

LUANDA: A COMPLICATION

A look at the Angolan Art Scene

By Valerie Kabov

Forming an impression of any place requires a multiplicity of perspectives, especially in the African contemporary art context. If you rely on international press and PR alone, you risk ending up with half-baked conclusions, as found in a recent *Wall Street Journal* “insight” feature by Kelly Crow (May, 2016), which proclaimed that “Africa’s artistic institutions are fuelled almost entirely by hometown support, resulting in self-sustaining art scenes that appear to be thriving whether or not the rest of the world pays attention.” Going to the place is becoming more and more important in this rapidly changing terrain. However, no personal impression can be authoritative without accessing and reflecting on broad-based local expertise, mitigated by awareness of local politics as well as the international context.

So it made sense on my recent visit to Luanda to observe things from a position of an educated ignoramus and to seek counsel from a diversity of experts to understand the local context, environment, and history underpinning it. For those operating in the international sphere of African contemporary art, impressions of Angola are punctuated by the prominence of art collector and philanthropist, Sindika Dokolo’s highly publicised efforts, such as the 2007 Venice Biennale African Pavilion, the Golden Lion victory for Angola’s first pavilion at Venice Biennale in 2013. A little more broadly, impressions of Luanda are coloured by the mythical and hair-raising

stories about the most expensive city in the world with \$60 burgers. Suffice to say, the view from the ground, was bound to prove a lot more nuanced.

Luanda is a stunning and sprawling metropolis of over six million people, with a downtown replete with high-rises and intense construction, historical buildings and a gorgeous seaside promenade, a resort style beach and entertainment “island” satiated with nightclubs and restaurants to rival Miami. In spite of the current currency crisis, the petro-dollar economy appears to remain in over-drive for some, with a lot of highly conspicuous consumption – luxury cars, nightclubs, fancy brands and with banking, a dominant industry. Equally conspicuous on the highways in and out of downtown is the destitution, with lots of people living in over-crowded favelas while they struggle with rising prices of basic commodities and other shortages from water to electricity.

Where does art fit into all this? Our preconceptions would suggest that a large moneyed class and a dense urbanised population is an ideal environment for cultivating a thriving art scene. Fundamentally that is true, however, there are some complications. Astoundingly for a vast city and the nation’s capital, Luanda does not have a national art museum or public art collections. The latent promise of situating Dokolo’s expansive art collection in Luanda for the benefit

of the Angolan public hovers without landing, with the Dokolo Foundation moving its headquarters to Porto. My trip coincided with the Triennale of Luanda (also convened by the Dokolo Foundation) but a visit to its home at the stunning Iron Palace – designed by Gustav Eifel – found the place vacant of exhibition activity, with only the famously reclaimed Mwana Pwo mask on public display, off-site at the Currency Museum (Museo de Moeda).

Despite this initial let down, I was surprised to discover that there is in fact a burgeoning private sector drive to buy art and to collect both privately and on a corporate basis, filling in a void left by the lack of public collections. Appearing to operate with little curatorial guidance, the financial sector in particular is active in buying art and advancing towards formal corporate collections, mostly buying works directly from artists. A good example is the insurer ENSA, which has a well-documented permanent collection but has also (since 1991) run an established acquisitive annual prize to support and promote contemporary Angolan artists.

With little international engagement and artists acting as entrepreneurs, mediators are an odd recent innovation. There are a tiny number of commercial galleries (compared to what can be expected in a city of seven million) in operation, and those that do exist are still finding their path and a way to assert their importance to artists, the art scene and



Rita Gt, installation view of 'Conexões Femininas,' at Galeria Sede do Banco, Luanda, 2016. Artwork, #GiveUsPause #ActionsOnAGlobalFlatness,' 2016. Image courtesy of Valerie Kabov.

the market.

Suzana Sousa, a curator and academic, explained that post-independence the development of Angolan art was driven by the establishment of “The Union of visual artists (UNAP), [which] was founded in 1977 by prominent artists at the time and was created as a political organisation of the party in power... at the time, this is two years after independence; art was an important element for propaganda, murals, and the development of both a revolutionary aesthetics and of a national notion of art.”¹ Professional skills were passed on in studio through the master-apprentice system, with the establishment of a secondary school for the arts arriving later. The civil war interrupted most cultural developments for decades. It was only in 2013 that a university course teaching art was introduced.

Hildebrando de Melo, an artist and aspiring gallerist, plans to open a new gallery in 2017. Having already developed projects such as ArtLab & Co, de Melo articulated the need to understand the colonial history of Angola in understanding Luanda’s

syncopated contemporary art landscape. He underscored the impact of five hundred years of colonial rule by the Portuguese, which left a strong legacy in both production of the arts (on painting in particular), as well as a culture of collecting.

“Angola before the armed struggle – if we transport ourselves to the colonial time – was a rich country with great economic strength, because of agriculture and a focus on coffee. That’s why you passed by a house designed by the architect Gustav Eifel, who also designed the Eiffel Tower. During that time there was a certain elite [who] started collecting and becoming interested in painting. That’s why you find facades of buildings with works in tile, large murals in some public places.

This was interrupted by the revolution and the civil war but is now beginning to re-assert itself, buoyed by petro-dollars and, ironically, because of corruption. Between 2001 to 2014 many people were collecting art in Angola. Because of this, people started to realise the value of art, and started to see art as a store of value. Also in the current currency crisis, while we are seeing

the local currency Kwanza depreciating, some Angolans are buying art more than ever.”

A similar view is echoed by Rita Gt, an artist and curator of Angola’s 2015 Venice Biennale Pavilion, who gives some additional clues as to the reasons for corporate enthusiasm: “I think there’s more corporate support than a collector culture. Still, I have noticed a fast and interesting development in terms of cultural activity for the last four years when I arrived in Luanda. Now with the supposed crisis, more people can understand that art is a good investment and a great way to generate economic activity. In my point of view, corporate support is essential. It allows companies tax discounts and improves art as critical thinking instead of practices just based in sales.”

With only a very small number of galleries in Luanda, visiting banks became the prime opportunity for understanding what is going on in contemporary art in Angola. What became very evident is that there is a vast disconnect between the international contemporary art image of Angola and the work produced by their peers in the country.

With few exceptions, the picture was more representative of an art scene disconnected and even isolated from international art currents and from their internationally engaged peers. There was also a persistent sentiment that Portugal is one of the most important, if not the most important art centres and points of engagement with the international art community.

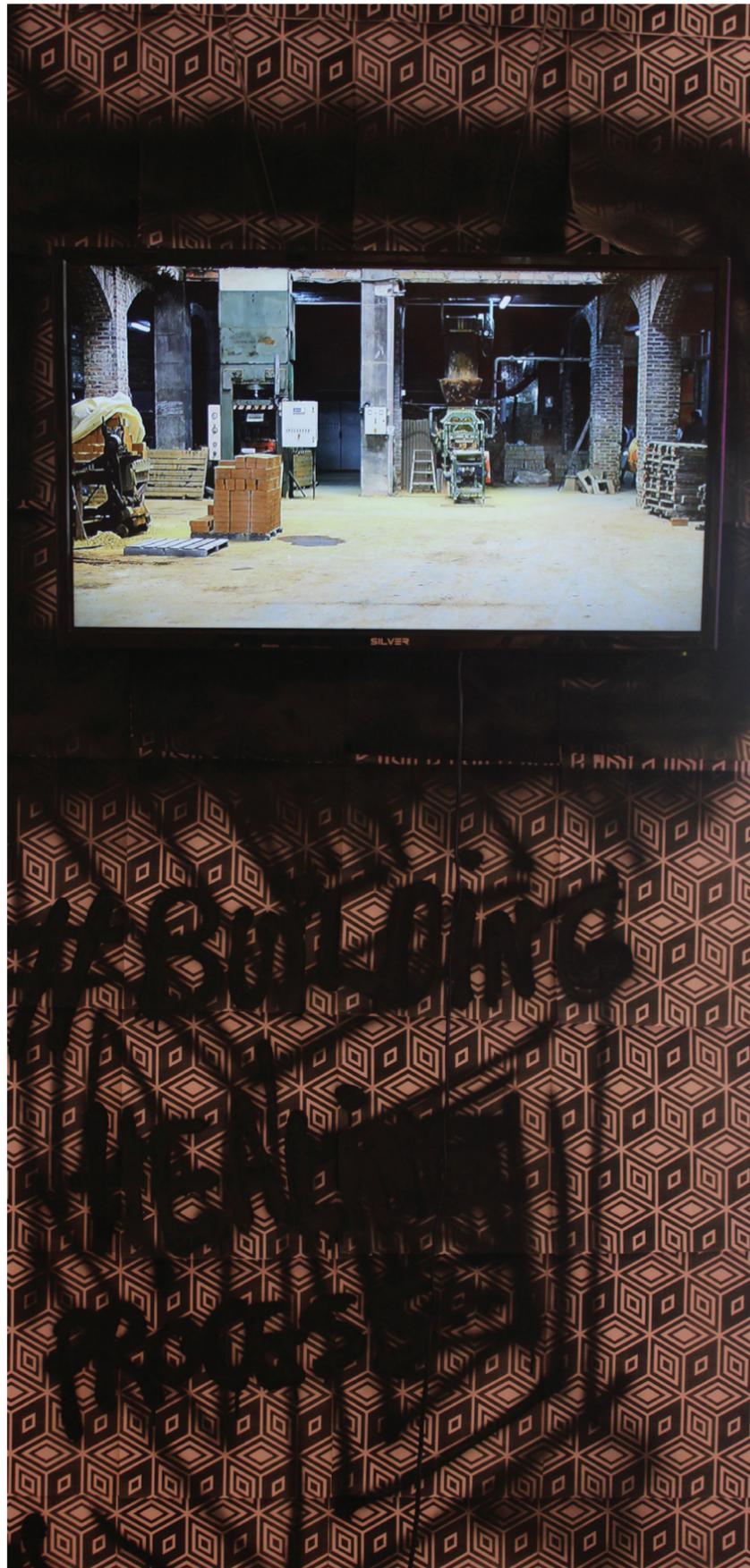
Paula Nascimento, curator of the Angolan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013, clarified that in addition to the breach in activity following the war, the UNAP has had a reactionary influence on art in the country having created a platform, which:

“seems to have become more of a syndicate organisation – a trampoline for political status – than an artist’s organisation. Its programme is very weak, and it involves more the promotion than what could have been research and guidelines for artistic education, as well as a strong body to help the ministry in the development of cultural policies... Although they have around seven hundred members, this organisation operates using a completely out-dated methodology and are very detached from the discussions going on, not just internationally, but also and more importantly in the other independent spaces within the country.”

Nascimento also elaborated on the gap between reality and the international perception of Angolan contemporary art, articulating some political tension:

“The majority of the generation of artists that are well-known and are inserted into global markets are a small number... The Golden Lion might have given the impression that we (and I mean myself, Edson and those other well-known artists) are part of a larger group but that is not the case. Here in Luanda the impact of the award for artists was big. It really opened up space for other production, for other spaces of production – before things were too polarised between UNAP and Triennale.”

The recognition of the need to professionalise and internationalise was the most pressing issue for Adriano Dominic de Maia, a gallerist who is managing two recent gallery projects, the not-for-profit Tamar Golan gallery and the commercial Espace de Luanda. Interestingly,



THIS PAGE AND THE PAGE FACING: Rita Gt, installation view of 'Conexões Femininas,' at Galeria Sede do Banco, Luanda, 2016. Artwork, #GiveUsPause #ActionsOnAGlobalFlatness, 2016. Image courtesy of Valerie Kabov.

he also emphasised the responsibility of the artists themselves to work towards professionalism and rise above the challenges if they are to achieve support of the government and the collectors: “In order to gain this support the artists have to develop themselves more, otherwise we shall always be engaging with the same handful of artists – the same ones that have been easier to export internationally. What I mean is that for more local artists to come through the ranks, they have to be shown to concentrate their efforts in self-development.”

He also added the need for artists to recognise the importance of galleries for career development and access to international opportunities, clearly a challenge in his environment: “They must develop relationships with galleries and pass this responsibility onto the gallery so that collectors and investors in art (present and future) are educated into visiting the correct spaces and engaging with the right sort of intermediaries. Naturally, artist talks and atelier visits can and should be encouraged, but the hitherto very informal structure has to be formalised and given a sense of professionalism and seriousness, not to mention the correct fiscal treatment.”

Maia also made a pointed observation, calling out Angolan diasporan artists, who are enjoying the limelight and market attention while living abroad but do not return home to support the local art scene and their peers who don’t have the opportunity to travel and learn:

“Let’s not forget the fact that Angolan artists who live in the diaspora or are already established abroad by-and-large fail to return to their country of inspiration and exhibit in Angola, for some years now. These artists and their exhibitions are very much needed in order to help raise the bar nationally.

The synergy between internationalisation and professionalisation was also an important issue for Rita Gt, who added that it: “Is really important that one could understand the importance of opening up Angola to international cultural and visual exchange to permit artists to grow and to belong to a contemporary global way of



living. Not everyone dares to live in Luanda, so if someone makes positive and serious work intending to generate more activity in the art scene I guess it is courageous and should be welcome.”

During my visit, I attended the opening of ‘Conexões Femininas’ at Galeria Sede do Banco, organised by the newly in hiatus Mov’art gallery, in the lavish mezzanine gallery in the headquarters of Banco Economico, downtown. The exhibition featured the works of Ana Silva, Keyezua and Rita Gt. The exhibition and presentation quality would not feel out of place in any city with a developed art sector, advocating visibly for what is possible as well as demonstrating that there is both the sponsorship and a well-heeled audience interested in joining the ranks of elites supporting contemporary art.

Hildebrando de Melo also underscored the importance of exchange with the rest of Africa as an imperative for the evolution of Angolan art, as opposed to the current Western-centric internationalisation. He says: “My original gallery idea was to be a place to gather artists, to promote and protect their work against dispersal. But then I started to travel inside Africa and began to think in terms of the continent, about a space that could establish a cross-

cultural dialogue with Africa and the world. So presently I have the ambition that this gallery represents artists besides Angolans... the best artists in Africa, in a dialogue with the world.”

After several decades of war, Angola is a country which has only been at peace for just under fifteen years. While complicated on the surface, the prospects of contemporary art are enormously optimistic. What I saw was the key ingredients for a successful art sector – enthusiastic and proactive artists and curators, a supportive and financially able collector base, convinced of the importance of endorsing and promoting local artists, evolving educational institutions and a passion to push ahead. I would also add that Angola has no shortage of inspiration for its artists, both in its history and legacy, as well as its dynamic and conflicted economic and political realities. *A luta continua!*

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FOOTNOTES:

1. All quotes in this article are from interviews conducted by email in July 2016.