



CHAPTER 6

TOWARDS A THRESHOLD AESTHETIC OF THE TRICKSTER

Es[h]u presides here, because we should not forget him. He is the Trickster, the Lord of the Crossroads, sometimes changing the signposts to lead us astray. Rotimi Fani-Kayode (quoted in Mercer 1999:292).

A disorientating space flooded by a grid of blinding lights at different heights; concurrent noise from different directions emerging to be that of a rifle rhythmically being assembled and taken apart, pacing to and fro on a platform overhead, the rolling sound of empty shell casings on the floor – all executed by black-clad performers concealed behind the light sources; in front of the lights confounded viewers and shifting shadows – such is the stuff of the performance-installation by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, commissioned by Documenta 11. The sensory trickery and conceptual double play of Bruguera's *Untitled (Kassel 2002)* (from the series *Engineer of the soul*) in the Binding-Brauerei could be considered as a revealing example of the artist functioning as a trickster. Through the simultaneous interplay of hidden and overwhelming sensory impulses, the work aesthetically induced a momentary synesthesia, a sensory cross-over that stopped viewers in their tracks and prompted them to make sense of the confusion. Bruguera (2002:555) approaches sound as the “measure of a place”, as key to memory and myth about a place. The sounds literally highlighted by this work played on Kassel's history as weapons manufacturing centre before and during World War II, which resulted in the Allied bombardment of the city and its reconstruction as, among its crowning achievements, the city of Documenta. Thus the work performed on one level as counter-memorial to Kassel, but to an audience living in the post 9/11 present of polarisations around the ‘global war on terrorism’ the work's engagement with instruments of violence resonated with much more than a specific place and its past.

While certainly provocative, Bruguera's work does not easily lend itself to humour, an aspect usually associated with the notion of the trickster. Criticism



of the lack of humour in Documenta 11 hinged on the gravity of works such as this and the implied aesthetics of the curatorial view. The emphasis on sober, even sombre, socio-politically engaged artwork was construed as a kind of anti-aesthetic stance,¹ as if wit, frivolity, messiness and sensuality are essential to a “commitment to aesthetic space” (Steiner 2002:108). Underlying this line of criticism were notions about the transcendence² of art objects and the viewer, or art critic’s, response to works as primarily based on pleasure-principles. In this regard art theorist Grant Kester (1999/2000:2) points out that littoral³ or engaged art practices are often condemned as “unaesthetic”, based on the immanent location of aesthetic meaning in the art object. Given the littoral positioning of the entire project of Documenta 11, a closer scrutiny of selected artworks are proposed in order to discover whether the curators could be regarded as limiting or expanding the aesthetic field.

Advancing from the premise that subversivity is a goal to aspire to, the contention of this chapter is that, firstly, the curatorial intention of this Documenta was precisely to show up narrowed-down definitions of what could be considered ‘aesthetic’ in contemporary art production.⁴ Secondly, a case will be made that restrictive notions of the trickster and the carnivalesque employed in theorising the role of the artist⁵ undermine the subversive potential claimed for visual arts. The specific focus will be if, and to what

¹ The exhibition is criticised for being “[a]esthetically starved” (Schjeldahl 2002:95), lacking in “unconditional commitment to aesthetic space” (Steiner 2002:108), “the political become nothing if not the antidote to aesthetically convincing, ‘sensual’ art” (Hollert 2002:165) or its curators made out as people “for whom the messiness and frivolity of art are almost moral failures” (Kimmelman 2002:1).

² Dismissing Bruguera’s installation as an example of tedious, politically correct work, critic Ranjit Hoskote (2002:[sp]) criticises many artworks in Documenta 11 for being “illustrative or referential: the didactic assembling of evidentiary material replaces the transformative possibilities of art”.

³ See the discussion on littoral curating in the previous chapter.

⁴ Enwezor (2003a:44) claims in reaction to the criticism that “there was no humor, no sex, no mess, no fun”, that this focus on abjection was strategic: “we wanted to question the function of the exhibition and what making an art exhibition means at this present point in time when we live with an excess of images, but with few relations to connect those images”.

⁵ The statement of critic Kobena Mercer (2002:89) – that “the carnivalesque spirit of irreverence evoked by writer Jean Fischer [in the Documenta 11 catalogue], who explores the trickster figure across different cultures, was in short supply” in the exhibition – will be considered as such a formulation. Mercer (2002:89) seems to overemphasise the role of performance art, which he views as especially “sidelined by Documenta 11’s sobriety”, as the preferred medium of the trickster.



effect, Documenta 11 showcased possible examples of subversive aesthetic strategies.

It could be argued that if the visual arts are to stake any claim to criticality, the notion of aesthetics needs to be reconsidered given what Hall (2001:12 emphasis in original) terms the globally pervasive “aesthetisation of daily life”:

There are aesthetic practices distributed by a massive cultural industry on a global scale and the aesthetic is, indeed, the bearer of some of the most powerful impulses in modern culture as a whole, including what we used to think of as its antithesis – the ‘new economy’ which is, par excellence, a *cultural* economy.

Strategies for resistance to the “economicization of culture” (Miyoshi 1998:259) and agency of artists (and audiences) confronted with the dual homogenising and fragmenting forces of globalisation, have to be taken into account when thinking about contemporary aesthetics. In this regard this study positions itself to engage with Documenta 11’s exploration of what can be called a *threshold aesthetic* as an effort to critically expand, rather than weaken, the functioning of the aesthetic.

In order to investigate this thesis, possible trickster roles of the artist and threshold positions will be dealt with in this chapter. Specifically how Documenta 11 performed as trickster among global mega-exhibitions will be discussed. This involves the evaluation of the significance of an adversarial post-colonial approach compared to other oppositional stances. The chapter concludes with a contextualising in the aesthetic sphere of the threshold notion of *thirdness* as derived from Third Space and Third Cinema.

6.1 TRICKSTER AS PROTOTYPE OF THE ARTIST

Bruguera’s play with concealment, disorientation and ‘noise’ to engage her audience is typical of the shape-shifting form of the trickster. The mischief wrought by such trickster-strategies goes beyond jest and frivolity to affect often far-reaching, even sacred, changes. Insisting on a show of jest, hilarity



and absurdity (whatever the cultural definition of a joke for the viewer/critic may be) in fact limits the role and scope of the trickster-artist, who may or may not employ laughter as a tool to thwart her/his target. Art theorist Jean Fisher (2002:64) cites the example of the Yoruba trickster, Eshu, who “mischievously creates noise to engender a new pattern of relations” between two sworn friends on adjoining farms. Donning a cap that was black on one side and white on the other,⁶ he rode backwards on his horse between the farmers in their fields. The ensuing fight about the colour of the hat and direction of the driver was only settled by Eshu, who pointed out they were both right and reminded the two that their vows of true friendship can be undone by him.

In his extensive investigation of the archetype of the trickster we are reminded by Hyde (1999:6) that travelling trickster figures like Eshu, Raven, Hare, Coyote, the Monkey King, Krishna and Hermes are all lords of in-between who traverse boundaries with ease. In fact the trickster is master of the threshold as he actively seeks out or creates boundaries, since borderlands are the site of ambivalence, ambiguities, contradiction, paradox, opposition and crossings. This interstitial positioning is shared by the artist who approaches art production as nomadic activity in a Third Space.⁷ Such an artist equally shares the transgressive, disruptive and untamed identity of the trickster as agent for change. Trickster-style artists have the distinct preoccupation of being what Hyde (1999:256) describes as “joint-workers”, particularly “joint-disturbers”.⁸ They unsettle what supposedly fits harmoniously together and interrupt the stability of laboriously crafted structures on the one hand, but also force together that which is seemingly disjointed, opening up the seam for disorder, accident and chance. The

⁶ In Fischer’s retelling of theorist Lewis Hyde’s (1999:238) version of this tale, she changes the colour of the hat to red and white. In terms of the lesson also being about absolutes, the black/white distinction is maintained here.

⁷ See the section “Nomadic subjects on the war path” in chapter 5.

⁸ Hyde (1999:252-280) develops the notion of artists as *artus*-workers from the supposition that tricksters attack gods and ideas at the joints, their weakest spots, and from an etymological analysis of the Latin noun *artus* (a joint or seam in the body) containing the Indo-European root *-ar*, meaning “to join”, “to fit” and “to make”.

trickster can ultimately disjoint the functioning of the hinge by keeping the joint flexible in different directions.⁹



Figure 28: Fabian Marcaccio, *Multiple-site paintant*, 2001-2002.
Pigmented inks on canvas, silicon, polyoptics, oil, 3 x 70m.
Binding-Brauerei, Kassel.
Photograph by the author.

Of course, individual artists may or may not follow any number of subversive trickster-strategies, irrespective of medium. Even in the ‘safe’ medium of painting, Argentinean-born Fabian Marcaccio displays the cunning of a boundary-crosser. In his work for Documenta 11, *Multiple-site paintant* (2001-2002) (Figure 28), Marcaccio incorporated elements of conflict through techniques of dematerialisation and mutation into images that read as abstract from a distance. Paint, silicone gel, found objects and photo sequences eat into each other and spill over the edges of the painting-pathways that invaded Kassel outside the gallery space. The integrated flows of Marcaccio’s work, which the artist describes on his website (Paintants [sa])

⁹ Fisher (2002:67) refers to Marcel Duchamp’s *Door: 11, rue Larrey* (1927) in this regard. Being hinged to simultaneously serve two rooms in his studio, the door opens one room as it closes another, or alternately, it keeps both rooms partly open or half closed.

as “abstract based history telling”, is a de- and re-territorialised zone indicative of nomadic space, where boundaries are blurred and corrupted to thrash out a nebulous space of becoming.



Figure 29: Joan Jonas, *Lines in the sand*, 2002.
Video-installation (still).
Binding-Brauerei, Kassel.
Photo: Werner Maschmann. Copyright: documenta GmbH.

The installation/performance *Lines in the sand* (2002) (Figure 29) by American artist Joan Jonas established criss-crossing thresholds on different levels through multiple narrative references and interdisciplinary practices. Two texts by poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1884-1961) – *Helen in Egypt* (1955) and *Tribute to Freud* (1944) – set up the framework for the work. The idea put forward by H.D. is that Helen never went to Troy, but to Egypt instead, and that the fantasy of the woman, who supposedly caused the Trojan war, is thus really about the formation of mythical constructions. As trickster-narrator Jonas intercut excerpts from the Helen-text with descriptions of H.D.’s therapy sessions with Freud, while mixing up ‘real’ presentations of a bygone-Egypt (photographs from 1910) and the ‘fake’ contemporary casino Luxor in Las Vegas. On a single visual plane video-projection was combined with live



drawing, ritualised movement, shape-shifting masks and costumes to obscure and conversely unveil connections that reinforced the blurring of lines in the sand between facts and fabrications, phantom and fiction, reality and myth, the personal and cultural. If the crafting of flexible joints and shifting of boundaries are regarded as essential to the labour of trickster-artists, then both Jonas and Marcaccio could be regarded as excellent examples of threshold-art.

6.1.1 Two kinds of opposition

Yet for some the trickery-techniques employed by Marcaccio and Jonas do not nearly go far enough to destabilise the systems within which the artworks continue to function. What is required of the subversive artist is to be no less than a terrorist, argues Documenta-artist Kendell Geers (2005b:133):

The work of art needs to move outside the logic of language into the dangerous world of terror. The codes of language and history are threatened only by terror and that which is unimaginable, unpredictable, unexpressible, untranslatable, unmentionable, unsayable, inappropriate and articulated through humour, contradiction, danger and extremism.

This view challenges the effectiveness of a reactionary dynamic of negation which uses the same codes it is supposed to counteract and can, therefore, easily be integrated. Yet, an obvious problem with an approach of the artist as anarchistic trickster is sustaining a slash-and-burn aesthetics in a state of perpetual revolution. The enduring modernist dynamic of art history has shown that 'revolutions' are not only assimilated into the mainstream, but are actively advanced in order to feed, what art historian Rosalind Krauss terms, the myth of the originality of the avant-garde.¹⁰ Given the postmodern sensibility that appropriation and transformation might be the only tactics

¹⁰ Krauss (1985:157) maintains the avant-garde notion of originality is conceived in terms of "a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth" and is located in the notion of the self as uncontaminated by tradition and capable of incessant rebirthing.



available to innovators, it is questionable if a clean break is possible or even necessary for renewal.

In this regard the distinction is useful that Hyde (1999:269) makes between two kinds of trickster-strategies modelled on Loki – whose actions precipitated Ragnarök, the cataclysmic destruction of the gods in Norse mythology¹¹ – and Hermes, who keep the cosmos lively by stealing from Apollo and beguiling him with lyre-music. The revolutionary Loki is an oppositional figure who instigates a chain of events that leads to the world being reborn, while the mischief wrought by convivial Hermes leaves the balance of order and disorder intact while exposing weaknesses in the system. It could be argued that the latter strategy equates with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984:11) characterisation of the carnivalesque as

the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (*à l'envers*), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.

This dynamic inside-out reworking of the world, renewal through reversal, is by nature of the carnival always bound to a time-frame. At the end of the festival things return to normal, thereby limiting the function of the mischief-making to "ritual dirt-work" (Hyde 1999:187) that is aimed at a release of tensions built up in the system. This constraint does, however, not preclude comprehensive or unanticipated changes resulting from the ambiguous work of the trickster working from within the system.

6.1.2 Duplicitous intermediary

The ambivalence of laughter when engendered by trickery reflects the duplicity built into the role of the trickster as intermediary or third party, as one who questions and challenges, a kind of outsider-figure. Eshu, riding on the

¹¹ According to some versions of this mythology Loki orchestrated the murder of the god Baldr, invincible but for a dart made of mistletoe, by tricking Baldr's blind brother, Höör, to aim it at him. This death set in motion the events that lead to Ragnarök.



border between friends, enable *and* confuse communication between them, because as “go-between he’s a kind of static on the line, a connector who may or may not connect” (Hyde 1999:116). The trickster’s potential for disruption lies on the threshold where crossings can be created as well as disturbed. *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version) (2001) #17/ #31* by The Atlas Group could be regarded as prime example of a work straddling this duplicitous space. The video is supposedly about the captivity of Souheil Bachar, the only Arab to be detained for 3 months in 1985 with the Americans Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen. The information supplied with the work (*Documenta 11... catalogue* 2002:181) maintains that of the 53 tapes about the captivity only tapes #17 and #31 are available for screening outside Lebanon. Taken at face value the protagonist’s musings about masculinity and homo-erotic fantasies may seem obtuse,¹² yet if one bears in mind that the character Bachar and the tapes are pure fiction, the work prompts the response: *Why* this elaborate deception? The insertion of an Arab figure into the narrative of what was regarded as the ‘Western hostage crisis’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s, plays up differences in historical and cultural coding. By utilising disinformation, withholding evidence, mixing facts and fiction – in short, producing static on the line that confounds one-way communication – this work is intended to shake up certainties. An ambiguous space is created where the viewer is unsure if the work’s trickery principally deals with Reagan-era narratives or the twenty-first century narrative of a clash of civilisations.

Another artwork that explores the ambiguous potential of the threshold is *Homebound* (2000)(Figure 30), the installation of Mona Hatoum, born to a Palestinian family exiled in Lebanon. She subverts cosy notions of home by electrifying utensils like funnels, colanders, eggbeaters, graters and furniture to emanate a menacing buzz, which is amplified by lamps flickering at irregular intervals like warning signals inside objects. The whole installation is fenced off behind a wire barrier that simultaneously functions as a fortification

¹² Failing to see past the scam-tactics of the work, critic Michael Kimmelman (2002:1) commented on the “video testimonials by a Lebanese man who recounts his fears and (of all things) sexual impulses while being held hostage in Beirut” as an example of what he deems the “lack of irony (or is it naïveté?)” of Documenta 11.

guarding against intrusion, and a blockade that restrains movement. By sabotaging the safety of a home, Hatoum's work reveals 'home' – both as habitat and place of birth – as a duplicitous space. The use of kitchen utensils creates a threshold between mother's work and motherland, which by destabilising notions of shelter, refuge and sanctuary, reassesses the implications of location and dislocation, of exile and return.



Figure 30: Mona Hatoum, *Homebound*, 2000.
Installation view.
Fridericianum, Kassel.
(*Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition venues*. 2002:77).

For the visual artist the subversive power of trickster-strategies lies in its potential to baffle, mystify and perplex, because puzzlement holds the promise of shifting perceptions. Thus art can function as space of translation in which the “perfidious fidelity” (Maharaj 1994:28) of such an exercise is substantiated and a space for incongruities and difference is articulated. When trickster-artworks produced in such a liminal space are exhibited to international audiences thresholds are multiplied, thereby increasing the



possibilities for mischief and prospects for cultural exchange. For the postcolonial curatorial project of Documenta 11, in particular, threshold consciousness could be regarded as of vital importance in order to exploit ambiguities, dislodge certainties and resist hegemonies.¹³ As mega-exhibition on the global circuit, an embrace of the threshold further entails approaching transcultural translation on shifting borders, as it were. The next section specifically explores to what extent Documenta 11 could be considered successful in the implementation of this twin strategy of translation and resistance through the inclusion of trickster-art.

6.2 TRICKSTER IN THE GLOBAL SPHERE

The main challenge for the effectiveness of a threshold positioning in visual art is finding ways to destabilise hegemonising forces associated with globalisation that co-opt and buy-out any form of resistance in cultural production.¹⁴ Certainly, limitations on artistic agency in the globalised sphere have intensified and expanded since the Situationists set out to chip away at the society of the spectacle. However, the monstrous reach of globalising processes is undermined by the uncertainty at its multifactorial, polycentric core.¹⁵ Put another way, expansive hegemonising structures can be fractured at the seams by tricksters disturbing the joints. A supposedly seamless, globalised art scene can inadvertently expose the limits of the 'global' and thus show the way for resistance. Fisher (2002:64) reminds us, "[w]hile international biennials and conferences privilege the institutionally 'acceptable,' they also provide sites that the 'unacceptable,' can take advantage of". As exhibition critical of its own role in the globalisation dynamics of the art world specifically, and culture production generally, Documenta 11 dealt with the notion of the trickster in two significant ways: by

¹³ Enwezor (quoted in Creischer & Krümmel 2000:79) locates trickster-art as continually jumping between resistance and translation.

¹⁴ Referring to the hegemonising and materialising structuring of all relations in a globalised, deterritorialised world, Enwezor (2002b:45) claims "strong, critical responses to this materialization are contemporary art's weakest point".

¹⁵ See Chapter 4 for a discussion on the vulnerability built into the volatility of globalisation dynamics.



including trickster-style artworks that show up the complexities of localised and transcultural production, and by functioning as trickster on the global mega-exhibition circuit.

Artists serious about agency seem to follow what Enwezor (Griffin et al 2003:163, emphasis added) describes as “the *strategy of proximity* (a strategy that keeps them in the game, while effectively situated outside of it) [... by utilizing] the idea of the trickster – a mode of behavior akin to Situationist *détournement* – to confront the power of the market”. The Situationist International practices of *détournement*¹⁶ and *dérive*¹⁷ could be considered specific trickster approaches, aimed at the de- and rerouting of narratives as well as behavioural patterns. In this context art making is similar to the drawing of maps, but contrary to the simplifying coding of geographical maps, these charting exercises employ the logic of the labyrinth in order to confound. Apart from the objective to create a zone of complexity, in which even the habitual and commonplace are stripped of familiar meaning, Debord and Wolman (1956:1) theorised that these strategies could democratise (or communise) the cultural playing field. Extended participation by unfashionable and unknown artists, even the revival of ‘bad’ art, could further break down barriers to understanding difference. On both these scores – heightened awareness of complexity and multiplicity as well as enlarged participation of artists and other cultural practitioners - Documenta 11 could be considered as trickster-project. If one ascribes to Fischer’s (2002:66) view that “the key to trickster’s function is not the resolution of conflict but the revelation of complexity”, then Documenta 11 indeed functioned as trickster on the global scene.¹⁸

¹⁶ Translator Ken Knabb (Debord & Wolman 1956:note1) analyses the meaning of the term used by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman in *A user’s guide to détournement* (first published May 1956 in *Les Lèvres Nues #8*) as “deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning aside from the normal course or purpose”. *Détournements* could involve elements of everyday life or cultural products being placed in new contexts and in unexpected combinations.

¹⁷ According to Debord (1958:1) *dérive* or “drifting” is aimed at going against the flow of “psychogeographical contours” which limit the entry and exit to zones of influences in cities.

¹⁸ See chapter 3 & 4 for a discussion on Documenta 11’s commitment to examine complexities of globalisation and the production of locality through the implementation of a global commons.



Documenta 11 specifically set out to undermine the global market dynamic of assimilating difference and dissent by turning it into profit, through favouring artworks and production strategies that resisted commodification on some form or another. Particularly collective and collaborative practices were explored for their potential to advance global trickery in this Documenta. Enwezor (2005:19) distinguishes between “fixed” and “flexible” groupings: a group of artists producing work under collective authorship, such as the British Black Audio Film Collective and Canadian Inuit Igloodik Isuma Productions, or open alliances of individuals and organisations such as the Congolese Le Groupe Amos, Senegalese Huit Facettes, Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective and Multiplicity, founded in Milan.

Both approaches subvert modernist notions of originality by undermining the reification of unique art objects being produced by individual genius, a “simultaneous aporia of artwork and artist” (Enwezor 2005:20). Furthermore, being often politically orientated and critical of formalist aesthetic values, works by collectives resist easy digestion by the art market. Aiming at the empowerment of locals marginalised by decolonisation and globalisation processes, the socio-cultural projects of Le Groupe Amos and Huit Facettes¹⁹ question the function of art production in locations where gallery structures do not function as in the North and disenfranchised people have no use for white cube art. Network-based open approaches especially “delays or defers” (Enwezor 2005:21) efforts to label activities as ‘products’. The network narratives initiated by Raqs Media Collective defy notions of property and location precisely in order to explore the possibilities of freeing up culture production for hybrid practices.²⁰ The participating public is encouraged by this group to modify and produce versions of their work, which essentially stays a work in progress. By crossing barriers between what could be regarded as art and non-art, artist and audience, product and process, these collective approaches display the threshold positioning that enable artists to stay above and below the radar of market forces.

¹⁹ The works of Le Groupe Amos and Huit Facettes are discussed in detail in chapter 3 and 4 respectively.

²⁰ See section on digital commons in chapter 4.

The work of Meschac Gaba, born in Benin but living in Amsterdam, could be deemed particularly cunning commentary on the art market and on how the uneven conditions of production in the North and South impact the institutional sanction of artistic hierarchies. His commissioned work for Documenta 11, *Museum of contemporary African art: humanist space* (2002), is conceived as the last of twelve spaces in a nomadic museum-without-walls which can be displaced or recycled to different localities. Two other works in the series, *Museum of contemporary African art: the library* (2001) and *Museum of contemporary African art: the museum shop* (2001) were also exhibited at Documenta 11.²¹



Figure 31: Meschac Gaba, *Museum of contemporary African art: humanist space*, 2002, and *Museum of contemporary African art: the museum shop*, 2001.

Installation, Kassel.

(*Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition venues*. 2002:194).

The 'humanist space', offering hundred golden bicycles for rent to visitors during the hundred days of the exhibition with the purpose of turning the profit over to humanitarian causes in Africa, was in Kassel situated adjacent to 'the

²¹ Other spaces in this museum include the draft room, summer collection, music room, marriage room, salon, architecture, art and religion, game room and museum restaurant according to the website of the work at <http://www.museumofcontemporaryafricanart.com/entree.html>.



museum shop' (Figure 31) in a temporary structure outside the main exhibition venues. For the passer-by this structure could read as a support for Documenta 11, as providing a service and souvenirs to cultural tourists. The ambiguity shown by the work's dependence on Documenta, yet simultaneous critiquing of institutional expansion and commodification, exploits threshold positioning to the full. Inside the store African and Western currencies were recycled in objects that comment on the economic conditions of Africans living with structural collapse and on the capitalist assessment of value as purely economic value. The function of a museum shop as money-spinner of cultural kitsch was thus destabilised by reclaiming it as exhibition space, closer in function to the library set up as space of learning. The composition of Gaba's museum questions not only the traditions of trading and displaying of cultural objects in Western museums and the absence of museum structures in Africa, but it could potentially initiate a dialogue about the distribution of cultural resources. Taken at face-value the title of the work deceptively suggests a single utopian view of a museum for contemporary African art. However, by positioning this work between homelessness and borderlessness, the artist creates a space of parody in which the workings of institutional power is transgressed.

As institution Documenta 11 subverted its own role as purveyor of the best and latest goods to a global art market not only by the inclusion of artworks critical of consumption, but especially by constructing a transgressive, despectacularising, nomadic exhibition space. The installations favoured in the curatorial selection played no small part in this; in particular, installations orientated towards excess in terms of scope, form and time. The display of entire oeuvres or series of works by single artists, and selection of time-based video and film installations could be considered tactically disruptive to the easy consumption of artworks as art products. An added bonus of the inclusion of various works by single artists, was that the meaning of artworks was contextualised by the artists themselves, thereby limiting curatorial framing.

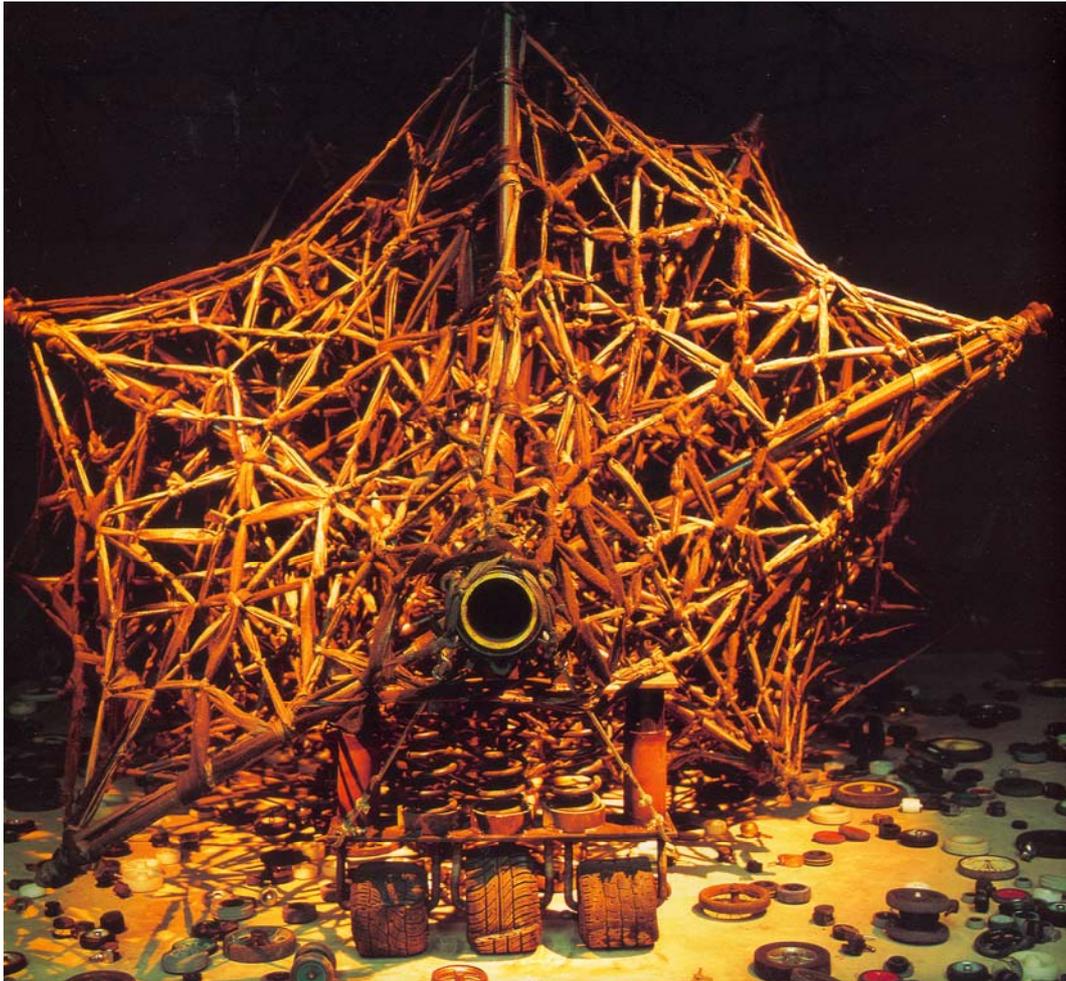


Figure 32: Nari Ward, *Landings*, 2002.
Installation.
Binding Brauerei, Kassel.
(*Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition venues*. 2002:136).

For art historian Johanne Lamoureux (2005:73) Documenta 11 challenged “closure and fetishization” through the “tension between the pristine condition of the venues and presentation and the intermittent encounter with formless installations”. Exhibits of large parts of single oeuvres were obvious examples of such amorphous installations – *Boutique products of Choreh Feyzdjou* (1973-1993), Dieter Roth’s (died 1998) *Large table ruin* (1970-1998) and Croatian Ivan Kožarić’s *Atelier Kožarić* (1930-2002).²² Unstructuring was also deliberately developed by artists as a form of trickery to flout notions of high culture profited in galleries – as in the work of Portugese-Brasilian artist

²² Posthumous showing of work by artists such as Feyzdjou and Roth, as well as the inclusion of artwork making an impression in previous decades, form part of Documenta 11’s bag of tricks to defy expectations of delivering cutting-edge work to the market.



Arthur Barrio *ideaSituation: SubjectiveObjective interRelationship* (2002)²³ – and to express an anti-skill aesthetic that resisted delivering a polished product in the work of American Raymond Pettibon *Untitled* (2002), who juxtaposed banal everyday language, literary references, comic strips, drawings and newspaper fragments. The indeterminate space of disorder was exploited on a large scale in the sculptural installations of Jamaican-born Nari Ward and French artist Annette Messenger. Both Ward's *Landings* (2002) (Figure 32), a hydraulic-operated organic weapon-like structure patched together from discarded materials, and Messenger's *Articulated – disarticulated* (2001-2002), computerised automatons of fragmented and mutant physical shapes, achieve a disquieting emotional charge through the magnitude of jumbled pieces.

The proliferation of artists who use some notion of formlessness strategically in Documenta 11 had less to do with a “celebration of the theme that ‘things fall apart’” (McEvelley 2002:83) than with ambiguous construction of meaning and the curatorial intention of withholding an overview. The project of Documenta 11 was, according to Enwezor (2002b:42-43), to show that “there are no overarching conclusions to be reached, no forms of closure” because in its threshold positioning “Documenta 11 places its quest within the epistemological difficulty that marks all attempts to forge one common, universal conception and interpretation of artistic and cultural modernity” (Enwezor 2002b:43). This anti-totalising approach distinguished Documenta from other mega-exhibitions on the global circuit and offered what Lamoureux (2005:71) terms an “antidote to *Magiciens de la terre*”²⁴ and other decontextualised and reductionist approaches to non-Western culture production. With the goal of creating an ethical global “constellation of public

²³ According to Carlos Basualdo (*Documenta 11_Platform5: Exhibition, short guide*. 2002:30), this work is a combination of two series, *Situações* (Situations) and *Experiências* (Experiences), originating from the early 1970's and late 1980's respectively, that challenge notions of public and gallery art while aiming at reenergising emotional involvement of the viewer.

²⁴Lamoureux (2005:68) maintains that the inclusion of non-Western artists in the exhibition held at the Centre George Pompidou in 1989 merely reinforced Western values – specifically the notions of the artist as innovator, the inherent value of artistic objects and object making, and the “spiritual channeling” potential of displayed objects – thereby constructing sameness between the artworks through fetishisation.



spheres” (Enwezor 2002b:54) Documenta 11 set out from the space of ambiguity and complexity on the side of the trickster intent on thwarting market forces. The next section will evaluate the kind of opposition posed by this curatorial positioning.

6.3 APPROACHING AN ADVERSARIAL AGENDA

A threshold aesthetic calls for an adversarial trickster positioning in which the untamed, unstable, unfixed, nomadic, disturbing – in short, both the unsettled and unsettling – are favoured. Rather than being a celebration of contrariness and conflict per se, this localisation is a recognition of the transformative promise of what in an auditory regime would be *dissonance*; that which is inharmonious, discordant and jarring. The object of producing such ‘noise’ would be to break the spell of the ‘music’ and reassess the full complexity of sounds and silence as in a John Cage composition. Valuing the jolting potential of the clash, adversative approaches to art production entail a form of tactical brinkmanship: some concessions can be forced and certain borders need to be shifted. Embarking from this position, the requirements for agonism and strategies for adversarial exchange will be discussed in this section.

6.3.1 Opting for agonism

The transcultural public sphere envisioned by Documenta 11 may depend on an adversarial agenda if the condition for a vibrant pluralist democracy is indeed posited as agonism, the position put forward by political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2002) in her presentation for Platform 1.²⁵ According to Mouffe’s (2002:90) formulation, “in democratic societies, while conflict cannot and should not be eradicated, neither should it take the form of a struggle between enemies (antagonism), but rather between adversaries (agonism)”. The kind of agonism Mouffe (2002:91) argues for resists being “tamed” or

²⁵ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of Mouffe’s arguments.



adversaries turned into “competitors” by hegemonic forces, in order to maintain the vital capacity to articulate alternatives. For transcultural exhibitions dealing with cultural difference, an agonistic positioning may be of particular significance as a counter-localisation to multiculturalism. Peaceful coexistence of essentialised differences as key element of multiculturalist managerial strategies needs to be undermined in support of what Hall (Hall & Maharaj 2001:54) terms turbulence:

The turbulence I speak of concerns the sense of freefall and melt-down of ethical engagement with difference, which goes beyond its packaged, manicured version as the experience of curious, titillating difference sifted down to diversity.

In her analysis of post-apartheid art in South Africa, art historian Liese van der Watt (2004:49) makes a convincing case for an adversarial aesthetics that functions in a space designated as post-identity, post-race and post-ethnicity in which artworks “actively engage the failure of identity”.²⁶ This kind of post-positioning affirming the liquidity of identifications does not mark a moving beyond the engagement with difference, but rather an agonistic approach towards fixed notions of signification. The aim is to open up a space of uncertainty through artworks that disrupt and perplex visual regimes codifying social relations. Literary theorist Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (2000:158) posits race is such a scopic regime that can only be put out of joint by an “adversarial aesthetics” following a visual line of attack. Border infringements are at the heart of Seshadri-Crooks’s (2000:159, emphasis in original) trickster-stance:

I am proposing an adversarial aesthetics that will destabilize racial looking so that racial identity will always be uncertain and unstable. The point of such a practice would be to confront the symbolic constitution of race and of racial looking as the investment we make in difference for sameness.

²⁶ Van der Watt (2004:46) maintains the artists included in the seminal exhibition *Personal affects: power and poetics in contemporary South African art*, originally held at the Museum for African Art and The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York (September 2004 – January 2005) – Churchill Madikida, Samson Mudzungu, Steven Cohen, Minette Vári, Thando Mama, Diane Victor, Berni Searle, Mustafa Maluka, Wim Botha, Claudette Schreuders and Jane Alexander – “embrace loss, absence and becoming rather than being; they welcome the fragment, the provisional, the question, rather than the answer”.

Thus the work of dissonance can turn into “discoloration” (Seshadri-Crooks 2000:160) and displacement, which could facilitate the resituating of discourses.

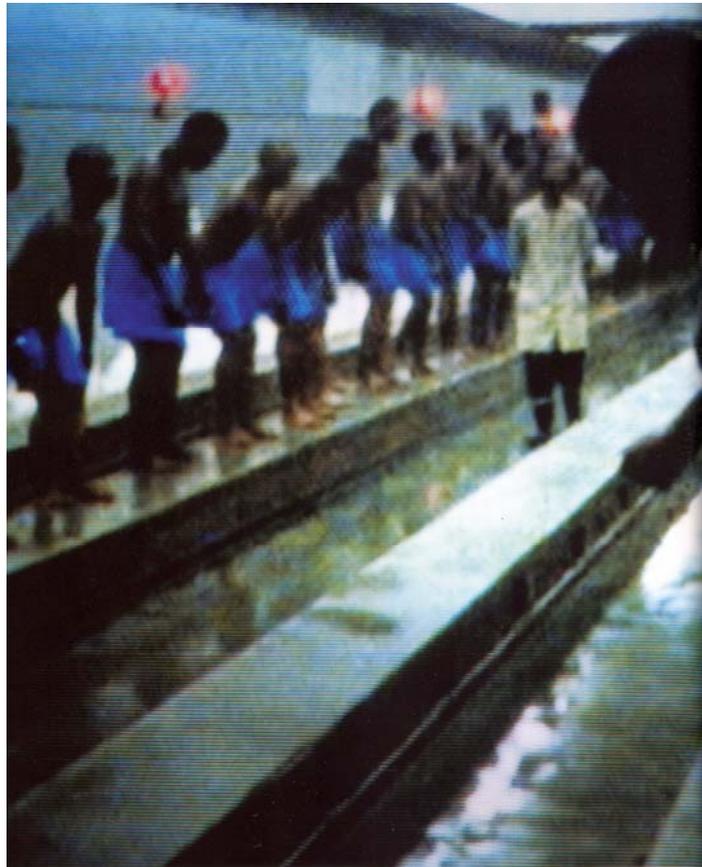


Figure 33: Steve McQueen, *Western Deep* (still), 2002.
25 minutes super-8 film transferred to DVD.
Binding-Brauerei, Kassel.
(*Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition venues*. 2002:176).

In the context of Documenta 11 Steve McQueen’s *Western Deep* (2002) (Figure 33) could be considered as a captivating example of adversative implementation of aesthetic means. Against critics such as Linda Nochlin’s (2002:161) demand for non-documentary “works full of sensuousness and colour”, McQueen’s film craftily interweave metaphorical and documentary elements of representation to create an ambiguous viewing experience of particularly the black body. The aesthetic qualities of *Western Deep* has been well received by critics, who even rank it as “the most outstanding” (Meyer 2002:169) work on display at Documenta 11. Appreciation of the formalistic



achievements, without considering the subject matter closely, involves turning a blind eye to what Enwezor (2003a:47) deems the work's disturbing encounter with the "beauty and disgust of the black body as a machine". Being commissioned for a postcolonial Documenta and dealing with bodies that in the South African milieu have been inscribed by the socio-economic engineering of apartheid,²⁷ McQueen's work calls for a reflection on the black subject and the viewer's gaze.

McQueen starts his film with blackness, blotting out vision in order to heighten the compressed, grating mechanical noise of what turns out to be a lift with miners descending down the deepest gold mine in the world. Throughout, a disorientating soundtrack, shifting intervals and unpredictable flashes of light create a hectic, visceral viewing experience that connects to the screened image of a feverish labourer with a thermometer between the lips. McQueen's aesthetic manoeuvring thus collapses the border between "viewer and viewed" (Demos 2005:87) by constructing a space in which "the audience oscillates between embodiment *before* the image and inclusion *within* it" (Demos 2005:86, emphasis in original). The empathetic link between the somatic experience of the viewer and the portrayed activities of the mineworkers is, however, disjointed by the very same aesthetic tools that draw the viewer into the work. Low lighting in the nebulous subterranean labyrinth portray disciplined, manipulated, confined and suffering bodies as indeed sensuous and luminous, bringing elements of seduction and voyeurism into play. In a scene with two rows of miners, performing a bizarre stepping exercise (probably a fitness-test) to the rhythm of a buzzer and blinking red light, the half-nude bodies in blue boxer shorts are cast in submission to the gaze of the viewer as much as to the figures in white coats monitoring them. Reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's systematic stop-motion photography of human locomotion, this scene, on one level, alludes to scientific engineering and the body treated as machine in capitalist production. Yet, on another level, the paraded black bodies agonistically

²⁷ Enwezor (2004:37) maintains under the panoptic control of the apartheid state the trace of the body as "archival and indexical referent [...] exists between norms of inscription and exposure, surveillance and disappearance".



confront the largely Northern gaze of gallery aesthetes at Documenta 11 in facing their own stereotypes of the black body, such as possible overdetermined interpretations of abjection and slavery.²⁸

By withholding a narrative or contextualisation through the medium of a voice-over traditionally employed in the documentary, *Western Deep* mines an indeterminate zone of interpretation that eschews any dominant reading. The ambiguous viewing position that the viewer is being cast in is thus compounded. It could be argued that the agonism engendered by McQueen's use of aesthetic tools is typical of the trickster-artist and that this work, seen together with that of Marcaccio, Jonas, The Atlas Group, Hatoum, Gaba and Ward in the spaces of Documenta 11, set an adversarial tone that thrived on dislodging certainties.

6.3.2 Proximity versus anthropophagy

The subtleties of Documenta 11's adversarial approaches become more apparent when compared with anthropophagy – arguably the ultimate aggressively antagonistic aesthetic strategy – explored by the preceding XXIV Bienal de São Paulo (1998). Both exhibitions set out to examine transculturality from the side of cultural hybridity, but whereas the São Paulo Biennale commenced from a specific non-Eurocentric oppositionality, Documenta 11 put varied global-postcolonial counter-positionalities forward for consideration. Instead of one strategy, Documenta 11 thereby employed a whole bag of tricks to unhinge narratives.

Taking the *Manifesto antropófago* published by Brazilian writer Oswald de Andrade²⁹ in 1928 as theoretical baseline, the biennale approached

²⁸ Art historian John Pepper (2003:79) cautions against a narrow interpretation of images of black South African bodies, which historically has been influenced by 'struggle photographs' disseminated internationally "leading us mistakenly to believe that nothing else existed in (especially black) experience outside the image either of the heroic body in protest, or the brutalized body subjected to the power of the State".

²⁹ De Andrade and his wife, artist Tarsila do Amaral, was pivotal in promoting anthropophagy as emancipatory strategy of an independent Brazilian Modernism. For Herkenhoff



cannibalism as, what chief-curator Paulo Herkenhoff (1998a:157) terms, “a sort of symbolic exchange with the enemy”:

You ate the enemy because the enemy had eaten your other, so that you can regain your past. Or because you would need the forces of the enemy to increase your own force. So the idea was to build yourself from the other or with the other.

De Andrade (1998:[sp]) identifies this cannibalistic project as: “Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into totem.” By employing a metaphorical version of what is regarded by European conquerors as the taboo practice of ingesting human flesh by barbarians, anthropophagy is in the first place: “The transfiguration of Taboo in totem” (De Andrade 1998:[sp]). Thus anthropophagy acts at the same time as “vaccine” (De Andrade 1998:[sp]), a line of attack against cultural domination, and as productive tactic, turning the neutralised enemy into an advantageous source of exchange. In this context the artwork is approached as, what artist Lygia Clark (quoted in Herkenhoff 1998b:[sp]) calls, “anthropophagic drool”, describing her work as “my own phantasmagoria which I give to the other, suggesting that they clean it and enrich it with their own phantasmagoria: thus it is an anthropophagic drool that I vomit, that is swallowed by them”.

The wide interpretations of these concepts by “dozens of curators” (Herkenhoff 1998b:[sp]) resulted from a mottled selection of artworks, that draw on some form of appropriation, to the inclusion of artists like Clark, whose work relies on interactivity. The vague application of the notion of anthropophagy is a function of the endeavour to recover a concept conceived to fortify nationalism in a transnational context. While anthropophagy is designed to be “Against all importers of canned consciousness” (De Andrade 1998:[sp]), the notion of oppositional exchange could conversely result in petrifying and essentialising differences, if compared to Documenta 11’s emphasis on nomadic producers functioning on shifting thresholds. In a globalised transcultural arena the varied counter-positionalities developed in

(1998b:[sp]) anthropophagy remains a “crucial strategy in the process of the constitution of an autonomous language in a country with a peripheral economy”.



postcolonial discourse present specific paths of resistance that could potentially push beyond assimilation and mutation. Cultural theorist Iain Chambers (1996:53, emphasis added) lists these as “*counter-histories* (of the black Atlantic, of the Jewish Arab, Indian and Chinese diasporas), *counter-memories* (of forced communalities of slavery, indentured labour and racisms), and *counter-communities* (cosmopolitan and local) that persist in the counter-discourse of a non-linear or syncopated understanding of modernity”. Rather than operating from a position of threatening alterity these adversarial localisations count on proximity in order to engage and possibly change opposing views.

As Mosquera (2003a:91) points out, anthropophagy “is not carried on in a neutral territory but rather one that is subdued, with a praxis that tacitly assumes the contradictions of dependence”. For the South this means continued unequal North-South power relations and circulation. In recovering anthropophagy as a curatorial concept the biennale did not come to grips with extensive postcolonial critique of the notion of cannibalism, such as that the discourse about cannibalism, in a sense, produced cannibalism.³⁰ Rather than attempting to dislodge hegemonies from a weak position that perpetuates colonial oppositions through the agonistic juxtaposition of North and South, non-Western and Western approaches, Documenta 11 opened up the possibility of reframing notions of aesthetic practice in the North and shifting discourses in visual culture globally. By situating culture production in Third Space and making “the terrible nearness of distant places” (Enwezor 2002b:44) its prevailing mode of globalism, this Documenta aimed for displacements across diverse trajectories. To what measure this translated in the actual expansion of visual strategies, is the focus of the next section.

³⁰ In his evaluation of the written ‘evidence’ for cannibalism in Fiji, the cannibal islands of the mid-nineteenth century, anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (1998:63) argues that “European cannibal narratives” relied on fictive accounts taken as ethnographic fact and that native populations responded by using cannibalism as the “weapon of the weak” against the intruders.



6.4 INDIGESTIBLE THIRDNESS³¹

Valuing Third Space and art production as ethical engagement, Documenta 11 seriously engaged with strategies of resistance in visual production. This involved in no small measure a re-examination of the trickster-tactics of Third Cinema.³² Co-curator Mark Nash (2002:132) maintains:

It can be argued that Third Cinema has provided a discursive space for a range of different cinematic practices that contemporary art has not been able to emulate and that the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of aesthetic discourse in the visual arts have taken a different course to those alternative, experimental, and political cinemas included under the general rubric of Third Cinema. Indeed, one of the aims of this Documenta is to draw our attention to this alternative tradition.

What distinguishes Third Cinema as trickster-art is that its various practices resist assimilation and cooptation; “it becomes something which the system finds indigestible”, according to Solanas and Getino (quoted in Nash 2002:135). By insisting on speaking with an accent and thrusting margins into the centre, artists in this tradition undermine any notion of a generic, ‘correct’ language, thereby rendering the dominant language as merely another accent. Although accented cinema³³ is born of necessity in peripheral production sites, having to come to terms with art production in a marginal or interstitial space might in fact mean the enabling difference for artists

³¹ This term “thirdness” is borrowed from curator Phillipe Vergne (2003:22), who coined the phrase for an aesthetic orientation examined in the exhibition *How latitudes become forms: art in a global age* initiated by the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis (9 February – 4 May 2003). The travelling exhibition includes work by artists from 7 latitudes: Brazil, China, Japan, South Africa, Turkey and the United States.

³² *Third Cinema* refers here loosely to non-hegemonic cinematic practices that can be regarded as alternatives to production and reception strategies of what Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema* (1969) termed *First Cinema* – the Hollywood model as dominant ideology of the production of large-scale spectacles – and *Second Cinema* – cinema d’auteur, independent and new wave films that, however innovative in terms of formal, narrative and distribution structures, remain subservient to the first.

³³ Film theorist Hamid Naficy (2001:10) develops the concept of “an accented cinema” as a postcolonial development in the Third Cinema tradition of exilic, diasporic and ethnic films of which the “tensions of marginality and difference [...] are not neatly resolved by familiar narrative and generic schemas”.

anywhere, who are intent on challenging hegemonies in an age of intensified globalisation.



Figure 34: Black Audio Film Collective, *Handsworth Songs* (still), 1986.
58 minutes 16mm-film transferred to DVD.
KulturBahnhof, Kassel.
(*Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition venues*. 2002:111).

The work of Black Audio Film Collective, founded in 1983³⁴ in London, is one of the oppositional approaches that Documenta 11 reconsidered for contemporaneous art production. The group's members – John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Eddie George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Trevor Mathison, and David Lawson – initially viewed collective practice as “a viable means of survival” (Black Audio... 2002:553), but in pioneering the formation of an independent critical black film culture they broke through media barriers with contributions to Channel 4 on British TV. Their critically acclaimed documentary *Handsworth Songs* (1986) (Figure 34, directed by Ghanaian-born Akomfrah, is situated in the political aftermath of the race-riots in Handsworth, Birmingham, and London in 1985 in which a black woman, Joy Gardner, and white policeman, Keith Blakelock, died. Against simplistic portrayals in the mainstream media of rioters as either demonic or victimised,

³⁴ The founding date is given as 1983 in the catalogue for Documenta 11 (2002:553), but according to the British Film Institute's website (Black Audio...[sa]) the group functioned as a collective from 1982-1998.



this work sets out to capture the multiplicity of “voices, tones and registers” (Black Audio... 2002:553) that differentiates black identities. By cutting post-war reportage of race into the film, events were contextualised in postcolonial Britain’s encounter with difference and the marginalisation of minorities. Rather than documenting facts, this work aimed at reconsidering history and the politics of representation. In *Handsworth Songs* the voices of contemporary Britain resonated as indeed infinitely accented.

Third Cinematic works included in Documenta 11 share an adversarial questioning of spectatorial regimes, whether it is *racial looking* as in the work of the Black Audio Film Collective, *ethnographic looking* in Indonesian-born Fiona Tan’s video portraits, *Countenance* (2002), *gendered looking* in Iranian-born Shirin Neshat’s *Tooba* (2002) or *anthropological/male looking* in Vietnamese-born Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Naked spaces: living is round* (1985). As diasporic artists living in Northern metropolises these artists are deeply aware of the power of the frame to perpetuate power structures. Trinh (1999:134) identifies her particular focus on framing in terms of the relations formed by looking:

I'm sensitive to the borders, edges and margins of an image – not only in terms of its rectangular confines, which today's digital technology easily modifies, but in the wider sense of framing as an intrinsic activity of image-making and of relation-forming.

Her engagement with rural environments in the West African countries Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Senegal in *Naked Spaces* carries no outright political content, yet her intimate framing of daily life “shot intuitively with the camera placed very close to ground level, where most daily activities are carried out in African villages” (Trinh TM 1999:134) is a powerful comment on the traditions of ethnographic filmmaking.³⁵ Rather than approaching filming as fieldwork to engage with cultural difference, *Naked Spaces* explores everyday life as transcultural space. By resituating subjects

³⁵ Documentary filmmaker David MacDougall (1998:267-274) points out anthropology and certain types of ethnographic films that employ an authorial stance advance from a master concept of “*understanding is seeing*” (MacDougall 1998:267, emphasis in original) with understanding as “a function of both viewing position and an inside/outside, or surface/depth construct” (MacDougall 1998:268). Hence the act of looking is constructed as neither participatory nor self-reflective.



outside the frames of ‘backward’, ‘primitive’, and ‘authentic’ this work destabilises colonial looking.

For the curatorial project of Documenta 11 the principal value of Third Cinema was the “plurality of voices” (Enwezor 2002b:55) that the works bring to the envisioned global public sphere and to an exhibition that “counterpoises the supposed purity and autonomy of the art object against a rethinking of modernity based on ideas of transculturality and extraterritoriality” (Enwezor 2002b:55). In their threshold positioning these works showed possible strategies for an aesthetic of resistance, of thirdness. Vergne (2003:22) lists constitutive elements of such an aesthetic as: proximity and locality, in-betweenness, performativity of audiences and artists, a leaning toward multidisciplinary, critique of museum authority, growing importance of the everyday, and the affirmation of the subversive promise of art. This view connects to Kester’s formulation of dialogical or littoral aesthetics, critic Suzi Gablik’s notion of “connective aesthetics”³⁶ and curator Nicholas Bourriaud’s (2002:57, emphasis in original) articulation of the artwork as relational object that functions like “*interstices*, like space-time factors governed by an economy going beyond rules in force controlling the management of different kinds of public and audience”. An artist operating in this relational or intermediate space is like Duchamp’s “anartist” (quoted in Maharaj 2002b:79), whose trickery messes up systematic drawing of borders and ‘works’ resembles interventions rather than products. An aesthetic of thirdness would also value multiplicity and what Bourriaud (2002:26) describes as “transitivity”:

This idea of transitivity introduces into the aesthetic arena that formal disorder which is inherent to dialogue. It denies the existence of any specific ‘place of art’, in favour of a forever unfinished discursiveness, and a never recaptured desire for dissemination.

Ultimately an aesthetic of thirdness implies an expansion of visual strategies across all kinds of thresholds, especially “any kind of over-wrought aesthetic

³⁶ Gablik (1992:4) maintains that an emerging “post-Cartesian, ecological world view” repositions art practice from a modernist orientation of a “disembodied eye” to a “‘listening’ self”, which shifts the focus to “interconnectedness and intersubjectivity”.



judgement as far as what is proper to all works of art” (Enwezor 2003a:46). ‘Thirdness’ as an aesthetic orientation thus corresponds to threshold consciousness as trickster positioning. Such an adversarial, interstitial aesthetic shows a firm commitment to the vigour of an aesthetic space not made impotent by hegemonising forces of the art market and cultural globalisation.

Whilst Documenta 11 did not put forward any novel curatorial approaches to expand aesthetic strategies, the engagement with various oppositional tactics within its rhizomatic spaces could be regarded as a cumulative effort to amplify the subversive promise of art. It is the contention of this study that this commitment to an adversarial aesthetic set Documenta 11 apart from contemporary mega-exhibitions and that, by valuing agonism, the curators showed a viable way in which art could be made indigestible to the system.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The degree to which Documenta 11 could be considered to attain, or fall short of, the adversarial potential of a threshold aesthetic of the trickster varies widely among critics sympathetic to the exhibition’s social commitment. Whereas art historian James Meyer (2002:168) praises Enwezor’s Documenta as “without doubt the most memorable version of the show I have seen”, Geers (2005b:132) derides the show for “usher[ing] into the mainstream the politically correct, multicultural (PCMC) artist from both the margins and the racially unequal centre” and leaving colonial power structures unchanged. While Documenta 11, by virtue of its status as normative exhibition, certainly facilitated co-optation of artworks onto the global circuit, it is considered by German critic Peter Bürger (2002:33) as a decisive break with Documenta tradition. This fracture is according to Bürger (2002:33) caused by the introduction of an aesthetic informing work by artists from the



Third World that transcends notions about the production and reception of individual art objects as well as European debates about ‘engaged’ art.³⁷

Rather than functioning as revolutionary trickster, Documenta 11 could be considered as a joint-disturber working within the system, while fully aware of its own limitations. If the notion of aesthetics, first coined in its modern usage by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten,³⁸ and that of art as well as art history are taken as “central to the very machinery of historicism and essentialism; the very *esperanto* of European hegemony” (Preziosi 1998a:513), then artists and curators from the non-West inevitably have to redefine art practice from within the system if they wish to be part of the discourse. One of Documenta 11’s curatorial aims was to subvert the Westernism in visual art regimes by expanding the discourse beyond institutional aesthetics. According to Enwezor (2002b:54),

Documenta 11’s paradigm is shaped by forces that seek to enact the multidisciplinary direction through which artistic practices and processes come most alive, in those circuits of knowledge produced outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism, or those situated solely in the sphere of artistic canons.

By setting out to open up the walls of aesthetic space to a constellation of public spheres, Documenta 11 managed to, at the very least, render some Western parameters of aesthetics problematic and shift ways in which art from the ‘peripheries’ is viewed in a transcultural field of representations.

The role of the viewer in a trickster-aesthetic was emphasised in Documenta 11, by linking the notion of the exhibition as “mirror/reflection” (Enwezor 2002b:53) to spectatorship and the carnivalesque. By defining spectatorship in terms of “the carnivalesque as its mode of enunciation” (Enwezor

³⁷ Bürger (2002:33) posits: “Aus den Ländern der Dritten Welt kommt uns hier eine Ästhetik entgegen, die nicht nur den Gegensatz von Kontemplation des Einzelwerkes und zerstreuter Rezeption hinter sich läßt, indem sie uns zu aufmerksamer Betrachtung nötigt, auch der Gegensatz von politischer und reiner Kunst, der die europäischen Debatten um die engagierte Kunst begleitet hat, verliert [...] viel von seiner Brisanz.”

³⁸ Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*, published in 1750, identified sensual knowledge as distinctive from rational knowledge, yet as valuable form of cognition in its own right.



2002b:54), the curatorial approach to the viewer stayed true to Bakhtin's (1984:7) designation of the carnival as threshold activity:

It belongs to the borderline between art and life [...] In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.

The distance between producers and mere observers of aesthetic products were indeed breached in the curatorial aim of producing an engagement with art as “cognitive-ethical episodes” (Maharaj 2002b:80). Approaching art production and reception in such a discursive-ethical expanded aesthetic sphere consequently increased the subversive potential for visual arts.