Democrats, Republicans, Capitalists and Creeps"... and You

In an interview with Journalist Alex Perry, former Governor of Nigeria's Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi spoke critically of the culture of corruption endemic in his country's political and institutional framework.

> *"To understand Nigeria, he says, you have to accept you are entering a world where all truth is relative, all fact is transient and what seems to be the most visceral and bloody reality can ultimately be revealed as artifice.*
>
> *"It's about power'" says Lambido. "Power, and the construction of truth."*

The layering of the various motifs employed in the exhibition "Democrats, Republicans, Capitalists and Creeps"… and You, may at first appear disparate but they are underpinned by a wider interpretation of the notion cited by Sanusi. "The construction of truth" describes a phenomenon that defines and evidences a cultural, political and ideological landscape; it is something that we are all arguably complicit in, irrespective of whether one posits themselves for or against such values. The extent to which media and its political values are embedded in our everyday lives determines and defines our thoughts and responses to any event or struggle that is brought to our awareness. Arguably, matters and events that are omitted from our attention for political and cultural expediency have just as much of a role to play in project of constructing and redefining a narrative as anything that we are told.

Nevertheless, the linearity of such narratives has been fractured by a plurality defined by a networked convergence between social media participation within the frame of a traditional corporatized mass media. With journalistic rigour and accountability diminished in comparison with standards that used to be observed, coupled with this expanded participation (or the illusion thereof) of the public or audience it seems that now more than ever, our media diet is governed by a notably ideologised authority, and therefore the compass that we use to determine truth.

It is now just over a year since the Islamic militant group Boko Haram kidnapped 274 girls from their school in Chibok, in northeast Nigeria. The tragic event was only one of innumerable crimes committed by Boko Haram since their campaign of terror began in 2009. Unimaginably bold in scale and nature, even this event was slow to garner the significant media coverage that it deserved internationally. In the weeks following the #Bringbackourgirls campaign grew in prominence, news coverage focused on the celebrity participation in the social media campaign which drew attention to the region which until then had been largely neglected by mainstream western media platforms despite the fact a string of such raids and murders had been taking place on a more modest scale for 5 years. The lack of progress made in the rescue operation, coupled with a wider culture of disinterest in sub-Saharan Africa led to a gross trivialization of what had taken and was taking place in the region.

The discourse quickly became one concerned with what was lauded as the growing impact of social media campaiging and a lack of girls education in the developing world. This shift in focus made a tragedy, in a part of the world many of us have been conditioned to hold in disregard, in to a means of reconstructing the event to satisfy existing media narratives that propagate western, neo-liberal hegemony at the expense of culturally relative analysis.

The exhibition features an incomplete list of the victim's names, (178 of 274) rendered in black Disney font. The dumb, whimsy of this work also echoes the formal language of a memorial or honors list, it communicates a simple piece of information about some of these girls that was largely spared from the coverage. Nevertheless, this vain personalization is undermined by the aesthetics of a formulaic, fantastic, romanticism defined by conservative corporatism and the inherent vacuity of a brand concerned purely with entertainment. The questionable taste of such a gesture employs the conventions of contemporary, conceptual art to mirror the obscenity of manipulating such a crime with the intent to interrogate the use of subtext that defines a largely conservative media landscape reliant on reductive moral grandstanding to reinforce the values of an established power base who essentially redefine the truth to their own ends on a daily basis.

The concentration on the role of social media, demonstrated a very public and politically problematic iteration of the function of 'the identity economy'[i]. A print of Michelle Obama refers to her prominence in the campaign that followed the kidnapping. As the most internationally notable participant in the campaign she went as far as to commandeer her husband's weekly address to state, "In these girls, Barack and I see our own daughters". I do not propose that The First Lady's statement was a purely cynical exercise void of compassion. However, in this context, as is the case with many other participants in #Bringbackourgirls campaign the gesture is defined by a will to project a deliberately constructed version of one's identity as sensitive, empathetic and liberal through the dissemination of information that your public or a peer group will identify a value in. This dissemination has an advantage that is as concerned with narcissistic projection, often at the expense any real engagement with the matter in question.

Despite it's viral success and support from personalities such as Jesse Jackson, Angelina Jolie, Sylvester Stallone and even The Coca-Cola Company one cannot deny that there is a glibness to such gestures that serves to promote a brand identity (this I would argue is as true of celebrities as businesses). In creating the impression that they care about such events and have a discernible interest in the victims of events such as the kidnapping these cultural figureheads present an artifice of compassion that curries favor with an audience. But the act conveniently neglects any proposal for continued action or an acknowledgment of the fact they are powerless to affect any change in circumstance.

Of course not all participants in the campaign were of public notoriety, the seemingly heightened projection of our 'individuality' that is provided by social media platforms produces the same logic on a humbler scale where privacy and publicity are blurred.

In 2009, Anders Colding-Jorgensen, a Danish psychologist studying the spread of ideas online conducted a simple experiment. In an effort to measure the viral potency of 'slacktivist' activity and the nature of how ideas spread online, Jorgensen started an online campaign to save Copenhagen's famous Stork fountain from demolition, within two weeks the campaign had gained somewhere in the region of 27,000 members but the proposition was entirely fictional, the fountain is a listed monument. What this harmless experiment demonstrated is, I would argue, the same as what happened with #Bringbackourgirls, as Evgeny Morzov puts it –

> "The problem with political activism facilitated by social networking sites is that much of it happens for reasons that have nothing to do with one's commitment to ideas and politics in general, but rather to impress one's friends."[ii]

The fountain is depicted to provide an anchoring point to these observations, indicating that while the work relies heavily on a such a loaded and tragic event, it is not primarily about the specifics of the case but of a wider set of concerns thrown up by the treatment of the story. The relationship between the story of the fountain and the #Bringbackourgirls is that while the events of genesis are poles apart, the behavioural pattern and logic are the same. The ease with which people can be seen to demonstrate outrage or compassion provides the motive for participation rather than the cause itself but is rarely demonstrative of any real participation or indeed investigation of the issue beyond the initial post or share.

In writing this I feel it is important to relativize my position by noting that I participate in these cycles, while I do not follow hash tag trends I am a user of these platforms. In doing so I enter the identity economy by constructing a relative truth about myself through the dissemination of information, very little of which I actually generate myself, feeding and consuming a chaotic narrative web composed of the constructed truths of others, defined by the public and personal desire to transmit ones ideological leanings. The result is an incomprehensibly complex delineated web of overlapping and conflicting narratives that is simultaneously organic and engineered. Therefore it is crucial to interrogate and tease out the subtext of any story so as not to be simply led, but to understand how and why a motive may be compromised.

A portrait of Vladislav Surkov is included to expand the discussion of obfuscation at work within the show. The PR strategist is credited with fostering the sustained and unprecedented support Russian premier, Vladimir Putin has enjoyed in his own country for many years now. Writing political satire and fiction under a pseudonym, and funding a variety of political groups and cultural enterprises often with opposing views to each other and that of the government he supports, Surkov is noted for identifying this non-linearity and deliberately exploiting it's potential in a landscape of varied media apparatus to promote a narrative chaos in service of a concept he calls 'managed democracy'. This strategy allows the Russian government to respond in different ways to different events partially of it's own construction to respond in ways that present differing political behaviours and ideologies that will appeal to wider strata of the population than can be achieved by a more simplistic and conventional party political system. Interestingly Surkov heightened this sense of confusion by telling people what he was doing and had done. In employing such a sophisticated and confusing strategy, he deliberately manipulated events to foster the narratives he was after, which perversely exploited a combination of herd mentality and behavioural unpredictability. Surkov explicitly employs *"Power and the construction of truth"* to use the words of Lambido Sanusi, in a very knowing way through an understanding of the sophistication of sub-text, a quality that many mainstream media pundits are not even aware of in their own work never mind that of others, this is also true of the language and behaviour that have become the hallmarks of this participatory digital culture.

While talk of power may seem distant and alienating, it is important to bear in mind that this culture of fractal and multiple truths is symptomatic of a logic that is product of the cultural economy facilitated by social media. The piece 'One and Three Selfies' aims to signify the means by which this logic has embedded itself in our wider cultural scope by employing an image that many of us possess an immediate familiarity with and experience of to create a sense of the implication of the individual within these cycles. The work appropriates the model of the American conceptualist Joseph Kosuth's 'One and Three' series from the 1960's. It features the dictionary definition of the word 'Selfie' as stated in the Oxford English Dictionary, a mirror and a printed selfie of the person who installed the work.

At the end of 2013 the inclusion of the word 'selfie' in the dictionary quite succinctly demonstrated how quickly and strongly this relatively new cultural logic has taken hold. As a universally recognised document of reference in the English-speaking world, the inclusion in the dictionary formalised the means by which this ubiquitous signifier of identity economy had entered our shared tongue. This casual, non-academic word has grown informally in a relatively new cultural context and was rapidly incorporated in to the language of those who attempt to officiate an essentially non-standardised structure that is in constant flux, namely language itself. The virality that allowed this word to be quickly adopted by the established gatekeepers of our language would have been impossible in previous history. It is a product of networked proliferation, but I would argue this says more about an inherent narcissism bound up in the culture of participatory media and less about the political and cultural agency that is often claimed on behalf of these platforms.

The relational adaptation of the canonical work by Kosuth facilitates the production of throwaway derivative imagery in order playfully lampoon the notion of a culturally authoritative voice that is often represented by the act of canonisation. In art historical terms, for the convenience of my position I liken the academic, and institutional cannon as a force that, at time occupies a role of cultural authority similar to that of mainstream media outlets in our day-to-day understanding of the truth. While this work, or this text at least, may seem bound up in cynicism and suspicion, the play at work here is intended to undermine notions of zealous cultural piety and conservatism that perceive this world of explicitly relative truth and constructed identity as a threat rather than a reality that already exists. In light of this understanding it determines that to enjoy an effective transmission of ones own values, creating meaning is not as simple glibly following a viral #trend, but requires a more sophisticated navigation of a new type of cultural economy.

Michael White (April 2015)

i A term coined psychologist Anders Colding-Jorgensen to describe the culture of exchange facilitated by Social media https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgLWPcPi2yE

ii The Net Delusion pg.186 – Evgeny Morzov

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