

From Postcolonialism to Decolonial Critique? A Visual Discourse of Dissent in Francophone Africa

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As neo-Enlightenment theorists extol the heights human society has reached in the 21st century (Pinker, 2018), armed with a growing mass of socio-economic data (Rosling, 2018), statistics indicate a significant fall in the number of people living in absolute poverty,¹ and an all-time high in global literacy (World Bank, 2018). Against the fact-free discourses of fear and loss disseminated by populist politicians across the globe, it is a powerful and compelling rejoinder. However, macro data are vulnerable to overgeneralisation. When those living on the margins of the data sets are lost from the conclusions, they risk being lost from sight on the global development agenda (Human Development Report, 2016).

This is becoming a reality in one region of the world. The headline conclusions from the global data are so far outside the lived experience of the poorest sections of society in sub-Saharan Africa as to constitute its opposite. The epicentre of this countertrend lies in the French-speaking countries of West and central Africa who occupy the one region of the world where the numbers of poor and percentage of the poor are actually growing (World Bank, 2018).

In this context of real economic fear and uncertainty, visual language has been stealing a march on textual cultures in generating some of the fiercest and widely disseminated political critiques of postcolonial society in Africa. Art practice is deploying a visual vocabulary

¹ This is set at around \$1.90 per day.

combining historiography, postcolonial theory and decolonial critique to denounce the failures of the postcolonial state and its alliances with foreign industrialised and industrialising powers.

This visual language encompasses the multiple influences now present in the aesthetic raw material of the sub-region. Local and regional artistic traditions mingle with global influences emanating from the cosmopolitan lifestyles of the artists themselves, most of whom live or have lived for extensive periods in Europe and exhibited around the globe.

Where these global artists demonstrate a specificity of place is in a function of art as politics through practice. As Chike Okeke-Agulu notes: '[c]onceptually, what one refers to as contemporary African art indicates a clearly critical relationship with tradition, the nation, and the world' (2009, 80–81). Out of the inevitable heterogeneity of art practice, a political narrative referencing history has been shaping the critical relationship and foregrounding the importance of place in visual culture from this area. While historically 'images of slavery are so rare in African art and in Beninese art in particular' (Adandé, 2010: 236) since the 1990s this trend has reversed. Numerous artists from Benin, the former heartland of the French slave trade,² have been explicitly referencing Atlantic slavery and exploring, beyond memorial legacy, resonances of that trade for contemporary society in the region.

In some cases artists draw directly from iconographies of slavery generated in Europe, using this as a transnational language in which to deconstruct the economic relationship that has bound Europe, Africa and the Americas for four centuries (Griffiths, 2015). Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè is perhaps the best known for this globally, having shown his monumental installation *La Bouche du roi*, depicting a slave ship, in major exhibitions on the three continents.

² Harvard University DuBois Institute slave voyages database estimate that some 1.8 to 2 million people were embarked from the Bight of Benin during the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, making it second only to West Central Africa (Luanda coast) in the number of enslaved Africans departing on the Middle Passage to the Americas.



Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du roi*. 2007.
Image courtesy of George Hixson at the October Gallery

Like many other artists in Africa, America and Europe, he references William Elford's famous 'Description of a slave ship,' the *Brooks* of 1789, a representation of the illegal 'close packing' of slaves. Hazoumè's ten by almost three metre floor sculpture serves as a vehicle for making comparisons between historical relations binding Europe, Africa and the Americas and contemporary labour practices in West Africa. From its first exhibition in the *Institut français* in Cotonou, Benin, it travelled to the Menil Collection in Houston. An accompanying video showed the Texan audience a typical trader in Benin scraping a dangerous and illegal living by smuggling petrol over the border between Nigeria and Benin, in a region that pumps over two million barrels of crude a day into the global oil market. Two years later it arrived at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, where slavery symbolically acquired an African voice in the form of a soundtrack of lamentations delivered in African languages. Hazoumè's agent at the October Gallery in London liaised with the British Museum to commission a fourth edition in 2007, marking the bicentenary of the passing of

the 1807 British Slave Trade Abolition Bill. It became the centrepiece of the British Museum's commemoration and toured the country.

In a body of work that resists traditional definitions, being anti-colonial, postcolonial and decolonial simultaneously, and located in an atemporal world that conflates historical past with present, the trope critiques the present relationship between local workers, local incumbents of authority (the postcolonial state), and foreign commercial interests. Hazoumè transformed the ship icon into a three-dimensional discourse on the future in *Dream*, 2007, where the boat, constructed from the detritus of the Niger Delta oil industry, carries away dreams for the future on a perilous trans-Mediterranean migration route. Hazoumè has stressed in interviews that the 'dream' needs to be fulfilled in Africa by Africans. This theme of loss by ship recurs in *Rat-singer: Second only to God!* 2013 depicting a white rat peering over the lost, presumably human, cargo of an upturned boat.



Romuald Hazoumè *Rat-singer: second only to God!* 2013. Image courtesy of the artist and the October Gallery. Photograph: Jonathan Greet

We encounter the famous Elford image again in a series of works by Congolese artist Moridja Kitenge, trained in the art schools of Lumumbashi, Kinshasa and Nantes, and now working in art education and practising in Montreal. Kitenge references slave history in his works and in his life,³ reflecting in his practice the impact of slavery on the present and future of Sub-Saharan Africa.



Moridja Kitenge Banza *Bateau négrier*, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist

In other cases, the historic trope has been implicit rather than built into the iconographic load of the work. In a monumental work, *The World Falls Apart* shown in Manchester, UK, in 2012, Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou presented the postcolonial African state as a decomposing all-embracing architecture of off cuts. In *Octopus* 2010, dried up petrol pumps narrate a story of loss in the failing oil fields of Cameroon.



Pascale Marthine Tayou *Octopus* 2010.
10 petrol tubes - 170 x 200 x 200 cm
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA
Photo by Ela Bialkowska

³ On the eve of his departure to the Americas, Kitenge spoke of reversing the triangular journey, his own taking him Africa to France and now to the Americas. Interview with the artist February 2012.

In contrast and more akin to Kitenge, the artist Pélagie Gbaguidi, born in Senegal of Beninese nationality, focuses on the metaphysical impacts of the aftermath of-extreme violence in a body of work called *Le Code noir*, referencing the legal code that regulated slavery in the French empire up to abolition in 1848. Calling herself a griot, she insists upon the contemporary relevance of her work as afterimages of a history that is still shaping the present in Africa.

Taken together works from this region have a cohesion in terms of their sense of place, and in several cases of historical reference. What they present in relation to postcolonial development politics is a clearly coherent critical discourse



Pélagie Gbaguidi, *Le Code noir*, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist

that focuses on the unresolved issues of historical legacy and contemporary despoliation, factors that remain specific to this region of the world. As such they create a visual culture of immense political relevance, possessed of historical insight that has too often eluded the social and scientific disciplines.

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