

Review: "Art," Identity, and Difference: Three (Double) Takes on Visual Culture?

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With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture by Lisa

Bloom Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to Marketplace by Olu
Oguibe ;

Okwui Enwezor Whispers from the Walls: The Art of Whitfield Lovell by Diana

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Essay Review

"Art," Identity, and Difference: Three (double)takes on Visual Culture?

WITH OTHER EYES: LOOKING AT RACE AND GENDER IN VISUAL

CULTURE, edited by Lisa Bloom. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 432 pp., \$35 paper.

READING THE CONTEMPORARY: AFRICAN ART FROM THEORY TO

MARKETPLACE, edited by Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, 268 pp., \$35 paper.

WHISPERS FROM THE WALLS: THE ART OF WHITFIELD LOVELL, ed-

ited by Diana Block. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1999, 88 pp., \$29.95 paper.

All of the books under review here strive to cross borders of one sort or another. The boundaries between disciplines in the Western academy, between cultures, between honored and ignored forms of human endeavor are all at issue as these writers explore what they are all willing to call "visual culture" (by which I take them to mean the practice of producing objects for use, interpretation, or enjoyment through the sense of sight). Unfortunately, the existence of boundaries between academic approaches to visual culture also constrains my review of these works, and does so in ways that I should begin by describing. For reasons of space, the description will be impressionistic at best.

Art history represents one way to explore visual culture. For Western art historians - for, as we will soon have occasion to say, traditional Western art historians - the subject matter is, of course, Art: the subset of visual cul-

ture produced by means of certain aesthetic practices, like painting, that have been especially valorized in the west. Since the eighteenth century these practices have been taken to constitute a distinct and perhaps autonomous portion of the social world that we denote with such expressions as "Fine Art" or "the art-world." This is what art history historicizes and what art criticism criticizes.

Philosophical aesthetics represents another way to explore visual culture, or another set or, for my purposes, another pair, of ways. On the one hand there are analytic philosophers, who tend to ask philosophic questions about fine art in ways made possible by analytic philosophy of mind and language - as, for example, when we ask what "art" means, or how we use the concept. Answers to these questions tend to be informed by classical empiricism and its culmination and annulment in the work of Kant.

Continental philosophers, on the other hand, in my admittedly meager experience, tend to ask philosophic questions about fine art or, true to the roots of the notion of the aesthetic, about experience as such, say, about *The Visual*. And they tend to use resources from phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, informed by Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. (I should perhaps speak here of an "Americanized" or "Anglicized" form of continental philosophy, since people who think about such matters for a living have worried that the Anglo-American academy, in taking up the subjects and techniques of post-structuralism, specifically of deconstruction and discourse analysis, has given itself an ossified and limited picture of the philosophical work on offer in France and elsewhere. I take no position on this.)

A third way to explore visual culture derives from the set of practices comprising cultural studies and its allied fields, such as performance, film, gender, postcolonial, and queer studies, critical race theory, and certain forms of feminist thought. These fields take the production and reproduction of culture and encultured individuals as their domain of enquiry, and produce analyses in which the more abstract versions of poststructuralism blend, or vie, with various forms of historicism and materialism. Rather than exploring Art, "art," or experience as such, these theorists use resources from or descended from continental philosophy to examine the social practices by which humans produce all sorts of signs or texts and, with them, sensibilities, subject positions, and power relations.

The books under review here all use continental resources to enrich - not, they all make clear, to forsake - art criticism and art history by pushing them closer to cultural studies and its allies. All three of the books explore the influence that race and ethnicity have on traditional models for approaching visual culture. Also, all three question the boundaries that separate high visual culture from low, Art from life (or advertising), the stuff that ends up in museums from the stuff that ends up adorning our homes or marking our passage through the world. Beyond this, two of the books, *Reading the Contemporary* and *With Other Eyes*, consider the conditions of transnationalism and post-coloniality; specifically, they explore the ways in which global forces, especially the forces marshaled and released by the establishment and decline of European colonies, shape the creation and expression of identity in visual culture. And beyond that, *With Other Eyes* adds a further concern with gender and the politics of sexual orientation. As an analytically trained philosopher, which is to say, as someone who is neither a continental philosopher nor an art historian or critic, it is diffi-

cult for me to evaluate the success of the reconstructive project undertaken in these books. I am sympathetic to cultural studies and to the project of nudging, or dragging, some "traditional" discipline toward Birmingham: I have, in fact, tried to practice aesthetics as a kind of cultural studies. But for me that means reviving a kind of pragmatism, not turning to continental theory. So *Whispers from the Walls*, *Reading the Contemporary*, and *With Other Eyes* provide someone like me with an interesting glimpse into parallel developments in a related field. But, as someone outside the relevant disciplines

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and unfamiliar with the techniques employed, it is difficult for me to evaluate the reconstructions of disciplinary practice that these works suggest, or to say whether practitioners in those fields will find these arguments useful or persuasive.

Of the three books, *Whispers from the Walls* is the most straightforward. It is a beautifully rendered companion volume to an exhibition of Whitfield Lovell's work that traveled in 1999-2000 from the University of North Texas to the Jones Center for Contemporary Art in Austin, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Put most simply, the exhibit consists mainly of found objects arranged in a small house built from salvaged wood. The design of the house and the objects left in and around it - including old clothing, an old phonograph, and a container of salt left by the door in accordance with folk custom - evoke rural black life the 1920s. And on the inner walls of the house, and on pieces of wood hung from the gallery walls outside the house, Lovell has drawn images of the black people who might have lived in this setting, based on photographs he acquired from local archives. The companion book includes fine photographic reproductions (in color) of these installations and drawings, as well as of others that predate the *Whispers* exhibit. It also contains thoughtful discussions, by Lucy Lippard and Jennifer Ellen Way, of the questions raised by Lovell's work. One of these questions is whether *Whispers* exemplifies an African American aesthetic, either because Lovell is African American or because he takes African Americans as his subjects or diverges from Western traditions in some other way that is common to African American artists. Another question has to do with the tensions between Lovell's work - his methods and his subjects - and the criteria for evaluation - for cognizability, really - in traditional art criticism. I am not sure that the text

adequately deals with these questions, but it does raise the right issues, and it does so while presenting some remarkable artistic work. I have never used this sort of text for a class so I am not sure how one goes about it. But I can imagine someone employing *Whispers* to dramatize questions about the idea of an African American aesthetic, or about the nature of art.

By contrast with *Whispers*, *Reading the Contemporary* is a wide-ranging collection of essays published over the last decade in such places as the journals *Artforum*, *African Arts*, and *Third Text*. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor have collected the pieces and published them together to indicate the emergence of, as they say, "a new critical language and method for the evaluation of contemporary African art" (p. 9). This reevaluation, or this renewed set of resources for evaluation, is important on account of three simultaneous developments: African artists have become more visible on the international scene, international and transnational concerns have become more visible in their work, and new forums have emerged for the presentation of this work. All of this leads the perceptive observer, the editors say, to wonder why this has happened and how, and what African art is now, and who is its audience. The essays in the book, along with the many full-color images that accompany them, are a prolonged answer to these and related questions.

Reading the Contemporary has four sections. The first, "Theory and Cultural Transaction," explores the limitations of the theoretical perspectives, explicit and implicit, that have structured and deformed Western encounters with African art. The essays in the second section, "History," explain how the contemporary African art scene got to be the way it is - or, better, since most of the essays rightly focus on specific regions, countries, individuals, or media, on how instances of contemporary art in Africa and by Africans got to be the way they are. The third section, "Location and Practice," examines the way individual African artists have been cast, or have thrown themselves, into the gap between the West and the rest. The titles of some of the essays in this section clearly indicate its theme: African artists, by seeking or being sought for conversation with the West, are "Between Worlds" and "In Transit" and forced to enact some variety of cultural "Fusion," all of which can exact serious professional, existential, and psychological costs, and all of which require a certain care on the part of those who would discuss the work that emerges from this experience. The final section, "Negotiated Identities," interrogates the processes, conditions, and consequences of identity construction, especially as these are shaped and complicated by post-colonial politics in a world, including an art-world, that has been shaped by centuries of more and less explicit pursuit of white supremacist ethical and aesthetic ideals. In this section, as in the previous two, the argument advances mainly by concrete example: almost all the essays focus on individual artists, locales, and countries (and for some reason almost all in this section involve southern or South Africa).

Some of the essays in the Oguibe-Enwezor volume offer abstract pronouncements about the text's basic issues - post-colonial identity, transnational cultural production, and a heightened suspicion of meta-narratives, including those of post-modernism, multicultural diversity, and art history. But the book is at its best when its contributors focus on illustrating what's at stake in these basic issues by discussing specific artworks, individuals, or places. Most of the contributing writers, including such well-known figures as K. Anthony Appiah, Manthia Diawara, and Laura Mulvey, do this. As a consequence one can get a clear sense of the fundamental problem - that Western traditions of thinking about art render African art and artists invisible qua art and qua artists - from reading just a few of the many quite interesting essays.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming size of the book and of its subject leads to that characteristic problem of anthologies, diffuseness of content. Oguibe and Enwezor want to undermine the art-world's attachment to the cluster of ideas surrounding what we might call, following Mudimbe, the Western invention of Africa, with its primitive and traditional folk and their anonymous artisans. But they also want to provide a vocabulary for discussions with and among westerners about productions of visual culture that come in some sense from a place that we still call Africa. Their subject is, after all, African art. So we have Senegalese filmmakers alongside Namibian linocut artists alongside South African aesthetic nationalists alongside North African photographers. I mention all of this not to point to a philosophical problem

of inconsistency vis-a-vis the question of essentialism: the world has over the last four centuries created circumstances that make modest and defeasible continent-wide generalizations about Africa and Africans theoretically and politically invaluable. My point is just that *Reading the Contemporary* gives its readers a lot, geographically, culturally, and conceptually, to take in. If the text is used in a course that aspires to a term-long survey of the issues raised by the African production of visual culture, and if it is supplemented by some clarifying summaries of the relevant theories, then this immense topical diversity might be manageable as well as fascinating.

With Other Eyes is as ambitious, conceptually, as *Reading the Contemporary*. Editor Lisa Bloom declares for her book the aim of pushing art history and humanistic theory in directions already mapped by feminist cultural studies and post-colonial theory. According to Bloom, art history and criticism remain wedded to a version of the view or, better, the gaze - in deference to Bloom's reliance on gaze theory - from nowhere: the presumption that critics and theorists can identify and speak on behalf of universal values and norms, that race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality have nothing to do with the production or evaluation of visual culture. Bloom also claims that humanistic critics of the gaze from nowhere - postmodernists, queer theorists, feminists of a certain stripe - remain oddly unaware of their own commitments to similar ideas; they are eager to point out the maleness of the gaze in visual culture but oddly unaware of the whiteness or Eurocentrism embedded in their own critical perspectives. The purpose of *With Other Eyes*, then, is to bring art history into conversation with feminist and other critics of the gaze from nowhere, and then to bring both traditions into conversation with the insights of a strain of feminist cultural studies that is deeply shaped by the concerns with race (or something like it) and the nation (and its successor-subjects) that shape postcolonial theory. The vehicle for doing all of this is a collection of essays, with some black and white images, that offer readings of a wide range of visual texts, provide historical and critical accounts of the discourses that have grown up around the experience of visual culture, and illuminate the connections between visual culture and identity.

Bloom divides the book into two sections. The first, broadly historical section presents diachronic accounts of the processes by which Western techniques for dealing with visual culture have been shaped by racism, sexism, and nationalism. Contributors to this section draw linkages between, among other things, the development and decline of the New York School of modernist criticism and the politics of Jewish transnational identity; between the imperial project of the British Museum and the creation of class, gender, and national identities in the museum's audience; and (by way of Bakhtin) between the images of Grace Jones and Saartjie Baartman, the nineteenth century's "Hottentot Venus."

The second section is more synchronic, a snapshot of a contemporary situation in which non-white and female artists, critics, and scholars produce work that undermines the traditional underpinnings of the gaze from nowhere (and, as we might say, from post-nowhere). Here the contributors

explore various models of artistic, cultural, and theoretical border crossings, including (but not limited to) crossings by the Body Shop, which is to say by global capital; by the transnational, multi-racial, San Diego-Tijuana-based feminist collective called Las Comadres; by Jewish comedienne Sandra Bernhard and her parodic aspirations to blackness; and by the ambivalent and contradictory processes of constructing and representing Israeli femininity.

I was impressed by the thoughtful and detailed manner in which the contributors to *With Other Eyes* worked through the theoretical implications of their subjects. I was impressed also, and a bit surprised, that separate treatments of such a wide and diverse range of phenomena, objects, institutions, and individuals could develop into a collection with much thematic unity. Bloom's expansive introductory essay left me uncertain that the name she coins for the basic approach of the book, "feminist colonial discourse studies," actually refers to anything coherent. But after reading the contributors' essays I did feel that I had explored different aspects of a single project. Unfortunately, the main unifying feature of the essays was also for me the most problematic.

As I mentioned above, all of these books do their work using the languages and techniques of continental philosophy. I mention this again because it makes the vast majority of the writing in these books at least a little forbidding to me and, I suspect, to people who share my lack of familiarity with the details and styles of post-structuralist theorizing. The essays are much, much easier to get through than, say, Baudrillard's musings on the various levels of "the real," but they still seem a bit wordy and dense in ways that would make me reluctant to assign them to students below the advanced undergraduate level.

The reliance on the conceptual and rhetorical resources of continental philosophy seems most pronounced in *With Other Eyes*, and for people like me in the respects mentioned above, most troubling. I have never been convinced that complaints about binary oppositions or inferences from psychoanalytic postulates are as useful as they are made out to be, though I have more sympathy for them than many analytically trained philosophers, and though they don't do as much work here as they might. But since these and other telltale signs of continental influence are the coin of the realm for Bloom and her colleagues, I have to leave it to others to assess whether the currency is being debased. I will say just this: for a graduate level or extremely high-level undergraduate class on some aspect of what I have referred to throughout as the art-world, *With Other Eyes* could be an extremely useful corrective to the tendency to see art and aesthetic experience as things that somehow float above human practices and politics - provided that there is also the time, and the will, to wrestle with the basic theoretical assumptions.

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