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By Tirdad Zolghadr

This autumn's Black Atlantic festival in Berlin epitomised the culture industry's postcolonial turn. But, asks Tirdad Zolghadr, how do the struggles that underlie the discourse compete with their 'critical consumption' by an art audience?

'So now the Americans are coming over here, telling us how to be radical.' I was standing outside the US pavilion featuring Fred Wilson at the Venice Biennial 2003, talking to an art theorist from Karlsruhe. Wilson had chosen to reveal the unacknowledged history of African slaves and migrants in Venice, and there was something almost sublime about my irritated, perspiring German friend, in his drenched Mike Kelley T-shirt and Diesel khakis, reprimanding Fred Wilson, of all people, for American expansionism – declaring Wilson the flagship of the very US culturati that would regularly mistake him for the porter at his own openings.

For the sake of argument, I tried to defend Wilson with some conventional postcolonial wisdom, stating that art was always instrumentalised in some way or other, and that at least the ideological agenda of the US pavilion – just like this autumn's Black Atlantic festival at the House of World Cultures in Berlin – is openly stated and pursued. But it is indeed undeniable that, with minority representatives gradually having established themselves in the Euro-American Kulturindustrie over the '80s and '90s, the critical/postcolonial agenda needs to be fine tuned, or defined more incisively. For one thing, various forms of political tokenism and essentialism have continued to be brokered and disseminated, through events and exhibitions asserting national, racial, or ethnic identities – albeit under epithets that are postcolonial, or otherwise 'theoretically informed'.

For another, the institutionalisation of critical theory and minority voices is making things rather muddled, and slightly paranoid. These days, the very critique of Eurocentrism and the museal modus operandi, the very gesture of bewailing the establishment, rarely offers more than a marketing opportunity, a chance for the institution to prove its postmodern finesse, and to pack off its critics into a dismal *mises-en-abîme* of auto-reflexive perplexity.

In light of the above, if the geopolitical theme park setting in the Venice Giardini isn't dicey enough, when it comes to a place dubbed the House of World Cultures, how can the paternalistic aura of an ethnic food fair possibly be avoided? It's one thing if an artist is being radically critical, it's quite another if a state museum assembles large quantities of subversive positionings for an audience that enjoys being flattered by its own multicultural credentials.

To be fair, Body Shop hermeneutics, the cushy sense of ideological superiority through critical consumption, is a phenomenon that supersedes any particular exhibition context. Generally speaking, it seems as if the difference between, on the one hand, political struggles in situ and, on the other, the dramatised, emotionally pumped up consumption of video installations and festivals representing them, is getting increasingly blurred.

At the House of World Cultures, Paul Gilroy's introduction to the Black Atlantic programme states the museum's ambitions to reflect on the 'contributions of the Black diaspora' through arts and culture, but also to explore the 'changing character of Western civilisation', along with other 'general aspects of contemporary art and culture', such as 'trans-nationality and trans-culturality', but also to reexamine 'overly innocent conceptions of modernity' in Western Europe and – while we're at it – to prove that 'culture itself will have to be reconceptualised'. (After another barrage of commendable claims and objectives, Gilroy reassures the reader that 'the Black Atlantic favours low frequencies'.)

The sound and the fury of the Epochal Moment, the drama of the Historical Threshold is something many different strands of contemporary internationalism have in common – a poetics of exigency accompanied by an outraged rhetoric of unveiling, of exposing hidden histories and backstage mechanisms.

But perhaps the one utterly unexpected moment in the press kit to the Black Atlantic is the candid affirmation that ‘trans-culturalisation’ supplies ‘significant resources [for] enhancing Europe’s multi-cultural democracy’. Here, instead of repeating the dramatic grievances of thus far unacknowledged voices, the text allows for a rare and sober insight into the very preconditions of critical consumption. At the risk of sounding cynical, it’s not the successful transfiguration of solidarity into a political token or commodity that is regrettable (heartfelt attempts to evade commodification are cheesy at best) but the fact that it’s happening pretty much unwittingly. If Africans are ‘coming over here’ to tell us how to be mainstream social democrats, then the luscious irony of the situation should be enjoyed precisely as such.

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