INAUGURAL LECTURE

Nana Adusei-Poku

A Stake in the Unknown

Hogeschool Rotterdam Uitgeverij

Colophon

ISBN: 9789051798890
1st edition, 2014

Cover:
Liz Johnson-Artur, *Untitled,* 2013

This book is published by Hogeschool Rotterdam Uitgeverij
P.O. Box 25035
3001 HA Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Publications can be ordered by
www.hr.nl/onderzoek/publicaties

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18 November 2014

CONTENT

A Stake in the Unknown

I will now take you on a journey through the past and the present, a journey which I hope will also show us that the past is much more present than one might think. This journey starts by focusing on the ways in which Black artists and intellectuals have described and challenged the socio-economic and socio-political conditions with which they have been, and still are, confronted. I have to emphasise at this point that I am not presenting Black artists and thinkers as a homogeneous group, or claiming that there is some specific essence of "Blackness" to be found in either the artworks or the artists themselves.[1] What I must stress, however, is that the challenges faced by Black[2] people within a white Western society are not the same as those faced by white people; that these challenges have been the subject of a great deal of debate amongst Black writers, philosophers, artists, activists, musicians, etc.; and that this debate has always had a quite distinct character, despite the wide variety of voices involved. Any discussion of diversity must start with the acknowledgement and respect of these differences as well as their consequences on a structural and personal level, a point which has been stressed by Black artists of all recent generations.

1 This methodology is crucial in understanding the multiplicity of perspectives of Black individuals. The art historian Darby English introduced this concept when he wrote: "It is now less convincing than ever to speak of Black artists as if they share an enterprise. The work of Black artists for whom questions of culture are a subject but visualizing or representing race/identity is not an end obligates us to displace race from its central location in our interpretations of this work. More, it recommends a turn toward the subjective demands that artists place on the multiple categories they occupy, and that we grant this multiplicity right of place in our methodologies." (English 2007, 12)

2 I write "Black" with a capital B because this term addresses first and foremost political and historical dimensions of the concept of Blackness, and relates only indirectly to skin complexion. The term "white", in contrast, is not capitalised, since this would obscure the use of the term "Black" as an act of political empowerment and as a socio-political construct.

Romare Bearden 1964. Pittsburgh Memory.
Collage of printed papers with graphite on cardboard.
Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York.
© Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

[1]

For example, the visual artist Romare Bearden (see Image 1) formulated this notion much more eloquently than I ever could when he wrote: "I believe there is an aesthetic that informs the art works of black peoples [...] since aesthetic formulations derive from cultural responses not from inherent racial endowments." (Bearden 1974, 189) Thus, if there is no specific essence of Blackness, or as Bearden puts it, no "inherent racial endowments", many of these aesthetics and artworks should instead be understood as a social commentary and a critical reflection on the society in which the artists live – so why not have a closer look, and allow these critiques to be heard?

PART ONE

Time to exit the status quo

Our journey begins in a neighbourhood of New York City called Harlem, which was colonised by Dutch settlers in the early 17th century and named after their hometown of Haarlem in Holland. (Mallory 2011, 7–8) (see Image 2) Here as elsewhere, the land was not heroically "discovered" as some historians claim; rather, it was taken from the Native Americans who already lived there, and who were brutally occupied, exploited as labour force, or simply killed by the Dutch settlers. (Slotkin 1973; Romney 2014)

Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, The Fall of New Amsterdam, 1932. Oil on Canvas [2]

[3]

Studio Museum Freestyle Catalogue Cover, 2001

Without going any further into the violent history of the Dutch settlements and presence in North America, (Slotkin 1973; Romney 2014).[3] I believe this is a good starting point in stressing that the histories which I will be addressing in this paper are as entangled and as hybrid as are our identities; in other words, the topics which I will be addressing here concern us all.[4] And so, my example begins at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where the curator Thelma Golden and the painter Glenn Ligon coined the term "post-black" in the context of a 2001 exhibition titled *Freestyle* (see Image 3).

"Post-black" is an attempt to describe a younger generation of artists, who are not concerned with discussions of race or identity, but nevertheless draw on the history and the artistic styles of their predecessors, while reintroducing styles which had been neglected during the 1990s. (Bey 2004) What is important to highlight here is that "post-black" is not the same as "post-racial",[5] nor can it be compared to the trendy and inadequate term "New Black". I will return to the term "post-black" later in this text, in the conclusion of the first part. For now I wish to focus on one artwork in particular from this exhibition, which has continued to fascinate me ever since I first encountered it: *Mark Bradford's Enter and Exit the New Negro*.[6] (see Image 4) I will engage only briefly with the artwork itself, which invites a much longer discussion, one that would lead us away from my key argument. Still, I will describe here formally what I see in the painting.[7]

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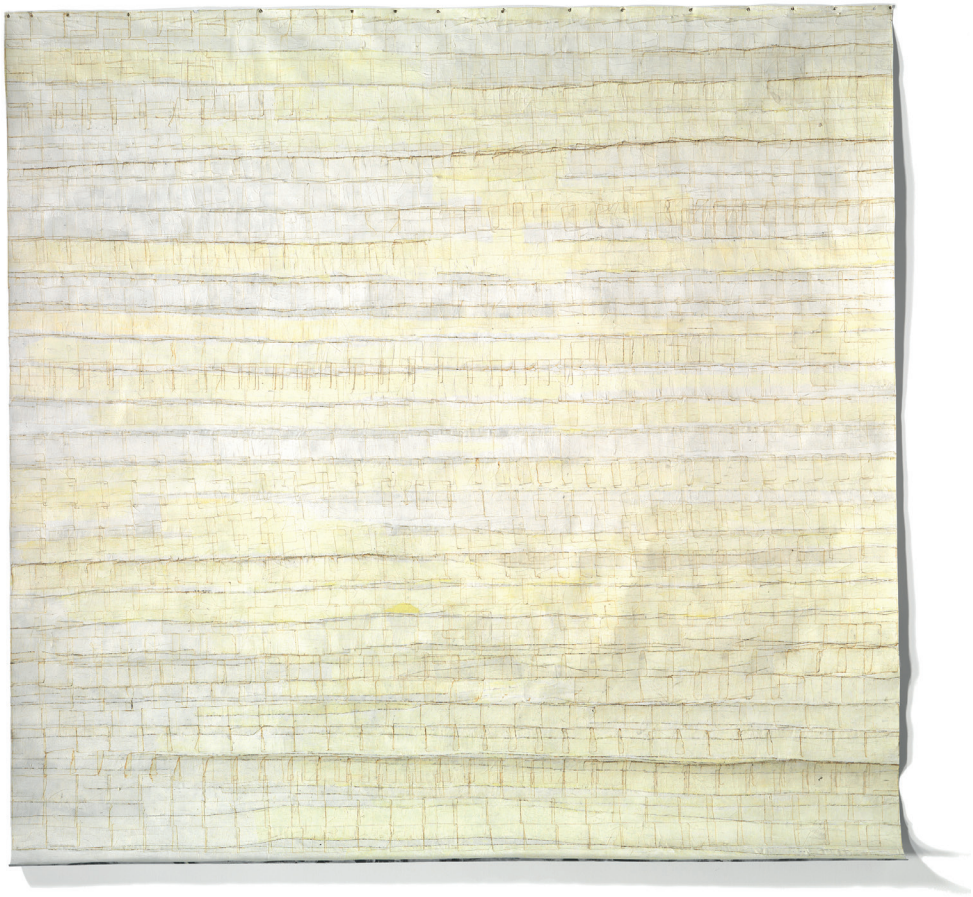
3 Also, I am not claiming that this falsely positive narrative exists only in Holland; it is part of a broader and ongoing North American mythology which denies its own brutal history. See for example (Shorto 2004).

4 For further reading on the topics of hybridity, entangled histories and cultural identity, I recommend (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1997a; Conrad and Randeria 2002; Stam and Shohat 2012).

5 "Post-racial" has been a particularly trendy concept since the US first elected a Black president in 2008. However, the US is by no means a post-racial (and thus post-racist) society; consider for example the recent police killings of unarmed Black youth in Ferguson, Missouri and Los Angeles. For another example of history repeating itself, this time in the Dutch context, see the arguments on an epistemic level for perpetuating the ubiquitous blackfaced folklore character Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) as part of the popular annual celebration of St. Nicholas.

6 For further reading on Bradford see (Siegel 2010; Bedford 2010; Storr 2010; Bradford 2010; Selman 2001).

7 Since it would be impossible to do this artwork any justice here, I would recommend for a more in-depth reading (Adusei-Poku 2012a).



Mark Bradford, Enter and Exit the New Negro, 2000. Photomechanical reproductions, acrylic gel medium, permanent-wave end papers, and additional mixed media, 108 x 96 inches (274.3 x 243.8 cm).
© Mark Bradford; courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

[4]

Enter and Exit the New Negro can be read at first glance as a modern painting. A somewhat irregular yet basically coherent grid of squares in various shades of white, grey, yellow and cream presents a rhythmic structure which invites for contemplation. The irregularity of the grid is echoed by the unpredictable shifts in its colour gradient. With a format of 2.7 x 2.4 metres, we are also dealing here with a large-scale artwork, a factor which again intensifies its meditative character. The painting hangs on the wall from small metal loops like a papyrus roll, an encoded parchment.