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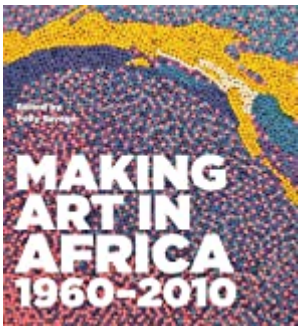

Polly Savage, ed. *Making Art in Africa, 1960-2010.* Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2014. 304 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84822-151-2.

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In The Marketplace of Creative Exchange

Subtitled âSeventy Conversations about Making Art in Africa,â *Making Art in Africa* is a series of artistâs statements about their work and their participation in artistsâ workshops, with prominence given to the international Triangle Artistsâ Workshop program initiated by Robert Loder in 1982. However, the book is not a history or chronology of the Triangle workshops, which were documented in the edited anthology *Triangle: Variety of Experience Around Artistsâ Workshops and Residencies* (2007). (Unfortunately neither that text nor Elsbeth Joyce Courtâs 2014 *Artists and Art Education in Africa* are available in Boston-area university libraries). Loderâs introductory essay and the footnotes Savage provides for the essays and each artistâs statement do provide a skeletal historical context for the reader.

The premise of the book is that collaboration and networking are central to the creative process, whether in workshops, community centers, or more formal educational settings. The elongated map of Africa that opens the book indicates the many sites mentioned in the text representing not only Triangle workshop locations but also the extensive network of artistic organizations that exist on the continent.

Making Art in Africa begins with a forward by Sir Anthony Caro and brief essays by Robert Loder, John Picton, and Polly Savage. Sir Anthony, who with Loder initiated the 1982 Triangle workshop between America, Canada, and England, expresses pleasure at the bookâs returning the reader to âthe basic emotion-given form. And we in the West can learn from itâ (p. 7). This posthumous statement hardly does justice to Caroâs ongoing contributions to the Triangle workshops in Africa and elsewhere, but rather unfortunately serves to confirm the readerâs cynical (and not entirely inaccurate) view that the workshops had colonialist underpinnings. However, it is safe to assume that the 4,000 artists who eventually participated in Triangle workshops in Africa between 1985 and 2008 benefited from them, even if in ways that may be difficult to articulate.

Savageâs introduction follows, and we learn that Caro and Loder initiated the idea to bring twenty-five

artists together for two weeks in order to continue the âsense of communityâ and creative exchange working artists had enjoyed in art school. (Because this founding idea was predicated on a Western concept of education, it did not initially take into account the fact that many African artists already were engaged in such exchanges simply as a result of the workshop conditions of their art-making.) Savage argues that since a comprehensive overview of such an extensive project was not practical, âthere was an urgent need to listen to what the artists themselves had to say and take into account the specificity of their work. We needed a multi-vocal approach that began with the work itselfâ (p. 8). The works to be discussed would be those in Loderâs collection, with the result that many of the artists interviewed participated in workshops or art schools without any direct connection to Triangle. As a group, the individual statements, Savage argues, âdemonstrate with vivid clarity the creative potential of collective action [as well as providing] compelling insight into a wide range of personal histories and artworksâ (p. 10).

Robert Loder, CBE, then provides an overview of his twenty-five-year involvement with the Triangle workshops, as well as of his professional activities in Africa that began in 1955. His summary âThe Development of Triangleâ provides a concise summary of the origins and growth of Triangle, and is indispensible. In his conclusion, Loder expresses pleasure at introducing to a wider audience the artworks âbrought together during this endeavorâ (p. 18). John Pictonâs âThe Voice of Africa: African Voicesâ follows. Picton presents a gloss of African history and then explains that this book is not art history âin the familiar sense of locating artists and their work within precise documentation, but in the way the artists talk it is history at its most basicâ (p. 23).

As an art historian, I felt sufficiently uncomfortable with the lack of context for the various workshops that I consulted the essay, âAn Artistâs Notes on the Triangle Workshops, Zambia and South Africa,â by Namubiru Rose Kirumira and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, in S. Kasfir and T. FÃ¶rster, eds., *Art and Agency in the Workshop* (2013, chapter 4). As the authors recount, the first African Triangle workshop, Thupelo, was organized in 1985 by Johannesburg-based artists David Koloane and Bill Ainslie after they had participated in a Triangle workshop in New York. The format was and remains a two-week session consisting of around twenty-five early, mid-career, and established artists engaging in open-ended, nonstructured activities designed to âexplore new ideas and expand the boundariesâ of their artistic practices (p. 116). In general, about half the artists were from the host country, the rest from elsewhere on the continent as well as from the United States or United Kingdom. One goal was that by bringing together established and informally trained artists, the latter could become more familiar with the international networks in contemporary art. Kirumira and Kasfir note that the latter often felt unprepared to contribute to the critical discourse, but nonetheless, artists would return, an option permitted because frequently the participants in future workshops were chosen by members of the previous ones. During the workshops, the artists were expected to produce two works, one of which would be donated to the sponsors to help defray its costs.

The Triangle Arts Trust is now the Triangle Arts Network and its mission has expanded along with its reach. According to its website, Triangle Arts Network sponsors workshops, residencies and exhibitions worldwide and âgenerates peer-to-peer learning, professional development for artists, curators and other arts professionals and the dissemination of emerging international art practicesâ (www.trianglearts.org).

As helpful as I hope this summary of Triangleâs history may be as a framing device for this review, the statements by artists who participated in those workshops do not constitute the majority. Rather, as explained earlier, the textâs larger mission was to establish the importance of artistic networks and exchanges in general by documenting the individual experiences of sixty-eight artists from eleven African countries. To obtain these statements, Savage traveled throughout eastern and southern Africa. Although Savage also conducted interviews in West Africa, Elsbeth Court and Atta Kwami contributed the majority from Nigeria and Ghana, respectively.

At the beginning of the sessions, each artist was shown a reproduction of a work of theirs from the Loder collection and asked, âDo you remember this work?â The resulting responses vary widely, needless to say, but generally the image produced insightful recollections of the artistâs career as well as of the time and place in which the work was made. The edited statements are organized by country (beginning with Nigeria, even though the first Triangle workshop was not held there until 1999). A brief timeline listing artistic and political developments in each country precedes the interviews.

With approximately one-third of the interviews (twenty-four of the sixty-eight) conducted in South Africa, that section is divided between Johannesburg/Limpopo and Cape Town, each with its own

separate timeline. The statements from Johannesburg/Limpopo and Cape Town sections are indicative of some of the rewards and disappointments of the book. Louis Maqhubela, whose style spanned his genre paintings based on his life in Soweto to the modernist work created after settling in London in 1978, provides a narrative of his career that interweaves his educational and artistic experiences. His âvoiceâ effortlessly negotiates the complexities of artmaking during the apartheid era, and his study at Goldsmithâs and Slade in London, and the work reproduced, presents an artist of the first rank. In contrast, the following commentary is by Neil Dundas, curator of the Goodman Gallery, who comments on the career of the late Robert Hodgins. The UK-born Hodgins is an important South African artist to be sure, but why does he qualify for inclusion in this anthology, as he was not directly involved in any international networking? David Koloaneâs moving statement follows, and although he helped to organize the first Thupelo workshop as well as to found the Fordsburg Art Studios (Bag Factory) in Johannesburg, he speaks less about his own significant contribution to South African art than about the importance of his teacher and mentor, Bill Ainslie, who in 1971 established the Johannesburg Art Foundation out of his home. Ainslieâs death in 1989 in an automobile accident when they were returning from a Triangle workshop (Pachipamwe) in Zimbabwe was a loss Koloane expresses simply but accurately: âMany peopleâs lives were touched by his kindness and a lot of people today have made their careers through what he taught themâ (p. 161).

Similarly perplexing contrasts occur in the section on the âother South Africa,â Cape Town. The statement by Lionel Davis credits the Thupelo workshop he attended in 1986 with freeing his approach to artmaking; he then brings together the networks of the Community Arts Project in Cape Town and the Caversham Press in Zwa-Zulu Natal, and finally recounts how he, Garth Erasmus, and others established Thupelo in Cape Town in 1993, where it has been held ever since. As with Koloaneâs statement, Erasmus sheds light on the cross-fertilization between the vast networks of community-based projects, in this way justifying the bookâs premise.

While Davis clarifies the history of Thupelo and his role in it, the interview with Penny Siopis that follows discusses specific artworks only. She begins with *Patience on a Monument: a History Painting* (1988), a painting that is in a museum collection, as well as *Cape of Good Hope* (1989), a second major painting from the volatile late 1980s. Again, as with Hodgins, Siopis is an important artist, and as always, her commentary is intelligent, but her statementâs contribution to the theme of creativity through networking is negligible. Moreover, there is no credit given the museum that owns *Patience on a Monument*; indeed, no credits are given for any artworks reproduced in the text, even though all of the photographs of the workshops are provided with image credits! This is simply irresponsible.

In the end, the reader is left with a beautifully produced book with many excellent individual artistâs statements rather than a documentation of âcreative exchange.â If this is a compilation of âconversations,â then why are the voices of the interviewers (primarily Savageâs) entirely absent? Shouldnât the questions asked be included to at the very least make clear how the interviewer shaped the resulting edited statement? Or could the interviews have taken another form, such as video, so that there would be a record of a genuine conversation? Was the first-person artistâs voice deliberately muffled because a number of the artists included are dead, and are presented as remembered by others? As Carol Magee and Joanna Grabski state in their introduction to *African Art: Interviews/Narratives*: âFor those of us writing about cultural production in Africa, interviews figure across the strata of our scholarly projects, from the research process to its formal presentation in publications and exhibitions.â[1] Given their centrality to the research process, surely these interviews needed to be framed theoretically, and the selection, organization, and sequencing of the resulting statements explicated.

Lacking a clear structure, the multiple voices in *Making Art in Africa* tend to become a cacophony. Is this book about artistic exchange, or an homage to the extraordinary creativity of the artists interviewed, or is it, finally, a celebration of a private collection? One telling quote is from Johannes Maswanganyiâs discussion of his sculpture *Ancestor Tree* (1987): âI made this sculpture to remember my father. I saw the funeral in my dream â¦ then Trent Read â¦ came to buy it from me and then sell it in London. My father is in London now because the sculpture is in London!... So many people have asked, âWhere is that sculpture? Why did you sell it? You should have kept it to remember your father always.â I say, âNo, I needed the money, because I am always short of moneyââ (p. 199). Though hardly surprising, this reminder of the power imbalance at the heart of the workshops/exchanges is a moment of candor otherwise lacking in the artistsâ statements.

Savage undertook an arduous journey through Africa

because she was confident that what the artists would say would be worthwhile. Perhaps the very lack of a structure or theoretical framing of the resulting statements will permit future researchers to use the artistsâ edited words as a starting point for further investigations into how artist interviews might become conversations. In the meantime, the color reproductions in *Making Art in Africa* demonstrate unequivocally the exceptional achievements of the artists from this continent. As a patron as well as a founder of Triangle, Loder was positioned to assemble an important private collection. One is left with the hope that a collection of this quality may find its way one day to a museum in Africa.

Note

[1]. Joanna Grabski and Carol Magee, eds., *African Art, Interviews, Narratives: Bodies of Knowledge at Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.