

Beyond current debates on representation: a few thoughts on the need to develop infrastructure for art in Africa

This text was published online by ASAI in 2006 [\[LINK\]](#)

by Mario Pissarra

The discourse on contemporary African art is a comparatively recent one, and has to a large extent been dominated by issues of representation: what image of Africa is or has been communicated to the world, and to itself? Who is or who should be representing Africa? And who and what is Africa? Much of the discourse has been led by Africans in the diaspora. This generation of intellectuals has taken on the critical need to address negative, sometimes racist constructions of Africa that have been dominant, particularly but not exclusively in the West. This need to address negative perceptions of Africa, coupled with the present location of a critical mass of African artists, academics and curators in the USA and Europe goes some way in explaining why there has been an emphasis on interrogating 'Africa' as a concept, and why issues of representation have been foregrounded.

Yet the contested issues of representation, as important as they may still be, recede in relevance when one begins to consider the real challenges facing art in Africa; particularly from the perspective of practitioners on the continent. Once we begin to address the realities of making, researching, documenting, critiquing, collecting, and curating art in the geo-political entity that is 'Africa,' different priorities emerge from those that currently characterise debates on contemporary African art. In other words the debate on Africa and its contemporary art needs to begin to focus more intensively on the art being made on the continent of Africa itself, and to begin to identify and address those enabling and disabling factors that impact on its development.

Arguably the real challenge facing art in Africa concerns the urgent need to develop the capacity of practitioners on the continent through building an infrastructure for the visual arts, so that Africa's artists do not have to look elsewhere to develop careers, and also do not have to depend on external sources for validation, particularly when the validation that comes from elsewhere may be premised on interests that are not necessarily those of practitioners working on the continent.

It is also important to recognise that the question of infrastructure cannot be looked at without critical reflection on the nature of art itself, since the answer is not be found in building physical and organisational structures based on models that evolved to address specific interests elsewhere. Rather it is to be found in artists developing a practice that has relevance and resonance on the continent, without being confined to the conventions of the white cube. Artists need to acknowledge and engage with the unique challenges of African contexts, and the infrastructure

that needs to be developed must facilitate that process. It is therefore impossible to separate the question of infrastructure from that of developing a critical discourse that contributes towards establishing a developmental framework for art in Africa. For this reason it is important that the emerging discourse on infrastructure is linked to questions of shifting and evolving paradigms. There is more than bricks and mortar at stake here.

The argument that Africans, and all people concerned with Africa's development, should begin to look towards the continent to identify not only needs but also the potential, both nascent and often neglected, is not to ignore broader 'universal' or global concerns, but rather to recognise that Africa has to take responsibility for its own development, to take the lead in developing its own agenda based on its own priorities, in order to be able to engage with 'others' as equals. So long as we defer Africa's development for seemingly greater benefits elsewhere, we defer Africa's promise of liberation, maintaining unequal relationships that were, for the most part, established through colonial conquest. In developing and affirming a multiplicity of centres within Africa, rather than continuing to perceive and perpetuate notions of Africa as marginal, there is scope for partnerships and exchange with all progressive interests, both within the diaspora and beyond, but this should be contingent on identifying and addressing Africa's interests first.

Once the questions of developing infrastructure on the continent begin to be addressed in earnest, the discourse on contemporary African art will bear little resemblance to current debates. There will be an opportunity to redefine art outside of the interests of the dominant, western centred model. Issues of representation will continue to be important, but they will be informed by evolving paradigms on the continent, rather than being defined by virtue of being in tune or in opposition to dominant trends in the West, as is all too often the case.