

POSITIONING NOKO

Unearthing the 'cosmo' in the 'local'

Prof Ruth Simbao

Galerie NOKO opened its doors in the Central district of the Nelson Mandela Bay area of the Eastern Cape in 2014. According to the Charge d'affaires, Usen Obot, the gallery aims to grow the arts industry by highlighting "alternative voices" (Straton 2015). Positioning the gallery as community-minded, he seeks to make the gallery accessible to the public in order to facilitate richer appreciation and knowledge of art (Williams 2014).

The inaugural exhibition in 2014 was titled *Redefinition of the status quo*. Since then a number of exciting themed exhibitions and public dialogues have taken place, including the exhibitions *No Caveat*, *Breaking Surface*, *NewNowNext*, *Saints & Sinners* and *The Art State*, and the public dialogue, *Africa Art*, *Multi-culture* and the *Factor X Discourse*.

What might it suggest to launch a new gallery with an exhibition titled *Redefinition of the status quo*? In what ways might the status quo be interpreted from the perspective of a gallery, artists and viewers located in the Eastern Cape – one of the poorest and, as some might say, the most art-starved provinces in South Africa? More importantly, how is the status quo being redefined and who is leading this charge?

...and the rest

When I conducted a Google search using the phrase 'commercial galleries in the Eastern Cape', the first website that appeared was headed *Galleries in the Western Cape*, revealing close to fifty galleries in Cape Town and a further fourteen galleries in the "Rest of the Western Cape". The Eastern Cape was at first glance invisible, as it fell indelicately under the label "...rest of South Africa", following the usual big three: "Galleries in Gauteng", "Galleries in KwaZulu-Natal" and "Galleries in the Western Cape".

This discourse of "...the rest" is all too familiar in the art world, particularly to art practitioners and enthusiasts based on the African continent that was, for a long time, categorised as part of "the rest", prompting Chinweizu's (1978) and Stuart Hall's (2006) critique of "the West and the rest". While such critique might seem passé to contemporary ears tuned to globalisation and purported de-centralisation, Hall's elucidation of discourse – that which limits other ways of constructing ideas about things – persuades us to gauge whether such restrictive ways of categorising 'place' (the 'West', 'Africa' and accompanying stereotypes) have actually disappeared.

While proponents of 'global art' have set 'place-bound' art free, rendering the question "Where is an artist from?" virtually obsolete, the underlying issues of power (the power not to be restricted by, named by or shaped by others) have not necessarily expired. New or perhaps more subtle forms of redlining still exist, and while our 'global' art-maps

denote vibrant, interconnecting flows, barely-buried lines of exceptionalism still operate within many minds.

Who is exceptional?

At a moment when 'Africa' is being paraded at art fairs across the world, who is exceptional? Are we sufficiently conscious of the effect of South African exceptionalism in the world of contemporary art? South Africa might be projected as an 'African country' when it participates in the gains of contemporary art's 'Afrifad' (Simbao 2008), but many South Africans still view South Africa as exceptional in light of what is often perceived as the broader socio-political and socio-economic 'scourge' of the continent – "...the rest of the continent", "them". During apartheid, South Africa exhibited a "dangerous and inexcusable ignorance about Africa", and the (at times romanticised) post-apartheid 'African renaissance' is often tightly associated with neoliberalism and global capitalism (Lazarus 2004).

What other forms of exceptionalism exist when we compare galleries based in Port Elizabeth, for example, to galleries in the self-declared 'world-class' city of Cape Town or the 'Afropolis' of Johannesburg, which, albeit a gritty and extremely painful place for many, is often framed as fashionably cosmopolitan? What does this discourse that shapes identities of places suggest about Gallery Noko, which is based in the Eastern Cape, and how does it position Noko in terms of constructions of value – that is, the most valued artworks and the most sought after artists?

As Galerie NOKO exhibited artist Michael Barry laments, a lot of Eastern Cape art talent tends to be 'exported' to larger cities with more robust arts industries (Williams 2014). Similarly, one of the artists participating in Ambassador's Footprint, Benele Njadayi, asserts: "It is hard to establish a name for yourself in the art arena especially in Port Elizabeth". What do the artists (Benele Njadayi, Lorinda Pretorius, Johan Bloom and Siyabonga Ngaki in Ambassador's Footprint and Mathias Chirombo in the special project, Consuming Us) offer this international platform, and what does this relatively new gallery bring to the table at the 2016 Cape Town Art Fair? Does it matter where the gallery is situated? Surely geographic positioning is not relevant, after all?

Where are you a local?

If Noko's inclusion in the Cape Town Art Fair prompts the crudely worded question (either directed at the gallery, its director or its associated artists): "Where are you from?", then I'd suggest geographic positioning is indeed irrelevant. As creative writer Taiye Selasi (2014) argues, "As any recent immigrant knows, the question 'Where are you from?' or

'Where are you really from' is often code for 'Why are you here?'. Underlying this question, she suggests, is the desire to categorise the world in relation to power: "Where are you from? Mexico. Poland. Bangladesh. Less power. Germany. Japan. More power. China. Russia. Ambiguous". While her critique is specifically aimed at the strained concept of 'the nation', simplistic perceptions of power propped up by inventions of value, creep easily into various aspects of our assessment and consumption of art. Art – as discourse – is infamous for its exclusiveness. While we might think that the art world no longer sings to the tune of Euro-American elitism and South African exceptionalism ("Lusaka. Harare. Less power. New York. Berlin. Power. Johannesburg. Cape Town. Ambiguous"), even within South Africa's borders, we perpetuate exclusivity in the arts: "Johannesburg. Cape Town. Cosmopolitan. Port Elizabeth. Mthatha. Parochial".

Moving away from the reductionistic question "Where are you from?" Selasi proposes that we ask: Where are you a local? At which grocery stores, spaza shops, cafes or markets is your face familiar to others? For most of us, our answer takes on a plural form, be it shops in Paris, Dakar and Johannesburg, or stores in Vukani, Butterworth and Cintca. Many of us would quickly assume, though, that one of these experiences is naturally cosmopolitan while the other is inevitably parochial. But this is not necessarily so.

In Selasi's words, many of us are "multi-local". "The difference between 'Where are you from?' and 'Where are you a local?' isn't the specificity of the answer, it's the intention of the question".

Relishing in the cosmological

A key goal of Galerie NOKO is to foster diversity in the visual arts, and in so doing engage with local and international artists, create dialogue between practitioners of local, national and international stature, and stimulate intersections between the art world and the broader public. Galerie NOKO's participation in the 2016 Cape Town Art Fair, I submit, plays a significant role in generating diversity, not just diversity within the Eastern Cape – its immediate community, but also in generating diversity at this international platform.

It's important that we don't limit our thinking in terms of what diversity can actually mean. Is a South African art fair diverse if we include a few artists from 'other African countries' but all the South African artists are only local in Cape Town and Johannesburg? Is it diverse if participating artists are local in a myriad of places, but the aesthetic of all the works simply reads the same?

In her talk, "Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local", Selasi draws from the research of William Deresiewicz who writes, "Students think that their environment is diverse if one comes from Missouri and another from Pakistan –

never mind that all of their parents are doctors or bankers".

In considering where one might be a local, Selasi suggests that one asks oneself three questions: 1) What are my rituals and in what places do daily rituals make me feel at home? 2) Who are my meaningful relationships with, and 3) what are my restrictions? Am I judged, accused or discriminated against in a space that others might assume is my refuge – my 'home'?

While I have lived in seven towns or cities in five different countries – Kapsabet, Hammanskraal, Cape Town, Toronto, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Lusaka and Grahamstown – and spent my longest years in Cape Town, if I reflect upon Selasi's three 'R's' (rituals, relationships and restrictions) I realise that length of stay does not amount to feeling more at home. When I contemplate why being active in art circles in Lusaka feels more comfortable for me than being present in the art scenes of the Western Cape or the USA, I am reminded of my experience when I participated in Galerie NOKO's public dialogue, Africa Art, Multi-culture and the Factor X Discourse, last year.

It was during the period when South Africa was in the throes of rolling blackouts, and I was speaking on a panel with Molemo Moiloa (Director of VANSAs) and Michael Barry (from NMMU), which was chaired by Mathias Chirombo. At the start of the talks we were plunged into darkness, except for the glow from a building across the road that was fed by a separate electricity grid. As we huddled around candles as artist, academics and gallerists, it felt somewhat poignant that the red-yellow glow that warmed our discussions of art and society, emitted from the neon Adult World sign across the way. Feeling as if we were in the rosse buurt of the Eastern Cape, I was strangely at home, not due to the presence of a sex shop per se, but due to the figurative attendance of the 'outside world' – in this case not personally invited but welcome nonetheless. In a global commercial artworld that tends to breed sameness framed as 'standards' and 'value' (it is not uncommon for one biennale to look similar to another biennale, which could in fact be any other biennale), Gallery Noko advances much needed diversity.

That night, in the supposed backwaters of the Eastern Cape I heard as many, if not more, different accents, different opinions, different agendas and different visions than I've heard in art settings in Paris, Kingston and Hong Kong. Some people were activists, although not all were actuating the same cause. Some students were from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University – a university off the grid of institutions deemed 'world class'. Some were neither artists, nor critics, nor educators, nor gallerists; some were local in Port Elizabeth, others in Lagos, Lusaka, Grahamstown or Harare.

If we talk about globalisation, it is critical to recognise the cosmological – to go beyond the often-elitist networks of academia and commercialisation, and to go further than the large cities easily marketed as cosmopolitan.

It only takes a small shovel to unearth the 'cosmo' in the 'local', and Galerie NOKO sheds this light.

REFERENCES

- Chinweizu. 1978. *The West and the Rest of Us*. Lagos: Nok Publishers.
- Hall, S. 2006. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power". In *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives* edited by R. C. A. Maaka and C. Andersen. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Lazarus, N. 2004. "The South African Ideology: The Myth of Exceptionalism, the Idea of Renaissance". *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(4): 607-628.
- Selasi, T. 2014. "Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local". TEDglobal talks. www.ted.com. Accessed January 2016.
- Simbao, R. 2008. "Afri thing is not what is seems", *Art South Africa* 7(1), Spring 2008, 58-63.
- Straton, A. "Gallery Noko First Birthday Celebration". *MyPE News*. 4 November 2015. www.mype.co.za. Accessed January 2016.
- Williams, A. "Creating canvas for others: New gallery to market emerging artists and mentor pupils for free". *Herald Live*. June 22, 2014. www.heraldlive.co.za. Accessed January 2016.
- Professor Ruth Simbao is the NRF SARChI Chair in 'Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa' at the university currently known as Rhodes.*