

Dirty Laundry: Can we think beyond Venice?

This text was published online by ASAI in 2007 [\[LINK\]](#)

by Mario Pissarra

I have previously argued that Africa's representation in Venice is irrelevant when compared to the need to develop alternatives at 'home'. In essence my argument is that we should not judge the success of South African art (or African or 'non-western' art for that matter) by its presence or absence in the prime venues of the 'international' arena, of which the Venice Biennale is both a leading example and symbol. The health of a country's art should not be judged by the number of international 'stars' it generates, since this may provide a false picture of the state of art in that country or region. Rather it should be evaluated on the quality and extent of its art practice, galleries and museums, art education, publishing, patronage, and all the critical components of art infrastructure that are essential for the development of art.

My argument is that by directing our energies at government to support representation in 'Venice' we effectively ignore fundamental challenges and inadvertently perpetuate an iniquitous system where Africa (and the 'rest') will always be judged according to its value in the 'centre' rather than in its own environment. Simply put, what should our priorities be if we are to develop a sustainable practice?

The recent choice of *Check List*, drawn exclusively from the Sindika Dokolo collection of contemporary African art, to represent Africa in Venice introduces some new dimensions into this debate. I refer specifically to the allegations by Ben Davis in Artnet that the Dokolo collection has been built on money looted during the last days of Mobutu's rule in the Congo. What Davis did not emphasise was that this does not only cast a shadow on the forthcoming African exhibit in Venice, and by extension Venice itself, but also raises critical questions about the credibility of the fledgling *Luanda Trienal* of which the Dokolo collection is an integral part.

The implications of the Dokolo collection (and the collector's ongoing patronage) being built on 'dirty money' are so depressing that some may choose to ignore Davis' article or to read into it grounds for 'afro-pessimism', although it should be noted to Davis' credit that he pointed out that many collections in the west were (or are) also built on dubious foundations.

The question arises as to whether the kind of money required to organise an exhibit in 'Venice' necessitates problematic alliances, or whether this is simply endemic to patronage of most large scale events. (Who remembers Mike Van Graan's "Don't Quibble with Keble" article in Mail & Guardian, where the respected commentator urged critics to be grateful of Keble's support for the visual arts?) Dare one 'bite the hand that feeds' or be better advised to look the other way?

In reporting on the selection of *Check List*, ArtThrob demonstrates the prevalent tendency to avoid the difficult issues of patronage. ArtThrob noted that 'eyebrows were raised' at the idea of *Check List* being drawn from a single collection. No mention was made of Davis' allegations. Is the question of *Check List* deriving from a single private source of any significant consequence, when it has been alleged that the collection itself amounts to little more than money laundering? Should we steer clear of these uncomfortable issues out of 'solidarity' with *Check List's* curators Fernando Alvim and Simon Njami? When we keep quiet do we do it out of self-interest, and when we speak up do we commit professional suicide?

Ultimately what the debate around who should represent Africa in Venice does is to distract from asking harder questions: what kind of programmes really need to be developed for art on the African continent? Can we think beyond biennales?

Both Johannesburg and Cape Town biennales highlighted the phenomenon of large scale events being poorly attended by the wider public, a pattern that is repeated across Africa. While government support, or lack of, is a significant part of the problem, a challenge remains for the art community to prove that it can develop a comprehensive vision and plans informed by local realities. Given the numerous difficulties we face, it becomes far easier to lobby for representation in Venice, or to design events that are thinly disguised versions of imported models.

POST SCRIPT

This was submitted for print publication early in April 2007 and an edited version appeared in *Art South Africa* vol. 5 no. 4, alongside other comment on Venice. Note that the online edition of *Art South Africa* contains a defence of the Dokolo collection by one Ray Duncan. Also note that three months after Artthrob first raised its eyebrows in March, Sue Williamson appears to be countering dissenters by citing Robert Storr and Olu Oguibe's rejections of criticism of the Dokolo collection. See "Venice: What took so long?".

POST POST SCRIPT

The day after posting this online I became aware for the first time of Sindika Dokolo's response to the Artnet article, published on 18 May 2007 on Artnet. MP 8 June 2007.