

Art of the expedient

Gamal Nkrumah recalls a recent photographic pronouncement of the aesthetic paradoxes of Africa

Let the existing foreclosure of an exhibition of African photographic genius speak for itself. Not every show merits a standing ovation, but the display of historic photographs of Africa at the precise point in the 1950s and 1960s when African spirits were high and aspirations were in the ascendant. The contrast with contemporary Africa is striking. Cultural organisations across the African continent desperately need to do more to help themselves. A new act is theatrically unfolding in the drama of arts funding in Africa. The key word is neo-colonialism. African artists are called upon to play their role to the full.

Nevertheless, African arts institutions are struggling in an age of public and private austerity. Overhauling the grant allocation process, masterminded by European benefactors is no longer welcome. The colonial system of funding favoured African arts institutions ran the risk of inducing a grotesque form of African complacency and dependency. Who else in Africa but the old colonial masters in Europe are willing and able to reward African creativity?

Visionary Africa Art at Work is an itinerant urban exhibition of contemporary African artistic practices with the objective of highlighting how culture and creativity could be manipulated to advance development. "This initiative is an integral part of the strategic partnership between the European Union and the African Union. There are 25 million Diaspora Africans resident in Europe. Africa is Europe and Europe is Africa," Paul Dujardin, Director of the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

The first EU-Africa summit convened in Cairo in 2000. One thing is best explained at the start -- a paradox to some Sub-Saharan Africans and North Africans as well -- that Africa is one continent.

The image conjured up by Africa is replete with violence, lack, abject poverty, destitution and barbarous drama. Visionary Africa: Art at Work is specifically designed to counter such malicious badmouthing and abominations. It is not so much about the continent fabulous archeological sites and artifacts, the impressive Axum obelisks of ancient Ethiopia or the Great Zimbabwe ruins. Rather it is about the mundane -- people, prostitutes -- white and black at work in the bars of cities and small towns in the deepest recesses of darkest Africa.

Africa is replete with many paradoxes, contradictions and exceptions to the rules of conventional wisdom. Poignant photographs of dancing adolescents and working women hint at a world of a sophisticated urban culture. Cities of concrete jungle, congested traffic and suffocating pollution.

The performing arts are virtually dying in vacuity and derision. The descent into vitriolic ideological and political polarisation is played out with an identity crisis smouldering away.

North Africa has a new swagger. It is not quite in step with the rest of Africa. There is political Islam, there are Western secularist values, and there are indigenous intellectual influences. The phenomenal sweeping to power of the Islamists in parliamentary

elections has brought a simmering continental quarrel once more to a furious boil. The North African post-Arab Spring from now on requires the Islamic Sharia laws to verify the status and certify the credentials of those whom they suspect of debauchery -- artists, musicians and dancers. Much depends on what the Islamic Sharia law and the courts take debauchery to mean.

Does North Africa understand what is at stake? The state in North Africa pleads no choice. To put it bluntly, freedom of expression -- in poetry, on stage or in film -- is not compatible with the militant Islamist rulebook. Yet, Islamists or at least the more open-minded and moderate ones, are vaguely conscious that they ought not to make fundamental rule changes as far as art and culture is concerned.

Luck has not played a particularly large role in the Islamists' recent good fortune in North Africa. The secularists are still searching for a practical political philosophy that will hand them power on a silver platter.

What would be wrong is to believe that their dazzling performance at parliamentary polls is all down to the Islamists own Herculean efforts. The West has turned a blind eye as long as its oil supplies are secured.

"The question of the exhibition is intimately bound to that of the audience, and it seems to me to be a question of obvious theoretical relevance, as it symbolises, I believe, a question to which the contemporary world, in the broadest sense, will have to provide answers," curator Simon Njami extrapolated, he is one of Africa's most distinguished international curators.

"What audience do we reach out to when we design an exhibition outside of the traditional places of consecration, namely museums and biennials? How can one make a contemporary art project accessible to all, in countries where the institutional and artistic infrastructure is lacking?" These are pertinent questions put by Njami. "The more structured a society is, the more totalitarian its public sphere will appear, because in such cases, the state is in charge both of the means of control and of implementation," he expounds.

"In so-called 'third world' countries, and particularly in Africa, the manner in which the people use the instruments available is frequently characterised by a transformation and reinterpretation, both of which I feel are central to open exhibitions," Njami notes.

"The Charter of the African Cultural Renaissance is a cultural tool that empowers Member States to promote Pan- Africanism and cultural renewal, and guides the elaboration and implementation of national policies towards the achievement of common goals," Chairman of the Commission of the African Union Jean Ping

"With its launch at the Africa-EU Summit in and its subsequent travels to Addis Ababa and Ouagadougou, Art at Work tested its proposals on the field. I have been a great advocate of the African Cultural Renaissance and I am pleased to find its spirit at the heart of Visionary Africa. The project's success in Africa depends on the cooperation of local communities, artists, and cultural organisations, on their interaction with ideas put forward by curators David Ajayi and Simon Njami," Ping stated categorically.

"The pavilion I conceived and designed for Visionary Africa: Art at Work is compromised of three gallery spaces, three entrances passages that interconnect, and a central tower, which acts as a sign that can be seen from surrounding area. The way in which these components are brought together creates three types of space: linear in-

between spaces for movement, square-shared volumes for stopping and looking, and a central gathering space at the base of the tower," David Adjaye extrapolates.

"The entrance spaces are open to the sky, but the gallery spaces are overhung by pergola-type tools roofs whose depth creates shade in the shape in spaces below. The roofs also overhung the edges of the pavilion and suggest a fourth research on each of the 52 African capitals," Adjaye expounds.

"My concept for these pavilions is based on the on the notion that they represent a molecular unit for the design of an art space," Adjaye notes.

"Our idea I to talk about art and work, with the intention of supporting civil society in a wide range of locations."

"Instead of spending money to campaign for better facilities, we used that money to work with an art institution, or a non- profit organisation, to build a structure. The structure is linked to a local organisation that looks after it, and that will allow artists who are not in the mainstream to show their work in a space that supports public discussion and education," Adjaye elaborates.

"To meet both sets of requirements, the exterior of the building is as much part of the exhibition as the interior," he adds.

"There is no shortage of large spaces in Africa, and there are many large sheds that are not fully used. What sometimes happens is that they are subdivided using cheap wall systems and end up becoming rambling bazars," Adjaye paints a prosaic picture.

"I conceived the galleries as an alternative to this type of scenario, as they are intended to be big enough to accommodate any are without the need to manipulate the space," Adjaye remarks.

"The Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, joined hands in 2009, and together conceived and brought to light the cross- disciplinary platform, Visionary Africa," Paul Dujardin interjects.

And beyond that, the Centre for Fine Arts (CFA), Belgium, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), the Palais des Beaus Arts (PBA) and Adjaye Associates cooperated. They collaborated together with Egyptian artists and art centre directors such as Moataz Nasr Darb1718 director where the workshop of Visionary Africa at work was convened on a cold and wintry day. This was soon after a delightful opening evening at the Azhar Park where the exhibition of photographs that provide an insight into the intellectual and aesthetic profusion of artistic output in Africa.

C a p t i o n : Idi Amin is proclaimed president of Uganda

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