

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR



Installation view: Cape Town Art Fair. Courtesy: Fiera Milano Group

Dear Oliver,

I had the VIP pass for *Art 14*, London in my wallet, all set to travel to my favorite destination. But the deadlines on a book I was working on interfered with my travel plans. I was so disappointed when I discovered that you were in London participating in *Art 14*. All that I could think of was how much fun we could have had, wining and dining in the British capital.

Back in December 1987, armed with a newly earned Bachelor of Arts degree and a copy of

Salman Rushie's *Midnight's Children*, I boarded *The Blue Master* – a large cargo ship I found docked at the Cape Town harbor. It was headed to Rotterdam, via Portugal. After handing over my passport to the captain, I ran onto the deck and excitedly waved to Andrew, my boyfriend who came to see me off. I waved to him until his orange T-shirt grew into a tiny speck. I then went to my cabin and cried for two days. I was 22 years old.

I boarded that ship with no firm plan other than a need to leave South Africa. One of the crew members gave me an address in

Islington. London enveloped me, took me on a journey and opened my mind. I saw exhibitions, Leonard Cohen and went to the Ministry of Sound, it was a love affair, exciting and unencumbered.

But before I forget, let me tell you about the second edition of the *Cape Town Art Fair*, which incidentally was held at the end of February to coincide with the *Design Indaba*. For more than a decade now, the *Jazz Festival* at the end of March and the *Design Indaba* have proved to be Cape Town's two premier events in terms of audience numbers

and accolades. It goes without saying that it excludes any sporting events.

It gets hot in February, and as the summer heat peaks, so do the visitor numbers. It is my favorite month in the city. It is also the time I see the innovative publisher, Satoru Yamashita, who never misses the *Design Indaba* (one of the occasions where it was inevitable, he sent a substitute). We see one another for at least half an hour, and he always brings me gifts of newly published books and a copy of his *Plus 81* magazine.

The art fair drew an audience of around 6,000 visitors. It is not much, internationally speaking, but not bad for Cape Town, considering it was only the second edition. Our booths were downstairs, near the main entrance, Omenka's just twenty meters away from mine. I liked this area very much, it was uncluttered, airy and enough room to have a decent view of the works on offer. My one gripe and criticism was that some galleries got away with showcasing unsold inventory. In my opinion it is bad form – visitors pay to attend the fair.

I want this fair to succeed. So I decided to help by putting the organizer in touch with Howard Bilton, the flamboyant art collector and Hong Kong-based chairman of the Sovereign Group. I never have much success in match making – but this time around it worked. Sovereign Group has signed a three-year sponsorship deal.

I can see you frowning already Oliver? Why does an African art fair need an Englishman as a patron? I tell you what, let's agree now to meet in Hong Kong for *Art Basel*. You meet Howard and decide for yourself. I am serious. But be quick, the international art calendar is relentless, as you know.

When you and I met, you were curious to learn more about the most significant differences between Cape Town and Johannesburg. Without letting too many cats out of too many bags, I can safely report that if all goes according to plan, Cape Town is due to become the continent's number one museum destination, all privately funded. I am excited about this. A museum-rich city stimulates the industry, creates jobs for curators, registrars, restorers, educators and most importantly, it develops a culture of art appreciation and an audience. It is also important for South African audiences to view their own superstar artists within the museum context, and particularly within



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the proximity of works produced by their (international) peers. Commercial galleries in Cape Town have over the years, assumed the role of playing museum. It has certainly filled a gap, but it is not ideal. I will be keeping you informed about all these new developments in my next letter.

I am signing off by saying congratulations, to

your country and to mine. Happy centenary celebrations Nigeria! And to South Africa – happy, happy happiness on your twentieth! Let me know if I will see you in Hong Kong.

As always, lots of love from down south,

*Heidi Erdmann*