

Get Connected! New Markets, Audiences, and Perspectives in Exhibition Exchange

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Where Do We Come From? What [and Where] Are We? Where Are We Going? The Iziko South African National Gallery at the crossroads of staying and getting connected

Marilyn Martin

This address is dedicated to Pancho Guedes, a mentor and source of inspiration in my life, who passed away on 7 November, aged 90. You will learn a little more about him this morning as I had included his exhibition in my presentation from the beginning.

Thank you for the invitation to speak today and for bringing your ideas and experience to South Africa. In my time at the South African National Gallery, I attended a few CIMAM conferences, but we did not connect with ICEE. Never too late!

Originally the title of my presentation was inclusive of the situation in South African art museums; while working on it I shifted focus to the Iziko South African National Gallery (ISang) and, to a lesser extent, the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), but the latter has also been sacrificed in order to keep to time and to allow for greater depth, as well as a serious consideration of the broader socio-political and economic context in which museums function.

I have approached my presentation from aspects of the conference theme and questioning/discussing them in relation to the ISang. What I can say for all our art museums is that the challenges outweigh the opportunities, and the future appears daunting; yet exciting things happen. We always seem to be at some or other crossroad! To this end I have turned to Paul Gauguin for my title and the structure of this presentation. Little did I know that *Nous Sommes Unis* would be a rallying call against terrorism and barbarism after Friday 13th in Paris.

Where Do We Come From?

The South African National Gallery has its origins in civil society and this is something of which we can be enormously proud, but alongside it runs a history of official indifference and neglect, on which I shall touch from time to time, as well as directors finding themselves at loggerheads with the government of the day. The first efforts towards the formation of an art gallery in Cape Town were made in 1871 by the South African Fine Arts Association (which still exists under different names and structures throughout the country, e.g. the Association for Visual Arts in Cape Town), and given further impetus by the Thomas Butterworth Bayley Bequest of 45 paintings the following year. When the South African Art Gallery Act was promulgated in 1895, there were well over 100 works in the collection and in 1896 the collection became the property of the Cape Colonial Government. This was the beginning of the South African National Gallery, the present building opening its doors on 3 November 1930. In 2001 new legislation amalgamating

national museums was implemented and what is now Iziko Museums of South Africa came into being.

What [and Where] Are We?

I don't need to provide a definition of what a museum is and does for this gathering, but I do have a few comments following from exchanges I had with Helene Vollgraaff. When Helene first contacted me about participating in the workshop that took place on the 16th, I saw the title of this conference and wondered about the emphasis on the market and the business-orientated language used in the key themes. Our email correspondence revealed that ICOM was discussing the (re)definition of museums and staff; that there are museums that are structured like companies and that former museum professionals work as consultants. I am one to embrace change and chance, but at the same time my response to this is deeply embedded in the African and South African context. It is commendable that museologists continue to share their knowledge, and nobody can deprive them of earning an income that rewards their expertise, but it means that our museums are drained, skills are not transferred and vacant posts are not always filled.

South Africa's economy is milked dry by incompetent individuals and dysfunctional departments that outsource their work to consultants: national and provincial government departments spent more than R30 billion on consultants in the financial year ending February 2015. This is despite a Treasury directive issued by former finance minister Pravin Gordhan in 2013 warning against excessive spending on consultants and outsourcing functions that should be performed by the departments' 1.3 million civil servants ("Public Service Accountability Monitor" (PSAM), 2015).

Iziko has not been immune to this trend and I was part of a number of such processes. I remember well one of the consultants telling senior management that we would continue engaging consultants until one told us what we wanted to hear. This was years ago, but the dependence continues and he has since returned. Developing what was called the 'Big Picture' for Iziko was outsourced, but fortunately there is no sign of it being implemented; yet another restructuring is on the cards.

And the museum as a business? That of course depends entirely on the origins and nature of the museum. Business jargon already bedevils public institutions, each one has to be branded (even if there is not much to brand), has to have a CEO with a salary and a car to match, while the gap between management and curators and scientists gets bigger. What are business principles and why should they be the panacea for institutions of culture and learning? Where are we as a result of neo-liberal policies and the economic melt-down following on 2008? Toxic income inequality is but one result.

I mentioned the role of civil society in the founding of the national art museum; the same can be said for the JAG and others in South Africa, but since the earliest colonial days we have been ruled by philistine governments when it comes to the visual arts and the present one is no exception. Our Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) would be thrilled if our national gallery could sustain itself – of course it has done so for decades, but this is different from notions of self-sustainability and a museum as a business that relieves government of its obligations. Official responsibility for the national, provincial and local cultural patrimony is not negotiable.

Already publicly funded art museums – at national and city levels – are struggling against extraordinary odds: financial; political, bureaucracy; relevance to audiences and government officials who, 21 years into our democracy and without having visited our museums, still regard them as white-dominated colonial and apartheid institutions. The situation is exacerbated by internal lack of capacity and maintenance of buildings. In this environment, what happens to the ideal of custodianship, of taking care of what we have inherited from the past, of building upon that through collecting, researching, interpreting and sharing our collections? Of engaging both past traditions and – to call to mind Fredric Jameson's phrase "the ontology of the present" – what it means to be in time and of one's time? Expertise is lost, morale is diminished, imagination and vision frustrated and stifled.

And the focus and potential to influence artistic production shift from the museum and public sector to the private sector, to private museums, commercial and corporate galleries and the market. Traditionally curatorship was the domain of the art museum and biennial, while commercial galleries and art fairs focused on the market and sales. This has changed dramatically in South Africa in recent years. Many South African galleries are taking curatorial responsibility for exhibitions that are conceptually sound, while they continue to show and promote their artists, including through museum shows and publications, locally and abroad.

This is increasingly where South African art history is being rewritten and made. Commercial galleries are exposing and promoting South African artists abroad; what are our art museums doing? Iziko Museums is ideally placed in a curatorial context where there are no more boundaries, between art and science, art and religion, art history and anthropology, past and present, but to what extent is this explored? The amalgamation has resulted in the centralisation of power, in the process eroding the strengths of the individual museums, while highlighting their weaknesses. The ISang has not produced any substantial publications since 2008. Once upon a time museum curators and art critics in South Africa had more influence on the art historical canon than the gallerist and art market. That is no more.

Apart from the role as a creative negotiator who requires a multitude of skills, museum directors and curators can also be activists who strive to bring about societal change through exhibitions and taking a stand publicly. We did this at the national gallery from 1993 to 2007, in the face of former president Thabo Mbeki's HIV/Aids denialism and right next door to Parliament. Today there is mostly silence about government policies and actions in the arts and museum sectors and we succumb to self-censorship. It is left to individuals like activist and playwright Mike van Graan, cartoonists such as Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro) and actor Pieter-Dirk Uys to use satire in order to ask difficult questions and to twist knives into wounds. Visual artists like Stuart Bird, Laurence Lemaona, Ayanda Mabulu and Brett Murray have dared to raise and address controversial issues through their work.

Looking further afield, the situation has grave repercussions for the African continent. The presence and profiles of African scholars, major exhibitions of and publications on classical and contemporary African art (particularly during the last thirty years) have eroded the dominance of the West. African art is being documented and foregrounded, bringing it to the global public attention and awareness, and stimulating debate. African artists have become global citizens.

In spite of the radical shifts and progress, so much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century perceptions and attitudes that were applicable to Africans, to classical African art and African modernism, still influence and sometimes determine what is exhibited and written today. Blockbuster exhibitions are aimed at international audiences. Post 1994 there have been numerous exhibitions of South African art, but how many have engaged African curators living and working on the continent and how many reach our shores? They are, more often than not, too ambitious and expensive to be accommodated in an African art museum.

This raises the question “What do we mean by exchange and how do we interpret and implement the dictionary definition and the spirit?” *Exchange* is both a verb and a noun: the act of giving or taking one thing in return for another; reciprocal giving and receiving; something offered, given, or received in an exchange.

A few examples will suffice. First – the absence of or inability to effect exchange.

Okwui Enwezor invited many scholars and writers on our continent and in the diaspora to contribute to the magnificent catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *The Short Century Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*. It was ambitious, starting at Museum Villa Stuck in Munich in February 2001 and travelling to the House of World Cultures in the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and Museum of Modern Art in New York until May 2002. Having contributed to the catalogue and loaned works, and sensitive to the criticism that our public is seldom if ever exposed to such major travelling shows, we at the Iziko Sang enquired about hosting it, even if not in its entirety. It would have been possible, but the expenses were prohibitive.

A recent blockbuster originating from Enwezor proved to be controversial when it finally reached our shores in 2014. ‘The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life’, co-curated with South African academic and curator Rory Bester, moved from the International Centre of Photography in New York (2012) to Munich and Milan. Bester withdrew from the Johannesburg exhibition for “professional reasons” and Enwezor and Omar Badsha, one of the participating photographers, engaged in an ugly quarrel in a public forum (Partridge, 2014).

In seeking an answer to why we as South Africans get so touchy, Matthew Partridge wrote (2014):

One of the issues is around ownership with the question who has the right to tell a history, to narrate our story being commonly asked. Overarching narratives thus become problematic when these different experiences of the past converge and meet in an exhibition.

It’s been a question on my mind. Why did an exhibition of photographs about apartheid by South African photographers start in the U.S. and stop twice in Europe before coming to South African shores? Money, I’m told. Resources. Costs. Funders. Travel and Sustenance. Big names. Curatorial fees.

‘Africa Remix Contemporary Art of a Continent’, with catalogues in English, French and German, commenced its tour in 2004. Promoted as the largest exhibition of

contemporary African art ever seen in Europe, 'Africa Remix' was the result of an international collaboration among four countries and institutions: Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, the Hayward Gallery in London, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo.ⁱ

In September 2004 Jean-Hubert Martin formally approached the ISang and requested our collaboration, as the curators wished to bring the show to Africa. Unlike the European museums that had been involved from the start and had curators assigned to the project under the leadership of Paris-based Simon Njami, arguably the major art museum on the African continent was contacted weeks *after* the opening of the exhibition in Düsseldorf on 24 July 2004. The only collaboration possible was to accept the show, in an edited form. Again, being acutely aware of our lack of resources to research and organise major exhibitions outside South Africa, we agreed that it could be a desirable project. We requested a budget and suggested that we work with Njami on a selection that would be appropriate for our spaces and audiences. There was complete silence, no acknowledgement, no response and in February 2005 I informed Jean-Hubert Martin that we were no longer interested in the show.

The Johannesburg Art Gallery was more accommodating and hosted the exhibition in 2007. Chief curator at the time, Clive Kellner, observed in the adapted catalogue (Kellner, 2007:9):

Historically, because similar exhibitions were hosted in either Europe or the United States, the framing of the subject of African art is usually defined, written and determined by Western historians and curators. The ability to control the content and the way it is translated and ultimately perceived is not in the hands of Africans. Similarly, debates surrounding such exhibitions and the discourses of African art should be taking place in Africa and not only in the international centres where the exhibitions are held.

While the exhibition was welcomed by many, it was a missed opportunity for constructive engagement – from the beginning – between theorists and practitioners, between Europe and Africa. Njami described the show as 'an interrogation', but in Africa the question arose: "Is this contemporary African art or yet another European invention?" Much has changed since then, but the impetus has come from art fairs in South Africa and abroad and from local and international commercial galleries increasingly interested in African.

As long ago as 2003 Kendell Geers asked:

Why is it that the Kentridge retrospective [curated by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and hosted by the ISang from December 2002 to March 2003] will visit South Africa last when all the works originated in Houghton? The irony is that if the retrospective had been organised and curated five years ago, by a South African museum, then all the huge fees and royalties for the show would have been paid into a South African museum rather than the other way around.

We know why, but we don't seem to be able to address it. We could blame the West, but that is a futile exercise. Calls that Africans take charge of our history and destiny have been heard for decades but they fall on deaf ears. While Africa walks with tyrants who

benefit from disorder, her people are doomed to betrayal and suffering and seek refuge elsewhere, her artists leave in search of better lives abroad and she is drained by the diaspora. The African continent offers little in the way of support, funding for individual creativity, infrastructure, art museums, commercial art galleries, a market and major shows. There are biennials in Bamako (photography), Dakar and Cairo, but even in a rich country like South Africa the Johannesburg Biennial could not be sustained.

A few examples of exchange, or true reciprocity in travelling exhibitions.

Ezakwantu – Beadwork from the Eastern Cape (October 1993 – May 1994), curated by Carol Kaufmann and Emma Bedford, travelled to Germany accompanied by our then exhibitions officer Jon Weinberg; *Scratches on the Face Antiquity and contemporaneity in South African works of art from Iziko Museums of Cape Town*, was curated by Hayden Proud and was seen in Mumbai and New Delhi as part of an official museum exchange in 2007 (Ditsong Museums in Gauteng formed part of the project); I curated *Coexistence Contemporary Cultural Production in South Africa* with Pam Allara for the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, and it was shown at ISang (2003 to 2004).

'Invoice', a survey show of the work of Santu Mofokeng, one of South Africa's foremost photographers, coincided with his 50th birthday. It included photographs from virtually all his major bodies of work produced in the period between 1982 and 2006. Originating in a partnership between Autograph ABP in London and the Iziko S A National Gallery, with the support of Standard Bank Gallery and Gallery MOMO in Johannesburg, the exhibition travelled to Johannesburg, Kimberley, and Durban and was finally shown at Rivington Place, London in 2009.

By May 2006 we had commitments from a number of role players and potential funders, but no money and it took extraordinary focus and energy from the late Pam Warne, our curator of photography and new media at the time, and active participation by Mofokeng with his international contacts, to be ready for the opening in December 2006. Several other venues were considered, but as costs became clear various institutions pulled out when they realised they couldn't afford it. This is in part due to the fact that we did not have all the information required to organise the tour earlier than we did, and consequently many museums had already finalised their budgets and exhibition schedules for this year.

The whole experience was exhausting at times, but also inspiring and rewarding on many levels: it was a superb exhibition, an example of true reciprocity and equality in exchange and the national art museum was responsible for Mofokeng's first solo exhibition in the UK.

Another excellent example of international exchange and astonishing international and local support was the exhibition of work by Pancho Guedes. The first part of 'Pancho Guedes: An Alternative Modernist and Works After April 25th 1974' was commissioned and produced by the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel and curated by Pedro Gadanho; it focussed on the period of nearly twenty-five years during which Guedes was active in Mozambique and his extraordinary achievements involving over 500 projects.

But both Guedes, who had been my head of department at Wits in the 1980s, and I wanted more for the exhibition at the ISang, so the second component introduced work

created mostly in South Africa, after April 1974, the date of his departure from Mozambique. It was curated by architects Henning Rasmuss, South African and Dagmar Hoetzel from Germany, in consultation with the architect; it was separate yet conceptually linked to the S AM show.

The many logos on the invitation speak volumes but they cannot capture the spirit in which the architectural profession, former students and funding organisations responded, with individual contributions ranging from R3 000,00 to R100 000,00. I had two fundraising committees, one in Cape Town and one in Johannesburg and we managed to raise close on the R1 million required. With the support of Steven Sack, then director of culture in Johannesburg, the exhibition travelled to Museum Africa. Years later Guedes' work would also again be seen in Mozambique.

It was a rare privilege to host a full retrospective of Pancho Guedes' oeuvre, to share it with students and learners through extensive education programmes, lectures and publications and to inspire new generations of architects. It revealed his capacity to seamlessly bring together Europe and Africa, art and architecture, dream and reality.

The role of the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg is central to the success story of major exhibition exchanges, and it has since 1981 maintained the Standard Bank Young Artist Award that travels throughout South Africa. I want to discuss just two examples of our partnership with Standard Bank.

Marlene Dumas' first solo exhibition in South Africa after she had moved to the Netherlands more than 30 years before, was curated by Emma Bedford, then curator of contemporary paintings and sculpture, and featured some 50 paintings, drawings and prints, as well as personal letters, documents and photographs collected by the artist. Works were drawn from public and private collections in South Africa and abroad and was accompanied by an illustrated catalogue.ⁱⁱ

The high point of my museum career as director and curator was 'Picasso and Africa'. My co-curator, and co-editor of the book, was Laurence Madeline from the Picasso Museum in Paris; planning and negotiations took three years. The exhibition opened at the Standard Bank Gallery and moved to Cape Town in the April 2006. It required huge financial and logistical support to bring 81 works by Picasso to South Africa (we also included the three in our own public collections) and to organise loans of African art from a number of South African institutions.ⁱⁱⁱ While the project happened within the ambit of a cultural agreement between South Africa and France, there was no financial support from DAC.

The exhibition was a resounding success, with numerous programmes and activities, and people queuing in the April rain.^{iv} Thousands of visitors, including learners and people with disabilities, were exposed to the art of Africa and Picasso for the first time; they were enthralled, stimulated, challenged, informed and educated. And all staff involved had the experience of working with international museums and curators as equals, sharing and learning a great deal.

Where Are We Going?

Predictions are perilous, so I shall tread lightly. However, the socio-political and economic context in which our future is being forged is a reality to which I have already

alluded. South Africa and her museums are at the crossroads and we need to make the right choices.

University, corporate and commercial galleries, and private museums have become increasingly important and each indeed has a significant place, but as public museums we must reclaim the leadership roles we have lost to the market and other role players. It is clear from my presentation that exhibition exchange cannot happen without partnerships, membership of networks of influence and the commitment to raise money for projects in which we believe.

We are required to act on the lack of funding to curate and tour major exhibitions ourselves and to pay attention to the unequal or lack of access to resources and structures on the continent. If we don't, those in positions of power who live in the West will carry on shaping notions of African art, forcing their perspectives and expectations on us and on an unsuspecting Western public.

South Africa is brimming with creative talent and our art museums are in a unique position of looking backward and forward at the same time and presenting contemporary cultural production in the context of the past. With all the challenges facing the ISang, artists still dream of survey or retrospective exhibitions in their national gallery, and we must ensure that we have something to offer them. The road ahead is not easy and I want to pay tribute to the curators and other museum professionals in art museums in South Africa in general and in the Iziko Art Collections Department in particular. Somehow they manage to uphold standards and safeguard our patrimony in the face of the challenges mentioned, while earning pitiful salaries and with no career path or prospects in sight. We cannot afford to neglect and lose them, for without them we face a cul-de-sac.

In the broader context, the principle of arms-length funding from central government is eroding, national museums are now agencies of DAC, subjected to the tyranny of bureaucracy while obliged to keep DAC happy at all costs, fearful of biting the hand that feeds, albeit crumbs. It is shocking and untenable that 72% of government departments and parastatals do not comply with the Public Finance Management Act.

The Zeitz MOCAA is taking impressive and ambitious shape on the Waterfront and people often ask me what will happen to the Iziko Sang once this museum opens. Nothing that has not already happened; there needs to be a huge and concerted effort on the part of Iziko to try to regain lost ground and occupy its rightful place, which is different.

One major drawback is that of space. In the early 1990s, we identified the crucial need for additional space and a centre for contemporary art in Cape Town; we initiated a process for a competition, but it went on the back burner post Iziko Museums and came to naught. As a council member (2010-2013) I put it back on the agenda, but, as far as I could establish, it has since been removed. Without such a centre, the art collections department of Iziko has nowhere to go, little to offer. It will require volition and political will for the Iziko Sang to once again be positioned strategically.

The Zeitz MOCAA vision of raising museum standards in South Africa, encouraging the growing interest world wide in African art and making major acquisitions (something that

the art museums can no longer do) will be of benefit to all. For all the rhetoric of transformation and inclusivity Iziko has shifted from tri-lingualism to being an English-only institution in its publicity, signage and invitations and at this basic and most significant level of engaging with the public, Zeitz MOCAA is already leading the way.

Of course it is not without controversies of its own. One of the threats to ourselves may be cultural insecurity and parochialism; on the one hand this will negate many benefits the Zeitz MOCAA has to offer; on the other people are already so overwhelmed by the presence and power of the museum-in-the-making that they may follow trends and ideas blindly and neglect to engage critically with the museum and its projects.

In this context I cannot emphasise enough the significance of civil society and public institutions in a democracy, but they have to be independent of pressure to execute political agendas. At a time when our students have started a revolution, the sitting president says that his party is more important than the country; when the minister of tertiary education,^v Blade Nzimande, suggests that the private sector should foot the bill for free education, the purchase of a new R4 billion plane is on the cards for president Zuma.

We understand that the student protests are about much more than fees: “At every step of these protests, the students have eloquently articulated the sentiment, shared by many outside their ranks, that the decolonisation project is not finished and the time has come for a new kind of politics” (“Editorial: #FeesMustFall is shaking us up”, 2015). But since this was written, on 23 October, violent acts by the police as well as some diehard protestors have escalated. Our country needs a seismic shift at every level to address core problems, and to use the many crises for renewed thinking so that we may avoid suffocating in the rising miasma of our political, social and economic atmosphere.

I say this against the background image of Albert Adams’ (1929-2006), *South Africa 1959* (also known as the African Guernica) of 1959 (oil on board, triptych: each 1.83 x 1.22cm). It is as telling and compelling now as it was then. Much has changed, much has stayed the same.

My plea to this forum is that we fight our battles fearlessly and on every front, that we get and stay connected and committed to cultural and exhibition exchange as a two-way process for the benefit and enrichment of all.

ⁱ This text is drawn from Martin, M. 2006. All encounters produce change Africa, Picasso and beyond, in Madeline, L. & Martin, M. Eds. 2006. *Picasso and Africa*. Bell Roberts Publishing: Cape Town.

ⁱⁱ Edited by Bedford, it included essays by her, Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, South African author Marlene van Niekerk and Dumas’ own writings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Musée Picasso, Musée nationale d’art moderne in Paris, the Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte, Standard Bank, the French Embassy, the French Institute of South Africa, Air France, Business Arts South Africa.

^{iv} There were 106,000 visitors to both exhibitions’ including 26,000 learners; 52,000 to Iziko Sang in 42 days.

^v De Vos, P. 2015. Pierre de Vos: Is the party more important than the country? Available: <http://firstthing.dailymaverick.co.za/article.php?id=72572&cid=2015-11-11#.VkWv-F4098F>
And his concluding remarks: "But where a President suggests that politics (and the loyalty to a chosen party) trumps all, it is not only the person that is exposed to criticism and ridicule: it also becomes more difficult to argue that his or her office should not be ridiculed or mocked. This is because the person holding that office would have signalled that he or she does not hold the position as head of state in high regard, and does not consider the office as important as holding the office of political party leader."

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