

South African contemporary art in the global context

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I've been fortunate enough this year to have visited both the Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, and the 52nd Venice Biennial. A main objective was, as always, inspiration for new articles, art production and teaching material for students, but, being a born and bred African, the secret agenda when visiting global events such as these are always to *compare* the art production of Africa (and more specifically South Africa) with that of the rest of the world. Being part of a continent characterised by social violence, illnesses, political conflict and, in some cases, poverty, makes one over-sensitive to the conditions and cultural production of so-called first-world countries that on the surface seem peaceful, privileged and conflictless to the African outsider.

Considering the recent history of the Documenta and other globally premised art exhibitions has revealed global impulses rooted in economic, social, moral and intellectual advancement, as well as an ideological drive to include the art of peripheral and marginalised cultural groupings. Historically speaking, the phenomenon of global culture started to appear during the Sixties and Seventies when sensitivity for social injustices and prejudices was cultivated worldwide, leading to arguably more democratic, transparent and equitable processes and structures. Similarly, 52nd Venice Biennial artistic director and curator Robert Storr's theme in the main international exhibition, *Think with the Senses - Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*, conceptually announces nothing new to the postmodern globalist, signaling a non-ideological, inclusive position of a "fundamental approach to art aimed at presuming that analytical dichotomies between perceptual and conceptual, thought and feeling, pleasure and pain, intuition and criticality too often obscure and deny the complex presence of all these aspects in our experience of the world"¹. This open-ended theme could accommodate a wide scope of work on the main and fringe exhibitions ranging from the cool, intellectual, glass labyrinth of Belgian Eric Duyckaerdt's to Algerian Adel Abdessemed installations dealing with myth, taboo and political heritage.

¹ From the Introduction in the 52nd Venice Biennial catalogue.

The fact that this year the African Pavillion presented at the Artiglierie at the Arsenale in Venice is a first in the 112-year old history of the Venice Biennial, once again reflects global ideology. Yet, *Check List Luanda Pop*, the exhibition curated by Simon Njami and Fernando Alvim, represents a poor reflection of what is currently happening in contemporary African art. This exhibition was conceptualised by the curators as a manifesto for “expression far from established trends or conventions, ... a space for thought, confrontation, and proposal”², but for South African visitors accustomed to, for instance, the technically and conceptually accomplished new work of Minnette Vári exhibited recently at Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, her 9-year old video work, *Alien*, seems dated and ‘elementary’. Technically and conceptually South African Tracey Rose’s work on this exhibition was similarly a far cry from her *Ciao Bella* (2001) that formed part of the 49th Venice Biennial. Nigerian Olu Oguibe’s simplistic installation, *Keep it real, memorial to a youth* (1997-2000), as well as Angolan Paulo Kapela’s *Atelier* (2007), that both belong to the genre of resistance art that usually annul all other aesthetic criteria, reveal old sentiments regarding political oppression and struggle, as if Africa has nothing more to offer.

In contrast, South African Churchill Madikida’s moving exhibition, *Status* (2005), exhibited at the Neue Galerie at the Documenta 12 that explores the sensitive terrain of Xhosa male circumcision practices as well as the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, convincingly engages with global concerns and transcultural, shared consciousness. His work sheds light on issues that are pertinent to contemporary Africa, but simultaneously is a global concern. Michael Featherstone (1991:146) calls this kind of transnational grouping organised around central interests a “common ethnies”. When we look at the South African cultural scene, it is clearly characterised by multiculturalism, which demonstrates how nationalist, racist, messianic and socialist elements have entered into a blend of cultural diversity. According to Gen Doy (2000:85), the so-called ‘new internationalism’ in African art (as evident in Madikida’s work), which shows a progression from ethnicity to multiculturalism to an engagement with the international, is far more about a conceptual avant-garde than a political one. This view is commensurate with the transcultural nature of the practice and scholarship of diasporas of artists who are migrating across the globe; it is not a case of the celebration of the ethnic ‘Other’ who has become empowered, but about the nomadic state of being as a human being whose history is continuously unfolding.

In the South African context though, it not easy to rationalise African art production imbued with cultural and artistic leftovers of traditional techniques and styles into neat

² From the Biennial press release May 2007

packages without taking cognisance of political leftovers. Due to differences in culture, the non-African world has been brainwashed for several centuries, not only decades, into patterns of categorical and stereotypical thinking, further convoluted by the fact that due to previous policies of racial discrimination, many blacks in South Africa were left poor and uneducated. However, discrimination according to race predates current postmodern history and was insistent already in the seventeenth century during times of slavery and elsewhere where Europeans sought to justify their domination.

Madikida's progressive work, however, is the exception to the rule at Documenta 12 where Africa has been bitterly underrepresented. To quote an Australian friend, the abundance of African photography, as represented by the work of David Goldblatt and Guy Tillim for instance, seems to confirm old anthropological and colonialist notions of the imperative for the documentation of Africa since it cannot speak for itself. Through such representation Africa remains a place of Otherness, the coloniser's gaze "transfixed by the ideal that Africa is a dark place waiting to receive the colonizer" (Kellner in Enwezor 1997:31). South African artist David Koloane (Enwezor 1997:32) argues that "the crux of the matter is that artists in South Africa not only had to walk the tightrope -- between two diametrically opposed worlds, the one being the apathetic community without any basic resources, and the other being the power and influence of patronage -- but also had to run the full Apartheid gauntlet." The lingering after-effects of this kind of sentiment predicated in politics cannot be ignored and requires a paradigm shift beyond the apartheid syndrome.

This turn has indeed occurred and South African art has since 1994 moved into new unchartered territories to now engage with personal, national and global issues on a collective scale. Postmodern African identity has become hybridised and socio-politically informed, and Western notions of so-called 'authentic' African art as entrenched in themes of poverty, politics and traditionalism have to a large extent become obsolete. In 1996 already, Documenta 11 curator Okwui Enwezor argued that:

It might be worth it to recognise, especially for contemporary African artists working across many borders, that culture and history are neither continuous nor uninterrupted. Today we speak not of history or culture, but of histories and cultures, and any artistic initiative needs to recognise the inherent plurality of cultural experience. Thinking of my own background and experiences ... I have come to realise, with perhaps a hint of unintended irony, how much history, culture and identity are often

hybrid, incomplete, suffused with 'impurities', rebellions, impermanences and contingencies (Williamson and Jamal 1996:6).

At many pavilions and groupings of the Documenta 12 as well as the 52nd Venice Biennale, themes of apocalypse, atopia, dystopia, violence and conflict dominate; themes that are more socially than politically premised and can be observed in the work of South African artists such as Diane Victor, Tamlyn Blake and David Koloane as well. In spirit and concept the suggestion and depiction of violence in the work of Argentinian Léon Ferrari at the Biennale reflect the fiction of the acclaimed British author, J G Ballard, who in many works depicts dystopian postmodernity, bleak cityscapes and the psychological effects of technological and social disaster, especially relevant to South African cities that are currently violence- and crime-ridden.

Belgian-Mexican Francis Alÿs's *Bolero* (1999 – 2007), exhibited at the African Pavilion at the Biennial and comprising an installation of 511 drawings for animation, depicts the meaninglessness but profusion of replication in contemporary life, just like his many other dystopian anti-*passant* depictions of the *Doppelgänger*. Alÿs described this process as follows: 'When arriving in ... Havana (new city), wander, looking for someone who could be you. If the meeting happens, walk beside your doppelgänger until your pace adjusts to his/hers. If not, repeat the quest in ... (next city)' (Urban Myth 2001:46-49). A South African artist such as Stephen Hobbs works with the same theme, as has Kudzi Chiurai. Similar to Adel Abdessemed's *Exit* (1996) at the Biennial, several South African artists such as William Kentridge and Jan van der Merwe deal with the topics of history and the monolithic self as teleological constructs that have buckled into a dystopian nightmare of senseless reiteration and disintegration. Many artists such as Nalini Malani of Pakistan and Amy Cheung of Hong Kong explore dimensions of self and identity in relation to natural and artificial contexts in a more mythological and existential sense, just like several South African artists such as Marlene Dumas and Candice Breitz.

In his introduction to the South African version of the catalogue for *Africa Remix*, Clive Kellner, the Chief curator of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, argues that transnational exhibitions provide an overview of a particular part of a continent to other parts of the world which become significant as "landmarks within the larger discourses of contemporary African theory and practice".

Hopefully such exhibitions, also Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum's presentation of South African art production in a changing society, will impact on audiences in terms of an increased awareness about South Africa's role in Africa as well as the need for sustained

global interrelationships. Through these kind of exhibitions a trajectory of shared dialogue and affiliation can be created that will challenge old perceptions and deconstruct clichés of Africanness.

Sources quoted

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