Comment

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In my response, I intend to discuss what the effect of my being appointed to curate the South African section of the exhibition after the demise of the apartheid system of government.

The unifying of the South African section with some of the continent's fellow participants. The discourse between the West and Africa often constitutes a minefield of cross wire contestation of its material culture and artistic production. The lack of economic independence, infrastructure and related resources often makes it easier for a foreign curator to ream the continent like a trophy hunter on safari than it is for a local curator to do likewise in their country of birth. It is not surprising therefore to realize why the concept of the exhibition emanated from the organizers of *Africa 95* rather than from the artists themselves.

I had always been eager and fascinated by legends of African art in all its manifestations. We appear in Africa to be more conversant with European and American art movements and trends than we are with our own history. The name Picasso sounds more familiar in Africa than say Uche Okeke or Gerard Sekoto. The legend of Leopold Senghor, the former president of Senegal who also initiated the concept of negritude and subsequently convened a negritude arts festival in Dakar in 1966, an initiative which was followed by the Nigerian Festac festival which both brought together practitioners academies of African descent from the continent and all over the world to interrogate problems confronting Black African artistic practice.

These and other similar smaller events became signposts of the future direction of artistic expression. I have always been of the opinion that is only by speaking through collective voice that artists can begin to attract the attention they deserve as well as lending dignity to their practice and ideals. The installation of the first democratically elected government in South Africa and the monumental presence of Nelson Mandela miraculously transformed the colony's polecat status to that of respectability. The cultural boycott and trade sanctions imposed by the United Nations because of the erstwhile government policy of racial discrimination were revoked after decades and South Africa was reunited with the international world. It is significant to note that all the other participating countries had gained their independence much earlier and South Africa was in essence celebrating its very first post apartheid government.

The Seven Stories exhibition was as such one of the major events which happened. In 1990 the then banned African National Congress Liberation Movements

cultural formation based in London convened an arts festival known as Zabalaza which means to struggle in Xhosa, in London to celebrate the release of Mandela and his first visit to London.

It is important here to note that artistic expression in South Africa has always been an integral aspect of the struggle for liberation. It is not surprising therefore, that David Elliot the then Director of the Oxford Museum of Modern Art had to consult with the cultural formation of the African National Congress in order to curate the *Art from South Africa* exhibition.

A condition he had to consider was that of working with a co-curator in South Africa. I was selected to work with David on that significant event. The advent of Africans provided me with the daunting challenge of being the first Black African curator to present an integrated South African exhibition. It is in this context that the *Seven Stories* exhibition was a milestone in allowing an authentic voice to represent the respective countries.

The initial meeting of all the curators representing their respective countries was convened by Clementine Deliss the head curator in order to outline the individual curators concepts. It was for me inconceivable that Ulli Beier could represent Nigeria, one of the largest countries in Africa. I learnt later that he was there only in an advisory capacity. Kenya was represented by Etale Sukuro. Ulli Beier was replaced by Chika Okeke now based in the United States. Wanjiku Nyachae, who though born in Kenya spent most of her time in London, curated both Kenya and Uganda's displays.

Salah Hassan, art historian and curator, became responsible for both Ethiopia and Sudan. Salah, though born in Sudan, is based in the United States.

It was evident that the organizational structure was in several respects flawed and what clearly come through was indiscretion, subterfuge and the lack of professional resolve. Nicodemus' observation that Clementine Deliss was an anthropologist rather than an art historian became evident in her later handling of the project. Anthropologists especially in Africa often tend to extend their role to encompass the visual arts. One of the largest collections of Black African expression in South Africa was initiated by Professor T. De Jager, an anthropologist at the University of Fort Hare. Fort Hare is a historic institution in Southern Africa due to the fact that it educated prominent leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Mugabe and Robert Sobukwe et al. Professor De Jager for many years before his retirement treated the collection as his personal property and it was not used as a teaching aid and to the faculty of fine art. He would only show it to his distinguished friends to entertain them.

The Senegal representative was an artist who had benefited from Leopold Senghor's team of presidency which established an artist village in Dakar in the sixties. Leopold Senghor was a model leader who was himself a poet who encouraged and promoted the arts at government level. The Senegalese display was in essence

dominated by the work of one artist who projected himself as the embodiment of Senegalese culture at the expense of a collective voice.

As mentioned earlier, it would appear as if the authentic representation of some of the countries was by proxy rather than representatives who had researched the selection from each individual country. It would also appear that Ethiopia and Sudan were not represented by curators living in the respective countries. There appears to have been considerable adlibbing along the way which denied artists within specific countries the opportunity to be adequately represented.

The salient question is why these countries were denied a voice rather than be mimicked with odds and ends from private collections. Why were these countries not personally visited by the head curator?

The experience and knowledge I had acquired working with David Elliott on the *Art from South Africa* Exhibition became an asset when I curated the South African Section. The challenge of negotiating the acquisition of work from various collections was not as insurmountable as I had imagined on the contrary. I received support from some of the most unexpected quarters. Ironically one of the most important pieces of the exhibition was in the Fort Hare collection.

I received a brute shock when the director of the Cultural Studies Department sternly refused to release the work until I had to enlist the help of the Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, Catherine Lampert. I was also inundated with phone calls from artists from different cultural backgrounds who under normal circumstances would never have dreamt of phoning a black African colleague or curator before.

The reluctance by critics and art historians based in the capital centers of Europe and the United States to acknowledge art from Africa as modern or contemporary is to say the least illogical in its contradiction, when considering that the modern African state is a fact of life acknowledged by world bodies and world markets. This recalls to mind how the erstwhile apartheid system of government referred to Black African communities in various euphemistic terms but that of their origin. Nicodemus refers to this reluctance when she cites Professor Uche Okeke's objection to the term transitional being employed to define African art expression today.

In South Africa the category came about as a result of a groundbreaking exhibition curated by Ricky Burnett sponsored by the BMW German motor company. The work in the exhibition included wood carvings from the Venda area of the northern province which were seen for the first time in the BMW exhibition which toured Germany. Some of the mainstream galleries also introduced a transitional component in their gallery practice. The transitional category soon became a discriminatory vehicle for separating neo primitive from mainstream expression.

I also not necessarily believe that presenting the story of a country in the form of an exhibition need necessarily assume a chronological format as Nicodemus seems to

suggest. It is evident each country will be bestowed with quintessential elements which might not be determined by its creative chronology as for instance its geographical location.

The *Seven Stories* exhibition concept had the potential to be radically different from previous African art projects. The potential of the concept in providing each section with an authentic voice was eroded by the head curator's patronizing attitude by paying lip service to this crucial element of identifying a voice rather than mimic the voice of each country. The opportunity was also lost to render the responsibility of each section to the rightful role players in each country. It is puppeteering exploits such as these and other recent initiatives which seek to deny African expression its rightful place in contemporary expression.

I sincerely believe that the dialogue we have had with our Japanese counterparts will not merely become a diary event in our era. The beginning of a network which will gradually spread through the continent in order to entrench our responsibility as custodians of our culture as well as its most fervent ambassadors. This has been a historic meeting of two cultures which only we can ensure will also help to change the course of our history.