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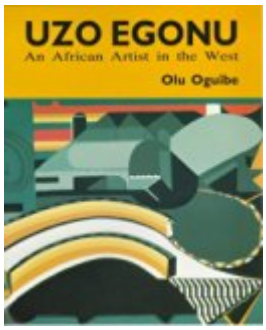

Olu Oguibe. *Uzo Egonu, an African Artist in the West.* London: Kala Press, 1995. 175 pp. $27.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-947753-08-5.

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How does one narrate the career of an African artist who spent his life in the centers of European culture, in the West? This is the subject of Olu Oguibe's analysis in *Uzo Egonu: An African Artist in the West*. In 1945, Nigerian-born painter and printmaker Uzo Egonu left his home town of Onitsha for England at the age of thirteen to pursue an education in the fine arts. With the exception of a brief visit to Nigeria in 1977 for the Second World Festival of Arts and Culture FESTAC celebrations, which was truncated by a virulent flu (the artist's much-anticipated homecoming lasted all of two days), Egonu lived out his life in England as an expatriate. An intensely private individual, Egonu developed a critically acclaimed personal style in painting and printmaking, received the patronage of highly placed individuals in British society such as the Duchess of Albans, and achieved international recognition for his contributions to the plastic arts.

The place and role of non-Western artists in the hallowed narratives of art history remain a point of contention today, especially in the sustained attempts by critics and art historians to overturn the entrenched illusions of cultural purity on which many twentieth-century narratives of art are constructed. We are familiar with the achievements and shortcomings of some of these attempts and the chagrin of a "mainstream" art history that collectively defines such endeavors as revisionism, dismissing the often trenchant tone of interrogative critiques with the rhetorical equivalent of a tartly raised eyebrow.

These defenders of the status quo recognize in revisionism a transgression of carefully constructed ideological edifices of art history, and they are disoriented by its demands for equal consideration of the works of non-Occidental artists in art historical narratives. Although one may argue that mainstream art history has made great strides in accommodating the works of these "Others," let us point out here that the pivotal term in this perception is "accommodation"--such rights as one extends to those who are not worthy, out of one's own desire and noblesse. The initial euphoria of postmodernism's interrogation of modernist hegemonies is today somewhat muted in a contemporary realization that accommodation has

very specific limits, beyond which the non-Occidental artist exists solely as a marker of art history's indifference to the rigors and contexts of his/her history. Within the context of this history, any text that attempts to situate non-Occidental artists as key players in the modernist experience of art and culture is often categorized as a revisionist enterprise. Such characterization operates as a tacit restatement of the primacy of Occidental experience of art as the norm by which all other realities are measured (preferably as deviations).

It is a measure of the impoverished state of affairs concerning critical attention to the practice of modern African art, that texts like Oguibe's which focus on the professional practice of modern African artists are few and very intermittent. Oguibe's book arrives at an important juncture in the historiography and analysis of this practice, especially in the face of continued efforts by certain individuals to define modern African artists as later-day primitives, a modern incarnation of "tribal" craftspeople whose works are supposedly informed by undefined intuition rather than by intellectual engagement with issues of form and concepts. By its pioneering focus on the career of a significant, yet neglected, African artist whose practice defies this simplistic reading of modern African art, Oguibe's book is a very welcome addition to the sparse literature on this subject.

Egonu's career as an artist in England raises a number of cultural and art historical issues, which Oguibe attempts to "pull into a critical frame drawing on the artist's works and insights gained through interviews with him" (p. 9). He conducts an analysis of Egonu's life and career, especially in terms of his attempts to negotiate the rigid processes of exclusion by which major British galleries and exhibition spaces were made inaccessible to artists of non-European descent--thus creating a context of practice that the author elsewhere describes as a "terrain of difficulty."

Oguibe's thesis is fairly straightforward: Egonu synthesizes his African background with the forms of European modernism and achieves in the process, a mode of expression which, in its commitment to his African roots (specified here as the artist's Igbo origins), and its social vision, defines a modernism different from the nihilistic inclinations of its European variant. Political issues of difference and otherness (not to mention an entrenched racist attitude) result in an effacement of the artist from art historical discourse while relegating him to a practice on the margins. Oguibe is careful to mention that "Egonu cannot be strictly defined as an artist of the margin, for although he was denied a place in the center, he indeed operated and survived within the boundaries of that center, which meant that he lived on a certain level of assured patronage and an, albeit inconsistent, access to the structures of the establishment" (p. 8). Oguibe supports his analysis with over one hundred illustrations, many in color.

The book is divided into seven main chapters. Beginning with a biography of the artist, it weaves together specific issues related to the artist's aesthetic orientation, his emotional and intellectual commitment to his estranged homeland, the emotional turmoil of the Nigerian/Biafran civil war and its effects on his work, and the artist's struggle with failing eyesight, which led to a period of "painting in darkness" compounded in part by a series of heart attacks in 1986, and dire predictions by his doctors that he had less than a year to live. As Oguibe narrates Egonu's career, the artist emerges from these ordeals with a noted philosophical orientation and a renewed commitment to his art. Oguibe provides reasonable documentation of Egonu's development as an artist, the range of influences from which his personal style derived, and, most important, he asks us to consider Egonu's career as a unique interrogation of modernism by an African artist even as this occurs within a European cultural context.

Oguibe writes with an awareness of the difficulties raised by his subject of analysis--Egonu--and his material production. How do we situate

this artist? Considering his context of practice, is it not more fruitful to situate Egonu's work within established traditions of European formalism in the twentieth century? Oguibe seems to disagree. Egonu's work, he contends, is informed by concerns larger than mere formalistic excellence, although he achieves this as well. Themes of domination, racism, and oppression converge in his images, and these are related to his status as an African, hence an outsider in British society.

Through analysis of specific paintings and prints by the artist, Oguibe maps Egonu's indebtedness to European modernism and his initial recourse to an aesthetics of nostalgia in the genre pictures in which the artist first encoded an awareness of his African origins. He presents the artist as an individual engaged in a recontextualization of European modernism, subjecting it to a thematic and conceptual transformation that focuses partly on Egonu's Igbo heritage and partly on his philosophical perception of human affairs. Through detailed analysis of Egonu's involvement with the works of European masters (the Flemish School, Caravaggio, and the Post-Impressionists) and his "meticulous recollection" of his Igbo origins and traditions, Oguibe's text presents Egonu as someone with a keen intellectual and conceptual awareness of his creative medium and his social and cultural experiences.

In chapters 3 ("The Egonu Aesthetic") and 4 ("Community and Commitment") Oguibe makes a claim for Egonu's relevance both to European modernism and to his indigenous Igbo (African) society by postulating concepts of "social relevance, community and commitment." The first explains that Egonu's art is not just derivative of modernism since the artist projected, in his art, a well-articulated notion of social relevance and a commitment to the postcolonial vicissitudes of his Nigerian nation; this awareness contrasts with modernism's claim of an autonomous universe of form in which the artist is answerable solely to his creativity and his art is a reflection of the genius of its maker/creator. The latter concept interrogates Egonu's notion of community and dismisses an essentialist attitude which holds that social commitment is only possible in terms of an artist's specific location within the cultural and geographical parameters of a social context. Oguibe contends that Egonu came to the realization that "to become a proper or 'better' part of one's homeland, to know it and to believe in it, one needs to escape it and, by acquiring an alternative experience, come to appreciate it and identify with it, to truly claim it" (p. 90). This claim, which Oguibe conveniently attributes to the artist, reiterates a postmodernist definition of the contemporary artist as cultural nomad and is worth further investigation.

We get few glimpses of the artist's wife, the German artist Hiltrud Streicher, who is mentioned mainly in terms of her 1966 interview with Egonu (and her later role as his wife, administrator, representative, and financial lifeline in the artist's pre-1970 period of relative obscurity), but not in terms of her possible influences on Egonu's development as an artist. The history of modernism is replete with stories of female artists whose association with famous painters effectively truncated their own careers, and such associations have provided locus for feminist interrogation of the careers of these artists. Did Hiltrud Streicher continue to function as an artist after she met Egonu; do we dare ask if she contributed, in any way, to his material production, especially in the period when his eyesight was failing between 1980 and 1985? Some of Egonu's work in this period (for example, "The Four Seasons," 1983; illustrated pp. 148-49) fit uneasily into the structure of the artist's formalistic and stylistic development, as one can infer from the plates Oguibe provides to illustrate his analysis. Unfortunately, these questions are not examined, although in light of the stated influence of Egonu's wife on all other parts of his life, one makes brave

to posit these as legitimate issues for any art-historical analysis of the artist's career.

Oguibe places in the foreground Egonu's Igbo heritage and its relevance as a broad conceptual and formalistic marker for Egonu's interrogation of modernism. Since Oguibe's analysis of Igbo social and aesthetic structures is detailed and sophisticated, are we to accept Egonu's (equally sophisticated?) awareness of his Igbo heritage as an innate experience that resurfaced in later years to reconfigure his art, or as a calculated intellectual response to museumized specimens of African art forms, or a general adoption of notions of African heritage a la Negritude? An illustration in the book shows Egonu surrounded by several of his paintings (p. 10): apart from a conspicuous canvas of a black female figure posed against a luscious landscape, there are two variations on the subject of a man climbing a palm tree. Such nostalgic images, which operate as visual codes for "primitive," pre-colonial Africa, have been popular in London at least since 1948 when Ben Enwonwu began a spate of public exhibitions that made such expressions of Senghorian Negritude familiar to British art audiences.

Oguibe does not quite explain his position on the question of Egonu's constitution of artistic identity. Instead, he stresses the intellectual nature of Egonu's recollection of his Igbo roots, although he goes to great lengths to define how Igbo aesthetic and conceptual structures provide Egonu with the tools he needed for his interrogation of modernism. Considering the fact that Egonu was only thirteen years old when he left his homeland, some of Oguibe's arguments appear overdetermined in their attempt to define the artist as a perceptive observer whose grasp of Igbo cultural forms at that age is nothing short of genius.

The text also glosses over the class implications of Egonu's family background by presenting as a norm the unique location of an emergent Nigerian middle class for whom the practice of regularly sending their children to study in foreign institutions persisted even after Nigeria's independence in 1960. It is among this class that issues of national and cultural identity became paramount in analysis of African politics and culture, a point emphasized by Ngugi wa Thiongo in several critiques of this class and their conception of identity. Analysis of this problematic calls into question Oguibe's premise of colonial domination and resistance, especially those glib polarities that are usually drawn around colonizers and their colonized Other. It also provides a suitable framework for interrogating issues of race, class, and identity within the intertwined history of the British colonial metropolis and its colonies, especially as this relates to Egonu's career.

Egonu, who arrived in London in 1945 as a British colonial subject, went through major displacements of political and cultural identity in the metropolis. First he defined himself (or was defined) as an African, then with Nigeria's independence as a Nigerian; then as a Biafran during the failed Biafra secession bid (a defining moment for his Igbo identity), and later as a Nigerian once the threat of secession was quelled by Nigerian military might in a contest in which Britain played a major role. Each of these shifts in self-definition played out in Egonu's themes and in his efforts to carve out a niche for his practice in the European art establishment. Is there room for us to postulate a British identity for Egonu in light of his lifelong sojourn in Britain? And if there is not, why not? Indeed, one may ask whether it will ever be possible for African artists to transcend the assumption by critics that they are carriers of an innate characteristic whose sign is ever manifest in their production. What are we to make of the standard which implies that there are artists, then there are African artists?

The intricate play of multiple identities in Egonu's life and career is enough to postulate the artist as a quintessential postmodern icon. Oguibe downplays such an interpretation, at least until

the end of his narrative, when he feels compelled to signal his investment in trendy postmodernist speak (pp. 163-66). His postscript, awash in unadulterated jargon, largely undermines an otherwise lucid narrative. It also negates his earlier stated intention not to "apply to Egonu's work the plethora of discursive frames thrown up by the shattering of the modernist monocle" (p. 9).

Oguibe makes an effective case for Egonu's significance as an artist. We may better comprehend his claim if we consider that an Occidental artist who has the same length of professional practice and international recognition as Egonu does would undoubtedly be the subject of several retrospectives, art historical treatises, and coffee table texts. What is not so clear from his narrative is whether Egonu enjoys much recognition (as the author implies) in Nigeria, where he had only two exhibitions--one solo and one group show--both in Nsukka. Since his career played itself out in Europe, his specific contribution(s) to the history and development of modern art practice in Nigeria, a context in which he is represented by his conspicuous absence, remains debatable.

Oguibe's appeal to Egonu's sense of identity and community predicated on exile is difficult to sustain. How, for instance, was his "social vision and commitment" perceived within his Igbo (Nigerian, African) society? The kind of postmodern sense of community espoused for Egonu invests African artists "in exile" with the authority to represent and speak for communities from which they are long estranged. In Oguibe's text, we are invited to perceive a sense of community in several paintings in which Egonu sublimates the horror and reality of the Nigeria/Biafra conflict. If these paintings epitomize social commitment for the artist (according to Oguibe's definition of the term), one wonders what to make of the commitment of Egonu's compatriot, the poet Christopher Okigbo, who traded in his pen and prodigious verses for a rifle and a battlefront grave in that same conflict. Oguibe's interpretation of Egonu's "vision and sense of community" is a meta-narrative, a construction of imagined spaces in which the untidiness of actual social existence is displaced in favor of elegant abstraction. One recognizes the importance of such imagined communities for the exiled artist, but not the author's desire to construct an aesthetics of transcendence around it.

What Egonu's practice demands of art critics and historians is a recognition of the historical and conceptual links between European conventions of modern art with its contexts of practice, and the development of a twentieth-century tradition of modern art by African artists. An analysis of what makes modern art in Africa (especially the easel-painting tradition) unique in relation to European art and indigenous art forms and contexts of practice is sorely needed as a conceptual background to subsequent analysis of African artists both on the Continent and in the West.

The major weakness of this book lies in Oguibe's determined efforts not only to reclaim for Egonu that center, which he contends relegated the artist to a marginal place on the modernist stage, but to project the artist as the inheritor of both European modernism ***and*** an indigenous African (Igbo) conceptual framework of artistic and cultural practice. As it maps Egonu's transformation from a struggling, inexperienced artist to a confident, mature artist whose practice is validated by his induction into several prestigious international art organizations, Oguibe's text becomes in essence a retelling of modernist narratives that substitutes an African incarnation for the white male "master" and surrounds him with all the requisite tropes of alienation, anguish, exile, and solitude. The Egonu that emerges at the end of the narrative (***sans*** postscript) may as well be Egon Schielle, a solitary hero who conquers the angst of life in the Diaspora. By the standards of Oguibe's own incisive critiques of such modernist myths, his recourse to this kind of narrative is rather regressive: however, it also emphasizes the

difficulties inherent in any analysis of modern art by artists of African descent.

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