

An abstract painting with a dominant palette of warm, earthy tones. The background is a rich, textured orange-red. Overlaid on this are various brushstrokes and splatters in black, white, and a vibrant yellow. The composition is dynamic and layered, with some areas appearing more saturated and others more washed out, creating a sense of depth and movement.

Curating in the Dark: Notes on a Fugitive Concept of Black Curation

By Phokeng Setai | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

The last forty years have seen substantial market attention being directed towards the aesthetic practices of Black African artists. Causing an exponential rise in expenditure on Black cultural production circulating in the global economy, stimulated by neoliberal interests seeking to capture extant vernaculars of Black African subjectivity. Such particularistic articulations of Black subjectivity have, over time, become commodified—instrumental to their commodification has been the removal of these practices from the cultures in which they were inherited (Gilroy, 2000:249). This paper delves into the machinations of this trend and interrogates by means of critical speculation how nascent

curatorial constructs and discursive models may engender alternatives for engaging with Black modes of artistic production.. The paper proposes a method of 'curating in the dark', a speculative, multi-vocal dialogic praxis and non-linear approach that seeks to intervene into bankrupt models of curating or engaging with Black art. Curating in the dark is geared towards expanding the scope of what we understand Black art to be in the spectrum of current global artistic practices, and what it can also still become. Furthermore, this avowedly speculative inquiry seeks to disempower the neoliberal art system's modalities of capturing Black artistic practices and cultural patterns in the present.

In the 1960s, Africa had begun undergoing substantial political transition. A tide of African countries gained independence from European domination, sending shockwaves through the international community. This caused concern in the Western world¹ and stoked fears that it would have to loosen its powerful grip on political economic affairs on the continent (Okeke-Agulu and Enwezor, 2009). The decolonial momentum continued into the 1970s and reached a resounding crescendo in the 1980s, with the liberation struggle thriving in southern Africa culminating in Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe gaining their independence. Meanwhile in South Africa, dissent against the apartheid government led by student and worker resistance movements escalated at an alarming rate. For those African nations that had begun their transition into post-independence life, this phase presented a huge challenge to their new political agendas.

A majority of these countries liberalised their economic markets on the notion that doing so would be a positive stimulus that would enable their countries' economies to expand. The strategy proved effective in this regard, as post-colonial life in these countries heralded the promise of great opportunity, neatly sheathed in the prospect of a new post-colonial nationalism. The burgeoning market economies of these countries, and the resolute presence of neo-colonialism, had an interesting effect on the art and cultural patterns that began mushrooming in different parts of the continent. It is the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s in particular that became a defining era in the socio-political historiography of the African art and cultural landscape. So called 'African art', more specifically the art of African artists emanating from post-colonial territories, entered the global art marketplace. This fuelled a commercial spike in the purchasing of artwork produced by these artists and instigated the birth of contemporary African art.

It is at this critical juncture that the term 'contemporary' in relation to African culture started to feature significantly in global cultural discourse. The term became used to describe those emergent genres of African art-making, particularly those emanating from the postcolonial African world. In a very short space of time, contemporary African art became a highly sought-after commodity. Prior to this moment, African art had been reduced to

moribund classifications which portrayed African onto-epistemology as benighted, and African material culture was used as proof of this 'fact'. The present-day phenomenon of the proliferation of Black images in international contemporary art is a direct off-shoot of the last 40 years of the neo-liberalisation of the global economy, during which time the art sphere has undergone significant transformations. Most notably, the art world has gradually deviated away from an overemphasis on representation of white European artistic subjectivities, and shifted its attention towards the aesthetic practices of Black African artistic producers. The last decade alone has seen this trend escalate even further, evidenced in the exponential rise in global levels of demand for Black art.

Financial markets operate on the basis of the principle of speculation, and the commercial art market is no different, as can be seen in how the soaring interest in Black African aesthetic modes, practices and cultural objects is inextricably connected to the commercial fixation with Black African cultural production. Up until this point, I have attempted to explain how the rapid ascendancy of Black cultural production in global economic markets is propelled by neo-liberal market forces, for whom expressions of Black African subjectivity appear merely as commodities readily available for consumption. The resultant shifts in the global economic order that occurred in the latter stages of the 20th century, from economic liberalism to neo-liberalism, coincided with the transition of political dispensation on the continent of Africa and other parts of the Global South. So extensive were these transformations that they had an invariable impact on incipient articulations of universal Black African subjectivity. Over time, the effects of the commodification of Black African subjectivities became visible in how emergent modalities of Black African artistic and cultural production started to rapidly assume the form of economic goods.

The objectification of modes of Black African subjectivity – whether it be on an ontological, epistemological, or purely materialistic basis – doesn't begin with the passage of the world economic system into the neo-liberal era. Rather, history would have it, intrinsic to the machinations of the Western imperial enterprise has been the intentional distortion and detachment of Black African cultural and spiritual components from their emplacement and their conversion into commodities assigned a

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definitive economic value (Gilroy, 2000: 249). The introduction of neo-liberalism marked a significant moment, as modes of human cultural expression and creativity became subsumed into the global economic superstructure. At present, human creative and cultural functions have developed into major economic reservoirs and powerhouses of capitalist production and accumulation. This phenomenon has proved to be a determining characteristic epitomising the advent of the neo-liberal era, namely the commodification of cultural patterns, particularly those of Black and/or other minority cultural groups into objectifiable products which are then dispatched into different parts of the globe.

This is one way in which post-colonial Black African culture has, in recent decades, been disseminated into different parts of the world. The art market, notorious for operating according to its own arbitrary rules based on subjective and symbolic speculation, has led us to this historical juncture in which Black artistic production seemingly lies at the frontier of global cultural production and discourse. What this remarkable development has unfortunately coincided with is the art market's inundation with copious amounts of artistic representations. These commonly appear in the form of popular styles of figurative and photographic representations depicting Black African human figures according to a mimetic register denoting quotidian scenes of everyday life, and/or attempting to portray familiar accounts and documentations of the multiplicity of Black subjectivities. The amalgamation of these aesthetic

representations can be seen as contributing to the repopulation of the denuded Black epistemological archival repository, which underwent despoliation at the hands of the vehicle of Western imperialism.

So copious are these aesthetic representations circulating in the art market that they are bordering on the line of aesthetic saturation. The superfluity of the Black figure in contemporary art runs the risk of homogenising Blackness and flattening its universal dimensionality. What makes this increasingly insidious is that for scholars such as Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2011: 6), who advocate certain aspects of Senghorian ideals, Black African art represents the philosophical worldview and ontological status of its people. If we were to go according to this principle to frame what constitutes contemporary Black African subjectivity, we would be led to believe that the phenomenon of the proliferation of images of Black bodies in contemporary art irrevocably essentialises Black African life and negates any of its complexities. This is the main issue with these *in vogue* representational aesthetics in contemporary art today; they perpetuate a singular understanding of Blackness and inconveniently trivialise the rising status of Black onto-epistemologies.

Nevertheless, I still believe that the excess of Black art in the art market should equally be read as an affirming statement of the space that Black cultural production has seemingly earned for itself in the broader domain of cultural discourse. Achille Mbembe, in the introduction to his 2017 opus *Critique of Black Reason*, foretold this condition, referring to it as the becoming Black of the world – claiming that Europe is no longer the absolute centre of the world (2017: 1). His viewpoint is by and large commensurate with the widening of regimes of representation. Today, modes of being that were previously excluded through colonial suppression, historical erasure and epistemic negation have become included into the expanded matrix that constitutes the broader landscape of human societies. Many sceptics see this as a renaissance of the disingenuous strategy of inclusion by exclusion. However, as suspicious as these trends may be, I see them contributing positively to the formation of global Black subjectivities.

It is important to critically engage with emergent trends shaping the face of global culture. History has

proven to us on so many occasions that the violence enacted towards marginalised cultures is a systematic consequence of white supremacy rather than merely a symptom of intermittent shifts in global patterns (Ross, 2013: 178). This makes it necessary, in my opinion, for us to implacably problematise these modes, and I use this point to further argue that it is not completely irrational to read the current emphasis on modes of Black African aesthetic representation as the residues of imperialism and grotesque manifestations of white European historical privilege intermingled with privilege (Walcott, 2018: 61). Lest we forget, white Europeans continue to have more visibility and rights of access in the art world, more than any other racial group. The global contemporary art world may be proliferated with Black art but the institution remains a bastion of Western European heteropatriarchy.

Western capital dominates in the art world and this has a corollary geopolitical impact on the circulation of capital in the global art world. This has me questioning the control that Western forces have on the imaginative faculties of Black African artistic producers? Throughout the generations, Eurocentrism has managed to successfully entrench itself in the global social imagination. Westerners scrupulously colonised entire realms of colonial and post-colonial libidinal desire tied to the imaginations of historically oppressed people (Mbembe, 2015). The overt danger of the West possessing so much power is that formulations of notions of Blackness will inevitably be to suit what the West deems acceptable. I argue that this warrants distrust of the authenticity of emergent social constructions of Blackness, as these could arise from fabricated schemas aimed at constraining vernacular personifications of the global Black experience. What if these arising formulations are in fact construed to encumber the malleability of Black onto-epistemologies?

I consider such tendencies to be reincarnations of the long-standing colonialist fixation to ethnographise the people whose life worlds are congenitally linked to the Black onto-epistemological paradigm. It is a pathology that can be traced as far back as the foundations of Western imperialism, through which Westerners endowed themselves with unbridled authoritative power over the cultural representation of the people they oppressed. Over time, this gradually engendered insular perceptions about colonized

people, which then became crystallized into historical facts and finally consolidated in the constitution of colonial archives (Scott, 1999 in Kasfir, 2007: 7). I argue that the legacies of these nefarious acts are observable in the formation and sedimentation of colonial visual cultural regimes that span the post-colonial world.

There are several reasons attributable to the sudden recognition of post-colonial Black African artists. Regardless of the disparities distinguishing one artistic producer from another, they all share one quintessential characteristic: their unique political subjectivities as former colonial subjects or descendants thereof, as well as the trait of belonging to a historically oppressed group of people. An overdetermined inference emanating from this is that Black African art-making practices are in summation an assemblage of sublimated traumas carried by its producers. These assertions are not completely erroneous, as numerous postcolonial African artists have been inclined to illuminate through their art the socio-economic and political conditions prevalent in the societies that they emanate from. The circumstances in these societies can get so visceral that it is understandable why they can easily saturate and enforce themselves on the life worlds of the artistic producers – almost with the force of natural law (Ndebele, 2006: 14).

Perhaps then, due to this, the aesthetic practices of post-colonial African artistic producers can be seen as articulations of curative sensibilities employed to cope with the damaging effects of colonialism on them and the societies that they come from (Mogorosi, 2021: 29). Tumi Mogorosi (2021: 19), in his book *De-Aesthetic: Writing with and from the Black Sonic*, proposes that we adopt an approach to our field of relations that aims to de-aestheticize and unframe the structural inherency of imperial violence scaffolding our onto-epistemic and socio-phenomenological field of relations. I concur with Mogorosi's stance; just consider the fact that in the recent history of human social life on planet earth, Black subjecthood has constantly been relegated to the position of objects of total and symbolic violence. Moreover, due to it being primarily by means of aesthetic judgment that humans negotiate the onto-epistemological and empirical ground on which we stand, similar aesthetic motifs are traceable throughout the work of post-colonial and contemporary Black African artistic producers.

Most of them tend to incorporate a critical component in their work, which oftentimes is rooted in their nation's current or past socio-political status. As political subjects coming from territories riven by all kinds of socio-economic and political absurdities, I resonate with the inclination to artistically process the complex political intersections and profound identitarian connections (Goniwe, 2017: 38). The explosion of contemporary African art became solidified in the mass commodification of African artistic production. In the contemporary art world, one explicit ramification of this is the manifest instrumentalization of Black bodies and experiences to construct particularly distorted narratives about Blackness (Mombaca, 2018: 43). All the more reason why it is important for us to problematise the rise and widespread proliferation of depictions of the Black figure in global contemporary art today (Gilroy, 2000: 255). I have come to realise the immensity of the influence these artistic representations have on the cultural imagination universally. These artistic representations act as signifiers and are therefore seen as synonymous with the collective Black experience. As a result, people use them as mediatory conduits to understand the nuances of Black life without having to live with the fact of being Black, like many Black African cultural producers have to do.

Persons who are designated as belonging to this heterogeneous cultural milieu known as Black beingness, act upon and internalise social inscriptions encoded in their experiences of the social world; they then make use of these typifications to construct their social political identities (Kasfir, 2007: 11). Global Blackness has successfully interpolated itself into the present-day discourse of neo-liberal cultural production. A huge reason for this is the manner in which Black pan-African artistic producers have aesthetically engaged their life worlds and translated them into idiomatic formulations of artistic and cultural expression (Hassan and Oguiibe, 2001: 22). Jacques Rancière (2004: 12) states that the system which determines how our sensibilities are distributed is what establishes the linkages of commonality and dictates the factual nature of sense perception which then discloses the respective parts that constitute our spectrum of existence. Rancière's elaboration of what constitutes our shared field of relations leads me to assert that social constructions of Black subjecthood are, to a large degree, responsible for

governing considerations of the aesthetic, rational and theoretical constructs that coalesce to comprise notions of Blackness, as well as anti-Blackness, throughout history into our present time (Bradley and Ferreira Da Silva, 2021).

The ramifications of these outmoded conceptual models are widely at play in audiences' encounters with and experiences of Black African and African diasporic artistic and cultural production. This leads me to side with Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2021) who state that, in order to be able to reimagine possibilities in which global Black subjectivities can exist outside the structural confines engendered by Western imperialism, we must eradicate and/or overhaul the basic tenets undergirding the aesthetic framework of our current symbolic universal order of possibilities. The same can be said about the aesthetic field of Black art: it unfortunately finds itself bound inside this order of non-possibility and, for this reason, there is an urgent need for Black artistic production to be untethered from the representational schematic enclosures of our current global superstructure (Bradley and Da Silva, 2021).

I am ultimately forced to question the extent to which we, in our practices as critical Black curatorial practitioners and intellectuals, may inadvertently legitimize and reinforce the very same libidinal economies against which our work theoretically tries to push. As in recent decades, artists, cultural theorists and producers have been waging a

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protracted battle in which they have questioned the thingification of Black bodies in terms of how they have been imaged inside the locus of Western ocular-centric imagination (Hassan, 2001: 26). This is all entangled in the neo-liberal politics aimed at converting Black expressions and attributes into a wholly different, universalised configuration that can no longer be called uniquely Black.

Curating in the dark

I argue that the same phenomenon I discuss above is at play with the multiplication of Black images that we see in the contemporary neo-liberal art market. This then begs the question, which I borrow from pre-eminent Black South African historian Professor Hlonipha Mokoena (2021), who in an interview poses the question: What does it mean to be a Black artist portraying Black subjects? Secondly, as the curators of these images, the people who build bodies of knowledge around these representations and contextualise them inside a global discursive field: What does it mean to create new knowledge and discourses around these artistic reproductions of subjectivity, especially one so maligned and elusive as the global Black subjectivity? I am here to argue that Black radical propositions of curatorial practice are in a stronger position than ever to rewrite cultural discourse by offering oppositional formulations to these staid constructs and one-sided conceptual models that foster circumscribed articulations of emergent Black onto-epistemologies.

Herein, I would like to propose a speculative method of '*curating in the dark*', whose aim it is to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies intrinsic to the practice of curating and contemporary cultural discourse. Through incorporating strategies of multivocality and dialogism in the construction of interventions, this experimental methodology seeks to critically intervene into staid and obsolete models of curating and engaging with the multifarious genres constituting Black artistic and cultural production. '*Curating in the dark*' is essentially geared towards expanding the scope of analytic vocabularies we use to curatorially interpret Black art. It is a curatorial methodology rooted in the interpretive paradigm, and functions according to an approach that endeavours to confabulate new epistemic terrains that can be accessible to all (Bassene, 2018:

199). This approach draws its ideological impetus from anti-capitalist and racist genealogies situated inside the revolutionary framework of the Black Radical Tradition. Its prime modality of expression is inspired by the temporal fluidity of process-based articulations of artistic production.

This primarily has to do with trying to resist the commercial art world's tendency to privilege the object as commodity form, but rather to intentionally engage with the forces of production (i.e. process as object), and centralise this aspect of artistic production as the main site of aesthetic emancipation (Bishop, 2012: 11). Hence why I envision strategies of '*curating in the dark*' to be contemporary descendants of Black avant-gardist aesthetic traditions. Because these strategies rely on collaborative and improvisational syntheses of divergent aesthetic practices, instrumentalised to generate social and cultural models that are divisible from hegemonic societal constructs. Emphasising the dematerialisation of aesthetic production enables social processes to come into the forefront. This alone is an empowered point of departure, considering how easily the neo-liberal art market ensnares Black aesthetics amenable to the commodity form.

***Suna Lebota*: a silent refusal to the images of our time**

At the beginning of December 2021, I embarked on one such speculative interdisciplinary intervention in collaboration with the artist Brian Montshiwa at Church Project Space², the latest addition to Cape Town's bustling art ecosystem. *Suna Lebota*³, the intervention that Brian and I conceptualised, was an experimental durational performance, performed by the artist Montshiwa and co-facilitated by the Church Project's production team and myself. The intervention spanned a period of five days, during which the artist repeated the action of applying red lipstick and kissing the pristine white walls of the project space. In the end, Brian amassed a total amount of 17 hours and six minutes diligently performing the action, whilst Nina Simone's live Montreal performance of her song *Stars* played on loop to great melancholic effect in the background.

The reason I am mentioning this intervention with Brian is that I undertook this project a number of weeks upon returning from participating in the *Black Self*

*Colloquium*⁴ organised by Ashraf Jamal and funded by the Nirox Foundation. At the time of my participation in the colloquium, *'curating in the dark'* was merely an idea that I wrote a paper on and presented at the conference. My collaboration with Brian at Church Project Space presented me with an opportunity to practically experiment with this inchoate concept. Before Brian arrived in Cape Town to begin their short-term residency at Church Project Space, we held a series of conversations on Zoom discussing a myriad of topics, related to our respective practices, what we were both currently reading and the phenomenon of Black images in contemporary art, amongst other things. It is during these preliminary conversations that I related the performance method of duration as a possible approach for the artist to explore during their ten-day residency. What led me to conceive of durationality as a methodology of intervention was the thinking I had begun doing around the aesthetic practices of deceased legendary Nigerian musician Fela Kuti and the writings of the distinguished South African writer, Professor Njabulo Ndebele. From a curatorial standpoint, practical factors such as the location of the project and brevity of Brian's residency featured prominently in my preparatory thinking. In response, the everyday as a site of knowledge juxtaposed to the temporal intrusions shaping everyday phenomenologies of human stories began to interest me. In my observations, I had noticed that performance-based artistic practices – particularly those involving of Black (queer) artists – had the tendency to be spectacularised in a manner that I had begun to regard as problematic.

Analysing this phenomenon in relation to the proliferation of Black images in contemporary art, the question occurred to me again, what did it mean for Black bodies to be the centre of so much spectacle? Professor Njabulo Ndebele, in his seminal book *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, has this to say about the impulse to spectacularize:

'The spectacular documents, it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms

without necessarily offering a challenge.' (Ndebele, 2006: 41)

The spectacle flattens out the quotidian, in many ways it renders it invisible by casting a shadow over the details of ordinary life; by doing so it strips the complexity out of our life-world experiences and intersubjective encounters with one another. In the context of live performance art, the Black body tends to be super-naturalised to conform to such alienating registers, inevitably de-humanising the performer and de-contextualising the performance from its intended meaning. Therefore, as a provocation to the artist, I asked us to explore the notions of duration and ordinariness as a radical counterpoint to the myopia of the contemporary art world. In doing so, we were already working in opposition to established temporalities of the neo-liberal art world. Furthermore, placing emphasis on the minutiae of the everyday alongside the performance, we challenged the viewer to think about their complicity in the construction of everyday life. Especially because the spectacularization of certain groups of people's lived-experiences disempowers their existences in such subliminally harmful ways.

This intervention of ours derives its theoretical thrust from the curatorial strategy which I refer to as *'curating in the dark'*. Brian and I made use of this approach to puncture the monotonous fabric of everyday life. This is what makes live performance art so potent because it is able to interrupt the ordinary and simultaneously disarticulate our expectations of the everyday. What emerged from these interactions between the artist is an experimentally fugitive performance piece which became referred to as *Suna Lebota*. As the experimental piece matured over the five days and the redness of the lipstick adorned the walls, assuming a cartographical appearance, what stands out to me more than anything is the manner in which the artist, Brian, as the main provocateur, returned the gaze back to us, the viewers. This evokes Tina Campt's musings in her latest book, *A Black Gaze*, in which she discusses emancipatory regimes of Black self-representation which lie at the disposal of Black people, subverting the white supremacist gaze and techniques aimed at capturing modalities of Black aesthetic production, and more importantly the onto-epistemological expressions of Black life.

Notes

1. I am using this term to refer to various regions, nations and states, depending on the context, most often consisting of the majority of Europe, Northern America, and Australasia, also known as the Global North.
2. Church Project Space is a multidisciplinary art project co-founded by Hoosein Mahomed and Shelleen Maharaj located on Church Street, in the Central Business District in Cape Town, South Africa.
3. 'Suna Lebota' is a Sesotho phrase which in English translates to 'Kiss the wall'.
4. *The Black Self Colloquium* was a two-day workshop think-tank that took place at Nirox Sculpture Park in Gauteng Province, 4–6 November 2021.

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