

for the next five years. Although Kassel is the natural 'home' of Documenta, and will always be its central focus, there is also room for re-thinking it on a global scale. Documenta could come to mean more than a very big exhibition in a provincial German town, and on this showing based on a random and ill-considered selection of work, arbitrarily installed and messily presented. We could indeed conceive of Documenta more as a notion for an exhibition that is staged in several locations around the world – and not the usual ones either. A meme that infects various venues, some of which might be galleries, some of which might be public space, others that might be parts of the countryside or the urban environment. A Documenta that reflects the massive global changes which have occurred in society, economics, power and politics since the first Documenta was staged in 1955.

Documenta 12 took place in Kassel, Germany, from 16 June to 23 September 2007.

Belatedness All Over Again

The African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennial

Anthony Downey

The presence of an African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennial caused a flurry of excitement this year at what is an already over-excitable and occasionally self-satisfied bi-annual event. This level of excitement and critical response – alongside the fact that it would appear to be an earnest step towards establishing a permanent pavilion – could be put down to two things: first, the globally aware expectations of an art-going audience and, second, the demands placed upon curators to respond not only to these expectations but to the immanent range of artistic practices within Africa today.¹ This is to be largely commended and the inclusion of an African pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennial, however belated, is likewise to be applauded. Nonetheless, there are questions that need addressing before we all get too carried away. To begin with, there is the

slightly mystifying assumption that contemporary African cultural production can be somehow represented *in toto* as a geographical totality. Admittedly, the whole concept of the Venice Biennial is based around the centrepiece Giardini with its eclectic and more-often-than-not uneven collection of nationally defined pavilions. Nevertheless, Africa, needless to say, is a continent not a nation – and this despite a tendency to discursively portray it in culturally and historically homogenous terms. And whilst the demands and pitfalls of curating cultural diversity – or, to put it another way, differentiating differences – apply to all such geocentrically orientated shows, I would argue that there is more at stake in an exhibition that takes the continent of Africa as its conceptual starting point. Long since the site of the West's apparently irreconcilable (and consistently predicative) Other, any curatorial remit that represents Africa to a Western audience must avoid reducing African art to a homogenised form of spectacle. Furthermore, in an artworld that has become so indelibly globalised in all areas, the national, or indeed continental, set-up seems at best quaint and at worst reductively prescriptive. In terms of explanatory purchase, and in light of the historical homogenisation – in geographical, political, cultural and social terms – to which Africa is traditionally subject, it would seem both curatorially suspect and counter-productive to have a pavilion dedicated to one continent.

To add to this already compromised premise, and a source of much bemusement to many, is the fact that the first African pavilion is drawn from one individual's collection, namely the Sindika Dokolo African Collection of Contemporary Art based in Luanda, Angola. The original 'Check List' – the basis of the African pavilion – was curated by Simon Njami and the Angola-based artist Fernando Alvim and was thereafter submitted and selected by an international jury consisting of Meserem Assegued, Ekow Eshun, Lyle Ashton Harris, Kellie Jones and Bisi Silva, the jury in turn being chaired by the Biennial's director Robert Storr. To draw on one collection, however good or extensive it might be, is a singularly problematic venture, hampering as it does – in an a priori fashion – any overview of African art derived from or developed outside the collection itself. Add to this the fact that the collection, a private concern to date, is further 'authorised' by its inclusion – and therefore partial no doubt to an accrual in economic value – and we enter into an ethical minefield that seems, to my mind at least, unavoidable in the context. We could nonetheless ameliorate these misgivings through reference to the inevitable expediencies that surround the Biennial. Selecting an already curated collection, bearing in mind the costs of transport and the exigencies of time, could be seen to be a good

idea, nowhere more so than when viewed in the highly pressurised and gargantuan context of the Venice Biennial. In this instance, a collection was better than nothing at all. And at this point, after raising such caveats, I could finally move on to discuss the merits or pitfalls of such a collection, if it were not for the fact that the collection itself and its owner – specifically the source of the latter’s wealth – have both been the object of inquiry and allegation to date.² Whilst it is not necessarily the place to rehearse these allegations, it suffices to note that such allegations have been raised in the context of critical responses to the show.³ And this, to put it mildly, is downright disheartening. Given the West’s condescending and ultimately self-serving view of an innate and historically prevalent form of African corruption (that old racist slander), the very fact that the first African Pavilion should be tainted with such allegations, substantiated or not, further feeds such perceptions; and it is frankly beyond me how such a state of affairs could have arisen at such a critical moment.

We could again (somewhat kindly in my opinion) resort to noting the pressure of putting on such a show, but it is a patently unsatisfactory state of affairs to contend with – critically or otherwise. I can only speculate on this – admittedly a critically suspect practice – but despite the fact that volume two of the Biennial’s catalogue foregrounded ‘Check List – Luanda Pop’ and Simon Njami’s essay, there are no images of the collection included therein. We have to await entrance to the actual Pavilion before we are handed further information on the show. Even the short guide seems oblivious to what works were actually going to be in the show, its two pages given over to a confused and surprisingly de-contextualised text and a few ‘pop’ inspired portraits of individuals as diverse as Frantz Fanon, Bob Marley, Steve Biko, Malcolm X and Mahatma Gandhi. At this point, I want to suggest that the belated appearance of Africa at the Biennial is mirrored in what would appear to be a series of somewhat belated decisions vis-à-vis the inclusion and content of the actual pavilion itself. This may appear critically harsh; nevertheless, from the very outset we seem to be on familiar and all too recognisably problematic ground – and we have yet to address that which we originally set out to do: what is the purpose of this pavilion (beyond, that is, its function as a recognition of the globalised concerns of both curators and audience); and what, moreover, is the curatorial rationale underwriting it?

Implicit in the latter question is a further one: does this show reflect contemporary African art – or, more pertinently, can a show that takes its cue from one collection ever hope to do so? Apart from an essay from Sindika Dokolo who curiously – and all the more so if we bear in mind the jury’s choice of

his collection – points out that the collection is ‘an African collection of contemporary art rather than a collection of contemporary African art’, the only other essay that attempts to contextualise the curatorial imperatives underwriting this show is one by Simon Njami. It is problematic, and again critically suspect on my behalf, to take an accompanying essay as the basis for a critique of a show, but when it is the only textual evidence of the reasoning behind such a show then it is not unreasonable to expect some sort of rationale to be contained therein. Such a statement could be further supported by the fact that the first thing we see upon entering the exhibition space is not an artwork but Njami’s essay writ large upon the wall. Having read this essay there and a number of times thereafter, I am still none the wiser as to why Njami chose these works; nor what restrictions, if any, were placed upon him when he was doing so; nor what point he and Alvim intended to make here. As I noted earlier, the inherent prescriptiveness encountered when you are limited to curating a collection results in nothing more than a curatorial gambit that shows off what is in the collection. As to how the works related to one another in the space itself, there was very little attempt to develop an argument or produce any critical purchase – through juxtaposition or otherwise – on the works contained therein. On one or two occasions, there were indeed themes to be had, as when we see Mounir Fatmi’s *Save Manhattan 03*, (2006/2007) – a collection of speakers with a light shining on them so as the shadow that they cast appears to be a representation of a pre-9/11 Manhattan – in the context of Paul D Miller’s (aka DJ Spooky) *New York is now* (2006), the latter some found footage of New York in what appears to be the 1920s. Splicing through our view of these works was Kiluanji Kia Henda’s *Ngola Bar* (2000), a triptych of photographs with the words ‘pop’ and ‘Luanda’ appearing on the two outer images. Placed as it was between Fatmi and Miller’s work, it seemed to advert to that other ‘modernity’: the (post)modernity of a fragmented, incomplete and (post)colonised Africa. However, even this obvious visual affiliation could be circumstantial, and in other parts the curation was just plain crass as when we are presented with a 3 x 4 cm portrait by Chris Ofili sandwiched between two 285 x 285 cm paintings by the Spanish artist Miquel Barceló.

As to why Barceló, and elsewhere Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, were included (or, for that matter, the Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar and Haitian-born Mario Benjamin), I can only speculate. At worst, as in the case of Warhol’s 1978 portrait of Muhammad Ali, the reference could be that the American boxer was of African descent, as was Basquiat. Is this a reflection of Dokolo’s statement



Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Ngola Bar*, 2006, triptych, C-prints on aluminium, 200 x 140 cm. Courtesy Sindika Dokolo African Collection of Contemporary Art

that the collection is one of contemporary art and not contemporary African art per se, and if so why was it chosen as representative – if, indeed, it ever could be – of contemporary African art? As for Barceló, I am simply not so sure why he was included and the accompanying essay does little to reassure me, consisting as it does of a series of time-worn critical tropes and some ill-thought-through theoretical throat-clearing about blackness as metaphor. Again, at best, this text is confused; at worst, it is downright problematic if not heuristically dangerous. A few examples will suffice. In a half-hearted effort to give us some reasoning, or even direct us towards a starting point for this show, Njami suggests that the ‘word “black” needs to be given a metaphorical value, considering it the password of those who Fanon, once again, had defined as “the damned of the earth”’.⁴ I had to read this sentence a couple of times before its gravity dawned on me: if ‘black’ is given a metaphorical value – wherein which a word, phrase or figure of speech designating one thing is used to designate another – are we not merely repeating, albeit with a different stated purpose in mind, the discursive trope (alongside the attendant use of

metonymy and synecdoche) that colonialism employed to signify all sorts of inadequacies?⁵ Of course, this could be seen as an empowerment of the term itself and an inversion of its metaphorical resonance and weight within colonial discourse; but are we not merely reinstating a reciprocal form of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic that postcolonial theory has long since tried to avoid and think beyond? And if blackness can be metaphorical, what about whiteness? ‘Our aim’, Njami continues, ‘is not to go into a psychoanalysis of the ex-rulers, but to explore the mechanisms that, after political emancipation, will determine the intellectual emancipation of the “black” continent’.⁶ We are on all too familiar territory here, an arena where cultural production can only ever be seen through the prism of the political; a context within which African artists are *made to answer* or address African history and be political in a way that would not necessarily preface discussions of so-called ‘Western’ artists. Elsewhere, and writing with the need to arouse artistic and audience awareness in mind, Njami argues that:

This leads to the importance of finding a language suited to the expression of a world of sensations in harmony with a history that emerges in an original project. Not in an exhaustive demonstration of the mastery of new tools, but in *appropriating a message and an aesthetics that will be its vehicle.*⁷

To his credit, Njami does recognise the importance of the aesthetic (the actual effect of a work of art), but it is the ‘message’ (the political) that must inevitably be carried over by the aesthetic (the ‘vehicle’).⁸ It is genuinely wearying to have to point this out, but the tendency in any curatorial rationale towards an identitarian rubric based on political and intellectual ‘emancipation’ has the concomitant effect of over-determining cultural production, nowhere more so than when art is reduced to a politics of identity and history that further subjects it to the demands of cultural theory and identitarian politics. You may live and work in New York or London, but you will never – according to this logic – escape the historical past and the recursive logic of your birthplace. Secure in *the* default, prioritised Western identity – which is, in turn, firmly grounded in the othering of, *inter alia*, Africa – it would appear that whilst the West can afford the luxury of contingent identities, African artists are compelled to wear, if not the fixity, then the fixture of their national, political, social and artistic identities on their sleeves. But does this have to be the case, and do we need to shift emphasis here? I would suggest that rather than reading African art through the prism of the political, we (and by ‘we’ I mean art critics, curators and audiences alike) need to appeal to an expanded sense of the aesthetic in these works,



Yonamine, *The Best of the Best*, 2007, installation and video. Courtesy Sindika Dokolo African Collection of Contemporary Art

one that is ultimately responsive – but neither reducible nor answerable – to sociopolitical, historical and cultural concerns.

So, finally, what of the actual work on display here – and before it is observed that I have left that which is most important to the last, I want to note that this was intentional and mirrors all the issues above and the need to address them in advance. The work, that is to say, has become subject to the very things – be it political expediency or the economics of curation – that it should of necessity transcend. Suffice to say, there are inevitably many strong works here – and it would be frankly even more disturbing if there were not. Specifically, I am minded to mention Nástio Mosquito's *Mulher Fósforo* (2006), a poignant portrayal of what appears to be a transvestite sex-worker in a moment of disconsolate introspection; Ruth Sacks's *Don't Panic* (2005), a humorous and yet disturbingly Orwellian video of an aeroplane skywriting 'Don't Panic' in the sky above a by-now possibly panicking city; and Yonamine's *The best of the best* (2007), an installation with a video that explored the variety of cinematic influences through the small-scale billings announcing films from Europe, America and Africa alike. Loulou Cherinet's *White Woman* (2002) and Zoulikha Bouabdellah's *Dansons* (2003) both offered pertinent commentaries on cultural ambiguities and the aesthetics of filmmaking and editing. I would also note Yinka Shonibare's *How to blow up two heads at once* (2006), an installation that comprised two headless, Dutch-wax fabric clad 'gentlemen' demonstrating a visual tautology wherein two individuals

engage in mutually assured self-destruction by shooting one another simultaneously – which is undoubtedly far worse than shooting oneself in the foot(?). And it is perhaps with this latter sense of accident-prone behaviour and ill-considered strategies that we leave the African pavilion, an idea that was problematic to begin with and thereafter utterly compromised in all the belatedness of its inception, rhetoric and curatorial realisation. Perhaps this is what is most 'positive' about 'Check List – Luanda Pop': the fact that it was supposed to exist, albeit in a compromised form, as a signifier of belatedness – and therefore a visual counterweight to past absences – is reflected in its very composition and curatorial pitfalls. And this, put bluntly, is simply not good enough when we consider what is at stake in the broader context of African art, its curation, and ultimately its reception.⁹

NOTES

- 1 Although heralded as something of a first for the Venice Biennial, African art has been a focal point for previously curated shows that existed under its aegis. In 2001, Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan curated 'Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa in and out of Africa'. In 2003, the Biennale's then director Francesco Bonami selected Gilane Tawadros who then curated 'Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes'. For a review of the latter, see Anthony Downey, 'Contemporary African Art: Shifting Landscapes', *Third Text*, no 66, 2004, pp 91–6.
- 2 For a full account of these allegations, and links to further sources, see Ben Davis, 'Art and Corruption in Venice', available at: <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/news/artnetnews/armemews5-18-07.asp>, first published 23 February

2007. Davis reports that one artist, Barthelemy Toguo, apparently dropped out of 'Check List' as a result of the controversy. I would also direct readers to Sindika Dokolo's response, again on *Artnet*. See <http://www.artnet.com/magazines/news/artnetnews/artnetnews5-18-07.asp>, first published 18 May 2007. Original article now removed, Dokolo's response included at first address.

- 3 We could also note that the Sindika Dokolo collection is not exactly alone when it comes to the roster of Western collections that have long been the source of allegation and inquiry. However, such a defence seems at best pyrrhic and at worst disingenuous.
- 4 Simon Njami, 'Check List – Luanda Pop', in *Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2007, p 2
- 5 In the online version of this essay, Njami opts for 'black' rather than 'blackness': 'Let us start by pointing out that the term *black* does not refer to any particular colour. As Fanon would say later, it is all about expressing humanity. Just as in 1980s England the word *black* grouped into a single problematic all those who were not of British origin, including Greeks and Cypriots at one point, *black* should be read as a metaphor. Like the rallying cry of those whom Fanon (again) called *the damned of the earth*.' See <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/can/venezia/eng/2007/tou/nafrika/press-01.pdf>
- 6 Njami, *op cit*, p 2
- 7 *Ibid*, p 3, emphasis added.
- 8 Robert Storr's exhibition title, 'Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense' goes some way to addressing this dichotomisation and the relegation of the aesthetic to a one-sided Western-inclined art history, a reductive politics of identity, and the equally prescriptive exigencies of abbreviated forms of cultural theory.
- 9 I have explored these issues in depth elsewhere. See, for example, Anthony Downey, 'Curating Africa: Africa Remix and the Categorical Dilemma', *Wasafiri*, no 46, 2005, pp 47–55; and 'Critical Imperatives: Notes on Contemporary Art Criticism and African Cultural Production', *Wasafiri*, no 47, 2006, pp 39–48.

Africa at the 52nd Venice Biennale Exeunt Aesthetics and Critical Discourse

Christine Eyene

The first official 'African' Pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale has spilled so much ink in the months leading to its opening that, it would seem, there is much

more to write about the strings operating the 112-year-old institution than about the work exhibited. Between the intellectual wars waged by pro- and anti-Venice factions, the allegations made against the African collection and the manifesto-orientated exhibition, that which could have represented enlightened moments of reflection on current art practice in Africa and the diaspora instead wandered between spheres foreign to the visual idiom. Creative processes, contextualisation and exhibition display suffered from the haste to create what will be remembered as 'the first "African" Pavilion' in Venice.

Prior to the opening week, three texts by curators Fernando Alvim, Simon Njami and private collector Sindika Dokolo were circulated by the Pavilion press office, in an attempt to foreground the concept behind 'Check List – Luanda Pop'.¹ Two of them made vague statements about the exhibition being conceived as 'a manifesto for expression far from established trends or conventions' and as being 'a space for thought, confrontation, and proposal'. The vagueness lies in the fact that the essays 'Check List: A reflection on fifteen years of African contemporary art around the world', co-signed by Alvim and Njami, and 'The shock of being seen' authored by the latter, do not articulate fully that which they claim to posit. In their joint text, the curators found it necessary to revisit the emergence of contemporary African art, the first stages of which, according to them, seem to have been forgotten by all. They quoted a number of their projects, among them *Revue Noire*, described as the art magazine that 'instantly changed the way the world perceived African creation'(emphasis added); and 'Africa Remix', considered the peak point in the history of African art exhibitions; while Salah Hassan and Okwui Enwezor's experiences in Venice are reduced to mere contributions 'to sustaining the debate'. What this selective account of late twentieth-century African art history shows is a distinction – drawn incidentally along a colonial heritage – between the two factions considered custodians of ultimate knowledge in matter of contemporary African art.² It also reflects two different curatorial approaches. Whereas US-based curators have, in my view, always striven to provide an intellectually challenging art historical framework to their shows, 'Check List' fails to engage with what it describes as a 'crucial moment in the history of art'.

Historically, art manifestoes have always entailed a rupture in the form of revolutionary aesthetics or concepts; but what the exhibition aimed to achieve remains to be demonstrated. The unsubstantiated discourse, as far as art interpretation is concerned, is hidden behind an 'art speaks for itself' strategy. For Njami, this is a matter of appealing 'to the sense and senses'... '[t]o bodies and minds'.³ By