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The Art of Opacity

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The art of opacity

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"[The opaque] is that which cannot be reduced,
which is the most perennial guarantee of
participation and confluence."

'For Opacity', *Poetics of Relation*. Édouard Glissant.

What is an art that withdraws from sharedness
and commonality?

What is an art that resists appropriation?

What is an art that refuses to yield itself?

What, in sum, is an art of opacity?

To answer these questions, let us situate ourselves
inside a room.

Mind you: this is no ordinary room. This is a room
where the familiar and the unfamiliar betray their
established identities, and where meanings are simul-
taneously evoked and withdrawn.

For example: take a look at the ceiling.

It is familiar to the point of boredom. This is the same featureless modular ceiling endlessly repeated across corporate spaces, like offices, stores, hospitals, or government buildings. Yet there is something oddly unfamiliar about it. Perhaps it is the fact that it has been artificially lowered, and that one can see this artifice atop the entrance door where a gap reveals the space between the lowered modular ceiling and the actual ceiling of the room. Or, maybe, it is the fact that the ceiling has been coated in an invisible solution of morphine, insulin, ultrasound gel, and gold. Or it may be the fact that, for some reason, there are two pairs of exuberant handmade glass lamps in the middle of the ceiling containing a mix of palm oil and high-end cognac. Or, maybe, it is the mesmerising geometrical lattice of shadows cast by the light of these lamps onto the otherwise uneventful surface of the ceiling.

This juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar elements does not stop at the ceiling. Along the walls, there are eleven air-conditioning units linked by thick and heavy electrical cords. These are the familiar inverter units that pepper the exterior facades of office buildings. Yet here they are inside the room, filling it with the mechanical humming of their fans rotating at different speeds and intensities. At this point, we might venture certain semantic continuities between these inverter air-conditioning units and the ceiling. After all, both are ubiquitous elements of the familiar, and yet largely invisible, infrastructures sustaining contemporary workspaces. Maybe this is what this room is about. Maybe it is an attempt at interrupting the invisibility of these mundane and neglected elements. Maybe all of these unexpected juxtapositions are part of a strategy to bring into view what typically sits at the margins of our attention and force us to see them, to relate to

them. But is that what the high-end cognac or the insulin are about? Or is it a...

...but we are interrupted...

...the air-conditioners suddenly vary the speed and intensity of their mechanical humming...

...and music (!) comes out of them.

It sounds like an old familiar love song. But it is hardly recognisable. The song has been slowed down to a pitch that renders it barely intelligible. Like the rest of the elements in the room, the song sits at the threshold of meaning, tilting between legibility and illegibility, defying our attempt to make sense of it.

So here we are: in a room with an artificially lowered modular ceiling coated in a mixture of morphine, insulin, ultrasound gel, and gold, lit by hand-made lamps filled with palm oil and high-end cognac, and soaked in the dragged-out melody of a distorted song coming out of inverter air-conditioning units.

Nothing in this room seems to add up to a unifying and coherent narrative. There seems to be no clear answer: only discordant meanings and unsettled identities. Each new element creates a different juxtaposition that decentres and diffracts meaning. Everything seems designed to obfuscate, to confound, to refuse any attempt to make sense of it.

We may be tempted to work against this refusal. After all, this is part of the modern ritual we perform upon encountering an artwork: we search for a key, a pattern, a cipher that can provide us with a ground to situate ourselves vis-à-vis the artwork, and that can help us

explain it, clarify it, experience it, or understand it. One of the first obvious moves in this search is to look for the artist behind the artwork. In this case, we know it is Ima-Abasi Okon. However, we also know that artists are playful and mischievous creatures who enjoy toying with us. So, we may ask ourselves: what does she want from me? Sometimes the title may offer a clue to this question. Let's look at it:

(Unbounded [sic]-Vibrational [sic] Always [sic]-on-the-Move [sic]) Praising Flesh (An _Extra aSubjective p,n,e,u,m,a-mode of Being T,o,g,e,t,h,e,r)

Like the room, there is no simple way of reading this title. Because, like the room, the title is saturated with incongruous syntax and juxtapositions that render familiar words uncannily unfamiliar. The title, like the room, creates dissonances that force us to slow down and figure out how to read it. But, like the room, the title refuses to settle around any given reading. Every time we read it, we read it differently. And each of these readings opens and closes the room in a different way. Something is clear: this is not a title that attempts to build a relation between us and the artist by clarifying, explaining, or synthesising the artwork. This is a title that works by obfuscating that relation, thus diffracting and short-circuiting the possibility of reducing the artwork to any particular reading.

We may insist: but what does it all mean?

We may insist as much as we want, but this artwork, much like *Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to"*, refuses to give us an answer. It refuses the call to order, following, in so doing, the path of the poet Édouard Glissant in claiming its "right to be opaque".

However, claiming a right to opacity sits athwart in a contemporary art world that is premised upon clarity. “Who are you? What do you want? Why did you make this? What is this? What does it mean?” These are the questions that the different institutions of the art world throw at the artist and her work, and for which they demand clear answers. Much like an Althusserian policeman, the contemporary art world constantly calls out to the artist, “Hey, you there!”, forcing her to render herself transparent, to confess her intentions, and explain her work. This is an art world in which the artist is ceaselessly interpellated to generate clarity about herself: by writing artist statements that explain the meaning of her artworks; by giving interviews to disclose details about how her biography informs her practice; by writing essays to produce coherent narratives about her work; by filling out questionnaires to detail installation instructions; or by signing acquisition contracts to legally bind her to a specific description of the artwork. The museum, the gallery, the collector, the critic *want* clarity. They *need* clarity. Because they need to make sense of the artist in order to locate her within a tradition, they need to have a clear understanding of the artwork to figure out how to display it, how to ship it, how to preserve it and, most crucially, how to own it and how to transact it. They cannot allow the artist or the artwork to dwell in uncertainty. Otherwise: How do we know how to install it? How to display it? How to talk about it? How to sell it? How to preserve it?

We may think that a refusal to answer these questions is a nihilist gesture. But we would be mistaken. Because such refusal is never merely negative. This refusal is also an invitation to open up a different horizon of communication and relation, and with it, a different form of art: an art of opacity.

But what is an art of opacity? And what can it offer?

An art of opacity is an art that emancipates the artwork from the tyranny of clarity and univocal meanings by obfuscating any project to summarise, reduce, or settle the artwork under any single aesthetic narrative or political project.

An art of opacity is an art that refuses to establish the artwork as a holder of pre-established meanings that need to be discovered, interpreted, understood, or experienced.

An art of opacity is an art that resists being appropriated by anyone, and thus opens the possibility of being partially appropriated by everyone.

An art of opacity is art that welcomes enemies and friends alike.

An art of opacity is an art that calls upon us not just as mere witnesses or interpreters but as accomplices of the artwork.

An art of opacity is an art that invites us to relate to the work without the zeal to conquer it, to appropriate it, to capture it, to reduce it, or to clarify it.

An art of opacity is an art that welcomes partial relations, equivocations, and truncated understandings as forms of producing meaning.

An art of opacity is an art where incongruous, contradictory, incomplete meanings can coexist side by side.

An art of opacity is an art that accepts the simple truth that the artwork is never one, but is always many, end-

lessly open, unceasingly becoming, forever suspended in a horizon that is yet to come.

An art of opacity is an art of irreducibility, an art that works by multiplying, proliferating, and opening up meanings, rather than reducing them, unifying them, or synthesising them.

An art of opacity is an art of humility that invites us to dwell in the discomfort of not having final answers and to embrace the fact that any relations we build, any interpretation we venture, will always be partial, incomplete, tentative.

An art of opacity is art that refuses the ideas of commonality and sharedness as either preconditions or goals of our relation to the artwork.

An art of opacity is an art of the uncommons, an art where communication does not imply communion, where understanding does not require shared meanings, and where being together does not need identity.

An art of opacity is an art that invites us into a space where we can imagine unexpected confluences, impossible relations, and unsuspected coalitions.

In sum, an art of opacity is an art where we can enter a room with an artificially lowered modular ceiling coated in a mixture of morphine, insulin, ultrasound gel, and gold, lit by hand-made lamps filled with palm oil and high-end cognac, and soaked in the dragged-out melody of a distorted song coming out of inverter air-conditioning units... and leave it with without any certainty but filled with possibility.



(Unbounded [sic]-Vibrational [sic] Always [sic]-on-the-Move [sic]) Praising Flesh

(An_Extra aSubjective p,n,e,u,m,a-mode of Being T,o,g,e,t,h,e,r) 2019

11 stripped air conditioner inverters, 500 metres of power cables, three DMX controllers, Dimensions variable.

alongside-ness with-out identification1 + excess over the original value1 < (A-----d-----o-----r-----n), (2019)

Six channel sound 14'30.





Spotlights at Tate Britain: Ima-Abasi Okon, display view, Tate Britain, 2021.



Spotlights at Tate Britain: Ima-Abasi Okon, display view, Tate Britain, 2021.



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(An _Extra aSubjective p,n,e,u,m,a-mode of Being T,o,g,e,t,h,e,r) 2019.*





When the —[After-the-world presocial vivid thereness and ongoingly]— is in the system, (2019)
Polished steel, LED lights, hand-blown lead crystal, palm oil, Courvoisier VS Cognac, 20.5 × 11 cm.





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