

MORE OR LESS SLOW MOTIONS FOR NON-WESTERN ARTISTS IN SOME BIG SHOWS ...

Ramón Tío Bellido

I guess you can imagine how happy we are to be here with you all, after so many changes of dates, due to technical problems last spring and, most unluckily, to the civil unrest here, last November. Here we are then, at last – that is, nearly everyone we approached, when we started to organise this seminar is here today, and we hope we may look forward to some stimulating contributions and a lively debate.

The theme of this seminar is “Art Criticism and Curatorial Practices in Marginal Contexts”, and this clearly announces that we, in AICA, together with the majority of people we speak to, who are involved in promoting contemporary art, have to try and move things onto a new plane, and to try out, test and evaluate new methods that will enable us to establish a new kind of equilibrium to our activity. The situation that we can describe is that, over the last decade or so, contemporary art from Africa, as well as from other regions such as the Middle East, Asia and, to a lesser extent, Latin America, has now achieved a real visibility worldwide and a presence at almost all the major recurrent international arts events, including Documenta, the Venice Biennale and a host of similar events.

However, a number of complex and paradoxical questions immediately arise. To start with, we have to be sure what we mean by an “African” presence at these events, when we all know that Africa is an enormous continent, with a very large variety of different contexts, cultures and histories. Going on from there, we also have to tackle the distinctly delicate issue of who is likely to benefit from our interest in African art, and how. Much has been said about the role of the Diaspora, but much remains to be said about the returnees, who settle down and become established in the African countries from which they originate.

In the meantime, it has become increasingly clear that these questions, and the answers to them, must come from Africa itself, and from African citizens living and working there.

Nobody can deny that an enormous amount of work has been done in the Western world to bring about the current situation; and nobody can deny that – like it or not – individuals such as Jean-Hubert Martin and André Magnin, institutions such as inIVA and magazines such as *La Revue Noire* and *NKA*, have instigated and nurtured much of the current interest in Africa. But neither should we be allowed to forget that the majority of the principal international visual arts events takes place in the West. The few exceptions that we have to mention are the Dakar Biennial, the African Photography Encounters in Bamako and the Cairo Biennial, not to forget the abortive attempts at establishing the Johannesburg Biennial and, in terms of a straightforward exhibition, the outstandingly interesting *South meets West* in Accra, that then went on to the Bern Kunsthalle, in 1999-2000. (Please forgive me, for failing to mention any other examples that may have escaped my memory !).

In other words, we in AICA are trying, with the modest means at our disposal, to establish a platform for debate, similar to the one we organised in Dakar three years ago, and to offer a chance to as many colleagues as possible from this huge continent to share with us their own experiences and desires, and to speak freely about their problems or difficulties.

Among the points I should not forget to mention, it is our intention, in the relatively near future, to publish the proceedings of the Dakar Seminar and of the present and future events in this ongoing series, so that there will be no risk of forgetting, or ignoring, the sometimes embarrassing home truths that we are confronted with – embarrassing, because it is never very pleasant, always to be told about the same, rather depressing situations, that repeatedly make it

clear that without money, resources or effective policies, there can be no art schools, scarcely any universities where art is taught, no museums, no art galleries, nor anything much else ... and that nothing much can be done about this; embarrassing, too, because none of this is going to cause any surprise, and we all know it is impossible for an interest in art to exist, at any level, if the possibility simply does not exist, even to create any work, or to show the work that has been made. Above all, this is embarrassing, because we know that talking about “art” today simultaneously embroils us in an attempt to be very precise about the meaning of this word, now that globalism has gained the upper hand, just after the West had itself cut loose from the modernist paradigm and fallen prey to the uncertainties of the post-modernist age.

We cannot forget these realities, and we might do well, to remind ourselves very forcibly of this. The paths opened up to regions such as those we are here to talk about were abandoned by the Western world, once its own former social, economical and, of course, ideological values started to disappear or mutate, as if we had to accept for good that we were saying good-bye to a civilisation and all it stood for – and say good riddance to it, if it came to that !

Unless I am mistaken, what globalism was supposed to offer – and to correct – was nothing short of a redistribution of the entire imperialist system, giving to all those involved – the regions, countries, cities and other places capable for producing their own economic power – the freedom to take their own decisions and produce their own way of life, including, ideally, their own culture. UNESCO still referred to these countries as “developing”, though it is some time now since it resolved to discard that insulting neologism, “underdeveloped”. Of course, that was already something like a couple of decades ago, when the world seemed to be growing up peacefully, with the aid of what were (and are), supposedly, regarded as the most suitable models: democracy and pluralism. Alas, brutal economical changes and the rise of the newest bargaining procedures and ways of redistributing wealth in the richest countries have led to a crisis in society. At the same time, it has come as no big surprise that the collapse of communism – the end of this bizarre, but effective, dual between USSR and the rest of the western world – should also have contributed to eliminating any sense of a structured global ideology. At the same time, plenty of small groups have started to resort to localist and vernacular forms of assimilation tactics, whilst other forms of fanaticism have begun to play a highly dangerous role, worldwide.

The consequences of all this ? – Nothing, or virtually nothing of what was meant to placate the guilty conscience of the West has come to fruition. I cannot see, to date, that the social or economic situation in Africa has begun to improve; I cannot say, in all honesty, that I see any difference in the treatment meted out to the (non-)workers or not very welcome immigrants, in France, Germany, England, Spain and far too many other wealthy places...

Coming back to our subject, though, we can easily demonstrate that the art business has gone from strength to strength, not only in terms of the formulation of new policies for contemporary art collections, but most assuredly, in terms of radical changes and goals, as far as major exhibitions and events are concerned. I am not a sociologist, and in general I don't really like – or appreciate – the analyses that they and others are inclined to present, when talking about the role of art in the public domain. However, one has to admit that they have presented us with irrefutable evidence, whether we like it, or not. In the first place, this evidence can be measured by the numbers of visitors that have seen such and such an exhibition. I cannot recall these numbers exactly, but, just by way of example, I think everyone was astonished to learn that the recent Dada exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, in Paris, attracted some 500,000 visitors and that many people would be equally puzzled to be reminded that the Venice Biennale received no more than 250-300,000 visitors, on average, whilst the latest, somewhat abstruse, Documenta attracted an incredible 800,000 visitors. Looking at another, specific example, I guess that the very recent *Africa Remix* had some 120,000 – 130,000 visitors in Paris, though I don't know the figures for London and Düsseldorf, respectively.

There's no doubt about the upwards trend in art consumerism, and we should be very pleased about this, to the extent that we believe it to be a better way of teaching a wider public and enabling them to be better informed about, and involved with, contemporary art. Let's agree about this! Nevertheless, there is no doubt about the pressing need for us to experience something new, something different, and something unexpected. This all demands a very strong pressure for

renewing and reshaping the art that is placed on offer, in much the same way as happened in the areas of fashion, the theatre and the performing arts, in general. And this is why I always stress that the exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, opened the door to a whole range of non-western art, not merely from Africa, but from other parts of the world, as well.

Ever since then, everything seems to have speeded up – in our own field, at least – mainly through the agency of those two major events, Venice and Kassel, which we are about to discuss.

Put briefly, as announced in the programme, it is, of course, obvious that these two enormous, representative events have a great deal in common, even though their histories are very different. The Venice Biennale has registered all the upheavals of the modern age, and the epic history of the twentieth century can be read into its evolution, like an open book which records all the European wars, disasters and conflicts of the period. Up to the end of the Second World War, Venice was the stage on which were played out all the political changes and all the foreign policies that this Biennale was supposed to represent, and to show. The idea of the “national pavilions” dates back to the earliest days of the Biennale, but the presence among them of non-western pavilions – in the Giardini, at least – can only be traced back to the end of the 1940s; and even then, the only names to be added to the existing roll call were Argentina, Brazil, Lebanon and... Egypt. At the end of the Cold War this openness was emphasised, and some more pavilions were built in the '50s and '60s, at the same time as the Italian “national” pavilion (sic) was increasingly turned over to international displays entrusted to guest curators. In the early '90s, the number of venues for exhibitions was expanded, to take in the nearby Arsenale, where very new and recent work was supposed to be displayed, in contrast to the works displayed in the Giardini, which tended to be by artists who were better known ... Anyway, the point is that the Biennale expanded progressively, with the addition of new venues on each occasion, and an increasing number of so-called thematic exhibitions throughout the decade, or so, from the mid-'80s to the mid-'90s. Then there came about a further noticeable change, as increasing attention was paid, less to thematic or collective exhibitions than to regional and highly specific cultural events. The first signs of this change came with the arrival of Turkey and of the new countries to emerge from the break-down of the former USSR and of ex-Yugoslavia and the Balkans – no need to enumerate them here – and then, suddenly, the arrival of Africa, en bloc. I refer to the African arrival, advisedly, as a package, because I think it is very important to understand that showing artists from the entire continent as a package seemed to be the only way of giving them an identity, to distinguish it from the sharply defined national exhibitions that came from China, Taiwan, Korea, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and so on... So far, this has not really changed, and the only difference, if there is one, is that, for the Biennale of 2003, Gilane Tawadros was asked to introduce a special section devoted to contemporary African art – the difficulty, for her, being that, in the meantime, Harald Szeemann, in Venice, and Okwui Enwezor, in Kassel, had already stolen her thunder, by including individual African artists in their own mega-exhibitions. There was also, perhaps the additional factor that African artists did not have a separate pavilion or exhibition of their own at the last Venice Biennale, and that the interest which had been shown in Africa at other recent events seemed now to have been transferred to a very interesting and powerful show of artists from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kurdistan, Uzbekistan...), curated by our colleague Viktor Misiano. And that, surely, points to the change in emphasis now given to the even “newer” trends, epitomised by the states with newly emergent economies in Central Asia and, especially, China. Is it appropriate to suggest that, seen from this angle, Venice constitutes a kind of open stage for the presentation of the Western latest obsessions, that the focus of interest of the heavily entrenched “art world” shifts from one region to another, in turn, and that African’s “moment” may well, by now, have come and gone?

Looking at Documenta, and the hotly debated choice of Okwui Enwezor to curate the most recent edition of this, we may be tempted to draw the opposite conclusion. Documenta, which had been established in Germany at the end of a much-needed breathing space after the Second World War, was first established as a means for German artists to regain their prestige (or, at least, a presence) and once more to play a full part in all the controversies and debates of the West, and that were increasingly giving an audience and a presence to the USA, now that French culture and artistic influence had lost much of the power they had been able to exercise, prior to the conflict. Quite logically – though this is not the place to talk about these historical considerations

– everything has its price and, to be cynical, Germany understood that there was more to be won from playing the role of the guilty, defeated nation, following the trauma of the Second World War than that of the traitor, which France had had to play during this terrible period. The goal of Documenta, as the name itself made clear, was, and is, to try and make a critical assessment of the period of, first four, and now five, years that elapse between each edition of the event. For the first time, in 1997, the organisers of Documenta, being very punctilious in their approach, entrusted the role of Artistic Director to a woman, Catherine David – and to a woman, at that, who was not only not German, but Jewish ! Then came a still more radical territorial move, with the choice of an African curator, Okwui Enwezor, who was considered to be a Nigerian citizen and carried with him the whole burden of the intellectual Diaspora, for all that he had lived for a large part of this life in the United States.

I will not continue with detailing these events here, as I know our guests are going to speak about the significance of such choices, changes and decisions. However, I have taken the time to check the lists of artists invited to take part in the most recent editions for the Venice Biennale (since 2000) and in Documenta 11 (2002), and would like to give you a few facts and figures – not because I am a fanatic for statistics, but because I believe they give credence to the trend I have been trying to describe.

There were 125 artists at the last Documenta, which, as you will remember, was curated by Okwui Enwezor. Of these, 53 came from Europe or were working and living there, 34 from the US and Canada, 16 from Africa, 11 from Asia, 9 from Latin America, 4 from the Middle East and 1 only (really, only one?) from Australia. However, there was a quite large number of diasporic artists on this occasion, namely, 10 from Europe and 12 from the US and Canada. This means, in fact, that 7 out of 16 “African” artists were not living in Africa, 3 out of 6 were not living in Latin America, 3 out of 11 were no longer located in Asia, and, most strikingly, not a single one of the 4 artists from the Middle East was actually based there !

Looking at the last Venice Biennale and, more specifically, the two core shows curated by Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez, we find a very similar pattern: in the case of the first of these, *The Experience of Art*, which might be assumed to be more “classic” than the second, exactly one half of the 42 artists came from Europe, whilst the remaining 50 % was made up of 10 from the US and Canada, 5 from Africa (3 of them from the Diaspora) and 2 from Asia (both of them from the Diaspora). In the case of the second exhibition, *Always a little further*, which might be read as the mid-career retrospective of a curator who flaunted her attraction to non-western art, her very up-to-date social agenda and her concern with other current issues, such as gender, education, sexuality, and so on, exactly one half of the 58 invited artists were, again, from Europe and 11 from the US and Canada (7 of them from the Diaspora), 10 from Latin America, 7 from Asia and only 3 from Africa, if we discount the 2 “African” artists who came from quite different parts of the world.

If we want to look at other highly representational exhibitions in Venice that were devoted exclusively to African art, we have to go back to the year 2001, and to *Authentic, Ex-centric*, which was curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe (in other words, by the team from the magazine *NKA*), with the assistance of Emma Bedford. The organisers of this exhibition faced a host of logistical problems and, because they could only count on the solid support of the Prince Claus Fund, they were limited to the choice of 7 artists, of whom only 2 (Willem Boshoff and Bernie Searle) were actually living in Africa (South Africa, as it happens), at the time.

The 2003 Venice Biennale included the exhibition, *Fault Lines. Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, curated by Gilane Tawadros, which made the point even more forcefully, as 7 out of the 15 artists represented (9, if we include a couple more, who had died) actually came from outside Africa! (This is not a criticism – merely a statement of fact !). Moving on quickly, I am among those who believe that Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 was highly representative of the paradox we are experiencing today, which consists in having to accept a wider range of artistic opinions that quite legitimately appeal to us, on the grounds of their iconography, imagery and aesthetics, but that are also made to conform – as in Kassel – to quite academic, museological standards of display. I very much liked *Authentic, Ex-centric*, which was somehow discretely displayed in an typical, attractive, Venetian palazzo, where the interaction between the

artist's work and the domestic setting of a private apartment seemed rather effective, even if, as always, one could have criticised certain aspects of the selection. In contrast, I consider that the context provided for Gilane Tawadros' exhibit was really rather inappropriate – firstly, because this rather cursory display was swamped by the efforts of the other, rather trendy, curators of the adjacent sections, who had all been thrown together by the Artistic Director of the Biennale, Francesco Bonami, in an effort to mount a spectacular, consumerist event, involving as many artists as possible (more even than in the very suspect Biennale curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, in 1995) and, secondly, because Tawadros tried for the first time to show a number of not very well known artists in an international context, in a gesture which was very courageous, but difficult to pull off!

Again, I'm sorry about all these numbers, but I think they may serve as a good introduction to what we want to hear about, and discuss: when, where, and why are African artists invited to participate in these large, encyclopaedic events, such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale? What have been the results, here and there? Who stays, flees, vanishes, emigrates, returns? Who receives what kind of art education or training? And what are the goals and effects of a wide range of cultural policies? – These, and many more, are the kinds of questions that I anticipate we shall all wish to address, in the coming days.