The First Johannesburg Biennale: Work in Progress

Candice Breitz

There's one way you can look at this: it's like having a sickness in your body that gets more and more fierce as it is passing on to wellness. We don't have to view that period of intense sickness as an invitation to despair, but as a sign of potential transformation in the very depths of whatever pain it is we are experiencing.

bell hooks, Outlaw Culture

Whether the first Johannesburg Biennale 'Africus' should have happened, has been the question on which many of its critics have focused. The above quote from Outlaw Culture was chosen by curators Octavio Zaya and Tumelo Mosaka to preface the catalogue of their exhibition on the Biennale, 'Black Looks, White Myths'. The quote is, however, illuminating in relation to 'Africus' at a much broader level. For the Biennale did happen and thus we might stop debating whether it should or should not have happened and turn instead to asking, what it was that happened with the launch of 'Africus', a moment which, in effect, represented the coming-out of the South African art community after approximately four decades of isolation. As such, this review will address some of the criticisms of the exhibition, suggesting that, in many cases, what have been delineated as its weaknesses can be read instead as its greatest strengths, as 'signs of potential transformation'.

From the outset, the Biennale generated an inordinate degree of conflict. This was due, to a large extent, to the political moment at which it was conceived. Lorna Ferguson, its coordinator, set the ball rolling in 1993, at a time when Apartheid had not yet been fully or formally repealed. Given this context, the decision to form an alliance between the nascent Biennale and the Johannesburg City Council (in particular with the Johannesburg Directorate of Culture, whose Director, Christopher Till, was also the director of the Biennale), was greeted with controversy. Ferguson was, however, adamant from the start

that the Biennale would only take place once the first free elections had been held. At an early stage in the process, Ferguson and Till initiated a broad consultative process to steer the project through the period of transformation.

This consultative process, were I to describe it with more particularity, might seem fairly bizarre to all but the South Africans involved. The aforementioned are, by now, familiar with the well-meaning, yet obstructively convoluted mechanisms intended ultimately to generate consensus, by means of the complex configurations of consultation involved. Needless to say, nodes of contention quickly developed around how the consultative committees were selected, how representative they were and how much, if any, power they had to actually influence the decisions which were made by the Biennale.

Antonio Ole Canoa quebrada, 1994, mixed media installation.
Photo: Andriew Meintjes.
staff. At a slightly less formal level, amongst artists, dealers and critics, alliances were formed and broken, lobbies enjoined, meetings held and petitions drawn up. At the risk of oversimplifying the process, the various local struggles and the shifting and temporary alliances which were contingent to them, were concerned predominantly with the issue of representation. This kind of anxiety within an art community at the time of an international art festival, around the issues of who is to be represented, by whom and how, is hardly unprecedented. While it is true that South Africa has been in creative quarantine for a good four decades and that this may have rendered the community’s eventual exposure to the world at large a little more traumatic than certain other comings-out, the conflicts within the community took place on a battlefield which has been trampled for centuries by the various troops of the international art world. Geeta Kapur, amongst others, inferred, at the Curators’ Forum (held for the international curators in Johannesburg in March 1994), that the subjection of the international curators to local infighting was neither a particularly unique nor a particularly useful experience. My intention here is not to belittle very important issues, but to suggest that many of the complications which certain constituencies in the creative community put forward as reasons for abandoning the idea of a South African Biennale are unlikely to evaporate magically once a more democratic cultural politics is in place.

The teething problems experienced by the Biennale in its opening moments (for example, certain venues were still not ready on the eve of the Biennale) have been recounted frequently by various South African reporters. The consequent Ferguson-bashing that resulted was often unfair in the larger scheme of things, given that Ferguson was embroiled between the splintered demands of the art community and the bureaucracy of the Johannesburg City Council. For many of the international participants it was frustrating, but not particularly surprising, that a debut event of this scale ran into certain practical hitches. And many pinpointed the scale as central to the various problems which were encountered. Ferguson is the first to acknowledge that the project was, in some respects, over-ambitious. The Johannesburg Biennale brought approximately 300 international artists to South Africa where they participated in nearly 80 exhibitions. In defence of this enormous undertaking, I would like to suggest that the vast Biennale might be thought of as a diverse and creative cacophony, which may not have been played out as was initially visualised, but was nevertheless glorious and awe-inspiring. Awe-inspiring not in the sense of a tightly rendered Bach cantata, but in the sense of certain Zorn or Cage compositions. For neither the audience, nor the players themselves, could have predicted how the Biennale would play itself out, given the variety of components which were constantly in the process of being added and removed in the face of unforeseeable contingency. Neither would a stringently arranged composition have been desirable in a country where the likes of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Lucky Dube, Michael Jackson and Nirvana vie for airtime. It was by virtue of the dissonances which resulted from the loosely conducted interactions of the various components of the Biennale, that viewers were privy to a performance which reflected far more elaborately on the status quo of South African art than they might have been had Ferguson elected to wield a more authoritarian conductor’s baton.

A similar point might be made in relation to the eccentricity of the Biennale’s structure. Many of its detractors felt that they would have liked ‘Africus’ to have been more ‘African’ in character. While this is not the context in which to try and determine exactly what such critics might have meant by ‘African’, this writer for one shudders to think what might have evolved were the organisers to have literally tried to forge an authentically ‘African’ Biennale. Suffice to say that the organisers made a concerted if late effort to invite the participation of most other African countries. Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Namibia, Morocco, Mozambique, Senegal, Tunisia and Uganda were amongst those who responded to the invitation. Ferguson declined the opportunity to have a say in what kind of work was to be sent by African (and other international) curators. This ultimately meant that viewers were able to encounter the mythical allusions of Egypt’s El Ghoul Ali Ahmed’s sculpture, alongside the paintings of Gabon’s Bertrand Nzamba in which Cubist forms were blended with Nzamba’s reflections on his ancestral heritage, alongside the conceptual installations of Angola’s Antonio Ole. What was refreshing about this dynamic interplay of ‘Africas’ was the absence of an ideological narrative by means of which the viewer could find the true Africa and, indeed, the refusal of this structure to entertain the possibility of a homogeneous, definable Africa. The result was a pleasing celebration of the diversity of
contemporary African art, a diversity which disrupted the neat parameters which we have come to expect from international exhibitions representing ‘Africa’. It is perhaps in this light that Tony Karon wrote that:

Shifting the setting of an international art event from the moneymaking centres of the international art market to the developing world necessarily challenges many Western assumptions on the nature (and culture) of art. Which made the chaotic and unfinished nature of the Biennale in itself a catalyst for such a dialogue.¹

Johannesburg is not Venice, nor should it feel compelled to follow in its older brother’s cultural footsteps. The Venice Biennale, in the year of its centenary, is still blemished by scars which remind one of its exclusive origins. While the Venice Biennale can no longer quite so easily be caricatured as a colonial watering-hole, Venice remains a club which delimits its members with little discretion. It is true that each nation-state is theoretically entitled to its own pavilion, but not every country has the resources to construct one. Given that many Third World countries are unable to represent themselves with the savoir faire of North American and European representatives, it is hardly surprising that artists from economically silenced countries are easily co-opted into thematic exhibitions where they serve as vessels by means of which the hierarchical power inherent to the Biennale is perpetuated. The inclusion of South African Bonnie Ntshalintshali’s ceramic sculptures in the Aperto show of the 1993 Biennale was a case in point. Ntshalintshali is a black South African woman who has never had a formal art education. This in itself is not at issue here; however, the jarring juxtaposition of her work with works by artists like Damien Hirst, Janine Antoni and Matthew Barney suggested two temporally contingent needs: firstly, the need felt by those currently administering art in South Africa to be seen as functioning within the self-conscious western sensibility evidenced in the works of the aforementioned artists, and secondly, the need felt by Africa’s former colonisers to exorcise their own colonial hangovers through such an inclusion.

In his contribution to the 1995 Venice Biennale, which opened shortly after ‘Africus’ ended, South African artist Malcolm Payne reflected on the rarefied nature of the art world’s oldest Biennale. Due to South Africa’s prolonged cultural isolation, there is no existing South African pavilion; the Venetian municipality thus allocated an unofficial site to Payne. Payne responded by bricking up the exhibition venue and allowing the viewer only frustrating glimpses into small boxes in the wall, some of which remain poignantly empty, while in others Payne arranged small works by various South African artists, both living and dead. Payne’s work spoke of the complex power dynamics which structure the Venice Biennale, hinting at the necessity for South Africa to look for precedents to exhibitions which are perhaps less established, but nevertheless more thought-provoking ideologically than Venice.

I am suggesting that the greatest coup of the Johannesburg Biennale was its failure to emulate the Venetian formula. Of the two main Biennale locations, this was most strikingly evident in the ‘Electric Workshop’. Unlike the ‘Museum Africa’, a venue which is characterised by the sanitised ambience we expect of museums, the Electric Workshop’s speaks unequivocally of labour and decay. It is an industrial warehouse complete with hanging cranes, dusty alleys, unfathomable nooks and crannies and no pre-existing divisions which could be used to separate exhibitions. Its chaotic sense of violent fragmentation and architectural anarchy is both melancholic and disturbingly moving. With its dank corners and network of pipes, the building became a strange metaphor for post-Apartheid South Africa, a giant skeleton replete with reminders of its violent past. The insertion of exhibitions into this eerie space gestured with a powerful optimism towards the ability of creativity to survive somehow beyond and grow out of the gnarled shell of Apartheid.

Certain exhibitions made little attempt to reflect on this profoundly disjointed context. In fact, there were exhibitions which managed to reinscribe the boundaries which were challenged by the chaos of the context. The contribution of the United States, for example, was an already existing exhibition of the work of John Outterbridge and Bettye Saar. This exhibition was installed in the centre of the American exhibition space. In addition, South African sculptor Noria Mabasa’s wooden sculpture was crammed into a dark corner, where it competed with the building’s aluminium, intestine like piping, with no apparent sense of irony on the part of the curator. One could not help but read this South African addendum as a patronising afterthought.

Other participants went to greater pains to present work which would reflect sensitively on the political and architectural context. On the opening night of the Biennale, Cai Guo Qiang, who was represented in the Chinese exhibition, used gunpowder to blow a row of windows out
of a building set on Jeppe Street, opposite the 'Electric Workshop'. The artist’s controlled explosions left aesthetic traces, but at the same time reminded South African viewers of the several bombs which had been set off in the same street a few months prior to the election. The holes left in the windows spoke emblematically of both destruction and creation, of a creativity released through destruction.

An iconic motion towards creative survival in an ideological wasteland could be evidenced too in the work of Beninois artist Romuald Hazoume, who mounted a wall in the 'Electric Workshop' with traditional Voudon masks which were constructed out of plastic containers, oil cans and other urban debris. The works were given ironic titles like Miss Abidjan. Thailand’s Araya Rasdjarmrewanook reflected provocatively on the unsavoury space of the 'Electric Workshop' in a work entitled Prostitute’s Room. In the catalogue, Rasdjarmrewanook writes: ‘I am like most Asian women raised according to culture, beliefs and paths of the past, until one day I found that the truth as we know it changes...’ In her work, Rasdjarmrewanook materialised this epiphany through her exploration of the western tourist’s perception of the Asian woman’s body as sexual playground. She presented three tiny, curtained-

off rooms, symbolic of the confinement of the Asian women within patriarchal, western stereotypes. Each room enclosed a shallow square hole which the artist filled, in various versions of the installation, with blood, oil, ash and water; substances which serve for Rasdjarmreoansook as metaphors of suffering and violence. The installation reflected on the consumption and degradation of women through sexual abuse, pointing at the same time, towards the cultural dominance which certain cultures exert over others.

The funereal feeling about Rasdjarmreoansook’s installation was echoed in the work of Angola’s Fernando Alvim. Alvim alluded to the Angolan war through a visceral installation of bones, body parts and crucifixes in a darkened room off the central concourse of the ‘Electric Workshop’. The sounds of grief which reverberated through the shadowy room seemed to mourn the human loss precipitated by Angola’s civil war, but in this context, they reflected as menacingly on the dismemberment of South African society. Also in the ‘Electric Workshop’, the works of Israeli artists Judith Guetta and Simcha Shirman were juxtaposed with sculptures by South Africa’s Freddy Ramabulana. Shirman’s allusions to the Holocaust in conjunction with Ramabulana’s abject Nebuchadnezzar and Guetta’s solemn photographic remnants, suggested the intense and unspoken internal borders which remain once more concrete signs of social division have been dismantled. A sense of frustrated potential in a fragmented social context was evinced further by Ilya Kabakov’s installation in one of the South African exhibitions. Kabakov shrouded angsty, gestural paintings in bubble-wrap and placed them against a wall. The viewer was held beyond a comfortable viewing distance by a barrier which Kabakov had constructed. South African artist Belinda Blignaut’s work, which was part of the Australian exhibition, was calculated to evoke a more immediate sense of discomfort for the viewer, through its confrontational exploration of gender and identity.
Blignaut scattered posters of herself, half-naked and bound, throughout Johannesburg on bus-stops and in public toilets, with no explanation but a local phone-number. Calls were received by an answering machine which was installed in the Australian exhibition space in the ‘Museum Africa’.

Certain local and international participants could be heard to bemoan the ‘quality’ of the work on the Bienalle. This complaint, symptomatic of the same colonial hangover which gave rise to the disappointment of some in the lack of a rational organising principle for the Biennale, can only be taken seriously if we retain faith in the possibility of discernible and measurable ‘quality’ which might be used as a yardstick in the assessment of culture. While some walked out of the two day BUA! Conference organised by the Biennale staff, disappointed at not having found the same ‘standard’ of discourse which they had encountered during seminars at the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennale or Documenta, others remained to listen and participate in the complex negotiation of what cultural discourse might mean in the South African context in 1995. What emerged from the negotiations that took place during the seminars was the realisation that the universal standards of ‘quality’ held so dear by many international events, are not only impossible to transpose into the South African context, but intrinsically problematic in that they impose confining cultural value judgments. ‘BUT ISI TART?’*, asked a faux traffic-sign made by Natal artist Chicken-man Mkhize, which the Biennale used in its publicity material. Those who engaged in the discussions that evolved during the BUA! Conference, by dint of their presence, made a humble confession: Chicken-man’s question cannot be easily answered, nor could a simple answer to his question bear universal relevance.

In spite of, and perhaps partially because of, the structural problems experienced by the first Johannesburg Biennale, it succeeded in challenging the barriers which have been so noxiously invoked in the representation of Africa in earlier large-scale exhibitions. By virtue of the organisers’ refusal to impose a logic or hierarchy of any sort in arranging the relationship of the exhibitions to one another, a chaotic discursive space, in which the exhibitions could converse, argue and collide, was preserved. At the same time, the loose arrangement of the Biennale spoke of the flux of the historical moment, the shifting of identities and the breakdown of coherent categories in post-Apartheid South Africa. Within the anti-geography of the exhibition, there was a potential for viewers to construct their own narratives, a subversive potential which was understandably experienced by many as threatening. For it proffered no easily navigable path for either the newcomer or the established cultural critic. No one mode of representation emerged as dominant, and the Biennale could not be lucidly mapped with recourse to the theories of multiculturalism or post-colonialism which have been developed in other contexts.

The organisers of the Biennale elected not to paper over the social and political divisions which still plague a fraught South African cultural landscape. Rather than utilising the Biennale to masquerade a utopian South Africa, they chose themes which prompted engagement with the legacy of Apartheid. The Biennale could not and did not redress the imbalances entrenched in South African society over decades of discrimination. It did encourage the critical scrutiny of these imbalances as they manifest themselves in the domain of art. It provided a forum in which a vocabulary more pertinent to the South African context began to emerge, a context within which South Africa and the international art world might begin to meditate on the nebulous, multidimensional creature which is too often simply referred to as ‘South African art’. It is in the spirit of slow reconstruction and transformation that the first Johannesburg Biennale should be received; not as a polished event, but as an unfolding process, a work in progress.