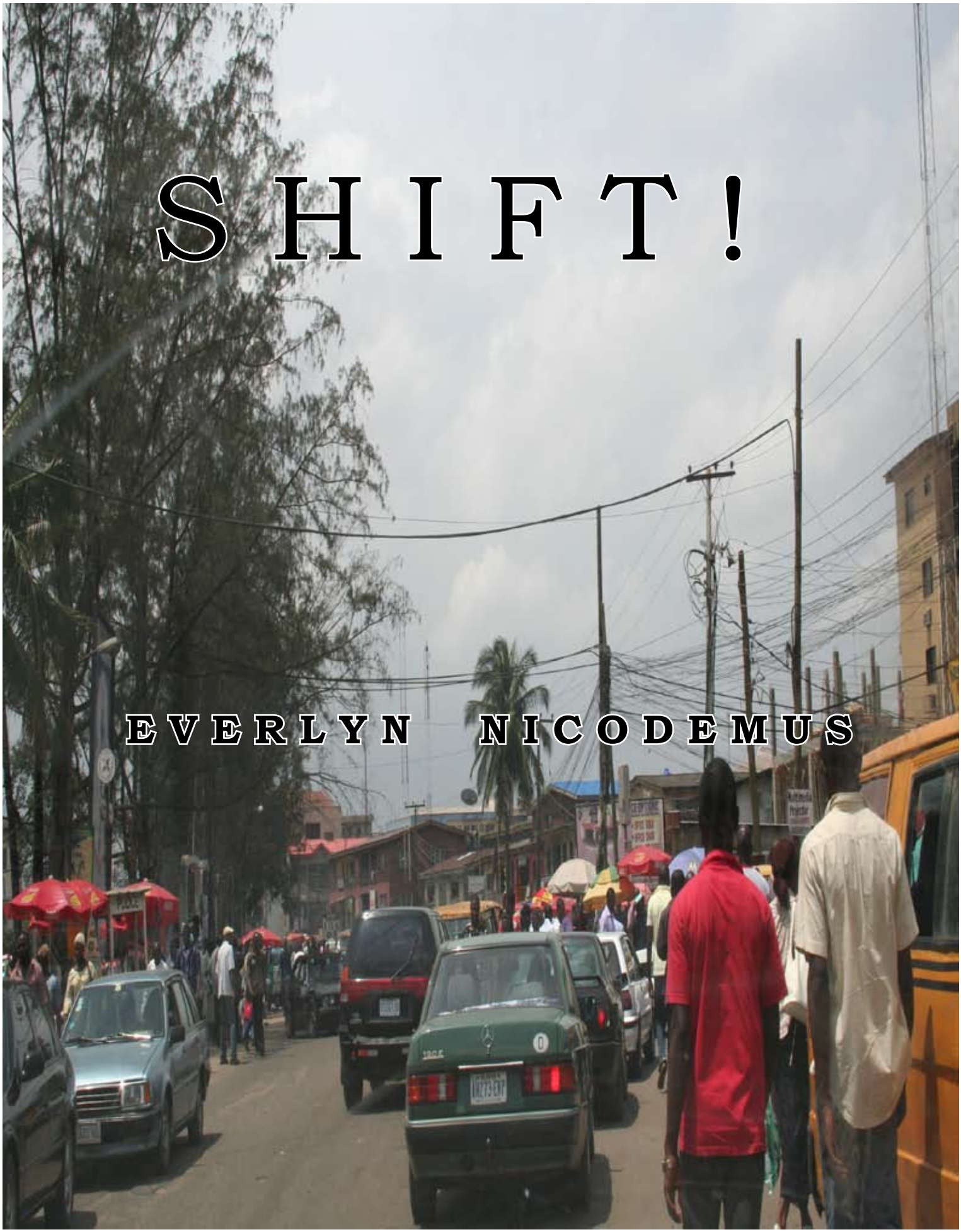
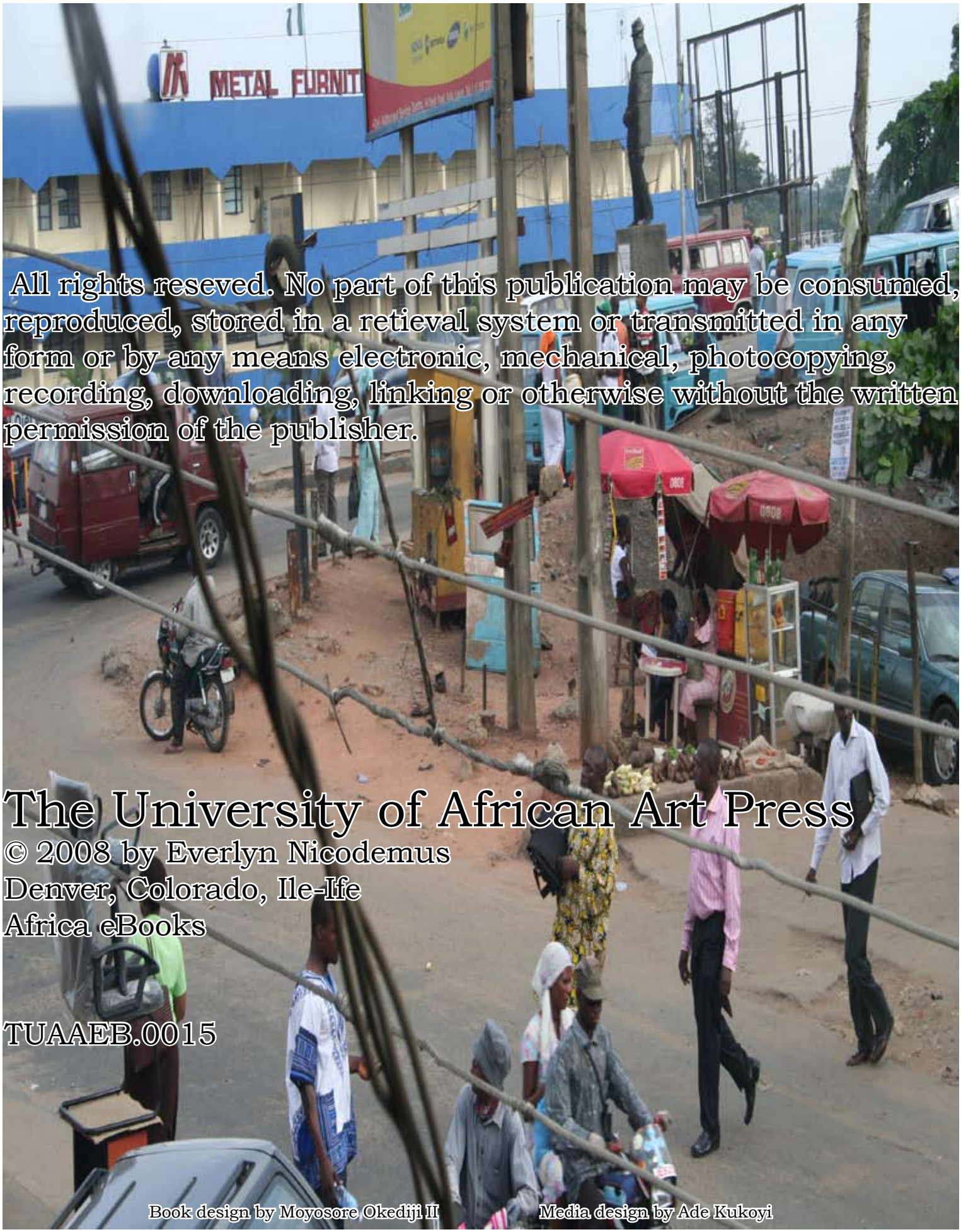


S H I F T !

EVERLYN NICODEMUS



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S H I F T !

Consider these statements:

“A certain Islamic-Arabic complex within the culture which due to prohibition of simulacrum favours abstraction, crossed by a dominant course of Christian church- and court-related pictorial representation patronymically handed over and completed by early migration and adjustment to radicalized socio-cultural variations including tendencies to primitivism, count for the characteristics of this widely known and thoroughly researched artistic production.”

And.

“We may have to go to the customs and procedures as well as to the local patterns of belief and the traditions of handicraft among

certain groups of farming populations in Eastern Europe to fully appreciate the conceptualized symbolic structure and the line of simplification and dependence upon materials and tools et cetera, et cetera".

I admit that these "quotations" are my own satirical constructions: they are paraphrases of a typical anthropological way of writing about artistic productions of non-Westerners as examples of specific cultural structures rather than as representing artistic categories or expressions.. It seems to me that every phenomenon, with the help of a set of coercive pseudo-scientific measures, can be squeezed into and justified by one invented cultural structure or another. And yet the absurdity of such constructions is only revealed when they become applied to the European context. Any academic who advanced such nonsense as a serious approach to the works of Pablo Picasso and Constantin Brancusi, or resorted to such explanations of, say, Guernica or The Kiss or Bird in Space, would immediately be ridiculed.

I do not pretend to have presented a valid judgement on anthropology here, but I have serious reservations about its understanding and analysis of art. I believe for instance that something said by Claude Levi-Strauss could very well be turned around. He writes in The savage mind that art proceeds from the fact of an object-plus-event to the discovery of its structure. I would reassign this statement to anthropology and note that by proceeding from a structure, it never reaches art as a discovery.

But what I want to say is this. We celebrate with this symposium a tenth triennial 1). And even before this forum was established thirty years ago, for at least half a century Africanists had dealt with traditional African art using the procedures of anthropology and ethnography. And these have effectively shaped scholarly thinking in the entire field on study of African art. I abstain from taking up the issue of how classical and traditional African

art ought to be approached. It is not my concern here. But I believe this observation holds even where an anthropological approach has eventually been enriched by an aesthetical appreciation of its objects of study.

The problem I want to take up arises when this same body of Africanists proceed to deal with contemporary and modern African art because they bring with them their traditional methods and ways of thinking. A case in point was when the curator Johanna Agthe at the ethnographic museum in Frankfurt am Main in 1990 apropos the exhibition Wegzeichen: Kunst aus Ostafrika 1974-89 argued for including modern African art in ethnographic collections in order to make them more attractive to the contemporary public but commented upon the exhibited modern works from a purely sociological-anthropological point of view. As a consequence of the anthropological approach, absurdities often are put forward in the name of scholarship, absurdities whose nature I tried to caricature. Unfortunately, there are still few art his-

torians and critics in the contemporary African art field to challenge the distortions and incompetence of the anthropological perspective.

This suggests that a radical shift in thinking is needed. We have to turn the tables and proceed from an understanding of modern art as a historical-cultural-aesthetic phenomenon before we approach its presence and history in Africa and in the African diasporas. Until such a basic understanding has been established, all balderdash about “africanity” should be omitted.

1.

I shall sketch out what such a procedure may look like; but beforehand, I should like to summarize a few points about the Western notion of art which underpins our understanding of modernism in visual art.

As we know, the Western notion of art was fi-

nally institutionalized in the early 19th century with the construction of Art History. It retained certain notions from earlier and ancient eras, but transformed them. As has often been pointed out, the sacredness originally emanating from the ritual and religious function of the art object was secularized and the object acquired a status of Art, a status still in a specific way significant and elevated above that of other objects. From being a craftsman, the artist became a creator. This was achieved by Romanticism and underlies the invention of Modernism.

2.

The French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has studied the process of this invention. His theory of the emergence of a field of autonomous, or “restricted”, cultural production gives us the possibility of understanding the genesis of literary and artistic modernism as a paradigm shift in a socio-cultural-political context and not just as a

change in stylistic features and ideas. At a moment in French capitalism when newly rich industrial tycoons threatened to make the cultural producers in the society their stablemen, a third alternative was invented between the choice of complying with the bourgeoisie, which meant producing for the market, and fighting the bourgeoisie, that is joining the class struggle.

The field of autonomous literature and art, which was established as this third alternative around key figures like Flaubert, Baudelaire and Manet, and which clearly distanced itself from the other two, could only be implemented by self-sacrifices. Authors and artists renounced worldly success and economic gain and addressed restricted circles of fellow artists and like-minded. They acknowledged no other demands than the laws of art itself. The capital they built was symbolic, cultural capital consisting of the appreciation within the group of their faithfulness to their art.

What Bourdieu defines as the field of autonomous art functions as a system of inner competition, as an ongoing war between new artistic position takings. When a young artist or a group of artists succeeds to a position or establishes a new ism, the dynamics of the whole field changes. What was yesterday the avant-garde becomes now outdated or classical and so on. It is a competition about consecration, about who will be awarded the belief (Bourdieu's term for acceptance) of the field as an artist and as a new pathfinder. Many different actors or agents are involved in this game of producing art-as-value, also the gallerist, the critic, the dealer, the collector etc.

This dynamic process of consecration now took over from the nomothetic monopoly through which the Academy and the Salon had controlled what should be accepted and rewarded as art. The centralized nomos was replaced by the autonomy of the restricted art field. This was the momentous side of the process, that art instead of becoming depen-

dent and directed was reconfigured as an independent “philosophical” instance.

There was an inner logic in how this field produced what we use to call the history of modern art. It might look like a contradiction that, while accepting this narrative, I also very much sympathise with the forerunner of Japanese modernism, Natsume Soseki. As has shown Karatani Kojin in his book Origins of Modern Japanese Literature, at the beginning of the 20th century, this unique intellectual wrote the following observations on the Western idea of universality as a historical construction: “We may say that it was a very precarious tightrope act which brought Western painting to where it is today. A moment’s loss of balance would have resulted in a very different history”. And he added: “Western painting has followed one line, and Japanese genre painting another.”

But when we follow Bourdieu’s analysis, we find none of the predictability that is often

present in modernism's autohistoriography. Inherent in the field we find instead a starting point and a selective mechanism, between which the tightrope Soseki talks about could be said to be stretched. This was the starting point: Falling back on its own, on art for art's sake, autonomous art production detached itself from all kind of moral or political interpretations of its subjects. It developed what is here called the pure gaze. I guess it can also be understood as pure aesthetical contemplation. Only, we then have to admit that this detached aesthetic operation of producing and reading artistic discourses may mean a very penetrating kind of perception, an act of discovery.

When it comes to movement, changes and directions, Bourdieu notes that they are produced by the field according to a set of rules of the game. These rules are unwritten and more or less unconscious, a second nature, interiorized in what he calls the habitus, a wide cultural initiation. For the actors the entire history of the field, all previous posi-

tions, are present in each new position taking. Change is in accordance with the habitus brought forward in a kind of centauric combination of revolt and negotiation vis-à-vis predecessors, opening up a new pathway but continuing the line of the tightrope.

This focus on change, on the perpetual revolution in modern art, takes us far away from the traditional anthropological approach, which meant neglecting history and transformation in favour of the study of repetitive objects as components of a an immutable cultural space. I believe that somewhere here the contact point between modernism and modernity is to be found. Not in the sense of a sequence of position takings, of isms, forming a parable of modern progress, an interpretation favoured by postmodernists when criticizing modernism. If Victor Hugo saw God's footprints in progress, already Baudelaire, the apostle of modern aesthetics, denied any accordance in art with the idea of Progress and Development cherished by the bourgeoisie. To Baudelaire, to be modern meant not to

be hypnotized by railway engines but to be in tune with the revolutionizing spirit of modern time.

As a modern artist I should prefer to interpret the process as a formulation and re-formulation of an individual's relation to the changing world and to the modern time she lives in. To conclude, Bourdieu's theory gives us one instrument among others to understand modern art and to see its contours. We can at least discern how it emerged.

3.

Before we proceed to modern art in Africa, we should perhaps consider how modernism spread. It may be instructive to recapitulate how it reached other, close by or distant so called peripheries which means how other parts of Europe, of the West, of the world have been annexed to or integrated in its field. Modern art in Africa didn't after all fall from heaven; it is part of a global process.

It is a well known story. Paris – if we accept that the main genesis of modernism took place there – naturally became the focal point to which artists from the whole world flocked and from which new ideas spread. Other European metropolises joined in as centres, London, Munich, Brussels, Milan, Moscow. Writings and reproductions spread the notion of modernism to cities around the world. For my discourse on how modern art developed in Africa it is important to keep in view the global process. In reality, this process was rather complex since the so called peripheries to a considerable degree were also originators and contributors of new ideas, the concept of modernism, for instance, being coined in Latin America by the poet Ruben Dario, the early wave of exchanges and interplays culminating around the time of the First World War. But the centrifugal movement was one of the crucial factors in the globalisation of modernism.

4.

Bourdieu's grid does not directly cover the role played by appropriations from other cultures in the genesis and crystallisation of European modernism. These appropriations cannot be reduced to position takings. I am referring to the appropriations from Japan in the case of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau, from Africa in Cubism and Expressionism and from Oceanic and Amerindian sources in the case of Surrealism.

The general assumption has been that they represented, at least in some cases like in Africa, a one-way process. This has been linked to colonialism and imperialism and seen as cultural exploitation. Though there is considerable evidence to support this view, it is easily forgotten that appropriations that have occurred in the opposite direction as part of a two-way process often have been dismissed as Western dependence and negated as legiti-

mate artistic appropriations. Easily forgotten is also, in a wider perspective, that the powerful process throughout mankind's history of cultural appropriations and cross-fertilisation knows many cases of conquest and colonisation having been triggering factors. Once again we are far from the traditional outlook of anthropologists and ethnographers, which has tended to see external contacts with and influence on so-called primitive cultures as harmful contaminations of an assumed cultural "purity".

Moreover, the European modernists' high-handed commandeering for their own purposes of a visual knowledge developed by other artistic histories has not facilitated understanding and acknowledgement by the West of the histories of modern art following the flow of modernism to other cultures. Acknowledgement has been blocked by a European and Western superiority complex. Unable to see that these new modernist histories have their own revolutions and sequences of position takings, the West has persisted

in considering them to be Western implants and imitations, thus demanding that Others should not respond to modernity but stay immobilized with those same native traditions which European artists once used in order to proceed further, as if global intellectual and artistic capital were its sole property. The West has been blind to any other art revolution than its own.

5.

In turning to the situation of African modernism, I find myself facing a sad chapter. Not only has the West persistently refused to acknowledge a modern African art with its own dynamic, growth and history, but it has frantically clung to notions of African primitivity. To get to the bottom of this would mean digging into the deep strata of prejudices against black humans extending back some thousand years. Instead I shall begin by introducing the brilliant German art critic and art historian Carl Einstein. He was to

my knowledge one of the earliest authors to write the history of 20th century modern art in the West, published already in 1926 in the prestigious Propylaen art history series. Most significantly, he was among the very first historians to write a book on classical African sculpture, the famous Negerplastik that appeared in 1915. Later on we find him in exile in Paris as Germany marched towards Nazism. In Paris he collaborated with Surrealist and ethnographic dissidents like Bataille and Leiris on the wild periodical Documents. In 1929 he opened an alleged ethnological study on the avant-garde artist Andre Masson with the words: “One thing is important: to shake what we call reality … this reality which has absurdly been given as such.” Eleven years later the absurd reality caught up with him. Like Walter Benjamin he was forced to take his life in the Pyrenees.

By way of Einstein, we witness how a vicious circle history comes full circle, namely the historical link between German nationalism and Germany’s imperial ambitions in Africa.

The Holocaust politics, to which Einstein fell a victim, had been rehearsed in South West Africa in the beginning of the century when the Germans tried to exterminate the Hereros. An aggressive colonial racism against the blacks, mingled with race hygiene paranoia, was passed back to Europe by anthropologists like Dr. Eugen Fischer, who has been proven to be among the inspirations for Hitler's Mein Kampf. From this perspective, even more weight should be given to Carl Einstein's exposure in Negerplastik of the vicious racism against Africans lurking behind the unappreciative European attitude to African art at the time.

"The African is from the beginning regarded as the inferior part which is there to be treated ruthlessly", he wrote, "and all that he achieves will be judged a priori as a fiasco." And clear about the crux of the matter, talking about the European with his superiority complex, he continued: "Thoughtlessly, he projected entirely loose evolutionary hypotheses onto the African; to some he had to sur-

render as an example of a misconception of primitivity while others covered the defence-less victim with phrases so obviously false as being peoples of an eternal primeval time and so on. One hoped through the African to grasp the beginning, a state which never was assumed to come out of the origin."

Einstein was no longer alive when modern African art began to be visible to the world. But in 1915 he had already perspicaciously articulated the analysis that gives us the key to the whole tragedy of Western reception of contemporary African art that was to follow... or the farce. You may choose the word. He made no secret of the fact that he first of all blamed the role of anthropologists and ethnographers for the prevailing negative attitudes towards African art. I find my own scepticism of the competence of these professional disciplines to judge art perfectly confirmed when he writes: "To consider art as a means to anthropological and ethnographic knowledge seems to me dubious, as artistic representation hardly explicitly express-

es anything about the kind of facts to which such scientific knowledge is bound.”

6.

In Negerplastik Carl Einstein made his analysis of the formal structure of classical African sculpture by taking Cubism as a point of reference, the birth of which he himself had assisted to in the studios of Braque and Picasso. But he didn’t mix up things. He made it perfectly clear that he understood pre-colonial African sculptures as functional, entirely predetermined by religion, while to him Cubism represented a modern artistic revolt against a perceived plastic degeneration within Western art. Read closely, his book demonstrates the fundamental difference between a religiously and magically ritual art and a modernism based in aesthetical revolt as position taking and discourse. They represent two systems of thought, two notions of art. It means that we have to acknowledge at the heart of the shift to modern art in Africa

something much more decisive than the introduction of new materials and techniques. We have to recognize a decisive paradigm shift.

This fact has sometimes been blurred. I disagree with Salah Hassan when he says that this dichotomy, the paradigmatic opposition, has been exaggerated by a simplistic approach, and that it is misleading because between the two there exist many intermediate forms. Every paradigm shift knows its diffuse intermediate spaces. If we are to be at all capable of approaching modern African art as modern art and not lose ourselves in transitional phenomena, the paradigmatic difference has to be kept clear. Modern African art can neither be reduced to artefacts nor be dismissed as artifice.

7.

Many of the views surrounding modern African art could with advantage be put in a

wider perspective. If modernism has been slow to develop in some African countries, the reason is obviously political obstacles not removed until independence – if at all. One may ask, analogously, for how long did the political circumstances of the former Soviet Union hinder the comeback of modernism in Eastern Europe? Considering the patronizing air with which the West – and I am here talking about its art establishment as well as its ethnologists-anthropologists – has approached contemporary African art (all those prejudices which have been ventilated and manifested about the "primitivism" and the "childlikeness" of artists in Africa and modern African art as a "western" parroting), it might be instructive to remind oneself of the attitudes that met modern art from what was once another periphery, the United States of America. As late as the years around World War II Paris held an extremely patronizing and prejudiced attitude towards American culture. In France the United States was regarded as uncultured, young and naïve. Its only original contributions were thought to be Hollywood

movies and New York skyscrapers.

When American painting was exhibited in Paris shortly before World War II, French critics dismissed it as entirely derivative of European modernism, which to them of course meant imitating Paris. The only American painting that found favour in the eyes of the French, writes Serge Guilbault in How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, was primitive American painting, its Naives. “Primitive art, said French critics, embodied the exuberance, the naiveté, the raw, popular force that they took to be the essence of America (mingling reality and myth).” And as late as 1947, when six American modernists, among them the important African American painter Romare Bearden, were given an exhibition by the famous Maeght gallery in Paris, they were met with the same haughty sneers. “This kind of audacity”, wrote Arts, the voice of the French art world, “has long been familiar in the art of western Europe. For us it could not cause either surprise or scandal.”

In the following year the young American art critic Clement Greenberg announced that modern art in the States was the foremost in the world. And ten years later, to the surprise of scandalized French critics, New York had taken over from Paris as the Metropolis of the modern art world. The American painter Gottlieb, a participant in the denigrated Maeght exhibition, wrote in 1950: “In the last fifty years the whole meaning of painting has been made international. I think Americans share that tradition as much … and if we depart from tradition, it is out of knowledge, not innocence.”

One can naturally also ponder the connection between American cultural expansion, the Marshal plan and the atomic bomb. The conclusion for Africa is simple: economic power counts, as does military power.

8.

I think we have completed our flanking movement and are prepared to tackle the issue of modern African art within its own histories and its own situation, in different African cultures, countries and regions but as part of the world, having emerged as one periphery among others and also as part of this global meaning of art about which Gottlieb had spoken.

It means that we emphatically leave the anthropological view of art in Africa as having no history. Modern African art has indeed a turbulent history interwoven with colonial oppression and even more so with the struggle for independence and with the proud manifestation of postcolonial African identities. And it has its important black African pioneers.

I shall conclude by concentrating on one such pioneer, Gerard Sekoto, and go directly to an Anglican school for black children in Pietersburg in Transvaal in South Africa. Pro-

fessional art schools for the black majority of the country did not exist but unintentionally training to become teacher in the country's black primary schools showed to offer a certain kind of substitute, because teachers were expected to learn to produce handmade visual teaching materials. In Pietersburg two young teachers are at the beginning of their careers as artists, Sekoto and his friend Ernest Mancoba. They are discussing going to Paris, just like young artists in most of the world in those years. It is 1937. Mancoba emigrates to Paris the following year. Sekoto breaks from teaching and devotes himself full time to his painting; but he stays in South Africa and moves to Johannesburg, where he resides in the black township Sophiatown.

At the school Mancoba had had a somewhat higher artistic status as he was carving church sculptures. Sekoto's talent as a painter was less noticed for the simple reason that every teacher was supposed to paint educational charts and to sketch illustrations on the blackboard as printed materials were

lacking.

What were they thinking? We know that they were discussing van Gogh, and that Mancoba, who recognized his friend's painting gift, saw a parallel between Vincent van Gogh and Gerard Sekoto in a Protestant human compassion. In the Twenties and early Thirties, Meier-Graefe's monograph on van Gogh had spread throughout the world, giving access to knowledge about one of the key role models for modern artists.

For almost ten years, Sekoto painted black social reality in the townships, Sophiatown, District 6 in Cape Town and Eastwood in Pretoria, several of which were to be demolished during apartheid. He exhibited and was recognized, that is to a certain degree, in so far as he was always referred to as "the native painter Gerard Sekoto". As among the very first black artists, he even had a painting Yellow Houses. A street in Sophiatown, bought by the main art gallery in Johannesburg. He

had some contacts in the white art world, for instance with the South African “New Group”, which brought inspiration from Paris and Europe. Sekoto seems to have grasped the artistic message from the modern pioneers even more boldly and intimately than his white South African colleagues.

In 1947 Sekoto departed for Paris to a difficult existence in exile. In South Africa apartheid unveiled its ugly face. He was never to return, but his thoughts remained there, and he was among the exiles who protested against the apartheid regime. To the exhibition in the United States in 1986, “Voices from Exile”, he sent a painting entitled Homage to Steve Biko. He died in Paris in 1993, recognized at least by the Blacks and by open minded people at home as one of the pioneers of Modern Black South African art. How long will it take for the world to discover what a great artist he is?

What Sekoto achieved during his ten years as

a painter in South Africa amounts to a very personal artistic journey that paralleled the shift from Postimpressionism to Expressionism, an exploration that fully relied on his formal manipulation of colour, rhythm and light without letting the preoccupation with language outmanoeuvre the message.

What makes his paintings unique is a very specific psychological-emotional dialectics. In some of his works one can clearly distinguish its outlines. In other works it is present as a growing intensity. The bodies of working black convicts in his painting Song of the pick form an active collective unity of enormous dynamic strength. While the white supervisor beside them, whom the system has invested with the power, looks like a deflated sack of potatoes. The absurdity of minority rule is transferred into contrasts of colours and lines. In similar ways in many of his works one can feel the duplicity of sorrow and warmth, of brutal oppression and the strength of black human togetherness. Yes, it is black South African consciousness, ex-

pressed as painting. It is not formalism but realism more capacious through its formal richness and its sensitiveness.

But where is that “traditional africanity” everybody was speaking about?

It is true, in other African countries farmers have been and still are the overwhelming majority, living with the traditions connected to farming life. What Sekoto painted in the 1940s was the accelerating industrialisation of South Africa, which brought black masses to the cities, the culmination of a process of modernisation and cross-culturation that over the centuries had left many of the old African traditions behind.

While the white Boers (Dutch for peasants) nostalgically turned to their own “primitive” past, the black South Africans were confronting modernity along with all the hardships and possibilities it brought. This urbanisation was feared and denied by the South African

government as Nelson Mandela tells us in his autobiography. Mandela came to Johannesburg to practice as a lawyer in the same year as Sekoto. The government maintained that the Africans were by nature a rural people and ill suited to city life. But it proved to be a lie, writes Mandela. The populations of the townships were well adapted to city life and were politically conscious. Urbanism created a sense of solidarity. Mandela depicts the same change and the same reality in words as Sekoto in his paintings.

This is of course the background to the fact that black South African modern art is formed by a specific situation and history and imprinted by an already clearly modern urban spirit. But if you choose to use this difference to argue that contemporary artists in other parts of Africa should be looked upon as by nature closer to rural cultural traditions and therefore ill suited to modernity and modernism, are you then not simply adopting the wishful thinking of apartheid ideology in the arts?

1) An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Tenth Triennial

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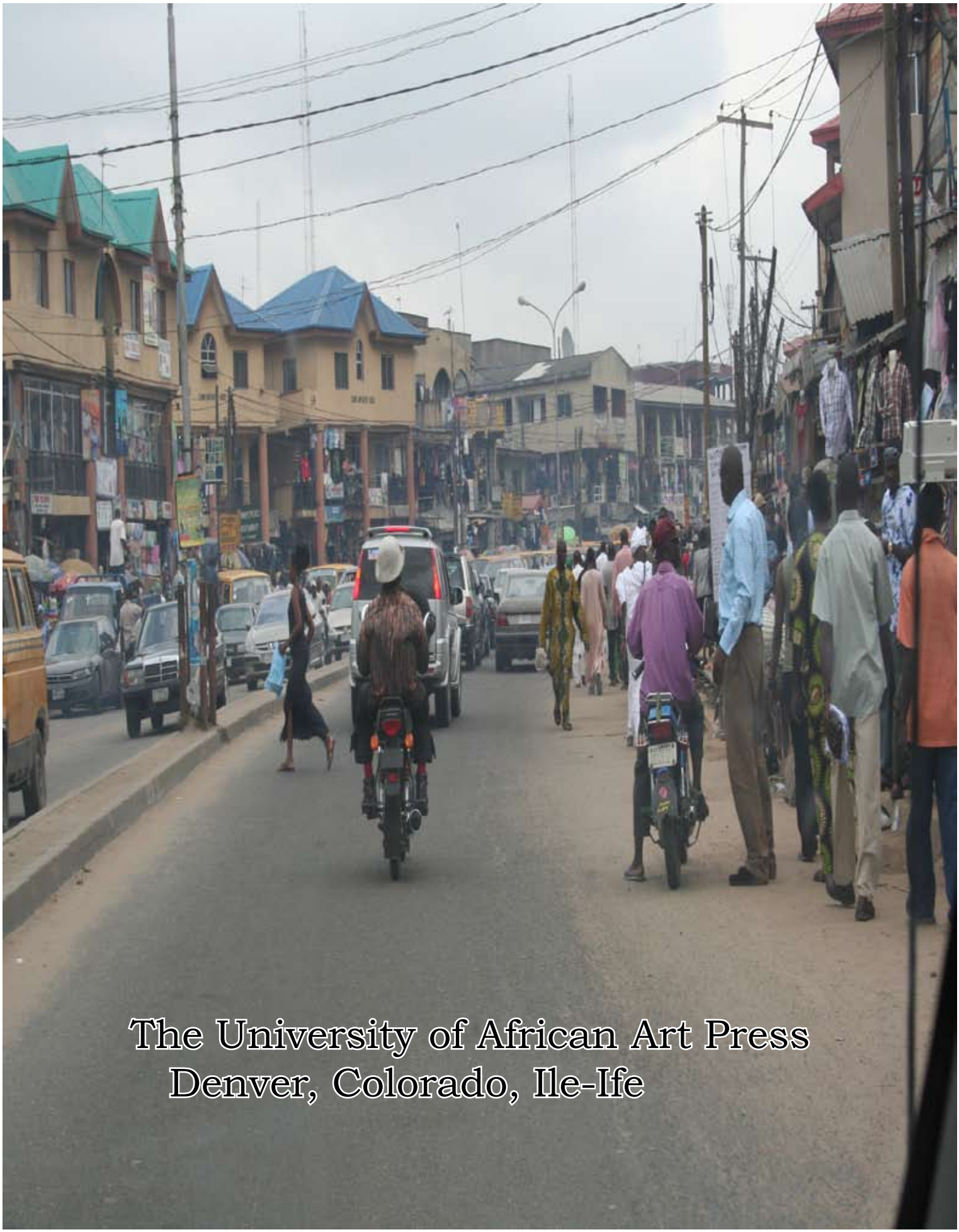

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