

Africa's Interlocutors: Lize van Robbroeck in conversation with Sylvester Ogbechie

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by Lize van Robbroeck & Sylvester Ogbechie

This is an edited version of an 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. The first and latter part of this conversation have previously been published by Prof Ogbechie on his blog, but has hitherto never been published in its entirety.

While many have criticized the representation of Africa by Western curators, few voices have been as openly critical of Africa's representation by diasporan Africans as Prof Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie. Apart from an interest in the issue of interlocution, Dr. Ogbechie's research focuses on alternative modernities, and the colonial and postcolonial conventions of representation in the arts and visual cultures of African and African Diaspora populations.

Born in Nigeria, Ogbechie is a faculty member of the department of History of Arts and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He serves in several advisory and consultative capacities, and his writings have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. A self-declared 'cultural entrepreneur', Ogbechie recently inaugurated a scholarly discourse on contemporary African visual culture and new media from the perspective of the Nigerian video film industry. In addition, he founded Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture, a bold initiative aimed at providing opportunities for publication of detailed research on African topics. His monograph on pioneering African modernist artist Ben Enwonwu is forthcoming.

Lize van Robbroeck: One of the most distinguishing features of colonialist discourse is the tendency to speak on behalf of the colonized Other. The result is that the representation of African culture has been an almost exclusively Western preserve for centuries. While the need for self-representation is frequently raised by Africans, it seems that it is not easily attained. Could you discuss some of the problems Africans are encountering in their efforts to be heard?

Sylvester Ogbechie: The principal problem that Africans encounter in their effort to be heard is that they are subject to the hegemony of Western discourses. The hegemony of the West is most evident in its control of technologies of discourse (publishing, research funding, museum access, academic appointments, etc.), and lack of access to these impedes the production of knowledge about Africa. Second, the work and opinion of Western scholars are valued far higher than those of African

scholars [1]. Third, African scholars have a very difficult time publishing in the USA, especially when they try to publish books on African subjects. I spent four years trying to get various University presses in the USA to accept a manuscript about Ben Enwonwu, one of the foremost African artists of the 20th century, and all except one of them rejected it outright. One went as far as claiming that analysis of Enwonwu's art does not fit into their understanding of art history. Usually, publishers dismiss books on African subjects by claiming that they do not have a market for them. However, by not publishing in these areas, they ensure that no market emerges or at least they can continue to claim that there is no market for these books. In my field of art history, you can find countless books on even the most insignificant white artists but it is hard to find decent texts that analyze modern and contemporary African artists. Additionally, 98% of all publications on African art in the USA are exhibition catalogs that often promote the collection of one or another Western collector, and publishing in African art history is indelibly yoked to the needs of the art market for 'tribal' art.

True power, according to Louis Marin,[2] consists of the ability to silence discourse. The West has this power and African interlocutors in recent times have struggled mightily to wrench some measure of this power away from the West. It is obvious that this effort, while yielding some results, is not necessarily working well. For one, the continued impoverishment of the continent prevents the development of valuable means of producing and disseminating information. Bad governance by African rulers has a lot to do with this situation but so does the use of global financial control to cripple African aspiration in order to make the continent's wealth available to the West.

One thing I found when I came to the USA was that there was a lot of misinformation about Africa, including from scholars who have actually devoted a lot of time to the study of various African peoples. These scholars were extremely knowledgeable about many African practices but many of them lacked adequate language skills suitable to their subjects of study. Nevertheless, the research of Western scholars is often validated far above the cultural knowledge of someone who actually emerges from the cultures in question. Behind this issue is the assumption that African knowledge is easily accessible to an interviewer, which is often far from the case. This doesn't mean that someone is more credible merely because they come from the culture concerned (the insider-interlocutor paradigm) but that Western scholars often do not question their modes of knowledge production (which often consist of securing second-hand knowledge from interviews with local interlocutors), yet their research is seen as more objective and unassailable.

Finally, we have to consider the role of museums in this whole issue. The discourse of art is one of the most mediated discourses in the entire field of humanities. Artworks are objects of great financial and political value in the West and the reification of artworks supports a massive industry that venerates artworks as cultural artifacts. Museums are the high temples of this new form of worship. A colleague once told me that museums are the quintessential foundations of Western hegemony and their power will never be broken. Museums serve as the funnel through which African artworks are transformed into Westernized objects. Museums break down African art objects and invest them with new meanings. They provide the cover of 'objective analysis' that allows these objects to be redefined according to

Western interests, and above all, they ensure that the value of the objects is directly proportional to the provenance they attach to it. Museums are also the repository of the great looting of African cultural patrimony by Western colonial powers. There are scholars who have argued for a closer look at the role of museums in this regard, and its role in silencing oppositional statements about art collections. Usually such focus is discouraged.

So overall, African scholars confront great obstacles in their effort to redirect the manner in which knowledge about African art is created and disseminated in the West. Their continued marginalization is a testament to the hegemony of Western control of discourse.

There is an often-heard argument that African scholars should not expect to be well treated in the West or have the West be overly concerned with Africans' lack of access to Western knowledge sectors. This argument asserts that Africans should develop their own technologies of discourse and use it to counter Western hegemony. It is a facile argument since we exist in a global culture and the whole point of Western hegemony is to undermine the emergence of alternative centers of power or discourse that can challenge its control. African scholars and artists are right to insist on engaging Western culture on its own terrain, since the West's reach is global and hegemonic.

LvR: In the last few decades, Diasporan African artists, intellectuals and curators such as Okwui Enwezor, Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe (and yourself) have made a concerted effort to gain a platform in the West as interlocutors and re-presenters of African art. Do you feel that Diaspora Africans are perhaps ideally situated (since they are in the West, but of Africa) to perform this task? Or do you feel that there are also disadvantages to the fact that African artists are today largely represented by Diasporan writers and curators?

SO: I do think there are distinct advantages to the increasing prominence of Diaspora voices in the West, but I have also criticized our willingness to throw African-based practices and artists overboard in the process. There are advantages to being in the West, but of Africa; however, we need to be aware that extended duration of life as an expatriate cuts one off from the flow of cultural practice in Africa. While I keep abreast of developments in contemporary Nigerian art, my study-from-a-distance approach is essentially research-based in the same manner as that of any other scholar. So although I have the advantage of being familiar with the context of artistic practice in Nigeria, it is also true that I have minimal knowledge of the subtle movements of taste and critical responses. I see this most clearly in my lack of knowledge about contemporary Nigerian music. I am simply not au courante with current tastes in music, which is usually a good indicator that one has lost touch with the flow of cultural life. I am sure this has an impact on my work as an art historian, and I have recently tried to rectify this gap by becoming interested in visual culture, especially that of the newly popular Nollywood-Nigerian film industry.

In essence, I am saying that our presence in the West has advantages but also has a cost. We have very definitely changed the tenor of the discourse here, and have in various manners shaped the direction of the field in significant ways. However, the longer we stay here, the clearer we identify with the West and the more difficult it is

to claim to speak for Africa. In fact, I have never claimed to do such a thing, but I have always insisted on speaking to my own experience and scholarship. And I think being of Africa is very important to that experience, and that it has some value to our collective discourse on African art and culture.

LvR: It is a fact that Diaspora studies are a very fashionable academic topic at the moment. The reasons for this seem to reside in the fact that Diaspora raises many pertinent questions about cultural identity and the politics of the global and the local. There are, however, increasingly fears that this focus on Diaspora constitutes a second wave of marginalization of Africans and the complexities and problems of the African cultural milieu. What are your feelings about this?

SO: Diaspora studies are relevant and can help integrate Africa into global history, by showing the impact of peoples of African descent on the production of the modern world – a project that they essentially bore on their back but are routinely denied credit for. However, fears that this new vogue and focus on Diaspora studies might be a new way to marginalize Africa are not unfounded. I have vehemently opposed the attempt to position Diaspora Africans as representatives of African cultural practice. This project is no less colonialist in nature than the Western attempt to speak for Africa. There is undoubtedly a need for interlocutors and no one can argue against the good that has come out of the curatorial work done by Okwui Enwezor and others like him. However, I watched in amazement as museums in the West use the works of Diaspora African artists to fill their collections of ‘contemporary African art’. This endeavor effaces Africans from the site of their own creativity and continues to sanction Western preferences over the actual practice of African artists. It is historically immoral, intellectually unethical, and quite insulting to African artists who live and work on the continent. Africa is a mess, and there is unwillingness in the West to take responsibility for helping create the mess Africa is in, and also a desire to not be bothered with this anymore. In that regard, the focus on the African Diaspora has similar impact as the use of African artists based in the West to represent contemporary African art in general. Both deflect attention from the cultural environments of African artists based on the continent and promote the idea that this region has nothing significant to contribute to contemporary global art practice or discourses. The focus on Diaspora African artists must operate in tandem with a focus on Africans who live and work on the continent. (To use an example, there are large numbers of Irish emigrants in Chicago, but nobody goes to Chicago to study ‘contemporary Irish art’).

LvR: In an attempt to dislodge Western (in Enwezor’s terms) ‘pornographic’ presuppositions about naïve and primitive Africa, Diasporan African intellectuals have made a concerted effort to re-present contemporary African art as cutting edge, sophisticated and competitive. In the process they often tend to focus on African artists who have had some kind of access, ironically, to Western art training. Yet, when I recently acted as external examiner for an art department at a prominent East African university, I was struck by how little infrastructure the art school had. The students have no access to computers, the rooms are small and barely equipped, and the standard materials they have to work with are cartridge paper and poster paints. The theory syllabus seems to deal largely with local art and is almost exclusively Afrocentric. Given that this seems to be the norm for African universities, how can African students compete with students from the ‘international’ arena who

have access to the latest technologies, who regard themselves as part of a global, trans-national art arena, and who are immersed in contemporary art discourses? Is it necessary for African artists to compete?

SO: I guess the issue is twofold: judged by international (which means, Western) standards, of course one would argue that the lack of resources hampers the ability of African artists to compete globally. After all it is difficult to imagine that they can realize their best potential without adequate tools. However, the Afrocentric focus of the students mentioned above is not necessarily a liability. I teach in the USA and I know that American schools are equally ethnocentric, and most Western art schools do not give any attention to art practices from Africa or outside of the West for that matter. In fact, most of my students know absolutely nothing about Africa. However, the products of Western art students are seen as somehow more 'universal' than those from Africa. Why is it that African concerns are not a valid subject for art in the West but the work that results from this marginalization of the continent is not seen as parochial? The 'global trans-national' arena of 'contemporary art' is too often a limited terrain, in which the same individuals are recycled endlessly.

The lack of infrastructure remains, however, a persistent problem in African education, and it raises the legitimate question of how various governments view art in the larger scheme of national development. Let's face it: the value of art is directly proportional to its use as an expression of power (aesthetic, political, cultural, social, etc., but power nevertheless). In a struggling economy, people wonder whether it is proper to devote money to promoting fine arts or such practices when other sectors of the national economy equally need funding. Also, when African governments like Nigeria and Senegal have tried to expand funding in the arts, usually World Bank policies force them to cut these funds and direct more money to paying off external debts.

Also, it is important to note that the kind of art that you refer to above reflects European practices of art, which reifies the singular product and is treated as a commodity that supposedly has intrinsic value. I have argued elsewhere that African conceptions of art differ and that contemporary art is now moving towards a non-Western conception of art that emphasizes process and performance rather than product. Whether African countries should devote huge funds towards exhibiting these new kinds of art is a question to ponder.

I am not sure that we should expect African art students to compete in the sense of requiring them to engage issues in a manner consistent with what obtains in Europe. Critical practice (and great art) results from encounters with space, in its sense as a location from which one engages the world. No one lives in 'transnational space'; one lives in Lagos, London, Lubumbashi or Luxemborg. I think the more important question is why we consistently refuse to take African creativity on its own merit.

Don't get me wrong: I have been a merciless critic of the laziness of some African artists who routinely recycle favored motifs using a hackneyed negritude as shield from public criticism. However, there are quite a lot of very innovative art coming out of Africa. If we dismiss this work because it doesn't look like the art coming out of New York, we do it great injustice. That said, I travel often to New York to see what is in the galleries, and it strikes me that the return of narrative painting in the West

actually mirrors similar kinds of art in Africa, Nigeria most especially. In an era when John Currin, Odd Nerdrum and other figurative artists are prominent, we may be making a mistake in what we perceive as 'contemporary art' in the West, which in recent times have turned emphatically figurative and parochial.

It is obvious that an increase in technology will greatly expand the capability and vision of contemporary African artists in Africa. The pertinent question however is whether we are not placing too much emphasis on the value of technology as a thing in itself. The vast amount of technology available in the West does not seem to me to be increasing the quality of art out there; rather it has often driven Western artists to nihilism by ensuring the need for ever more esoteric forms of newness.

LvR: (a) Given the flourishing and prolific informal production of art (especially for the tourist market) in Africa, do you feel that there is a need for academic art training in Africa? (b) Do you think that the common workshop situation, where young artists are apprenticed to experienced older artists, perhaps supplies Africa with enough art expertise to dispense with institutional art praxis?

SO: No to both questions. You cannot dispense with institutional art education/praxis and to even suggest such a thing is scandalous (it raises the very racist idea that Africans have an innate creative spark which is best represented by artists who have no formal education—I call this the 'Pigozzi Paradigm' and Africanist scholars have fought against its presumptions for decades). For one, art historians have been unwilling to grant tourist art any measure of critical validation and we can't posit any alternative to formal/institutional art education unless we are prepared to engage the tourist art market with a high degree of critical analysis. So far, tourist art is routinely dismissed although it is obvious that it is more ubiquitous than products of institutional praxis. I have in recent times started to interrogate tourist art as evidence of a new kind of visual culture engendered by the totalizing force of transnational capital. These artworks are literally 'objects' that become invested with value through the validating power of Western institutions rather than by their intrinsic or cultural characteristics.

We however make a major error when we focus too much on tourist art or expect this kind of production to take the place of institutional training and praxis. Academic art training (actually 'formal education' is a better term) does not merely provide the artist with practical skills for art making; Art institutions define for students their location on the continuum of visual culture and material production in the arts seen from the specificity of contemporary cultural practice. For European artists, this invariably means a study of the development of art in Europe and its reification of genius in the practice of individual artists whose localized production were often held up as examples of 'universal' ideals to which art aspires. For the colonized or formerly colonized subject, the issue of locale is paramount since he/she lives in contested relationship with the production of European artists with whom it is difficult to establish any cultural affinity. Colonial ideology denigrates the indigenous art of colonized populations and expects colonial subjects' encounter with European culture to be the defining impetus of their subsequent creativity. Contemporary African artists who obtain formal education receive a critical apparatus that enables them to deal with this contested heritage and subsequently allow them to intervene in the production of narratives about their contexts of practice.

Tourist artists and informally trained artists (except those actively promoted by local or foreign curators) often lack this awareness of their role or position in their cultural context of practice. They are also often not given credit for their work (most tourist art are 'anonymous' although the dealers often know who produces them, much like most traditional African art in Western museums are identified as anonymous productions), which allows these artists to be truly spoken for. Finally, by reducing their work to the status of commodities, the artists and their works are undervalued, which ensures that whatever benefit accrues from collecting such work goes directly to the mostly European collector who ends up creating provenance for the artworks by virtue of his status as its collector (African artworks in the West are often identified less by their African producers and more by their European collectors. The works gain value from their inclusion in Western collections and modes of provenance). The ultimate result of the above process is that tourist art and its modes of dissemination carry on a clearly colonialist process of appropriation which reduces African creativity to 'tribal' and 'cultural' objects in order to deny them any significant value in the global market and discourse of ideas.

The above process silences the producers of tourist art, and this is why they can never emerge as active agents in any discourse of cultural practice. It is not that they aren't aware of their roles or activities, but that they are denied the opportunity to see their practice as anything beyond the production of objects of mere economic subsistence. To suggest that this category of cultural producers mitigates any need for formal or academic training for African artists is to engage in the worst form of racism possible. In the USA, tourist art abound, but no one has yet suggested that the art schools close down because of the abundance of folk artists who churn out endless numbers of velvet Elvis paintings. Note however, that the American art market and discourse has found ingenious ways to elevate artists formerly regarded as producers of tourist art into the canon of American masters. At a recent meeting of the College Arts Association (the umbrella organization of art historians in the USA), a whole panel was devoted to Thomas Kincaid, who is clearly a producer of tourist art; and artists like Norman Rockwell are quickly being canonized. However this attention is selective, and the art market in the USA makes a definite distinction between the works of academically trained artists who work within the gallery system, and those who operate in the informal art market (by which I mean those who sell their works at art fairs, and often make more money doing so). When critics want to take the measure of cultural practice, they analyze the works of the artists who work within the gallery system, not those who operate outside of it. I think the same system should apply to African artists.

LvR: Most of the art produced on the African continent today is unfashionable in 'international' terms. A lot of the art may be described as nationalistic; or primitivistic (in the sense that it hearkens back to a romanticisation of tradition in a Negritudist vein); or as a kind of formalistic Modernism. What are your feelings about the relative isolation and conservatism of the African art scene?

SO: We have to decide as scholars whether we are interested in studying African art as it is practiced, or in prescribing for Africans what African contemporary art ought to be and then seeking practitioners who fit this mold. I think scholars have not quite worked hard enough to identify the different strands of work done by African artists but even if we think we have, it is arrogant to imagine that the West can prescribe

conditions of artistic practice for Africans. I have long maintained that most Western curators dismiss figurative art from Africa (which you describe above as nationalistic, primitivist, romantic, or Negritudist) because they simply do not know how to read them. When an artwork invokes cultural icons of significance to its African audience, it is often dismissed as parochial and unimaginative. Yet, there are vast resources devoted to artworks that reflect nationalist and figurative ideals in American art, many of which are now being promoted as 'cutting edge'[3]. These works, very similar in style and substance to Yaba School art from Nigeria, is not denigrated. Instead, it is highly praised.

Western scholars casually dismiss figurative art from Africa because they lack knowledge of its cultural context and have deemed these cultural contexts to be marginal and thus not of importance. This celebrates the ignorance of Western critics while accepting their biased judgment as credible. There has not been any exhibition in the West devoted to figurative art from Africa, at the scale of other kinds of major exhibitions. The principal artists who worked in this medium have not had their day because their works have narrative components that require deep knowledge of cultural history and politics. It is easy to apply postmodernist jargon to the work of Diaspora artists, and celebrate their transnational existence (which is basically a lie since these artists carry Western passports and live quite comfortably in specific national spaces). Until we have exhibitions that engage figurative work from Africa, I don't think scholars have any right to judge this work negatively. *Primum vivere, deinde philosophari* ('Eat first, then philosophise', as the Latin proverb goes). First subject the works to appropriate critical analysis, then judge it in any way you want. You can't jump to judgment without first engaging the works.

I am not saying that we don't have bad art from Africa. However, in this post-postmodern age, after an era in which Western scholars vigorously argued that anything can be art, to continue to insist on this summary dismissal of African figurative art is quite hypocritical. If anything can be art, then it should be possible to engage figurative art and especially tourist art from Africa as legitimate contexts of artistic practice, especially since they deal with those issues – such as displacement, boundaries, the glocal and the instability of identity and representation – which you identify as resonating with postmodern academic discourse. It is hideously biased to assume that these issues have resonance only in the West. Africans travel much farther than most Westerners ever do in their lifetimes, and it is wrong to assume that the above issues do not figure in their works, even in those who mainly live and work on the continent. What we should be doing, if we are to be honest as scholars, is to try to figure out (through detailed and unbiased analysis) how African artists engage such issues in their figurative art.

LvR: Responses to the Africa Remix exhibition seem to indicate a new trend to dispense with politically correct responses to African art in the West, and to revert to a more open racism and cultural imperialism that is disturbingly reminiscent of the colonial era. What, to your mind, is eliciting this response? What, do you feel, would be an appropriate response to this blatant neo-colonialism?

SO: This response arises from a new confidence in the Western project of imperialism, which has been growing in leaps and bounds since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York (September 11,

2001) finally provided the basis for a bold move to bring the rest of the world under the control of the West through the might of the USA. Without demeaning the suffering of those who died in this attack or minimizing the threat posed by terrorism, it is obvious that this incident provided the US with a chance to try and remake the world in its own image, by making it safe for transnational predatory capitalism. This effort has run into significant resistance in Iraq, and is increasingly unraveling but nevertheless persistent.

The racism and neo-colonial adventurism of the West emerges in light of the new feeling of global dominance described above. The Manichean division of the world into 'us' (the US-led block of white Western nations) and 'terrorists' (describing all who oppose the American grab for global power in the post-Soviet era) has diminished the constraints imposed by pleas for greater social equality and global justice that framed much of the last half of the 20th century. Without anyone to be accountable to, racism has re-emerged in the West as a favored way of dealing with non-white peoples. I have in press an article that investigates the persistence of this Western colonial mindset and its racist effects, which allows us to compare the US invasion of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 with the British invasion of Benin in 1897 [4]. The similarities in the modus operandi and reasons proffered for both invasions are scary. But really, in a world where you do not have to bother about the humanity or equality of someone you are intent on subjugating, racism and barbarism rules; witness the current conflagration in the Middle East.

What is the appropriate response to this current racism, neo-colonialism and imperialism? See Frantz Fanon.

LvR: One of the major conundrums facing African artists is the issue of pre-selection in exhibitions on African art in the West. You mention in your response to Brian Sewell's review of Africa Remix that Western curators are only prepared to showcase work by African artists that have already been validated by their selection for prior shows or if they feature in major collections (artists such as Samba come to mind). It is therefore an unfortunate byproduct of the West's centrality that the canon of African art is determined by Western curators and collectors. How can this issue be addressed?

SO: I really have no idea what can be done about this since this issue derives again from Western control of technologies of discourse. The problems engendered by the Western desire to create and sustain its idea of a canon of African art (traditional and modern) are the same deriving from the West's subjugation of black peoples in the wider order of things. He who pays the piper dictates the tune, and as long as the West has this inordinate power to dictate the discourse, it might be impossible to create any meaningful opposition[5]. The question of canon formation is one of power and it has played out in other sectors. Take South Africa for example: under its international isolation during the apartheid regimes, South African art history created its own narrative of national practice which mostly engaged local white art and denied adequate representation to black art or global art for that matter. This approach was roundly criticised and after the end of apartheid, South African art history has made attempts to become very inclusive. However, less than 14 years after apartheid, there are major exhibitions in South Africa devoted to Randlord art, and intense efforts being made to re-legitimise much of the white art that was

promoted during apartheid. In addition, white South African artists are being more easily incorporated into the global art discourse while black South African art of the resistance period is being undermined as propaganda art. This practice ironically absorbs white South African artists into an international network of global apartheid in which their works become easily more valued and valuable than the work of black artists. The white artists benefit from this pre-selection process that at the same time undermines their fellow black South African artists.

We are confronted here with a truly insidious problem of global inequality and racism, which is going to be very difficult to overcome. I sat at a panel during eKAPA and listened to a white South African artist declare that after a decade of post-apartheid, he was free to not have to bother about its history or the fate of black art, thus free to make any kind of art he wanted. At a conference at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles, I raised this issue and a panelist told me that she was not obliged to worry about the question of Western colonial power every time she wanted to talk about modernism. This kind of blanket dismissal assumes that the issues have been resolved and we can now move on, and it reflects a very problematic lack of sensibility of the part of these individuals, an unwillingness common to white people who steadfastly refuse to interrogate how they benefit from the structures of global racism.

I should reiterate here that we can't solve the above problem by asking Africans to create their own discourse and choose their own canon. This will be like instituting the apartheid ideal of 'separate but equal', which we have seen from its manifestation worldwide, actually means separate and unequal. We can ask curators to be more receptive to issues that concern African artists, and allow their selection of artworks to reflect the actual conditions of practice on the ground, but that brings us back to the question of power in the first place, and thus proves to be a diabolical circle of negation, a catch-22.

LvR: How do you think Africa's numerous Biennales can gain greater visibility and attract greater interest globally?

SO: They need more funds. The financial outlay for art exhibitions in the West is astounding, mainly because these exhibitions are folded into major programs of civic development. The budget for DocumentaXI was in the range of 27 million Euros, and major exhibitions in the USA often easily top \$5 million. Western countries use art exhibitions and cultural events as a money-mill, establishing an iconic identity that draws tourism and benefits the local economy. African Biennales have to aspire to that kind of total package in order to increase their visibility.

That said, we have to engage the ethics of diverting huge national funds to African Biennales in a context in which the countries in question have not created useful infrastructure to engage this kind of practice. There is a legitimate question of whether it is right for African countries to try to replicate Western forms and institutions of visual culture such as museums and biennales. By replicating these institutions, African countries are locked into a subsidiary role in the international marketplace of ideas. Outside of South Africa, I see no possibility of any African country being able to benefit immensely from the tourism that such events attract not because they are incapable of creating tourist industries, but because there is often

concerted efforts by the West to sabotage African tourism by declaring most African countries unsafe to travel in.

We may also need to rethink the idea of Biennales as the primary location for exhibiting and promoting global art. Biennales not only extend the history of West's World Fair ideology, they also explicitly bring contemporary art into the purview and control of global capital. Both aspects make it a problematic model for African countries to follow, the first for validating the racist heritage of the Biennale model, the second for not taking into consideration the fact that lack of adequate capital often makes a mockery of such grandiose programs.

LvR: You have expressed doubts, in your response to Sewell's review of Africa Remix, about the desirability of exhibitions with a continental or Pan-African scope. Would you like to discuss why you have such reservations? Do you feel that there are possible strategic benefits to be had from organizing such a show on African soil?

SO: I have written a sustained critique of this practice[6] (which I call 'Omnibus Exhibitions'), but I am not against them per se. I only ask that curators who produce such shows take full responsibility for them and not try to pass them off as groundbreaking efforts to do one new thing or another. The continued tendency to mass 'Africa' into one lump has become quite insulting, since it negates a focus on what distinguishes peoples from various parts of the continents and makes mockery of regional, national or even cultural political aspirations. Omnibus exhibitions are laundry lists and unfortunately will be here with us for a while to come. However, critics can and should make an effort to find new ways to engage African art. Ways that respect the individuality of artists and cultural producers, while giving an audience clear explanations of how things come to be.

As to the strategic benefits of organizing such a show on African soil, why not? Large exhibitions allow us to interact with a wide range of artworks and can be as inclusive as possible. We are often forced into this kind of continental overview because funds for major exhibitions of African art arrive intermittently and are often seen as best spent in this manner. What curators should not lose sight of is the need to create new ways of engaging African art.

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Notes.

[1] For a cogent analysis of this global hierarchy in the marketplace of ideas, see Canagarajan, A S. (2002), *The Geopolitics of Academic Writing*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

[2] Marin, Louis (1988) *Portrait of the King* (Martha H. Houle, trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[3] See for example, works by Bo Bartlett,
http://www.bobartlettart.com/paintings/oil_paintings.html.

[4] See Ogbechie, S.O. (2006), 'The Perils of Unilateral Power: Neomodernist Metaphors and the New Global Order' in Terry Smith et al. (eds.) *Modernity and Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture After the 20th Century*. Duke University Press.

[5] For Ogbechie's analysis of this issue in relation to Documenta XI, see Ogbechie, S. O. (2005), 'Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze' in *Art Journal* 64:1, Spring: 80-89.

[6] See Ogbechie, S.O. (1997), 'Exhibiting Africa: Curatorial Attitudes and the Politics of Representation in Seven Stories....' in *African Arts* 30:1, Winter: 10, 12, 83-84.