

Symposium
2-3 juillet

**Writing about Art:
the Role of an Art Magazine in promoting contemporary African Art**

**by Barbara Murray
23 June 2003**

(The typing error in the title of my paper – “the RULE of art magazines...” well, magazines may not rule but they have a large, widely-based contribution to make.)

I want to start by quoting an expert to lend some theory to this very practical paper. Barthes describes a text/work of art as a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of images/influences, none of them original, blend and clash”.

He says : “There is no truth to be deciphered but everything to be disentangled...”

“The space of art is to be ranged over – ceaselessly positing meanings ceaselessly to evaporate them...”

Positing meanings into the global interpretation/understanding, getting those other views into the game...”

So the space of all art, including African art, is to be ranged over, for people to draw out and add on their understandings and interpretations, which can then be shared and passed on to other people – people everywhere who are seeking better understanding and knowledge – that is the main driving force of humanity.

The artists in Africa are producing, making art... but if their work disappears, is not accessible, and people don't know about it, that work cannot have any effect, cannot add its contribution to humanity's evolution.

A work of art is a complex event. It is a site of debate – that both expresses and generates concepts, values and meanings. The true complexity of an artwork is revealed through viewing, discussion, research into the work and into its reception, the responses and ideas it creates in its audiences. Critics mediate between the work and the viewers, through study, research, interpretation and translation.

In our context, the role of translation is an important one.

If people are really to meet and understand each other, across the gap between two cultures, translation is needed. In literature that is easy to see. If I don't read French I need a translation. My understanding depends on the quality of the translation which, in turn, depends on the translator's knowledge of the

language and context of the work. In the same way visual art, music, dance need translation, or perhaps translations in the plural.

There maybe an immediate and simple response – a simple understanding - by the viewer, but the complexities and nuances remain untouched, unrealised, unless someone can initiate the viewer into those complexities. Who can recognise what is absent? ...speculate on why things are included or omitted? ...analyse the systems behind the structure and formation? ... grasp the significance of the materials, symbols, choices? ...untangle the allusions and references? ...illuminate the values expressed and explain new or unusual concepts ? To reach the deeper richness of the multiple strands that make up Barthes' "entanglement", without doubt, expertise and specific knowledge are necessary.

Every critic needs to "speak" the language of the art he or she is writing about. If an African critic, like me, arrives in Britain and makes comments there is some limited validity - and at times an outside view can bring new and relevant perspectives - but I need a lot more knowledge of the local culture to understand all that is implied - that takes time and research. I may have immediate responses which are valid but inevitably superficial. More is needed to approach that "entanglement" if I am not to end up in an even bigger entanglement, and probably mistaken in my understanding. For these reasons, African art critics and, more specifically, local art critics within individual African countries, regions and cultures, are needed. Local culture, local history, local realities, context, politics, beliefs, all enter into the concepts that artworks convey. Local translators are needed. There is no restriction on anyone analysing any art anywhere... this is not an essentialist position, but rather one that acknowledges the complexities of reality and does not seek to impose one reality onto others.

Cultures change all the time, at every moment. It is local people who experience this. There are strategies of selective appropriation going on constantly, local people analyse this. They are aware of the processes and understand the parameters. For too long, Africa has had imposed or been given prescriptions... you must/you should do X, Y, Z. Each prescription fits someone's agenda... but whose ? Human society is a conflict zone, a battle for the power to do certain things rather than others. Every relationship is an exercise in balancing power - a marriage, the relationship between mother and child, between buyer and seller - who hasn't lost their power and been "taken for a ride" when buying something ? - the cultural power struggles between traditionalist and innovator, rural and urban actors... it is the ancient human game of chess. A winning strategy depends on knowledge and the taking of the opportunities for power that are available. Even in war there is always talk of "winning the battle for hearts and minds" ... something guns can't do... Language is our strongest medium for gaining power – through speaking and writing.

We see now, more clearly than ever, the importance of hearing/reading multiple voices. We know that having one overlord or dominant system/world view deprives us all of better understanding. However, if some voices are not heard and cannot then be taken into account, those peoples will continue to be

sidelined, and their challenge, and their right to a voice, will continue to be ignored.

It is important for the voices of the south, of Africa, of minorities, to make themselves heard in the global narrative which is currently dominated by the West. One of the reasons for Western dominance is their wealth of printed material which is, so far, humanity's most successful medium for transmitting education and knowledge. Whether this will be challenged by the internet remains to be seen. I use the word "wealth" of printed material... and it is precisely that. Using knowledge leads to power and power to wealth.

Publishing art criticism is a concrete way of taking power. Once an article is printed, it is there, permanent. It won't dissolve. It will go into archives and libraries and databases... become part of the interpretive aura that surrounds a work of art and adds to its meaning and significance. Printed knowledge is concrete expression and creates a defence against the impositions of others. They have to consider it. African critics need to take up their right and their power to interpret and translate their own arts.

Fine so far... write down your knowledge in a notebook, but then what ? Who can read it ? It is necessary to publish it and get it out to be shared by others. So publish a book ? In the current situation in Africa, an art book is highly unlikely. Books are expensive to produce – you need to find substantial support to get it published and book publishers often have stringent conditions. Then, books are expensive for people to buy so the audience you reach will be smaller and probably only the elite. Writing a publishable book need extensive study and research, a long period of writing and rewriting the 100, 200 or more pages - time which few people have; and then the printing process takes more time... so that any book that comes out will probably take a minimum of 6 months. Books, of course, are important, and recently two or three books and in-depth critical catalogues on contemporary African art have been published and are making a significant impact in the West (their distribution and accessibility within Africa is still, unfortunately, very limited).

For the more realistic and practical scenario - worldwide - a cheaper, quicker, shorter and more accessible format for publishing art criticism is used... the art magazine. This is worldwide, not just for African countries. Art magazines everywhere provide a quick, accessible, easily digestible and cheaper source of up to date information and views. Their immediacy facilitates debate ; letters in reply to an article in the previous issue soon create useful discussion ; different people can insert their opinion on the same topic - for example, a local exhibition which may still be on display when the magazine is available - this leads to real exchange of ideas, respect for the multiplicity of voices and expanded understandings.

Basically art magazines are there to :

* record and give information about art

So many artworks in Africa - and the values, concepts and meanings that accompany them - disappear. There is very little printed recording of

contemporary artwork in Africa. This is the legacy for the future... for our children... for future understandings of lived realities... but much of Africa's cultural legacy is not being recorded.

Exhibitions are soon over and, all too often inaccessible particularly for the majority of people in Africa. In a recent issue of *Glendowa* the editor wrote : "catalogues go a long way, much longer than the shows themselves... people go to publications : what is written, what is said and what is not said."

Recently an architect complained to me that it was extremely difficult to get information on African architects... he wanted participants for a conference in Costa Rica on Tropical Architecture... something on which African architects have much to contribute - but he could not find any publications to guide him.

Curators who invite artists to exhibit often rely on critical articles, reviews and reproductions as reference material... again African artists are left out.

At a recent Awards Selection Committee meeting, it was clear that the role of printed material - preferably with good photographic reproductions - is extremely important. Funders too rely on printed matter to make decisions about which artists or cultural initiatives to support.

Teachers and academics need printed materials to teach and do research. In too many countries, not only in Africa, there are only printed materials on Western art and Western art history and Western theories so that is what they have to use.

Art magazines are a practical means of recording of all types of creativity and can encourage a greater development in teaching, research and particularly in art criticism which is not yet established in many African countries.

Art critics and cultural commentators need reference materials if they are to do good research. Criticism engenders further debate. Critics usually write with knowledge of and reference to other critics. They need to be aware of the arguments and able to get evidence for their propositions. A large number of students in Europe and America do masters and Ph.Ds on Zimbabwean stone sculpture... largely because there already exists a reasonable body of printed literature (books, articles, magazines, newspaper reviews) on it which they can refer to and argue with and develop into new theses. From one perspective this is transferring knowledge out of Africa, further empowering and enriching the West... it would be good if African students could be likewise engaged in investigating contemporary African art and sharing it with their societies on the continent.

* magazines promote artists and help to build up patrons and a market and interest in the artist's work... which leads to sales... which means that the artist can continue to create. This is a very important aspect of magazines. In Zimbabwe, people buying art were always very pleased to find an article on their chosen artist in *Gallery*... it provides knowledge, some authority and serve when their memories fail or when other people want information about their purchase.

Worldwide, it is an indicator of success if your work is written about. The necessity for income should not be forgotten in the rush to theory and criticism... after all if the artists can't sell then they will begin to distort their work in order to reach some sort of market and then we have sales-oriented work and the degradation of creativity. As Everlyn Nicodemus says, art functions in "precarious conditions" in Africa – magazines can help to strengthen artists and give them a more secure structure to depend on. And further, Michael Wayne says : an art magazine can form a "holding operation" – serving its own purpose, building its local base.

*art magazines generate local knowledge for the local community ; they can educate and inspire ; they can act as agents for change. Again quoting from Glendowa, Yusuf Grillo says : "the broad cross-section of the public is (in Lagos) not appreciative of art." The fact is that this applies worldwide. It is only a minority (to use our term), in every place, that appreciates the visual arts. However, the huge growth of interest in art in Europe, particularly in Britain, is, I think, in large measure related to the huge number of publications on art – at all levels and in all formats. The media play an important role – publicising exhibitions and events – art critics who write for daily newspapers have notable influence in the UK, as have TV and radio programmes on the arts... and for anyone with more than a superficial interest there are, in the UK, many specialist magazines to choose from. Art magazines, published in different African countries, could get more diverse views about art to more people and have a similar effect.

Fundamentally art magazines have the same role to play throughout the world. If you ask a French, American, German art critic, she would most likely agree that magazines play an important part in the French, American, German art scene... and the exchange of ideas between those countries. Wherever they are, it is their relative cheapness, accessibility, up-to-dateness, easy absorption (with short articles rather than long texts) and their ability to offer a range of perspectives and new ideas, that makes art magazines such a good vehicle. It is the variety of their contents that is useful. These same attributes apply in the African context.

Art magazines in Africa, and indeed in much of the non-western world, do however face some stiff challenges. Probably the first one that comes to mind for most of us is money. An art magazine does need money to staff and produce but this can be kept to a minimum. It is good to start small and keep it simple, growing when it is possible and needed. There is, however, a balance to be found, between a very inexpensive product which will have no status and give poor service, and a slightly more expensive product which provides good, perhaps colour, reproductions and can afford to pay writers and artists for their contributions. On the positive side, I think more and more sources of financing are becoming available – from local companies and businesses, outside cultural funding organisations who are realising more and more the value of such material, and, in the more enlightened countries, even from government bodies. A good proposal and a sensible budget are needed. Advertising should also be a good source of income but often it will only follow once the magazine is already successful.

In the present situation, with probably little or no competition/no other magazine covering specific topics/perspectives within a country or region, an art magazine has to take on responsibility to represent as widely and as openly as possible – something magazines in the West, which now usually cover a fairly narrow field, don't have to do. The larger field, particularly with limited staff and resources, is demanding but it does offer the potential of a wider readership.

Art magazines in Africa also have to work hard at getting readers, subscribers and users, because at the present time, that readership is not yet established as it is in Europe for instance. It takes time and effort for a readership to grow. Often inventive ideas are needed to provide for a particular need that will lead to wider readership. For example, producing a School Activity Sheet for each issue, written by an art teacher and based specifically on the content of each issue can result in the magazine being used as an effective educational tool. Involving local teachers and academics is a useful route and enables the content to reach a much bigger group. Looking at the various strategies used by other art magazines is a good means of finding alternate avenues to readers.

There is the very practical challenge of distribution. Price plays an important role here. How to get the magazine to the many people who need and want it. This is a difficult issue. Some sort of inbuilt subsidy seems necessary. With *Gallery* one of the funders agreed to free distribution to institutions that could not afford to subscribe which included the National Gallery, schools that taught art, urban and rural libraries and a selected list of African institutions that were considered important recipients. This problem of distribution applies to all aspects of contemporary African art. The few books do not reach many people in Africa, neither do the exhibitions or catalogues. Again, some new approach to distribution is needed. For example if every art institution in Africa that cannot afford to buy was provided with a copy... what a difference it would make. All these productions are funded and this aspect should, I think, be brought to the fore, as an integral part of the budget. Such use of funds would be more beneficial than some of the other expenses.

Unlike the West, the editor will have to seek out writers and critics, approach people who may become critics, and even introduce and nurture potential writers. Starting the local branch, AICA-Zimbabwe, was interesting because it drew together people from various areas of the society, many of whom were writers and interested in art but had not had the opportunity to joined the two. It may also be necessary to approach galleries and art institutions to enlist their involvement. Often generating enthusiasm for the magazine is a major hurdle, but active participation by other institutions is both practical and necessary. If it is the only magazine, it becomes a community and national effort. As a corollary, it is important that critics and editors remain sceptical and aware of whose interests are being served by any contribution and aware of their own role in selecting.

Local tensions and conflicts are inevitable. Artists demand to know why they have not been written about. Writers favour one gallery. People are upset by reviews and interpretations. Public bodies respond angrily to criticism or

suggestions. Groups resent other groups. All these things are part of every magazine's experience, again worldwide. In smaller countries and in the smaller art communities, particularly where criticism is not a prominent part of the educational system or culture, issues can become sensitive. It is important to continually balance the conflicting needs for freedom of expression and respect. However, basically very few human beings accept criticism easily and when you are inexperienced at such manoeuvring, it can be very difficult... in fact, it is one aspect of magazine production that is always difficult, everywhere.

Although I emphasise the local, it is important in Africa, as in every place, for "other" views to come in, whether these are regional or international. With so few magazines in Africa, the idea of having regional co-operation is useful... more writers and readers and artists. Within the continent, exchange of articles would greatly assist local editors by providing existing material. And internationally, for example, to be able to include articles from and to magazines such as Third Text and Nka would be very beneficial. The challenge is to remain as open as possible and to encourage the flow of ideas. Often critics from environments where magazines are common are a good source of "letters to the editor", arguments and rebuttals to articles, though again these need consideration and assessment.

Another challenge for art magazines in Africa is the balance of local and Western influence and theory... here the power of language becomes apparent. A pertinent exhibition in 1993/4 curated by Charles Gaines at the University of California was called "The Theatre of Refusal – black art and mainstream criticism". The curator juxtaposed works of art with the reviews they had received in the American press and analysed the language used. The curator investigated what he called "the tactics of powerblocking" – attempts to homogenise art i.e. make all black art "the same"; the "panic" of defensiveness at the threat posed by outsiders claiming a space in mainstream art; use of labelling; focusing on negative aspects; making jokey remarks; declaring it "unenjoyable"; dismissing work as confrontational; patronising and rejecting work as not fitting Western categories etc. We all need to be more self-aware; to analyse our use of language. "Rationalism" and "objectivity" and many other terms continue to be used as tools to maintain the status quo. As art needs translation, so too does art theory. This is an area of specialisation but one which editors in Africa need to take on. The language used to write about art informs and transforms the significance of the artwork.

And there is always the challenge of quality. What this is, and who decides, very much depends on the local context. It is important that it is "good enough" quality, that it meets local expectations and that it cannot be dismissed, particularly by outsiders. Quality writing and criticism is something that evolves. With every good article published the sense of standards and possibilities are extended. I think every society has the same proportion of intelligent, articulate members who are interested in cultural matters – whether you have ten million or one hundred million, the proportion or percentage of that population remains the same. It is a matter of finding those people. It is important for the magazine producers to have confidence in their ability to

recognise quality, but at the same time, to be very open to comments, suggestions and criticism... the critics too must be criticised. It would be good, in the context, to set up an "open university" type course for art criticism, with discussion of theories and perhaps mentoring projects with members of AICA to raise levels of awareness and gain experience. If the quality suitable for the community of readers is not achieved then the magazine will not last long.

Having said that, all magazines have a lifespan... many good ones have only lasted a year or two – and again, not only in Africa but also in Europe. It is a natural evolution. When a task is done, it goes and something new comes along and takes its place. I know the editor of a specialised sculpture journal in England who is this month coming to terms with the fact that she is working on the last issue. The magazine will stop production after only 4 years for many reasons : not enough readers, not enough interest, not enough advertisers, not enough money. The history of the birth and death of art magazines would make interesting research.

I think that even a few issues, of a magazine, specially in Africa where there is so little published, makes a contribution. In the same month that we started *Gallery* in Zimbabwe, a magazine started in South Africa which only published 2 issues... but those 2 issues are still an important statement and contribute to the archives of knowledge on South African art. Whether *Gallery* survives for much longer or not, it has made a contribution. And the strange thing is that once there has been a magazine, the need for it becomes more obvious. So even if there is a gap it will eventually be filled by someone else starting another one.

African art may not be central to the global scene, but for local communities, it is central. Africa like everywhere else is constantly redefining itself with all its contradictions, complexities and conflicts and more avenues of interaction are needed for contemporary African art and its audiences, both local and international. Art magazines are one means to stimulate and create openings and new directions. It is not for the West to "redistribute" but for Africa to claim its place, to "use strategies" such as magazines to expand its potential, to make "its own commentaries", to "escape the relational game" by doing its own development, to "interrogate itself about the cultural currents, contexts and realities", to establish its own processes and conditions so that it can then meet "others" on the global platform and exchange as an equal.