

PETER WAYNE LEWIS: Multilogues for the Human

Babacar MBow

- * The effectiveness of oppressed peoples in the struggle for communication, as transmitters or receivers through systems influenced by this hierarchy ("hierarchy of images" and the ideological contours of representation "of what Michel Foucault calls" power / knowledge"), depends on their realization of the obsolescence of the struggle for the nature of truth alongside the struggle for the control of truth; and the irrelevance of "beauty" alongside the power to choose and name beauty. From the start, the question of aesthetics has always been a non-dialogue between those who adhere to the conditioned world order and those who stand to gain from a reconstructed forum.

————— Clyde Taylor, "Black Cinema in a Post-Aesthetic Era"

In exploring the body of works by Peter Wayne Lewis through the articulations that grid it, we enter the debates on artistic practices and invite a move beyond given limitations to more expansive visions. For Stuart Hall, articulation is a form of connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditionsⁱ. Hall's point is that articulation is a linkage which is not necessarily determined, absolute, and essential for all time and that the unity which matters is a linkage between articulated discourses and the social forces with which it can, under certain conditions be connected. If these practices do not wish to go around in circles, they then must exhibit transversality in their search for that elusive elsewhere beyond hybridity, to new thought. *Beijing Booster* a survey of works by Peter Wayne Lewis at the Museum of Contemporary Art of North Miami (MOCA) is not an advertisement of a conformist individualism but a privileging of a more discreet approach by an artist whose work retains a real liberating dimension. Moving away from reiterations of Duchamp's display of a urinal without realizing that it has lost all its subversive charge, Wayne Lewis presents bursts of a thought that invests in and broadcasts engagements with various social issues: migration, transnationalism, cosmogonies and their metamorphosing into "Globalectics". This plural engagement with visual expressions (teaching, painting and curatorial practice) retraces a path of a "Globalectics" Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o defines as "...combining the global and the dialectical to describe a mutually affecting dialogue, or multilogues in the phenomena of nature and nurture in a global space that's rapidly transcending that of the artificially bounded, such as the nation"ⁱⁱ.

Here, the dialectical is also erasure of the image through destruction of what it may be thought to represent. The iconic sign which puts in relation the qualitative similarity between the signifier and the referent loses, through articulation, its character of index or clue to affect other types of signs. In these images-traces, the given sense becomes the constructed sense, a sense that goes beyond what is directly present in the retinal image; a mental image which transcends the visible present to appear as a flourishing and fluctuating imaginary. Concrete reality transforms into an abstraction in which the image changes, becomes opaque to open the plastic space and be born-again; a migration of the sign which, in its wake, leads to a mutation of the gaze by enriching the mental functioning of the artist: rendering opaque to reveal what is hidden, covering the recto to make the verso appear, allowing the underlying objectives of erasure to rise to the surface. By dis- encumbering the gaze, the erasure searches to apprehend secret and

unexplored domains beyond the borders of the pictorial. These secret spaces, although escaping the visible, would be sites for transcendence susceptible to opening the field of art making and discoursing.

The series in this exploration: *Strings*, *Suite in Grey*, *Beijing Booster* and *Painting from the Middle Earth* are a kind of a parastatement. We know Peter paints listening to Jazz, "My Favorite Things" comes to mind to parallel Wayne Lewis' brush strokes that are reminiscent of John Coltrane's rapid, tortuous flight from one pitch to another, an accelerated ascending and descending of the scale. The rhythm of the brush strokes sketches the itinerary of this global "flâneur" who makes of his peregrinations between Trenchtown, Jamaica; Sacramento, California; Tokyo, Japan; Hoboken, New Jersey; Boston, Massachusetts; Bavaria, Germany; Dakar, Senegal and Beijing, China, the occasion for multiplying our understanding of forms and expressions beyond unicentricity that still grids certain ways of seeing and manners of being. Edouard Glissant speaks of "consent not to be a single being"ⁱⁱⁱ which Wayne Lewis saddles, traveling as a global polymorphous esthete. The global, Ngũgĩ argues is "that which humans in spaceships or on the international space station see"; the dialectical is the internal dynamics they do not see which is what the work of Wayne Lewis strives to reveal.

This attentive "flâneur", who thinks his "vagabondage" through, draws from it experiences for a creative potential of movement conceived as a privileged modality for the apparition of form. From physical translation to aesthetic *glissement*, the displacement as movement toward the other or a somewhere else is always a potentially generator of tension, an occasion for metamorphosis and finally subject for a creative work. Wayne Lewis has been developing this system-thinking-being for a number of years; a "consent not to be a single being".

In 2000, Lewis sojourned in Bavaria beginning the *Strings* collection through which he explored the internal logic of molecular biology, particularly the double helix as a move toward a "post deconstructionist and deciphering practice"^{iv} against the discursive rhetoric of an artistic unicentricity. *Strings* articulates being human as praxis building on the ruins of a catastrophe unequalled for our species about the historical urgency to go beyond the over-representation of the "Man" as signifier and significant of the human himself.^v

The structure formed by double-stranded molecules of nucleic acids such as DNA and RNA fascinated him. One finds similarities between the spiral polymer and the work which, at its core, argues the similarity of mechanisms of all organisms on the planet at the level of which they handle their genetic information and use it to create the building blocks of a cell. Lewis draws from these new possibilities science offers, to move us toward orders of understanding different from intuitive common sense or appropriation. His quest for the human begins "where such modes of thought end, or at least where they fail to address questions that require for their answers, more than enumeration, cataloging, impressionistic summaries, selected lists, or noncritical formulations"^{vi}. *Strings* give another sense to Wayne Lewis' pictorial approach. It does not signify the history of a subject but the attention to its own history without subject. It acts as a replacement in a Derrida's

sense of abstraction in that the non-mimetic image relies on the assistance of the viewer to complete its meaning.

Suite in grey is a series scribbled with vigor. Wayne Lewis ended at the hospital in the process of creating it. This remarkable entry is occasion for Wayne Lewis to give the tone; to withdraw his subject from visibility. Paying attention to the etymology is required for the subject to manifest. This paradoxical birth marks the act by which Wayne Lewis diverts from figurative pictorial conventions. By crossing Aristotelian physics (privation is a kind of possession) *Suite in grey* evidences Clement Greenberg's structural ambiguity in his concept of "tabula rasa", a non-aesthetic consideration of: formal elements, color, flatness, edge and scale, culture and geography that gave rise to the slogan "art for art's sake". Wayne Lewis rather speaks of "art for life's sake".

This because to make a tabula rasa is as much erasing as rendering a space available for apparition. The beginnings of Wayne Lewis were certainly marked by the figurative style. But this style already contained the chromosomes the process of synthesizing *Suite in Grey* continued. It is a necessary step for a practice of art he calls "analytic". To understand, Lewis says, is always "to unbind, to de-compose, to decode and re-sequence and in a way to destroy..." so much so that he engages in the destruction of the figurative to densify, to give thickness to the sensible and visible.

The exploded time of de-territorialization takes place in *Beijing Booster*, a space for a multiplied apparition on an artistic scene transformed into a platform for exchange of processes. Three analyses account for these shifts between know-how that makes the fluidity of contemporary art and challenges traditional classification. *Beijing Booster* can be described as a contradictory experience of a presence that strives to make itself forgotten. The ambition of this monumental artistic project is to push the strategy of removal of the matter to experience the materiality at maximum. Four elements allow for understanding the process: the aesthetic economy (quality) which distinguishes itself from any idea of parsimony (quantity) allows exploration of forms and infinite differences Wayne Lewis introduces in the repetitions of these structures (by simply changing the scale for example). The second element is the mobilization of the viewer; the works are considered as sites to be surveyed, spaces of circulation that reverse the usual frame of frontal and contemplative perception by engaging the topos on the path of its fluid becoming.

Equally paradoxical, the third characteristic of *Beijing Booster* is the claim of an art deprived of thickness or playing on the mirror effects in which the work is in a way only a kind of pure exteriority. Finally, the task of emptying rendered visually and physically acting constitutes the last characteristics of *Beijing Booster*. Peter Wayne Lewis thus paints, in reverse, a fragile space which, if not inhabited, signals tension between the real and the material, between the possible occupation and the absence of incarnated volumes. This progressive form suggests a movement of investment parallel to Thierry Davila's rupture with thought of the gratuity of an art that pretends to refer only to itself^{vii}, to re-link with a conception of the work as object of knowledge half way between scientific and magical thought; a "bricolage" according to Levi-Strauss' interpretation.^{viii}

Painting from middle earth is the story of the vagabond traces that an artistic world in constant movement manifests. These works, in which vibrant scarifications resonate as an invitation to discovery, are not only opportunities for interrogating the powers of transformation and transmission by an artist but also the vitality of forms and their pathway to resist oblivion. By accomplishing a duty of tacit memory, Peter Wayne Lewis marks out beyond words, the journey of a thousand paths of a creativity which repeats to renew itself. As a builder of bridges in this universe of ephemeral transactions, Wayne Lewis confronts the era to characterize an ensemble of gestures that is after all a circulatory system, a mechanism that escapes static thought.

Claiming synthesis, Wayne Lewis develops three strategies: to do away with style (the general notion of art) for the profit of facture (a singular way of producing works) and introducing an anti-artistic element which foils pictorial conventions and other inventions to produce visual chaos. His process is really a work of fogging which he undertakes in a manner similar to the concept of “de-creation” of Giorgio Agamben^x. By erasing the form so that the trace that constitutes the work appears, Wayne Lewis only repeats an ancient gesture of valorization of the interior drawing. This indistinct depth, because erased, frenetically disappears, which gives the subject to sight, participates in practice of a “blind drawing” as Derrida describes it.^x Wayne Lewis lets the unpredictable energy deploy in one stroke without knowing toward what this graphic rush leads to.

Peter Wayne Lewis introduces a rupture with the traditional sense of ideal visibility in Western philosophy. This brutal separation from the traditional sketches the frame for perception of the almost invisible which guaranties “its permanence in the memories”. Through these gestures, Wayne Lewis organizes the improbable meeting of graphic practice and its others: the vacuum, whiteness and obstruction of the perceptible.

The last five years have wreaked havoc on our common humanity. Now is the time to repair. However, to repair is not to return to a pre-order but to rather construct a new humanity in which not only some of us are better off, but one in which we are all better off. Wayne Lewis has been at the vanguard of this necessary order and for this we say Nuff Respect!

Consulted works

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ⁱⁱ Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo. *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, Columbia University Press, New York, New York, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Moten. *The Universal Machine: consent not to be a single being*, Duke University Press, 2018

^{iv} Sylvia Wynter. *Rethinking Aesthetics: Notes Towards A Deciphering Practice in Ex-Iles in Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, Mbaye Cham ed. Africa World Press Trenton, New Jersey, 1992.

v..... "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human after Man, Its Overrepresentation -
--An Argument. *The New Centennial Review* 3.3, 2003.

vi Houston A Baker, Jr.. *There Is No More Beautiful Way: Theory and the poetics of Afro-American Women in Writing in Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Patricia Redmond, Chicago University Press, 1989.

vii Thierry Davila. In *Extrémis: Essais sur l'art et ses déterritorisations depuis 1960*, *La Lettre volée*, 2010.

viii C. Lévi-Strauss. *La Pensée sauvage*, Paris, Plon, 1962.

ix Giorgio Agamben. *Image et Mémoire (Image and Memory)*, Paris, DDB, 2004.

x Jacques Derrida. *Mémoire d'aveugle, L'autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris RMN, 1990

Babacar MBow is the former Director and Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) of North Miami, former Curator in residence at the Museum of Black Civilizations of Dakar, Senegal and current Consultant for the Panafrikan Heritage Museum of Accra, Ghana.