



IS : Expanded Cinema (is) a Diaspora

Review of Media Art Exhibition at the Africa in the Picture Film Festival 2012

by Yvette Granata

Pictures evoke boundaries, or as Friedrich Schlegel says, “every work of art brings its own frame into existence.”¹ In the cinema, the screen frame imbricates imagery that is both dynamic and fixed, overlapping motion images that are simultaneously bound within a screen’s borders. With expanded cinema and media art installation, the cinematic frame has spatially unbound itself. It has undergone a dispersion with expansion, a scattering of the picture’s borders.

The common definition of ‘Diaspora’ is also a scattering, or a displacement, usually referring to a group of peoples removed and dispersed from their homeland. This definition does not include a specific direction, but usually does imply a one-way trajectory. When Jacques Aumont likened the camera to the locomotive, he stated “both [the cinema and the locomotive] transform a previously circular and spatially anchored movement into one that is circular and lengthwise. Moreover, both involve the transformation (. . .) of a spatially anchored movement into one of displacement.”² Diaspora of peoples can thus be likened to a cinema and an engine of transformation.

The Africa in the Picture Film Festival, one of Europe’s largest African film festivals, makes this their central theme. Established in Amsterdam in 1987, the festival is dedicated to showcasing films and video from Africa and the African Diaspora, occurring annually every fall. In their last edition of the festival, which took place for ten days from October 19-28, the programmers combine expanded cinema and the theme of diaspora, featuring a multi-media exhibit at its core for the first time, titled *IS*. As the opening main event, exhibited throughout the duration of the festival, the 2012 festival presented its

program of 72 films by Pan-African filmmakers past and present with the exhibit as the central framework. Focused on integrating “visions about the different stages of relocation,”³ the exhibit offered, not only a combination, but a double-entendre foundation to the context of the festival: cinema of a diaspora *is* an expanded cinema. As reflected in their statement, ‘We can go forwards and backwards in history, migration, displacement, homelessness, shared histories, questions about identity and the legacy this has created. A ‘Third Space’ in which people can share, discuss and inspire each other, whether they were born in Africa or not,’⁴ the notion of diaspora is presented as multi-faceted and multi-directional, not simply a one-way train.

While providing a frame for the festival’s diverse films and directors - under such section titles as ‘Caribbean Classics,’ ‘Gay Africa,’ and ‘Black British Third Cinema,’ among others—the exhibit also gave ground in three dimensions to the picture of cultural spread. *IS* featured the installation work of Remy Jungerman (Surinam), Martin Waalboer (Netherlands), Oumar Mbuenge Atakosso (Senegal), and Antonio Jose Guzman (Panama). The artists’ installations were presented in the NASA (New Art Space Amsterdam) project space for three weeks, where an art house cinema combines with a large contemporary art gallery in a two-story building. The lower level of the NASA space was home to the exhibit, while films were presented in two different theater screening rooms on both floors, as well as at other cinemas around the city. With NASA as the center, visitors were encouraged to peruse the exhibit before and after the festival screenings and events. By looking closely at the installations, I wander through the dynamic context of diaspora put forth by each artist.

Antonio Jose Guzman’s three channel video installation, *Regressions: the Legend of Billy Maclean* (2012), depicts a transnational journey that follows the trail of Scandinavian adventurer Billy Maclean. Billy, so the legend says, traveled through Asia searching for the purification of his soul and at the end of his journey settled in Panama, Guzman’s homeland, where Maclean formed the spiritual commune, *La Reunion*. After having gone through past-life regressions with a psychologist, Guzman discovered a repressed memory of Billy Maclean. His discovery of buried memory leads his camera,

as he treks through the possibility of other hidden memories along the path that Billy traveled to get to Panama. Instead of looking for the familiar or for a connection to Billy, Guzman retraces Maclean's continental adventure in order to look for his own possibly repressed selves.

Each screen of the video installation displays a different continent, a search for memory in parallels. We watch his journey on disconnected monitor frames situated on screens at various heights from the floor. Although the videos are separated by the screen boundaries and vertical positions, they connect into a thread of parallel simultaneity—it is one journey—and through the hint of something possible—it is an 'adventure' in which Guzman playfully walks us through. Within the frames, we see Guzman coolly saunter, his back turned to us, exploring what he may discover in places that he has never before been, and we are suspended in the possibility of his discovery. Despite the local cultural inflections and geographical specificities in each screen, we see commonalities: the ocean side, the preparation of food, the grey skies—always in front of Guzman, visually hinting that no territory is unique. But it is when Guzman stands in front us, looking away from us across the screens, that we connect the thread. It is only through him that the screens are solidified and speaks the point: this journey is Guzman, the artist is the territory. Nationality is awash, not as an attempt to connect differences, not as gesture towards borderless identity—but as interjecting laps on a personal archaeological dig. Diaspora identity here is not at issue—Guzman is not looking for connection to his 'roots'—it is on the other hand at play, as an adventurous search for internal discovery through someone else's uprooted wandering.

Remy Jugerman's installation of silkscreen prints faces Guzman's video installation. The prints appear like a wall of flags, a hallway of nations that might exist, in a world like ours, but not our own. The prints purposely hint at recognizable forms, such as the painting of Mondrian and of different national flags, with diaphanous Afro-religious iconography appearing throughout. Jugerman's wall boldly and colorfully teases the viewer to name the places of his influences. Try if you will, yet the forms remain as distant teases, and like Guzman's screens, create a surface to dig through for a present

framed with multilateral possibilities. Jugerman visits and recreates imagery of vaguely familiar pasts, and by doing so, forces us to look and think again about the present.

For example, in his print titled, *PeepinaDevilB1* (2011), we see the reflection of his own work re-formed with the ghostly trace of a devil-like icon over an image that echoes another print titled *PeepinaC3* (2011). While the latter hints at a resemblance to a British flag or an amalgamation of red, white, and blue flags, the former is a repetition of the other work with a translucent head of a devil figure transposed over the image. Yet the image of the devil is not a value statement—it is a piece of the whole in a conversation of images. Because it is his own work that we see in transformation, not simply a mash-up of historical icons, a process of cultural production comes forth. Jugerman's prints cause the viewer to engage in a practice—forcing us to look at the form in front of us now, to compare what we are looking at in this moment to what we saw a moment ago. In posing us to ask whether it is a story of recreation of the past or a possibility for the present, the message is clear: one must look from left to right and then right to left—one direction alone is insufficient. The eyes must wander—the gaze needs to travel. We must look closely, horizontally, *and* in no particular order to see the picture in view. Here diaspora is about the eyes, requiring a multi-directional practice of vision.

Behind the wall of Guzman's video installation, we find Martin Waalboer's photo cinema, *A Dream Called Harper* (2012). Waalboer's piece is a photo and sound documentary on the search for the story of Harper, Liberia, the nation founded by freed slaves of the American Colonization Society in 1822. A former nautical engineer, Waalboer traveled the world and to the US where he began to take pictures. In Louisiana, he met Mr. Allen, who told Waalboer stories of his ancestors, former slaves in the US, and of his desire to go to Liberia but whose health prevented him from travel. Martin decided to go himself in Mr. Allen's stead and traveled to Liberia to capture the traces of a story of re-migration and reclamation, one that otherwise has little historical documentation.

Waalboer's piece opens with title cards on the history of Harper and then cuts to the

image of an abandoned and broken cinema theater in Harper. We are invited to sit and watch the screen within the Liberian theater, and Waalboer's photos appear superimposed within the screen in the photo of the theater. It is an image of Harper within Harper, making us aware of Waalboer's position as an outsider. Opposite to Guzman's search as an artist from the Americas who follows the trans-national path of a European, Waalboer is a European that travels to the Americas and is inspired to track the path of African Americans. Waalboer's photo-cinema is an installation of re-routed images, his camera following a search for a place narrated to him from another man's memory, of a place that neither men had ever visited. It is hence an imaginary construction of un-experienced memory, begging the question: whose story we are watching? Is it Waalboer's, Mr. Allen's or the town of Harper's? It is the meditation on this question that lingers and remains interesting through the piece. Separated loosely by the exhibit wall, with an open door to walk from one to the next, Waalboer's installation is in a dialogue with Guzman's and Jungerman's by way of their opposite motions, taking dives in different directions, albeit circulating currents. Diaspora here is thus a two-way circuit, through which the stories of separate personal histories interact.

Turn the corner and a long grey hallway reveals Oumar Mbengue Atakosso's installation, *Lost & Found*. A series of objects sewn into grey blankets are splayed about the ground as though a shipwreck has occurred. The grey material fits the objects like a new skin, the contours of each object are sharply defined yet monochrome and shadowless. They absorb all light and mute the contrast between themselves. Atakosso says the grey material is reminiscent of the blankets used for saving refugees from capsized vessels in international waters, while the objects are things found on the street en route, things thrown out or left behind in passing. At first glance, the material covering the objects appears dismal. The objects seem constrained within it, the surfaces seem similar. But Atakosso invites us to touch them, to feel the texture and explore the muted contours. In coming close to the objects and interacting with our hands, the constraint of the fabric becomes a channel, one that must be viewed with the fingertips in order to understand.

While the fabric is a familiar one for the 'post-modern immigrant,' Atakosso invites us to bring the texture of the blanket into our own experience, to form it into our memory as well. For the artist, the grey material is not a leveling of identity or a removal of difference, but a reframing of position. His statement explains, "the installation is based on three aspects that are embodied by the notion of homothecy. In this work, homothecy is a metaphor to describe one point in space from different points of view. Think of Russian dolls, one inside the other, geometrically occupying the same point, yet having a different relation to the outside world because of their relationship to each other."⁵ In this way, Atakosso's installation is a layering that plays with position as a notion of interior scale. Interior and exterior become surface. As opposed to questions of assimilation or contradictory gazes between other and another, diaspora identity is not a question related to surface as viewed from the outside, but turns reflection into a dull point. Instead, the contours must be felt, be touched, and spatial positions must be learned. The eyes are hindered not to cripple us, but as an effort to actively mobilize the hands. Diaspora here thus involves a practice of touch, making personal memories out of our close interaction.

In looking at possible pasts and futures across multiple borders, the exhibit resembled an ocean current more so than a particular continent. With *IS*, the festival not only provides us with an expansion of approaches for experiencing African diaspora cultures, but also with the presentation of an expanded cinema format, makes diaspora part of the *form*. In the film festival setting, expanded cinema often comes as a supplementary side-bar or as a self-contained borderland presented concurrently with the films in the main festival program, such as the New Frontiers section of the Sundance Film Festival (border expansion reflected here in the section title itself), or the Berlinale Film Festival's Forum Expanded. Of all of the festivals that I attended this year, the Africa in the Picture film festival was the only festival to frame its array of films with a centralized expanded-cinema exhibit, offering dispersion as touchstone instead of as frontier.

By highlighting a multi-media exhibition format, but also showcasing the work of under-represented voices in cinema, the festival fully places the peripheral in the center.

Moreover, through the exhibit, we are invited to the program as participants, not simply as spectators. We have to move our heads up and down across screens to watch Guzman, walk along the wall looking back and forth to view Jugerman's installation, dig through super-imposed images of Waalboer's layered story, and touch the fabric of Atakosso's objects with our hands. In this way, we become aware of ourselves as participants in the making of history and culture, not just spectators viewing the stories of 'others.' In contrast to what Bazin says of the cinema frame—that it “is not a frame like that of a picture, but a mask which allows us to see part of [an] event”⁶—the artists' works created a pliable mask that invited each visitor to actively slip on and move around in. Yes, a diaspora is a scattering, but here we are encouraged to integrate ourselves as cultural participants and intersect our viewpoints across multiple histories. It is in this way that we are positioned to culturally engage with diasporic cinema presented in the program. With this in mind, after we course through the exhibit, only then are we ready to enter the film festival and view its diverse, global body of film.

¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Fragmente zur Poesie and Literatur*, edited by H. Eichner (Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel edition) vol. 17, no. 1 (Munich: Fink, 1981), p. 92.

² Jacques Aumont, “The Variable Eye, or Mobilization of the Gaze”, in Dudley Andrew (ed.), *Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), p. 235.

³ www.africainthepicture.nl

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ www.oumarmbengue.com

⁶ Ara H. Merjian, “Middleborw Modernism,” in Angela Dalle Vacche (ed.), *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 170.