

Conversation between Evelyn Owen and One-Room Shack.

Evelyn Owen: UNITY has been created 'in the Olympic spirit'. Is UNITY a critical as well as a celebratory piece? And what is the role of art and artists in engaging with the Olympic Games?

One-Room Shack: *Yes, it is a celebratory piece because it seeks to engage with the spirit of the Olympic Games, and this would be humanity's better angel. UNITY therefore celebrates the possibility of humanity's inherent goodness in the face of those destructive forces that highlight our racial, political, economic, social and individual differences. We are under no illusion about the wheel of inequality which determines how the world goes round. The Olympic Games is one institution that brings that out in bold relief if we are to consider the nature and history of sports that are given visibility, and, in addition, those who determine the structure of the Games. Yet the ideal that underpins the Games is one that should be celebrated. As artists, it is important that we are able to critically explore the meaning of the Olympic Games as well as other compelling human issues that it yields, which are never discussed because of the beautiful seduction of its symbolism.*

EO: What do the Olympic Games symbolise to you? Can you comment on the significance of the Olympics to Nigerians, and to Africa more widely, or does it really depend on the context? Do the Olympic Games have a universal meaning? How can art help us to hold on to the promise of unity in diversity?

O-RS: *Well, the Olympic Games is intended to celebrate the idea of unity in diversity through sports. We would be hard pressed to speak for all Nigerians on its significance. From our own perspective, the Olympic Games provide an opportunity for Nigeria, nay Africa, to fraternize with the rest of the human race. No other institution brings that about on a much broader global scale. We think that the Olympic Games' notion of unity in diversity is reflective of the Igbo adage that says, "let the eagle perch, let the hawk perch. If one refuses the other the will to perch, let that one lose the use of its wings." The adage speaks about respect, love, compassion and good neighbourliness, and what would be the penalty if one should go against such an egalitarian relationship. We can find similar aphorisms in the different world's cultures. In that sense, the Olympic Games' quest for human fraternity based on mutual respect and tolerance, through sports, has a universal underpinning. As artists, we explore the merits of such universalism.*

EO: UNITY is an interactive installation, which comes alive with the movement of viewers through its maze-like structure. How important is it to you to incorporate your audience's embodied responses into your work? How do the possibilities opened up by participatory, responsive art works relate to your interests in social, political and economic power and their distribution across space?

O-RS: *When Watermans initially advertised its call for participation, it specifically mentioned that proposed projects should be interactive and with full participation by the audience. We decided on a project that not only engages with phenomenology in terms of how the work yields itself to the viewing experience, but more importantly, how the audience helps to produce and complete the work. Our project is not complete as a piece until it interacts with the viewing audience. It cannot alight without a*

participatory audience walking its labyrinth. With respect to the second part of your question, UNITY does not necessarily or directly engage with our interest in social, political and economic power, and their distribution. However, as we have already mentioned, in celebrating the spirit of the Olympic Games, UNITY also conceptually speaks to those “real” aspects of our human existence that the symbolism of the Games masks. We have termed those “real” aspects as destructive forces. It is also important to reemphasize that the Olympic Games is undergirded by a hegemonic structure that determines the nature of sports that it is invested in and where the Games are hosted. The Games is yet to come to Africa. The potential argument would be that no African country has the structure and economic power to host the Olympic Games.

EO: I’m interested in what you say about the hegemonic structure of the Olympic Games, and the highly specific (perhaps even exclusionary) sports and geographical locations it is invested in. On the other hand, as you also emphasise, the vision and wider symbolism of the Games is one of all-embracing egalitarianism. This tension – between the specific and the universal, between the exclusive and the inclusive – seems to me to be an important paradox that UNITY addresses, as you say, through its invitation to peer beneath the mask of the Games, whilst also celebrating what that mask represents. Thinking about your work as artists more widely, what is your strategy when dealing with such complex ideas? What tools and tactics do you use to explore subtle concepts and contradictory realities, and make them accessible to your audiences? Are you more concerned with developing particular arguments, or with opening up spaces within which different points of view can be articulated?

O-RS: *We would rather not call it a tension but a fact of reality. In a classical structuralist sense, there is always the idea of binary opposition governing reality. What we do in terms of strategy is to locate a consensual ground from which we engage with reality. It is a consensual ground because we are more invested in grey areas rather than establishing the good or bad. This is not to say that we do not call a spade a spade when it is necessary. In UNITY, our approach in examining what may be considered to be the politics of the Olympic Games is to create a maze that approximates the complex nature of both the human and Olympic realities (the good and the bad) using simple yet loaded symbolism, and legible iconographies. These are the five letters of the English alphabet which spells unity but which are also representing of the five Olympic rings. It is a really convoluted position but that is the nature of reality so to speak.*

EO: Yes. I think that your focus on grey areas and on locating a consensual ground is similar to how I would interpret engaging with ‘tensions’ – that is, thinking about the conceptual and material relationship between two (or more) positions which may be contradictory or at odds with one another, but are nonetheless in conversation. This idea of a conversation between different positions leads me to think about your practice, as two artists, working collaboratively under one name. How do you work together to create art as One Room Shack? Can you talk about the practical and conceptual challenges and opportunities of being mobile artists working in different environments, across borders and cultures? Do these experiences feed into your creative work?

O-RS: *Our paths crossed the first time as art students at the University of Nigeria Nsukka almost fifteen years ago. We realized that we shared common interests, similar attitudes and perspectives to life, and driven by same ambitions. One Room Shack was inspired by our shared dream to tell human stories and to engage with universal issues and ideas that can be both local and global. Distance has*

not really been much a problem for us in terms of our work. Our ideas are often articulated and clarified in series of e-conversations, phone calls and physical meetings. We get together as much as possible when time and space permits although it was better when the two of us were mainly operating out of the same abode in Nigeria. Mobility has a tremendous role in our work given our interests in globalization and its effects in creating the illusion of an integrated world. As we move constantly through spaces and deal with myriad contexts we are able to experience both the merits and political correctness of globalization, which we then engage with in our work.

EO: I'd like to talk more about globalization, how it has affected you, personally, and as practising artists, and your reasons for focusing on it in your work. Can you give some examples of its merits, as well as its drawbacks, for artists working in Nigeria? How do you identify and address the impacts of globalization in everyday life, as distinct from (or perhaps in relation to) the impacts of other contemporary social, political and economic trends at different scales?

O-RS: *Globalization is one interesting concept that suggests competing or conflicting ideals, depending on what part of the world one is from. With regard to the international art world, Gerardo Mosquera talks about globalization as flattening, reifying and manipulating cultural differences to suit a global hegemony built on Eurocentric foundations. For Nicolas Bourriaud, his concept of altermodern in the age of globalization suggests the recognition of a decentered art world, the materialization of multiple nodes of power especially in non-Western centres, and a more evenhanded form of global exchange. That is to say, a utopian international art world that resonates with Leopold Senghor's idea of universal civilization, where cultures contribute equally to a global cultural pool based on mutual respect. But we all know that there is no equalization or parity in global relations. For example, with an American or British passport, one can easily navigate international borders. With such passport, one is stamped in at most international airports without having to deal with the headache of visa applications and rejections, provided you do not stay beyond the 30 days or is it 90 days, ceiling, in most of the countries. As practising artists from the so-called developing world who may be considered as global nomads because of the itinerancy associated with contemporary artistic practice, easy mobility or its lack thereof, is an issue we constantly deal with. It is one issue that brings the rhetoric of globalization closer to home. Without over flogging it, globalization as a political, but more importantly, an economic idea, is only interested in opening up economic borders, especially for Western multinational (a very seductive neologism) corporations. Economic migrants, mostly from the so-called developing world, continue to seek the promises globalization claims it offers, with limited success.*

Our projects walk the fine line of addressing issues associated with how we see and/or are emplaced in the world as postcolonial subjects. Through projects such as Unity Maze, we are more interested in locating grey areas in both Mosquera's and Bourriaud's positions. Perhaps that is what you see as a tension, but it is what we describe as the discourse of globalization opening up or closing the discursive space.

EO: I find your critical reading of globalization really helpful, especially in the way that you draw attention to unequal geographies of mobility. As I think your comments suggest, it is important not to let seductive ideas of global connection and equalization distract us from the continued relevance of location within the wider systems we are situated within. By location, I mean geographical location, but also the implications of this for the political, economic, social and cultural contexts that artists experience; without being defined by these contexts, artists may certainly engage with them. What

influence do Nigerian and/or African contexts have on your creative enterprise, in terms of both form and concept?

O-RS: *The fact that we are of Igbo ethnicity, Nigerian nationality, and from the continent of Africa, colour the way we see the world. We cannot deny or run away from these facts even as we claim cosmopolitan citizenship. Our work tends to be political and/or sociological because of our circumstance as postcolonial subjects and also the issues we are interested in. For example, we do not shy away from examining the structures of power not because it may be considered “cool” to do so but because we are convinced that there are a lot at stake that needs to be dealt with. We look at how the structure of power reveals itself at a global level, and Africa’s place in that complex matrix. Who gets spoken for when the conversation is about poverty, and who is most likely the focus of attention when it is about inequality, etc.? At the same time, we also examine how power is brokered at local levels, say, in Nigeria. An example is local arguments with regard to political and economic patronage, what is described in the Nigerian parlance as sharing the national cake. We are interested in how the sharing of the national cake and also its crumbs reveal a badly contrived political system that continues to destabilize our very existence as a country. It is important that we bear the different contexts, the local and the global, in mind when we conceive of our projects and also be critically reflexive.*

EO: And what’s next for One Room Shack? How do you plan to develop your interests in discourses of globalization, and what sources are you currently drawing on for inspiration?

O-RS: *We have a couple of projects still in the oven. We have been articulating the parameters of some, such as Dinner for Two and Aesthetics of Low Food, in the last five years, while others are still at the ideas level. Like we have already stated, our projects deal with the various aspects of human experience that can be discussed under the broad banner of contemporary globalization.*

EO: Can you talk more about ‘Aesthetics of Low Food’ and ‘Dinner for two’? What is the significance of food and eating in your creative practice?

O-RS: *Food is universal but it can also be revealing of social class and structures if we consider the different kinds of food outlets such as restaurants, hotels, mobile food vendors, etc., and the kinds of individuals that patronize them. That is the main reason we employ it as our point of departure in engaging with power and hegemony. “Aesthetics of Low Food,” which we began in 2006, was inspired by our experience of eating at a buka (temporary food cafe), which was a walking distance from our one-room abode when we were living in Abuja, Nigeria’s political capital. The buka was in the heart of the city, close to the three arms zone where our national assembly is located, and the national secretariat. However, it was patronized by security guards, clerical officers, and drivers who work at the big government organizations. It was very interesting to us to consider the paradox at play, given the proximity of the buka to the seat of “high” government, and those it served. We conceived the Ikoyi project to extrapolate on the Abuja experience when we moved back to Lagos.*

There is some connection between ‘Aesthetics of Low Food’ and ‘Dinner for Two’ in the sense that food and food places are inserted as iconographies. However, the narratives are not the same, and the subtexts of the visual messages are conveyed differently. ‘Dinner for Two’ examines the relationship between the so-called First World and Third World, using the G-8 meetings as a conceptual framework, and the physical setting of a dinner date as a visual metaphor. The notion of a dinner date between two individuals suggests a measure of conviviality or friendship. Yet, regarding the relationship

between the G-8 and Africa, this is hardly the case. Behind the sweeping gesture of civility and philanthropy lies the paternalistic politics of an adult (G-8) dictating to a child (Africa) on what is best for him/her. Hence, 'Dinner for 2' offers a platform for us to chew on the many ideas of moral capital (historical and temporal), how it frames or is framed in the relationship between the "global few" (G-8), who control the global political economy, and the "global many" (Africa in particular, but also the rest of the developing world). When we conceived of 'Dinner for 2' in December 2009 there were no Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Our project becomes very germane given the spate of "Occupy" movements that are generating excitements in the West.

It is important to end the conversation by saying that in our work, we also play with humor and parody as a counterbalance to a potential fixation on the serious nature of our subject matters by a potential audience. This has a way of opening up our work to multiple readings on many levels.