

ENCOUNTERING OTHERNESS. DEPTH OF FIELD: A COLLECTIVE APPROACH TO AFRICA

CONOCER LA ALTERIDAD. DEPTH OF FIELD:
UNA APROXIMACIÓN COLECTIVA A ÁFRICA

ROSARIO JIMÉNEZ
rosario.jiménez@urjc.es

Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos de Madrid

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to approach postcolonial African photography through the pictures of the Nigerian group DOF (Depth of Field), in terms of what has been called Trans-African Photography; a photography that brings down the borders of the African continent and denies the identity aspects of “the African” as a Western construction. The pictures of this new generation keep no relation with such characteristics as the naïve, the primitive or the brute, all of them related to “the African” from the point of view of the West. On the contrary, they insert themselves into the global dialogue of the Postmodern Art. And by doing so, they break away from the omnipresent ethnocentrism in the arts. It is important to raise this topic in the academia in order to create legitimization for these artistic practices that question not only the art circle and its system but also the social construction of an imagery that is currently widespread in the Western Countries. The training of these photographers has taken place mostly in Europe. Therefore talking about the migratory flux of the art and its meanings becomes necessary as well. The pictures of DOF, rather than represent the Other, raise controversy about the pertinence of Africa being part of a globalised world distributes their artworks and, at the same time, relocates them away from their territory. This has caused a great split not only in the western imagery but also in more traditional-style African photographers such as J.D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere, Tam Fiofori, Jide Adeniyi-Jones y Sunmi Smart-Cole. **Keywords:** Photography postcolonial Africa; representation; Otherness; postmodern art.

Resumen: El propósito de este artículo es realizar una aproximación a la fotografía postcolonial africana a través de la obra del grupo nigeriano DOF (Depth of Field). Se tratará en él lo que se denomina Fotografía Transafricana; una fotografía que rompe con los bordes del continente y que niega el carácter identitario que desde Occidente se ha utilizado para construir ‘lo africano’ desde un punto

de vista colonial. Las fotografías de esta nueva generación nada tienen que ver con lo naif, lo primitivo o lo rudo –características éstas asociadas a lo que podríamos etiquetar como “lo africano-occidental”–, sino que se insertan en el diálogo global del arte posmoderno y rompen con el etnocentrismo imperante en las artes. Es importante tratar este tema desde el mundo académico para legitimar unas prácticas que cuestionan no sólo el círculo y el sistema del arte, sino también la construcción social de un imaginario que a día de hoy sigue imperante en el mundo Occidental. No hay que olvidar asimismo que una parte importante de la formación de estos fotógrafos se ha desarrollado en Occidente, por lo que es necesario hablar también de los flujos migratorios del arte y de sus significados. Las fotografías de DOF, además de tratar el tema ‘del Otro’, promueven el debate sobre la pertinencia de la entrada de África en un mundo globalizado desde el que distribuir sus obras de arte al mismo tiempo que las deslocaliza de su territorio. Esto ha causado una gran brecha no sólo en el imaginario occidental sino entre los fotógrafos africanos más tradicionales como es el caso de J. D. Okhai Ojeikere, Tam Fiofori, Jide Adeniyi-Jones y Sunmi Smart-Cole.

Palabras clave: Fotografía poscolonial; África; representación; Otredad; arte posmoderno.

1. Introduction

Our images of Africa are mediated by the representation that the Western world has made of that continent. As said by Stuart Hall (1997), the stereotype used to represent black people is still the one taken from the slavery days. Renowned photographers of the Magnum agency, such as Robert Capa and George Rodger, used their cameras to portray the African land and thus contributed to the creation of an exogenous imagery that was gradually to become the only representation of the continent. African images by western photographers have oscillated between the fascination for the exotic –the exotic being, by definition, that which shocks– and the social protest –the work of Isabel Muñoz is well known in Spain–. Issues such as female circumcision, sexual violence, hunger, war and the situation of children have been a leit motiv in the representations that the West has made of Africa.

But we cannot forget that representing not only has to do with the descriptive process of mimesis, but also with a performance of duties whereby the representation plays the roles of those represented, that is, speaks on their behalf. That is why those images made with a distant perspective –the *régard éloigné*, as Lévi Strauss (1983) put it– contribute to create the frontier between Us and the Other. They implicitly separate barbarism from civilization. They fully introduce difference. And difference, as Derrida (1978) taught us, is never innocent. Difference

is based on hierarchic relationships between the opposing poles that constitute the grammar of otherness. And it is then that, as Barthes (1977) said, one enters the land of the myth or the meta-message: representational practices with such a heavy connotative content that denotation is obliterated.

Africa and Africanness have thus undergone the three typical stages of the representation of the Other. The first stage is characterized by its total absence in the representational systems –the expression “Africa, the forsaken continent” summarizes well this first stage–. The second stage implies access to a representation wherein the continent is spoken for by the West –it is the stage of the creation of the colonial imagery–. The third stage, promoted by the postcolonial movements and the practices associated with them, is the most interesting one and will be the subject of this article. It is characterized by the access of the Other to their own representation. And this is where the Depth of Field group comes into the picture.

The fourth Photography Biennial, one of the most important photography events in Africa, took place in Bamako, Mali, in 2011. The goal of that edition, which was entitled *Rencontres de Bamako. Pour un monde durable*, was to reflect upon the creation of a sustainable world and to encourage a political and social commitment among African artists. Issues such as the global warming, the scarcity of water or the exhaustion of food and mineral resources were addressed by the different artists who participated in the Biennial. In a continent affected by the unequal distribution of resources, devoting those limited resources to the creation of a sustainable world may also become a political as well as an environmental issue. It must be remembered that in 2010 many African countries celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their independence so it was the right time to sum up the progress achieved since independence. The heterogeneity of the proposals submitted to the Biennial undermines the homogeneity of the representational practices carried out by the West in relation with Africa. Artists submitted action proposals that will allow them to build a sustainable world from Africa and not from the exogenous policies of the development projects designed by the West.

That year, within the context of the Biennial, the Depth of Field group was born. The group, which consists of six photographers from different regions of Africa, had a considerable national and International repercussion. Its founder, Nigerian photographer James Iroha Uchechukwu, was a key element in the cohesion of the group. Through workshops and seminars, he also actively mentors a new generation of African photographers. Toyin Sokefun-Bello “Ty Bello”, Amaize Ojeikere, Emeka Okereke, Zaynab Odunsi, and Kelechi Amadi Obi are the other members of Depth of Field.

Their photographs, which have a marked individual perspective, show the complexity of a continent that has traditionally been represented from the outside with a homogeneity that is non-existent, stereotyped and cliché-ridden. This variety is accounted for by the great African exodus and offers a subject and language multiplicity that gives a fair idea of the richness of the African photographic scene. These artists, many of whom use different media, deal with topics such as the relationship between people and their environment, identity linked to certain kinesic trends such as changing hair-styling in African women depending on regions, the life of African colonialists, etc. This access to representation empowers artists to speak for themselves, to represent their selfness and to question the images of African Otherness that pervade in the West. The imagery is broken and reinvented. New representations are fitted together which, although not symmetrically dialogic, propose a new way of regarding Otherness that supersedes the simplistic and dual formula of Orientalism. Through the DOF Group, Africa speaks for itself and represents its own interests, both cultural and political.

They are not the only ones working in that direction. Projects such as “Invisible Borders: The Trans-African Photography Project”, created in Nigeria in 2009, try to change society by talking about Africa from Africa. Their activities aim to do away with the borders between the local, the national, and the international –thence their name–.

Furthermore, the Other became the creator of Otherness when these photographers began to study outside of Africa and to photograph the cities of Europe and the United States from their own distant perspective. Thus in 2011 the Africa.es Project was created in Spain, in which the members of the DOF Group participated. An exhibition of their work was held in the Sala Minerva of the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid. The show was part of the Arte In-visible Project, an initiative developed by the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional al Desarrollo, which supports the visual arts in Africa. With their cameras, the African photographers represented the relationship of Spanish cities with landscape. The result was a collection of images of Spain made from the particular vision of the Other.¹

Thereby these photographers represent the transition from the colonial –a colonial imagery– to the postcolonial. From the Other to the creation of Other Africa.

[01] For further information on these photographers go to:

http://www.casaffrica.es/en/agenda_europa_africa.jsp?PROID=727515

2. The Depth of Field Collective or the New Photography in Nigeria

Postmodernity has been considered by its detractors almost as a weakness of a Modernity so old that it cannot keep the certainties and promises made by the Enlightenment. Everything flows; nothing remains: that seems to be the motto of postmodern times. And thus the solid becomes liquid.

But Postmodernity has also been responsible for the dismantling of those truths regarded by Modernity as absolute and, above all, universal. One of those solid truths was the identity of the rational and thinking subject. This subject, whose existence depended on his/her thinking, turned out to be a dominant white-Western subject. History, or rather “Histories”, have been written and rewritten by those subjects. And they were also the ones who set up the limits with the Other, thus establishing a hierarchical ethnographic map. In these dividing practices, whereby the subject is set apart from the Other in an Orientalist way, as explained by Edward Said (1978), the difference between them is defined in binary terms. The healthy subject as opposed to the ill one; the sane and the insane; and, to focus on the topic of this paper, the West as opposed to Africa. Thus the West is regarded as the developed one, the modern, the one driven by Reason. Africa, on the contrary, is the mysterious, the unknown, the non-developed, the peripheral, where the discomforts of culture remain totally unknown. And so does Reason.

That egocentric and biased Self was to be, if not buried, at least challenged by Postmodernity. That conscious Cartesian subject, fixed by Kant as the most representative philosopher in modern times, suffers the opposition of the Lacanian subject. These subjects, under the threat of fragmentation of their own Self, felt as early as during the mirror stage –that is to say, under the threat of their schizophrenic identity– protect themselves from the exterior world. They protect themselves from the Other, from the different, from what Foucault called the abnormal (Foucault 2004). According to Foucault in these dividing practices “the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him” (Foucault, 1988: 790).

But these dividing practices also create a relationship of superiority, conceived almost as a natural fact determined by nature, revealed itself as a relationship mediated by fear. A fear that is in the root of the different categories where the Other is placed. But, if the Lacanian subject did not know it, he/she at least suspected it. In Postmodernity the cynical, as stated by Sloterdijk (1987), knows, but he/she holds on to ideology as a form of self-defense

In this context of ruptures, so suspicious of the Truth and the Real, emerges Postmodern art in Europe, supported by May 1968. It could be argued that postmodern art is an intellectual art based on concepts and totally remote from rea-

lity. But we agree with Angela McRobbie's thesis that postmodern art creates a space for social changes and political transformation. These changes are especially true about postcolonial art (McRobbie, 1994). By deactivating the meanings associated to spaces, postcolonial art creates a re-definition of them. And by freeing them of their old meanings they can create their own new ones.

Postcolonial art has been of crucial importance in the access of the subalterns to their own representation. We should keep in mind the different meanings found by Gayatri Spivak in the polysemic word "represent". In German there are two words which make clear the difference between them: *darstellen*, meaning "represent in a mimetic process" (a meaning of the fine arts); and *vertreten*, which means talking in lieu of somebody else (a political meaning). In modern times, both meanings have been used in a confused way. As stated by Spivak: "The complicity of *vertreten* and *darstellen*, their identity-in-difference as the place of practice—since this complicity is precisely what Marxists must expose, as Marx does in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*—can only be appreciated if they are not conflated by a sleight of word" (Spivak, 1988: 270). The right of the subalterns to speak for themselves and dismantle the so-called universality of images, the right to separate *darstellen* from *vertreten*, has been one of the achievements of the postmodern subject. And art has often been the means for it.

It is in this context that the Nigerian Depth of Field photography collective emerged. As we said in the introduction the collective was founded in Mali in 2011 at the fourth Meeting of African Photography. The name of the collective makes reference to a film and photographic optical effect, namely, the area between the nearest and farthest objects in a scene wherein the image appears acceptably sharp. But what is more important, it makes reference to their attempt to give visibility to places ignored by Western representations. To create a Depth of Field in the worldwide system, so that the furthest areas don't appear blurred because of the other's intervention on them.

In spite of being a collective, their works are highly individualized and have their own aesthetics and specific isotopic features. What do these six photographers have in common?

First of all, a project. A work-in-progress. Every week they propose a topic, which they discuss the following week. It is especially relevant the use of the city as a stage for their representations, as opposed to the rural Africa established as a common place by Western culture. Lagos is a throbbing city of 21 million people. The city never takes a rest. The night-time pictures of Uchechukwu James-Iroha, founder of the group, are a proof of it. In his photographs, the city shows itself as a threatening stage, full of dark, dangerous night markets where photographers are not at all welcomed. But Lagos is also a sleepless city because of the

roaring traffic, the incandescent kerosene lights that create an aura of romanticism and mystery. A city in chiaroscuro with multiple stages resisting simple definitions. A city just like all others cities in the world.

Landscape, its representational context, constitutes in this way another element of representation and not only the framework where the photographs have been taken. The photographers involve themselves with the environment. The environment where they grew up, mediated by affection. By establishing a new representational topographic itinerary through six different ways of looking, they create a new semantic map of Nigeria. This new map establishes heterogeneity instead of homogeneity. It breaks the unique thought paradigm and substitutes it for multiples speeches of appropriationism of the space.

Their pictures range from photojournalism to conceptual photography, in a style that blurs the differences between African and Western art. Differences rooted in the belief that there is a naïve art created in Africa and based on the grotesque and the raw. What has been colonially called primitive art. This concept of photography is in strong opposition to the one developed by traditional photographers in Nigeria, much more concerned with social rites and using a naturalist point of view (wedding pictures as well as portraits are popular there).

This rupture with tradition makes it clear that, in spite of the specificity of every member of DOF, of their individual styles, they share some aesthetic characteristics as well. The most remarkable one is perhaps the meaningful use they make of the artifice. A heritage from the German New Objectivity, they don't hide the staging, the use of close-ups, the artistic lighting both indoors as outdoors, and the use, perhaps excessive, of the flash. It is not the truthfulness of the images that is on stake any longer. As pointed out by Rania Gafaar: "The ambiguity of photography as an artistic means for conveying the uncertain line between documentation and the documentary, typology and fiction, as well as between new and old media, comes to the foreground" (Gafaar, 2011: 243). The medium thus breaks its constituent invisibility and makes itself fully visible, almost obstructive. The medium is part of the topic, of the message hidden in their pictures. As for aesthetics, it could be therefore stated that their artworks are no different from the artificiality that dominates current landscape photography, regardless of whether we are referring to artistic photography, fashion or photojournalism. This new concept of photography is not being easily accepted by Nigerian schools, much more conservative in terms of style. The same happens in the streets, where photographers frequently have to face authorities.

This adherence to Western representation can be explained by the training of the members of Depth of Field. Their professional career is an illustration of the migratory flux caused by globalization. Their works are exhibited all over the

world and their knowledge has been acquired through sojourns in different countries. These migratory fluxes makes it more and more complicated to establish a definite definition of the Other. The specific, those characteristics that supposedly differentiate them, reveals a hybrid identity that can no longer be classified as defined. Meanings flow in a continuous flux that seems destined to move eternally, to never be entirely fixed. The aforementioned *africa.com* project, whereby some photographers of DOF along with other African photographers represented different Spanish cities, is an example of it. But it is not an isolated example. Toyin Sokefun took a series of photographs of South London to accompany the DOF exhibition in the South London Gallery.

However this inability to fix the meaning to the Other, to include the Other in a global 'us', may be only a fiction of postmodern times, for they do create possibilities but also a myriad of illusions whose real foundation is still in many cases the postulates of Modernity. In studying the works of Benveniste and Lévi-Strauss, Gerd Baumann (2004) has showed very efficiently how the grammar of alterity is not based on a binary relationship, as it may have seemed initially. It turns out to be a ternary if you look into it closely. In this apparently binary relationship there is always a third component that is usually forgotten. The following schema would be the result of the ternary grammar applied to our case: Western countries –African subjects immersed in the globalization process– African subjects outside the globalization process. The former would be the forgotten individuals in the binary grammars of alterity.

It is also important to dedicate some lines to the educational goals of the DOF collective. They focus on spreading a concept of photography in which they believe. James-Iroha Uchechukwu has helped to form a new generation of young Nigerian photographers through the seminars and workshops organized by the group, which provide both professional and conceptual support. The *Invisible Border* project created by Emeka Okereke, with which we will deal in the next section, is an example of this. The artist is not a historian any longer, but a teacher, whose works are a tool for social change, for motivating social transformations of Africa inside Africa. They are not interested in memory, in looking back on the past to rebuild their identity features, but in the present and, above all, in the future. A present from which to create their own identity. A present that makes them the owners of their own future. As pointed out by Macdonald: "Many social theorists have suggested that we are currently living in a period in which the identities of the past are becoming increasingly irrelevant and in which new identities, and new identity formations are being created" (Macdonald, 2004: 273).

The imprint of the West can be noticed as well in the artistic practices of the members of the collective, which favor intermediality. Perhaps the most remarka-

ble case is Ty Bello, since she, in addition to her photographic work, is a well known gospel singer and a make-up artist. She breaks in this way her double condition of the subaltern; a condition due to her origin and to being a woman. But the group is also involved in advertising, of which the work of Kelechi Amadi-Obi, the editor of the fashion magazine *Style Mania*, is an example.

A distinctive aesthetics based on the concept of beauty is another of the common features of the members of *Depth of Field*. They have appropriated an aesthetics in a world that Susan Bück-Morss has defined as unaesthetic. According to Bück-Morss, individuals received so many aesthetic stimuli that their capacity to respond to them has been obstructed. Bück-Morss says: “The aesthetics is no longer a way to contact reality, but to obstruct it. In doing so it helps to destroy the power of human organism to politically answer” (Bück-Morss, 1992: 35). As far as *DOF* is concerned, we disagree with her statement.

This cult of beauty is the result of a progressive change in the art conception in Africa. According to Oloidi: “The European artist focused on physical body, but the African artists focused on the spirituality enclosed by the body. Europe concentrated on physical beauty; Africa was preoccupied with moral beauty or character” (Oloidi, 2011: 10). As we know, aesthetics, even if it is excessive, is also a political element. That’s the reason why Beauty was brought down from the throne it occupied for centuries. Postmodern aesthetics has been characterized by the ugly, the grotesque and the abject. The end of the art, as announced by Arthur Danto (2003), brought along the defeat of beauty. Beauty was accused of sharing the bourgeois values and of cooperating with a world where so many atrocities took place. But in recent years, photography has used Beauty even in the most unexpected fields. Photojournalism, competing with the images broadcast by television –the history of media could be described as a history of the competition of the different formats– foster spectacularity. The colors of its images are saturated in a way that, paradoxically, does not promote the involvement with the event. Thus the bursting of the traumatic real is increasingly unlikely. But beauty, as we know, is also a powerful political tool.

Two factors may explain why Nigerian photographers are taking control of Beauty:

- ▶ The plasticity of their European background.
- ▶ As a means to opposing the image of the ugly associated with Africa.

Beauty, accused of indulgence in the West, is used by *DOF* as a means to reveal the political manipulations of the colonial system of representation. Theses

photographers show the beauty of the ugly, turning all the landscapes into beautiful images. Artworks such as James-Iroha's *Fire, Flash and Blood* series, shot in a garbage dump, present a colorful aesthetics and, at the same time, capture the traces of the city of Lagos. He creates a poetics of beauty in a continent often represented from the point of view of horror. An aesthetics that is both a social denunciation and a claim for an identity. The images of *Fire, Flash and Blood* are also fully meaningful, since Africa has been considered by many western firms as the garbage dump of the Earth. They throw out there, sometimes under the umbrella of developing programs, the unusable. Therefore Africa, the garbage dump of the West, shows in a subversive and countercultural manner the beauty of these rejected spaces, commonly avoided and classified as non-sites and heterotopic landscapes.

Regarding this prominence of beauty in DOF's photographs, it would be useful for the purpose of this paper to reproduce some the words passed between photographer Emeka Okereke and his father in his hometown. As he shows his pictures to him, Omeka says: "So our work is to celebrate the way Africans live their lives. It's like this image now is a rubbish dump... But the photographer photographs it in such a way that you see the beauty. This beautiful reflection of people in the water. It's not any more about the rubbish but the beauty of people". In reply, the father says: "It would be better if you didn't see the rubbish, if you took it out away from this place". To these words Okereke replies: "Yeah, then it won't be the same photo any more. The contrast between what is beautiful and what is not so beautiful helps to put emphasis on that which is beautiful. To show that it is just our own way of being. Our own way of resisting. That we should be proud because that is the only thing we have" (Okereke, 2012). His work does not hide reality but shows it in a different way, so as to show the contrast in order to set up a battleground where beauty defeats ugliness. This is Beauty as resistance, as opposed to beauty as indulgence in Western terms.

Not only don't they reject their link with the West, but they feel proud of it. They create a hybrid art whereby all their experiences merge together in an identity made of borders and not strictly defined. An art in accordance with the transnational map drawn by globalization and its continuous migratory flux, both of persons and meanings. An art for which movement is the key word. Emeka Okereke, who lives between Berlin, Paris, and Lagos, has stated: "We're transiting to something. I can't say for sure what it is. When I went to Paris to study I realized that I was becoming stuck in some idea of which I'm not part. So I never left Nigeria. I just lived in Europe. I'm a border being. I live in two places all the time" (Okereke, 2012). His identity is liquid, transnational, dislocated.

Modernity facing tradition, the photographer as an artisan facing an inter-medial artist and a patriotism based on the appropriationism of representational

practices in their territory are some of the characteristics that may summarize the Depth of Field attitude. But this modernity also implies a breaking of their boundaries and, of course, a place in the international art system. To create a trans-African photography, as we shall see in the next chapter, also implies the development of an art market. The extension of the medium among the members of the collective to other fields such as advertising, architecture or portraiture is without a doubt a symptom of the new notion of the artist. According to this new concept, the artist binds himself with the market and abandons the notion, still valid in Nigeria, of the photographer as someone who does not make a profit with his profession. As pointed out by Kelechi Amadi-Obi, who used to work as a lawyer: “I have always known that whatsoever you do, if you do it well enough, money will not be a problem. If you provide certain services and provide them with world class quality, people will always pay you” (Nkenm-Eneanya, 2012).

So they combine their commercial work with the social component. Amadi-Obi again says: “To brand photography in Nigeria, photographers must pause with sheer and serial commercial photo and show some concern for their social environment,” he says. For him photography must not be reduced to a commercial mechanism. A private practice is mandatory, distant from the firms’ requirements, which continues to carry out a social labor. But, and that’s totally innovative in Nigeria, both the commercial and revindicative spheres work in symbiotic collaboration in order to achieve a Trans-African photography.

3. Invisible Borders: Trans-African Photography

In recent years the Other, almost invisible years ago, has become almost omnipresent in the art system. The subversive and countercultural has become “the normal”. The minority, an overwhelming majority. The Other, a multiplicity of Others. As Joaquín Barrientos has pointed out:

“In only two-and-a-half decades, the geography of contemporary art has gone from being exclusive and centralized to omnivorously all-embracing and self-revisionist. At every turn, we see biennials, fairs, round-tables, and exhibitions materializing. Each and every one of them is explicitly international and asserts a “harmonious” coexistence between artists from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia, South and Central America, the Mexican-American border, Eastern Europe, and (apparently) elsewhere with artists from North America and Central Europe. In a very short space of time, the mainstream has given up its limited territory and gone in search of the periphery. As in the old days of colonial expansionism, alterity, the exotic, the diverse, or, in one word, the Other, have aroused the interest of museums,

galleries, macro-exhibitions, and commercial contemporary art fairs. Even a group territorially and culturally as far removed as the Innuits was represented in the new arena of contemporary art as articulated by Documenta 11 in Kassel. In the blink of an eye, the scenification of the multicultural has turned into the raw material of every international exhibition. The West was avid for alterity [...]” (Barrientos Rodríguez, 2012: 322).

Barrientos is effectively referencing a crucial aspect of the migratory flux of globalization. The peripheral has become almost the core. This aspect cannot be considered as a change itself in contemporary art since most of these exhibitions fit the Western notion of art in relation to the Other. We should keep in mind that the backgrounds of most curators are connected to the West. An extreme effort of the will must be made in order to keep a distance from the symbolic notions in which those backgrounds are rooted. An effort which is not made in most cases. Although the presence of the periphery is a fact, it is also a fact that it is generally convenient to the West's identification of Africa, to maintain the comfortable difference from the Other. As pointed out by Freeborn:

“In spite of the ramifying experiences of globalization indicating connectivity between the local and the international in a seamless world, the western art establishment has continued to insist on an ethnic identification for African art. Crudity and juvenile form provide that African identity in terms of the normative expectations. Indeed, critics seem obsessed with the primitive and naïve as a display of the significant difference between the African as "other" and the West” (Freeborn, 2005: 1).

To appropriate the distribution of the artworks and not only its creation becomes instrumental in order to create a self-identity. And, above all, to spread the necessity of becoming globally focused. Artists must expose themselves to training programs, collaborations and competitions that give them a better perception of their jobs and teach them to apply world best practices.

This is the purpose of “Invisible Borders”, the photography project created by Emeka Okereke in Nigeria. The project is currently on its fourth edition. It is based on the trip as a form of transition, of movement to unknown landscapes. The symbology of the trip is fully present. Through it the photographer not only registers reality, but also becomes a different individual as if in a ritual process in search of the Self, of identity. Thus the trip becomes a part of the creative process. Topographies are dislocated, borders become invisible, and meanings turn ultimately into interchangeable signs in a flux where its authorship remains unfixed.

In 2011 they travelled from Lagos to Addis Ababa. In 2012 they completed the route from Nigeria to Lubumbashi, Congo. In these journeys, different artists from different disciplines and African countries cross the continent in search of images that will allow them to appropriate their own representations. The chosen group makes stops of five to seven days in the capitals and other important cities of Nigeria, Cameroun, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Congo (Kinshasa and Brazzaville) to create artistic works in collaboration with the local artists in the cities, while networking within the art community. They also made stops in towns between cities according to the on-ground reality of the trip.

The result of this project is a dynamic, rich and contradictory conception of Africa that opposes the simplified notion of the continent. It is not a closed representation, but a continuous one to which all participants can contribute. Terms such as dysfunctionality, disorganization and underdeveloped culture are confronted. Okereke says: “This is the huge argument we have about “oh Africa is dysfunctional” and all that. But the truth is we have our own kind of organization that comes from improvisation” (Okereke: 2012). Conceiving Africa as a dysfunctional continent is to apply a conceptual map made out of ethnocentrism, to definitely consider the Other in terms of the West.

But the project also seeks a detachment from Africa so that the participants can immerse themselves in a trans-African photography and, as a consequence, compete with Western countries in equal conditions. They resist to be considered as part of a specific culture, to be enclosed inside borders.

Transculturality has been an important part of the postmodern art system. It aims at creating a more global system regarded as a network system based on collaboration. Thus transculturality allows a free circulation of meanings as well as the impossibility of seizing them entirely. It makes it difficult to determine neither a geo-aesthetic nor a geo-political map of contemporary art. As Joaquín Barrientos has pointed out:

“From what we have seen, it should be obvious that the international contemporary art system is far from being a smooth space articulated by the free confluence of equidistant global mobilities. The contrary is true: the present global art circuits constitute a complex net of geo-aesthetic tensions that exert power over the politics of transcultural representation, as well as over the very politics of transcultural mobility. As earlier stated, the globalization of cultural diversity has rendered inoperative any approach to the international contemporary art system that—in a deep sense—fails to take into account the geo-aesthetic dimension of global art. And it is in this dimension that the mechanism of global circulation of art intersect with the geopolitical negotia-

tions of subjectivity. Therefore, the geo-aesthetic approach to translocal contemporary art is strongly linked to symbolic displacements and subjective mobilities, in the sense that those displacements affect the way in which symbolic, immaterial, and cognitive assets circulate at present. In this way, the mobility of this kind of asset is directly or indirectly refracted in the internationalization processes of art and the universalization of knowledge” (Barrientos Rodríguez, 2012: 261).

The universalization of knowledge requires a learner who is willing to accept that his/her comfort zone of deconstruction has undergone a metamorphosis and will never be the same. A transcultural photography needs a transcultural beholder that does away with ethnocentrism and tackles the opposition existing between himself and the Other in more egalitarian terms. We agree with Bekers’ statement:

“Thus, a ‘transcultural’ method for reading the artwork that shifts between the perspectives may allow the beholder to overcome the potentially frightening ‘us-them’ opposition and create a more productive ‘I-you’ relationship” (Bekers, 2009: 261).

The more productive relationship Bekers talks about must take place in both the I and the You, that is, in both ends of the communication process, since the Other is partly mediated by the representation of him/herself that has been in effect for centuries. This is why constant attempts are made in Africa to educate young people. Even if they will not be in charge of the representation, they will participate in the decodification which is also a part of the construction of identity. In the website “konnnect africa” they say: “Via our Konnect Africa Online Forum (Drop a Line), you can share your testimonies, success stories and inspirational stories with a view to driving change and building a community of enviable Africans who will make a difference and undeniable impact in their academics, careers, vocations and communities.”

By intervening in the codification and decodification process, the place of the difference is redefined leaving a blank space in the whole representational system. A blank space that should be filled in with the I-You relationship that Bekers mentioned. A blank space that must be filled in by means of a global dialogue establishing a more equal and productive connection for both parts.

4. Conclusions

Cultural studies and Postcolonial approaches have attempted to give visibility to the representational practices emerging in postcolonial countries. This visibility

is made possible by the migratory flux of academics and artists. But one question remains unanswered. Are the postcolonial representations closer to reality? Is identity constructed by the Other rather than by ourselves? There is no answer to this question. Truth is poliedric and identity a social construction in which the individual takes part as well. What is clear enough is that without the individual part, without the right of the subject to speak out for him/herself, identity is imposed through ideology. It is therefore a biased identity for a biased and oppressed Self.

The pictures of *Depth of Field*, their aesthetics and style, evidence that African photography is entering the global art system. It is a controversial entry, for it could be argued that, instead of creating their own identitarian features, they will lose their identity in the process. But no culture has developed alone. Only by merging with other cultures and by hybridation have they managed to survive for centuries. There is not a pure culture, if we may use these terms. Much less so in our postmodern times, when we are enclosed in a networking world.

The Other is inherent to ourselves. We construct our identity through the difference from others. The subject is partly what the others are not. But what remains of the subject when the Other is undistinguishable from him/herself? When the Other uses the same aesthetics and representational forms as him/herself? And here comes the problem of specificity. To argue that globalization erases the typical African features is to wrongly suppose something specific actually exists in a continent precisely characterized by heterogeneity. It simplifies Africanness by using a social construction that takes the place of the real thing. Representing Africa as the different and creating a nostalgia of a “nostos” (a place) that actually never existed is to deny it access to the global art system and therefore to compete with other artists in equal conditions.

Another question remains unsolved: the peripheral regard that permeates current exhibitions is not but a mutation of the Western regard. Is that a subversive and countercultural practice or just a subtle way for the West to take power without having to even make an effort to manipulate meanings? Is it a new free art market where the “free” part only benefits the more powerful countries? Does it also empower individuals? We should keep track of this debate.

What seems definitive and unquestionable is the importance of collectives such as the Nigerian *Depth of Field* group, since they show a young generation of African photographers a different path for their works and provide them with the equipment, the technical knowledge and a sense of appropriation of their context that allows them to turn it into their own context and not an imposed setting. As said by Emeka Okereke (Sondiyazi, 2013): “I think the best argument we can make for anything concerning Africa is to go in and do it yourself, and that “doing it yourself”, does not necessarily guarantee success, but at least

the intention and the willingness to act based on that intention is the first step towards a journey with usually original and unique outcomes. And this is what we Africans ought to do. Damn the assumed consequences from all the analyzers with big numbers and hyperbolic predictions, and just plunge in, experiment, do your thing, and let history articulate your journey”² Building their own identity not as a way to success (to the Representation, with the capital) but as a way to create another representation in the unceasing flux of the global era.

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