

# Chalk and cheese, or yam and potatoes? Some thoughts on the need to develop a comparative critical practice

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by Mario Pissarra

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Sometime in the very early 90s the Johannesburg based Afrika Cultural Center invited and hosted Ngugi wa Mirrii, the Kenyan born, Zimbabwe based theatre for development practitioner. As the general secretary of the Cultural Workers Congress, Western Cape, I took on the task of organising a day-long itinerary for Ngugi so that he could meet with a range of community arts organisation in Cape Town. One of the most memorable incidents occurred at the Community Arts Project, then located in Chapel Street, Woodstock. Ngugi, having been subjected to a series of presentations highlighting the lack of resources for NGOs said something to the effect that: "You South Africans don't know how good you have it, in Zimbabwe we do most of our training outdoors under a tree".

I recalled this incident when I received the programme for this seminar. I wondered if we, i.e. the South African participants, were going to use this opportunity to complain about the poverty of criticism and publishing within the country? And I wondered how many of the South African participants would be able to name a single art critic or publication based in another African country? Certainly it struck me as unfortunate that an international art criticism seminar with an African focus should limit its sole panel discussion on art criticism to South Africa.

Having these concerns, whilst simultaneously feeling obliged to address the brief which this panel was given: i.e. to focus on South Africa and to draw on our own experiences; I decided that I would concentrate on issues concerning art criticism that affect writing on modern and contemporary African art, through the lens of a South African practitioner.

To do this I must first summarise two polar positions in writing on South African art. The first, seen vividly in the books of Esme Berman, once the Helen Gardner of South African art history, was to explain South African art, mostly white, by situating it within the trajectories of western modernism. To understand South African art you must first know something of Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism, etc.

Standing in stark contrast to this is the revisionist art historical writing that has dominated since the late 1980s, seen in books such as Steven Sack's *Neglected Tradition*, Gavin Younge's *Art of the South African Townships*, Sue

Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa*. These books signaled a shift towards defining South African art as uniquely South African, and significantly black. This was a very necessary and welcome shift from the Berman school of eurocentrism, but seen in hindsight it introduced a new problem. The problem I refer to is that we swung from one extreme where knowledge of a western art historical precedent was a prerequisite for interpretation, to the point where no comparative art historical framework was in place, and our art was seen as a purely South African phenomenon.

There are always exceptions to the norm. Matsemela Manaka's *Echoes of African Art* and Anitra Nettleton & David Hammond *Tooke's African Art: From Tradition to Township*, both of which also appeared in the late 80s, hinted that there was a broader African context to South African art. But by and large, our lens was now determinedly 'local'. Building on the early revisionist texts South African art historians began to deepen their enquiry beyond the initial thematic surveys. The most prominent new trend was the production of monographs and catalogues on single artists, particularly black pioneers. Another trend was the emergence of studies that focused on specific media. We also saw the advent of detailed case studies on individual art centres, such as Polly Street and Rorke's Drift. I wish to use these last examples to highlight why I think South African art history could benefit from a comparative framework that draws on African precedents. In doing this I do not want to detract from the value of these publications, which are characterised by detailed research and which hopefully will lead to further studies of centres such as CAP, Fuba, Funda, and the Afrika Cultural Centre, to name a few.

Example one: Cecil Skotnes at Polly Street in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The issue of Cecil Skotnes' teaching methodology at Polly Street, where he attempted to balance introducing new techniques and ideas with giving his students enough space to tap into a supposedly authentic African consciousness, can be compared with earlier interventions by expatriates in Africa, mostly but not exclusively in the colonial period. I refer to Margaret Trowell in Kampala, Pierre Romain Desfosses in Elizabethville (Lubumbashi), Pierre Lods in Congo Brazzaville and Dakar, Ulli & Georgina Beier in Oshogbo, and Frank McEwen in Salisbury. While all of these pedagogical methodologies represent various degrees of 'non-directive' intervention, which have been severely chastised by post-colonial critics for their paternalism, there is no doubt that their legacy has been immense, even finding expression in more recent examples, such as the Triangle Network. Arguably the singularity of Cecil Skotnes would be better appreciated if his methods and legacy were to be evaluated in an appropriate comparative framework; indeed it would be interesting to know which of these initiatives he was familiar with, and possibly influenced by. But this is not only about Skotnes; a critical appreciation of all of these initiatives could be enhanced through such a comparison.

Example 2: Rorke's Drift founded by Swedish Lutheran missionaries in the early 1960s

There is surely something significant in the fact that several of the earliest art education initiatives in Africa were introduced by missionaries. I suspect that a detailed comparative analysis between Rorke's Drift and other missionary led art

initiatives in the colonial periods in Nigeria, the Congo, and Zimbabwe would highlight both similarities and differences between the colonial administration of each of these countries; the respective orientations of the various Christian denominations; issues of emphasis in different historical periods; the personalities and approaches of the missionaries involved, and that this would offer some new insights into the artists and art produced. Certainly, knowing just a little of some of these initiatives enriched my own appreciation of Rorke's Drift. Like I suspect many others with a superficial knowledge of Rorke's Drift I assumed that the proliferation of religious imagery was a direct consequence of the missionary orientation of the project. Thanks to Hobbs & Rankin I now know that Peder & Ulla Gowenius, who initiated art training at the Centre were in fact not missionaries – they were 'disguised' as such in order to have the space to operate within the restrictive apartheid environment. The Gowenius', it seems, were more interested in cultivating a sense of pride and self respect through a knowledge of local history and culture, and through the development of income generating skills; than they were in saving souls. Apparently they did not encourage the use of biblical themes. Ironically, these came from the black students themselves, motivated in part by liberation theology, as well as by the adherence of some students to Africanised Christian sects. While these observations highlight the uniqueness of Rorke's Drift, specifically in its earliest manifestation, I am left wondering whether a comparative study of the art produced at various missionary projects, in South Africa as well as beyond its borders, would introduce information that would deepen understanding and appreciation of all these mission led projects as historic interventions.

In making the above points I have tried to briefly highlight how South African art history could benefit from a comparative analysis with other African examples; but also how African art history would benefit from such an approach. However I would like to use my remaining time to begin to address the question of developing an appropriate framework for the critical interpretation of modern and contemporary art. In doing this I am not trying to introduce a one size fits all approach, but rather to share with you what I personally have found to be useful in my own work.

The view that modern and contemporary art of Africa is a poor copy of western art has been rightly challenged by many post-colonial writers. It seems to me that much of the counter strategy has been to attack western notions of African authenticity, and to place emphasis on the heterogeneity, iconoclasm, and cosmopolitanism of Africa's art and artists. In doing this artists of African origin living in Europe and the USA, as well as artists based on the continent who work with technologically advanced media, including a number of South Africans, have been given the most space. Personally, I am less interested in many of these artists than I am in the question of how artists living in Africa adapt to the challenging political and economic contexts that many of them find themselves to be, from the colonial period to the present.

Thus I was very intrigued by Okwui Enwezor's project *The Short Century*, particularly the proposition it appeared to offer: that the critical interpretation of Africa's modern art needed to be situated within the contexts of decolonisation and independence. *The Short Century*, it seemed to me, offered an alternative way of looking at the art of Africa. Some of you may be aware that I wrote a very long review of the catalogue (I never saw the exhibition) which concluded that, the scale

of the project aside, *The Short Century* lacked substance. In retrospect, I think I reached this negative conclusion out of disappointment, since after reading it from cover to cover, twice, I was left with a sense of being cheated by Enwezor, since nowhere did I find an attempt to apply these ideas (decolonisation and independence) to the art on the exhibition. Nonetheless the process of critiquing *The Short Century* has helped me immensely.

Firstly, I think it is erroneous to attribute an anti-colonial agenda to all of Africa's modern and contemporary art. Certainly there was a degree of assimilation that took place, that could be interpreted, at least in part, as validating the 'civilising mission' of the Europeans. It is true, as Olu Oguibe argued in his article "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art" that an artist such as Aina Onabolu, widely regarded as Nigeria's first modern artist, successfully challenged European prejudice of Africans by mastering the white man's idiom (realistic portraiture in oils on canvas). But is there not a counter argument, that by rejecting indigenous practices and adopting western conventions Onabolu also exemplified the values of the emerging black middle class that saw western civilisation as a form of progress? In a conversation I had with Uche Okeke, Okeke highlighted that Onabolu was a Christian, and that he emerged in that part of the country where missionaries first made their mark. In contrast to the methods of Onabolu, in developing a postcolonial Nigerian art, Okeke and his contemporaries researched indigenous sources that Onabolu ignored. What this highlights is that the internal struggle with colonialism is in part a rejection, but also in part an embrace – how else does one interpret details conveniently ignored by Oguibe in his radical framing of Onabolu as a nationalist – such as that Onabolu accepted an OBE, as well as a tribal chieftanship, other than as evidence of degrees of conservatism?

It is this struggle, much of it seemingly contradictory and conducted at a deeply personal level, that I believe makes Onabolu the complex and intriguing artist that he is. It is also this level of struggle that Enwezor failed to address in his approach to decolonisation, which he appears to have interpreted in quite narrow terms. In a recent article I wrote called "Re-reading Malangatana", soon to be published in *Farafina*, a Nigerian magazine, I began by expressing my frustration with what I have found to be a general failure to adequately situate Malangatana within the anti-colonial and post-colonial wars in Mozambique. During the course of my research I came across an insightful comment by Mia Couto, the Mozambican writer. Couto remarked that the natives' encounter with colonialism was through the process of assimilation. Assimilation, as outlined by Harun Harun on a previous panel, refers to the implementation of colonial interests through the introduction of elements such as language, Christianity, education, and various social and cultural practices. Assimilation was deliberately used to create a class of citizens that were alienated from their traditions as black Mozambicans, but remained on the periphery of the settler class.

Malangatana, as a mission educated native who received the benevolent patronage of white artists and intellectuals can be seen to be part of this assimilated class; which also includes the so-called mulatto, born of the union of settler and native. In engaging with this concept of assimilation I began to make observations about Malangatana's work that previously were closed to me: in particular I began to discover how many of his early works contain images of women with skin tones

lighter than men, with long flowing hair, again unlike the men, and this made me begin to question whether he was commenting on the process of assimilation or was reflecting values that were based on white notions of feminine beauty. I also began to see how many of these women appeared in close proximity to the Christian cross, and how notions of guilt and retribution featured prominently in these works. I also looked at the frequent references to witchcraft in writing on Malangatana, and how these images of traditional healing were almost invariably violent and negative, although writers regularly claimed that he 'promoted' his indigenous culture. I also found that post-independence Malangatana's women began to have braided hair, and how a guilt free eroticism began to find expression. I concluded by putting forward the proposition that while there are some images that represent the anti-colonial struggle, it is really at the level of personal engagement with the values of the colonial class that decolonisation manifests as a theme in Malangatana's art.

It is when I approached the idea of decolonisation as an ongoing struggle with the legacies of colonialism that I began to develop new perspectives on artists such as Onobolu and Malangatana. However I have also struggled with applying this understanding of decolonisation publicly, since the term is more commonly used to refer to a historical event, in the way that, it seems to me, has been done by Enwezor. However, until I can come up with an alternative term that lacks historical baggage, I continue to use the notion of decolonisation as a pivotal concept in my quest to interpret much of the art in Africa.

I have, it may seem, deviated from the South African focus requested of me by the seminar organisers. However what I have tried to do is to demonstrate that it was through looking at art in other African contexts that I begin to develop new perspectives that help me re-interpret South African art. I also found that when one looks at the notion of international art through an African prism that one begins to develop new perspectives on western art. For example most students schooled in western art history would associate the 1960s with pop music and pop art. I found that once I educated myself more about African history the pivotal feature of the 1960s became decolonisation, not the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. This in turn led me to reevaluate Pop Art: to what extent does the iconoclasm of the period reflect the end of Empire? To what extent does the emphasis on brand names and packaging herald the advent of multi-national led globalisation? Certainly, it seems to me, there are intellectual benefits in developing comparative frameworks, since these allow for new perspectives to develop.

I could go on by talking about why, if I had the means, I would curate joint exhibitions such as Uche Okeke and Garth Erasmus, or Sokari Douglas Camp and Willie Bester, since I think that organising such encounters would enable us to reevaluate individual contributions. The processes of comparative reflection could facilitate a deeper understanding and fresh perspectives on art and artists, and the issues that arise in discussing them. If we are to develop a legitimate international art history we need credible critical tools, and comparative frameworks are surely part of that.