



Artists From the Hell Screen: Reports, Observations and Other Disturbing Things

by Reece Augiste

In 1943 the Bulgarian writer Elias Canetti provided a disturbing observation: "I cannot look at any more maps. The names of cities reek of burning flesh." In 1993 the European atmosphere still reeks of burning flesh. Ethnic cleansing is on the political agenda, a new Europe is being born.

Maps, be they historical, contemporary or futuristic, go beyond notions of national sovereignty and geo-political boundaries. Maps help define national identities, epic narratives of self, cultural differences and racial belonging, out of which flow immigration quotas and controls. Maps are often the cause of warfare and cultural genocide.

At a party I listened to an enlightening discussion on Europe. A man of the old European imperial school was forced to concede that Europe was now practising on its own people what it had for cen-

turies practised on the "darker races": cultural genocide and barbarism. As he put it, "The beast had turned upon itself." Silence descended, a few walked away, others plucked up the courage to say that war and death are part of the post-modern condition. The irony was not missed.

With the 500th anniversary celebration of Columbus's Atlantic voyage of "discovery" and cultural deracination came the idea of the "new Europe," a Europe estimated to have 50 million people of non-European origin by the year 2000. Approximately 16 million already possess citizenship in a European state. Europe's internal boundaries have been dismantled and it is now creating a new identity characterized by a sense of cultural unity shared by all its citizens. The byword is that we are all Europeans now. At least, that is the offi-

cial version. It's picturesque, pastoral and consumer friendly.

The Bosnian experiment of ethnic cleansing and the frightening growth in racial attacks from Rostock to London, Vienna to Paris, Amsterdam to Milan, make it difficult, and maybe even suicidal, to believe that this new identity is based on some shared notion of "cultural unity." I can see only further fragmentation, an increase in racial intolerance, more deaths and suffering.

This practice of racial intolerance, bigotry and xenophobia recently made the headlines in certain sections of the British press. Not another arson attack or some human flotsam being barred from entry, it was the actions of a small group of art curators that opened the floodgates. In the spirit of cultural diversity, hybridity and cross-cultural exchange, they mounted a touring exhibition called *In Fusion - New European Art*. On display were the works of eleven non-European artists living and working in various European states. Their points of origin are as diverse as their current places of residence. Coming from the Caribbean, Iran, Africa, Latin America, China, Turkey and Lebanon, they found not only that their presence was not welcome, but that their art was not considered art.

With the *Birmingham Post's* headline: "Tories Blast Exhibition of Foreign Art Out of Sight" and the *Daily Mirror's* headline: "IM Art Show a Load of Rubbish," the bells of intolerance began ringing. Although most of the controversy focused on British Telecom's 1 million dollar sponsorship deal with the South Bank Centre for British art shows over the next three years, the monetary factor was a convenient excuse for attacking the kinds of issues and subject matter that the artists chose to address in their work.

Attacked by Birmingham's conservative councillor Alan Blumenthal, the exhibition was dubbed "...a diabolical liberty that we have to pay for this so-called art through our phone bills. If this is all BT can come up with they should spend the 1 million dollars on reducing the customers' bills." This outburst forced the Ikon Gallery director Elizabeth McGregor to comment: "I don't know why Tory politicians are complaining about BT's excess profits when they privatized it...I am always happy to debate the work we show, but I object to politicians condemning things they haven't seen."

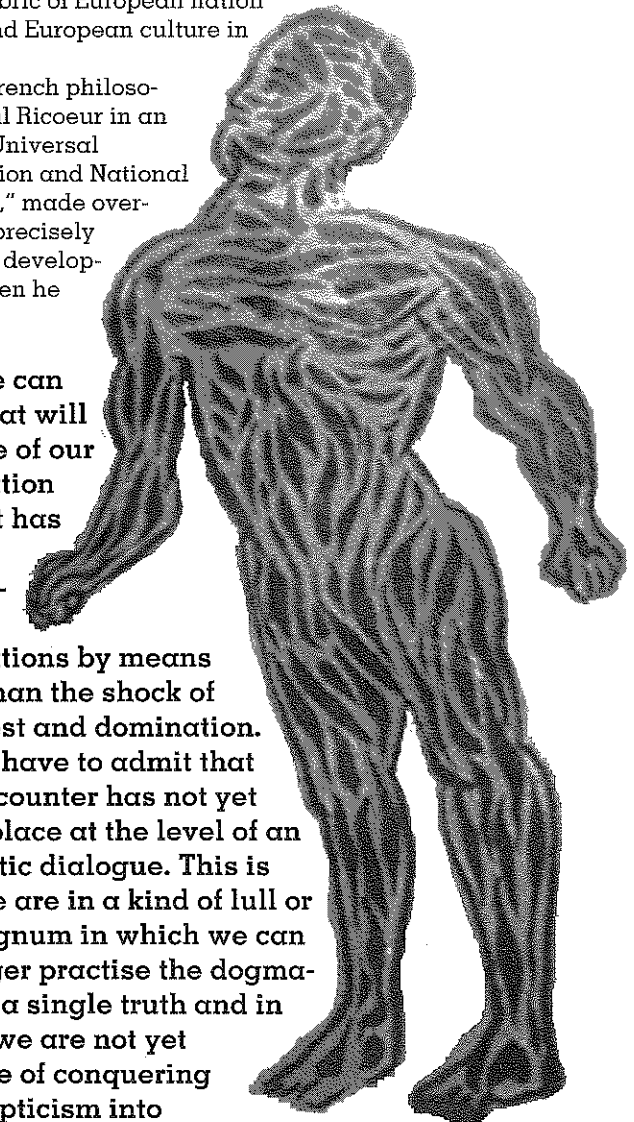
Even more alarming is the fact that this backlash occurred in an English city that attempted to promote itself as a European centre of arts and culture last year. As the *Birmingham Post's* art editor Terry Grimley said, "Conservative councillors...struck a blow against Birmingham's international aspirations by condemning an exhibition they had not even seen."

It is this parochialness, a product of the English

village pump mentality, with its congenital capacity for always looking inwards, of which in a paradoxical way the work on exhibition was a critique. In my estimation the *In Fusion* exhibition was one of the best curated exhibitions so far this year. For their inventiveness, courage and capacity to provoke debate, and even wonder, the eleven artists have demonstrated that the racial factor is at the cutting edge of what is defined as the "new Europe." Again, in a strange twist of historical and geographical circumstances, the works on display point to new possibilities: what Europe may become once it is stripped of its privileged position as the custodian of a singular truth. It is about what will happen to white ethnicity when the dramatic influx of new identities, framed as they are by a set of distinctive non-European attributes, are woven into the social fabric of European nation states and European culture in general.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in an essay, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," made overtures to precisely this new development when he wrote:

"No one can say what will become of our civilization when it has really met different civilizations by means other than the shock of conquest and domination. But we have to admit that this encounter has not yet taken place at the level of an authentic dialogue. This is why we are in a kind of lull or interregnum in which we can no longer practise the dogmatism of a single truth and in which we are not yet capable of conquering the skepticism into which we have stepped."





Felix de Rooy,
"Ave Regina Europa/White on Black"

It is this skepticism that is fuelling the upturn in nationalist paranoia and the xenophobia currently engulfing Europe. And it is also this skepticism and its effects on transnational consciousness that will deliver a mortal blow to the current idealistic edifice which says that Europe is becoming a post-modern cultural space, where ethnicity, cultural plurality and racial difference co-exist. The post-modernist crusade against the hegemony of modernism has had its advances and successes, but its attempts to incorporate the post-colonial imagination into its general strategy against the grain of modernism only serves to highlight the theoretical and political limitations of post-modernism itself. It is incapable of addressing race or ethnicity as a concrete, lived experience. How does a post-modernist address the chaos in Bosnia: war as a post-modern condition?

This is the sociocultural context in which the exhibition has to be read and the controversies gen-

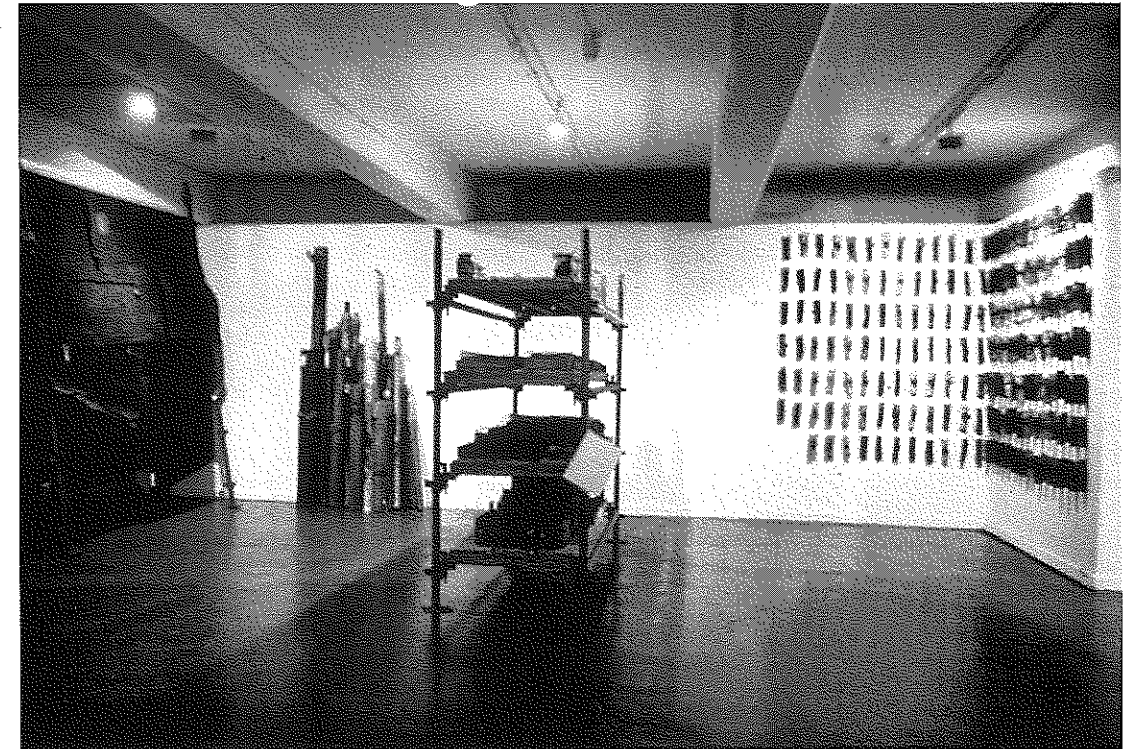
erated understood. Twentieth century history is one of migration and cultural displacement, whether or not the movement is the result of political upheavals or the search for inspiration in another country. From Gauguin to Modigliani, from Dali to the African-American artist David Hammons (currently resident in Europe), migration and cultural interaction have been potent sources of inspiration for artistic production and cultural engagement.

Indeed, migration is the organizing theme of the work of Lebanese artist Benni Efrat. Currently based in Antwerp, Efrat's installation entitled *Ararat Express* was originally conceived as videotapes and TV monitors placed on horseback and carried to a certain location. An installation continuously mobile thus reinforces the themes of cultural flows, disorientation and the lived experiences of exile.

Within the physical confines of the art gallery Efrat has had to introduce a degree of stasis, nonetheless with tremendous impact. Here we have a long line of video machines and corresponding monitors placed on wooden supports with an abundance of diverse images flicking across the screens: images of migration and cultural dispersal, of boat people drowning in the process of finding their own niche of Nirvana, political refugees, hoards of animals and an endless stream of people on the move. Suggestive and moving, Efrat's work is about the world outside the art gallery and that world's impact on the artistic imagination. *Ararat Express* is about the ecological/demographic changes of the latter part of our century and a hint of the future cataclysms in the next. The contrast between hi-tech electronic displays and horses quietly grazing on dry grass in the background brings into focus Efrat's central motif of motion and the logic of migration/dispersal.

Like Efrat, the Brazilian Claudio Goulart is concerned with exploring in a spectacular way the experiences of travel and dislocation. Goulart's installation consists of 100 gold-lacquered suitcases juxtaposed with images of conquest and exploitive brutality. These images of torture and human depravity echo the frightening canvases of Hieronymus Bosch. Goulart's selection of images deliberately goes against the dominant representations that European artists produced of America. Commenting on this strategy, Goulart declared that:

"...most of these artists who made them (images) never left Europe and consequently their production is saturated with idealizations and is on the border, if not pure fantasy."



Chohreh Feyzdjou,
"Products of Chohreh Feyzdjou"

Vitor Meirelles's nineteenth century painting *The First Mass in Brazil* falls into this genre. In deconstructing this nineteenth century fantasia, Goulart presents a series of black and white prints which depict cultural confrontation defined by the parameters of subjugation and cruelty. These are images of mass executions, dismemberment and beheadings. Entitled *It's Worth Its Weight*, Goulart's installation is an ironic statement on contemporary Europe and its cultural genesis.

The cataclysm hinted at in *Ararat Express* we find at the centre of Felix de Rooy's installation as it traces the origins of European conflict through a series of collages. Framed by de Rooy's themes of racial fusion, religions and languages, his work explores, through allegory, the seemingly disparate cultural and historical elements that best define Europe's symbiotic relationship with its illegitimate children. His use of brilliant light to underpin the religious intensity of his subject matter serves to highlight the chaotic and cataclysmic forces stalking the European landscape. In fact, these collages present emblems of European trade, conquest, cultural imperialism and remnants of its classical age. In a piece entitled *Resurrection* de Rooy addresses the themes of life and death through a complex juxtaposition of shattered Greek statues and skeletal remains reminiscent of an Egyptian mummy, set against a luminous landscape of mysterious images. Pagan and subliminal, these images seem to carry a message of redemption through resurrection, while at the same time recasting Europe's sense of itself as a higher civilization in the context of cultural domination.

This theme of cultural strangulation is most clearly expressed in another piece entitled *Cry Surinam*. Using a paraffin heater (an object common to immigrant homes in the 1950s, 60s and 70s) upon which is placed three artifacts, a book with Surinam written on it, a large human bone, a black head with its mouth open as if in a scream, and an effigy of a Christian saint stuck half way down its throat, de Rooy expresses the historical terms of Europe's relationship with its former subjects who now populate its landscapes.

However, the significance of de Rooy's installation is that it is directly related to his *Negrophilia* collection, an archive of over 5000 items/objects of "Western popular culture containing representations of black people from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day." Encyclopaedic in scope, the collection is a meticulous documentation of every racist stereotype ever propagated by the West. In fact, the collection exists as a

archaeological site of the racial self and its psychic foundations in Western culture. It's a complex visual testament of the processes of cultural domination and its philosophical and political impact on the black self, resulting in psychic scars, ontological bruising and spiritual fragmentation.

Paradoxically, the *Negrophilia* collection is also an inversion of the discourses of racial domination and dislocation in that it also reveals the psychic orientations of post-Enlightenment man in his relation to and representation of the racial other. He occupies a space of racial phantasmoria, a figure of cultural perversion invested with a delirious identity. And it is probably in this context that the collection has its greatest value as a repository for the study, reflection and analysis of Europe's historical and contemporary relationship with diasporic subjects.

Placed between the notions of cultural relation and historical demands is the work of Iranian artist Chohreh Feyzjou (based in Paris), *The Bazaars of Babel*. The grammar of her exhibits are so culturally specific that even the phrase "Product of Chohreh Feyzjou" reinforces a hermetic discourse of the representation of the other. Its beauty is that it demands a recasting of modernity by placing at its centre the desires of the artist and her work. The immediate, most striking thing about Feyzjou's "products" is the colour black. Every single object is stained with charcoal or a black dye and arranged in precise, systematic order. This fixing of objects (scrolls, jars, crates, bags and boxes of different sizes) functions as an ironic statement on the West's obsessions with fixity as it struggles to exclude and maintain its grasp on modernity as essentially a white aesthetic edifice.

Feyzjou makes overtures to new possibilities of an "imaginative culture" in which the guardians of modernity accept their cultural debt to ancient traditions and the aesthetic tropes of ex-colonies in the formation of modernity itself. But it has to be understood that Feyzjou's chamber of objects is a call for recognition that goes far beyond the West's classical notion of "cultural influences," as is quite often the case when art historians refer to the primitivist forms and aesthetic textures in Picasso. Her yearning is for a recognition of syncretism and Europe's acceptance of acculturation as an evolving and intrinsic component of its symbiotic relationship with diasporic culture. In our modern babel, linked by satellite systems producing a circuitry of electronic images underpinned by syntaxes of migration and exile, cross-cultural translations become the new paradigm through which identities can be expressed.

It is in the Uruguayan artist Carlos Capelan's work that we encounter a subliminal expression of the self as Europe begins to fragment under the ten-

sions of nationalism and ethnic conflict. In an interview with a British newspaper, Capelan declared the nature of his trajectory: "I am trying to focus on the Western self and otherness in relation to this self." But it is the manner in which he visualizes this relationship that holds the greatest fascination, for it is predicated upon the historical conditions of a Uruguayan exiled in Sweden.

For the construction of his "chamber of identities" Capelan used 75 litres of mud carefully pasted over four walls, 300 old books, 40 rocks and an assortment of furniture, with which he created a living room. At once private and yet public, this living room is also a museum that houses objects "with which we surround ourselves to establish our identity." Capelan uses old books neatly positioned in stacks held down by blocks of rocks; the mud walls are inscribed with quotations from linguistics, sociology, philosophy, art history and friends. Personal items invested with sentimental values are encased in glass cabinets. The room's ambience is further heightened by a sepia quality of lighting produced by reading lamps and triangular standing lamps. On the walls are also fragments of a tree root; elongated objects like dried bones/shells hang off the walls, held together by black strings.

Capelan's room is like an ancient shrine. Devotional and ritualistic, it is a kind of cultural testament to the complex issues confronting Europe, issues pertaining to the racialized self, cultural boundaries, linguistic borders and spiritual location. Ultimately Capelan's project is about making contact with otherness, of forging through a dialogue free of the violence associated with xenophobia and cultural arrogance. "What I'd like," he says, "is to build a self that is not hegemonic - which is in contact with nature and with what is happening outside the home and which doesn't believe this culture is superior to other cultures." On entering Capelan's living room one sees a sign on the wall that reads: WELCOME TO MY ROOM. Capelan's room, like the work of the artists I have discussed and those whose work for, reasons of space, I am unable to discuss, presents us with a nonhegemonic global vision of culture that is syncretic and shamanic.

Together or as individual pieces, the work of these artists constitutes a living map: a map of the self and its psychic foundations as we approach the next century, a map built on a new set of philosophical and cultural values. Perhaps it's the kind of map that Elias Canetti would have liked to have seen.

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THE ELUSIVE SIGNS OF AFRICAN-NESS: RACE AND REPRESENTATION AMONG



Woman with Colours, Licia Bronzin

LATINAS IN THE UNITED STATES

GLADYS M. JIMÉNEZ-MUÑOZ