

# From the Editor

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The role exhibitions have played in the growth of contemporary African art as a field within the discipline of art history, and as an important part of the global contemporary art is, undoubtedly, immense. And the reason for this is not far fetched. When properly conceived, art exhibitions provide unique opportunities to engage with important questions, issues, or debates pertinent to our understanding of, or approach to, the work of one individual or that of a group of artists. In the field of contemporary art, perhaps more so than in other fields of art history, exhibitions constitute primary sites and processes of knowledge production in the sense that, apart from the critical import of the conceptual problems motivating show, they make art works available to their established and potential critical and popular spectatorships and thus insert the art, regardless of the curator's intentions, into new discursive horizons in which knowledge is propagated, contested, and reevaluated. In a sense then, one might argue that no other form of critical practice equals art exhibitions and curatorial practices in reifying and insinuating an emergent field into the consciousness of the art world. *Nka* has, from the onset, kept abreast with exhibitionary practices in the field of contemporary African art, and the need to examine and debate crucial issues pertinent to international exhibitions of African artists led on the one hand to our decision to convene an unprecedented roundtable discussion by some of the leading figures in the field, and on the other to feature essays focusing on some of the key exhibitions of the past few years. As readers of the roundtable will notice, despite the incredibly rich, articulate ruminations by our panelists, several problems remain unexamined, and underlying tensions are apparent, all of which are indicative of the fraught nature of the field itself and the need for continuing discussions about methods, goals, tactics, structures, and politics underlying or implicated in contemporary African art exhibitions.

One subject I would like to see subjected to close examination in a future issue of *Nka*—I am sure we will work on this—is the rise of alternative spaces for showing ambitious, experimental, non-commercially viable yet daring work by artists inside the

African continent. (Let me admit that “alternative” here might be the wrong term, since the supposed “mainstream” spaces, with the exception of South Africa, either do not exist or are vastly inept and ill equipped to deal with this work, thus making the alternatives seem more like the only normative spaces for contemporary art. One might better call them “independent” to highlight the fact that they are not beholden to state patronage and bureaucracies, but instead are the result of work by motivated individuals who against great odds are committed to making a difference in their various art worlds). In the past few years we have seen important programs and events—art exhibitions, workshops, symposia, residencies, and artists projects—organized by L'Appartement 22 in Rabat, Rashid Diab Art Centre in Khartoum, Cairo's Townhouse Gallery, and most recently the resuscitated Artists' Alliance, Accra, and the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos. There are of course many others in various parts of the continent. What these modest yet enterprising, non-profit institutions have done is to make it possible once again for exciting and experimental work by local and international artists never seen in normative art museums and galleries available to local spectatorships; in a way, these initiatives are reminiscent of the now legendary Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan, Enugu and Oshogbo, and the Chemchemi Cultural Centre in Nairobi of the 1960s. These centers, for the most part, answer to the longstanding need for suitable spaces and facilities for display of and conversation about work involving new media and challenging formats many artists have now embraced but with little or no opportunity of showing their local spectatorships, until now. The success of these centers will depend on, apart from the sustained enthusiasm of their founders, an effective exploitation of the resources of the internet, networking with colleagues inside and outside the continent, maintaining the trust of artists and patrons, and, more important, an unrelenting identification with the most ambitious, critical work available in their different spheres of operation. In any case, I am convinced that Africa's meaningful participation and presence in the global contemporary art scene and associated critical networks will depend on the success of these and similar new initiatives within the continent.

However, one area that neither these new centers nor the otherwise mainstream art institutions, where they exist, are grossly disadvantaged is production and circulation of major (some would say

“blockbuster”) thematic or survey exhibitions, which despite their usual controversial aspects, play important roles in asserting the place and significance of a given field in the contemporary art world. Think of the effect of *Africa Explores* and *The Short Century* on the state of our knowledge! More than anything, the absence of such shows within the continent point to the sobering reality of Africa’s fragile economies; indeed we are reminded of the symbiotic, if uncomfortable, relationship between art and money, between the big shows and massive capital of the sorts hardly available in the continent’s cash strapped economies. While we continue to expect more of these kinds of exhibitions, even if they only manage to circulate outside the continent, the big events inside Africa, chiefly the Dakar and Bamako biennials (and Cairo to a lesser extent, because of its continuation of the national pavilion model, with the resulting exclusion of artists from many African countries), and the newly established Trienal de Luanda and Doual’Art, deserve support for creating important international platforms for circulating significant work by artists within and outside the continent. Moreover, the premature death of the Johannesburg Biennale, despite its tremendous promise, and the stunning implosion of what was to be Cape Town’s *Transcape* recently, highlights the difficulty of establishing and sustaining major biennials generally but especially within the often debilitating sociopolitical and economic contexts of contemporary Africa.

Let me conclude with some thoughts on the challenges facing contemporary African art in the international art world, particularly in the aftermath of the controversies surrounding the African pavilion at last year’s 52nd Venice Biennale. I am concerned less with the merits or otherwise of the exhibition selected for the pavilion, and more with the critical and political contexts in which shows like that are unwittingly enmeshed once they enter the international terrain. I recall that one of the more alluring arguments made by director of the international section of the Biennale, Robert Storr, was that his African pavilion was the starting of a surefire plan to make the African pavilion a permanent feature in Venice. As it turned out, however, even Storr himself eventually acknowledged the impossibility of a vision such as his, simply because the structure of Venice does not allow for the kind of token pavilion Storr might have intended. Was this naiveté or pure hubris? We will never know. But as critics of his plan knew all along, pavilions in Venice cannot sur-

vive on the goodwill of a director of one edition of the Biennale; rather it must be backed and sustained by an *interested party*—usually a national or regional cultural agency—that pays for the space and organizes each biennial outing in line with its given mandate. In other words, there is no easy route, no thoughtless missionary interventionism or quick fix solution, to Africa’s permanent or sustainable representation in Venice and other biennials with national pavilions, short of an improbable decision on the part of the governments of African countries to—as Egypt did decades ago—establish their own national pavilions. Which is why, regardless of what might be its shortcomings, the Africa-in-Venice initiative of the Forum for African Arts, with its long term plan of establishing a physical space dedicated to African artists—a pavilion in the real sense—in Venice presented and still presents the best opportunity for continued, *significant* African presence in Venice.

But there was something else at play. For those who have followed the continuing exchange between Storr and my colleague Okwui Enwezor in the pages of *Artforum*, it ought to be obvious that there was nothing innocent or indisputably altruistic about Storr’s attempt to hijack or elide the proven and important work of the Forum for African Arts, particularly in his bold assertion of his role as legislator for African artists and curators on the continent who have supposedly fallen victim to the hegemony of their compatriots living in the west; and this from someone who until his stint in Venice, and despite a long curatorial career, could not be counted among the many western curators and critics with longstanding interest in and support of work by African artists. Now that the 52nd Biennale has come and gone, we are thus left with the question of how and to what extent the controversies surrounding African participation in it, or the actions of those involved in the debate, have advanced and will continue to be of significant benefit to contemporary African art, or create enabling structures, networks, platforms for the work of artists living inside and outside the continent. Beyond the 52nd Biennale, the work of sustaining the presence of contemporary African artists in the major international circuits must continue as previously with less vaunts and more reliable and sustainable commitment to the challenges and tasks ahead. That—and I am quite sure about this—is how the modest gains made thus far were achieved in the first instance.