

Open the Gate

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by Olu Oguibe

[This letter was initially written in response to a letter from Salah Hassan and Okwui Enwezor to Robert Storr, Artistic Director of the Venice Biennale. It was copied by the writer to interested parties and is reproduced here with his permission.]

To Dr. Salah Hassan
Forum for African Arts

September 19, 2006

Dear Salah,

Thanks for your email of September 1 regarding the response from yourself and Okwui Enwezor to artistic director Robert Storr's open call for proposals for the African Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale (letter attached below). I had hoped that you would call to discuss this on the phone as you promised, failing which I felt that I should send you my thoughts on the matter as well as share those thoughts with other concerned parties.

I would like to say that I do not share the views that you and Enwezor have expressed in your letter to Robert Storr regarding the issue at hand. I do not share the view that it is wrong for Mr. Storr or the Venice Biennale Foundation to make an open call for proposals that allows other parties in Africa or elsewhere the opportunity to put forward their ideas and visions for an African exhibition in Venice. On the contrary, I happen to think that Mr. Storr's decision to establish an African pavilion as an official part of the Biennale is, at least in the interim, a very positive and commendable development. And as a firm and consistent believer in open processes, I also think that Storr and the Venice Biennale Foundation have done the right thing by making the proposal process an open one that anyone with a good idea and the resources should be able to participate in. I do not accept or share your view or Enwezor's that under no circumstance should the process be opened to wider participation or that the Forum for African Arts should exercise a perpetual monopoly over African participation in the Venice Biennale outside the main exhibition.

As I understand it, what you and I have struggled for all these years is that more Africans should have the opportunity to present their work and ideas to the contemporary art world, be they artists, curators, historians or critics. That is why we established the Forum for African Arts. I believe that Robert Storr's idea of an open call fits this ideal while the present call by you and Enwezor to close the process and preserve it for a privileged few runs contrary to it. I sincerely believe that there are other curators out there in Africa or elsewhere with good ideas that might offer contemporary African artists even more opportunity to be seen and understood in varied lights. There are emerging as well as established curators all across the continent: in South Africa, in Egypt and the rest of Maghreb, in Ghana and Kenya

and Senegal and Ivory Coast and Angola and Ethiopia, as well as abroad, who would appreciate the chance to present their visions to the world. There are institutions, also. To deny them the opportunity to do so, and demand instead that only the Forum for African Arts be recognized in Venice, would run contrary to all that you and I have worked for. I think it is wrong and unnecessary.

True, the task of presenting an exhibition in Venice is not an easy one and requires a great amount of resources both financial and logistical. In this regard, the Forum for African Arts may be considered to have an advantage. But we would never know what other individuals or institutions can do unless they, too, are given the opportunity to take on the challenge of taking African artists to the Venice Biennale, which is what I believe Robert Storr's open call does. We may have experience, but how do we allow or encourage others to acquire the same experience if we demand that they be shut out of the process, as you and Enwezor have demanded in your letter to Robert Storr?

We may have clout and connection, but we have no monopoly on vision. We cannot turn our advantage into a right. Moreover, we cannot afford to be part of any demand, idea, arrangement or suggestion that seeks to limit the opportunities of African practitioners in the art world. We simply cannot afford to turn ourselves into gate-keepers.

As an organization, we should present our ideas to the Venice Foundation. So should others in an open process that rewards merit rather than privilege or loyalty. In the end our idea for an exhibition in Venice is chosen for its rigor or for the experience or resources that the organization brings to the project, all well and good. But to demand that there must not be any open calls or process, or argue that only we should have the opportunity to take African artists to Venice is a step in the wrong direction. Let's not forget that the first such pavilion for Africans in Venice was organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem, and not by any exclusive African monopoly. That "pavilion" won the first exhibitor's prize in Venice in 1990. It is sad enough that the Forum for African Arts has turned its back on such open processes within, and now prefers to appoint curators without open calls for proposals that give a broader array of African curators the chance to participate, but we cannot seek to impose the same closure on others.

My entire career in the contemporary art world has been devoted to the struggle for more openness and more opportunities for all, not less. For this I have been vilified and often wrongfully accused by many, but it is a path that I have every intention to continue on rather than retract from. Two years ago, on July 6, 2004, I wrote an open letter to the Venice Biennale Foundation and the City of Venice in which I argued that the time was more than right for a female artistic director for the Venice Biennale. In that open letter I concluded thus:

It is important that Venice breaks the tradition of male-curators-only. For one, the tradition is obviously anachronistic and not in tune with the times. It may appear consistent with another sad fact, which is that very few museums in the world today have female directors, but that is not a trend worth replicating. As the premier biennial of modern and contemporary art, Venice occupies a powerful symbolic position. Whether they succeed or fail in the details, a female artistic director for

Venice will nevertheless help address a problematic reputation as well as inspire numerous young curators who may otherwise believe that there is a glass ceiling.

Eventually, the Venice Biennale did appoint female artistic directors, which was a very positive step. I see Robert Storr's open call for wider African participation in Venice in same light. I believe we have a duty to embrace it, rather than oppose it for personal gain. I believe we ought to continue to encourage greater and wider participation by all, especially the teeming body of young curators now emerging on the African continent, and not seek to shut anyone off. Also, if we are serious about building open societies on the continent, I suggest that it is time that we began to embrace transparent processes and open participation.

I hope that Storr and his team are not pressured to abandon their idea by the letter from you and Mr. Enwezor. I also propose that in order to avoid any conflict of interests, members of the board of the Forum for African Arts should not participate in the panel that Robert Storr has proposed for this process. There is no shortage of African experts or other individuals that could serve on such a panel, which could be chaired by someone of the integrity of Ery Camara, president of the jury of the 49th Venice Biennale, for instance.

Ultimately, special African pavilions in Venice will not be sufficient to address the more critical issues of Africa's poor representation in the biennial's main exhibition or the continued inability of African nations to establish pavilions that promote the work of their citizens on the world stage. For now, however, the Venice Foundation has taken another positive step with its open call for proposals and ought to receive our encouragement, not our condemnation.

With very best wishes,

Olu Oguibe, Artist
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