

## PETER WAYNE LEWIS: *A Multi-logue for the human*

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In exploring the work of Peter Wayne Lewis, through the articulation that grids it, we enter the debate on artistic practice and invite a move beyond given limitations to more expansive visions of humanity. If artistic practice does not want to go around in circles, it must exhibit transversality as it searches for that elusive elsewhere; exogenous aesthetics, beyond hybridity to new thought. *Paintings from Middle Earth 4*, the exhibition of works by Peter Wayne Lewis at Skoto Gallery, is not a publicizing of a conformist individualism. It rather is a privileging of a more discreet approach of an artist whose work retains a real liberating dimension. Peter Wayne Lewis moves away from reiterations *ad nauseam* of Duchamp's display of a urinal without realizing that it has lost all its subversive charge. Peter Wayne Lewis rather presents bursts of a thought that invests in and broadcasts its engagement with various fields – transnationalism and universalism that are metamorphosing in “Globalectics”. The multi-faceted engagement of Peter Wayne Lewis with the visual expressions (teaching, painting and curatorial practice) retraces a path of “Globalectics” artists. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o defines Globalectics as “...combining the global and the dialectical to describe a mutually affecting dialogue, or multi-logue, in the phenomena of nature and nurture in a global space that's rapidly transcending that of the artificially bounded, as nation and region”<sup>1</sup>.

Three series in this publication: *Strings*, *Suite in Grey* and *Beijing Booster* sketch the itinerary of this global-*flaneur* who made of his peregrinations between Trenchtown, Jamaica; Sacramento, California; Tokyo, Japan; Hoboken, New Jersey; Boston, Massachusetts; Bavaria, Germany; Dakar, Senegal and Beijing, China, the occasion for multiplying our understanding of forms and expressions beyond the unicentricity that gridded twentieth century ways of seeing and manners of being. Peter Wayne Lewis travels as a global polymorphous esthete. The global, which Ngũgĩ argues as “that which humans in spaceships or on the international space station see”; the dialectical is the internal dynamics that they do not see which is what the work of Peter Wayne Lewis strives for the revealing.

This attentive *flaneur*, who thinks his vagabondage through, draws from it the experience of the creative potential of movement conceived as a privileged modality for the apparition of form. From physical translation to aesthetic sliding, the displacement as movement toward the other or a somewhere else is always potentially a generator of tension, an occasion for metamorphosis and finally the subject for a creative work. Peter Wayne Lewis has been developing this system-thinking-being for a number of years. In 2000, he sojourned in Bavaria beginning the *Strings* collection through which he explored the internal logic of molecular biology, particularly the double helix as a move toward a “post deconstructionist and deciphering practice”<sup>2</sup> against the discursive rhetoric of an artistic unicentricity which no longer holds.

The structure formed by double-stranded molecules of nucleic acids such as DNA and RNA fascinated him. One finds similarities between the spiral polymer and the work which, at its core, argues the similarity of mechanisms of all organisms on the planet at the level of which they handle their genetic information and use it to create the building blocks of a cell. Lewis draws from these new possibilities science offers, to move us toward orders of understanding different from intuitive common sense or appropriation. His quest for the human begins “where such modes of thought end, or at least where they fail to address questions that require for their answers, more than

enumeration, cataloging, impressionistic summaries, selected lists, or noncritical formulations.<sup>iii</sup>”

The artistic language of this transnational artist can also be read through the concept of *cinéplastique* Thierry Davila defines as “a practice in which the movement becomes the means to examine both the stability of form and the categories that allow capturing it, to move the [aesthetic] process but also the language that claims to account it”<sup>iv</sup>. The work of Peter Wayne Lewis is then a process of sequencing, adaptations, appropriations, rejections and collaborations, contestations of pathways, detours, contours and short-cuts to get to the scientific truth that we share 99% of what makes us human.

The proliferation of practices and interactions between practitioners, new skills allowed by new technologies and the expansiveness of information and its media has led the art on the path of a generalized de-territorialization. Peter Wayne Lewis understood this very early by constructing his artistic worldview as open and dynamic, one in which the exclusivity of practitioners of specialization is erased. To be an artist is to “fire on all cylinders”, to give meaning to any form. Here is a terminal as well as an original position, a posture in extremis as to be located “at the extreme point of the apparition of sense (...) hence at the edge of a possible dislocation” (ibid). The work is then an articulation of the dynamics of transnationalism of artistic gestures which are both the effect of globalization and the development of a more lively cultural industry of which the art industry is just a segment.

The de-territorialization we witness in the work of Peter Wayne Lewis is not a simple voyage or a superficial manner of experiencing the permeability of borders through thickness of Bank accounts or possession of a passport from a particular geography. It is a possibility for the artist to emancipate himself from conventions, to deconstruct their practices and experience their viability in other fields in the hope for a revitalization of the form or the emergence of a new energy. Engaging aesthetically with the thought about deterritorialization and difference inspired by Deleuze and Gayatri Spivak’s articulation of ‘other worlds’, Peter Wayne Lewis articulates an aesthetic of translations between artistic territories.

Viewing the work of Lewis through simple delineations may seem artificial. Perhaps instead we need to acquiesce preliminarily to the exercise of sketching the lines of interpretations. From this circulation between ideas, artwork and texts that we have described above, we can move to the circumstances that commanded the production of the artwork. Four points of articulation that are also four modalities of de-territorialization emerge, structured through the three collections above mentioned.

“*Strings*” designates de-territorialization as a temporal event. It functions as a propaedeutic to the aesthetics of Peter Wayne Lewis. Thinking of its de-territorializations then cannot be envisaged out of an understanding of its proper temporality rooted in migration “*movement of Jah People*” his countrymen would say. The aesthetic exercise in which he engages goes in the sense of a chronological definition of art: making art is a manner of taking time, the time that is as offered and which one inhabits, to take charge of its exhibition. This usage of time, this way of manipulating it, is only the other name of the pure grasp of the reel, of the present taken for itself. In the intimacy of the duration, “the pure real is rendered to a certain extent –visible and readable”<sup>v</sup>. In this sense, the work is closer to this definition while simultaneously distinguishing itself from it. When Peter Wayne Lewis registers the date of the creation of the work, he literally takes date. By *taking date* and not making date, Lewis does not interrupt the passing of time but instead penetrates and invests it.

It is about “constructing a certain state of vigilance with time in time”, to be an attentive and alert watchman. This device gives another sense to his pictorial work. It does not signify the history of a subject but the attention to its own history without subject. It acts as a replacement in a Derridean sense of abstraction: the non-mimetic image relies on the assistance of the viewer to complete its meaning; an exit toward a terra-incognita of art as well as complete immanence in the creative process.

“*Suite in grey*” is a series scribbled with vigor. Peter Wayne Lewis ended at the hospital in the process of creation of this series. This remarkable entry is the occasion for Peter Wayne Lewis to give the tone to his work: to withdraw his subject from visibility. It requires paying attention to the etymology for the subject to manifest. This paradoxical birth marks the act by which Peter Wayne Lewis differs from figurative pictorial conventions. By crossing Aristotelian physics (privation is a kind of possession) *Suite in grey* evidences the structural ambiguity of Clement Greenberg’s *tabula rasa* on non aesthetic considerations: formal elements, color, flatness, edge and scale that gave rise to the slogan “art for art sake”. Nkiru Nzegwu has already argued against this devaluation of extrinsic, non-formal elements such as sources of influence, direction of technical innovation, approximation or divergence from realism and subject-matter.<sup>vi</sup>

However, to make *tabula rasa* is as much erasing as rendering a space available for apparition. The beginnings of Peter Wayne Lewis were certainly marked by the figurative style. But this style already contained the chromosomes the process of synthesis in *Suite in grey* continued. But this synthesis is not a will for nothing; it is a necessary step of a practice of art he calls “analytic”. To understand, Lewis says is always “to unbind, to de-compose, to sequence and in a way to destroy so much so that he engages destruction of the figurative to densify, to give thickness to the sensible, to the visible for looking. This is why some have hastily rejected his work as being out of the African Diaspora corpus because of his abstraction attempting thereby to define him as a marginal who harbors hate for the figurative. But!

If we integrate Africa into the explanatory scheme and relocate our analysis to the African world, historicization will show that European artists at the turn of the twentieth century learned the principle of abstraction and the philosophy of transcending reality from Africa (Nzegwu 2008). Thereby is revealed the falsity in accounts of modern and contemporary art that claim epistemic primacy for European genius. Synthesis is a historically recurrent and pregnant theme identifiable from African carvers to Michel Basquiat.

Claiming this synthesis, Peter Wayne Lewis develops three strategies: through acclaimed eclecticism, to do away with style (the general notion of art) for the profit of *facture* (a singular way of producing this series); introducing an anti-artistic element which foils pictorial conventions; and finally any other invention to produce visual chaos. *Suite in Grey* is really a work of *fogging* the artist undertakes in a manner similar to the concept of “de-creation” of Giorgio Agamben<sup>vii</sup>. By erasing the form so that the trace that constitutes the work appears, Lewis only repeats and ancient gesture of valorization of the interior drawing. This indistinct depth, because erased, frenetically disappeared, which give the figure to sight, participates in a practice of a “blind drawing” as Derrida describes it.<sup>viii</sup> Lewis lets the unpredictable energy deploy in one stroke without knowing toward what this graphic rush leads.

*Suite in Grey* introduces a rupture with the traditional sense of ideal visibility in Western philosophy. This brutal separation from the traditional sketches the frame of a perception of the almost invisible which guaranties “its permanence in the memories”. Through these two gestures, Lewis organizes

the improbable meeting of graphic practice and its others: the vacuum, whiteness and obstruction of the perceptible.

The exploded time of de-territorialization takes place in *Beijing Booster* — a space of apparition multiplied, on an artistic scene transformed into a platform of exchanges of processes. Three analyses account for these shifts between know-how that make the fluidity of contemporary art and challenge traditional classification. *Beijing Booster* can be described as a contradictory experience of a presence that strives to make itself forgotten. The ambition of this monumental artistic project is to push the strategy of removal of the matter in the work to experience the materiality at maximum. Four elements allow understanding of the work. The aesthetic economy (quality) which distinguishes itself from any idea of parsimony (quantity) allows an exploration of forms and infinite differences Peter Wayne Lewis introduces in the repetitions of these structures (by simply changing the scale for example). The second element is the mobilization of the viewer: the works are considered as sites to be surveyed, spaces of circulation that reverse the usual frame of frontal and contemplative perception by engaging the *topos* on the path of its fluid becoming.

Equally paradoxical, the third characteristic of *Beijing Booster* is the claim of an art deprived of thickness or playing on the *effects miroir* in which the work is in a way only a kind of pure exteriority. Finally, the task of emptying rendered “visually and physically acting” constitutes the last characteristics of *Beijing Booster*. Peter Wayne Lewis thus paints, in reverse, a fragile space which, if not inhabited, signals tension between the real and the material, between the possible occupation and the absence of incarnated volumes. This progressive form suggests a movement of investment so that taking place fuses with taking date. It parallels Thierry Davila’s rupture with the thought of the gratuity of art — an art that pretends to refer only to itself — to re-link with a conception of the work as object of knowledge half way between scientific and magical thought, a bricolage according to Levi-Strauss’ interpretation<sup>ix</sup>.

### **Anchoring Peter Lewis firmly in the African Diaspora**

Some have hastily rejected the work of Peter Wayne Lewis as not belonging to the African Diaspora corpus because of its abstract style. Yet, abstraction in art is a process that recomposes reality to create a new, vital reality that transcends the laws of illusion<sup>x</sup>. This unthinking rejection stems from the process of rendering African and African agency completely invisible which has had a long history that began in the age of European Modernity. The goal of invisibility was to make the racist case that Africa was a dark continent and Africans contributed nothing to human civilization. Modernity then is seen as only a Western product. The outcome is an alienation from abstractionism within some quarters of the African Diaspora that see it as Euro-American, forgetting that careful researched juxtaposition of African art to modern European paintings and sculptures reveals the falsity of theories such as the thesis of affinity that downgraded Africa’s centrality to the development and conception of modern art. For Nzegwu it also established that modern art is predicated on the forms, optical principles, rejection of the laws of illusion, and creative modalities of traditional African art. The newness or modern character of this principle of abstraction for Europeans of the time lies in the fact that for over twenty-three centuries from the mature Classical style of the Periclean era in ancient Greece (450-440 B.C) to the early twentieth century, mimetic representation was the dominant model of creativity in the Western art scheme. To reiterate, modern art is modern because of its abstract style and this abstract style owes much to Africa.

Herein the difficulties in defining Peter Wayne Lewis’ work! Any definition imposes limitations; his work is denial of the limits.

What Peter Wayne Lewis offers for our gaze to linger upon are remedies to our frustrations and psychoses that impose a fuzzy rationality — a challenge to the spirit that manipulates things. He has escaped the mistaken canons and norms that erase African Diaspora from abstract thought to point toward the path of art, thus rescuing us from a world that seems not to contain anything anymore.

The work is a sign of the times. It is not only liberation of the mind imprisoned by provincialism but perhaps a much needed manifestation of Globalectics in contemporary art. His Revolution is a denial of the death of the spirit and cheers to the triumph of the human.

*Painting from middle earth 4* is the story of the vagabond traces that an artistic world in constant movement manifests. These works which vibrant scarifications resonate as an invitation to discovery are not only opportunity for interrogating the powers of transformation and transmission by an artist but also the vitality of forms and their way to resist oblivion. By accomplishing a duty of tacit memory, Peter Wayne Lewis marks out beyond words, the journey of a thousand paths of a creativity which repeats to renew itself. Builder of bridges in this universe of ephemeral transactions, Peter Wayne Lewis confronts the era to characterize an ensemble of gestures that is after all a circulatory system, a mechanic that escapes static thought.

Nuff Respect!

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- ii Sylvia Wynter. “Rethinking Aesthetics”: Notes Towards A Deciphering Practice” in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, Mbaye Cham ed. Africa World Press (Trenton, New Jersey, 1992).
- iii A Baker, Houston, Jr., “There Is No More Beautiful Way: Theory and the poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing” in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Patricia Redmond, Chicago University Press, 1989
- iv Thierry Davila. *In Extremis. Essais sur l’art et ses déterritorialisations depuis 1960*, La Lettre volée, 2010
- v Ibid.
- vi Nkiru Nzegwu. “Dodard and Modernism: A Radical Evaluation of Haitian Contemporary Art” in Philippe Dodard: *the Idea of Modernity in contemporary Haitian art*, Babacar Mbow ed.
- vii Giorgio Agamben. *Image et Mémoire*, Paris, DDB, 2004
- viii Jacques Derrida. *Mémoire d’aveugle, L’autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris RMN, 1990
- ix C. Lévi-Strauss. *La Pensée sauvage*, Paris, Plon, 1962
- x Nkiru Nzegwu. “Dodard and Modernism: A Radical Evaluation of Haitian Contemporary Art” in *Philippe Dodard: the Idea of Modernity in contemporary Haitian art*, Babacar Mbow ed.

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