

South Africa
South America
Australia
New Zealand

The South Issue: new horizons

contemporary art without frontiers

Juan Davila
Pat Hoffie
Jim Allen
Matthew Ngui
James Geurts



Philip Rikhotso *Untitled 1* 2004, wood and paint, courtesy of Gallery MOMO.

Politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought or, for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity or transcendental theory.'

sharlene khan

African art has, since the 1980s, gained ground in the Western contemporary art world. Large-scale shows featuring African art have set the stage for portrayals of a post-colonial Africa. This is not an easy task of course when one has to negotiate a minefield of myths and fallacies about a place; even more so, when one seriously considers the reality that it is in fact an entire continent, with 53 countries filled with hundreds of cultures, religions, languages, traditions, politics and histories.

Despite this, the all-encompassing 'African' label has perhaps been necessary not only in bringing attention to the continent and its cultural productions, but also in trying to challenge and dispel prevailing stereotypical notions of whether Africans can actually make that thing called 'art', what is African art, and how should it be included in international showcases, whether African art lives up to international art standards, the usual 'is it art/ is it craft' debate, what constitutes an African artist and what is 'contemporary' in Africa? Curators such as Jean-Hubert Martin, Francesco Bonami, Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe, Salah Hassan and Simon Njami have been faced with these difficult artistic and ideological challenges when featuring African art in mega exhibitions, pavilions and biennales.

While many of these curators have had the best interest of Africa at heart, our 'saviours' have also come under intense criticism. The many Western curators who have traversed African countries picking artwork to represent the continent have been criticised for perpetuating some of the very same

stereotypes that they themselves have tried to challenge: they can be seen as exploiting 'Africa' in the same way colonist traders, anthropologists and historians did; and more recently of engaging with African art superficially, of choosing to focus on socio-political work only and then through a 'supermarket shopping' mentality.

It is based on these paradoxes that this article questions the role of curators, quite specifically Western curators who engage with 'Other' contexts like Africa. Their importance in the global system is not under question here, but rather their roles and obligations as purveyors in cultural knowledge systems. This article does not deal with the 'business' side of contemporary curatorial practice, but rather questions curatorship on an ideological, moralistic level. This is partly because curatorship is not only seminal in the dissemination of information on different African experiences, but also actively engaged in promoting Africa as cultural capital in the wider contemporary art circles and Western culture. In this, I compare curators to Edward Said's idea of the intellectual and call upon curators to seriously consider the implications of their role as intellectuals in contemporary culture. In his *The Representations of the Intellectual*, Said identifies that the ability to represent is what implicitly defines an intellectual:

Today, everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci's sense. The central fact for me is, I think that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public.²

Nothing could, in my view, define a curator more accurately in today's art culture than the above definition, as curators are constantly seeking to represent not only new art styles and practices, but increasingly 'other' contexts, situations, perspectives, identities and histories. Making visible what we have not seen or have overlooked, bringing new readings and complicating existing readings is the 'artwork' of a curator. This ability to represent others however is indeed a burdened one. Representation comes with a level of responsibility and accountability not only to an audience, the sponsors and an institution but to those being represented – and with extensive histories of oppression, colonisation and exploitation in any African country to work against, this is certainly not an enviable task. The art of representation entails not only what and who gets shown, but by whom and for who, but let me initially begin with the what and who.

Representation and Responsibility

Attempts to showcase African art inevitably run into a number of representational problems. Curators are faced with various expectations of what a show on Africa should encompass from the historically specific traditional artworks that have come to typify African art, rural or informal creative works (craft) to new media works that fit neatly into twenty-first century contemporary art exhibitions. An established First World/Third World polemic that significantly differentiates between 'art' and 'craft' has resulted in any African shows ignoring craft or showing more new-media works being attacked as being untrue to the Third Worldness of Africa.³

Another constant expectation that is heaped upon art from Africa, is that of works which deal specifically with the socio-political and economic woes of Africa. African artists can often be heard bemoaning the fact that while Western artists have the luxury of 'art-for-art's sake', Third World artists have to be the moral conscience of the world, serving up the dramas of Third World existence: i.e. war, famine, women's rights, child abuse, racial politics, poverty, disaster after disaster. While one has grown accustomed to this type of representation in the mass media, that they constantly flood the supposedly more critical realm of the visual arts is indeed troubling, as it still offers up colonised trauma for the Western gaze.

So because strife-ridden Africa remains highlighted curators of large-scale exhibitions confront the paradox of trying to challenge stereotypes of exotic craft-based, timeless Africa and often end up dishing out representations of collective or personal struggle that continue to 'Other' Africa. 'Struggle' becomes our cultural capital and passport to international art exhibitions and we continue to be defined in this way to a Western audience.

It is important to note here that though these curator-intellectuals are active players in the ongoing 'redefinition' of Africa for the West, they are (thankfully) not the ones who define Africa for people living daily life in the various African countries. As Michel Foucault aptly put it:

In the most recent upheaval, the intellectual discovered that the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves.⁴

But if Foucault is correct about the masses being able to articulate themselves, why is it so hard to hear expressions of Africans about themselves, their homes, their art except through these Western curators who use Africa as a knowledge base?

Many of the curators who have curated African art exhibitions either have an interest in African arts (e.g. Martin, Bonami) or some sort of cultural tie with 'Africa' (like Enwezor, Njami). Problematically, some of these Western curators use their black skins as automatic qualifier to access various African contexts and have subsequently become 'gatekeepers' to African art. Many of these curators were born in different Western countries, educated in Western systems and have gone on to become authorities on contemporary art from Africa, some of them never having lived for more than a few months at a time in any given African country.

Firstly, let me say that in questioning the positioning of these black Western curators, there is a question that always nags me (on a democratic and humanist level). Surely any person, anywhere, has the right to become educated about a context, to invest in it, and then go on to represent and teach about this context? My answer is usually yes, but it is much too problematic when these outsider voices become the 'official' experts at the expense of locally-based voices. Even more worrying is when these outsider experts seek to control what is shown about Africa, when, where and how and eventually become intellectual filters for the representation



Sharlene Khan and Collen Burrows
Hung Curator 2007, digital photograph.



Clifford Charles *Millennium* 2000, black paint and street posters, 2.60m x 1.80m.

of all things African. This recently became evident in the disagreement between academic/curators Enwezor, Hassan and Oguibe with regard to the open call for submissions for the African Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. On the South African website ASAI, Oguibe accuses Enwezor and Hassan of trying to channel proposals for the Pavilion through their arts organisation Forum for African Arts. The falling out between these former curator buddies ultimately reveals a level of politics in which apparently people based in Africa have little say. Although the Forum for African Arts can be seen as 'overseeing' shows on Africa (in terms of logistics and funding), such spaces can easily become a vigilante position. Oguibe writes in his letter:

*We may have clout and connections, but we have no monopoly on vision. We cannot turn our advantage into a right. Moreover, we cannot afford to be part of any demand, idea, arrangement or suggestion that seeks to limit the opportunities of African practitioners in the art world. We simply cannot afford to turn ourselves into gate-keepers.*⁵

The authoritative antics of the Western-based curators have also resulted in the manifestation of 'supermarket' curating. For this kind of curating, curators with hectic schedules jet in for a day or two to view artworks in one city then the next, before jetting off to the next African country. Often, these curators are looking for 'brands', i.e. artists who are already well established in the art scene, whose works represent a distinct African struggle and who won't present any difficulty for time-strapped curators to work with. Artists from only certain galleries are chosen; tried and tested artists are shown repeatedly at the expense of a host of younger artists who are never given exposure; while many different types of artworks are ignored in favour of individual or collective identity masturbatory explorations. While 'supermarket' curating is not restricted to Africa only, for Africa it has had some serious implications.

In South Africa, it has meant that it is easier to work with white South African artists who continue to have access to privileges that make it easier to contact and work with them. One does hear what a hard time international curators have dealing with local circumstances: i.e., trying to contact black

artists who don't have or can't even use email or provide them with jpegs or slides, can't meet deadlines, are 'unprofessional' due to various economic circumstances, and can't even articulate a paragraph on their work, and so on. Fellow curators can easily sympathise with such woes as it does make the curatorial practice very difficult indeed. But then again, when one comes into a local circumstance steeped in differential economic inequalities that has impacted greatly even on art production, one can't shy away from challenges simply because they are difficult.

A simple question that pops into one's mind with regard to the above dilemma is that if international curators find it so difficult to work with local contexts, then why not work more closely with local curators to get a better idea of what's going on locally and who have more time to deal with the practicalities in a local context? This reluctance may hint more at international curators being unwilling to relinquish their 'authoritative' status than anything else. Protecting one's reputation is also probably at the heart of superstar curators being unwilling to take a chance on unknown artists, although this will be excused away as maintaining the 'artistic integrity' of the exhibition or being certain that established artists will deliver the goods.

The working strategies of these intellectuals ultimately reveals more about the integrity of the intellectual (and, sometimes their lack of courage) than it does about the artists and the local contexts themselves. As difficult as all this may be, let us not forget that many of these curators have been propelled into the limelight through their engagement with Other contexts. This engagement is a choice and implicates these intellectuals with their area of inquiry. They become part of its knowledge production and this is where responsibility has to be coupled with a serious level of accountability.

Accountability

One would assume that curators coordinating a show on 'Africa' or a specific African context would be quite familiar with the socio-politics of that domain, even if it is limited to the visual arts field. It is therefore surprising when international curators dealing with 'Other' contexts are quietly ignorant of local political and socio-economic wranglings. One can argue that this can be expected, at least initially anyway, but when these outsider intellectuals are presented with insider politics, and still choose to actively ignore them, this ideological stance becomes a moral issue as well. Increasingly in South Africa, black artists, writers and curators have found that in trying to 'educate' international curators on the warped art system that still exists, our complaints fall on deaf ears or are intellectualised away as curators feel that they are above internal politics and are reaching towards a universal artistic stance that is apolitical. The contradiction is easy to see here. These intellectuals,

who are unwilling to take local politics into account in their curatorial strategies (and affiliations), have absolutely no problem in displaying the problems of social dynamics on an international art stage.

This mentality was revealed by prominent curators Fernando Alvim, Ruth Noack and Donna Cornwell at Sessions eKapa in Cape Town in 2005⁶. It was repeatedly disappointing to hear them say that they did not believe they should get involved in the local politics of the (South African) art scene, despite how untransformed it was and despite being directly confronted by black South African artists who unequivocally told them how their curatorial methodology was merely perpetuating the inequalities of the inherited apartheid system. Their denial of the political dimension of art production, and their desire to keep art 'free' from racial, internalised politics is nothing new, especially for South Africans faced with a post-apartheid White liberalism that seeks to deracialise things for the convenience of 'moving things along'.⁷ But the reality is that life in 'Africa' is inseparable from politics at every level. Even an apolitical stance is a political stance. Inherently, though, the unspoken attitude here is one of professional and personal cowardice, as Steve Fuller reminds us:


*Bystanders to wrongdoing can always find it in their self-interest to remain silent, and over time the significance of their cowardice may evaporate as memories fade of who was at the scene of the crime. Indeed, if intellectuals were inclined to believe in Original Sin, this would be its mark: that people can routinely get away with, and even benefit from, keeping their counsel, refusing either to examine the evidence for themselves or, worse, to declare what they truly believe to be the case. If you're an intellectual, 'tact' is the tactful way of referring to cowardice.*⁸

And while curatorial subjectivity ('I have the right to do what I think is best') is indeed a privilege of the curator, it is a privilege that has accountability to the people and the systems that it shares a symbiotic – almost parasitic – relationship with, and there is no delusion (at least for Africans anyway) that it does impact upon and even hurt local systems. So what then is the role of curators as intellectuals in a cultural system?

For Said, the role of the intellectual wasn't an easy one, but it certainly wasn't an impossible one either:

*At bottom, the intellectual in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier, nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwilling, but actively willing to say so in public.*⁹

Intellectuals who make a living out of their interests in Africa and African art, have indeed slowly made a difference to 'placing' African art within the circuit of contemporary art.

However, with this showcasing, intellectuals have to go beyond the stereotypical, the predictable, and the 'safe', in order to prod, to probe, to present the mundane and not just the sensational, to show catastrophes, frailties and commonalities, to show the successes of people making a difference everyday in Africa, and maybe to even ask Africans how they define themselves and each other, what is important to them and what makes their day. They will never of course know any of this if they zip in and out of African cities as if they're on a four day flight to outer space. 

1 Edward Said *Representations of the Intellectual* The 1993 Reith Lectures, Vintage, London, 1994, p16.

2 *ibid.* p79.

3 There is of course some truth to the latter part of the statement, that while many parts of Africa may be very technologically advanced and on par with First World countries, there are still just as many Third World inequalities which results in a very complex, often contradictory way of living.

4 Michel Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (ed.) D.F.Bouchard, 1972, (1977 edition), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp207-208.

5 Ougibe, O. *Open the Gates Africa* South Art Initiative (ASAI), 2006. <http://www.asai.co.za/forum>

6 In 2005, a conference was held in Cape Town as a prelude to the *TransCape* – a large biennale-type exhibition in Cape Town in 2006, which unfortunately due to serious financial constraints, only took place in 2007 on a drastically smaller scale. *Sessions eKapa* was meant to be a formal session that discussed various issues around representation.

7 In fairness to Okwui Enwezor, he has never shied away from commenting and addressing differential politics in the art world in South Africa, even at the expense of incurring the wrath of the White-dominated art world. By doing so, he has actively contributed to art discourse in South Africa as artists and art-players have engaged him on his perceptions.

8 Steve Fuller *The Intellectual* Icon Books, UK, 2005, p24.

9 Said, *op.cit.* p17.

Sharlene Khan is an artist who lives and works in Johannesburg.

Johan Thom 'The Perfect Human' series, performance held at Gallery MOMO, June 16, 2006. Photo: Mika le Roux.

