

La Question Adéagbo

HOMI K. BHABHA

What questions should we put to the work of Georges Adéagbo?

How can we slip into the ambulant archive of his art, without unmasking its enigma, without surrendering our desire?

Look how Adéagbo moves between collecting, commissioning, curating and creating: his labyrinthine ways (Cotonou, Kassel, Cologne, London, New York, Toyota) and means (paintings, newspapers, hand-written notes, commissioned totem poles, *objets trouvés*, texts, translations, textiles) track the routes he takes to transform the *signature* of an object, while preserving a *recognition* of its systems of cultural reference and social symbolism. The art of Adéagbo is not about facile pluralism; it is about the difficult problems of propinquity. What Okwui Enwezor has acutely described as the analogical influence of the African marketplace on the form of his work, "as pure contingency, as a perpetual site of accumulation and consumption, dissipation and collocation"¹, gives rise to an ethical and aesthetic practice that is engaged with the edgy and anxious 'nearness' of difference, a responsibility towards negotiating the shocking *semblances* of proximity, against all the odds of displacement and non-identity.

Adéagbo's archival installations produce a bricolage of *differences* – of image, genre, media, historical context, narrative strategy, figurative traditions – that displace the conventional *distinctions* through which political practices of power and privilege claim a hieratic aesthetic authority based on religious orthodoxy, nationalist integrity or cultural authenticity. The inter-

cultural and intertextual *mises-en-scène* characteristic of all Adéagbo's work not only transforms the field of reference of any single element or gesture within the work; it initiates an ongoing process of "translation" that connects culturally and temporally diverse signs and symbols in a movement which, like the process of translation itself, refuses to enslave a work to one life, one language, or one interpretation.

"... *Ma personne de Georges Adéagbo n'est pas esclave (l'homme vivant, pour être en vie, on a de force, de puissance...)*".

Adéagbo's archive of rerouted and recycled subjects and objects is always in translation. To make works that are both lost and found in translation is the primary method of Adéagbo's practice as an artist and a curator. As Stephan Köhler points out, "Adéagbo brings along only about half of the elements from his home country. Then he looks around during his (usually ten day long) stay before the exhibition's opening to see what the host city has to offer him, be it in objects found or purchased."² Adéagbo's commissioned portrait of the French artist Georges Rouault, done by a painter in Cotonou, bears a primitivist resemblance to Rouault's flat, fundamental visages, outlined in dark defining strokes, like stained-glass figures. The scale, however, is different; and the gaze of the Rouault-like brushwork is revised in the manner of the draughtsman from Benin, so that the French artist has been re-assembled, his resemblance translated rather than transformed. Translation makes proximate what is known and unknown; it creates a propinquity between the original and the copy, where the one is the

double of the other, not its duplicitous imitation.

Critical opinion justly admires Adéagbo's archival assemblages for their explorations of the logic and the lyricism of *unlikely* encounters: "a paradoxical field of fictions that inform the various phantasm of the Other in (post)colonial discourses"³. But it is a paradoxical practice of art that has also been celebrated for its "synoptic presentation [that] is nothing less than bringing together the essence and the events in spite of all their diversity"⁴, or, alternatively, "generating complete confusion instead of stimulating well-grounded references."⁵ Such forms of paradox and confusion certainly generate instabilities of interpretation, and epistemological crises of reference and reality. However, a paradox is premised on the *knowability* of doubt, for as the etymology of the word suggests, *para* = beside, beyond, contradictory to, *doxa* = opinion. Paradox, juxtaposition, contradiction are amongst the most influential conceptual keywords that have been used in response to Adéagbo's *œuvre*, and are frequently connected with his practice as a post-colonial or global artist representing an 'alternative' modernity, or an "acute postmodernity" graphically visible in contemporary Africa. So far, so good. But how far does it go? And good for whom or what? Are these the issues that drive Adéagbo's *quest*? Are these the *questions* that emerge from the contingent histories and the enigmatic enunciations that are visible in his assemblages, recyclings, revisions, classifications, copies, photo-copies?

These thoughts were provoked by most useful statements from Georges Adéagbo and Harald Szeemann, entitled "Belgian Colonisation in Black Africa."⁶ The least useful part of the text is the theme announced by the title, a topic to which Adéagbo makes no reference at all, and Szeemann only explains:

I have to say I chose him, a black artist, because there's nevertheless this story about Congo, and even though Benin wasn't part of Belgian Congo, but for them, of course, it's a past they still suffer from. You shouldn't think that colonisation finished just like that.

It is not that Adéagbo would disagree with the idea that the long shadow of colonisation –

the post-colonial penumbra – still falls across Africa. But it is interesting to note that Adéagbo prefers to talk impressionistically about the Berlin Wall, Algeria, Indo-China, Vietnam, and US and Brazilian slavery. What is more intriguing, however, is the artist's insistence on returning, again and again, to the ontological status of the art-work, and the artist's communal role as "missionary". His language is that of carefully crafted parables, myths of origination and instruction, and metaphysical metaphors:

Art. But what is art? Art is a way of talking. It's a way of walking. It's a way of showing things to people in an indirect manner (indirectement), in order not to become their enemy. You choose other ways (autres chemins) to let the other know what you've got to tell him to become his enemy. So he believes you're on the same road (même chemin) as he is. But you're on a different road (chemin différent).

Art on the whole is a way of talking, a way of doing, a way of walking, a way of living amongst people.⁷ (my emphasis)

There is a way in which this seemingly artless statement provides an important insight into both the physical, material structure of Adéagbo's work (the building of the installation), and its philosophical, phenomenological stance (*Bildung*). His installations work around the walls of the gallery space and extend to the floor, spanning both axes of aesthetic representation and spectatorship, the vertical and the horizontal, as they run across/against each other in the viewing experience: the wall and the floor; the screen and the stage; sight and site; art and object. When your erect eye engages the *mirror* of the wall, your attention is distracted by the horizontality of the floor-display, often held down by stones, as if the floor were itself a wall struggling to rise; and when your eye falls to the floor and you 'overlook' the display, you are also displaced by the gaze of verticality emitted by the wall-mirror that beholds you, upholds you, although your attention is turned elsewhere, downwards. Adéagbo's installations prioritise neither verticality or horizontality, neither the painterly *regard* or the sculptural presence; he puts both dimension into circulation creating a cycle of seeing and reading; of returning the look and

being caught in the gaze; of being placed and displaced. As you walk around the installation you are continually caught in this axial tension and contention, between the vertical and the horizontal playing off each other, *as if* they were uncertain about which path was taken by the enemy, and which taken by the friend.

This is one illustration of art's *indirect manner*, which extends to another level of semiotic struggle in Adéagbo's installations as they stage a contest between the visual and the verbal, between icon and inscription. Adéagbo's archival art has often been noted for its juxtaposition of cultural objects and aesthetic genres that have diverse genealogies and provenances, and critics rightly praise his play with 'difference' as a way of overcoming essentialist cultural binarisms, East and West, North and South. The West African bazaar, or the Indian bazaar for that matter, is a much more protean and productive form of life than such polarities are capable of representing. What is noticeable about Adéagbo's arrangement of likely and unlikely signs, objects and images, is his genealogical exploration of the play of proportions and dimensions that arise from the propinquity of *genres* and histories. For instance, in placing a book beside a wooden sculpture from Benin, which abuts on a "found object" and sits behind a handwritten text, Adéagbo does not merely signify "cultural difference"; the art of propinquity creates a sequence or a statement, figuratively speaking, that suggests that 'difference' is not simply about what fits into one's sense of what is indigenous or foreign, home or abroad, inside or outside. Difference emerges from the blurring of boundaries, from the proximity of objects, *at the point at which these spatial and temporal processes become sites of interpretation from an aesthetic, political or ethical perspective*. The racist will rend apart the seam of proximity and arrange objects to prove the superiority of racially endorsed hierarchical values; the universalist will sublimate differences into an inclusive, transcendent category of immanent or timeless value ... and so on. If you take your directions for walking, talking, and looking, from the lesson of Adéagbo's work, you will understand why he says that art is *a way of*

showing things to people in an indirect manner. Your eyes will turn to the distant, even transcendent, horizons of the "mission" of art – "a mission given by him who sent me ... only he can draw conclusions about the road I am on"⁸ –, while your feet move in the mud of the history you make, as you interpret your mission, in the words of the artist, as a way of living *amongst* people.

What constitutes the indirect address of art? Recall the way in which Adéagbo always responds to a question with a fable, always approaches a concept with a parable. The *indirection* of art consists in its figurative language; its narrative persuasion; its rhetorical passion; its semiotic excess; its mimetic desire for transcription and translation. My observations on the ontological status of Adéagbo's work, as shaped by its "indirect manner", return us to Enwezor's insistence on the contingency of its formal and temporal structure, and compels us to ask: Why does Adéagbo keep adding one thing to another in an endless series of associations and reassemblages? What drives him to make these indirect chains of meaning, references and cross-references? What creates the passion for iteration and intervention that fuels Adéagbo's archive fever, his delirium of documentation, his affiliative affliction?

It is time to turn to Adéagbo's notion of the "Research on Art" – perhaps this is *la question Adéagbo*? Let me turn to two of his parables on creation:

What became of Adam and Eve when they took and ate the forbidden fruit? Who saw today, has not seen tomorrow ... The Research on Art!

The name of all human beings, and all animals, can be found in the 26 letters of the alphabet, what would become of human beings, or of animals, if one letter of the 26 would lose itself, would disappear?

To locate the artist in this post-lapsarian landscape, after the fall, is not simply to raise again the late Romantic hero, although the artistic missionary from Benin sounds as if he comes from the same tribe. Fever. Delirium. Affliction. Adéagbo tells of his early trauma, before the making of his first installation, when his pas-

sionate vision was taken for madness, “so thinking I was crazy they’d bring me to the mental hospital where I would be given an injection.”⁹ The “re-search” on art is the desire to search for the missing letter of the alphabet. In eating the forbidden fruit, the transparency of the ‘meaning’ of life is lost, the immediate and identitarian correspondence between names and things disappears, the human body and mind have to be clothed, in-vested with veiled meanings, masked by metaphors. These mediations neither reveal the truth nor hide it, but continually taunt and terrify the human artist with doubt and dilemma – *if only one letter went missing ... „si une lettre dans les 26 lettres parvint à s’effacer pour s’éclipser ...?”* What emerges through this guilt, shame and anxiety, after the *loss of the letter*, is the pleasure and the power of the “indirect manner,” the invention that constitutes the will to narrate and illustrate, to repeat and reinvent.

The re-search of art is the mission to re-find and reform *l’objet trouvé*, to revise and replicate what is at hand, but out of one’s grasp. The artist, Georges Adéagbo finds his mission in the will to *re-search* the lost letter of the alphabet, not to mourn its loss, which would enslave him to a negative ontology. By resisting negativity, Adéagbo searches for the missing letter by exploring ‘other’ languages, other vocabularies of art, other traditions of story-telling and narrative. In drawing them close to each other without combining them into a universal language, Adéagbo creates the art of propinquity, *not similarity*. He imagines new etymologies of experience, other philologies of being. His pleasure comes from learning to mix colours, and when a new shade emerges from the re-semblage of existing colours, it signifies the shadow of the lost letter of the alphabet shimmering on the wet horizon of paint like a mermaid who is half recognisable as a human form, and half a mythic, metaphoric invention:

Take the colour black and add to it the colour white, to give you the colour grey; take the colour red and add to it the colour white to give you the colour pink. Le métissage de l’art.

The lost letter of Art, which is now also magically *l’objet trouvé*, speaks in the voice of the mermaid that is half-mocking and half-mourn-

ing: *You can call my name, but you cannot catch my sign*. The research of Art goes on and on; and because it lives off the trace of the lost letter of the alphabet, the repeated blending and re-naming of colours, there will always be the search for another archive. Another day.

Notes

- 1 Okwui Enwezor, “The Ruined City : Desolation, Rapture and Georges Adéagbo”, in: *NKA, Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 41, Spring 1996, pp. 14–18.
- 2 Silvia Eiblmayr, ed.: *Georges Adéagbo. Archäologie der Motivationen – Geschichte neu schreiben. Archaeology of Motivations – Re-writing History*. Ostfildern 2001, p. 34
- 3 *ibid.* p. 9
- 4 *ibid.* p. 46
- 5 *ibid.* p. 55
- 6 *ibid.* pp. 64–5
- 7 *ibid.* and BBL (Banque Bruxelles Lambert), ed.: *ForwART – a choice*, Brussels 2000 (revised translation)
- 8 Eiblmayr p. 64
- 9 *ibid.*