

Economics of national liberation in Venice and Basel

Okwui Enwezor's *All the World's Futures* appeared to herald a new era for African artists on the global stage. Unprecedented numbers of African and diasporan artists included in the main exhibition, unparalleled press, with headlines like "Why Africa is the buzz at this year's Venice Biennale"¹ and comments like:

"After this exhibition, any supposedly international contemporary art exhibition that does not include a reasonable number of African and black artists will look so small, and utterly narrow-minded."²

However, this year's *Viva Arte Viva!* demonstrated a return to business as usual – rather than a next step from the paradigm shift promised by Enwezor's exhibition.

So, despite almost a decade of celebration of African contemporary art in the international arena – a decade since the Africa Pavilion at Robert Storr's Venice Biennale – the number of African nations represented as part of the exhibition that claims to represent the world is still minimal. Only eight out of 54 in this edition (Seychelles, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Angola and Egypt).

How can we increase the participation by African states in this crucial global forum? This was the premise of and the key question posed by the African Art in Venice Forum launched during the previews for the 57th edition this May. However even more than articulating the need for presence, the discussions at the Forum highlighted the challenges across the board faced by art sectors on the continent; from infrastructure and building local markets to establishing strong local institutions and institutional collections to art education and opportunities for artists to succeed without needing to leave the continent, such as strong gallery systems and engaging ensuring that international engagement is done on the basis of peerhood and professional respect. So in the final analysis, one was left with a nagging question – whether national presence at Venice Biennale was necessarily most important.

The idea of national presentations is also being questioned more broadly, amid growing international and art world sentiment about the dangers of nationalism as a force of division and enmity. In the 57th edition of Venice Biennale, several "pavilions" pointed to alternative visions, among them the highly successful Diaspora and NSK pavilions as well as the Tunisian pavilion, which eschewed both nominating an individual artist or national theme with a pavilion of distributed kiosks issuing universal visas to all visitors. In the African context the Kenyan Pavilion also raised different but relevant issues of national representation and government involvement given the fact that in 2013 and 2015 Kenya's national participation was over-run by Chinese artists and in 2017 it succeeded – through the efforts of individual artists and curators – in spite of the government reneging on its promise of support.³ This success also confirms that artists can succeed in creating visibility, presence and

¹ By [Lauren Said-Moorhouse](#), for CNN Updated 1748 GMT (0148 HKT) June 29, 2015
<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/13/africa/africa-venice-biennale/index.html>

² Chika Okeke Agulu *ibid*

³ Kenya works a miracle to bring its exhibition to the Venice Biennale, **Pavilion organisers put on a show despite receiving no government money**, [CRISTINA RUIZ](#), 15 May 2017 *The Art Newspaper*

<http://theartnewspaper.com/news/kenya-works-a-miracle-to-overturn-venice-biennale-cancellation/>

making a statement with greater freedom of expression and less pressure to stay on message.

In “*Do the Venice Biennale national pavilions still impart special status?*”⁴ Salimata Diop and Liz Lydiate, observe that:

*“Only one African country, South Africa, has a permanent pavilion at the Biennale. Does this and the situation of other countries without permanent sites, still matter? Perhaps not. In 2015 El Anatsui, not showing in a national pavilion, became the recipient of the **Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement** of the 56th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia – All the World’s Futures.”*

Unequivocally, African participation in the global art community forum that is Venice Biennale is crucial. However to date, most advocacy for African national participation has heavily focused on socio-political merits of the exercise, its importance in redressing historical under-representation and need to make a statement. Nonetheless there are numerous modes of engaging with La Biennale of which national pavilions are only one. In order to identify what is the most relevant and meaningful mode of engagement it is essential to recognize the totality of the nature of the Venice Biennale and its role in the ecology of the international art world and the art market.

If we look at this year’s main exhibition *Viva Arte Viva!*, while many have commented on the sharp contrast in the number of African artists selected compared to the record numbers in *All the World’s Futures* few have recognized it as a symptom of the lack of robust economic foundations for support of African artists on the continent. At present, the Venice Biennale does not have independent funding, as a result major galleries, philanthropists and foundations bear the responsibility for funding the production and presentation costs of the main exhibition. Therefore dynamics of participation correlate with dynamics of financial establishment and despite curators’ protests of independence, the market plays a crucial role in Venice. Furthermore, “*No matter how hard its curators have tried, the biennale’s impact on the art market is notable: showing in Venice speeds up sales, gets artistic careers going, cranks up price levels and helps artists land a dealer ranked higher in the market’s hierarchy.*”

“As at art fairs, the top dealers are prevalent at the Biennale. In the main exhibition, “All the World’s Futures”, organised by Okwui Enwezor, 17 of the 136 artists are represented by six leading commercial galleries: Gagosian Gallery, David Zwirner, Pace, Marian Goodman Gallery, White Cube and Hauser & Wirth (four of these artists—Ellen Gallagher, Isa Genzken, Georg Baselitz and Andreas Gursky—are represented by more than one of these galleries).

*These galleries also extend their reach into the national pavilions..”*⁵

Given this entrenched infrastructure and relationship, it is evident that for Africa

⁴ The Venice Biennale and the Art Market, the Venice Biennale as an Art Market: Anatomy of a Complex Relationship, 3-5 February 2016, London (www.iesa.edu), Royal Holloway University

⁵ **Who's bankrolling the Venice Biennale?** Putting on an event of this size is an expensive business—and increasingly it is dealers, collectors and foundations that are stumping up by GARETH HARRIS, ANNY SHAW | 7 May 2015 http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/Venice_Biennale_2015/who-s-shoring-up-venice/

without robust and pro-active collecting institutions, local markets and internationally engaged gallery systems on the continent, national participation in Venice is an ambivalent vehicle for progress of African art sectors.

More than that, it is arguable that to date the financial benefit of national participations and inclusion has largely benefited top international⁶ galleries representing African artists or galleries who cherry-pick African artists for representation following Venice. These galleries can be grateful for the hundreds of thousands of dollars in production budgets, logistics, PR, advertising and marketing investment made by struggling African states, which they can profit from immediately, for proverbially, collectors come to “see in Venice and buy in Basel.”

“Dealers ...are taking advantage of the Venice Biennale effect.. Traditionally, Art Basel in June benefited most from the Biennale..., as collectors bounced from Italy to the Swiss fair...”

Inclusion in the Biennale is a seal of curatorial approval—and collectors take notice. “The exposure is so important for mid-career artists,...”⁷

African under-representation is far more startling in Basel. Out of 941 exhibitors in this years Basel art fairs, with Art Basel’s 291 and the rest at the seven satellite fairs, only three African galleries took part, all three South African (Stevenson and Goodman in Art Basel and blank projects in Liste)⁸. Apart from those three, African and African diaspora artists proudly featured in *All the World’s Futures* and other Venice Biennales, were presented by major international powerhouse galleries - John Okrumfah (Lisson), El Anatsui (Jack Shainman), Lynette Yiadom-Baykoe (Jack Shainman), Ibrahim El Salahi (Salon 94). Some of the younger contemporary African artists were presented by London galleries, Kristin Hiji Jegard (Ephrem Solomon, Dawit Adebe), Ethan Cohen NY (Aboudia, Goncalo Mabunda) and at Scope, Tafeta (Temitayo Ogunbiyi, Niyi Olagunju, and Babajide Olatunji).

In his opinion piece on the Sotheby’s first auction of African art, for the *New York Times* in May 2017, Chika Okeke-Agulu, makes an astute observation:

“In this inexorable march to the mainstream, I am tempted to think of contemporary African art as akin to an urban neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Now that it is seen as high culture, the art and artists are gaining value, investors are jostling to get a piece of the action....”

This is very good news for the African modernists who will benefit from the increased visibility.

⁶ South Africa with its established infrastructure and art market can count among that number

⁷ <http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/see-in-venice-buy-in-new-york/> See in Venice, buy in New York?

Dealers stand to benefit because the Biennale opened early this year by [JULIA HALPERIN, PAC POBRIC](#) | 15 May 2015

⁸ <http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/don-t-forget-to-check-out-the-art-basel-satellite-fairs/>

...But the continent's masses will be the biggest losers. They will be denied access to artworks that define the age of independence and symbolize the slow process of postcolonial recovery."⁹

Looking at this year's Venice Biennale and Art Basel, the comment can be extrapolated to include contemporary artists and the losses of African art sectors also.

The push for national pavilions in Venice is placing African contemporary art at risk of becoming yet one more African raw material export until there is necessary local art sector infrastructure in place to leverage this participation. It is crucial to understand the art world trajectories and economic models, which impact on Africa's presence in Venice when making decisions to spend the enormous amounts of money required to mount a national pavilion. These very sums, can be effectively deployed to build the very infrastructure necessary to effectively ensure the long-term economic sustainability and future of African art sectors from building international quality art schools, to endowing art institutions with proactive collecting budgets, to supporting the creation of local markets.

⁹ Modern African Art Is Being Gentrified, CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU MAY 20, 2017 New York Times