# AT THE BORDER POST OF WESTERN ART: THE PROVISIONAL "REAGGREGATION" OF MOSHEKWA LANGA'S ART INTO THE SOUTH AFRICAN CANON

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## Abstract

When Moshekwa Langa's eponymous solo exhibition opened in Johannesburg in 1995, it was hailed as turning point in South African art as it appeared to mark the entry of the first black South African artist working within a neo-conceptualist rubric. Untrained and hailing from a rural locale, years earlier Langa's art would most likely have been deemed unprogressive or "traditional". Borrowing from Arnold van Gennep's (cited by Turner 1969) notion of 'reaggregation' – the final phase of a rite of passage, where the subject transcends the liminal phase, in this article I explore the shifts that facilitated Langa's provisional inclusion, while unpacking the manner in which his identity paradoxically served to ensure his liminal status. Olu Oguibe (2004) suggests that African artists can resist this position through acts of self-definition. Langa avoided this route; he was complicit in constructing his liminal identity. He challenged reaggregation via an ironic re-enaction of reintegration as a universalist subject in a photographic body of work that responded to the skewed reception of his 1995 exhibition.

Meditating on this landmark moment in South African art history, I demonstrate how terms and labels used to "elevate" or culturally position Langa's art, such as the neo-conceptualist tag, were fundamental to his art being reaggregated by the predominately white artworld, although it was to some degree an uneasy fit. Other theoretical frameworks used to usher his work into the canon of the contemporary, such as a notion of African conceptualism, as proposed by Salah Hassan and Oguibe (2001) are explored. So, too, are the intricacies and flaws involved in "inclusionary" or corrective processes instigated by the same authorities that played a role in determining exclusionary paradigms.

Van Gennep and Victor Turner's theory of liminality proves useful in mapping the mechanics of aggregation and the position of the liminal subject, but, as I demonstrate in this article, it cannot sufficiently contextualise imposed notions of liminality as ascribed to African artists by Eurocentric writers who privilege inclusion into occidental canons above others.


Contemporary African artists are often thought to occupy an indefinite territory that exists between several binary couplings: contemporary/traditional, urban/rural, self/other and western/African. In other words, they are located 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention' – a phrase the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1969: 95) coined to describe the existence of liminal subjects during rites of passage. Turner's notion provides a useful metaphor to describe the ambiguous position of the African artist. The idea that the African artist occupies an uncertain status is one that Olu Oguibe (2004:10) challenges during his scrutiny of an interview between Ivorian painter Ouattara and Thomas McEvilley, the American art critic, in which he observes the latter's keenness to pinpoint his interlocutor's connection to a rural, traditional locale, although the artist was born in the urban centre of Abidjan, and currently lives in New York and Paris. Oguibe (2004:10) suggests that a contemporary African artist's identity undergoes more scrutiny than their work – a tendency that could be attributed to an occidental impulse to locate the artist "between" a set of geographical and ideological positions, which would concretise or substantiate their liminal status. Oguibe intimates that this desire to link artists to traditional and rural existences is part of a scheme to distract from the contemporaneity of the African artist's work and suppress the ideologies or intellectual pursuits underpinning it. In Ouattara's case, cerebral engagement with the substance of his art is obviated in service of constructing a biographical narrative that serves to underscore his otherness and "in-betweenness". Oguibe (2004:11) notes that although Outtara was outraged by McEvilley's line of questioning, he kept his cool. Ouattara's response was motivated by a tacit acknowledgement that as a contemporary African artist he occupies an outpost terrain, 'a location on the periphery of the principality' that McEvilley governs (Oguibe 2004:11). In other words, McEvilley controls the borders of western art and is able to deliver Outtara from the liminal zone he supposedly occupies, although he seems determined to ensure that Outtara remains in this ambiguous terrain.

Turner's theory on liminality, which draws from Arnold van Gennep's processual analysis, was developed to explain the rituals of the Ndembu tribe in Zaire. It could provide a framework to understand not only artists as "liminal" people – Turner (1969:128) suggests most artists are, by nature, 'edgemen' – but the cultural reaggregation or reincorporation of African artists' work within the western canon. Liminal personae or 'threshold people', as Turner (1969:95) terms them, are those persons that 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space'. This has particular relevance for African artists perceived to be caught between western and African cultural conventions. Turner (1969:95) proposes that reaggregation is the final phase of a rite of passage when the liminal subject becomes reincorporated into society and adopts its set of customary norms. From this perspective, McEvilley's desire to locate Ouattara within a rural African context could be read as part of a strategy to "reaggregate" Outtara into a society seen to be most befitting him and thereby undercut his liminal status. However, appropriating this theory of liminality and/or applying it to the cultural positioning of African art is problematic. As it was developed by westerners in an effort to grasp the intricacies of traditional African practices, this theory conforms to an occidental tendency that Oguibe identifies in McEvilley: to situate African expression within an ahistorical and supposedly unprogressive existence. It also seems contradictory to project a theory developed by westerners to understand traditional African society onto contemporary African art, which is haunted by its supposedly dialectic relationship to traditional African practices. In other words, use of Turner's theory of liminality undermines efforts at effacing this often prejudiced reflex. Employing this theory in the context of contemporary African art also risks implying that its "reaggregation" into the western canon is the goal of non-western artists.

Oguibe's concern is primarily with the manner in which occidentals determine the boundaries that delineate dichotomised frameworks and thus set the conditions for their liminality. Such pervasive typological modes of perceiving ensure that African artists become the primary subject of their art, forcing them to struggle


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**Figure 1:** **Moshekwa Langa, *Untitled (Skins)*, 1995, mixed media. Photograph by Emma Bedford. Courtesy of the Goodman Gallery.**

against 'displacement by numerous strategies of regulation and surveillance' (Oguibe 2004:12). Oguibe (2004:13) proposes that in order to counter this form of regulation and surveillance, African artists should employ a strategy of self-definition. In other words, by constructing their own narratives of self, African artists would be able to "overwrite" those fictions that seek to fix them as liminal subjects.

The South African artist Moshekwa Langa became the object of scrutiny when his eponymous solo exhibition, held at the now defunct Rembrandt Van Rijn gallery in Johannesburg, caught the art intelligentsia's attention in 1995. The attention he generated was mainly because he was seen as the first black artist to have created art that was undeniably contemporary, given that it evinced characteristics associated with neo-conceptualism – a label which activated his reaggregation into a white dominated artworld, then beholden to a western construct of art. Curator and art commentator Clive Kellner (1997:160) sums up Langa's significance at the time as follows:

> Langa provides the sense of a future, where aspiration can be granted at the end of the proverbial yellow brick road. By mimicking Langa's success, albeit in his shadow, we are all offered the opportunity to be part of what is coming, as Langa epitomizes everything that the establishment has been seeking: he is a young, black, (and) conceptually-based artist.

The intense attention his exhibition garnered implied that Langa was an anomaly. His status was predicated on the fact that despite being black and hailing from a rural locale where he did not have the opportunity to study art at a tertiary level, he had managed to create "progressive" work that was on par with that of white conceptualists. The manner in which he was hailed as a progressive, contemporary artist created the impression that Langa had transcended old biases – in other words, he had been reaggregated. However, initial responses to his work suggested its resonance remained inextricably tethered to the traditional/contemporary dialectic and to the fact that it operated as an expression of a liminal state of being caught between African and western cultural norms.[1] Paradoxically, the very attributes that guaranteed his position similarly threatened to undermine it; these attributes ensured that his work hovered on the threshold of the western canon, thus reinforcing the perception of his reaggregation as constantly provisional. Given this actuality, Turner's model of liminality falls short in encompassing the complexities surrounding the positioning of Langa's early *oeuvre*, particularly if one takes into account that his liminal status was largely imposed by certain theorists, curators and critics (such as Kellner 1997; Walker 2002, 2003, and Friedman 1995, 1996) in the late 1990s. Put another way: considering that Langa's position as a liminal subject was ascribed to him, it was not a stable one; furthermore, it was not an actuality that Langa himself perceived, given that he has never articulated an awareness of himself as a liminal subject in any interviews.

Nevertheless, Langa encouraged, if not pre-empted, this outlook by embracing his ambiguous position. The process of his art-making was initially propelled by an autobiographical impulse,[2] yet he embraced a number of devices which allowed him to evade "self-definition"– for instance, all the artworks of the 1995 exhibition were left untitled and he desisted from offering any explanations for them. This left his art production vulnerable to imposed interpretations.

Artists' ability to determine their position and products is limited. As Jean Baudrillard (cited by Jones 2006:100) notes, 'a subject can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He [*sic*] is now only pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence'. In such a context, the artist and his/her work[3] is "produced" and constructed by others – critics, gallerists and theorists.

For his 1995 exhibition, Langa produced an *Untitled* work informally known as *Skins* because of its resemblance to animal pelts. I focus on this artwork, showing how his perceived liminal identity was imposed by writers, theorists and critics in the 1990s and how this impacted on its contradictory cultural positioning within the South African and international artworlds at that time. This was to satisfy a variety of socio-political and art historical agendas pertinent in that first year of South Africa's fledgling democracy and, in the international context, to address anxieties attached to globalisation and its subsequent threat to "locality". Turner's phases of liminality prove useful in framing the ways in which liminal subjects are conceived and how their reaggregation is negotiated, although, as has been stated earlier, it cannot fully explain the contradictory nature of the concept of the liminal *vis-à-vis* contemporary African art.

The contemporaneity of art by black artists was historically conceived through patterns of reaggregation – as defined through Ricky Burnett's landmark exhibition, *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* (1985) and Steven Sack's *Neglected Traditions* (1988). Thus, the following overview of the ethos driving inclusion in these exhibitions is intended to contribute to an understanding of the initial reception and positioning of Langa's *Skins*. I also demonstrate how scrutiny of Langa's liminal identity during this period informed his subsequent art-making, which seems to have influenced the production of a flurry of identity-based art, in which self-definition or an irreverent deflection of self, expressing a desire for non-conformity or temporary reaggregation, was a dominant trope.

It should be noted that any conclusions I draw regarding the reception to Langa's 1995 *Untitled* work, *Skins*, are gleaned from an in-depth survey of texts published around the time of his first solo exhibition. As Oguibe implies, it is critics and theorists who presume to position artists and their works by placing emphasis on certain aspects, such as biographical information, in order to support their view. However, as opinions shift and vary between writers, this kind of positioning or non-positioning is never fixed or stable. As such, it should be acknowledged that critical reflections on the reception of Langa's *Skins* and his entry into the South African artworld, which were published towards the beginning of the new millennium by Kathryn Smith (2000) and Tracy Murinik (2003), upturned and challenged previous attitudes.

## Caught between tradition and modernity[4]

As a cipher for identity, *Skins* was a perplexing product because it evoked a clichéd concept of Africanness, and consequently expressed a contrived notion of selfhood. Consisting of numerous torn cement bags covered in dark splodges, the bags recall the patterns of animals' pelts. Their uneven silhouette also mimics a preserved animal skin. Langa makes no attempt to disguise the character of the material; the cement manufacturer's branding remains visible. Nevertheless the *ersatz* animal hides imply a connection to an African idiom. Several South African ethnicities employ animal hides in their traditional dress. Thus, their affinity to traditional culture has become generalised to the point where animal skins have become popular décor accessories, serving as shorthand signifiers of "Africanness". The manner in which Langa's *faux* animal skins were displayed suggests that they were not intended as decorative objects;

fixed onto several wires with the aid of pegs, they appeared more like garments drying on a washing line.

Langa's employment of this trite African motif could have been viewed as an ironic gesture towards undercutting stereotypical notions that art created by black artists should reveal their ethnic affiliations. It also pointed to ways in which traditional cultural practices have evolved in urban contexts. The use of readymade objects in the production of so-called "traditional" art is often cited as a manifestation of the ways in which traditional African customs have been influenced by globalisation and modernisation. The use of Barbie dolls in the production of Ndebele dolls (Nettleton, Charlton & Rankin-Smith 2003:52) is an example of this phenomenon. Superficially, *Skins* shares some similarities with these supposed hybrid forms, in that a traditional accoutrement (animal skins) is replaced by disused objects (cement bags) derived from a consumerist culture. Thus the significance of Langa's *Skins* could be framed within the context of evolving traditional forms that have transmogrified to meet the demands of a progressive African culture. Such objects are often deemed to be the product of two conflicting worlds: African traditional culture and the contemporary western world.

It is useful to note that Van Gennep (cited by Turner 1969:166) uses two different sets of terms to describe the three phases of passage that encompass the transformation of the liminal subject: the first set is separation, margin and reaggregation, while the second set is preliminal, liminal and postliminal. As Turner (1969:166) observes, the former set refers to spatial conditions, whilst the latter evokes transitions within a particular space and time. This is pertinent to how one might apply the notion of liminality in relation to the positioning of African art products, which are typically classified as either traditional, hybridised traditional contemporary objects or western/contemporary. Here the term "traditional" refers to van Gennep's notion of 'separation' – that which is visibly other to supposedly advanced western artworks. Therefore, it follows that "margin" or "liminal" refers to those artworks that are neither traditional nor contemporary, and as outlined earlier, "postliminal" or "reggregation" would apply to artworks that fully conform to western art norms. As I make clear further on in this article, the spatial and temporal dimension that underpins these sets of terms also has bearing on the classifications of African art; traditional artworks are associated with a dated impulse that is situated within a specific spatial condition, namely rural living and its concomitant cultural lifestyle, which is seen, particularly in the attitudes embraced by the likes of Burnett (1985), to be quite separate from the kind of existence and art produced in urban contexts. Van Gennep's terms prove useful in delineating the boundaries and phases necessary to frame the liminal, for, until a norm or convention is perceived, nothing can be seen to exist outside of it. In this way, the liminal is conceived in relation to a dominant model, which in the context of most art history, is defined according to western notions of art.

Langa's *Skins* were deemed as hybrid objects because it was presumed that he occupied a narrow divide torn between authenticity/tradition and modernity – a conflict said to be driven by the need for an African artist to prove 'oneself authentic and [lay] claim to a naturalised tradition which is not immured by western ideology' (Kellner 1997:157). This assertion implies that traditional artworks lack authenticity within a contemporary context, while conversely, Africans making contemporary art are creating work that is not authentically "African".

Langa's connection to a specific ethnic culture that may have informed his art was tenuous. He moved to KwaNdeblele, a semi-independent homeland for the Matabele people at the age of fifteen, where he might have been exposed to the colourful geometric painting style associated with the Ndebele. However, the artworks at Langa's 1995 exhibition displayed no links to this heritage. The only reference to tradition that *Skins* evinced was a generic one. In this way, the traditional/contemporary dialectic that was imposed on his work had little validity. Salah Hassan (1999:219) warns that such dialectical readings of contemporary African culture are founded on biased western constructs that have failed to recognise that Africans and other Third-World people 'entered the dialogue with modernism long ago' and that contemporary art in these regions has been in existence for more than half-a-century. In this way, the notion of traditional or contemporary African art being separated by space, time and geographical locations appears oversimplified, even false, thwarting the notion that art evincing characteristics of both exists on the "margin" or "liminal' – to borrow van Gennep's definitions.

Langa was living in Johannesburg at the time of the exhibition and was in the employ of the state broadcaster; nevertheless his connection to a rural setting was foregrounded by writers and critics (Kellner (1997); Mercer (2004); Friedman (1995, 1996)), ensuring that his work remained connected to traditional cultural practices, or the preliminal. Langa (cited by Friedman 1996: 29) did not contradict this view, declaring his art as an 'extension of my working everyday in isolation at home in KwaNdebele. I'm slowly learning the contemporary art discourse but theory wasn't something that consciously informed my art'. This statement implies that, at the time, Langa perceived himself as a "rural artist" – perhaps he was not aware of the political signification of the designation, or perhaps he was fully aware of the connotations attached to the tag and chose to exploit his "origins" as a selling point. This conflicted with the contemporariness of his art and the neo-conceptualist impulse thought to underpin it.

Contemporariness is geographically defined, asserts Hassan (1999:218). Contemporary art was (and is) a category

> reserved for the works of those African artists who are mostly urban-based, produce work according to the norms of Western modern art and exhibit in galleries, museums or foreign cultural centres ... Works produced by this category of artists are classified as "elite", "fine"; or "high" as opposed to other forms referred to as "traditional", "tourist", "commercial" or "popular" (Hassan 1999:218).

Langa may have been complicit in constructing his rural/untrained artist persona but he also attempted to evade "self-definition" – a factor which may lead one to conclude that he was complicit in constructing his liminal identity. When he first approached Stephen Hobbs, then-curator of the Rembrandt Van Rijn gallery, with a view to exhibiting, he showed Hobbs a number of items, such as diaries, photo-albums containing family pictures and a scrapbook, all of which seemed to offer biographical information about himself (Hobbs 2009). According to Hobbs (2009), this was a false biographical narrative constructed by the artist that conformed to the mercurial nature and illegibility of his work. For Hobbs (2009), this proved an attraction: in his view, it made Langa's work appear 'so frustratingly inaccessible' that he, as the viewer, felt compelled to grasp 'the root' of his work.

In the broader context of the white-dominated South African artworld, there was a perception that knowledge of Langa's character and history, which was also obscured, would somehow unlock its meaning. Langa's resistance towards "self-definition" was part of an effort to deflect prescribed notions that had historically been attached to black artists by the white-dominated artworld that acted as self-appointed custodians of the local cultural terrain. No doubt Langa rallied against entrenched racial classification systems propagated by apartheid ideology, which sought to assign fixed characteristics to different racial groups, in a bid to redirect attention to his art. Despite these pointed efforts, however, he was objectified and his supposed connection to a rural locale was foregrounded in an effort to situate him as an artist caught between rural/urban contexts.

Given that black artists' creative outputs[5] were so closely tied to their context, the latter was an important factor in classifying and comprehending their work. Thus Langa's rural background and origins became a source of interest, and "placing him" became the central subject of the work rather than the mechanics of his expression – echoing Outtara's experience in his dealings with McEvilley.

'When I started to show my work, I felt forced to talk about the experience of "otherness" rather than the poetic gesture, which is really what interests me', Langa (cited by Janus 2002:91) observes. Thus, it is clear that the nature of the dynamics surrounding his inclusion within the local art canon similarly highlighted his exclusion. In this way, his reaggregation was paradoxically based on his marginal existence – as van Gennep's phases of liminality delineate, "aggregation" can only be possible if exclusion has occurred. In this context, however, one can also see a subversion of these phases, where reaggregation and marginality become conflated or part of a single social/cultural continuum. As a result, the contemporariness of *Skins* was never completely attainable, whilst paradoxically, his rural origin ensured that his ability to evoke conceptualism was considered to be remarkable.

## *Skins's* link to conceptualism

In an interview with Kobena Mercer (2004:[s.p.]), Langa explained that *Skins* was a product of an experiment underpinned by a distinctly western preoccupation: documenting a narrative of the self. After matriculating, he was apparently gripped by a desire to write an autobiography – 'how I came to be what I am' (Langa cited by Mercer 2004:[s.p.]). He found the medium of writing inadequate: '[e]very time I thought I had encapsulated in words everything that could have influenced me, there was something just hanging on the outskirts of what I wanted to say'. Frustrated, he looked to other modes of expression. The village where he was living was adjacent to a building site. Disused cement bags were in abundance and before long he began to experiment with these objects (Mercer 2004:[s.p.]). Thus it seems that while the production of *Skins* was underpinned by an autobiographical gesture, it was not directly indexical of the artist's identity.

Initially the animal pelts in *Skins* were not the art objects *per se*. When he first showed the artwork to Hobbs (2009), Langa presented a photograph of the *faux* animal hides on a washing line. Hobbs (2009) immediately perceived the work as an installation, a term which was unlikely to have been part of the nineteen year-old Langa's lexicon, given his self-confessed ignorance of contemporary art discourse.

Langa's lack of grounding in conceptual art was not viewed as a hindrance to his artwork's association with conceptualism: in fact, it appears that his art was more highly prized for it because it was evidence that he possessed a level of sophistication beyond his perceived social or educational limitations. As Hazel Friedman (1995:30) confirms, his work was 'nothing short of astounding in terms of its sensitivity to materials and its conceptual sophistication. And the fact that Langa has had no formal art training makes his achievements all the more impressive'. Thus it was with a degree of almost paternal interest that the predominantly white South African artworld fixated its gaze on Langa, cultivating him into a veritable icon, who appeared to undercut one stereotype while making him conform to another (Friedman 1996:29).

Shaped by his own frame of reference, Hobbs (2009) made selections of the work Langa showed him according to what he perceived to be of value. As a practicing artist, Hobbs aligned his own artmaking practice with the neo-conceptualist movement that had come to dominate contemporary practice in South Africa since the late 1980s, when the likes of Alan Alborough, and later Kendell Geers, had been working under this rubric. Thus it seems likely that in the year following democracy, when the art community were looking to "democratise" art production and display, they would have been on the lookout for black artists perceived to have embraced the conceptualist ethos. Langa appeared to fit the bill and was admitted into what Friedman (1996:29) terms 'the elite club of white boys known as neo-conceptualists'.

The label was a vital part of his reaggregation into the predominantly white artworld and in many ways, it seemed like an easy fit. Neo-conceptualism was distinct from conceptualism in that it embraced the postmodernist impulse in the sense that 'the documentary or text was replaced with a cynical materialism that presumed to criticise the commodity system' (Morgan 1996: 40). Undoubtedly, Langa's appropriation of cement bags in *Skins* is in line with this definition of neo-conceptualism. Originally photographed *in situ* on a domestic washing line, the *Skins* display also conformed to a 'critical strategy of contextual insurgence' – a feature that Tony Godrey (cited by Richards 2002:35) identifies as being specific to conceptualist practice. However, given that at that period of Langa's career he had little, if any, awareness around these art historical terms, one might question how valid it was to impose them onto his work. As Okwui Enwezor (2001:72) asks: 'what does it mean to nominate something as conceptualist, something that acts like, looks like and resembles those practises but whose chief concerns may lie elsewhere?'.

The conceptualist tag was vital in classifying Langa's art as contemporary, even though it conflicted with his rural background. The cultural cachet attached to the conceptual art tag ensured the work was viewed as undeniably 'progressive' or '*avant gardist*' (Richards 2002:35). The conceptual label immediately distinguished it from art and cultural practices historically thought to define black so-called traditional expression or the resistance art genre of the 1970s and 1980s, which directly attacked the apartheid system. The label was an expedient device to mark a new post-apartheid era in South Africa art that was no longer defined by 'an art of ideology but of ideas, whose struggle site lies not in the didactic political turf but in more ineluctable existential realms' (Friedman 1996:29).

## How contemporaneity was historically defined

The notion of contemporariness *vis-à-vis* art produced by black South Africans has historically been linked to the manner in which their work evinces characteristics common to progressive art produced by whites. In other words, it was only when black artists appropriated western approaches to art (Sack 1988:9) that their cultural production was viewed as contemporary. If one reads this phenomenon through the lens of van Gennep's phases of passage, it becomes obvious that conforming to the norms set by the white western dominated artworld would guarantee reaggregation – the phase following the liminal or marginal one.

It was at Burnett's exhibition titled *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* (1985) that black artists exhibited alongside white artists for the first time and under the contemporary rubric. Burnett eschewed aesthetic absolutes and implied in the catalogue essay that in post-colonial third/first world contexts such value systems are inappropriate. Nevertheless, he suggested that the white artists' contributions to the exhibition were undeniably more 'sophisticated' because of their advanced skills and the manner in which their work demonstrated an awareness of 'art developments in other parts of the world' (Burnett 1985:[s.p.]). Of course, black artists had been well aware of international trends in art: many had appropriated the modernist vocabulary since as the early 1900s. This was demonstrated in Steven Sack's 1988 exhibition, The Neglected Tradition, which was engineered to reclaim the history of black modernist art production.

The latter exhibition celebrated artists such as Gerard Sekoto and John Koenakeefe Mohl (Sack 1988:9), who began painting in the western tradition in 1920s and 1930s, and were dubbed "the pioneers" of a new South African art history because they assumed a socio-realist/impressionistic mode of painting. However, this implied that black artists' work was only deemed "high art" or "modern" when it mirrored traditional western art. Once again, it seems that in order for black artists' work to be reaggregated into the white-dominated artworld, it needed to conform to a set of rules and conventions that defined it at that time. Sack's intention to uncover art produced by black artists working in the modernist tradition that ran parallel with developments in art in white art circles was a noble one and helped to shatter misconceptions reflected in Burnett's statement, but in doing so, he unwittingly implied that black African cultural expression that predated Sekoto and Mohl was not modern.

Consequently, Sack inadvertently drew a potent boundary between the traditional and the modern, the outmoded and the progressive. In this way, the apparent "inventiveness" of black artist's expression was measured according to the degree by which they were able to produce work that transcended the limitations of their restricted educational and financial circumstances. A different set of criteria was employed in measuring the value of work produced by white and black artists. Here one might begin to see how efforts towards effacing one set of boundaries provides the foundations for another, and how notions of contemporaneity – both temporally and ideologically – are defined.

Echoing Hassan's observation that western historians associate contemporary art with African urbanity, Burnett (1985:[s.p.]) identified urban artists with contemporary expression, because artists in these locales 'tend[ed] to look at the precedents set by the official white culture'. Thus the urban/rural dichotomy intrinsically collapsed into the traditional/modern dichotomy that substantially shaped how contemporary African art was defined.

## An African conceptualist product?

Defining Langa's *Skins* and the work from his 1995 exhibition as neo-conceptualist appeared to flatten its paradoxical nature and the manner in which it potentially challenged western constructs of art. Kellner (1997:161) perceives the ambiguity of Langa's work to be driven by a strategy to usurp western hegemony: 'since conventional forms of access are denied, western cognitive practice does little to unveil the paradoxical meanings that lie at the core of his practice'. In this way, one could conclude that Langa's art purposively evaded and challenged the typology and politics of reaggregation.

At the time that *Skins* generated attention, it seems as if there was no appropriate language within which to frame it. To resolve the quandary, Oguibe and Hassan might well have made a case for it being read under the banner of African conceptualism. In other words, they might have called for the terms of reaggregation to be re-defined according to African paradigms. They advance the notion that conceptualism is not specific to western contemporary art practice as it serves as a firm link between contemporary and classical African art – both evidence a 'pre-eminence of idea over form' (Oguibe & Hassan cited by Richards 2002:37). So while western theorists locate conceptualism within a specific set of historical events, Hassan and Oguibe (2001:10) argue that there is no firm genealogy of conceptualism: 'conceptual art emerged … from a long series of unconnected and not altogether intentional acts and interventions in which artists elected or rejected certain forms of strategies in artmaking' – events which they believe have occurred on the African continent. This purview implies that an artist would not need to be aware, or be consciously creating neo-conceptualist work, for it to be recognised as such.

Hassan and Oguibe's alternate history of conceptualism, or their rejection of its occidental genealogy, ensures that African products such as Langa's Skins are able to be framed simultaneously within local and global discourses. In this way, reaggregation would no longer be the objective or final phase, and existing 'betwixt and between' as Turner puts it, would be a permanent condition. The loosening of such art historical certitudes is perhaps a necessary one, particularly if western imposed notions of art are to be disrupted. Enwezor (2001:72) proposes that, 'conceptual art has become so institutionalised that it has come to occupy a narrow strip of territory encompassing only discourses flowing out of very specific practices'. However, while the erosion of prescribed boundaries ensures plurality, it also risks 'nullifying the critical point' (Richards 2002:36).

## A "universal" product evoking a universal condition

The spirit of postmodernism may have encouraged pluralism, thus opening so-called high-art circuits to vernacular or non-western cultures, but as Gerado Mosquera (2005:220) observes, such moves have also

> introduced a new thirst for exoticism, the carrier of either passive or second-class Eurocentricism, which instead of universalising its paradigms, conditions certain cultural productions from the periphery according to paradigms that are expected of it for consumption by the centres.

Langa certainly satisfied a "thirst" that the international community was looking to satiate: the year following his exhibition at the Rembrandt Van Rijn gallery, he showed at *Young Art in South Africa* held at the Galerie Frank Hänel in Frankfurt, the exhibition *South Africa at the Forefront* at the October gallery in London, and *Colours: Kunst aus Südafrika* at Haus der Kultuen der Welt in Berlin. After South Africa's transition to democracy there was heightened interest in art from this country. That Langa embodied the optimism which defined this era with his ability to produce such progressive art despite his circumstances was proof that history could be transcended. His perceived dual existence, his liminal position, and the sense of displacement his work evoked also made him attractive to international audiences, for, in the context of rising transnationalism, displacement had come to be viewed as a universal condition.

> Although places such as Bophuthatswana, Kwa Ndbele and KwaZulu-Natal, all of which have been featured in Langa's map-based collages are neo-colonial tribal constructs, under a rubric of global displacement they become as cosmopolitan as any place else whose population is essentially a transient ward of the nation-state at the mercy of global capital. In this respect Langa's work is hardly region-specific. Without ever leaving the confines of his native South Africa, Langa could have assumed the status of "world citizen" and his work could rightfully claim to being "cosmopolitan" insofar as that word commensurates with the term "global village" (Walker 2003: 207).

The feelings of displacement Langa was thought to have experienced in his life were believed to be evidenced in the cornucopia of mediums and media that he appropriated. These included quotations, drawings, photographs and objects (Ghez & Colombo 2002:24), used in a way that offered onlookers a view into a world of chaos that appeared to defy logic. As a result, it was not only Langa who appeared to be a liminal character; his work was also considered to be part of a ritual to enact his liminality; to replay the condition. Turner (1969: 128) suggests that artists tend to be liminal people as they 'strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing to enter into vital relations with other men [*sic*] in fact or imagination'. His view of artists indirectly highlights the manner in which they have been stereotyped as 'edgemen' (Turner 1969:128), and are thus forced to comply with this notion of occupying a position on the "edges" of society. Turner also considers the act of artmaking as a liminal one – he suggests liminal processes are the 'generating source of culture and structure' (Schechner 1987:11).

However, Langa's displacement was framed as being incurred by the colonising procedures of western culture (Kellner 1997:160), which, as Hamza Walker (2002:79) implies, were exacerbated when the artist moved from KwaNdbele to Johannesburg. Thus a western influence was perceived as a corrupting force that severed his connection to traditional African life, resulting in a crisis of identity that, in turn, forced him into a liminal zone. Such attitudes have shaped western theories around African or "black art", where the "traditional" label fixes these products as symptoms of an un-progressive and unchanging society 'enshrined within a mystique of an historicity and cyclical perpetuity' (Nettleton 1991:32).

Given that in 1996, Langa created maps depicting Bophuthatswana from trash bags and tape, titling one *They Lived Happily Ever After*, it is likely that the sense of displacement he may have sought to articulate was centred on the manner in which black people previously had been removed and relocated to land prescribed for people of that race by the apartheid state. Locally, historians and critics suppressed the political thrust in Langa's work as it more than likely conflicted with a desire to establish a new post-apartheid era in South Africa art, which was no longer designed to overturn apartheid ideology but to engage with conceptualist practice.

International art theorists believed Langa's significance as a contemporary artist was rooted in the fact that his art traced 'the fault lines … shaping contemporary experience locally and globally' (Tawdros cited by Hall 2003:34). Thus, he was viewed as an individual caught not only between rural/urban, local/global contexts but (local) authenticity/purity and (western) progressive universal trends. On the international art circuit, he was mostly fixed to an "outpost terrain" – the ghettoised territory of international South African or African contemporary themed exhibitions.[6]

The idea of Langa as a rural, untrained artist was, to some degree, an imposed construct. He was not disconnected from urban culture or global movements. While growing up in KwaNdbele he immersed himself in novels and popular magazines, and was an avid listener to serial fiction read on the BBC radio (Janus 2002:90). Langa also enjoyed a high-quality private education at the Max Stibbe Waldorf school project, a mixed-race school in Pretoria, where he received a prescriptive school art education (Schipper 1999:32).

According to Murinik (2003:10), who was one of the local theorists who began to take a critical look at how Langa's work had been received and positioned, Langa was motivated to take up a residency at the Rijkasakademie in Amsterdam in 1997 because he was fed-up with 'the sense of confinement that came with being typecast in South Africa'. The status of "world citizen" was however, denied to him, as in the international context his work's value was tied to his identity 'as manifest in his name, race and country of origin – (and) was in all likelihood expected to reflect regional specificity' (Walker 2003:207, 208). Langa concurred with this observation: 'everything I touched in Amsterdam was misunderstood. I could make a simple gesture but it would be "a gesture made by an African and then by a South African". It's been described as "too clever"' (Smith 2000:5). To circumvent this dilemma, Langa (cited by Smith 2000:5) again created art that was purposively ambiguous and unreadable, as 'a way of dealing with the situation without really dealing with the situation'.

## Langa's photographic retaliation

It was through interviews with people such as Kathryn Smith (2000) that Langa appeared to rally against the manner in which he was positioned by theorists and critics, but it was in a series of photographic portraits he created in 19997 that Langa directly engaged and challenged the manner in which his perceived identity had overshadowed his practice. These photographs may be read as a response to the manner in which he had been "objectified" after his 1995 exhibition. Langa features in the scanned Polaroid photographs, sometimes holding a lamp with a naked bulb over his body, thus encouraging scrutiny thereof. He is pictured wearing ubiquitous "western" attire – a pair of faded jeans, white briefs and white socks. These ensembles completely deny his supposedly rural African connection and suppress any form of individuality. In other words, he becomes 'the universalist subject' (Walker 2002:81), supporting the idea that he had been reaggregated into mainstream western culture; his otherness, his "in-betweenness" appears to be suppressed. In some images he is half-naked, thus creating the illusion of vulnerability, but the generic white briefs and socks "neutralise" or blank out his identity, while still highlighting the fetishisation of his dark skin tone. In this way, he offers himself up for scrutiny while keeping his identity concealed behind a generic façade.

Unlike the work on his 1995 exhibition, these photographic portraits are all titled, thus allowing him to assume (some) control of how they might be read. Indeed, the titles are telling and reveal a sardonic impulse at work. *My Life as a Disco Queen, as Told to John* Ruskin evinces Langa's desire to displace stereotypical notions surrounding an artist from the continent. Aside from holding a microphone, in these images Langa does not resemble a "disco queen". That this fiction is told to Ruskin, a famous nineteenth-century art critic, confirms Langa's choice to (mis)represent himself and mislead a probing western critical gaze.

In *Far Away from any Scenery He Knew or Understood*, Langa makes a sardonic reference to his supposed displacement. The title is ironic, given that the artist is pictured in a barren lounge in which there is only a black leather sofa. *True Confessions: My Life as a Disco Queen, How I Left the Couch* depicts the artist attempting to defy gravity as he jumps in the air above the sofa. Walker (2002:81) suggests that this futile action is advanced as a tongue-in-cheek metaphor articulating Langa's inability to transcend narratives of the self. In other words, whatever strategy he embraces, Langa remains the objectified subject. Walker (2002:81) suggests that Langa's photographic series recalls Samuel Fosso's self-portraits (1977-1978), which were defined by a playful engagement with identity through the use of dress. Although Langa does not employ as many theatrical props as Fosso, he also engages in role-playing – a strategy that Walker (2002:82) proposes is synonymous with self-determination. Langa does not necessarily conceal his authentic self in these images – no doubt he wears jeans, white underwear and socks in his day-to-day life. However, as this generic western ensemble does not express the idiosyncrasies of his character, it works at deflecting information about him. He presents a "bland", everyday and unremarkable persona whose innermost desires (to become a disco queen), are not visibly traceable. From this point of view, reaggregation presents as a physical transformation, perhaps masking an internal form of liminality that can never transcended.

This photographic series reveals Langa's efforts at exploiting the visual demand for knowledge of the other; however, by presenting generic visual cues, he circumvents any efforts at fixing his identity. As Judith Butler (1988:519) asserts, 'an identity [is] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts … '; hence through the stylisation of the body through gestures, movements and here, dress, such acts all combine to establish the illusion of an abiding identity.

Many South African artists such as Tracey Rose, Lawrence Lemaoana, Nandipha Mntambo, Athi-Patra Ruga, Zen Marie and more recently Gabrielle Goliath, have followed in Langa's footsteps by figuring ambiguous and shifting images of themselves in their work, with their multiple identities activated via dress. This popular impulse in South African art seems to be part of an attempt at deflecting the physical markers of difference and establishing them as unreliable signifiers of otherness. It can also be read as part of a strategy to displace the objectification of the "othered" artist, thought to be caught in a terminal state of liminality. However, because their strategy requires assuming a number of physical guises, they affirm this notion in a sense because they are continuously caught between multiple identities. In this way, while moments of reaggregation are enacted – such as when Langa appears to become the universalist subject in his white briefs and socks – it is only temporary and seen as a futile objective, particularly in a fluctuating social and political context such as South Africa, where the norm is constantly being renegotiated and redetermined. This actuality renders reaggregation impossible, as the matrixes of conditions which permit its occurrence are constantly shifting.

This kind of photographic self-portraiture, which places the artist's identity at the centre of the work, could be read as a tacit acknowledgement of the politics that had engulfed black artists such as Langa in the 1990s. The results were bodies of work that countered fixed identities. A lack of identity, asserts Grant Farred (cited by Morresi 2004:148), 'is the most desirable form of self representation, [it] is the most confident articulation of the public self: not to have an identity yourself is to know that you are in power'. This idea advances the notion that reaggregation does not necessarily empower the subject.

## Conclusion

As outlined earlier in this article, Langa's *Skins* also advanced an ambiguous identity; although the work alluded to generic traditional rural cultural practices under renewal, by being labelled as a neo-conceptualist installation it could also sit within the bounds of the contemporary western art canon. At the time that it was exhibited, critics and theorists struggled to reconcile its seemingly contradictory nature. Jean Fisher (2005:237) proposes that instead of viewing such products as hybrids, it is more useful to conceive of them, particularly those which employ disused objects, as the result of syncreticism, which she defines as a mode of expression concerned with 'constantly mobile relations that operate on the structure of languages and at the level of performance'.

Whereas radicalism was once assumed to lie simply in the "message", Fisher proposes that it is now enacted in artists' subversion of language systems. In this context, the artist enters a territory of already circulating signs and meanings of information, which Fisher claims no longer stimulates the imagination. To do so would require 'finding a way of speaking that cannot lie only in the communication' but can be enacted in how 'the receiver inhabits language itself' (Fisher 2005:237). The use of disused products in artmaking operates as a metaphor for this process where language is reinvented from common resources: 'this imagination seeks a syncretic solution without the signs of otherness producing chimeras' (Fisher 2005:238).

Syncreticism, as Fisher explains it, provides a useful lens through which to grasp Langa's work without resorting to locating it within specific western or African paradigms. From this point of view, the message Skins articulates is subordinate to the manner in which Langa has inhabited the diverse vocabularies it evokes. Langa generates his own Esperanto by drawing from a territory of circulating signs which include both western and African visual languages, between which the boundaries are no longer clearly defined. Consequently, within this domain neither is privileged and both are subordinated to the artist's agenda. In this way, self-definition is not predicated on advancing an image of the self but on (re)determining the language of self-expression.

Today, the traditional/contemporary dialectic that underpinned the initial readings (Kellner (1997), Friedman (1995, 1996) and Walker (2003)) of Langa's work no longer informs perceptions of it. After his 1995 exhibition, his art did not evince any connections to supposed traditional practices, until he held an exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in 2009 titled *Threshold*. On this exhibition, he showed documentary footage of a funeral in a rural setting and a series of photograph portraits of people from his hometown, Backenberg, which paraded an ethnographic bent. In the press release for the exhibition, it was suggested that Langa was 'intimidated by traditional rituals as a child'. Consequently, the implication was that he been an observer of traditional practices rather than a participant. This implication shatters all the theories that came out in the late 1990s that posited Langa as standing at the threshold between tradition and modernity. The video footage of a funeral service, which he filmed, showed the rituals to consist of both western and African rites, implying that lines between these cultures has become so blurred that they would be indistinct, particularly to an outsider.

Langa's liminal identity has taken on a new guise; now that he has been living in Europe for more than a decade, he is both the outsider/insider – in the context of South African cultural production and society, and in a European context. Hence in his work for the 2009 exhibition, he observes his hometown and the rituals that take place there from a position of cool detachment, although it may be driven by a desire to reconcile with his roots, his past. This is an act he may not have felt free to do before his 2009 exhibition, given the emphasis that had been placed on African artists' ethnic identities.

Oguibe's study of McEvilley's interview with Ouattara suggests that it is necessary for African artists to suppress their connection to rural traditions in order to ensure that their work is aggregated into the contemporary western canon – or at least to annihilate the liminal identity imposed on them. Of course, if western critics such as McEvilley seek out a link between their work and rural traditional mores, such efforts are futile. Ultimately, it seems, as in the case of Langa, that African artists can use this phenomenon to their advantage; the perceived liminal nature of their personae or the liminality which is expressed in their work adds further layers of ambiguity to the latter. In some works, such as *Skins*, the liminal becomes the thematic focus: it is not simply an expression of a liminal existence but forces viewers to confront their own position within van Gennep's phases. In other words, the perceived unintelligibility of an artwork might prompt a viewer to reconcile with the fact that while they may be reaggregated in one group defined by a particular set of conventions, they remain locked out of another. It is this aspect of liminality which Turner and van Gennep's theory does not account for, particularly within the realm of art production where the artist, or any subject for that matter, can simultaneously occupy the outsider/inside positions; in other words, be reaggregated into one society while being excluded by another. In the sphere of art and other cultural activities, reaggregation into occidental canons has simply been privileged as the central principality, engendering a false yard-stick against which reaggregation has been measured. Ultimately, therefore, the question is not who guards the borders of the principality of art and how they apply that control, as Oguibe (2004:10) proposes, but rather why that territory is privileged over others.

# Notes

1 This attitude pervades Kellner's (1997) writing on Langa, but it also defined how he was perceived by international art theorists such as Hamza Walker (2002).

2 As he would later explain in an interview with Kobena Mercer (2004).

3 As I demonstrate in this paper, an artist's persona and products are conflated: in other words; the positioning of their work is often determined by their status.

4 The term is used here to denote contemporariness.

5 This was particularly relevant to supposed traditional artists because their art was thought to be a product of their ethnic affiliations.

6 Apart from the African themed shows he participated in during 1998, in 2003 his work was included in *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* at the 50th Venice Biennale, Venice and at *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, Museum for African Art, New York.

7 Langa's photographic portraits showed at a solo exhibition from 23 February to 9 May 1999, at the Centre D'Art Comporain, Geneva and then later that year at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

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