

A research focus on “Visual and Performing Arts of Africa” (ViPAA)

Professor Ruth Simbao

Despite the fact that Africans have always produced art, the discipline of Art History has been shaped less by Africans on the continent and more by the legacy of colonialism. As a result, ‘African art’ has a history of being framed largely by European and North American art enthusiasts who posit themselves as collectors of African art and view Africans and their creative productions as ‘raw material’ for study and collection.

While this history has to some extent been challenged and critiqued, according to Professor Ruth Simbao, an Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture in the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University, not enough has actually changed. As a result the contemporary discourse of ‘African art’ is still largely controlled by privileged institutions, curators and scholars in or closely aligned with the West.

For Professor Simbao, this means that the study of the arts of Africa is in crisis:

“With the recent rise of what scholars call ‘Global art’ comes the announcement - by scholars in the West - that ‘new artworlds’ have not only been welcomed by the international artworld since 1989, but are in fact determining the shape of ‘Global art’. While this might be the case to a small extent, below the surface it remains largely untrue. Of concern is the fact that while ideas of globalization, deterritorialization and post-geographies are theoretically exciting this embrace of ‘Global art’ and ‘Global Africa’ obscures perceptions of the problem. Selected artists from these ‘other artworlds’ - largely the Global South - are at times far removed from local art scenes, and the core institutional culture of ‘global’ art spaces and art discourses have barely changed beyond superficial transformation and inclusion.”

As such, this international discourse more often than not excludes what is actually happening on the African continent. However, from this crisis comes the opportunity to reconsider how the arts of Africa are framed and taught within our institutions. At Rhodes University this platform is created by the “Visual and Performing Arts of Africa” (ViPAA) research focus area,¹ which is led by Professor Simbao:

“There are so many exciting things happening on the continent but often these things are not well documented or there aren’t the right avenues or resources available to local artists to move beyond the local context. What we aim to do is document and analyse that which takes place in local art scenes on the continent, developing theoretically progressive ideas about geopolitics and place. As a team, we produce exhibitions, books and journal articles, advancing strong local voices that engage



ViPAA focus area research group

Photo: Paul Greenway

¹ Funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation and launched in 2011, ViPAA is a research team based in the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University.

globally to produce, analyse and theorise alternatives to the problematically limited international discourse.”

The audacity of place

For the last three years Professor Simbao has led the ViPAA team in a study of these geopolitical problems by researching a number of sub-themes under the umbrella of “The Audacity of Place and the Global South”. As she explains:

“There is a lot of fascinating work being produced by Human Geographers, for example, on the importance of embedded yet agile notions of place, however the dominant artworld tends to flatten place. Post 1989, the rise of art biennales and art fairs across the world has played a significant role in flattening the stories of art and creative production. Despite the perceptions of flatness created by the dominant discourse, in actuality art around the world is not becoming the same, for new differences and new forms of diversity are continually being produced by creative human beings. Rather, what is happening is that privileged art institutions produce the mirage of sameness, and only the select few works that fit into the discourse of privilege receive substantial international recognition. Works that don’t reflect this image are often either patronized or completely ignored.”

Since the start of the Focus Area theme ‘The Audacity of Place’ in 2011 eight students, all of whom have been core members of the ViPAA team, have written and graduated with theses on various issues of place and art. This is especially significant considering that within a discourse of contemporary arts of Africa that prefers a supposedly global framework, these theses all engaged with ‘embedded concepts of place and the production of knowledge from locally situated perspectives’,² such as South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Nigeria.

Also significant were the *Making Way*³ exhibitions curated by Professor Simbao that included students from the ViPAA team, most notably Dotun Makun⁴

and Gerald Machona⁵. These exhibitions sought “ways of opening up new conversations about cultural diversity, social tolerance and human understanding at a time of intense movement and change in the Global South,”⁶ with a specific focus on Africa-China relations.

Reviewing the exhibition, Darryl Accone⁷ wrote, “Appreciation and thanks must go to Simbao and the African and Chinese artists she has gathered so sensitively and skillfully to present a picture of the very human nature of the Africa-China relationship.”⁸

Acknowledging this human element was key, as explained by Professor Simbao:

“Human beings are creative, and creativity produces diversity. While it is obvious that not everyone in China or everyone in Africa thinks the same way, there is a tendency for these nuances and differences of human experiences and opinions to be flattened in the economic and political arenas. This exhibition attempted to reveal individual experiences of artists who engaged with concepts of movement in a bottom-up way, rather than claiming broad geopolitical statements about China and Africa.”

Veering to the global south

The Focus Area group is also currently in the process of producing a book titled ‘Veering South: Place, Culture and Society’ edited by Professor Simbao, who notes that eight out of the thirty proposed authors are or have previously been ViPAA members. This publication aims to rigorously analyse society, culture and the arts of the ‘Global South’ and is significant in that it emphasises

² Professor Ruth Simbao, Fine Art Focus Area Report and Proposal, p6.

³ *Making Way* opened at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in June 2012. It then moved to the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg in January 2013.

⁴ Dotun Makun is a painter from Nigeria, and is currently based in Lagos. He graduated with a Master in Fine Art degree from Rhodes University in 2011 where he majored in painting.

⁵ Gerald Machona is a Zimbabwean born visual artist with a Masters Degree in Fine Art from Rhodes University.

⁶ www.makingway.co.za

⁷ Darryl Accone is a writer, teacher and independent scholar based in Johannesburg. His work includes non-fiction, memoir and fiction and he teaches Creative Writing at the University of Witwatersrand School of Arts.

⁸ Mail & Guardian, 1 February 2013, p9.

scholarship that analyses the complexities of the South and is produced within the South. As Professor Simbao explains:

“Obviously the Global South is not a homogenous entity, and it is critical that scholarly engagement maintains slippages, nuances, tensions and contradictions when talking this way about the world. However, while recognizing the myth of this framework, it can still be an important way to frame discussions about art and cultural production, challenging the illusion of sameness produced by privileged art institutions.”

According to Professor Simbao, discussions of the ‘Global South’ often focus on economics, framing the south as ‘poor’ and ‘deprived’. Instead, the proposed publication ‘Veering South: Place, Culture and Society,’ draws on theories from the book by Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, which argues that the ‘south’ has insights that the ‘north’ can, and needs to learn from.

“This shifts the perspective from Africa being a resource of raw material to be analysed and theorised by scholars in the north, to Africa being a place of insight and leading ideas. Certainly in the artworld, this perspective is rare,” explains Professor Simbao.

Strengthening the continent

For Professor Simbao, this emphasis on producing high quality scholarly outputs is what makes the ViPAA Focus Area important in an African context:

“There is an emphasis on producing scholarship in this area that is published in internationally visible sources so that scholarly voices in Africa are heard and are able to make an impact in the broader art world. As such, we aim to do more than just produce interesting art projects in a local context. It’s imperative that these projects are used to theorise and analyse the discourse so that African artists and scholars set the trends from within Africa. This is critical as Africans need to have more agency in terms of how ‘African art’ is exhibited, framed, viewed and written about.”

Critically linked to this approach is institutional collaboration with universities across Africa and Professor Simbao has already begun to establish connections with universities in Zambia and Uganda, which she plans to strengthen in 2014. She hopes that this will allow the ViPAA team to move beyond South Africa to build south-south conversations across the African continent and beyond. This approach to the field of visual and performing arts of Africa could also go some way in strengthening the production of Art History and Visual Culture knowledge through meaningful collaboration.

Professor Simbao has also proposed a mentoring project called Residencies for Artists and Writers in the Eastern Cape (RAW--EC). RAW--EC aims to provide residencies at Rhodes University to artists from South Africa and other parts of Africa. These artists will then be paired with emerging writers who in turn are mentored by scholars with strong research and publishing track records. The idea is for artists and writers to engage with one another to bring new voices into conversations of art locally, nationally and further afield. As Professor Simbao explains:

“I think this is really important in South Africa, especially in terms of art criticism and scholarly writing where many of the same voices are being heard and therefore the same kinds of things are being said. Ultimately, I would like this to become part of the ViPAA Focus Area and I would like to bring artists in from other countries in Africa. The critical focus of the project will be on emphasizing the importance of publication in credible sources to allow artists and writers to receive international exposure. Hopefully this will enable new voices to be part of an international scholarly debate so that the international discourse of ‘African art’ can shift. I’m quite excited about the project and if we can find further funding to keep the project going and expand the pool of artists beyond South Africa, then we can do a lot with it.”

Moving forward into 2014

As Professor Simbao leads the research team into 2014, the ViPAA Focus Area will take on two new connecting themes that she hopes will enable them to continue to grapple with ‘the disjuncture and the stereotypes that grow out of recent global shifts and current moves to explore a ‘Global Art History’⁹.

⁹ Professor Ruth Simbao, Fine Art Focus Area Report and Proposal, p3.

These new themes will be 'Visuality and Forms of Blindness' and 'Performing Self/Performing Society', as explained by Professor Simbao:

"The notion of blindness is so important to scholars in visual culture because we focus so much on seeing, but when we see, there is also so much that we don't see, both literally and metaphorically. This idea can be applied to the artworld and to the idea of what is framed as 'African art' as there are persistent blind spots in the international artworld's perception of the arts of Africa."

There are currently fourteen PhD and Masters students engaged in the ViPAA Focus Area, a number Professor Simbao hopes will continue to increase with time and with increased collaboration, both within Rhodes University and beyond:

"For me ViPAA is very much about a desire to build the next generation of African artists and scholars, who can challenge the international discourse of 'African art'. Many of our students have already started to realize the importance of what we are doing; they want to speak for themselves and correct outside perspectives of what the arts of Africa are. Importantly, though, it's not about producing a regressive, rigid separation of place

that buys into a dichotomy of 'here' and 'there'. We retain a very strong desire to engage globally but with the hope of shifting the international discourse on an ideological level, producing locally embedded knowledge that challenges current perspectives. It's a long term project but from a scholarly perspective it's absolutely crucial. There are still a lot of walls to break down but I am positive it is going to develop into something significant."

- Laura Watermeyer