

Connecting Africa

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The title for this panel discussion should really be “connecting Africa ”. Certainly “reconnecting Africa ” is misleading if it implies that “ Africa ” was once connected, and that the restoration of this connection is currently on the agenda. A number of commentators, Ali Mazrui and Olu Oguibe (1993) among them, have made observations about the fictiveness of a united Africa, and how the term Africa has historically meant different things to different constituencies. Mazrui has argued that it was in fact western imperialism that inadvertently created the incentive for the notion of pan-Africanism to emerge, and pan-Africanism has been (and continues to be) more of an ideal than a reflection of actual relations between, on one hand, African countries; and on the other, between Africans on the continent and in the diaspora.

While there may well be different interpretations of what constitutes “Africa”, “African artist” and “African art” there can surely be little doubt that there needs to be greater networking between artists (and associated professionals) on the African continent. In my view this networking should be directed towards a dual objective: building art’s infrastructure on the continent; and developing forms of art that have relevance to people living in Africa . Both these goals: building the infrastructure for art in Africa and making art that has meaning and value in Africa are essential if we are to create the necessary environment for artists in Africa to develop professional careers without, as it seems to many at present, having to emigrate to the West. It should be noted that, in an era of globalisation this is not a parochial call. Artists in Africa do need to see themselves as part of a global community, but unless they begin to prioritise the development of art on the continent, they will continue to be the junior or exotic partners in an Occidental frame.

The extent to which artists in African countries are isolated from each other is of course a relative one. Artists in countries such as Nigeria and Senegal have, particularly since political independence in the early 1960s, made several attempts to build relationships with fellow African artists, with varying degrees of success. Artists in East Africa have a history of migration, particularly between Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, much of which has been centred on Makerere University. Artists from these countries would no doubt have different perspectives to countries such as South Africa, where, due to apartheid, isolation was actively enforced until 1990, and another extreme case, Morocco, where the ruling class declines to participate in the AU and seeks integration into the EEC. Several North African countries also have stronger historical ties to the Middle East and Mediterranean Europe than they do to sub-Saharan Africa .

From a South African perspective there are many compelling reasons to build our links with artists in Africa. There is on one hand a historical context where due to the legacies of slavery, colonialism and racism South African art history cannot, in my view, be fully appreciated without some degree of comparative analysis with the experiences of other

African countries. There is also a moral argument that a country that inflicted so much pain on the continent, particularly on its neighbours, and which subsequently received a relatively privileged position on the world stage should not deny or ignore its historical role as an aggressor, and commit practically towards playing a constructive role on the continent. There is also an argument that South Africa which stands at the juncture of a developed and developing world has a critical role to play in assisting the development of an internationalism in which there is an equitable relationship between the so-called north and south.

These arguments face many challenges. One concerns the historical legacy of oppression whereby artists in “developing countries” view themselves as inferior to artists in the west. Another concerns the less altruistic nature of human beings, in particular the tendency to take the shortest cut to advance their own self interests: why take the long road when Venice is calling? The other major challenge is that transformation in South African art has been almost exclusively tied to questions of achieving demographic equity, personified by race and gender, which, while understandable given the local politics of , is arguably short sighted. It is shortsighted in the sense that little concern has been given to examining the nature of existing relationships with the rest of the world, relationships which, particularly in the field of the visual arts, are almost exclusively with Western countries. The question of building relations with artists in African countries, as well as in the “South” should not be seen as “outreach”, but a central objective in the process of decolonizing South African art. Looked at from the point of view of this conference, an “Africa panel” should not be a last minute addition but should be woven into all the debates on transformation.

The solution requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach. At a basic level there is the urgent need for consciousness raising through education and advocacy. Until we are aware of a) the value of art made in Africa; and b) the political arguments to prioritise the development of art in Africa; we are unlikely to make much progress. Then there is the need to identify existing networks, and possibilities for cultural exchange, followed by the development of an African agenda informed by the needs of artists on the continent, with clear priorities and realistic, sustainable programmes. There is also the critical need to establish a mechanism to drive and monitor these processes. I will now talk briefly about these levels of engagement.

The question of education about art in Africa is a critical one. How many of us, supposedly educated in the arts, can identify artists working in African countries other than our own? Where art is taught in schools and universities how many of these institutions talk about contemporary art and African art as mutually exclusive terms? Where we have national and provincial museums how many reflect an awareness of being part of the continent?

With regard to existing networks of artist led or artist centred initiatives it should be noted that several do exist, but how visible are they? How do we get the mainstream media to give greater prominence to these initiatives? On the other hand is there any truth in the perception that sometimes these initiatives are deliberately kept quiet, a guarded secret among those in the know who use these networks to promote themselves?

Governments also have a vital role to play. Here one needs to look at the potential role of governments in supporting the practical integration of arts into pan-African programmes and objectives such as Nepad, the African Renaissance, promoting peace and stability, deepening democracy etc, as well as to give substance to the paper agreements on cultural cooperation that our governments are often quick to sign and slow to implement.

On the question of an African agenda for the visual arts it should be noted that Africans in the diaspora have played a critical role in challenging western perceptions of Africa . However, the context of their operation has to a large extent required them to play by the rules of contemporary art as established by western curators. In their quest to challenge the notion of Africa as “primitive” they have tended to privilege technologies that, for the greater part, are not accessible to most artists in Africa . It is now time for professionals on the continent to begin identifying priorities for development of art on the continent informed by the realities of life in Africa.

Efforts to develop an African agenda and programmes to build art in Africa need to be driven by motivated groups and individuals, and a degree of coordination needs to take place. Here I would like to briefly refer to the Forum for African Arts. As I understand it the Forum was established in the 1990s with a view to promoting the visibility of African art in the West. Consisting of a select group of stakeholders, the Forum appears to have had some success particularly with regard to the Venice Biennale. Now I do not want to comment on the questions of exclusivity, transparency and accountability of this Forum, of which I really know very little. I highlight this example because it seems that the formation of the Forum does illustrate how establishing a lobby with legitimacy (in this case by including high profile figures) can deliver some results.

Is the time right for the establishment of a Forum for art in Africa consisting of professionals who are based on the continent? Can such a Forum act to facilitate discussion on the development of an African agenda; and function in a transparent, participatory and accountable manner? Certainly greater use can be made of existing opportunities such as electronic and print media, African biennales, artists workshops and academic conferences to help develop an African agenda, but without a lobby such opportunities can be easily wasted.

In closing I should clarify that the call for a Forum for art in Africa should not be confused with the need to develop local, national and regional lobbies, which are mostly weak or lacking and sorely needed. Rather it is envisaged that such a pan-African Forum would complement such processes, and could serve as a catalyst to facilitate the process of ‘connecting Africa ’, because unless a committed group of people take on this mandate we can expect the status quo to remain intact.

To conclude this brief input I would like to refer to Rasheed Araeen’s challenge to progressive thinkers to “stop thinking about the West as the society or the centre of the world” (2002: 454). Recognising that we need to do this is perhaps the easy part, mustering the will to do so is, I suspect, much more difficult. Are we in Africa capable of making this paradigm shift?

References.

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