

FOUR PERSPECTIVES TO CURATING FOUR EXHIBITIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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Introduction

It is already common knowledge that curatorial projects of contemporary art are becoming increasingly contestable. This is because curators are often caught between popular notions of exhibitions and the prescriptions of professionals where popular ideas hold little or no sway. The recent quest for professionalism has also impinged upon the functions of the curators as the indispensability of different specialists such as registrars, conservators, educators, exhibition designers, audio-visual technicians, among others, informs a successful exhibition. However, this does not remove the primary responsibility of the curator as the director of events around exhibition. This paper examines four exhibitions in South Africa and attempts to critically examine their curatorial paradigms. The exhibitions were held at different times and spaces in South Africa. Here an attempt is made to identify the lapses in the curatorial process and also point out where each succeeded.

Is There Still Life? Continuity and Change in South African Still Life Painting.

Is There Still Life is an exhibition of still life paintings in South Africa held at the Old Town House, Cape Town in 2008. I attended this exhibition and made important observations in the curatorial style adopted by the curator. According to Michael Godby, the curator, the still life paintings date back to one hundred years. The paintings were mainly a mixture of contemporary South African works with seventeenth century Dutch works acquired by Sir Max Michaelis that are now part of the Iziko Museums of Cape Town. Godby's aim in this exhibition is to explore the variety of different messages and meanings that are evoked within a single genre.

The exhibition is remarkable for one thing: an attempt to reconcile the colonial and the postcolonial into a homogenized cultural ensemble. This type of curatorial paradigm has become more receptive in the face of critical condemnation of exhibitions that encourage cultural dichotomy. But the curator's aim no doubt may be to showcase both colonial manifestation in these works and at the same time present a hybridized stylistic relationship that evolved over time. Thurman (2008) has noted that this curatorial paradigm "brings up the problem of definition: what is still life painting? What kind of painting can be included in or excluded from this category?" Thurman's question becomes even more compelling when one observes that some works in the exhibition may defy the still life categorisation. According to Godby:

There is a degree of artifice in Still Life subjects that is not necessarily present in the related genres of 'Interiors' or 'Studies' of individual objects ... the objects may be arranged to make a pleasing or challenging set of relationships between themselves and the space in which they are set. Or the arrangement may have been made in order to make symbolic connections between the different elements in some sort of narrative (2008:4).

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Given the fact that Godby selected a wide range of works that cut across household utensils to miniature mechanical apparatuses such as rat traps and toys it is understandable why he chose to establish a symbolic connection between the objects and the spaces they are set. While the works were rendered in impressionistic, abstract and naturalistic styles, there was virtually nothing to suggest that still life as a genre appealed to popular interest. There is every insinuation that suggests that still life belongs to bourgeoisie sensibility. This is shown, for example, in the work of Abraham van Beyeren titled *Still Life with a Nautilus Cup*. The painting establishes a connection between a wealthy patron and the artist commissioned to produce the work. It is infused with a profusion of shellfish, fruit and other foods symbolically suggestive of Europe's growing trade networks in the years of empire.

Still life, no doubt, celebrates the material success of their owners. In early Dutch still life paintings, for example, the surfaces of the paintings are replete with excessive ornamentations that reveal the wealth of the owners. It is also important to note that the rise of still-life painting in the Northern and Spanish Netherlands reflects the increasing urbanization of Dutch and Flemish society, which emphasized personal belongings, trade, knowledge—all the features and distractions of everyday life.

In this exhibition moralizing meanings are reflected in some works of South African artists such as Robert Hodgins's *A Conservative Still Life* and Pieter Hugo's photograph *In Tyrone Brand's Bedroom*. Both works exhibit a didactic message using skull as a motif which in certain quarters are believed to symbolize the certainty of death. In the above works, it seems that the enjoyment evoked by the sensuous depiction of the subject is in a somewhat conflict with the moralistic message. Thurman (2008) argues that "although still life painting can celebrate material success, it can also caution against it." For example, as Thurman argues, "Jacob van Els's *Still Life with Plums and Carnations* can be seen as part of a counter-tradition in Dutch painting that affirmed simplicity in reaction against such excess." On the other angle plumes could be suggestive of decay.

Thematically, works in this exhibition cut across social, cultural and political nuances evident in the curator's choice of demarcating works by 'sections.' Similarly, the formal expressiveness also comes with its own diversification. The renditions are in the ranges of conventional, unconventional and extreme conceptualisation of forms.

One major curatorial lapse in this exhibition is evidence of a more traditional model where works have to be demarcated not by stylistic affinities but by thematic or perhaps cultural and genre association. The space again may not have helped the categorization. Some works were misrepresented because of the sectionalising. The choice of detaching photography from the rest of the exhibition is again old fashioned. This is still in keeping with the tradition of exhibiting photography as a 'contradistinct' genre from other art mediums and as one lacking in integration with others; of course, the curator could have as well separated oil, acrylic or pastel paintings. This shows that photography has not been fully integrated and some curators still believe in its isolation.

Another major shortcoming of the exhibition is lighting. This impaired visibility especially in station 12 where most works wore a surrealistic mood; the opaqueness of the works was heightened by the un-illuminated room. Beyond the above obvious pitfalls, "Is There Still Life," is significant for its attempt to mix Western and non-Western artworks thereby breaking the "modernist hierarchization of cultures" (McEvelley, 1996:36).

In the end the exhibition was complete with works that reflected the dichotomy between sufficiency and lack as could be seen from Vivien Kohler, *Basic Necessities*, suggestive of a condition quite critical to the socio-economic needs of most Africans while Penny Siopis's *Piling Wreckage upon Wreckage* which shows hundreds of objects cluttering the scene offers a critical assessment of post-apartheid consumerism and environmental concerns.

Dunga Manzi / Stirring Waters

The second exhibition I look at is Dungalamanzi. Dungalamanzi is the first major exhibition to celebrate Tsonga and Shangaan art and heritage. Part of the aims of this exhibition is to address "the problems of alienation and silence" (Leibhammer 2007:1) and to "bring the knowledge and living memory of the Makhubeles to the artworks" (Ibid). The exhibition which showed at The Iziko South African Gallery from January 1, 2008 to June 30, 2008 may have, obviously, succeeded in inciting public sensibilities to the Tsonga and Shangaan cultural milieu but the question is whether it actually resolved an on-going debate about "terminology, labelling and classification" (Ibid) when African art is involved. The curators presented South African art from an ethnographic point of view though attempts were made, albeit unsuccessfully, to contemporize some aspects of it. There may be some omission of some technical and professional expertise expected of an exhibition of this nature. It may have also perpetuated a "dehistorized view of the (Southern) African aesthetics" (Mercer in King 1999: 299)

I am particularly not sure whether these works were meant to be displayed as art works or objects of 'heritage.' The works of N'wa-Manjho is a mixed media work of textile, safety pins, glass beads, and thread. One may wonder why this work should not fit into the label of a post-modern work of a 'self-taught' African 'conceptualist' and what distinguishes the work "Join The March to Freedom" from the caricaturist exhibits of Paul Klee? That is where the problem of labelling comes in. What makes a work either traditional or contemporary? I am not also comfortable with the structure of this exhibition whose premise may be said to "downplay the dynamic criss-crossing of *artistic* elements thus encouraging the view of Southern African art as static" (Ibid). The real essence of these works may have been undermined because of their presentation which may have also been influenced by "official histories, social and political attitudes and recontextualization by the curators" (Leibhammer 2007:1)

Obviously there is evidence of a complex historical relationship that brought these artworks into being aptly provided by Makhubele's narration but do they strike us as traditional, modern or postmodern? Why must traditional healers be lumped under art and brought under the framework of museum pieces? Are these works products of professional curating or are they collected to serve a political purpose? If not why didn't the curators think of alternative ways of presenting the Tsonga/Shangaan world view outside the context of the museum. In fact there is a further advancement of Western preconception of what African art is all about here. Well, that is by the way.

Looking at the works the curators have tried to create categories that might seem problematic when viewed critically. There are four sections to the exhibition: "the older wood carving tradition, "the spectacular attire and equipment of traditional healer", "the innovative beading traditions of the twentieth and twenty first centuries" and lastly "the contemporary carving from the region." The above four sections show

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that there is so much to see that the space may appear grossly inadequate for such broad combination.

On display was the “carved wooden stool with chain” which falls under contemporary group but which looks like objects reproduced for a particular motive. Likewise, the arrangement of *Xikhigelo* headrests were out of context in that the traditional function is sacrificed for mere aesthetic apprehension. Indeed the problem of this exhibition is as Kobena Mercer has noted that “by de-contextualising utilitarian artefacts, (just like *Xikhigelo*) detaching them from their original intentions then repositioning them in a museum environment where they are appropriated for their aesthetic qualities alone” (Mercer in King 1999: 299) we may not address the fundamental question of identity in African art. Other objects on display are beaded textile called Minceka, waist coat worn by diviners which is imbued with figurative motifs, and other wood carvings. One thing that is significant about the works is the design ideas which comprise of geometric motifs in both symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns. This is a testament of Africa’s design ingenuity which is being undermined by the West.

This exhibition is considered as an attempt to raise debate on certain aspects of its curatorship. It succeeded in conveying a message of culture and cosmology of a group or groups of people but if its presentation is carried further beyond the domains of the walls it could make more meaningful impact on the lives of the people it is intended for.

Upstairs/Downstairs

Spaces: urban spaces, gallery spaces, artists work space, internet space, museum space, exhibition space, room, home, place, exhibition space, to mention several. These are some of the wide significations which “Upstairs/Downstairs” forces us to contemplate under its theme of ‘space.’ Although the curator presents this exhibition as a concept of interrogation bounded around ‘home,’ her continuous reference to ‘space’ again suggests a remote connotation; an amplification of the theme far beyond ‘home.’ This ample reference obviously purports a perception of this exhibition in the light of phrases like ‘urban spaces’ or the like. Can we say that this exhibition could have found a befitting appropriation in words like ‘place’ or ‘home’ as a veritable representation of works on display. The reason for this suggestion is given by the whole exhibits which did not in any way deal with the issue of urban centres as a national or international shifting contexts far removed from the individuality and confinement encoded in ‘homes.’

In my mind this exhibitions which showed at AVA gallery in March 2008 deals with individual contest for space and the curator through her text compels us to discern beyond the presented works and see ‘space’ rather than the presented ‘home.’ ‘Space’ has a tendency to either confine, desert, quit, evacuate, destroy, fragment, and in fact initiate any action that may hinder the activities of freedom or infringe on human right. But the space configurations in ‘home’ entail a desire of the individual to attain peace; it presupposes a place to enjoy love, tenderness, warmth, passion, goodwill and the struggles to achieve this is still encapsulated in the ‘home’ concept. The works on display proves no less a fact. Margaret Stone’s “Everything Must Go” is a photographic collage which shows different segments of a living room in periods of human occupation and possible eviction. There is individual contest for a little space here, perhaps a landlord evicting a tenant to reclaim his space. Another evidence is Justin Brett’s “Apartments” rendered in medium cast plaster. Again it depicts apartments in a skyscraper viewed as a mark of individualism in modern

cosmopolitan lifestyle. It bespeaks of a life of seclusion and locked-up-enclosures standing in strong opposition to primeval communal life in Africa. This type of living may be seen to be devoid of friendly love. “Attendant’s Quarters, Shell Garage near Colesberg” a light-jet print also shows human habitation in a manner that does suggest neighbourly co-existence. We may blame the curator for Ed Young’s ‘Squashed’ and its attempt to exclude plebeian appreciation, conceal interpretations and unveil a successful obscurity. This type of work is still open to critical attack for its intention to eliminate non-professional, non-elite observers. Charles Maggs’ “Walking Man” is a video display of a man moving around space. This is a story of man’s constant voyage through instruments of obstruction erected by ‘man’ himself. As he walks, he meanders through narrow spaces like doors, and tries hard not to encroach into others’ spaces. Perhaps, there may be another dimension to this interpretation. Two of the most remarkable works on display is Gugulective’s “Upstairs/Downstairs” and “The Building is the Man” (figure 1). But the puzzle lies around more on “The Building is the Man,” a living space using the wall of the exhibition hall as the floor of a room and the floor of the exhibition hall as the wall of a room. This room is suggestive of what obtains from ghetto dwellings. A multi-purpose apartment where a small living room space serves as a bedroom, a kitchen, a sitting room, and in some instances a toilet.



Figure 1. The Gugulective – The Building Is The Man (2008).

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Now back to the curator's perceived intention at representation of space. Gugulective's works present a ghetto not from a socio-nationalist context, not as an issue that would initiate a debate around a nation's constitutional exclusion of the less privileged but as a socio-psychological inquiry of an individual and his quest to find a place in the society. This is a personalised struggle that would revolve around 'home' rather than 'space.'

Apart from the above thematic (mis)readings one may begin to ask why the curator decided to present Nandipha Mntambo's "decommissioned guns and Knives" in the manner it was presented. Does the artist have a good reason to interrogate space using this medium and does it fit into the context used in this exhibition? How does the work interact with the museum space? Another perceived misplacement by the curator is Jake Aikman's "David Scadden, Beside Himself" which does not seem to connect with both 'space' as a concept and the space allotted to it in the AVA hall.

In conclusion, "Upstairs/Downstairs" serves as a reminder of humanity's historic dislocations in urban spaces brought about by the globalization of world's economy and culture. It is reminiscent of South Africa's radical fragmentation of urban spaces resulting from Apartheid. I would rather advocate for 'home' as the theme of this exhibition rather than 'space,' otherwise the curator should have gone beyond the living rooms and quarters. She should have drawn us into the ghettos, into the cities, into the villages, into market places, into geography, into sociology and in fact into every other means that would satisfy our notions of 'space' in a wider perspective.

Atlantic Art Gallery

ATLANTIC art gallery goes the name. Here are works reminding one of Joan Miro, Salvador Dali, Giorgio De Chirico, Art Deco vestiges among others. This gallery which is located in Long Street, Cape Town does not engage in formal art exhibitions and works are permanently on collection. This is an uncurated gallery show where even professional artists sell their works. On display is a perfect re-enactment of what looks like 19th century art movements in Western Europe lumped together with other South African art forms in a market oriented manner. This is a very good place for curators to vent anger were it open for curatorial assessment. But the director has remarked: "They are purely commercial" and she does not want to hold brief on that. We are constantly inundated by the so called uncurated exhibitions as art seems to be a booming business with a lot of economic attraction.

Uncurated art shows most often are commercially driven and this has generated a controversy among critics over the desire by commercial gallery owners to hawk art. Their argument is premised on the perception of art by commercial gallery owners as 'business' which does not need professional curating. For example, in Atlantic art gallery the artworks do not have price tags and this is part of the market strategies employed by the owners to lure prospective customers. Prices are basically negotiable. This practice is thought as substandard by professionals who uphold the view that "integrity is most important for an art gallery." The amount of artworks piled on top of one another in haphazard manner bespeaks of scarcity of ideas and an emphasis on quantity than quality. Over time this alternatives resonated with critical debates in form of 'art as academic enterprise' and 'art as commercial enterprise' but even some that uphold the later notion still involve curators to forestall a process of

degeneration. This type of gallery encourages artistic forgery as artists will be compelled sometimes to heed to mercantilist demands. Very striking resemblance of R. Shingsby's works to that of Joan Miro may testify to this fact. One may assume that buyers now want to see a replica of Joan Miro and Shingsby being the next to his style would be asked to reproduce concepts.

As art assumes greater autonomy in the hands of inept and inexperienced practitioners, no visible efforts have been made to abbreviate such unwholesome gallery practice. This is even attributed to increasing agitations for more alternatives that allows 'low' and 'high' art practice to exist *parri passu* as a necessary prerequisite towards achieving an eclectic and exciting art community. For this reason we may conclude that for Atlantic art gallery, 'everything goes.'

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