



## Editorial

# Africa's breakthrough: Art, place branding and Angola's win at the Venice Biennale, 2013

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Since long before anyone actually thought of terming it a 'brand', the prestige of many places and nations incorporated art. For most of the early modern period in Europe, the halo of artistic reputation shone nowhere as bright as above the Republic of Venice. Although the crown indisputably passed to Paris in the nineteenth century, Venice hit on an innovative scheme to restore some of its artistic significance: to invite the world to the city every two years to display the best of their artistic production. Since 1895 the Venice Biennale has become a fixture on the international art calendar. From the early 1900s onwards major exhibitor nations built permanent pavilions in the park at the eastern end of the city, now known as the *giardini di biennale*. The biennale has spilled beyond these limits and countries without permanent pavilions now take space in the converted workshops of the Venetian shipyards – the *arsenale* or in galleries, palazzos or repurposed churches dotted around the city. In 1980 Venice, relishing its role as host, split off the architecture component into its own biennale which runs in the off years. The result is to the world of art what the Olympic Games are to sport or the cycle of Universal Expositions to design and display: a convergence of talent, a showcase, a festival and a zone of intense competition where reputations are broken and made.

With governments usually footing the bill and therefore expecting art to carry at

least part of the burden of national representation, the politics of national prestige has frequently bubbled to the surface. When, in 1964, the American artist Robert Rauschenberg won the 'grand prize for painting' for work which used motifs from America's space program and presidential politics (JFK was a regular image) French critics were outraged and the extent of America's cultural power was undeniable. Similarly, when the US contribution to the 1970 biennale was marked by anti-Vietnam war protests, including the expulsion of the artist William Weegee by his own pavilion team for the crime of creating a poster reading: 'Impeach Nixon', the crisis of American power was no less clear.<sup>1</sup> The biennale has embraced this political significance. The entire 1974 biennale was themed for Chile to protest the CIA-backed coup of the previous year. In more recent years the Venice Biennale has provided a stage for the rise of China, which first exhibited in 1993. It also served as a grandstand for the new generation of British artists who did so much to bolster that country's claims to creative capital at the turn of the twenty-first century. The biennale of 2009 presented the problem for the Mexican government of President Calderon when artist Teresa Margolis made the violence of the drug war the central feature of the pavilion. Her title said it all: *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* (*What Else Could We Talk About?*)<sup>2</sup> Even with this turbulent history it

was with some surprise that the international art world awoke in June this year to the astonishing news that the prize for the best pavilion of the 55th biennale of 2013 had been awarded to a new comer to the biennale and a nation with little association in the public imagination with art: Angola.

Although the art world was surprised – the only precedent was the surprise win of Egypt back in 1995 – those of us who track international exhibitions were not as shocked by Angola's achievement. Angola was a notable presence at both the Shanghai expo of 2010 and Yeosu expos of 2012. Its contributions on those occasions included a notably warm and hospitable pavilion team and excellent use of film and other techniques to evoke life in the South West African nation, but while the expo contributions kept to the rules of genre of twenty-first century expo pavilion, the biennale pavilion emphatically broke the mold. Perhaps part of the success lay in its decision to directly engage the biennale theme of *'La Palazzo Enciclopedico'* (the encyclopedic palace) as devised by the guest director of the 55th biennale, Massimiliano Gioni. Gioni's notion was to respond to the idea of Italian-American artist Marino Auriti from the 1950s to encompass all human knowledge within a physical space (Auriti built a model of a proposed encyclopedic palace for Washington DC). The Angolan pavilion presented Angola's capital Luanda as an 'encyclopedic city' and therefore a component of the sum of human knowledge even if humanity was not especially interested to include Luanda within its mental compass.<sup>3</sup>

The pavilion was created/curated by the Italian architect and designer Stefano Rabolli-Pansera, founder of the not-for-profit, politically engaged design collaborative Beyond Entropy, and his Angolan colleague and collaborator Paula Nascimento. In 2011 Beyond Entropy approached the Angolan Ministry of Culture with an offer to design an architecture pavilion for the 2012 architecture biennale, and this new exhibit followed from the success of that initial offering. The Angolan government provided no funding for the pavilion; rather Beyond Entropy raised the limited budget required from corporate

sponsorship. Given the designers' commitment to sustainability they made no approach to the oil companies who had bankrolled the recent Angolan expo showings. Even so some African art commentators couldn't resist framing their success with a sour reference to 'oil-rich Angola'. Their strategy was not to create an immersive or exclusive Angolan experience but rather to insert images of Luanda into an existing space and, in Rabolli-Pansera's words, 'change everything by changing nothing'.<sup>4</sup>

Rabolli-Pansera and Nascimento built Angola's contribution inside one of Venice's hidden gems, the small gallery in the Palazzo Cini in the Dossodoro district, just a couple of canal hops from the famed Galleria Academica. The Palazzo Cini is home to a delightful private collection of renaissance art from Tuscany and Ferrara collected by Italian politician, entrepreneur and philanthropist, Vittorio Cini (1885–1977) including a fine Madonna and Child by Piero di Cosimo of Florence. The genius of the Luanda Encyclopedia City exhibit was to keep the Cini collection on the walls. Angola's pictures were displayed on the gallery floor on a set of rough wooden pallets. Each pallet featured a stack of copies of a giant image of a forgotten corner of Luanda created by the Angolan photographer, Edson Chagas (1977–). The pictures – known as his *Found Not Taken* series – focused on digital images of crumbling plaster or paint-work juxtaposed with items of junk or used found and posed by the artist. Through his selection these views became wonderful and arresting blocks of color and pure shape as well as troubling testament to poverty gnawing at Luanda. Nothing in the pictures seemed unbroken, unblemished or unused. Two images showed bottles positioned to catch water from rusty drain pipes suggesting that someone was drinking rainwater. No people were pictured; just the detritus of their passage through the world. Though specific to one time and place – Luanda at the moment Chagas snapped the shutter – the power of the exhibit came from its wider applicability and function as a part of an encyclopedic index to decay across the region, the continent, and beyond. Luanda was offered both as a city and as a paradigm for the urban African

condition – with a population estimated to be roughly equivalent to that of New York City’s eight million, living in much the same density but without the benefit of infrastructure or building much above a single story.<sup>5</sup>

As co-designer Rabolli-Pansera recalled, once the concept was in place all the details of the exhibit flowed from that, minimizing the intrusion of design decisions. The size of the posters were conditioned by the size of the antique elevator in the building; the size of the pallets by the size of posters; the number of stacks by the requirements of fire regulations, the heights of the stack of posters by the total allowable weight of the exhibit, and their location within the gallery by the location of ceiling beams in the historic building. The exhibit began with 23 pallets. Then came the public. The viewer was a key part of the pavilion. On entering the gallery every visitor was invited by a large notice to purchase for €3 a giant red paper folder, which carried some background to the exhibit and artist in large black lettering, and to select for €2 a picture whichever of Chagas’s images took their fancy, and thereby build their own catalogue of the show. The collapse of the art into the creation of a catalogue into the challenge to purchase spoke powerfully of the commodification of Africa. The curators did not replenish the stacks, rather as they were exhausted that pallet was removed. By the final weeks 18 remained. The designers imagined that in time the whole exhibit would simply disappear.<sup>5</sup>

The Beyond Entropy team had taken a remarkable approach, but the true genius of the exhibit was its coexistence within the existing gallery. This became a metaphor for the presence of Africa within European civilization. Each visitor was subtly forced to make a choice about whether to look at and engage the pictures of contemporary Luanda or to look away, step round the stacks of pictures and keep their eyes firmly fixed on the glimpses of the European past on the wall. Those who wished to engage and consume were soon encumbered by armfuls of enormous posters. Those who wished to ignore Angola were no less transformed into performers within the gallery space. Once the initial crowds had thinned underlying attitudes became visible. Some visitors

seemed single-minded in their determination not to look at the Angolan pictures, focusing on the walls with the intensity of tightrope walkers watching the platform at the end of their wire, anxious not to fall. Perhaps there is no safety net between Venice and Luanda. The gallery staff became used to the polarizing impact of the pictures: fascinating some and repelling others; engaging some, enraging others and, in short doing exactly what art is supposed to do – make people think. Its success has ensured that the exhibit will live beyond the closure of the biennale on 24 November 2013. The pavilion has been purchased by an as-yet anonymous foundation which plans to send the exhibit on tour and provide a permanent home on the African continent.<sup>5</sup>

There is a well-worn British saying that ‘one swallow doesn’t make a summer’ and Angola’s success requires that attention also be given to the wider presence of sub-Saharan Africa at the biennale. If not yet a summer, the signs of spring are undeniable. No one voice speaks for Africa and, indeed, one voice didn’t even speak for Angola: the pavilion’s corporate sponsor, the Angolan insurance company ENSA installed a supplemental exhibit on the top floor of the Palazzo Cini with the title *Angola em movimento* (Angola in motion) to showcase works of contemporary Angolan painters and sculptors in the company’s own collection. The gallery staff on the day of my visit was plainly uncomfortable with the confusion this co-located exhibit brought. The supplemental Angolan show had charms – vivid color and striking images – but lacked the clarity and conceptual coherence of the show on the floors below.

Like Angola the Ivory Coast also made its debut at the 2013 biennale. Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa returned. Ivory Coast hit home with some remarkable work in a pavilion entitled ‘Traces and signs’, including the sculpture of Jems Koko Bi (his work included a boat full of severed wooden heads) and photography of Franck Fanny. Kenya rather controversially backed away from presenting only its own artists to invite international artists into the two gallery spaces which it reserved. The decision to include eight artists from China, an Italian resident in

Kenya and only two artists actually from Kenya caused controversy in Kenya and Venice alike. The failure to engage the authentic artistic community of Kenya was read as an insult of monumental proportions surpassed only by the ugliness of Kenya bending over backwards to curry favor with the rising power in the region, China, by ceding them gallery space.<sup>6</sup>

South Africa, in Venice for only the second time since its post-Apartheid return to the international art world, shone as a beacon with an extraordinary pavilion in the *arsenale* complex that reflected a range of work from that country's lively art scene. The South African pavilion extended the notion of the encyclopedic into the archive, developing a show around the ways in which South African artists today repurpose the evidence of their countries past to rethink its present. Entitled 'Imaginary Fact: Contemporary South African Art and the Archive', the pavilion included a piece by Cameron Platter which adapted the techniques of ANC anti-Apartheid print making to question religion; some powerful portrait work by Andrew Putter which pushed back against the history of ethnographic photography; collages subverting historical pictures by Sam Nhlengethwa and some astonishing sculptures built out of torn and carved books by Wim Botha. The centerpiece was a video installation by Penny Siopis called 'Obscure White Messenger', which juxtaposed images of home movies from the apartheid-era with the text of a government psychologist's interview with the assassin of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in 1965. With images ranging from a writhing octopus (presumably in the Durban aquarium) and a bizarrely fascistic life-guard sports competition, the installation became a glimpse into the collective unconscious of the Apartheid society.<sup>7</sup>

The relevance of Africa was equally evident in some of the other national pavilions too. The Belgian pavilion included text from South African Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee. The German exhibit (which in order to make a point about internationalism was held in the French pavilion and featured only non-German artists including China's Ai Wei Wei) devoted an entire room to the work of South African photographer Santu Mofakeng. But the strongest external evocation

of Africa came in an unexpected quarter: Ireland, which devoted its entire installation to an African subject. The Irish pavilion – entitled 'The Enclave' – was a video installation housed in a tiny old chapel on the banks of the Grand Canal showing a film of life inside rebel enclaves in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The exhibit was created by war photographer Richard Mosse working at great personal risk with cinematographer Trevor Tweeton, with music/sound design by Ben Frost. Their achievement was considerable and bears description at length.

The film 'The Enclave' played across six screens arranged at angles inside a dark inner room. The viewer may have been drawn to settle on images on just one screen but was always aware that different images were playing elsewhere. Faced with more than three hours of footage in around half hour the viewer had to accept that his or her view of events was partial. The audience was denied the god-like omniscience which is the illusory gift of the standard documentary format. The images of poverty, natural beauty, disturbing violence and familiar banality of everyday life that unfolded across those screens in long takes and relentless tracking shots were thought-provoking alone, but Mosse had taken the extraordinary decision to photograph his entire film on infrared stock. This film stock was designed to photograph the invisible spectrum to help penetrate camouflage. In Mosse's hands it became a great metaphor for the war photographer's craft. When this film was processed everything that would normally be rendered in hues of green turned into shades of red. The world of the Congo became suddenly a beautiful, surreal and even psychedelic alien landscape. This Africa was emphatically other, bereft of the connection to the western world, save for flashes of recognition sparked by the energy of a child, the effort of a group of people manhandling a shed, the word 'California' on a t-shirt or shared finality of the corpse, lying in the roadway like a piece of garbage. The political point was clear. 'The Enclave' urged the western audience to look and think again about the crisis in central Africa. It was the 'Africa as tragedy' frame writ large. It is good to know that like the Angolan exhibit, this show will also live on beyond Venice

with showings in 2014 scheduled for Mosse's native Kilkenny and the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin. While applauding the extraordinary achievement of Mosse and his team it is good that this was not the only image of Africa at the biennale. The risible Kenyan showing notwithstanding, for once through the lens of Edgar Chagas and agency of Beyond Entropy, indigenous African creativity won through. African self-representation trumped Western reportage, and Angola won. While Angola, South Africa and Cote D'Ivoire all commented on the harsh realities of Africa's condition under globalization, their combined strength suggested a potential transformation which was harder to see in the Irish view.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural diplomacy began as a luxury of the wealthiest nations and art diplomacy has often served as the most rarified expression of western claims to cultural exceptionalism. But others may speak. Africa's music, literature and filmmaking have long-since begun the process of opening a much wider conversation. Angola's victory at the biennale of 2013 demonstrates that art can also play a role in this process. Art can serve as a mechanism to articulate a younger nation's experience and perception of the world; it can provide an occasion for dialogue and the creation of shared meaning. Art is a gift to share. Art can be a valuable way to demonstrate that its place of origin is not just a 'problem' of the past but can be a partner in conversation and a teacher in the present and in years to come.

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Most of this issue of *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* is given over to discussion of the state of place branding on the continent of Africa guest-edited by Dr Joao Freire, this journal's regional editor for Europe, the Middle East and Africa. As Dr Freire makes clear in his introduction, the attempt to collate a series of articles on the African approach to place branding served to reveal the degree to which the concept has still to take hold across the region. While so many African countries and institutions remain silent or disorganized in presenting their image to the world, other images – including the outmoded picture of Africa as relevant only as a recipient of

Western aid – remain dominant and impede collective advancement. Given this deficiency it is appropriate to recall the African saying often cited by the founder of this journal Simon Anholt when urging politicians to embrace the long-term strategic planning necessary to develop a truly competitive identity: 'The best day to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best day is today'.

## NOTES

- 1 This story is well told in Michael Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- 2 Margolis centered her pavilion on blood washed of the sites of violence in the narco-war. Margolis washed the floors and wall hangings in the blood and made furniture from concrete mixed with the same.
- 3 For background see Massimiliano Gioni's preface to *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico/The Encyclopedic Palace: Short Guide*. Marsilio/La Biennale di Venice, Venice, 2013, pp. 18–21.
- 4 Stefano Robolli Pansera to Nick Cull, phone interview, 18 November 2013. For an 'oil rich... Angola' reference, see Sean O'Toole's blog review: <http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/angola-marks-venice-biennale-debut-with-a-victory/>.
- 5 Pansera/Cull phone interview.
- 6 For press and blog coverage of this issue, see <http://crypticparadoxes.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/the-kenyan-pavilion-at-the-55-venice-biennial-what-next-after-the-disaster/>, <http://www.wamathai.com/why-are-chinese-artists-representing-kenya-at-the-venice-biennale/>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22791617>.
- 7 The virtual pavilion tour is at <http://www.imaginaryfact.co.za/>.
- 8 Press materials on the pavilion may be downloaded from [http://www.irelandvenice.ie/content/files/Pavilion-Of-Ireland\\_Richard-Mosse\\_Press-Kit\\_2013\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.irelandvenice.ie/content/files/Pavilion-Of-Ireland_Richard-Mosse_Press-Kit_2013_FINAL.pdf).

**Nicholas J. Cull**