

The (Dis)placement of National Art in a Transnational Artworld

Over the past fifteen years, critical and curatorial attention in the field of contemporary African art has shifted steadily away from a primarily tropical geography of practice toward a global, diasporic one. And this is neither surprising nor inconsistent, given that the majority of influential critics and curators are themselves located within this diaspora and not operating from the African continent (South Africa, with its own freestanding art world, is the most prominent exception). The African artist working in London or New York is far more likely to receive critical recognition than one in Yaounde, Kampala, or Addis, not because of any conspiratorial power-brokerage as is sometimes alleged, but because of the far greater visibility in the West of his or her practice.

A second shift has followed inevitably from the first. That same diasporic/ migrant/nomadic African artist operates in a very different creative environment than the one he or she left. Call it swimming with the big fish, if yours is a cosmopolitan leaning. Call it jumping on the transnational bandwagon if you wish to uphold the uniqueness of locality. If you go to live in France, like it or not, you will have to learn to speak French. When the creolization process sets in, it requires, first of all, the absorption of new media and new genres. The person who painted back in Nigeria becomes an installation artist in Los Angeles. She or he receives critical recognition for innovativeness and versatility and for demonstrating that African artists can compete as equals on the world stage. What is the problem with any of this?

For one, the collector and audience base for those artists must also shift, since the old base has different expectations: It wants African art that decidedly does not look international or avant-garde. Many members of that audience base are in African cities or universities where the artists came from, but there are also quite a few who support that preference among museum- and gallery-goers in Europe and North America—and among collectors everywhere. However, the bigger issue is the nation itself. Leaving aside the necessity of demonstrating one's cosmopolitanism to the international community, most artists see themselves as at least partly grounded in their

early, place-based experience. El Salahi said of this, “the locality of one's own home becomes almost a past dream, very, very dear. You have a longing for it, nostalgia, as if were something from a long distant past” (Beier 1993). While a younger generation of transnational artists is more likely to see this double life as less dreamlike and more in pragmatic career terms, it is still a fact that the past matters: To paraphrase Faulkner, it isn't even past. How is this to be negotiated in a globalized scenario?

And let us present the issue in the broader terms it deserves: For every transnational, there are dozens of artists with similar training and potential who stay in Africa, because they want to or have to. What is recovered memory for the artist who left is everyday reality to them. This lived experience is also the lodestone of their creativity, fraught as it often is with oppressive politics, enduring poverty, and conflicting generational pressures. In states that have suffered through civil wars, come into existence through harrowing liberation movements, or merely survived dictatorial regimes, contemporary artists have been forced to test their loyalties to that state. One thinks of Uganda, Nigeria, Sudan, and many more. For Angola and South Africa, for example, the anti-elite idea of the artist as a “cultural worker” helping to forge the newly ascendant identity of the nation has until recently provided a counter-position to avant-garde internationalism. In the comments that follow, a few artists, critics, and scholars address these issues. Readers are encouraged to respond.

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TRANS/NATIONALISM IN ANGOLA

Can national unity exist as an artistic theme within today's global avant-garde? Is nationalist art best expressed through the technology that asserts a nation's innovative capacity, or is it best expressed through the emulation of revolution-era two-dimensional art?

Recently the first Trienal de Luanda (2006–2007) figured Angolan nationalism with their “Lunda Tchokwe” project. Trienal participants scanned images for José Redinha's 1953 ethnography of Chokwe mural painting and then digitally removed Redinha's signature, which appears on each illustration in the volume. This was, according to Trienal organizers, essentially a collective artwork by a group of Angolan artists who participated in the Trienal. The statement that accompanies the Trienal explains that in addition to correcting the wrongs of Portuguese cultural colonialism, “Lunda Tchokwe” and the Trienal de Luanda assert Angola's creative capacity. The

images were printed for exhibition around the city of Luanda and displayed on the elaborate Trienal website (www.trienal-de-luanda.net). “Lunda Tchokwe” is overtly nationalist. But more importantly, its digital medium points to the Trienal's possession of the technological infrastructure that is so rare in Angola. Along with the Trienal's patrons, the medium of the “Lunda Tchokwe” project shows that funding opportunities for the arts in Angola are in the private sector; no longer can the state be the primary sponsor of “Angolan” art. As nationalist art still bites at the heels of the global avant-garde, I argue that the medium of an artwork, supported by “dense layering of economic and social history” (Krauss 2000:10), many times affects whether the work is interpreted as either nationalist or global. In other words, medium operates on the level of content when we talk about nationalist versus global art, evidenced today by the disparity between painting and so-called global media in large-scale exhibitions.

Chika Okeke-Agulu recently tied issues of patronage to the overall status of “art collecting in Africa” with regards to the selection of one collection to constitute the African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2007:4). During the 2007 Biennale, critics scrutinized the profile of the collection's Angolan owner, Sindika Dokolo. The major issues are enumerated in *Artnet Magazine*, including Ben Davis's contention that Dokolo's substantial collection is tainted by his father's involvement with the Bank of Kinshasa during the Congo civil war (<http://www.artnet.de>).

At home the Dokolo collection contends with Angola's history of socialist support of the arts. The conflict came to a head when it was decided that the collection would be featured in the Trienal de Luanda. In an interview with the author in March 2006, Trienal director Fernando Alvim extolled the collection as an exciting creative development for postwar Angola. Some Angolan artists and critics are less convinced, suspicious about its funding sources. Artists in particular point to the gap in available art media as proof of inequities in curatorial selection and chances for visibility. In nations such as Angola, where the state increasingly forms partnerships with multinational ventures, funding sources for projects such as the Trienal de Luanda may conflict ideologically with nationalism. When African artists do have access to new media, the meaning of their work is inflected—at least in its reception—by the widespread ambivalence over multinational finance.

Despite the many local outreach projects of the Trienal and its stated nationalist aims, Angolan art critic Adriano Mixinge (2005) asks whether the Trienal's (primarily Alvim's) financial and curatorial practices are fit for a country where, since 1975 independence, art

production has ostensibly operated under the umbrella of the state. He draws an ideological contrast between the largely privately funded Trienal and the state-run União Nacional dos Artistas Plásticos (UNAP). Since Vitor Manuel “Viteix” Teixeira, Angola’s premier artist and a founding member of the UNAP, is featured in the Dokolo collection, we have to assume that Mixinge’s primary objections—like Okeke’s—are to the circumstances of Dokolo’s wealth.

And yet Mixinge suggests that the foreignness of the collection lies also in the curators’ preference for global media. He worries that the Trienal promotes “emerging artists” at the expense of exhibiting more-established Angolan artists such as António Ole. Mixinge disapproves of Alvim’s selection of artworks in new media because they are derivative and situated in the “non-space (Marc Auge)” of the global art scene. These criteria, he argues, dilute the “Angolanity” of the artwork. I myself observed a disjuncture between new media of the Trienal and the preponderance of two-dimensional art of the UNAP. A strong contingent of painters persists in emulating Viteix, incorporating Chokwe and other “Angolan” symbols into two-dimensional abstract images. Nationalism, especially when figured in painting, seems out of step with international exhibitions and collections. Though Okwui Enwezor highlighted “spectacular difference” in “Documenta 11” through disparate media (many developed precisely to conceptualize chaos and difference), many Angolan artists are skeptical about these media because they depend on opaque financial networks in order to be produced.

Unlike in Senegal and Nigeria, where artists have been open to “globalism” in their art and exhibitions, heterogeneity both as a curatorial theme and as an art practice chafes with many nationalist-minded Angolans who search for common visual symbols and not painful reminders of a fractured society.

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PAINTING, NATIONALISM, AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

Two issues raised by Delinda Collier that are central to Kasfir’s observations about the “(dis)placement of national art” are, first, Teixeira/Collier’s suggestion that—to put it in quasi-Senghorian terms—painting is Angolan, new media is global; second is the contrast Collier draws between global-minded and heterogeneity-accepting Senegalese and Nigerian artists and the nationalist-minded Angolans.

Sometime in 2001, a major controversy erupted in Nigerian art critical circles following the “New Energies” exhibition by students from the University of Nigeria, my alma mater.

The exhibition, hosted by the Goethe Institute, Lagos, was organized by Nsukka professor El Anatsui. Consisting of installations, video, and sculptures constructed from organic and synthetic materials sourced mostly from the local environment, the exhibition was different but not necessarily unprecedented (Olu Oguibe’s 1989 “Statements” exhibition at the Syrian Club, Lagos, comes to mind). In any case, critics of the show, in the tradition of conservative reaction against new/modernist art since the nineteenth century, charged that there was no “art” in the show. More pertinently, a few commentators from Nsukka and Lagos claimed, as have the Angolans Collier speaks about, that installation art was Western and hegemonic, while painting was the quintessential medium of contemporary Nigerian art. (It does not matter that the two most influential artists working in Nigeria today, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Anatsui, are not painters; see Okeke 2001, Ikwuemesi 2001).

This anti-“New Energies” criticism resulted from failure of the imagination and amnesia about the history of art on the part of critics and artists who want to claim painting as the medium for their (oft-misplaced) nationalism. In fact oil painting (since none of these artists/critics, as far as I know, refer to indigenous traditions of two-dimensional work) was imported from Europe and is also without doubt still the most *popular* but not necessarily the most critical global contemporary art medium. Moreover, there is nothing specifically Nigerian or Angolan about painting; artists select media—painting, sculpture, photography, film, installations, conceptual work, and technology-based media—depending on what direction their creative imagination, pedagogical heritage, and market forces move them. Leading from this, the crucial question is: What kinds of curricular programs subsist in the art schools? At Nsukka today, the sculpture program directed by Anatsui continuously produces students who scoff at the discourse of media specificity, not because they have been simplistically “transnationalized,” but because they look at their *local* environment and traditions of multimedia visual cultures and find that oil on canvas or plaster sculpture represent the most *alien* media, with far less to offer today’s active artistic imagination.

The connection between place of primary residence and “nationalism” vs. “transnationalism” is a fraught one. And debates about what medium belongs to one or the other are misguided, because ambitious contemporary artists *everywhere* are always seeking new ideas, techniques, media, processes, irrespective of their residence or ideological/political leanings. To bundle nationalism—painting—African residence is to misrecognize the important critical work in diverse media by artists—such as Dilomprizulike, William Kentridge, Antonio Olé, Pume, Amal Kenawy, Kofi Setorji,

and David Chirwa—who live respectively in Lagos, Johannesburg, Luanda, Kinshasa, Cairo, Accra, and Lusaka.

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MEDIUM, CONTENT, AND CONFLATION

Having written about contemporary artists who live on the African continent in both urban and rural settings as well as those who live in diaspora, I agree with Sidney Kasfir’s admonition against forgetting artists who are not hooked into the international artworld. That said, in order to make such a call, Kasfir constructs a dichotomy between the national and the transnational that obscures both the functioning of the art world and the common issues addressed by both contemporary African artists on the continent and those who live in the West. Delinda Collier’s commentary picks up on this dichotomy, exploring how it plays out in an Angolan context. It is this dichotomy between the national and the transnational and the connotations each author has made in underscoring the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the two poles that it is critical to explore.

In invoking the words of El Salahi as a means of demonstrating the importance of nation, Kasfir has conflated the ideological formation we know as the nation-state with diasporic longings for an ancestral home. El Salahi’s is a psychological longing, one that is part of exilic and diasporic experience. Along with the conflation of home and the national, Kasfir leaves the idea of a national art unexamined. Left unexamined and as a framing of her text, the issues articulated by artists must necessarily be seen within the framework of the state. While there are numerous examples where such is the case for artists who live on the continent as well as for those who do not, Kasfir’s text suggests that nation is a concern for all who stay and, furthermore, that nation is a concern for none who leave.

Following Rosalind Krauss’s work on William Kentridge (2000), Collier conflates medium and content. For Krauss, the ability of drawing to morph into content in Kentridge’s practice lies in the artist’s ability to turn drawing onto itself. Drawing’s reflexivity in Krauss’s analysis is vital for this transformation. In the case of Angola (and I would argue the same in the case of national art both in and out of Africa), medium is not content. As far as which medium serves as a language of a national art, I cannot think of a single case where a non-conservative medium has served such a role. In the Senegalese case, painting and textile designs were the medium through

which Senghor sought to invoke the visual in the construction of his nation. However, stemming from his familiarity with twentieth century art, there was never a distinction drawn between the national and the avant-garde.

At the end of the day, both Kasfir and Collier draw out tensions between here and there, home and away, and the national and transnational, and it is vital to explore these tensions in their messy and complicated intersections to further tease out the complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory positions that are as part and parcel of the field we call, perhaps clumsily, contemporary African art.

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AFRICAN HETEROGENEITY ON ITS OWN TERMS

Of course we should pay closer attention to artists who have remained behind in Africa. But why is this putative opposition between nation and global community still such a pressingly recurrent theme in the discussion of African, rather than any other kind of art? Clearly there is still a close structural association between Euro-American conceptions of race and citizenship, on the one hand, and the other forms of temporality reserved for Africa. It is, as Homi Bhabha put it, an enduring consequence of the Enlightenment ideal of Man that it depended on the historical “belatedness” of the black man elsewhere (1994:236–56).

Sidney Kasfir has staged a deliberately crude opposition between nationalism and globalization. She also has a very provocative nostalgia for the old world of post-independence African artists. The trouble is that this papers over the history of the combative relationship between artists and the state in Africa, a relationship that has often been troubled by condescension, by Stalinism, and by the patriarchal absurdity of old men demanding that young men and women make token, proto-modernist images in support of the emerging nation.

Let us have a proper discussion about hybridity in Africa itself. Let us also be fair to postcolonial public intellectuals. Enwezor, Oguibe, Salah Hassan, or Giyatri Spivak depend in part for their critical power on a mobilization of non-metropolitan discourses: In Spivak's case, her profound engagement with the debates around subaltern and peasant studies in South Asia has revolutionized the study of power elsewhere. Similarly, for many of the diasporic artists Kasfir has in mind, continued engagement with African locales and political cultures provides a means to engage the public cultures of the countries they inhabit. Sokari Douglas Camp is not someone who has fallen out of Kalabari tradition into the lapsed world of the European

avant-garde. Kalabari funerary sculpture, her father's death, the Delta oil wars, all provide a critical idiom to engage the complicity of the Blairite state with energy transnationals.

Perhaps the bigger issue is not the end of “the nation”, but of citizenship. Whenever you look closely at the long history of apparently bounded national traditions, those traditions dissolve across borders. The South Africa that Sidney Kasfir associates with a “freestanding artworld”—I agree with that characterization—drew its styles and critical idioms from an active engagement with the Harlem Renaissance, from global Black Consciousness, from Soviet realism and Cuban mural art learned in the military training camps, and so on. Outside of the conservative, object-based logic of African art collectors, there is very little to sustain notions of intrinsic national difference in contemporary African art.

But there is another kind of pressure towards regional identity and difference that goes unmentioned in this debate. As John and Jean Comaroff have argued (citation tk), while millennial capitalism encouraged the idea of transnational flows, in post-Soviet states and in the new South Africa this produced a hypostatized association between citizenship and autochthony. Because the nation was no longer an appropriate economic stage for neo-liberal economic adventures, it became necessary to fall back on simpler ideas of regional belonging. In many of these post-totalitarian states, the fact of your local birth became more important than the nature of your citizenship or rights. Ironically, therefore, the logic of place-based art curation and collection starts to mimic the logic of states under pressure of globalization: Citizens and artists are increasingly defined not as rights-bearing subjects of a nation, who may have come from elsewhere, but as ethnographic autochthons. This, in turn, mirrors the tactics of neo-liberal capitalism itself, with its new focus on places (rather than nations) as sites of investment. It thus echoes the desperate attempts on the part of people trying “to differentiate their place from other places . . . in order to capture or retain capital investment” (Harvey 1996:297).

So perhaps we have a debate after all. The question is not of “national” traditions betrayed by self-identified diasporic artists, but of the always-already hybrid nature of place-bound traditions in Africa. What is at the heart of the argument is the need to face the transnational influences on art-making within African cities like Kinshasa, Johannesburg, and Lagos, where a shuttling between styles and influences and an oscillation between high gallery and low tourist forms is the norm. This heterogeneity includes, of course, a comprehensive engagement with film, video, radio, and cellular telephone use that is more ubiquitous than in Pittsburgh or Prague.

Look by all means at the contemporary

African artist at home. When you do so, however, you are likely to find someone born in Kinshasa, now living in Harare, someone who is not a painter, and who is under threat of being expelled.

Ironically, in this exchange, we have settled on the example of Angola as a place where, according to Delinda Collier, painting holds its own as preferred medium through which to exemplify national unity. Some twelve years ago, a very different Angolan exhibition called “Memórias-Íntimas-Marcas” was curated by the selfsame Fernando Alvim discussed in Delinda Collier's response. That show brought together three artists bound to a conception of place more akin to the one I have been favouring: an Angola defined not by colonial borders or the foreign curator's interest in maintaining fictive peasant traditions, but by intense political work. In their separate ways, all three artists (a South African, a Cuban, and an Angolan) had been scarred by involvement with the war in that country. The common language they found referred extensively to the idea of scarring, scar tissue, and traumatic displacement as images for the reemerging state. As arbitrary as it sounds, this still seems to me more expressive of the habits of mind and influence in contemporary African art, amongst artists living on the continent, than faintly wistful attempts to resurrect the ghosts of past states and national programs.

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Notes

1 Adriano Mixinge, personal communication, March 2006.

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