

you should
take yourself
more
seriously
as a photographer

Constructive
criticism
lays
down
some
of
the
most
important
waypoints
that
give

focus
and
direction
to
an
artist's
quest.
Art
is
language.
Art
is
dialogue.
And
so
artists
need
feedback
to
give
their
work
relevance.

Maputo cityscape

Maputo Curators' Meeting, 14-17 October 2008
reviewed by Helge Denker © (2008)

Arbitrary praise is of little worth beyond affording some transient buoyancy. Objective criticism, on the other hand, puts work into context. And if a work withstands a critical review, if I can evaluate critical comments and decide: No, they do not hold true; the image says what I want it to say [after all, I am coming from my point of view, not that of the reviewer] then the image becomes stronger – sometimes much stronger. It has stood the test of critical scrutiny.

22 Photographers from 14 countries across Africa gathered in Maputo in the third week of October 2008, with the slightly ambivalent aim of subjecting themselves – or rather their portfolio of work – to the critical review of seven internationally recognised curators from various parts of Africa and Europe. The emotions of artists are often inextricably linked to their work, so it tends to not just be the work that is reviewed.

I arrived in Maputo totally exhausted. I'd just barely managed to complete a large assignment, submitted it on the morning of my flight, thrown a portfolio of work, a few clothes and a backpack of camera gear together and headed off. I almost missed my connecting flight from Johannesburg to Maputo due to a delay in take-off from Windhoek and had to argue and run to get the last seat on the plane,

with the result that my bag did not arrive in Mozambique with me. I was finally in my large, comfortable hotel room with great views of Maputo somewhere around midnight – but without my portfolio and unsure of why I was here at all.

The Goethe-Zentrum in Windhoek had invited me as the Namibian participant around four weeks earlier and I had accepted on impulse, not really knowing what to expect of such a meeting. I'd never attended a 'curators' meeting' and the concept seemed somehow vague. There was little background information available. But I still felt that this could be an important opportunity to regain some focus as a photographer. I work in a lot of very different fields and my photography has become a bit peripheral.

The event was initiated by the Goethe-Institut in Johannesburg, originally as a part of the FotoFesta, an international festival of photography held in Maputo. FotoFesta was cancelled pretty much at the last moment due to internal problems, but the Goethe-Institut decided to go ahead with the curator's meeting – to set a sign about the importance of photography in Africa.

I spend the first morning in Maputo retrieving my bag [containing my portfolio] from the airport. In

Curator monologues





portfolio review

the afternoon, all the participants gather at the Instituto Cultural Mocambique-Alemanha [the Mozambique-German Cultural Institute, ICMA] for the start of the programme. The place has a good, relaxed atmosphere. A brief welcome and introductions are followed by the booking of curator sessions. Each photographer will have the opportunity to see four of the seven curators in half-hour, one-to-one meetings. To make the selection of sessions fair, we all draw a number out of a bowl. Number 1 has first choice of booking sessions. I draw number 22. But I still get to book meetings with the curators I had most hoped to see, although three of the sessions will be back to back in one day.

The focus of the first evening is a panel discussion by the seven curators, which turns into a long set of philosophical monologues on art and photography, with minimal practical information on the art of curating. Interesting, without doubt, but somehow not tangible enough for the audience of young photographers eager to talk to each other and find out where they are from and how they came to be here. I use the time to consider how to optimise my meetings, by scrutinising the statements of the different curators.

Afterwards, we have a great buffet dinner of local food at the ICMA – our hosts are certainly going out of their way to cater for our sustenance. A number of local photographers attended the panel discussion and we now mingle and talk about photography, art and life.

Later back at the hotel, Mwanzo from Tanzania, Massalo and Luaty from Angola, Michael from Ethiopia and I fetch our portfolios and meet in Mwanzo's room to look at and discuss each other's work until after midnight. This sharing of portfolios [which goes on behind the scenes throughout the three days], this opportunity to discuss our work, ethics, philosophies, opinions and dreams with the other photographers, turns out to be perhaps the most inspiring part of the Maputo gathering – at least as important as the actual meetings with curators.

My four meetings are all remarkably different from each other in the views and comments expressed by the different curators. I go into the sessions with some specific questions and issues and find answers in each case. But beyond that, some of the meetings are frustratingly vague in their outcome.



outside the gallery

Surprisingly, not one of the curators is interested in reading my essays on photography, published in my portfolio book, 'One hundred shots'. Not that these are definitive writings; but considering that the panel discussions of the first evening touched on many of the same topics, I'd thought the chapter headings might spark some interest.

I look forward most to the meeting with Simon Njami, a renowned art critic, writer and curator from Cameroon, with a base in France. During discussions, he's not shy to speak his mind, always ready to disagree or be controversial – although he doesn't speak too much. He exudes assertive erudition combined with dismissive judgement. I want a review with some real teeth; I need something that I can use to make a decision about where to go with my photography, which I feel has come adrift in the last couple of years.

Njami takes time to look at each page of 'Shots', which I present as the central part of my portfolio. He grasps the core of images and text at a glance and comments succinctly on them. Some of it is simply a personal dislike of certain

imagery, other comments provide constructive guidance. In the end, the comment that hits home most is this: 'You should take yourself more seriously as a photographer'.

I also meet with John Fleetwood (South Africa), Colette Olof (Netherlands) and Felix Hoffmann (Germany). Each meeting yields useful input, but I come away longing for something more tangible than 'you have good technique' or 'you need to be more daring in your approach'. Valuable comments are made on how to tailor my portfolio for gallery exhibition purposes (my focus has always been on printed publications), but beyond that, I'm somehow left a little wanting.

I have been thinking about the future of my career for some time. The invitation to this event came like a sign from above: Here is something that can provide you with new focus. A meeting like this can be a kick in the butt, a wake-up call. Time to get out of the rut we're in, find new approaches, look again with fresh eyes. But it's not an easy thing to do – to escape that avalanche of images that seeks to bury us each day and produce something fresh, something that comes from a truly personal viewpoint and

manages to captivate and communicate.

It's the cliché: This could be a turning point. In the career of at least some of the photographers here, it should be. If nothing more, it should be a stepping stone for all of us. But: Where to from here? What do I do with the impulses that I've been given?

In the idle time between curator sessions, I walk the streets of Maputo, trying to get a feel for the pulse of this city. And I go looking for some

answers to my many questions. I visit the World Press Photo 08 travelling exhibition, housed in a small historic fort. I try to put my work and my career into context, try to find a way forward. In the end, although I am revitalised, although I have found some inklings of new inspiration, I don't feel much wiser. Maybe the answers will still come.

A few of us congregate over lunch (at an excellent seafood restaurant) to talk about our meetings and commiserate about harsh critiques.

where to from here



The growing camaraderie is great, at this gathering of people from all over Africa with one common interest. And someone always seems to have their camera out for a quick snap. The evenings are wonderful. We all get together for good food at cool restaurants, visit a couple of exhibitions, interesting clubs – hanging out in good company, in an exciting city, talking about photography and African politics and the world.

Peter Anders (in charge of all Goethe-Institut Programmes in Africa), Birgit Plank-Mucavele (Director of the ICMA) and Cara Snyman (PRO, Jo'burg Goethe-Institut) are always around to make sure that everything runs smoothly. It's a tight schedule with good coordination needed to get everyone to their meetings, to dinners and hotels and at last back onto their planes (we are accommodated in two hotels and two mini-buses run a continuous shuttle service to and from venues). Most of us take the few minor hick-ups in our stride.

But where does the idea for this gathering come from? Are there plans to make it a regular event? I briefly speak to Birgit Plank-Mucavele about it, but although I receive good information on the programmes of the ICMA, I don't get real answers on the curators' meeting. That's the

domain of Peter Anders. But we don't manage to find the 15 minutes needed to put things into context. Just a little more time, another day – or a slightly smaller group – might have allowed for a more satisfying wrap-up at some levels.

There is a feedback session in the late afternoon of the last day. Everybody sings thanks and praise. The curators emphasise that we should be critical, that this would help the organisers to evaluate the event. The one comment that crops up again and again is that the photographers would like to have a forum to look at each other's portfolios (these have only been shared in small groups during spare time). Beyond that, no-one says much in the way of criticism.

It is clear that the event has generally been a success and should be repeated. It is a great idea, that perhaps at this first meeting didn't have the chance to quite realise its full potential. Just like we as participating photographers need to work hard if we really want to be 'in the gallery', so the organisers and curators can make small improvements to help us get there. The concept has huge potential – plenty of reasons to do it again, to work at it and improve it and keep it going. This was a starting point, from which great things can come.

Maputo nightlife

