

critical perspectives: The role of
the visual artist

Jentjes 5.2.3

In the early seventies I was asked why African painters and sculptors have nothing to say about their art. The asker of that question was a stranger to our cultural reality. She naively imagined all artists to be people who sat together at street cafes, wearing black berets, drinking glasses of wine and generally enjoying and expressing themselves. Those of us assembled here know just how incorrect that image is. But are we articulate about our art and if so have we discussed with each other or those who are genuinely trying to understand our culture, the issues important for us as artists? The answer must be yes. We have lots to say and we are here to do just that. To discuss with each other and anyone who wants to listen and learn.

I was asked to discuss with you the role of the visual artist. In a world moving rapidly away from a literary to a visual assessment of day to day living we must have a part to play. My task is to define a basis for this part. My hope being that after I've presented my thoughts we can together hammer out any kinks or malconstructed ideas I've expressed or advance on any correct ones.

If we have a role then be it to function as verbs in the grammar of culture. The so called "Art world" is inundated with definitions of roles for the artist or principles for artistic purpose. Some shockingly precise and dogmatic others vague like elastic rubber gloves made to fit any hand. Are we to don the uniform of one and march its precise yet restricted course? Do we slip into the suitable skin-clinging smoothness of the other? Are other possibilities open?

Vagueness and dogma only indicate our topics complexity. Both demonstrate the need to grasp, to embrace and understand. If we acknowledge the complex make-up of our culture and history and recognise equally the complexity of creative thought and artistic praxis then possibilities other than vagueness and dogma can be found. If we are to act as verbs then with a truer knowledge of our cultural and historic grammar and with the awareness that art is not a simple part but the complex heart of our cultural body.

In our vocabulary the word culture stands, somewhat awesome, like a monument glowing. Each syllable saturated with meaning. Its a nice word to have dangling at the tip of ones tongue or tucked away in a cuff ready to be pulled out when other words fail us. In the hands (or better said mouths) of politicians of whatever colour you may care to choose, it has been juggled and played with, with such dexterity that if one asked any pedestrian or member of the audience here present for their view of culture, the confusion created would become apparent by the discrepancies in definitions. This is not intelectual deficiency. This is the result of deliberate "tactical confusion" on the part of certain intellectual and power elites.

There have been times when outside forces claimed we had no culture. In our time it is claimed, by government spokesmen and the like, that things are being done for the development of our cultural tradition. Both claims are attempts to hold ground, to perpetuate the status-quo. If the black artist can no longer be told that he lacks a culture, then the

acknowledgement of culture must be steeped in tradition. Weighed down with an outsiders view and understanding of this tradition. This creates the illusion that culture is taken seriously. However, it leaves untouched the old racialist arguments that our culture is lacking in development and therefore we have nothing to offer the worlds cultures in the future. Such a strategy has a twofold result, We artists begin to doubt our own creative ability. The world outside loses interest in our culture because they have been conditioned to expect nothing from us. This situation opens the floodgates for what the more radical amongst us call cultural imperialism.

A definition of culture I've grown to use over the years reads:

The total result of positive, creative interaction of humans with the environment and other humans. A kinetic process covering the full spectrum of human activity.

Culture is therefore not tradition neither is it the Arts. The former implies a lack of movement, the latter being a small but important segment of the cultural whole.

This definition seems to be the only one that allows me to recognise those human activities aimed at shaping our world into a more human one, as truly creative and cultured.

With it I can draw parallels between the work of farmers, poets and even freedom fighters. Within it the artist remains rooted with the people. There is no dissection of artistic praxis from the national reality. Within this definition we are working words and our artistic praxis becomes a tool for change.

The father of the Guinea Bissau revolution Amilcar Cabral said

"I dont need to remind you that the problem of liberation is also one of culture. In the begining its culture and in the end its also culture. The colonialists have a habit of telling us that when they arrived in Africa they put us into history. You are well aware that its the contrary - when they arrived they took us out of our own history. Liberation for us is to take back our destiny and our history."

If in the fifties one picked up an African history book in any town library (if there happened .to be a library) the world presented to you in those pages had nothing to do with you. It was about other peoples actions, most of them against your forefathers. Today African history books are quite different. They are filled with a sense of your and my presence. It is history in our time, seen through the black eyes of the African people.

The African art history books of the fifties were rare and their content by and large exoticism in its ugliest form. Characteristics, curiosities things fill these pages. There was no acknowledgement of a cultural super-structure. No sense of depth or growth and no words about the dynamic potential of a culture. (There are admittedly serious scholarly attempts at understanding but mainly it was an outsider structuring the taboos that still haunt our art.)

One revealing fact about African art both contemporary and traditional, is that those exhibiting, documenting and analysing it - in short those formulating Africas art history are almost

entirely non-African! There is a shocking similarity here to Africa's general history. Yet we have had no artistic revolutions in Africa, even in those states whose independence was won through armed struggle, to correct this.

Present publication practice in relation to traditional African art has shifted to ethnographical appraisals. The early exoticism has been removed and placed into the discourse on contemporary work.

Important for the dynamics of most revolutionary movements in Africa was the acknowledgement that they had lived under a false sense of history. If we as artists could start with the acknowledgement that we have been practicing our art under a false sense of our art history, then I believe our movement forward holds many pleasant surprises and frightful truths. One of these truths is found in the question of style. The early European evaluation of our stylistic innovations has been so interiorised that it remains for many African artists the subject of their creative endeavour. African art is expected to look like It is expected to fit a certain mold. One cast by some non-African ethnographer or art critic. If an artist today dares to extend his creative expression to a field outside of this mold, he apparently runs the risk of being compared to western European models. The work is seen as just another poor example of Mr. X. in London or Mr. Y. in New York. Why is an artistic innovation a risk for an African artist? Did Picasso, Braque or Brancusi see cubist abstraction as a risk even though its similarities

(6)

to traditional African sculpture were so clear? No, there is an attitude of mind being layed bare here. An attitude which says "blackman know your place. Your cultural place below that of the dominant culture."

The first African novel by Achebe was attacked in similar fashion but the work has proved to be one of Africas best and most read pieces of literature. Most of our writers have grown to ignore this colonial criticism. They give us the best example that its not only a question of message carrier, of style, but also one of the message and its cultural relevance.

If for some of us the question of style is one of identity then let us reflect on those who made a certain style of African art vogue. It certainly wasnt our poets or dancers or visual artists. The opinions held on African art today are those nurtured by the hothouse nurserymen of African art. Like prize roses they have pruned African art to fit into their cultural garden.

If we acknowledge the use of sophisticated modern weaponry in the liberation struggle, why question an artist who uses photography or stainless steel or video tapes in his or her art? We accept the mass of modern western technology in our everyday lives. We dont question our relationship to the motorcar or electric ovens or the mass media. All these things influence our lives both positively and negatively. Why then do we fall back on traditional art forms and modes of expression when expressing our lives through our art? Do we do it just for traditions sake? For the sake of style?

(7)

Is it not possible for us to use our knowledge of our traditions in a manner other than repetition? In a manner which indicates both where we have come from and where we are going?

Often European artists ask, "How is it possible to be creative in the oppressive South African situation?" I refer their question to the very basic problem of survival. We have survived because of our parents creativity and their parents creativity. The very need to live and to improve on that living, is the motor of our creativity. That we have not lost our sanity or the will to struggle under increased government pressure, demonstrates not only the governments weakness but our creative strength. Creativity is our domain. It is action toward and for a fuller humanity. Oppressors have never been creative. Clever, yes, but never creative. Control and maintenance of the status-quo are their actions. For them creativity implies self destruction. It should therefore be clear to us that our freedom is linked to our creative action as a people and to our creativity as artists. In the South African situation talent becomes a challenge.

The argument of art for arts sake has been dealt with in many a symposium. Achebe once compared it to, "Just another piece of deodorised dog-shit." A point of view I do not fully agree with. But I cannot begin to argue the art for arts sake argument in a situation where children are being shot and killed for protesting at injustice. Any South

African artist who dares to uphold this argument as relevant for South African culture, only demonstrates his utter disrespect for our dead and a certain shallowness in the understanding of our culture. The South African situation demands an interest in an art that presents an imaginative vision of life rather than one which argues aesthetic strategy. For me a few cultural truths remain. The first is that our arts subject is man. For if artists are the verbs of African cultural grammar then the subject of that grammatical construction must surely be the noun man or people. A second is that art has always been in the service of man. The principles inherent in the Nigerian Mbari are for me basic to all African art. If there is something to bring out of Africa's cultural traditions into the contemporary world then it is the social aspect of that cultural praxis. The art of our ancestral past was art for life's sake. Is our contemporary art to be something different?

If content and style of such contemporary art should upset conservative South African opinion then let us say to them what Picasso said to the Nazi officers who walked into his studio, saw the painting Guernica and said, "This is horrible. Did you (Picasso) do it?" "No" Picasso replied "you did."

Our task as visual artists is clear yet extremely complex. We have to act in all the various spheres of influence which together shape the future of our art. It helps us little if we simply limit our actions to our studio production and the criticism of those who deliberately misunderstand us and exploit us from their position of power.

Such limitation leaves the field of action open for others. Their action only strengthens the framework that marks the limitations placed on our art at present. Our culture has deliberately been prevented from functioning fully for a very long time indeed. Our task is to formulate and define both our art and culture as we remove it from this framework. We must make South African art the art of our time. For if our ancestors or those of the Nok culture made an art which did not reflect their time and culture, would they not have done us and ultimately the world a great disservice? We have to be ubiquitous. We must become articulate about our work and through our work. Our voice and our hand must be heard and felt in the shaping of our art history. It must be present in the exhibitions be they individual or thematic group shows. We must develop our cultural voice and initiate a permanent dialogue between ourselves, also with those outside our culture who wish to understand us.

Visual art education must work to irradicate the interiorization of the western evaluation of our contemporary art. It should instill in our people a meaningful interest in their culture and art and move them to recognise these as an integral part of the nations struggle against racist domination.

The sphere of international art exchange has ignored the black artist on the grounds that they don't know who we are and that we are not up to international standards. This does not exclude the South African National Gallery from being invited to offer work to various international bienales. The jurisdiction on whose work gets shown at international level, takes place within this government institution. If racialism in sport

If racialism in sport has been successfully campaigned against, has the time not come to fight racism in art? This is a task we should acknowledge.

Then there is the ever important sphere of self criticism. The first challenging questions must be directed at ourselves and our work. To our attitudes on tradition and development and particularly to professionalism in artistic praxis. Are we prepared to run the race with other world cultures even though our present position in the field is way behind others? Do we want to put our talent into the arena for all the world to see and judge or does this thought make us weak? ~~need?~~

~~?~~ I believe we can get to the front of the running if we understand the race and our competitors.

Brothers and sisters, we have lots to do and its very late in the day. If we are to greet the sunrise with open eyes and resolute minds, we have a hard nights work ahead of us. There is little time for rest.

I do not presume by saying this that there exists a ladder of cultural quality. That one culture stands higher on this ladder than another. It is part of the dynamics of culture that in its proximity to other cultures it enriches not only the others but itself. I understand the race as a stretching out of hands.

Hamburg 1982

Gavin Jantjes

Collection Name: MEDU ON-LINE

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

©2022

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice:

All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use:

Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of the Historical Papers Research Archive, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the MEDU Art Ensemble Consolidation Project, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.