

## **Afrolization (Blueberry Hill Dub)**

### **Tobias Nagl**

In a seminal essay, the American art historian W.J.T. Mitchell asked with playful irony: If pictures were people, what kind of people would they be? Would they have a "colour" – or a "gender"? Would they have a "language" and a "culture"? If pictures were people, what would they *want*? Equal rights – with human language? Perhaps. (But that doesn't mean they would want to be transformed *into* language.) In Mitchell's eyes, pictures want one thing above all: to be recognized as "complex individuals" which, like people, have "multiple subject positions and identities".<sup>1</sup>

W.J.T. Mitchell's post-humanist reversal of the relationship between viewer and picture reminds us not only of some of the difficulties involved in speaking and writing about pictures, but more importantly reminds us that every act of painting and writing takes place in a political arena of representation and recognition. This is especially true of non-figurative painting, the genre in which the Afro-German artist Daniel Kojo Schrade has made a name for himself over the last fifteen years. Abstract painting (in particular since the triumph of abstract expressionism during the Cold War, aided by financial support from the U.S. State Department), in its radical striving for form, its refusal of superficial reference, and its self-reflective approach towards colour and canvas as elements of 'pure', media-specific expression, has long been suspiciously viewed by progressive art historians as an expression of an hermetic high modernism. In its supposed 'neutrality', which excludes large parts of the world, abstract painting is said to be permeated by Western ideologies of modernization, bound to U.S. geopolitical interests, and considered the domain of dead white men. It is only in recent years that this view has been questioned by post-colonial critics, who point out the mono-cultural bias of this well-meant critique, and emphasize the global character of aesthetic modernity, and the forgotten contributions of non-Western artists to the history of abstraction in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the discourse on minoritarian aesthetic formations is still dominated by sociological approaches and institutional critique, which tend to make the autonomy of aesthetic objects invisible: only rarely are the works of diasporic artists ennobled with the

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<sup>1</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?", *October*, Vol. 77 (Summer 1996), 71-82.

"dignity of objecthood", as Kobena Mercer has persuasively argued.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kojo Schrade's pictures represent an important intervention in these debates.

*Stop Look Listen* is the title of a series of paintings by Daniel Kojo Schrade done in 2003. The series turns modernism's claim to pause and confront the materiality of the painted object with one's own eyes into an aesthetic program. Anyone who has seen Schrade's works on canvas or paper hanging in a gallery will quickly notice that they set the viewer in motion and require spatial interaction. Their dimensions range from over-sized canvases to tiny miniatures; on closer examination, their apparently flat surfaces turn out to be a complex assemblage of paint layers, charcoal lines, scriptural fragments (like sequences of letters), and added mineral elements, such as sand or marble dust, which calls into question the two-dimensional "flatness" (Clement Greenberg) of the panel painting and subjects the gaze of the viewer to an oscillatory movement between the macroscopic and the microscopic (just like trying to follow a photographer who is working with different shot lengths simultaneously in the same frame). While the command to stop and look refers to the spatial dimensions of the aesthetic experience, the 'objecthood' and materiality of the canvas, *Listen* bears a temporal and dialogical signature characteristic of musical and linguistic perceptions.

This temporal dimension results on the one hand from the de- and reterritorializing movement described above, the controlled interplay of form-setting and form-dissolving elements and their effect on the viewer, and on the other hand from Daniel Kojo Schrade's mode of production: his pictures are created in stages over weeks and months, separated by breaks, in which he applies layer upon layer of paint, demarcates, sticks, modifies, scrapes away, or recontextualizes through added figurative or scriptural elements. The result could be described as a palimpsest, as a technique similar to the collage or montage, in which traces of earlier stages, however, are present or preserved [*aufgehoben*], even if not always on the surface but as an archive of underground inscriptions, which enter into a dialogue with each other on the canvas. This moment of perceivable time is reinforced by the use of typographic elements (often emphasizing elements from the picture's title, as in a close-up) which, unlike the simultaneity of viewing a picture, require a sequential reading and in their differential

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<sup>2</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Iconography After Identity", in: David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (eds.), *Shades of Black. Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham: Duke UP, 2005, 53.

character refer to the indeterminability of the production of meaning – an aspect of Schrade's œuvre which is also reflected in his serial mode of production. Like the remixes of electronic music producers, it examines motifs in their potentialities. Even the ambivalent status of writing itself – on the one hand medium of an unarrestable Derridian *différance*, on the other hand expression of what is assumed to be Western cultural superiority – is further twisted and complicated by Schrade's subtle mode of production: he takes his brush and individually copies typographic letters that belong to the world of technical reproducibility and the printed word, thus calling into question the boundaries of symbolic and painterly codes. Like a floating post-colonial relic, writing in Schrade's works often appears in the spaces between foreground and background, or in the transition between different colour areas, creating a "third space" of interpretation and memory.

At the same time, Schrade's abstract compositions are opened up through the use of writing towards reference. Like Asger Jorn (an early influence in addition to the *art informel* of Antoni Tàpies or Serge Poliakoff), Daniel Kojo Schrade reminds us that all painting – and writing – develops processually from what has been painted or written before and must be understood as the expression of a "dialogic imagination" (Michail Bakhtin), which in the eyes of post-colonial critics such as Kobena Mercer represents an essential feature of black and diasporic aesthetics across the "Black Atlantic".<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Schrade's use of text particles can be read as an echo of 'Third World' traditions of applied art (e.g. Latin American and West African signs or hand-painted Indian cinema posters) which he integrates as 'found' objects in the manner of *arte povera*. On the other hand, however, these text particles are direct reflections of politico-cultural, private and pop-mythological frames of reference: *Stop Look Listen* uses signs which can be found in Ghana (the home country of Schrade's father) at railway crossings, and which themselves are British imports that have been appropriated and often put to new uses. Other text fragments, together with the picture's title to which they refer, allude to Malcom X, the Surinamese ancestry of "Brother Beethoven", or W.E.B. Du Bois, the African-

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<sup>3</sup> See Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle. New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1994, 53-66. The term "Black Atlantic" was used by the British sociologist Paul Gilroy to denote a critical, transnational space of communication which has developed along the routes of the slave trade between Africa, Europe and America as a counter-culture of modernity; see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

American theorist of "double consciousness". One of the most important of these references, developed by Schrade in a number of series since the late 1990s, is the afro-futuristic figure of the "Afronaut", inspired by the visionary Jamaican dub reggae producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry. In the 1970s, as an alternative to the black nationalist and religious traditions of Rastafarianism, the remix pioneer Lee Perry began increasingly to integrate science fiction, space and alien metaphors into his private cosmology and to stylize himself as an extra-terrestrial visitor by means of a range of eccentric, even 'mad' costumes and props (CDs as magic amulets, umbrella hats, etc.). "Not all aliens come from outer space", as Perry once put it in memorable terms.<sup>4</sup> The musical trickster Lee 'Scratch' Perry resorted to extra-terrestrial tropes in order to lend expression to diasporic experiences of alienation and abduction, but also as a means to open up a creative space of possibility: as a modernist border crosser and as a radically anti-essentialist figure, the "Afronaut" stands not only for lost *roots*, but above all for the decentred *routes* taken across the "Black Atlantic" by black people and black forms of cultural knowledge in the course of the past 400 years.

In Schrade's work, the "Afronaut" appears in a variety of figurative incarnations – from the monochrome UFO to the black male torso, sometimes painted in the detailed afro-centric psychedelic style of Abdul Mati Klarwein or Chris Ofili. However, it most frequently figures as the dashed-off charcoal silhouette of an astronaut's helmet and an umbrella (or parasol), which emerges from Schrade's vibrant colour compositions and layered surfaces and plays around their borders. As the agent of a radically different hermeneutic, Schrade's "Afronaut" is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's equally extra-terrestrial angel of history (and also, in the transition between graphic and painterly codes, line and surface, of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which inspired Benjamin's theses). In his fleeting appearance, however, the "Afronaut" might also be read as a reference to Jean-Michel Basquiat's repeated use of symbols of black self-empowerment (like the omnipresent royal crowns) which he quickly 'tagged' in graffiti style.

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<sup>4</sup> See John Corbett, "Brothers from Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Sun Ra and George Clinton", *Extended Play. Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, 7-24. See also: Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books. 1998. For a fascinating cinematic glimpse into Perry's afro-futuristic universe, see the documentary by the former S.Y.P.H. member Harry Rag *Ich sende aus dem All* (1995).

In the exhibition at Iwalewa House (2010), Daniel Kojo Schrade animates the "Afronaut" several times and in different media contexts. In his *Blueberry Hill* performance, Schrade enters the gallery in white overalls and overshoes; around his waist he wears a tool belt which holds a folded umbrella like a sword and several rolls of masking tape (blue, red and green). After taking up his position, Schrade begins to attract the attention of the visitors by chanting "on-n-n-n" at different pitches in a voice between speaking and singing. He then goes through various contortions to stick little pieces of tape to the floor, which initially define the space in a mysterious way, and then serve as stepping stones or a kind of improvised bridge for the artist. Finally, Schrade makes a hexagon on the floor with masking tape, which functions like an island on which he can firmly plant both feet. The syllable "on" is now expanded by adding more words that suggest a song. The song is Vincent Rose's popular jazz/R'n'B classic "Blueberry Hill", which Schrade crosses with the lyrics of "Strawberry Fields Forever": "On – On – On ... On Blueberry Hill, *nothing is real*." Schrade then uncovers the upper part of his body, opens the umbrella, and fixes it by its handle to his chest with masking tape – the similarities to Lee Perry's performances and to Schrade's "Afronaut" iconography are now unmistakable.

Schrade then begins to place bits of masking tape freehand on the floor again, creating a path into the next room, while repeating his trick with song fragments: "Das – das – das alles und noch viel mehr, würd' ich machen, wenn ich..." (Rio Reiser's "König von Deutschland") is followed by the blues lines "Well – well – it must be South Carolina, Mother told me I was born there/but I really don't remember... ." At the same time, Schrade begins to cover the upper part of his body with blue paint. In the movement of the artist into and between different rooms, in the way the elements undergo a chronological development and take shape in a dialogical constellation, one can recognize in *Blueberry Hill* some of the central aspects of Schrade's aesthetic, which are also characteristic of his painting. Through these musical allusions, Daniel Kojo Schrade (who used to perform as a musician with a blues band) maps a complex space of possible identities and homelands. While these musical allusions can be quite specifically localized in African-American and bohemian/subcultural German traditions, they speak to each other in Schrade's humorous performance precisely through their irreality, their subjunctive consciousness, in short: their potentiality, which time and again is represented not least by the

iconography of the black space traveller. It encompasses loss, memory and the creation of new routes and crossroads. By bringing the black body into play and painting it blue, Schrade's performance also vigorously challenges the supposedly neutral role of the gallery space as a "white cube" which suspends all differences in the name of art.<sup>5</sup>

Daniel Kojo Schrade's three large-scale works *Anglophone*, *Lusophone* and *Francophone*, which were the centre pieces of the exhibitions, are similarly site-specific, and like other recent works they are characterized by a greater integration of figurative and photographic elements. The central motifs of this series are 'found objects': the plump British Michelin Man made of tires; the words "La vache qui rit", which allude to the French cheese of the same name; and a Portuguese-speaking masked figure with pipe and tie. These are direct references to the Iwalewa House and its collections. "La vache qui rit" was printed on the back of a work by the Senegalese painter Aboubacar Diané, who had obviously used a cardboard box of this popular brand as a canvas: in Schrade's work the words find their way to the front. The Michelin Man is a reference to the late Nigerian painter and musician, Prince Twins Seven Seven, one of the main representatives of the "Osogbo School" which developed after Nigerian independence: in his fantastic paintings which often contain allusions to Yoruba cosmology, the Michelin Man is also frequently found. The tie-wearer, in contrast, is one of several photographs by the Luandan family of photographers, Pinto Alfonso. However, it is not only the found objects and the place where they were found that are site-specific, but also the way the paintings are hung, calling into question the boundary between two-dimensional picture and three-dimensional installation, between foreground and background, canvas and gallery wall, frame and picture. By also painting on the gallery wall – sometimes in continuation of the picture, and sometimes in contrast to it – Schrade extends the transitive process that is also characteristic of the internal organization of his painted works, into the space of the viewer.

The counterpart of this site-specificity and localization (which, however, in its playful approach to boundaries and transitions must always be understood as being in a state of flux) is the motif of the "Afronaut", which here undergoes new mutations and transformations. Inspired by photographs of astronauts training in a pool, in *Francophone* and *Anglophone*

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<sup>5</sup> See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Schrade reinterprets the "Afronaut" using photos of deep sea divers found on the Internet, which he has transferred to the canvas in the style of Pop Art with all traces of their photographic materiality or painted on the gallery wall in the illusionist manner of a film poster. Like the UFOs in *Lusophone*, they suggest an enigmatic extra-terrestrial space of free-floating movement. Underwater metaphors occupy an important place in the Afro-futuristic tradition, as the ship (the model for the spaceship) represents one of the central symbols of the black diasporic experience and the "Black Atlantic". In a poem alluding to the practice of throwing sick or rebellious slaves overboard during the voyage to America, Amiri Baraka once wrote: "At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there's a railroad made of human bones." Such connotations are echoed in a whole range of African-American aquatic metaphors – from Jimi Hendrix's "1983...(A Merman I Should Turn To Be)" to the Detroit techno duo Drexciya's private mythology built on the utopian idea that the murdered slaves could have procreated under water and founded a sub-Atlantic civilization.<sup>6</sup>

In their wealth of transnational allusions, their inscriptions of overlapping temporalities and materialities, and their magistral mobilization of the most diverse painterly strategies, Daniel Kojo Schrade's works create a diasporic archive which refers not solely to the past but also holds itself radically open to the future. In their controlled interplay of formal construction, improvisation and chance, Schrade's works can be understood as the Afro-German expression of a black "vernacular modernism" (Stuart Hall), in which "formal mastery" and the "deformation of mastery" go hand in hand, because it both claims the unfulfilled aesthetic and political promise of modernity and questions the latter's omissions from a cosmopolitan perspective. In this sense, blackness and modernity itself might be understood as an "unfinished project". Not least thanks to Daniel Kojo Schrade, we have begun to perceive the decentred and polyphonic contours of this project.

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<sup>6</sup> See Kodwo Eshun, "Fear of a Wet Planet", *The Wire*, January 1998 (No. 167) and Ruth Mayer, *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalization*, Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2002, 207-255.