

*Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art*, Edited by Jonathan Harris

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*Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art* is the tenth volume in the Critical Forum series published by Tate Liverpool and the Liverpool University Press. The essays in the volume derive from a conference held in spring 2006 to mark Tate Liverpool's exhibition 'Inverting the Map: Latin American Art from the Tate Collection'.

The book presents a wide range of articles dealing with issues around the construction of identity and the politics, ideals, histories and memories that go into that construction. The articles appear in an equally wide range of styles, from a transcript of a conversation between the artist Bashir Makhoul and writer Gordon Hon in chapter two, to Nicole Wolf's almost stream-of-consciousness on the entanglements of narrative, fragmentation and history in chapter seven.

Whilst in some ways the book benefits from these different voices, they do at times appear quickly edited and become quite difficult for the reader to un-pick. This is amplified by the variety of subjects and artists the articles deal with. The book is a collection of loosely related single articles, rather than the comprehensive investigation into issues of identity in contemporary art one feels the editors believe it is. The reader finds that that the specificity of each article – be it South American architects or Nigerian folk artists – is such that it prevents the reader

from extrapolating any wider meaning from it for fear of generalization or essentialism. These articles, undoubtedly useful to those studying Iranian video-art or Nigerian woodcarvers, may suffer from this perspective in terms of reaching a broader readership. The reader is forced to imagine links between different articles, and may possibly insinuate similarities where there are none, or at the very least, such general ones as to render them meaningless.

If the book has a theme running throughout, then it is the means of the construction of identity. Harris' own introduction traces the development of Tate Liverpool, revealing the faultlines that ran down 1980s Britain in a series of binary oppositions: Liverpool and London, north and south, Labour and Conservative, working and middle-class, jobs and tourism. Of course, politics and society tend not to divide quite as easily as these divisions would suggest, and the author acknowledges this, confidently navigating the story of the “Tate of the North” – as it was initially called – through these framing binaries, revealing the vested interests competing for influence, from the Militant Tendency city council, to Michael Heseltine, to the Tate itself, shown as a somewhat single-minded and apolitical institution, an organization that will swap allegiances to achieve its aims. Whilst each vested interest does in some form represent potential visitors to the gallery, Harris makes it clear how each group manufactures an argument which best displays their importance to the project.

Taking the form of a conversation between the artist Bashir Makhoul and the writer Gordon Hon, the second chapter likewise explores the creation of identities, this time in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Beginning with a discussion on appropriation and identity in a common Israeli postcard of a falafel with an Israeli flag in it, the artist explores ideas of a 'tactical agility' (2008, p37) inherent in forms of resistance, and applies the idea to his own paintings, in which the

colours of the Palestinian flag are used in modernist-style abstractions or traditional Arabic patterns juxtaposed with the Shell Oil symbol. Makhoul suggests that Palestinian identity and resistance can be forged through this agility, fighting Israel's monolithically nationalist ideology and identity with a constantly shifting one.

The creation of identity, and the ideological battles that ensue from it, are explored throughout the book. Felipe Hernandez's chapter looks at the relationship between the "South American architectures" of Oscar Niemeyer, Luis Barragan and Carlos Raul Villaneuva and European modernism. He reveals the games of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion European modernists have played with the architectures of Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela, and others. These games effect the inclusion of South American examples of modernist architecture into the modernist canon in order to evidence modernism's expansion beyond western Europe and North America, but exclude them from equality with their northern hemisphere counterparts by decrying them as mere 'competent version[s]' (2008, p93) of an architecture that is the 'intellectual property' (2008, p93) of European and North American architects and theorists.

Will Rea explores the relationship between Africa, art and modernism, and the contemporary issues raised by the West's continued desire for authorial control of the discourses on African art. Filtering his observations through the work of two Nigerian artists usually separated by certain notions of modernism and primitivism, Rea notes that these ideas date from the 'arting' (2008, p141) of Africa in the early twentieth century, when tensions between colonial anthropologists and art historians led to fights over what was viewed as tribal art's significance. While anthropology stressed a comparative and scientific basis for the understanding of art and focused on signification in terms of social use of objects, art historians resisted any attempt to credit African artists with an

aesthetic sensibility or technical proficiency. In British museums, therefore, art was displayed more as anthropology than art, effectively denying history and placing African art in a 'timeless vacuum' (2008, p143) in which Western art markets still operate, vainly searching for a perceived "authenticity" that recognises no change.

Other articles take up this theme, notably Karen Jacobs' sociological investigation of the relationships of appropriation and re-appropriation between the Freeport Mining Company and the Kamoro people of Papua or Nicholas Mirzoeff's call for a movement from identity politics to a 'politics of identification', in which a 'new form of psychogeography' is created in which space acts as a 'locus for identification' (2008, p197-198). Nevertheless, whilst the reader may be able to detect this theme, it is unfortunately not specific enough to tie what is essentially a series of diverse articles together in any meaningful way. Read as an overview or introduction to current ideas of identity in contemporary art around the world, the book works well, but the questions it sets itself on the inside cover – 'How is [art] made the vehicle of novel nationalisms and historical re-inventions engineered by nation-states and their current ideologies of identity and cultural value?' – are perhaps too wide in scope for a coherent collection to be built round.