

## CONTEMPORARY ART AND ARTISTS, CURATORS, CRITICS, ART HISTORIANS AND AUDIENCES.

Meskerem Assegued

### What is Art?

Out of curiosity, I decided to *google* the definition of art. Google is an Internet search engine designed by a few computer geeks – or, more appropriately, website designers – to help amateurs like me to find information on any subject. It's been a long time since I went to a library for research. The Internet is bombarded with a plethora of information and misinformation about anything and everything. I can *google* and see an endless amount of images of art from around the world. The word Google itself is a new word derived from Googol, a word created by Milton Sirota, a 9-year-old boy, to describe a number written as one followed by one hundred zeros. His mathematician uncle, Edward Kasner, wanted to know how a child would describe it. On the website, the letters G-o-o-g-l-e are graphically designed with primary colors, which in itself is a work of art. A few seconds after I googled "Define: art" all kinds of definitions appeared. At this point, I had to decide whether I should cut and paste a few of these definitions, make minor alterations to sentences and pretend they were my own or shut the whole thing down and give rein to the thoughts and recollections that came into my head. To cut a long story short I opted for the latter course, with some help from my previous writings.

Going back to the question, "What is art?": Defining art is very difficult. If we think of art as a sensory expression of any kind, which includes music, dance, poetry, sculpture and painting, we are dealing with performances and audiences. When individuals create any kind of expression, they intend to impress their audience. The audience can be either buyers or admirers. Commodity or prestige, the final sensory product is created for an audience. If the audience is not in their mind, the created expression remains only in their mind, in the absence of tangible evidence. For the sake of argument, let us say that art is a sensory expression of any kind, and let us focus only on visual art. In this case, most of us are artists. For example, when I wake up in the morning, I stand in front of my mirror and dress up for two reasons. One is to cover my body, to please the society that imposes written and unwritten laws, that say: "cover up your body by all means possible, regardless of the climate" (most of the imposers are self-appointed law enforcers). And the other is to impress my audience, who may be my colleagues or the general public. When I stand naked in front of my mirror, I consider my body a blank canvas and when as I put layers of clothing that are creatively designed, I feel as if I am composing a work of art. I make sure that there is balance in my choice of colours and styles against my hair and the colour of my skin. This is what I do almost every day, and I am sure I represent a majority. In this situation, I am both the artist and the art. Art can be as simple as this or as complicated as the design of my clothes, my shoes or my bottle of body lotion. Once we start viewing art in this context, we begin to appreciate the everyday, living art that we are surrounded with. People with their variety of attire, hairstyles and make-up; the buildings, the cars, the endlessly changing colours of the natural light and the landscape, all turn into a live contemporary art exhibition. The abstract or figurative works of art in galleries, museums, or wherever else, give the impression of mimicking the world around us, in miniature.

In general, art is a very difficult term to define. According to European art historians, it was only in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe that people started calling objects "art" and naming the individuals

who created them “artists”. In fact, the social status of visual artists was very low, up until the time of the Renaissance. It was the musicians and the poets who were thought to be intellectuals. This situation changed, when European artists started gaining knowledge of mathematical perspective, optics, geometry and anatomy. Imitating nature, the principle of light and shade, modelling forms to make images appear three-dimensional, and using linear perspective, placed visual artists on a par with intellectuals. The public’s respect for artists and their work increased dramatically. In fact, artists began calling themselves “grazia”, referring to the divinely inspired genius embodied in their works of art. Then came modern art, rejecting history and obsessed with contemporary structure, substance, science and technology, as well as spirituality. This concept of modern art lasted for one hundred years from 1870 to 1970.

Towards the end of this period, however, a new era of artistic thinking began. Artists started to reject the formal standards of art education. The idea of “art for art’s sake” emerged. Artists began to assert their freedom, not merely from the rules of art, but from a public that demanded meaning and purpose in art. This situation made the rich, who had historically supported the arts, uncomfortable. Consequently, “art for art’s sake” gave life to critics and art historians who concentrated primarily on formal issues. Their discussions focused primarily on the composition, style, colour, line, shape, time, space and perspective of a work of art.

For centuries, those who confess to having any kind of knowledge about art have been trying to define it and give it a concrete meaning. However, the nature of art has prevented this. It changes continuously, in defiance of any attempt at definition. Therefore, art and, in particular, contemporary art, is something that depicts the moment that the artist is living in. As time changes, so does the definition of art.

### **Who are the Contemporary Artists, Art Curators, Critics, Art Historians and Audience?**

Throughout history, humans have been creating images to please the eye, to document the moment, to stimulate the mind, visually to express inexplicable internal feelings or to influence others and to convey a certain point of view. Prehistoric cave art, which is found around the world in places as far apart as Australia, Zimbabwe, France, India, Spain, the Sahara Desert, Ethiopia and South Africa, tells us how the urge to give visual expression to our inner feelings is an essential part of human nature. According to archaeologists and physical anthropologists, some of this cave art, such as that found in Blombos Cave, on the Cape shore of the Indian Ocean in South Africa, was probably created over 70,000 years ago, during the Upper Paleolithic period. In fact, decorative jewellery was also found in these caves, indicating the progressive and highly sophisticated minds of prehistoric humans. These cave artists gave us a window, through which we can catch a glimpse of their lives, through their art. Most of this art is a depiction of their surroundings and animal and human activities. The expressions of the figures are both realistic and abstract. The movement of the brush-strokes, lines and vibrant colours, and the accuracy of the figurative images, which extends to the internal organs and anatomical figures, as well as the abstract expressions and geometric designs, reveal the artists’ keen observations and deep analysis of their environment. The stable temperature of the caves, and the fact that they remained undiscovered by modern humans until 150 years ago, have played their part, in preserving the art. If the cave artists were able to create a plethora of artworks deep in the bowels of the earth, with the aid of minimal sources of light, it is not hard to imagine the beautiful art they must have created in the open fields, with all the light sources nature could provide. Unfortunately, the works of art they created in the open air have disintegrated over the years, as a result of human interference and continual changes to the environment.

From the earliest cave artists onwards, human society has always been associated with creative, ‘aesthetic’ art. There is not one society in the world, in which this art is not present, in one form or another. Sometimes, art is expressed in body painting, which covers the entire body with symbolic or aesthetic designs, or in modern facial make-up and nail painting. Decorations on various parts of the

body, from the all-over tattoo to the merest mark on a single spot, may all be viewed as artistic expression. Most monumental sculptures around the world, dating back thousands of years, are artistically designed, to give artistic expression to their time. Many of the 'Wonders of the World' – the pyramids, temples, palaces and sculptures of Egypt, Sudan and Mexico, the great walls of Zimbabwe, the intricate sculptures and temples of Hindus and Buddhists in South Asia, the perfect imitations of the human figure, in Greece and Rome, and many other places around the world – were directly commissioned by the state. They reflect the power and ideas that the state wanted to transmit to the people. Other monumental works were commissioned by the religious authorities, either to maintain a hold on their existing followers, or to attract new ones. In a few cases, however, independent artists broke new ground and employed unconventional or unexpected materials. These artists have been small in number, but exceptionally influential. Documenting the history of individual artists and their findings is a relatively new concept. We have no knowledge of the first prehistoric cave artist. The original stone sculptors of Egypt, India and Mexico, the architects of the great walls of Zimbabwe and the Makonde carvers of East Africa, will never be known, as individuals. We are left with assumption that these artists may have been the ancient goddesses and gods of their respective cultures.

The individual artists of our own time are different. We live in a world, in which we are constantly bombarded with a barrage of information. Our age is known as the "Information Era". We have nowhere to hide. The issue of privacy has become redundant. Still and motion cameras (camcorders) can be as small as a fingernail. Mobile phones come with camcorders, through which a person talking on a phone can also take photos or videos. A person's identity can be easily googled, especially if they have anything remotely to do with exercising a public function. It is like Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*. The nature of art and artists is closely related to the public. Once known, the artist cannot escape. The attention and value given to known contemporary arts and artists is immense. This reality has given birth to a new breed of contemporary artists. The arts are no longer heavily dominated by the power of the state or religion, but by art institutions and finance. On the one hand, artists are encouraged by their institutions freely to express their feelings, without any kind of restraint. On the other hand, the institutions decide what art is, and who the artists should be. This puts the artists of our own time in a dilemma. If they cannot penetrate the tight network of the art community, both nationally and internationally, their chance of survival is limited. The museums, galleries, educational institutions and media always cast their shadow over artists and their work and create an atmosphere of nervousness and uncertainty. Living under this pressure, many artists experience a form of anguish, which finds an outlet in trying to create something original and provocative. They want to attract the attention of the museums, galleries, curators, critics, historians and the public, and, ultimately, it is the cash they are afterwards. Classic examples of this are the art of the Makonde in East Africa and the Magic Scrolls in Ethiopia.

The Makondes, found in Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya, are some of the most highly skilled and intellectual artists in Africa. From time immemorial, these artists have carved very intricate and sophisticated sculptures from ebony. Once their art was exposed to colonial traders, they started producing carvings to satisfy their European clients. In fact, today, their largest source of income comes from tourists. Through this process, the freedom and originality of the art of the Makonde, that was once created for their specific spiritual needs, has been drastically reduced. This has also been devastating for the forests, from which the ebony comes. Today, finding an original Makonde work of art is like finding a needle in a haystack. Most artists of our time are confronted with the same situation as the Makonde artists. Throughout the world, the walls of galleries, hotels and restaurants are adorned with paintings similar to European and American masters, such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, George Braque, Piet Mondrian, Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt and William de Kooning, to name but a few. They are expected to be original, but the market demands familiar-looking paintings that would-be purchasers might have seen in museums, or in their friends' homes. Artists who dare to challenge this have to be "discovered" by a known curator, or by a gallery or museum that is willing to take risks. Otherwise, they have to make what the audience wants to buy.

For the most part, curators are interested in artists who have already gained recognition. Taking a risk on an unknown artist can become a financial, not to mention a critical, disaster. There are different types of curator, such as the ones who work as administrators in existing art institutions, those who curate in their own galleries, and those who are independent. The administrative curators usually hire young independent curators and take the credit for their work or, in other cases, claim a share in it. With few exceptions, these hired curators have the administrative skills and technical know-how to make a decent job of displaying the works, but have little interest in the art itself. However, there are also those who study, analyse and write about the arts and the artists and have the skill to display works thematically, and make them easily comprehensible to the audience. These curators are rare, and most of them work for large art institutions. Independent curators vary widely, from one to another, and are often successful. For the most part, they are unpredictable, take risks, push limits and have a tendency to make up their own rules, as they go along. They are not easy to pin down, so they can be a nightmare for art critics. Sometimes they take on the different roles of artist, curator, critic and administrator, all at once. An example of this is Okwui Enwezor. Educated as a political scientist, Enwezor is considered to be one of the leading curators, and an expert in African art of today. Damien Hirst is one of the most controversial artists today. He conceived, organised and curated *Freeze* (1988), which was widely acclaimed at the time, in Britain. Another contentious artist is David Hammons, who organised an exhibition with the title, *Concerto in Black and Blue*. Visitors to this walked into the pitch black rooms of the Ace Gallery in New York, holding small blue lights that had to be pressed hard to be switched on, and used to illuminate the empty walls – thereby creating what might be termed the individual works of art. Hammons came to Ethiopia and staged a similar exhibition with the title, *Divine Light*, at Zoma Contemporary Art Center.

In the Western art world, the people most feared by artists and curators are the art critics. They have the power to give life to, or destroy, the professions of the artists and curators. They usually focus on artists who are already recognised by major museums, galleries or other institutions. In fact, most critics echo what others have already said. The audience depends heavily on their opinions. At many art openings in the West, it is common to hear the audience repeating their opinions, as if they have come to see the art through the eyes of the critics. In most of Africa, where there are no critics, the audience makes its own assessment. Every now and then, newspapers write about a given exhibition. Most journalists, who have little knowledge about art, make positive comments or interview the artist, in an attempt to encourage the development of the arts. In contrast to the West, where hundreds of exhibitions are regularly attended by thousands of visitors, in Africa, there are always a few people who can be seen at nearly every exhibition. If three exhibitions open at the same time, two will share the audience and one is bound to be empty. Although healthy art criticism is a necessary feature for countries that are striving to adapt to western lifestyles, it is also necessary for people to have some understanding of art movements within their historical context.

In most of Africa, the traditional art that was once an integral part of society is vanishing. For instance, there are two art schools in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia: one is public, and the other private. They both mainly teach Eurocentric social realism. The artists, for the most part, work in figurative or semi-figurative styles, deriving from this social realist idiom and create images reflecting economic hardship, emotional strain, and grim and degrading situations. For the last ten years, many young artists have focused on 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century European art. One can easily identify Klimt, Schiele, Picasso, de Kooning or Munch in their compositions. This fashion for imitating the compositions and stylistic features of well-known Western artists is prevalent in many parts of Eastern and Western Europe, as well as North and South America. Critics play an important role in this. Their informed observation and analysis can challenge, or contribute to, exciting and original developments. However, a critic can cause untold damage, if he or she merely repeats something that has already been said or expresses a negative opinion about an artist's work, without taking into account the realities of the situation they are working in. Art historians play a significant

role, in documenting work and educating the public. They are important for the development of artists, curators, critics and the audience.

### **Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art, 2004**

By way of a footnote, I would like to add a few comments on my experience, as one of the six members of the selection committee for the 2004 Dak'Art Biennial. The other members came from Canada, France, South Africa, Austria and Cameroon. Over 350 African artists had each submitted, on average, five examples of their work – totalling around 1750 works, in all. Members of the committee came from diverse backgrounds. My expectation was that the coming together of five individuals, with totally different viewpoints, would provoke a lively debate about the large variety of art we had to choose from. The reality, however, was different. We all ended up discussing the style, movement, emotional expression and techniques of the art, as if we were all products of the same school of thought. In truth, we were. We all came with our own preconceived notions of what art was, or should be. In keeping with the latest trends and popular themes inspired by the major Western art events, such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta 11, we selected several video art pieces and installations. Three- or two-dimensional works of art, such as sculptures, textiles and paintings, that were readily to hand and represented the contemporary realities of Africa, were rarely selected.

The professional backgrounds of the selectors included those of art producer, director, independent and institutional curator, art critic, art historian and anthropologist. The governments of Senegal and France, as well as numerous national and international organisations, heavily funded the Biennial. The costs were immense. The major players in the Biennial were the curator, the members of the selection committee and the African artists who had been selected. The curator was paid, systematically and thematically to display the selected works of art, by category, in a certain order. The Biennial covered transport, food and lodging for the members of the selection committee and the selected artists. A catalogue was published, with articles written by some members of the selection committee. The Biennial also helped to organise exhibitions at a variety of different locations in Dakar, under the general heading of the “Off” Biennial. This provided venues for emerging and well-known curators and artists from around the world.

The other major participants in the Biennial were the public. Most were either members of the international art community or tourists. From my observation, very few of the locals were interested enough to come and see the art exhibitions. Aided by the warm weather, the Biennial was a welcome event for the traders in the open-air markets, who beautifully displayed the arts of the ordinary people on the streets. The atmosphere was festive, as the international visitors spent their money on trinkets. Taxi drivers and tour guides did great business, as did hotels, restaurants and evening bars. For the general public, the Biennial was one of the many public activities that they had only seen on television. The international artists, critics, historians, curators, journalists and gallerists took full advantage of the opportunity to network.