The Ujamaa IV Workshop in Mozambique

Els van der Plas

Among European and American curators and art critics there is a fear of being thought too 'western' that leads them to lean over backwards to show a proper respect for 'non-western' artists and curators. This gives rise to enormous self-imposed challenges that obviously cannot be met. This can of course be explained by our colonial past and our will to do good that is connected with relatively new political ideas about development cooperation. But who after all organised 'Magiciens de la terre', 'Africa Explores', 'Africa Now' and 'Africa95'? The dependence of African artists on western money is often a decisive factor. The exhibition 'Seven Stories' tried to give the 'African voice' a chance to be heard and to break through prevailing clichés. In the catalogue, the 'coordinating' curator quotes a statement by Thomas McEvilley in which he uses the term 'oracular', to which she responds: "... one might question the mythologizing connotations of the term 'oracular', as emblematic of western presuppositions that the artist in Africa is still bound to ritualistic and spiritual practices... etc"; and she tries to relate clichés about non-western art or artists to western cultural history: "The spotlight on the artist as storyteller and visionary for the people is not new. Artists in Europe... in the twentieth century... have carried messages of a collective will to implicate oneself in the cultural politics of the country."1

These kinds of attempts are valuable but are essentially doomed because of the paradoxic implications of the ideal in question; it is no easy matter to break with a structure that is based on inequality. Perhaps there would be a solution if 'Africa' were rich enough to foot the bill for its own international art shows, with Africans deciding whether or not the English or Dutch deserved to be represented. It hasn't got that far yet, even though 'Africus 95' made a step in this direction; sceptics (or are they realists?) continue to maintain that the economic growth of sub-Saharan Africa will continue to lag behind the West — with the exception of South Africa which is then described as, if not a western power, at any rate a westernised power that is in the process of colonising the rest of Africa over again. Colonial times revisited.

**THE WORKSHOP IN MAPUTO**

Organising a workshop in Mozambique meant that I was in the same position as the above mentioned curators. After all, the money for the workshop came from Holland (western aid for development!); part of it was channelled to an organisation in Mozambique to carry out the practical work of setting up in consultation with the Gate Foundation of Amsterdam. "Specialists and experts make a portrait of us without even bothering to look us in the eyes", was Ery Camara's charge against the European and American art historians at the CICA international congress on 'Strategies for survival, Now!' held in Stockholm in 1994.2 While nobody likes to be accused of this, it would seem that everyone unfailingly falls into this trap with open eyes. In the same lecture, however, Camara also states that while "Art knows no race", it does require language to interpret it. "I still ask myself: how is it possible to explain or criticise the art of a community without sharing a given set of rules, without even learning the language through which this community expresses itself." Trapped in a double helix of possibilities and impossibilities, Camara realises that he who lends you his eyes (white or black), determines in which direction you will look; according to him the only ones who can open your eyes are artists — they can even give you 'new eyes'. This notion of 'newness' gives us a possibility of moving forward and making real progress, not through forgetting but by using the act of remembering to assist us in writing new histories and in casting a new light on the process of representation.

Our sister organisation in Mozambique was the oldest established artists' association in that country, the Nucleo de Arte (founded in 1937). This body made the selection of artists from Mozambique, while the Gate Foundation was responsible for choosing participants from other
countries. There was some logic in this because Mozambique had been isolated by war for many years and had therefore been more or less cut off from information from abroad. One important feature of this shared responsibility was that both organisations wanted a say in the artistic direction to be taken, discussing and respecting each other’s choices.

**THE ARTS IN MOZAMBIQUE**

Art in Mozambique has undergone a long and turbulent history marked largely by wars and political upheavals. Nucleo de Arte has always played an important role in stimulating the arts. Initially it did so as a vehicle of the Portuguese government and Portuguese taste. After 1950, as a result of international pressure on the Portuguese colonial system which involved forced labour, Mozambican artists were permitted to apply for scholarships and to take part in exhibitions as a sort of ‘cosmetic promotion’. At this time two important artists who were involved in resistance to the colonial power emerged from the Nucleo — the painter Malangatane and the sculptor Chissano. Both of them began as servants in the Nucleo and developed into world-renowned artists with conscious ideals. Malangatane’s work, for instance, depicts a colony in decline and the pointless suffering of the people, in a ‘naive’ almost surrealist style. The forms of the Maconde tradition of sculpture in Mozambique have been revived in the modern artistic language of Chissano. His socially committed works are carved from a single block of wood, representing massed groups of people in their vertical length. Chissano also presents slender stalks of grass as simple sculptures or ‘constructivist’ collages made of iron and found objects.

After Independence in 1964 the Nucleo was backed by the Frelimo government, which saw the encouragement of art as a ‘national’ task and initially paid the organisation’s rent, gas and electricity bills. This high point was short-lived however; later the artists had to support and finance their association themselves. In the 70s and 80s, more and more cooperative ventures with other countries took place which often brought in revenue, whilst artists went to study in other Communist countries. It was during this time that the artist Fatima Fernandez started the
Ujamaa workshops.

The Ujamaa IV workshop, which took place in Maputo in September 1995, belongs, then, to a tradition in Mozambique and in Africa. There had been workshops in Nigeria and Kenya as early as the ’60s and ’70s, but it has only been since the late ’80s that workshops have been held on a more regular basis in various African countries, instigated by the British sculptor Anthony Caro and the collector Robert Loder. The concept was first applied in 1987 in the Thupelo workshops organised by Bill Ainslie and David Koloane in Johannesburg. It then spread to Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia, Namibia and Senegal. The workshop method gives artists a chance to see each other’s work and to exchange and discuss ideas, in a continent where travel and communication are not always easy.

In the West the notion of the workshop is associated with that of the communes, which declined in popularity after the ’60s, given the fact that group activity often stifles individual expression. The elitist notion of art is however again being challenged; artists are encouraged to engage in networking and to take part in group projects. In Edinburgh, workshops are held annually; joint activities between artists of different nationalities are becoming more frequent; while the most recent, admittedly predominantly African, workshop was held in Liverpool in the context of ’Africa95’.

The participants in Ujamaa IV came from South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, the Netherlands and Mozambique. The South African sculptor Andries Botha (b 1952, Durban) played a vital role in the workshop. His stimulating presence and boundless energy were admired and emulated by many of those present. In his sculptures he makes use of the technique of weaving different materials that he learnt from South African roofers, a craft that traditionally belongs to black women. Botha, who comes from the working class, began to take a stand against white rule at an early age; he made links with writers such as the poet Breyten Breytenbach who joined the resistance to apartheid. He does not call his work political, regarding it as being more involved with questions of ‘personal identity’, of human values and how these can be preserved in a racist society. In 1977 he was forced to leave South Africa and went to England. Rootless and disillusioned, however, he returned to Durban where he set up The Community Arts Centre in 1983 — a workshop that was open to black artists, and which he ran for eight years.

Botha’s Pietà was allocated a central role in the workshop. The working process is always an integral part of Botha’s sculptures; for him it is like an act of meditation. Passers-by in Maputo could peep fascinated over the low wall and see how the seated Pietà figure, made of wire and covered with acacia pods, was developing. The participants of the workshop walked by from time to time to keep up to date with the progress of the woven animal-human creature placed as an apotheosis in the arms of the huge seated figure; a mother mourning her son, a human mourning an animal, Botha mourning his country.

After a great deal of reflection, the Ugandan sculptor Lilian Nabulime (b 1963, Uganda) gave her sculpture the name of a medicine woman, Mukombozi, a sorceress with extraordinary powers. The standing wooden figure, crowned with nails, looks at the viewer almost with sarcasm, as though she is echoing Nabulime’s own criticism that there were too few women in the workshop. Nabulime took courses at the

famous Makerere University College art school in Kampala (established in 1921) with one of the co-founders, Margaret Trowell, where, nevertheless, she experienced the sculpture department as a bastion of male power that was not easy to break through. In her work, Nabulime uses a deliberate ritual idiom that she shapes with a formalist modernist approach combined with a feminist content. On another level she makes fun of the cliché of ‘the other as magical mystery other’ — the concept of witchcraft which is one of the oldest clichés of ethnography. Using the cliché of the sorceress as an example, she relates this issue to the question of women in our time, with particular reference to sexual oppression.

There is a connection to be made here with Freud’s ‘Essay on Lay Analysis’ (1926), where he writes about the ignorance of contemporary psychology concerning adult female sexuality which he describes with an English expression as the ‘dark continent’ of psychology. Jan Nederveen Pieterse comments: “In using this phrase in English, Freud ties the image of female sexuality to the image of the colonial black and to the perceived relationship between the female’s ascribed sexuality and the Other’s exoticism and pathology.” It is this layered racism to which Nabulime would seem to be referring, consciously or otherwise: the comparison of the ‘dark continent’ with the ‘impenetrable’ nature of female sexuality, the ethnological projection of ‘witchcraft’ (the exoticism of the ‘Other’), and the attitude of men in general towards women.

In Mozambique, the word for ‘witch doctor’, male or female, is curandeiro, and Mozambican artists often refer to them because they have a relation or friend who is one. The Mozambican artist Muando (b 1961) was inspired by the notion of the ‘family tree’, an object made by the curandeiros as a surrogate for the traditional sacred tree. People who don’t have their own tree, because they dwell in flats or have no land, can opt for this solution. Muando’s sculpture Family Tree refers to these small objects to which Mozambicans offer sacrifices, appeal for help, or simply tell their stories. Muando constructed a kind of maquette out of wood for Family Tree that had a unique quality that could not be reproduced. He does not use the same maquette technique as someone like Bodys Isek Kingelez, but treats the concept

‘maquette’ more symbolically. His carved wood statue suggests how a work of art may have a practical social value but can also function as a model for the curandeiro who makes similar sacred objects. The small cloth wrapped round its branches, for example, symbolises the understanding between tree and family.

Both Nabulime and Muando make use of ‘ritual’ elements in their culture, transforming them with their personal imagery. This approach is different from that of the sculptor Titos (b 1961, Mozambique) who said: “Maybe I am a curandeiro myself.” By this he does not mean that he practises certain rituals; he is really alluding to his own highly personal life style. He describes his work as ‘new’ in the sense that it was only three years ago that he chose the vocation of an artist and gave himself a ‘new look’ (with Rastafarian-style hair and clothes that he made himself) and made it his aim to develop new forms in art using a Mozambican idiom. “My life is art, I am an artist, everybody is an artist, life is art”, he said in English. It is a statement that sums up his approach perfectly. Self-taught and inventive, he has made drawings since he was seven; he used to mend his sister’s shoes, darn his mother’s clothes and help the people of his neighbourhood with their crafts. He applies these skills in making his objects for which he uses natural materials which he stitches together, avoiding the use of glue or nails. While his work reminds one of the organic oeuvre of the ‘shamanistic savior’ Joseph Beuys in both its outward appearance and its religious symbolism, it can also be compared with Botha’s wickerwork.

During the workshop, Titos made a large donkey out of bark and branches of trees with two people seated on it. They might have been two lovers travelling to a better world — Titos is a romantic — or maybe they refer to the image of Joseph and Mary’s flight into Egypt. In all probability, Donkey represents a combination of these different meanings; its emotional basis may well be the flight from the memories of the civil war in Mozambique that everyone would now like to forget.

A totally different kind of work is that of the Dutch artist Hans van Houwelingen (b 1957). On his arrival in the grounds of the Nucleo, which had been restored with a development grant from Holland, he decided to renovate the guard’s cottage, the one spot in the whole complex that remained totally dilapidated. In Holland, van Houwelingen has mainly produced site-specific art and in Maputo, too, he decided to make a socially committed work that was a criticism of the Nucleo’s neglect of the guard’s dwelling and of western development aid which dominates decisions in the world’s poorest countries. At the same time, he was, of course, making his own ‘voluntary’ contribution, prompting the question of whether his attitude is any different from that of a western art organisation that gives money to an ‘African’ institution to make an exhibition, delegating decisions to the ‘Other’.

This new policy of ‘decentralisation’ is now being adopted by many organisations involved with joint development projects. They aim to go beyond neo-colonial attitudes while still controlling the purse strings, which on occasion can have some strange results. Whilst international co-operation has always been a matter of negotiating, communicating and coming to joint decisions to the benefit of both parties in a variety ways, to treat your next-but-one neighbour differently to your next-door neighbour is an odd way of showing respect. Both the personal militant approaches of Botha and Camara and the
attitudes of artists like Titos at least open the way for new perspectives (seen perhaps through ‘new eyes’). This work makes possible a critical analysis of old methods. As Thomas McEvilley puts it, it is an “...art.. exercised in the service of defusing that tradition by its own tools”. These ‘post-colonial’ approaches may help to cut through the endless debates and lead to new syntheses. The important thing is that our focus remains art within the domain of global solidarity and not the incompatibility of I and the Other. Let’s start using our new eyes, instead of polishing old spectacles.

Translated from the Dutch by Donald Gardner


4 The Pieta is also part of a process that will lead to an installation including several works made with the same technique which will come together for the first time in an exhibition in France this year. In the exhibition in the French Mozambican Cultural Centre in Maputo in October, 1995, it also had a dramatically central place right in the path that visitors would have to take.


The Ujamaa IV workshop took place in Maputo, Mozambique, in September 1995. The exhibition ‘Ujamaa IV’ was held at the Gate Foundation, Amsterdam, from 7th May to 28th June, 1996.

Reviews

Absolut Relativity

Luis Camnitzer

Fifty paintings, photographs and objects which served as a part of the Absolut vodka advertising campaign that uses ‘fine art’, were shown in the Westwood Gallery, New York. The occasion also provided the opportunity to launch a book on the entire Absolut campaign, making the whole event one more successful promotional step for what had started as a rather obscure (even if crystalline) product. A drink as associated with Russia as caviar, but made in Sweden, was able to establish itself in the US market as the ‘real thing’ largely thanks to the convincing qualities of a publicity series started in 1980. Technically a non-drinker (anything over half a glass of wine puts me to sleep), I have to accept the given word that different brands of vodka cannot be told apart, which makes the power of advertising even more awesome.

As an artistic event, the exhibit was enjoyable but not overly impressive. In fact, it is the non-art ads for Absolut which are the most powerful. If one were to pick the classic examples of the campaign, those to be reached for would be the Absolut Brooklyn or the Absolut Venice, rather than the Absolut Haring or the Absolut Ruscha. The only outstanding example is Absolut Warhol, the piece that started it all, due to Warhol’s particular position between art and advertising.

The non-art Absolut ads have the particularity of treating the potential consumer as both a relatively intelligent and informed being and as a participant rather than a victim in the campaign. Modest riddles are proposed to find the bottle or to relate the title with the ad, and the general approach is a post-conceptual one, with the mandated utilisation of tautologies. Always using ‘absolut’ and one other word, common language usage is slowly infiltrated or, literally, branded with the product’s name. The whole