should i stay or should i go: the dilemma of the artists of 'island' africa

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So you’re a young artist. Living in Africa. Aware that you are located on what is still widely regarded as the periphery of the art world. You work hard here, in your studio, and you have a show at a gallery every 18 months or so, and a few pieces might sell, but often not enough to cover the production costs of the work. And although the market has improved in recent years, there is no real culture of art collecting here, and very few committed collectors of contemporary art. Moving your show to another city would cost even more, so usually you don’t do that. The newspapers believe their readers aren’t much interested in visual art, so you will be lucky to get a press review.

None of this is new, however. You’re used to working under these conditions, and you are part of a community of artists and you support each other’s work, and think some of it is gutsy and quite interesting, occasionally very interesting indeed. Because not much is at stake, there’s often a no-holds barred attitude which can be bracingly liberating. Many of you get involved in community projects as well, and you do believe that art is important, to some people, at least, and even that art can bring about social change. Funding of any kind for artists is very difficult to obtain, so for many young artists, production materials are whatever comes to hand. Moshekwa Langa got his first solo show in 1995 after spending a post-school year pottering around his back garden making photographs of small installations of old paper cement sacks, plastic bags and broken garden statuettes.

Once you have a few good shows behind you, and have begun to become a little bit known overseas, the problems become different. Now you have to manage an art career from long distance. To try to decide whether it is better to be represented by a local gallery or one working out of New York. If a New York gallery does agree to take you on, will it be a case of out of sight out of mind? Wouldn’t it be better to be on the spot?

So, should you stay or should you go? In the old days, before the ending of apartheid, you might have left the country for political as well as economic reasons as much as to advance your career, like Gerard Sekoto, who left Johannesburg for Paris in 1947 and never came back, and Dumile Feni. Feni went into exile in 1968 and ended his travels in the United States where his activities included visiting lecturer at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, before working as a graphic designer in New York and dying prematurely in 1991.

The decision has been made. You will leave, for a while, anyway.

So there you are. In your new working space in the north. You miss the space and smells of Africa, the urgent street life, the sun (such a cliché, but it’s true), the edginess, the slightly anarchic way in which you could conduct your art life there, just going for it, little bothered by bureaucracy or cold art hierarchies. In South Africa at least there is still the feeling of living within an engaged and energetic new society testing its own strength, stretching the possibilities of reinvention in unexpected and occasionally scary ways. The old world seems... tame, a little tired sometimes. Too ordered. “It’s a relief to get back to chaos”, said artist Bridget Baker, returning to Cape Town after a residency in Amsterdam in 2000.

It's not easy to make your way in your new art world. Although everyone is friendly enough, you have a sense that somehow your work is seen as just being different, not really 'contemporary' in the western art world sense, not quite what is wanted. You know that most people you now meet have no real sense of what it is to live in Africa. Someone (a college graduate) once asked you what it was like to
live on an island. An island? Yes, Africa.

There are other artists from your country here, but you also try to cultivate the acquaintance of local artists and art world people. You go to openings, hoping to make the right contacts. You see your task now as working on a new artistic persona which explores fresh terrains and techniques while building upon the strengths of the old. You don’t wish to be classified ghetto-style as an African artist, and asked slightly annoying questions by curators or other people who come to your studio like, “Where is the African in your work?” or, “Why are all African artists so political?” It is true that growing up in Africa is a politicising process. That is unavoidable. But surely it is seen as a good thing to routinely analyse and question social structures, issues of race and gender? Art is a filter which can provide the space for
new readings on such matters. So why does the term "political" so often sound pejorative? Although you might not always articulate this, you believe that the view of the world that you have gained from living in Africa is one grounded in the reality of how tough existence is for the majority of the people on this earth. Much of your work reflects this reality, one way or another. Reflecting on the absurdities and harshnesses of the colonial past and how this impacts upon the present is another theme. At the same time, the cultural values of Africa, which emphasise the community above the individual, and the exuberant creative spontaneity of Africa also play a part.

Still, to the world, you prefer to present your position as that of an international artist with global ideas who happens to come from Africa. You think that the essay which accompanied the Francesco Bonami curated show, Thresholds of the Clandestine Landscape at the 2003 Venice Biennale stated the situation of the contemporary artist clearly.

Wrote Sarah Cosulich Canarutto, "In order to pursue direct confrontation with the realities that surround them, (artists) have to be constantly aware of their outsider nature and possess the need to erase any kind of mental or material borders. Whether they decide to be nation-less nomads or, conversely, to keep their identity tied to one territory, artists in their essence are fighting against all kinds of orthodoxies, classifications or chauvinisms of the mind".

Coming from Africa to the established art world centres, you do not need to be reminded of your outsider status. What you find interesting about this statement is the positive spin put on that quality of gazing clearly at the world in front of you, the recognition that this is an essential attribute for the informed artist of today.

Take the case of three of the artists exhibiting on .za giovane arte dal Sudafrica, Bridget Baker, Doreen Southwood and Zanele Muholi.

Says Bridget Baker, "When you are overseas you are always looking for spaces into which you can project the 'myth-making', the narrative you are working with. The fact that the environment is unknown to you projects the validity of that mythical narrative. You don't necessarily have a real understanding of those spaces. It's a matter of: This is my view of the city, this is what I am seeing as an outside". Baker's Blue Collar Girl is cast in each city in which the artist finds herself, (there are six in the series so far) appearing always in her distinctive chroma-key blue coat, her styling somewhat in the manner of an Elizabeth Taylor film of the '50s. In the first panel of each triptych, the carefully staged setting is sophisticated. In the second, Baker's alter ego heroine is seen in a long shot, dangerously undertaking some difficult-to-distinguish action. In the third, the camera moves in for a tight close up to reveal the 'important' message the Blue Collar Girl has left behind: her branding now marks the place, "Only you can".

Brought up in a family of strict Christian values, Baker has taken this phrase from the Bible, and when she first used it in her work, would preface it with "Bridget says:". On its own, "Only you can" takes on an irony, reading like an over-used injunction of empowerment taken from a popular self-help book. "Only you can" appears again in reverse on the boot of the injured woman flyer lying in the snow in The Pilot (2007) a 13 minute piece which presents like an out-take – perhaps from Arnold Fanck's Die Weisse Holle von Pitz Palu (1929), or a lost reel from a feature film about an intrepid heroine made sometime before World War II. This scenario is strengthened by Baker's careful reproduction of the
scratchy, flickering films of that period, the flawless appearance of the heroine's complexion, which owes as much to the classic application of Vaseline on the lens of the camera as to the make-up artist's skill, and by the projection of the film from an old style projector.

Appearing first as a wounded heroine, the centre of attention, there is a startling change of pace as the flyer is lifted out of the snow, and becomes a small figure being hauled up the side of a city building, to be somewhat unceremoniously pulled over the top at the end, the loose rope disappearing over the roof as well, so no trace of her passage remains on screen. What is the end of the story? Has the heroine become a victim? Has her mantra of "Only you can save her? The fragment of film has ended, and the blank wall of the building gives no clue.

In 2005, Doreen Southwood was invited to execute a commission for a public sculpture for the southern Netherlands town of Tilburg. Southwood's *Sindroom* (2007) stands in the centre of a piece of common ground. The delicately painted bronze figure of a small dark-haired girl stands next to two children's playground swings, both of which are frozen in motion. One is caught high in the sky, out of control, while the child stares straight ahead. The piece seems to express the fears of childhood in a petrified moment of timelessness.

Southwood's concept of capturing a frozen moment is explored further in a different way in *The Dancer* (2007). In this graceful piece, the single figure of a dancer is frozen and caught in four poses to suggest one continuous flowing movement. The artist's use of bronze for the figurines with the addition of tulle for the skirts is a reference to the ballet dancers of Edgar Degas. Says Southwood, "*The Dancer* could be seen as a diary entry of a certain time in my life; an escape into a simpler state, where time loses its established value. Within the public world of daily living, people seem to have reached a consensus on what is an acceptable time frame within which daily schedules are structured. Only in the world of art making or performance is there more freedom to slow down time and draw the viewer's attention to the myriad details – feelings and emotions – that make up each moment".

"As a little girl, going to ballet classes and being surrounded by women (in my family) who loved being called 'ladies', indented me in ways I cannot seem to escape. This deep-seated denial of my surroundings makes me a foreigner in constant need of playing make-believe".

Photographer and activist Zanele Muholi is presently studying for an MFA in Documentary Media Studies at Ryerson University, Toronto, but the work she is currently exhibiting is firmly rooted in her own community, made "to contribute towards a more democratic and representative South African
homosexual history", and to give a public face to the black lesbian community, a community which has had to struggle against not only prejudice, but physical violence from men who feel their own masculinity threatened by the very existence of lesbians. Writes Muholi, “For many black lesbians, the stigma of queer identity arises from the fact that homosexuality is seen as un-African. Expectations are that African women must have children and procreate with a male partner, the head of the family. That is part of the ‘African tradition’. Failing to conform to these expectations, we are perceived as deviants, needing a ‘curative rape’ to erase our male attitude and make us into true women, females, real women, mothers, men’s property”.

In Faces & Phases (2007) Muholi’s sober black and white photographs of femmes and butches present her subjects in classic portrait style, engaging directly with the camera, demanding recognition and respect from the viewer. In Being (2007), Muholi lifts the curtain on lesbian domesticity, allowing us to observe spontaneous moments of love and gentleness between two young women, the close mirroring of their bodies a clear indication of the deep intimacy between them.

Moving from ‘my people’ of the lesbian world to the larger homosexual society, Muholi captures the performative Miss D’Vine (2007) in a series of fantasy poses and costumes, recalling the numerous personalities assumed by Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso. In Miss D’Vine, the traditional clichéd postcard pose of the demure country maiden seated in the grass wearing only a girdle of beadwork is subverted by the red stiletto heels and the very urban plastic trash caught in the grass behind her. Other roles to be enjoyed by subject and viewer alike include the Afro-haired swimsuited star of a Drum magazine photospread or a 60’s Blaxploitation movie, and a diva in swirling red robes.

Each of the three artists, Baker, with her intriguing staged, cinematic narratives, Southwood, with her vulnerable female forms and Muholi with her compelling images of the gay and lesbian community has drawn on her own very particular life experience of living in South Africa, to make work which has a universal resonance.