

Making History: Gavin Jantjes in conversation with Rasheed Araeen

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by Gavin Jantjes & Rasheed Araeen

This is an edited version of a recorded telephone conversation and email exchange that took place in July 2006. It formed part of a series of conversations conducted for From the Ground Up, the Reader developed for the Cape Africa Platform's Trans Cape exhibition. Unfortunately, the publication of the Reader was held back indefinitely, as a consequence of the funding shortfall which saw Trans Cape being replaced by the Cape 07 exhibition. This version is identical to that which was prepared for publication, inclusive of references to the original context.

The need for an African institute to undertake extensive research on contemporary art has been highlighted in recent years by Rasheed Araeen, the founding editor of Third Text. Araeen, who studied Engineering in Karachi, Pakistan before moving to London in 1964, has tirelessly campaigned against racism in the art world, and steadfastly sought alternatives to the readings of art emerging from the non-Western world. A pioneering minimalist sculptor and performance artist, he founded Black Phoenix (the predecessor to Third Text), established Project MRB: Art Education in Multiracial Britain, and curated 'The Other Story' for the Hayward Gallery. More recently he initiated the writing of an inclusive history of British art since 1945. His writings have been widely published and he received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Southampton and an Honorary Doctorate of Arts from the University of East London. Araeen's concern with Africa and its artists is reflected in his contributions to the biennales of Johannesburg and Dakar.

Gavin Jantjes: I think I should begin by asking you why you feel there is a need to call upon African thinkers, writers and critics to attend to the issue of more in depth research into the history of African visual art of the past 100 years? Have we failed, and if we have, what are the consequences of that failure?

Rasheed Araeen: What you have asked is fundamental to the issues facing contemporary African visual art, and they must be located within the conditions of Africa of the last hundred or so years. These issues are in fact about modernity which was imposed upon Africa by colonial powers and the fundamental changes it brought about not only in the socioeconomic and political structures of African society as a whole, but also their expressions in the arts. In art this shift took place from traditional expressions, which were symbiotically integral to the various and different communities across Africa, to the works of somewhat alienated individuals as part of the Western-oriented bourgeois classes. In other words, the modernism of art that emerged in Africa about hundred years ago, say in Nigeria, was an expression of the classes whose vision of Africa's future was not derived from the dynamics of Africa's own traditions but the ideas of human progress and advancement that came from the West. The power of these ideas, however, was not in the ideas themselves but their elaborations, expansions, interpretations,

disseminations and applications across the world through institutions. In art it has been the institution of the Museum that collected works of art from all over the world and interpreted them in accordance with the ideas that reinforced the West's own view of the world that it colonised and dominated.

Although this institution of the Museum was located in the metropolises of the West, its replicas were installed across the colonial world. What we face today in the postcolonial societies of Africa are the legacies of this Western institution, adopted and accepted by the African ruling classes as part of their being themselves replicas of the Western bourgeoisie. Trapped in this surrogacy, the very surrogacy from which they draw economic benefits and privileges, these classes are unable to confront this surrogacy and develop independent ways of thinking and acting.

This lack of independent thinking and acting has deprived Africa, like the rest of the formerly colonised world, of adequately independent means to look at and assess its achievement in art resulting from its encounter with modernity over the last hundred or so years. There are, of course, African intellectuals who are aware of this failure but are unable to do anything profound about it without an institutional infrastructure that can provide them with the means to carry out serious research work beyond the continuing anti-West polemics of Africa's ruling classes. The purpose of these polemics is to complain and then expect the West to do what these classes are unable to do themselves, to think and produce, for themselves, what is necessary for a modern African society.

It was in this context that I felt "a need to call upon African thinkers, writers and critics to attend to the issue of more in depth research into the history of African visual art", but I am not sure this call will be answered as the conditions to carry out this research do not yet exist in Africa – nor do they exist in other parts of the formerly colonised world.

GJ: I feel that what you describe as conditions for change point to the need for African nations to develop their own ability to manage and command the interpretations and recordings of achievements. Management and control are actions that do not often align with the general thinking about visual art. My personal impression is that most African nations lack both infrastructure (i.e. the institutions, staff and material goods), and the relevant collections to begin to work and rework material – to arrive at a history that is closer to an African reality, a more authentic and independent interpretation.

There is an initial task of developing the political will within African states to support the creation of 'new' African institutes of research that focus on interpretations of what Africans have produced and achieved over the past century. And I mean by this not avoiding an evaluation of what you have described as African art's colonial legacy, but also developing skills to research contemporary production. Most African historians are being trained outside of Africa, and those working on the continent are overlooked. South Africa has a substantial body of artists and it has a number of good researchers. The question can be asked why did it take someone like yourself who lives in the UK to get this debate off the ground? And if there has been such a call from within the continent, why did none of the institutions reply, even modestly, to such a call? The answer lies somewhere between not having infrastructure,

lacking the political will to make a positive change, and not knowing where to start.

RA: You are absolutely right. The problem does lie somewhere between not having institutional structure and a lack of political will to do something about it. But why is there no political will, even when Africa is now an independent continent? This is in fact the real question, which I tried to deal with before. I tried to show that this is due to a frame of mind which suffers from the dependency syndrome, and thus is unable to do anything for itself. It is happy, if not complacent, to merely supply raw material to the advanced industrial countries, and gladly accepts whatever is sent back in exchange in the form of modern products or consumer goods. It is thus unable to be innovative or produce a modern product. How can this frame of mind allow independent thinking or create the institutions that can promote independent research and scholarship?

However, the situation is not as bleak or negative as I appear to have painted it. In fact, despite the lack of institutions and support for free or independent thinking and the fact that those who have been involved in critical thinking and reflection on the situation in Africa have suffered enormously at the hands of unscrupulous, corrupt ruling elites – resulting in the mass emigration of Africa's intelligentsia to the West - there has been enormous work done by African thinkers and scholars, particularly in the fields of anthropology and cultural theory. But when it comes to the specificity of art and art theory, this work is extremely vague. It has not helped one understand the true significance of what Africa has produced in terms of modern art – both its success and failure. This vagueness, I believe, is the result of not paying serious or critical attention to individual works or individual artists' achievements. What is required is not only a theory of culture, but also scholarship vis-à-vis art theory and history that can explain the particularity of African modern art achievements as well as its relationship to the larger body of modern art history, both in terms of what it contains as the narrative of progressive developments and its accumulated knowledge representing ideas.

The prevailing tendency is either to accept what is given recognition and promoted in and by the West, and to allow similar works – with African themes – to flourish within Africa; or to merely celebrate those works of art which are seen as representing African spirituality. Whatever the case, there is little attempt to explain the significance of the works concerned through a method or methodology that involves rigorous analysis of what the works contain and represent. And when the West ignores these works of African achievement, misrepresents or excludes them from the history which is constructed on the West's own rational basis, there are loud noises against this state of affairs. When Africa cannot understand or makes no serious attempt to understand the significance of its own achievement, how can others understand it?

You have asked why I wanted this debate to get off the ground? Well, it would take too long to answer this question. It would be like telling my own life story. I will therefore be brief here. All this began with my writing of *Black Manifesto* in 1975-76, following my disenchantment with the Western art world, in which I suggested the possibility of a Third World art movement based on and integrated with the struggle for liberation from all forms of colonialism. This of course did not happen. I was naïve, but there was a desire and vision for a different and better future. However, I

realise that we did need a platform that would allow a discussion and exchange of ideas that might help us find a way forward collectively, resulting in my establishing the art journal *Third Text* in 1987. Although we managed to establish this platform successfully, and it is still there after almost twenty years with a voice which was not heard before from elsewhere, there has not been much movement forward beyond complaints and critiques of the West. It has failed to produce or suggest alternative ways of looking and reflecting, and offering an alternative to the failure of the Western avant-garde. This critique was necessary in the beginning – in which I myself was involved. Then it became not only repetitive, but *Third Text* was seen not as a vehicle for the development and exchange of radical ideas, but as a means of promoting whatever Third World/black artists did and those who were being ignored by the West. This actually brought a change in my thinking, resulting in my writing (in 2000) a critique of postcolonial cultural theory's involvement in art, which was not based on a rigorous study of art history and how artists from the Third World had actually challenged its Eurocentric philosophy, but on some cultural assumptions based on the West's own perception of Third World artists as 'others'. I have also been involved in many Third World biennales – from the Habana Bienal in 1992 to both the Johannesburg Biennales, to the Dakar Biennale since 1996 – and I have witnessed a progressively deteriorating situation not only in the production of art, but also in serious scholarship which can reflect a movement away from the dependency on the West.

Apparently, the situation now has changed as artists from all over the world are included in the Western biennales and mega exhibitions, and the ruling classes in the Third World are quite happy with this development. But this, in my view, is a capitulation to the world of global capitalism and its institutions. This cannot be a recipe for the development of the world free from Western domination.

My concern is therefore not only with Africa, but with the situation in the world today. I have used Africa as an example of the continuous intellectual dependency of the world on the West and its institutions. The Third World, particularly Africa, does not lack independent thinking minds, but these minds are either ignored or forced to turn to the West where many have no choice but to serve its neo-colonial agendas. There are of course remarkable exceptions, but the general situation is depressing. We are spending too much time on criticising the West, but producing no ideas that can offer radical alternatives. Only when we have our own institutions, which are properly funded and are allowed considerable independence to do research work and produce a discourse that represents our own being in the world, may there be a shift. Art is a small part of this greater scenario, but its importance in defining what we are and what we should do to find a place in the world as free human beings cannot be underestimated.

GJ: You extended your call for a method and scholarship in the Dakar biennale catalogue,, emphasising this urgent need to re-evaluate history and to build relevant institutional structures for research and scholarship on African contemporary visual art. For instance things we talk about today such as translation – by which I mean the ability to translate African artists' work in a manner that lets somebody outside of Africa grapple with its value. Our failure to organise and record history leaves the artist with very little opportunity to engage with this work other than through an existing historical discourse which stems mainly from Western Europe and the USA.

RA: We need interpretation by Africans themselves of the work that has been done in Africa for the last hundred or so years. That's why I invoked the importance of this. Without placing artworks within a history, we cannot understand their full significance. There have been constant complaints coming from Africa that Africa's modern contribution to art has not been included in the history which has been written mostly by the West. But this is a facile complaint, because underlying this complaint is a lack of understanding of the power structure which produces written histories. Nobody does things for others. The history of British art is written by the British; the history of French art is written by French men and women; American art history is written by American art historians. So what I'm saying is nothing unusual. Write your own history! But it's not easy. It is a very complex problem because just writing one's own history is not enough. Africa's history is part of a larger body of history, the history of humanity of thousands of years. You can't just write African history without making connections with the history of humanity at large. So it's an enormous task which cannot be undertaken without the support of institutions within Africa. But there are no such institutions, generally speaking. That is the main problem.

GJ: We're very determined in our work for this publication to address this failure to develop infrastructures in African national cultures – the kind of infrastructure that really supports artists, scholars, researchers, museum institutions, gallery institutions, collectors etc. Because of this failure, there is an exodus of African artists from Africa to Europe and the USA seeking to build professional careers away from their homelands. Therefore what they are achieving abroad is first and foremost being interpreted in those 'non-African' countries. The influences of this substantial body of cultural practice, in Western Europe, has a strong effect on how African artists produce work and how they adapt their cultural norms within that system. What artists would like to do is to provide some advice to their national institutions, such as art councils, universities and national departments of culture within government; to actually take stock of what they do and to become aware of their negative influence when they neglect to support or build this sort of infrastructure. I think one can pinpoint where they should be working, what they should be doing, and how they should be working with their admittedly limited resources. Africa is not a wealthy continent but there is the necessity to do it, and if you do it properly you can actually achieve something.

RA: Africa is not a rich continent but it does have resources. But the problem is that the resources are used unimaginatively and quite often they're wasted, because of the bureaucracy which is entrenched within the established system. So we do need some alternative to it. I was hoping that with the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, there would be changes within the art institutions. But it seems the old power structure is still there and maintaining the old status quo. So I think there is a need for an alternative research institution, which should be led by the younger generation which is aware of the problems. I don't think we can leave it to the older generation to do this task. I myself have been thinking about it for some time, which was the result of my regular visits to the Dakar Biennale. In fact, I proposed setting up such an institution in Dakar about six or seven years ago. I realized there was a lot of sympathy around, particularly in Europe, in favour of what was happening at the Dakar biennale, and I thought it would be an opportunity to consolidate what had already been achieved and move forward by setting up a research institution

associated with the biennale. This would have involved the creation of an archive of contemporary African art run by professional people, which would have allowed researchers to undertake the work of scholarship. My plan was to work out the whole thing imaginatively and then apply to the European Union for funding, as it has been supporting the biennale. I'm sorry we had to go to the West again with a begging bowl, but since charity was there, why not use it? We could have gone to the European Union with that proposal and I think they would have looked at this proposal sympathetically. We could have also approached some foundations in Europe. There are many foundations that would have been happy to come forward and support the proposal. But there was no interest in Dakar for this sort of thing. There was a lack of imagination and political will.

Another problem is that a lot of African intellectuals have migrated to the West, and they allow themselves to be used by the power structure there, rather than representing Africa and trying to make the resources come to Africa. What in fact they do there, in the name of Africa, is for the West and is consumed by the West. And thus nothing comes to Africa. I can give you an example in this respect of the project done by Okwui Enwezor, The Short Century. Your National Gallery in Cape Town wanted to bring that show there, but the money they demanded was impossible to raise in South Africa. So it never toured there. The project was about Africa but Africa itself couldn't see it. This is the problem with the African Diaspora. For African scholars or artists abroad, Africa is a commodity that they can package and sell in the marketplace of the West.

GJ: I suppose that's one way one could interpret it even though I wouldn't go that far, but I do think there could have been another way perhaps to initiate that project. I'm very interested in what you're saying about creating an institute for research and consolidating what is currently taking place. If one thinks of the number of African nations trying to create what they call biennales, there are some building blocks. Egypt has two, one in Alexandria, another in Cairo, Dakar has a biennale, Angola is trying to create a biennale, South Africa had Johannesburg, and we have the Trans Cape exhibition. There is also an attempt to initiate large-scale exhibitions in Mozambique, Madagascar, and even in Kenya. They all could be brought together. We discussed a very intriguing idea in Dakar, about what would happen if each of these biennales on the African continent were to focus, for just one occasion, on their local history. Meaning they would dedicate their resources and research to a specific local goal. In a period of 3-5 years we would begin to get a series of publications that together would build the first platform on which research could then be founded, because there would be some art historical research done from within those locations. I know from the South African scenario that quite a lot of research has already been done. What is lacking is a method to bring this together and make it meaningful through publication, education and discourse – to create a body of knowledge, a platform on which younger researchers and even more experienced researchers can build their future work.

If one could find a way to consolidate what has been achieved and make Africans take stock of the knowledge they have, Africa actually would in a way be turning its back on the discourse of globalization, or what you've just described as a problem Western European and North American institutions, and the Diaspora have created for the African intellectual and artist.

RA: You can say that generally speaking the dominant discourse comes out of the West. That doesn't mean there's no alternative thinking in the West. But it has not been explored. Despite all the criticism we could and should level against the West, there is still enough good will which can be constructively used. If there is charity, why not accept it? The problem is not the acceptance of this charity, but on what terms it is accepted and how is it used.

GJ: I want to stay with this idea of the West's relationship to Africa. I've been talking to Koyo Kouoh, an independent curator in Dakar, about this. One of the things that emerged is the issue of legacy. If you look at major international cultural institutions such as the French Institute, the British Council, the Canada Council, the Goethe Institute, or the various funds of the Dutch, Pro-Helvetia etc. – international institutions that are part of, I suppose, the national foreign policies of those countries – if you were to look at their legacy and ask some of these institutions that have now been functioning for 50 years, what have they left behind?' Have they left any infrastructure behind that Africans can build on or that can sustain research or practice? Have they focused their energies in that way? I think the call to African leaders and politicians to understand what they do when they do not create infrastructure, could also be an address to foreign governments.

RA: It's not only that the foreigners won't do it, they can't do it! You have to establish structures yourself first. Then you may have to go to them for collaboration, for help, for involvement.

GJ: I think we have done that, you yourself...

RA: Yes. Maybe I can give you a micro-example of Britain. You know yourself, we have been shouting for years about the absence of African and Asian artists from the mainstream of art history, and remember I did *The Other Story*. I did that project in 1989 because I thought knowledge could produce knowledge, and the mainstream art history would then take note of the knowledge this project produced and bring about changes in its narratives. But nothing happened. The art history which is being taught in British institutions is still the white man's art history. So I had to take the next step myself. I set up a project five years ago and I said 'I will do it myself, that is, write an inclusive history of British art'. I had to work out its whole brief, giving reasons for the re-writing of history, and how it could be done. I then approached the Arts Council for funding, but there was a tremendous resistance. I had to struggle for three years. In the end I did get some money – not enough, but enough to pay art history writers. I have now got twenty art historians who are involved in rewriting British art history. There will be no distinction made between artists on the basis of their origins – racial or ethnic. It will be the inclusive and most comprehensive art history ever written in Britain. The point is that things can be done if there is a will and determination.

GJ: You have actually shown this by an example. This is what you've also done with *Third Text*. However, even though there is a lot of good will in the West, trying to see the wood for the trees is very difficult. The dominant discourse has remained very ambivalent with alternative readings that try to break in from the margins. They constantly meet a resistance – a polite way of saying 'let's not go there, let's not

support that, let's just deal with these old ideas. There's a given track on which these things can run and we don't want to build any new tracks'. I don't want to accept that attitude, because it's completely negative and accepts that there will be no way to change. I am instead for trying to change things. One can make good, progressive insertions. One can begin to apply new ways of thinking and ways of consolidation among Africans themselves and we can do that with the help of international institutions, those who have the good will, as you say, and actually make some concrete proposals. There is a concrete proposal by yourself to the Dakar biennale to create a research institute related to the Dakar biennale, specifically focused on African contemporary art research. Africans would love to have this established within the University of Dakar or at another educational institution that would respond. And such a proposal could be inserted at the level of the European council if it had ministerial good will.

RA: Exactly, yes, but there is a huge problem. You know what happened during Dak'art 2000. They had put their invited guests in the most expensive only five star hotel in Dakar. When I arrived there, I got really angry. I started shouting at Remi Segna who was then the Director: 'why are you doing this, with badly needed resources? Why are you not using them to make a better exhibition or better research or publication'? The problem is that those who have power in African bureaucracy are not interested in art but use art only for their own ceremonial purposes.

GJ: I'm going to stick a little bit with this idea because we've spoken about publishing. We have the example of what you've done with Third Text. We have very briefly mentioned the idea of archives. These are alternative ways to start. Build archives and build something more around that. Such small beginnings would involve national collections. Some governments have very poor collections of contemporary art, others have much better collections. Just those two ideas hang in the air when one talks about infrastructure. We've mentioned the creation of a more rational research methodology that is not anthropological and does not take its primary ideas from what Europe is doing but rather from what is happening on the ground within African cultures. Perhaps we can start there and determine through research what contribution contemporary African art makes to the larger body of human history. These are all important bits of a greater infrastructure, even if such an internal or inward looking focus is perceived as flying in the face of a contemporary art theory that claims everything is now inclusive, everything should be a part of this global post-modern idea. We should do it and not be afraid to venture there. We need to look in the opposite direction, look inward and not outward. We need to do this to build a platform from which we can speak and partake in a global discourse. Africans need to have arguments that hold up researched, art historical and cultural positions. If we can't achieve these small building blocks to erect even a theoretical infrastructure, then nothing changes.

RA: I agree with you, the point is how to establish that institution which can deal with all the things we have talked about. There's no dichotomy between inward looking and outward looking. I think both of them should be there. By looking inward you can look outward. You use your inward position and apply to the whole world to understand what the world is we're living in. We must not go for one thing against the

other. It has to be both. Africa has to look at itself through its own eyes and through looking at itself it should look at the world.

GJ: That's almost a perfect way to end this. I think what you said in that last sentence is wonderful and could be held up as a way forward. Say: 'Look in both directions, look inward and look outward but the intention is to change and arrive at a new destiny'. I suppose that is what we're talking about.

Gavin Jantjes is an artist and curator with experience in developing cultural policy. He is curator of contemporary art at the National Museum in Oslo, and was artistic director of Trans Cape.