

A Brief Note on Internationalism

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Discourses around alternatives to modernist strategies of presentation, narration, and negotiation today demand a greater practicality and a more concrete sense of urgency than in the past. Considering the great gulf between the abstractions of intellectual talkshops and the realities of those cultural producers and cultures who should rightfully occupy such discourses, there is an urgent need not to theorise endlessly but to set to work and initiate concrete changes in our attitudes, predilections and inclinations, and in our prejudices. To polemicise is our right, of course, but to polemicise endlessly has a cost. The discourse of disparities in international art historical practice has known enough of woolly rhetoric and polemics, and international cultural practice, especially in the twilight of modernist totalitarianism, seems to suffer as much from the excesses of self-indulgent intellectualism, as from the intransigences of the structures of international art establishments. It is essential that we move from the escapist and inevitably dangerous labyrinths of abstract polemicism designed for American professorial tenures, to a more clear-headed practice of criticism, from self-indulgent intellectual masturbation to a critical corollary of what Ruby Rich has called "a prophetic aesthetics". We require more appropriate prefixes, more precise analyses. We need to name, not allude; confront, not apologise, and much as we may not need to polarise to polemicise, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, we must find the courage and integrity to polarise where necessary.

It would be wrong to expect that the disparities and inconsistencies in international culture brokering, especially as practised in the West, would disappear because the very spaces and institutions which perpetrate and perpetuate them, simulate situations of dialogue. There are deeper questions, more disturbing than discourse has named so far, which underlie inconsistencies in the presentation and appreciation of cultural products in the West's international arena. These in turn erect and feed structures of reference which, in their turn, sustain the very prejudices which created them. Thus is a cycle established which disadvantages and disparages some while it projects and centres others. And this cycle will

require more than talkshops and papers in élite journals and volumes to weaken or dismantle. The project of interrogating western internationalism must carry through to practicalities, and on to evidences of change. Those evidences are still very wanting indeed.

It is possible to see in the discourse of a new internationalism, as has emerged lately in alternative spaces of dialogue in the West, an initiative of openness in international cultural practice. But, in truth, what we are witnessing is a cyclic repetition of situations which in the past showed equal, even greater promise, but eventually failed to overwhelm the deep-seated and firm structures which we interrogate. The mirages of cultural tolerance which surface ahead of all such dialogue, like most cultural phenomena in the West, seem to follow the same thirty-year cycle as fashion and music, within which they speedily fade away, only to reappear. In Britain, for instance, there was a period of great excitement in the area of cross-cultural exchanges and initiatives from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Not only was the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) established, but also several other, even more effective projects were led by young cultural practitioners and theoreticians which would eventually define the nature and specificities of cultural production in Britain. This, liberal historians have documented and made tireless reference to. Thirty years on, however, these historical landmarks are erased in establishment narrations of cultural practice in Britain. Memory being short, therefore, it is conceivable that the new generation of practitioners and theoreticians, who did not witness that moment in history, perceive themselves as pioneers in cultural dialogue and tolerance. On one occasion an increasingly influential young British critic and culture broker, when reminded of this past of struggle and achievement, retorted that she was hardly born in the 1960s. From this it seems as if such preoccupations are overshadowed by a destiny of futility. A discriminate sense of history can only result in ellipses and deliberate forgetfulness, and a forgetful history is bound to find itself in a cycle of repetition. Repetitiveness creates ludicry and absurdity, a feeling which is not entirely wanting in the present discourse.

In a sense, certain key points are missing from prior discourses of cultural internationalism, and these omissions, I believe, contribute to the eventual collapse of each epoch of dialogue and activity. The first of these, to me, is the failure so far to arrive at a clear and shared understanding of what we mean by internationalism. So far this has been assumed, to the convenience of certain cultures and spaces, and to the detriment of others. Some years ago discussions were initiated by American culture brokers on the project of 'expanding internationalism'. This project was the object of an international talkshop, organised in Venice in 1990 by a concern with the familiar name of Arts International. Arts International has the peculiar distinction of being an initiative of the Institute of International Education, another concern which is heavily

funded by the United States government. This would in part explain AI's approach to internationalism, namely, the inclination to expand, in the true spirit of American global politics, rather than seek a new arrangement. Some would consider this approach very much in line with the modernist agenda of single-centring, borderisation and perspectival progression, hence the election of border consolidation and expansionism. Implicitly, the urgent project of internationalism, for the organisers of the American initiative, is not to redefine itself or to question its foundations and philosophies, but to extend its frontiers, to claim new territories. The imperative is not to grant the possibility of alternative discourses but to bring the rest of the world under the unifying boundaries of a dominant discourse, that is to say, to bring them into vassalage. Clearly this carries a ring of 'revisionist' modernism, of Habermas and the concept of 'finishing the project' of modernism. In other words, the Venice initiative comes across as a natural conjunction of the American expansionist foreign policy and the late-modernist agenda of a continuous civilising crusade.

From the discussions in Venice it was evident that the above understanding of internationalism — which was generously offered for expansion — is not only defined by the borders of the 'old' West, that is, western Europe, North America excluding Mexico, and the numerous settler colonies of the West, it was also defined by the colour of the skin, since this internationalism apparently had little room for Americans or Europeans or Australians of non-occidental descent. In the context of this understanding, internationalism, like modernism, only qualifies cultural activity and exchange within specific racial and geographic boundaries, and any such activity or exchange outside of those boundaries fails to exist. It has to find itself another name. This being understood, then any discourse on shifting borders may proceed.

One irony of the Venice conference was the ability of its organisers to assemble a formidable array of respondents and contributors from outside the borders of the dominant power centres of internationalism. The irony being that, rather than signal a moment of greater tolerance, an opening up to other voices, the beginning of a new era of multi-vocal and multi-racial equality within the establishment, this was a power game which merely reflected the western policy of reasserting global territorial and cultural control. The presence of critics, museum practitioners, academics and cultural workers from outside the West's cultural establishment, reassured it of its ability to occasion and command response from the rest of the world. Dialogue was neither the intention, nor the outcome in Venice. The essence was simple: in a changing world it is useful to get and keep the outsiders talking about, and perhaps believing in, the willingness of the West to let them in. Like the scientist Stephen Hawking says, "we must keep talking, talking..."

A 'New' Internationalism

Little subsequent debate has departed from, or challenged the above, clearly late-modernist, understanding of internationalism, hence the call for a 'new internationalism'. One would suggest that with the current avalanche of pluralist awareness, many societies are perhaps too pre-occupied with the daunting project of self-interrogation and renarration within their own borders to extend this critical disposition to debates on internationalism. So far little has been done to de-centre internationalism and its discourses; that is to say, to rephrase them, to refrain from discourses which only run at a tangent from western/modernist internationalism and in so doing fail to undermine its self-centring project, and to direct attention to a recognition of internationalism as denoting all practices of cultural exchange and interaction between peoples of all nationalities, in the Americas, Africa, Asia, the South Seas, and so on. Rather than direct attention to the reality of a pluralism of internationalisms, inter-nationalism being in itself a concept transcending national boundaries and one encoded in the physically and conceptually itinerant nature of the artist, much discourse seems to accept a monolithic Internationalism: some supernatural heroic phenomenon issuing from the impeccable ingenuity of the West and marked with a capital 'I'. So far there is little suggestion that the answer to the shortcomings or inadequacies of a 'given' internationalism might lie not in the invention of supposed alternatives, but in the recognition of existing parallels. The idea of global pluralism is yet to find a place in a historical moment pre-occupied with the articulation of national pluralism. This is the fundamental problem of emergent debates, namely that, by failing to question a given internationalism, and yet predicating themselves on it, they implicitly share in the dismissal of longstanding traditions of internationalist exchange between peoples and cultures outside the West.

To acknowledge this shortcoming is equally to acknowledge that the contentions in current debates which still face away from other internationalisms, are therefore about a specific space and that this space is essentially western. If internationalism is as we have allowed it to be defined, that is, as it is defined by western practice and discourses, if in our discussions we fail still to acknowledge and to centre other internationalisms, then all we are left with is our own preoccupation with the shortcomings of internationalism in the West.

Within the context of an understanding of internationalism as a global and long-standing practice rather than an occidental initiative, the questions and issues which come to the fore differ markedly from those which engage current debates. Artists through history have moved from society to society, from culture to culture, and taken the difficulties and challenges of such transit in their stride. Cultures have reached beyond their immediate borders for novelty and energy. Thinkers have transferred ideas from space to space and from context to context. This,

I dare say to those whose minds are shut to possibilities outside of their own little borders, continues. Questions of tolerance and intolerance, of recognition and non-recognition, of presentation and re/presentation, very rarely arise where the practice of internationalism is a historical given rather than a construct. In this arena, also, mutuality, rather than otherisation; difference, rather than inequality; genuine interest, rather than suspicion, are the hallmarks of interaction and exchange. Within this context the right quest is always for improved internationalisms, for new strategies of effective and enriching exchanges, and not for a 'new' internationalism.

To theorise the difficulties of internationalism in terms of western tolerance and acknowledgement of others, on which tenuous platform an alternative internationalism premises itself, is to ignore the above; to fail to acknowledge spaces, platforms and premises outside of the West. A new internationalism can only be proposed as an alternative if its object of negation is western internationalism. Otherwise it becomes moribund and irrelevant. Consequently, a new internationalism can only predicate itself on the dismissal of existing practices outside the West, since the latter already form a formidable culture of alternatives and by nature negate the domineering project of western internationalism. To search for a new alternative is to ignore this historical fact and concede to a singular centre. Alternatively, to acknowledge those cultures of internationalism demands a different rhetoric, a different discourse aimed at exploring their strengths and difficulties, discovering their peculiarities, extending their reaches and complexities, preparing them for the challenges of a new century.

Internationalism and the West

The shortcomings of western internationalism are an issue of great significance to those artists and cultural practitioners who work in the West, especially those who are continuously victims of such shortcomings. And the most significant source of difficulty for western internationalism is the traditional intolerance of the Occident to others. So deep are the principles and factors which underlie this intolerance, the inclinations and prejudices which feed it, that the much touted demise of modernist centrism has only brought in a multiculturalism which emphasises difference rather than encourages mutuality. Even then, it is important to note that the institutions and structures which service cultural production and exchange in the West operate still on a solidly modernist course. The policies as well as manpower have seldom changed, and where this is the case, there is little evidence of a decisive swing towards greater openness or a rethink of the project of the establishment. Not only does the establishment continue to preoccupy itself with the creation and celebration of the 'master/genius', having only created and appended the new category of 'contemporary masters' to the 'modern' and 'old'

on which it prides itself, it equally and most determinedly retains the traditional criteria on which these categories are decided. While the old hierarchies of class are beginning to crumble in forms like music and theatre with the invasion of urban space by mass culture and democratising technology, those hierarchies remain intact in the visual arts. Where pirate radio and 'indie' labels succeed, alternatives to establishment structures in the visual arts fail inevitably, because the old strategies of selective 'discovery', promotion and patronage, which favour artists and forms of a particular background while dismissing others, remain in place. Concepts of success, value systems and reward structures are still very much determined by the intricate complicities of 'free' market forces and the establishment. These have always constituted a bastion of intolerance.

What is lacking in discussions is that this intolerance is not an art historical or cultural question, but only a reflection of a wider, deeper societal disposition. At the heart of the closed-door policy of the art establishment in the West to forms, artists and traditions which it considers unacceptable, is the pervading racism of the West. It is increasingly obvious that, outside certain streams of African-American discourse, it has gradually become anathema to raise the race issue. It is no longer politically correct. In discussing the persistent intolerance of western society, especially with regard to cultural acknowledgement and collaboration, scholars increasingly duck into the dark alleys of convoluted rhetoric and language games. I dare to return race and racism to our discussions of art history and practice, because by merely alluding to it in the past, by merely skipping and skirting round it, by failing to point out to our white colleagues that the problem lies deeply lodged in their minds and souls, we fail to put our finger on the subject matter. It is almost self-defeating, perhaps silly too, to pursue the polite manner of self-analysis and dialogue which so far has characterised our interrogation of art historical practice, or to continue to exonerate individuals, spaces and institutions by creating the impression that they can be free of the endemic malaise of racial intolerance which plagues their society and defines its structures of reference. The philosopher W.E.B. DuBois stated at the beginning of the century that the greatest question of the 20th century would be race. Race has continued to define the relationship between the West and its 'others', between it and those who, though living within it, constitute its malcontents. The denial of opportunities which artists of non-occidental origin endure in the West, is only parallel to the discrimination which their communities endure in the work place, in education, in eating places, on the telephone and in the media. And it is this denial of opportunities which has kept them from the mainstreams of western internationalism since the latter merely builds on practices and points of reference within national boundaries.

It is important to note, as I did earlier, that in western definitions of internationalism, artists of colour repeatedly fail to feature. The recent

emergence of Australian art on the international scene is occasionally given as an example of a periphery-to-centre success story. But it must not be forgotten that this transition has been made without indigenous Australian artists, whose work remains located in the terrain of difficulty where it is viewed either as traditional or transitional art, and thus inappropriate to be qualified as international. Australia's successful entry into the circuit of western internationalism is a race-specific one, and only a resolution of the internal geopolitics of occidental self-articulation. Beyond occasional acts of tokenism, like the featuring of Rover Thomas and Jimmy Pike (both viewed by the Australian art establishment as indelibly marked by their aboriginality) in the 1990 Venice Biennale, indigenous Australian artists remain on the fringes of the establishment from which space they continue to wage a battle across the borderline. It may not be entirely coincidental that the same Biennale saw the appearance of Anish Kapoor, an artist of Indian descent, at the British Pavilion, and that of black Africans at the back of the Italian. The politics of Kapoor's acceptance, it has been argued, indicates no radical change in the disposition of the British mainstream, or the beginnings of a true redefinition of internationalism in the West. In fact, the more coincidental event of his Turner Prize in 1991, with black British author Ben Okri's winning of the Booker Prize for fiction, and the award of the Whitbread Prize for Literature to Caribbean writer Derek Walcott, set off a wave of paranoia in Britain and occasioned fears that English culture was under threat from outsiders. The introduction not so long ago of the category 'ethnic', as a qualifier for all cultural production from artists and communities of non-occidental origin, was a deliberate ploy to reinforce the boundaries which seclude those artists from the arena of western internationalism. The register is meant not only to evoke provincialism of the most parochial form, but equally to impose a time frame which dislodges its object from modernity. And that which lags behind in the crypts of pre-modernity cannot be considered appropriate for internationalism. *Races which are condemned to a hundred years of solitude do not have a second opportunity on earth.* Case closed. Yet one is hard pressed to find any cultural institution of note, be it the Tate Gallery or the Whitechapel Gallery or the Whitney Museum, with the courage to challenge categorically and unqualifiedly such clearly racial policies. At the bottom of the resentment, distrust, disregard, and disparagement which white curators, exhibitions officers, gallery directors, art historians and cultural policy makers harbour for the British artist of African descent, therefore, or the white establishment in Australia for the aboriginal artist, is race, and this cannot be stated often enough.

In the past decade, as part of the project of western internationalist expansionism which I mentioned earlier, western collectors, curators and critics have initiated a process of neo-primitivising African artists as the condition for their appearance and visibility in the West. Some of these

artists have been given entry to the most prestigious spaces in the West on the condition that they are naive, untrained, often unskilled in the manipulation of the specific materials which they are encouraged to employ, and inarticulate. Often too, part of the condition has been their habitation outside the West, which makes it possible for them to be 'discovered'. This equally ensures that they do not compete for a permanent place in western internationalism. They are introduced as circus-animals, as curiosities from the Dark Continent whose purpose is to amuse the West, provide a foil for the continued valorisation of the white master/genius, and help create the impression of an 'expanding' internationalism. If naïveté is theorised as the essential nature of African art, as the purveyors of this agenda do, and the naive is naturally consigned to the peripheries of western internationalism, it is clear that such artists as are now chosen to represent Africa's entry into 'internationalism' are so chosen precisely so as to preclude the possibility of their true acceptance. The neo-primitivisation of artists of African descent, therefore, is a deliberate, nasty game of mischief fundamentally rooted in an inclination to otherise and ridicule. And this, too, is a race issue.

Artists of African descent who defy the above categorisation fail to attract the attention of the establishment because their existence questions deep-seated racial convictions and anxieties. At the root of the zeal to primitivise these artists as a condition for their fake-tickets to internationalism, and the inclination to elide them should they fail the naïveté test, lies the conviction in the mind of the West that being of their race it is inconceivable that they could be equally endowed, or possess the capability to reason and imagine in the same manner, or deserve the same levels of appreciation, as their white colleagues. Behind the choice for neo-primitives like Cheri Samba over accomplished masters like Ibrahim El Salahi and Uzo Egonu, many of whom live and practice in the West alongside their white contemporaries, lies the conviction that their true nature is primitive and that their claims to sophistication are only an aberration produced by their regrettable contact with civilisation. And this predilection we find as much with the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, with all its liberal pretensions, as with the curators of Documenta in Germany.

The new obsession among the supposedly progressive sections of the western art establishment is to read into the works of these artists a 'continuity' with their supposed artistic heritages. Thomas McEville struggles to establish this in Kapoor's work, too. But behind it all is a yearning to prove and reassure everyone that modernity is not a threatened or contested territory after all, and that the Empire is not about to be gobbled up by its primitive vassals who *evidently* remain their old, innocent and enchanting selves. To primitivise is to make more tolerable, more containable, less competitive, less threatening. Its purpose, ultimately, is to freeze all those whose origins lie in the former

colonies of Europe in the precise historical moment of their defeat. To conjure a primitive on his back — as all illusions go — is a more soothing condition than to recognise a competent, fiercely competitive contemporary who pulls out the rungs of hierarchy and tramples the hedgerows of race. The latter is a genuine source of grave anxiety and fear, the fear that a supposedly less intelligent, less civilised and less endowed being is about to enter the territory of the civilised and the endowed and to prove himself or herself equal, and at worst more accomplished.

Fear, that fear which James Baldwin so clearly identified and theorised, the fear that the West might lose the only backdrop against which it can project itself in full power and glory, is at the root of its culture of intolerance. The West is not ready yet to see an equal Other, and as Chinua Achebe said, until this happens, until the West and its establishments are ready to acknowledge the humanity of artists of non-occidental descent, to accept them for what they are — artists and human beings; contemporaries — the deep flaws of western internationalism cannot be remedied.

The racist mind undergoes a process of kenosis during which it erases the Other, and this is not necessarily a conscious experience. The mental ellipsis partly explains the difficulty which curators in the West have in remembering artists of non-occidental origin when they devise shows, or exhibition officers when they draw up their programmes, or art historians when they theorise epochs. Because the unwanted Other ceases to exist, consigned to that amorphous and undistinguished mass of the 'ethnic', there is little reason to bother with him or her. The lingering stain of racist inclinations in the establishment manifests itself in a two-tiered pricing system which relegates the work of non-white artists, a system which so far only the late Jean-Michel Basquiat was able to break thanks to the fostering of white culture brokers. It manifests itself in art competitions where the supposed strangeness of a non-occidental/non-christian name is sufficient to disqualify an artist from consideration. It is still evident in the half-hearted attitude of critics to the work of non-white artists, and the inclination to see such work not as art but as an anthropological window into the 'ethnic' mind. To tabulate these manifestations would be a waste of space were there any signs of a great wave of change on the horizon. This, unfortunately, is not the case.

To raise the issue of race in the discourse of western internationalism is not to essentialise. Nor is it to be outdated, nor does it deny the efforts of individuals and, in very exceptional cases, institutions which are working towards greater openness in the establishment. Loud cacophonies of multi-cultural publicity are beginning to move the spotlight from issues which we can only ignore at our own peril. Race, said Dubois, is the most important question of the 20th century. Race will remain the crux of the matter until the West and its institutions and structures

are able to free themselves of intolerance. Without this liberating act, not much can be hoped for. Talkshops are in order, but talkshops achieve very little. Gandhi the Mahatma was once asked what he thought of British civilisation. His response: *It would be a good idea*. It is unfortunate to observe that there is even less of that civilisation in the art establishment in the West. Unless the curators, narrators and museum directors who run that establishment are able to extricate their minds from the grip of a predilection which essentialises difference and synonymises it with inequality along the lines of race, the cycle intolerance-misrepresentation-non-acknowledgement which characterises their practices will not cease; and there will be no progress in the West towards that great tradition of free internationalism which all cultures have encouraged throughout history and which has given the world its greatest moments of cultural achievement.