

Venetian Blind: A response to Malcolm Payne

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by Mario Pissarra

[This is a response to Malcolm Payne's "Viva Venice... Viva... Long live!" (ArtThrob, June 2006). Payne's piece was a response to my "Death to Venice" (ASAI, May 2006), which was a response to Marilyn Martin's companion pieces "Death in Venice" and "Faultlines and Fumblings" (ArtThrob, September 2003), as well as to Sue Williamsons remarks on the Venice Biennale (ArtThrob, July, 2003).] [1]

In 1977 my school principal, Chris "Carrot" Hurley, wrote a letter to my parents cataloguing my crimes against humanity. These included, and I remember these sentences precisely, "posting a scurrilous act on [his] authority in a school toilet" and "not only were [my] ideas on religion childish and immature but [I was] not content to keep them to [myself]". I have had to wait nearly thirty years to read anything quite so colourful about myself, so I must thank Professor Malcolm Payne for his instant classic: "Pissarra's treacherous posturing... promotes one of the most deviant disservices to the visual arts community since Christian National philosophy imposed its insular creed on artistic production in South Africa"

And that's not all. According to the senior academic I "grind", "grind" and "regrind"... I have a "convoluted doctrine" that "jumbles" and displays "peculiar conflations"... I "live in another time and place" and am "unwilling to grasp" reality... I have a "death wish for exclusion"... a "scrooge negativity"... and I'm rude to Francesco Bonami... Payne also claims in one part that my argument is "very funny", but I'm sure he's talking about himself.

Way back in the mid 1970s Peter "Jock" McKay, a former Free State shot-put champion and avid fan of D H Lawrence, taught my class the classic techniques of propaganda. I remember learning how important it was to discredit one's opponent, to substitute objective words with emotive ones, to repeat oneself until a 'truth' was established, to use hyperbole, to negatively label, to misrepresent an argument, and best of all... to practice "downright lying". A few years later Jock tried to whip the shit out of me for that scurrilous attack that made Carrot see red (really just a harmless cartoon), but I have always been grateful to him for teaching me to appreciate the finer points in the art of propaganda. It has often helped me distinguish well-argued criticism from that which pretends to be.

According to the honorable Professor I am calling on government "to reject an international development programme for the visual arts". Where do I say, or even imply this? In fact, if Payne were willing to grasp a position other than his own he would see that I am doing the opposite. I find it bizarre that he quotes my sentence "We should be asking [government] to support us in engaging with artists across Africa and throughout the Third World.", a sentence that can only be interpreted as a call for a developmental programme for the visual arts, and yet he perversely claims

the converse. And surely this sentence of mine contradicts Payne's claim that I wish "to see South African art contained within continental Africa, fenced-off from the rest of the world"? [2] All I am doing is arguing that our 'foreign policy' needs to be weighted towards art in Africa, and to the 'developing' world. All I am doing is calling for an emphasis to be placed on developing alternatives to Venice, Kassel, Paris, London, New York etc. I do not expect everyone to agree with me, but to claim that my position is as evil as Christian National Education, a system that propagated European superiority and African inferiority, is plainly ludicrous. To have this accusation made by a champion of the Venice Biennale and an opponent of what amounts to an Africa-centred developmental perspective is post-farcical.

Put simply there are two fundamental positions articulated in this debate, which in my view is not only about the pros and cons of Venice as an individual biennale, but also about 'Venice' as a symbol of the euro-centrism that is a consequence of colonialism. The dominant position is that articulated by Williamson, Martin and now Payne. This can be summed up as: everybody to the centre, ignore uneven power relations and cultural bias, and make like Sister Sledge ("We are Family/ My My Bonami and Me"). Which would be funny, if the stakes were not so high.

Interestingly Payne champions participation in Venice but dismisses Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan, two prominent curators who have clearly considered it important for Africans to participate in Venice. He does not even accord them the dignity of individual status, referring derogatorily to "Oguibe/Hassan et al". In contrast he maintains that "Principal curators (Bonami for example...) have chosen artists in the past to participate in satellite or themed shows from across the planet, not necessarily for their ethnic or national values, but for their work's capacity to fulfill a curator's vision in representing states of play within global art discourse". Where in this "global art discourse" has there been any significant and sustained acknowledgement of Africa? Is it because there has been no significant art from Africa? Why is Payne so happy to champion a system that has historically denied the existence of a modern African art, and before that the ability of Africans to make art at all? Is it because, South Africa apart, he does not believe a modern or contemporary African art exists? If this is not so, why defend 'Venice' so passionately?

Even if Payne disagrees with the methodology of Hassan, Oguibe and other curators of what he calls an "Other Africa [that] knows no nationality", surely he recognises their 'inclusive' method as a pragmatic response to Africa's absence in institutions such as Venice? Surely he recognises that without the intervention of the Forum for African Arts there would be very few Africans to have exhibited at Venice? Doesn't their intervention count for something, if Venice is so important?

I suspect Payne would attribute Africa's historical absence in Venice to the lack of support to artists from African countries, rather than seeing Venice as emblematic of the historical realities of western domination and prejudice (and let's face it Egypt has for years been treated as a Middle Eastern or Mediterranean country, rather than an 'African' one). It is presumably coincidental that books and museums on modern art routinely exclude Africa (and most of the world outside the capitals of the western art world), and that linking this observation to Venice is another of my "peculiar confluents".

Payne has some explaining to do. On one hand he promotes a strong emphasis on national identity, with repeated references to the need for South Africans to represent their “national aspirations” in an international arena. On the other hand, he applauds “principal curators” who practice a “non-ethnic global art discourse”. Why then, if he recognises that curators of international exhibitions have more than one model to implement, is he so evidently uncomfortable with the notion of being part of a curated ‘Africa’ which he dismisses as “devoid of the nation-state”? Payne must explain why he can leap from the narrow and nationalistic to the broad and universal, but refuses to recognise anything in between. Unless he does so, he communicates a strong sense of discomfort with being situated in an African discourse. Personally I am not surprised by this: I have previously tried to draw attention to the fact that post the cultural boycott the South African art world has tended to articulate an internationalism that has little space for Africa and much of the developing world. [3]

South African art books, prior to political change, regularly explained South African art in terms of its relationship to Europe, and the discourse developed then still informs the way most of us look at art produced outside of Europe and the USA. There is no doubt that as South Africans we are part of this ‘western’ model, that is a part of our history and culture, but is that the whole picture? Surely at this stage in our history there is a validity in exploring the relationship between South African art and artists and art and artists in Africa and elsewhere in emerging postcolonial contexts? Surely this is an important project if we are to acknowledge and address the consequences of colonialism; particularly South Africa’s racist past, the impact this had on our continent, and the ugly fact that this ‘past’ informs our present.

It is also debatable whether presenting your own country in Venice enables you to represent yourself on your own terms. The audience is well schooled in the dominant art historical discourse and evidently curators and artists would take this into account. For many participating artists and curators, the first prize would be assimilation and recognition into that environment, and if this is your ‘community’ then that is no problem. But advancing your own personal career in a developed art world is not necessarily the same thing as advancing a developmental agenda rooted in the realities of a context far removed from the buzz of a big biennale, a context that by and large is lacking in a developed infrastructure for nurturing and promoting art.

In contrast to Payne’s position, which strikes me as either surprisingly naïve or merely a reflection of a deeply entrenched, uncritical and unconscious eurocentrism, I am arguing that people who are committed to developing the so called Third World need to develop alternative centres. We need to make a concerted effort to invest in building our own institutions, and to strengthen our relationships with countries, regions and continents facing similar challenges. We need to develop discourses centred in our own divergent realities and perspectives. The reality is that much art as it is commonly practiced is irrelevant to the lives of the majority of people in the developing world, and many artists accept this scenario as a matter of fact. However, for some artists this alienation of the broader public presents a challenge to make an art that has relevance for our own context. If Payne does not identify with this “we” then perhaps it is because it is he that “lives in another time and place.”

My argument is not about “punish[ing] the west” as Payne claims, but about proactively doing something for our own sustainable development. How will we make any progress in developing our own infrastructure and audiences on the continent if we continually invest our energy and resources in ‘Venice’? Should we judge our progress by our greater visibility in Europe or the USA? Will there be a trickle-down effect? Or will we maintain a series of unequal relationships? Do we have to take radical, corrective action, or will our problems be solved by a national pavilion in Venice? For asking these questions should I be dismissed as an out of touch hack?

What is most peculiar about Payne’s response to my article is that he accuses me of pretending to speak for South Africa and Africa. Can the Professor not distinguish between “a” and “the”? I fail to see anything deceitful in presenting an article under my own name sub-titled “a South African perspective”. The simple matter is that my argument is informed by my being a South African. If my early ancestors had remained in Europe I suspect my view of Venice may well be different to what it is, so what is wrong in acknowledging my vantage point? In this age of post modernism does Payne really believe there is only one South African perspective? And is that perspective his?

For the record, the project I founded, the Africa South Art Initiative (www.asai.co.za), is a modest contribution towards creating a space for a critical postcolonial African discourse. Anyone can contribute to it, so long as they have something to add to the growing body of information and opinion on contemporary African art. The website provides, at no cost to users, substantial resources that are accessed daily by a wide range of interest groups, and for these reasons it is featured as a link on the website of several educational institutions. For initiating this project, I have received compliments from across the world – from academics, teachers, artists, curators, archivists, activists and ‘non-art’ people. I began this project late last year without the comfort of a secure income and no savings. It has no funding and no staff. Fifteen artists are currently represented on this site, with more to come, at no cost to the artists. I do not speak for the artists on the site, and they may not agree with everything I write, but, Professor take note, all of them have unambiguously expressed support for the idea that South African art and artists need to prioritise engagement with art and artists on the continent, certainly at this point in our history. I also know that the artists that contribute to ASAI are not the only ones who think this, since I have had similar conversations with many people. ASAI has created a space for such debates to take place, and it is this developmental project that the good Professor attempts to discredit as a ‘one man thing’ in order to undermine the validity of an argument that unsettles him. [4]

So Prof, time for us to sing a new song... “We are Family/ Mama Africa and Me/ We are Family/ My My Malcolm and Me...”

- *Mario Pissarra, with apologies to Sister Sledge, 18 June 2006*

Notes.

[1] Note that in her introduction to the context for Payne's piece, *Art Throb's* founding editor Sue Williamson not-so-subtle attempts to discredit my argument by noting that it "took him three years to respond". In making this statement by way of introducing my argument Williamson conveniently overlooks information that undermines her position whilst emphasising that which supports it. It was clearly stated that I wrote my piece in October 2003 and submitted it to various national newspapers for publication, without success. What I did not say was that my reasons for attempting to publish elsewhere (i.e. other than *ArtThrob*) were to try and broaden the debate beyond *ArtThrob's* constituency, and for the record one well known editor strung me along for months while I expected the piece to be published. It was similar frustrations with editors that contributed in part to my decision to establish *ASAI*, not only as a platform for my own writing, but also for anyone else who had something to say about contemporary African art.

[2] If Payne were to read my response to Martin properly, he would also see that I do not support narrow readings of Africa that exclude the diaspora.

[3] See for example "To neglect Africa is to neglect ourselves", *Art South Africa* vol. 3 issue 4 2005 p.41

[4] Does anyone discredit *ArtThrob* as "Sue Williamson's personal website? Did anyone stoop so low as to do so when it was barely six months old?