

The Implosion of History and Context

Submitted by [Mustafa Maluka](#) on Fri, 2008-07-25 13:17

Too often I have come across instances where critics have used ahistorical and acontextual claims in critiquing works by artists who like myself, do not come from the centers of power in the art world. This happens often through ignorance but more often than not, through intellectual sloppiness. When work does not fit into the context that the critic is used to addressing, it can lead to a type of contextual dissonance where the artist's work is imploded into the writer's narrow, subjective assumptions. As Heidegger has taught us, no interpretation of a text can be devoid of preconceptions and value-judgements.

One recent example where at least the artist had an opportunity to speak back is a conversation between the photographer Pieter Hugo and Sean O'Hagan of [The Guardian newspaper](#) in the UK.

Guardian: "And what about the charge that, by taking photographs that are set up to a great degree, he is exploiting his subjects for their 'exotic' otherness?"

Hugo: 'I reject that view utterly,' he says, suddenly angry. 'There's always an element of condescension in it, the notion that the people I photograph are somehow not capable of making their minds up about being photographed. And, you know, it always comes from white, liberal, European people, which suggests to me that there is something essentially colonial about the question itself.' "

How does one now, in this globally-mediated art world redefine the rules of engagement?

[Contemporary African Photography](#)

Submitted by [Ingrid Commandeur](#) on Fri, 2008-07-25 15:20

I think this might be one of the most important questions to ask at the moment concerning contemporary art, but also one that is very hard and difficult to answer. I recently saw the exhibition 'Snap Judgments - New Positions in Contemporary African Photography', now to be seen in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Perhaps you saw this too. One of the artist on show was Guy Tillim, a South African photographer who made a reportage about the elections in Congo. (The foto series was also selected for the most recent Documenta) He was criticized by the European artist Renzo Martens, for carefully leaving out all the white reporters on the spot, to create an authentic picture (read: manipulated). I personally do not agree with Martens' critical view, because i think any artist is entitled to use whatever means he/she sees fit to manipulate a photo, that is if it is not meant as a news report stating to represent the true version of this historical event, but as a autonomous picture. But while i'm stating this i realize we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?

the line 'between true and false' in this respect is very thin. This incident does show however (since it's exactly the same critique as Pieter Hugo faced) that the reactions to the photographers could be called somewhat stereotyped. Okwui Enwezor wrote an essay along with the above mentioned exhibition which I haven't read so far. But i'm curious though what he has to say on the matter..

[reading manipulations](#)

Submitted by [Lee Weng Choy](#) on Fri, 2008-07-25 15:51

Ingrid, I haven't seen the exhibition, and am not that familiar with Tillim's work, but I think I have a sense about what you're talking about. Can you post the image in question? (In low resolution, so as not to transgress on artist copyright.) My question is whether, after contemplating the photo for a while, it becomes apparent that there is a lack of white reporters on the scene, that there is something manipulated about the image, that the viewer -- and which viewer, exactly, the cosmopolitan, "average" biennale visitor? -- would somehow feel that this image is too idealized, that it is more authentic than authentic? I'm wildly speculating of course, not knowing the work.

I too am curious as to what Enwezor had to say ... do you have the text, and can you cite it. Would be much appreciated.

[How do you engage?](#)

Submitted by [Branka Ćurčić](#) on Sat, 2008-07-26 12:25

Question about does someone's work or artistic approach fall into representational and exploitative discourse is nothing exclusively reserved to colonialism of "white, liberal, European people" asking mentioned question to "subjects of colonialism". Is not this relation that concerns me, but rather the question posed at the end of your post: How does one now, in this globally-mediated art world redefine the rules of engagement? My association here is directed to understanding engagement with so called "subjects" (in this case photographed people). This is important thing to be discussed and it happens occasionally in what you referred to as centers of power in the art world - I witnessed a few, when this question has been posed to "European artists" doing specific, community based&referred projects. The usual questions were dealing with "What is your approach?", "How do you collaborate and engage with these people, based on which principles?", "How do you develop relationship with them?" - and I can not say that I ever heard any good answer except those falling into representational constraints.

There is one interesting project called "SLUM TV" (www.slum-tv.info) initiated by group of Austrian artists cooperating with Kenyan artist, working together on a small-scale video production in slum called Mathare in Kenya. Person can not find so much about approach and kind of engagement employed on the website, but there is - [Slum TV brochure](#) published (in Serbian and in English) for project's presentation in Serbia. Brochure contains several texts and interviews, among them those of direct facilitators of the project. There are no big answers to posed questions, but important is that some constraints about fragility of the project are reconsidered, usual representational approaches criticized, first blurry look into the possibility of engagement with community discussed...

I understand that you might be actually thinking about something else in your posting, but this would be my contribution... Sorry if I misinterpreted...

[My use of the aforementioned](#)

Submitted by [Mustafa Maluka](#) on Sat, 2008-07-26 19:58

My use of the aforementioned quote by Peter Hugo (who if you read the interview, is himself white) relating to "white, liberal, European people" is simply used to illustrate one very recent example of the kind of interaction I speak of. The key point I am trying to make was that the artist was confronted with the critic's narrow, subjective opinion and was responding to it in a manner that he felt appropriate. Most artists are not allowed a chance to respond to critics directly in this manner.

The further examples you give have little bearing on the kinds of interaction I speak of.

[shahidul alam](#)

Submitted by [Stephen Wright](#) on Sun, 2008-07-27 20:58

You might be interested in today's post by Bangladeshi blogger Shahidul Alam, which touches on some of the themes your remarks have elicited:

<http://shahidul.wordpress.com/2008/07/26/>



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