavowal. For Western artists, the key point of their cultural practice has been to become posthistorical (that is, to overcome the shadow of the Western classical tradition); for "non-Western" artists, the struggle is to attain the state of being post-ethnic (in this case, to overcome any identification with ethnic or racially based categories). These two modes of transcending one's historical condition seem to harbor the fantasy of manufacturing a new set of universals, albeit shorn of references either to one's past or to one's ethnicity. The curious thing is that Belting does not view the anxiety of Western artists in racial or ethnic terms. For them, the classical tradition, the archives of Western culture, represent the key burden. But for "non-Western" artists, there is no reference whatsoever to a classical heritage, no cultural archives to wage battle with; their anxiety, it seems, is of a biological type. Identity, the ethnic burden, is what they must overcome. And such an identity, one would assume, is a negative model of subjectivity around which artistic practice would make sense within mainstream discourse. I don't know whether I agree entirely with Belting's reading, but his observation is an important one.

The changes in historical consciousness and political relationships organized by the radical politics of decolonization and anti-imperialism have been productive for contemporary art. This is true not simply in ethnic or archival terms, but in deeply ideological terms of institutional individuation and categorization of the works and images of contemporary artists of diverse historical experiences. The changes of the last half-century offer important guidelines for exploring the work of a range of contemporary artists. Belting, therefore, is partially correct in his assessment of the field of contemporary art, but only insofar as all artists aim to be post-historical. The anxiety of ethnicity belongs to a wholly different sphere: namely, the question of cultural difference, from which Western artists are themselves not immune. From the 1960s to the late 1990s, this became clear as we witnessed how narratives of contemporary art passed from those formed exclusively under the rules of colonial modernity to those of postcolonial modernity.

I do not raise the specter of Eurocentrism as an epithet. It is essential to recall the way it situates and anthropologizes subjects of artistic contemplation so as to recognize the manner in which specific discourses about art have been formed and framed by the institutions of colonial modernity—art academies and museums, critics and media—and how the language of those discourses has been aligned with certain exclusivist and culturally specific judgments that pertain to aesthetic outcomes and positions. Practices that have come out of other traditions have been subordinated, for better or worse, to those judgments. The relationship between exclusivist and culturally specific judgments, elevated to universal principles, has left an indelible mark on the development of the non-Western artistic canons, leaving them largely under the interpretative control of institutions of colonial modernity.

But, while this interpretive control has frustrated a range of artistic practices that explore the conditions of otherness, it has ensured that a series of healthy counterdiscourses to colonial modernity's self-authorized evaluation of the cultural worth of artistic canons would be part of the larger architecture of the critical debates to come. These counterdiscourses have provided a path toward the development of postcolonial modernity, and can be understood, in both an ideological and a historical sense, as important critical interventions into the aesthetic judgments and artistic narratives of colonial modernity: slowly undoing its methods of social control and deconstructing its monopoly in the task of historicizing modern subjectivity.

If colonial modernity once consolidated its power in order to discipline, dominate, and dismiss its subjects, postcolonial modernity

challenges and disperses that power. The turn toward postcolonial modernity serves as a historical guide for interpreting the distinct artistic practices that have emerged from the cultural context previously constituted under the authority of colonial modernity. The historical coordinates of this turn allow us to draw a map for a series of interlocking arguments about the relationships between a range of producers and interlocutors: artists, curators, critics, and historians; museums and cultural institutions.

In the 1990s, there occurred a remarkable shift in the circuits of contemporary art, owing to the slow rise to prominence of new venues for the display and reception of contemporary art. This shift occurred both in the sites of exhibition-making and in the practice of curatorship. Most importantly, it occurred within the changed conditions of production. These three elements collided in the construction of the narratives of contemporary art. They became increasingly concerned with the wider ramifications for contemporary art of the discursive exclusion of art of minorities—African, Asian, Latin American, Chicano, First Nation, female, queer—within Western societies. These debates grew, based on the principles of multiculturalism and the then-emerging globalization.

The changes introduced into the field of contemporary art by postcolonial politics and poetics—including changes in exhibition practices and art history, changes in conditions of production, and transformations in contexts of reception and exchange, such as in museums and art markets—mirror the geopolitical realignments that have defined globalization. Reticular in its links to the contexts of art-making, the biennial form of exhibition-making emerged as the preeminent global forum for organizing the multiple positions of contemporary artistic practice. Biennials, especially those occurring outside Europe and North America, such as the influential and unabashedly ideological Havana Biennial, confronted and attacked the premise of the earlier modernist dichotomy that divided the world civilizationally: between enlightened cultural centers and inferior deculturalized peripheries, between progressive avant-garde mainstreams and atomized, stagnated margins, between modern artists and ethnic bricoleurs.

Not only were the coordinates of art-making scrambled and made unstable in such changing global networks—which now include Dakar, Gwangju, Istanbul, Johannesburg, and Cairo—the narratives of artistic production took on often heterogeneous, competitive, and mutually contradictory logics of production. By recognizing the multiplicity of approaches, the biennial model, as the key site for the production of the new discourse of contemporary art, began to disperse the centralization of the homogeneous discursive framework in which contemporary art was once contemplated. While the field of contemporary art still retains many aspects of the unevenness between the resource-rich developed world and the resource-poor parts of developing economies, there is no doubt that the complexity of art-making across many parts of the world has been established. Places for the display of contemporary art are no longer

irreducible to the tendentious patterns of binary separation of artists according to the logic of cultural determinism.

The dispersal of artistic content has produced specific places for their instantiation. Large-scale exhibitions such as the biennial model represent key testing grounds for our evolving encounters with the histories of modernity and contemporaneity. Exhibitions of contemporary art over the last two decades thus must be perceived as place-making devices for articulating the empirical evidence of the imaginative practices of contemporary art across the world, not just in Western centers of power.[4] With this shift across the now tenuous borders between center and periphery, between mainstream and margins, the question to ask is, how does contemporary art respond to the dispersal of the old hegemonic claims of cultural authority that did not recognize difference?[5]

If we recognize place-making as a crucial device for exploring the heterogeneity of today's contemporary artistic models, we will then come to a proper understanding of what it must have meant in the past—before the 1990s—to be differenced and, as such, in the "wrong place," on the margins of a purported mainstream in some imaginary center of discursive authority, and therefore thoroughly deracinated, beyond the grasp and knowledge of institutional recognition. The biennial model as a place-making device constitutes what the theorist Hakim Bey calls a "temporary autonomous zone" of encounters. It reminds us that the exhibition of contemporary art is modeled, constructed, and constituted as a kind of place for contemporary art and artists. If the goal of any exhibition is to create such a place for the specific visibility of a range of artistic and discursive activities, then the biennial model is not, as many have claimed, an encouragement of incoherence and, in extremis, a place for artistic nonsense.

Rather, this incoherence is what is proper to contemporary art and therefore one of its salutary features, as it exposes the fault line between former centers and peripheries. The large-scale exhibition model, despite its shortcomings—and there are many—does offer new institutional capacities for curators to articulate the new possibilities of contemporary artistic discourses globally. Without those capacities, the solidity of the place of contemporary art can just as easily again become differenced as yet another whim of fashion that will ultimately change and revert to the old, stultified model of modernist totalization.

Throughout my own career, my key interest has been rooted in the examination of artistic differencing through a form of curatorial counterinsurgency. I have been examining contemporary African art through exhibitions that are specifically decisive places in which the idea of the contemporary can be constituted, and, as such, are places for the creation of its meaning in relation to an enlarged global public sphere. In my work, what has been truly significant about the exhibition venue and its place-making possibilities is the way it grounds the work of the artists in the framework of their discursive practices and at the juncture of global and transnational communities.

I hereby proffer one among many examples I have initiated in my curatorial work, which I choose for its dialectical expansiveness, because it sought to abrogate the boundary between politics and art, cultural production and ideological positioning, and incorporate certain forms and poetics of violence and the aesthetics and ethics of contestation. In 1995, when I began work on the exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*,[6] I was not merely concerned with the relationship of African artists to the contemporary global sphere. Rather, in organizing the exhibition around a series of political attitudes and cultural disjunctures that were features of African decolonization movements, I thought it critically imperative to establish the relationship of the artist and political worker through their shared historical affiliation. To my thinking, the decolonization movements of independence and liberation were the historical occasions and events in which the thesis of the exhibition developed a careful curatorial model by consciously collapsing into one entangled inquiry the archives of colonial and postcolonial modernities.

In a sense, I was searching for what could constitute the *terra firma* for the undifferencing of contemporary African thought and cultural subjectivity, especially in light of the radical discontinuity in artistic forms introduced by the institutions of colonial modernity. *The Short Century* then became more than an exhibition about art as a form of cultural practice, but art as the framework through which a range of discursive activities could be articulated. My goal for the exhibition was to create not merely an event space for the reception of the radical proposals and procedures of decolonization. I wanted it to function as a concatenation of places signaling the complexity of the contemporary grammar of the postcolonial multitude.

The broader context of contemporary art today is situated in the domains overseen by those artists whose practices first began as responses to modernism through versions of antimodernism. I associate this antimodernism with acts of engaged criticality and reflexivity. The artists' antimodernism is clearly linked to historical models of earlier exhibition formats and to the interrogation of certain institutions' epistemological methods. What has emerged from this antimodernism is not a product of the negation of modernism as such, but a broadening of it; an attempt to foreground aspects of its recalcitrant practices, the joining of the high and low, the novel and the outmoded, vernacular and cosmopolitan, politics and aesthetics. These disciplinary ruptures, among many others, build the constitutive heterogeneity of the language of contemporary art today. By the same token, through the historical issues raised by this antimodernism, we witness the dispersal of certain modernist styles and institutional logics.

I want to conclude by raising the question of identity, which, until recently, has been the main lens through which differenced artistic models have often been critiqued and dismissed. I bring it up in light of the state

of emergency under which global politics are being conducted. Identity and its stubborn values have served as tools for all kinds of zealous cultural affirmation. Recently, it has been reignited in the most reductive and atavistic of modes and suddenly invested with a striking positivist veneer in the Western struggle against Islamic radicalism. The phantasm of identity as a utopian unifier for the reclamation of a civilizational place in the Western past is curious given the fact that identity was previously understood, in the hands of those who were differenced, as the means by which they were banished from the enlightened circle of modernity.

Identity—whether false or true, traditional or modern, local or global, religious or secular, economic or cultural—has remained a surprisingly resilient concept, as one of the major ways people of all social stripes and ideological positionings define or reflect themselves to others. Postcolonial cultural politics, to which aspects of Islamic radicalism belong, are no different in this regard. The fact that identities are considered by many to be fictions does not mean that they do not carry durable reserves of social empathy in the global public sphere. However, in many Western democracies, these attributes have often become freighted with a range of modifiers based on exploitative dichotomies: foreigner and *indigene*, immigrant and citizen, authentic and inauthentic, Muslim and Christian, terrorist and democrat, barbaric and civilized. In an age of terrorism, these modifiers have become reduced to a set of mutually exclusive antagonisms that lead to such reductive categories as "friend" and "enemy."

Passionate identity politics also reveal the extent to which these differences are problems of culture at large. Identity represents, therefore, not merely a token of cultural affirmation, a simple category of differencing, a baggage of ethnic profiling, identification, and classification within the rationalities of citizenship and belonging. It also illuminates the cultural and political frameworks around which the critical contents of modern and contemporary culture are formulated and built. Part of art's task is to argue the importance of identity as something other than an essentialized, ossified model of cultural affirmation in contemporary cultural discourses. The claim is not to dismiss identity, but rather to engage it in its many contradictions, to show how the stubborn myths of identity are relational to the dominant categories to which they often respond and, as such, have real cultural uses, particularly in the practice of oppositional artistic initiatives.

For numerous artists, postcolonial practices do not inhabit a marginal place on the global stage; instead, they are central to understanding the critical relationships among artists of divergent experiences across cultures, national affiliations, institutions, and the historical intersection of identities in Western and in postcolonial societies found in the European and Islamic worlds. In artistic works and projects, the postcolonial world is a world of conjunctions, a place of intersections, the point at which one renegotiates dominant practices of inclusion and

exclusion. In fact, under the postcolonial condition, contemporary art is enlivened, seen to be both complex and accessible. Such art, as part of an engaged cultural practice, offers a perspicacious view into how dominant practices and the legibility of the counter-practices that have brought them coexist in crisis.

Herein, the routes of exile and the dispersion of migration can be defined as a response to the late capitalist intersection of globalization and postcolonialism. To the degree that the figure of the immigrant has become a specter of modern biopolitical discourse, as thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Arjun Appadurai, and others remind us, questions of place and belonging will remain with us for a while, not least because the twentieth century's massive, unprecedented migration and colossal displacement of peoples have continued unabated. These movements remain the norm of the present. Due to the problems of uneven development and violent conflict that form the background to global migration, the general crisis often ascribed to the unending movement of large populations will remain part of the global discourse about place. These movements disturb the spatial coordinates of contemporary dwelling and place, rearticulating the ethical confrontation between the stranger and the neighbor. The disputes that arise about the condition of place make clear that out of the violent logic of colonization has dawned a new order of postcolonial migration, one continuously emblematized in the writing of new scripts of settling and unsettling, unhinging and rehinging of the national space, reimagining national identity while contradicting the fictions of national wholeness and completeness.

The agencies involved in the reinscription of space as concrete places convey to us, in the moment of displacement, a wholly different relationship to place than biennials, which have offered valuable opportunities for new politics of spatial description. In the migrant's social experience, cities and imaginaries of far-off national spaces, neighborhoods, and communities are the spatial coordinates of place. They each engender new conditions of territoriality, identity, and citizenship. Out of them, aesthetic and cultural activities emerge as witnesses to the continuous transformations of the cultural and political self. Examining the fissures of these negotiations has been the legacy of curatorial practices of the 1990s, as the place for the continuing undifferencing of centers and peripheries, while investing global exhibition spaces with a sense of radical contingency.

Whether in the figuration of the visa queue or the immigration queue—which artists working in the global arena routinely endure—their projects have focused critical attention on the question of open borders, as it encounters reactionary ideas about the integrity of the national space. In response, I want us to think of the anomalous, indeterminate, distorted places that enable the exorbitant designation of certain cultural spaces as off-limits to particular paradigms of contemporary practice, as the "wrong place" or destination for certain types of artistic subjectivity.

This "wrong place" imposes an ethical limit. But it also provides a critical opportunity for choice, especially as to how artists and curators ought now to think of the place of the transnational contemporary subject in the world of globalization, in a network of deep entanglement.

I have begun with the anachronism of millennialism in the 1990s and globalization as the founding political truth of a new and radical subjectivity, as the moment of reckoning for today's postcolonial domains of experience. Behind this historical view lie the troubled but well-concealed assumptions that come with its promulgation: namely, the denial of the postcolonial epiphany. Yet, forms of artistic practice need not deny the roots of their reference systems in order to attain to some posthistorical or post-ethnic bliss. The anxieties of contemporary art today are reflections of its discomfort with this form of transcendence and its entanglement with postcolonial subjectivity. But this discomfort does not arise from the incommensurable demands of the so-called relativism of postmodernism. It comes from the core recognition that postcolonialism and its transnational enunciation—not only in political and discursive terms, but also in analytic and aesthetic terms—are today the very foundation of the contemporary.

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1. See Terry Smith, *Architecture of the Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
2. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 3.
3. If one observes the recent changes in the Venice Biennale, the oldest biennial exhibition of contemporary art, one soon notices that these changes have led to the establishment of *Aperto '93*. The more recent increase in the number of participating artists from outside Europe and the United States is the direct result of pressures exerted by other biennials that have bypassed the nationalistic and repressive model of Venice. Venice has changed because it had no choice but to acknowledge the present global reality.
4. I borrow this term from Smith's (2006) idea of world-making as part of the construct of contemporary cultural experience.
5. For a sustained review of how the notion of difference plays out in responses to the colonial experience, see *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
6. The exhibition was produced by the Museum Villa Stuck, Munich and opened in February 2001. It subsequently traveled to Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and P.S.1 Center of Contemporary Art (now MoMA PS1), New York.