



EX POLITICAL KISSING

## Fernando Alvim

### A Sort of Peaceful Guerilla War

FIRST I'D like to thank the entire team that put this gathering together, above all because in the part of the South that is Africa we tend to get overlooked. It gives me a certain pleasure to be able to leave Luanda (Angola), a place that's more like a workshop for storytellers since we're a bit shut off from the rest of the world, and come to Mexico to speak about our experiences, and other ways of looking at the South.

What has struck me for two days now is that it seems to me that the status of the people of the South or of the people of South America is very conditioned by the North. For me the South is much more advanced than the North, for a very simple reason: it's more inclusive; it has people from the east, the west, and the north—and maybe even people from other planets live in the South; that said, there are fewer people from the South living in the North. This means the South is much more advanced than the North in terms of globalization, which I don't see as something negative; quite the contrary. Globalization makes it much tougher for a group of criminals to act with impunity; globalization allows for other parts of the globe to develop. However, it is indeed necessary to determine what kind of globalization, what kind of capitalism and what kind of attitude human beings will have in the future.

I think the problem lies also in that we haven't had sufficient skill in humanizing ourselves. We've spent a lot of time focused on the notion of

*homo sapiens* and I think we need to advance to another parameter, in that we must face challenges truly and pacifically, and we know it's not going to be very easy.

There are certain things that make me laugh in culture. I've been an artist for 30 years and I've spent a lot of time justifying why I'm an artist, and the fact that I'm from the south of Africa, from *Africa australis*—from Angola to be exact—but I do not have an appearance, at least in the sub-conscious minds of most people, that suggest I am or am not Angolan. I can't take responsibility for people's ignorance of human history and I'm not going to justify myself about something that I think is a resolved matter, above all in scientific circles, and above all as a consequence of work that's been done regarding the human genome and DNA. It would seem we're all cousins in the end. In a world that in theory ought to be cultivated and intelligent, we've never been able to transcend the idea of skin color. Scientifically, and from a chromatic perspective, it's an erroneous notion, because if a white person is white and a black person is black, then their children ought to be gray; in fact they are varying shades of brown.

The South is *mestizo* as are we all. We have always been hybrids and I think the problem in art and culture is that we haven't known how to create an independent, autonomous system that could dialogue as an equal with the world's political and economic systems. The cultural world will need to discover quick solutions; if it doesn't, it will continue to be completely colonized.

One of the problems we find is that artists in at least the last twenty or thirty years have allowed themselves to be completely colonized by systems that seek to dominate them, as if culture were something that could be defined as this microphone, for example, is defined. Culture is anything that escapes our grasp, and given that the South is also indefinite, I think we can try to find common reference points between individuals, between world regions. But more than just a matter of style, issue of the culture is more a register of existence, and a reflection on this register of human behavior.

The problems we see in the art and culture worlds are people that are much less open than even border guards. For example, when I enter

Mexico with an Angolan passport, the customs guys don't get caught up in notions of color. They know, because they were trained to know, that there are white people in African nations. As a counterpoint, when you get involved in a cultural project, you're asked almost daily whether or not you're culturally African. So I would propose an inversion: perhaps art should be handed over to the police, because there's a better chance of creating something with the police than there is with the culture world. I'm being a little cynical about art systems, but later I'll explain in a little more detail what happened to us in Venice last year.

Perhaps this could be a solution for problems South Americans experience in relation to cultural autonomy, as in the end it seeks to bring a method to one's own madness. When a chaotic culture, or a culture inside a system of chaos reorganization, uses highly sophisticated instruments produced in Germany, the usual result is it doesn't work.

When Marx arrived in Angola along with Cuban professors, we questioned ourselves subconsciously. In a tropical country with an average temperature of 32 degrees centigrade and 95% humidity, it's not surprising a political philosophy like Marxism could not operate due to questions of temperature. It was necessary to invent a little tropical Marxism and I'll explain how.

We were kids in school then. Revolutionary kids who had a right to be revolutionary because we were being attacked by South Africa, Zaire and the Congo. We understood back then that Marx had some interesting things to say, but we liked going to the beach with girls and smoking on the beach much more. Marxism didn't seem to allow for that, because our professors explained to us that work dignified men, but we continued to question that. Around that time in Angola, we trapped something like sixteen British, South African and US mercenaries. We asked our professor if being a mercenary was work and he responded yes, because he was paid to kill people. So then we said, well, in that case we need to revisit Marx because it's not the case the work dignifies, and therefore we can go to the beach, with this sort of easy openness of the Marxists. At the same time the Marxism was necessary, because if I compare the situation in Angola with that of the Congo, where they entered directly into mainstream capitalism after independence, the disaster was much greater in the Congo. I'd like to present a project about the South, carried out in the South, not just for people from the South but for everyone.

To explain our construction processes, and explain how to find new mechanisms, I'll offer a very simple example. There's a small painting by a deceased Angolan contemporary artist, Viteix, completed in 1968 in Paris. When we organized the first African Pavilion for Venice, we brought that drawing and at the same time we asked the Angolan postal service if they wanted to do a stamp—the very first contemporary stamp. For the second Triennial that is to be called *Geografias Emocionais, Artes e Afectos* (*Emotional Geographies, Art and Loved Ones*), we are going to work with every city that had a political, economic, cultural, or any other kind of relationship during the course of Angola's 1975 independence process. For that project we thought it would be interesting to present video and photography projects in the country's three hundred post offices, which are public spaces that are open some twelve hours a day. The systems we are creating are economic ideas expressly created for chaotic nations that survived a twenty-six-years-long war, in which we tried to stretch resources as far as we could and economize in every area. The Venice Biennial idea, the postage stamp, led to an idea for the second Luanda Triennial, whose visibility has expanded enormously. Regarding documentation problems, as you discussed yesterday, we've written to some three hundred museums around the world that hold ethnological images from African history that we do not have in Africa. The images are to be projected in those 300 Angolan post offices during the second Triennial. The idea is to absorb the documentation free of charge, because foreign ethnological museums aren't going to loan the pieces to us. But they can give us the images with their respective written introductions.

For the third Luanda Triennial, we wanted to put together a cultural movement called *Luanda Pop*. *Luanda Pop* has nothing to do with the Pop Art movement. It's "pop" because there is an Angolan photographer that has taken photos of a carnival in Luanda, with little kiddie cars. Wear and tear has meant the *ular* fell off the sign and only the *pop* was left.

Speaking of the South once again, we think Miles Davis or Michael Jordan are really the guys who have changed global aesthetics, sounds and performance: they are people who come from the South—they are neither the sons nor grandsons of Danish. It is they who have changed the history of the world: music today, for instance, is much closer to jazz than to Beethoven. You don't have to have a complex if you're from the South. In fact the situation's quite the opposite.

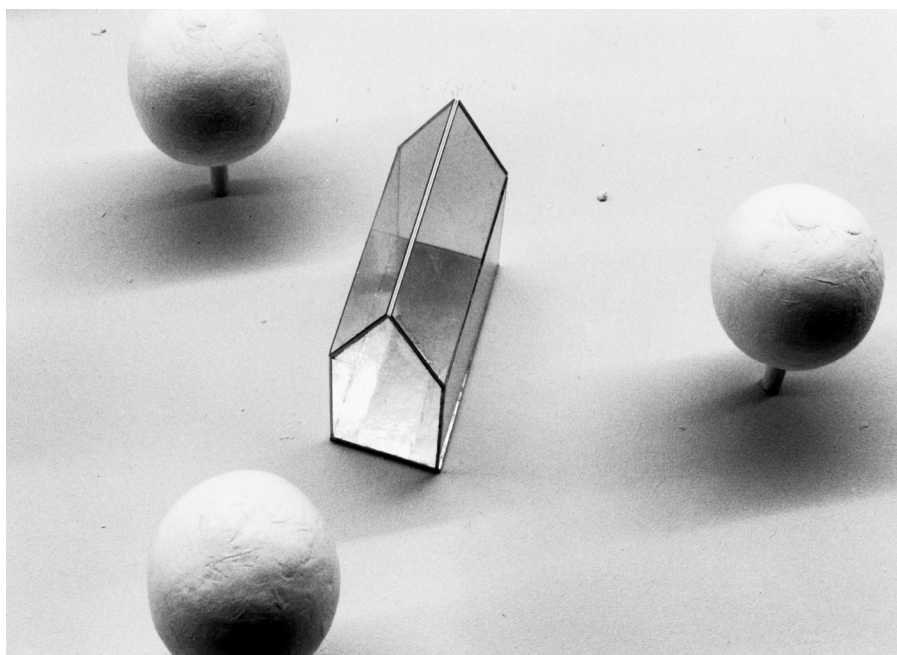
That same idea was behind the first Triennial: we put together the Triennial “antiproject” and we developed it economically with a system where every one who worked on the Triennial would carry the project with him or her when he or she was invited to go to some other part of the world. I presented the Luanda Triennial eight times as an artist, so the money we might have spent on trips representing the show was economized to invert the situation: 80% of the first Triennial budget was spent on artists, precisely because we believe artists have lost their place. They need once again to be the epicenter of the art system. Otherwise, the art scene’s alchemistic element is lost.

The first Luanda Triennial began with a question: How to be an artist in a country that managed to definitively eliminate apartheid? I get a little touchy about the fact that for years, every time I asked people—above all in Europe—if they knew how apartheid ended, they would respond, “Oh, yes—European artists did a concert at Wembley Stadium, *Free Mandela* that was broadcast all over the world. This is an extremely gratuitous and ignorant recuperation. We’re not making this into a political act, but we do propose taking to politician as if we were politicians ourselves. Art must be used as a political vector. Just as when I sit down with a banker to discuss a project, I don’t talk to him like an artist; I speak to him as if I were a banker as well. In politics it’s exactly the same: we are trying to perceive the symptoms of the most profound sort of Angolan-ness. Keep in mind this is the country that during the first days of independence—specifically on 11 November 1975—faced the threat of South African army regulars that were a mere 26 kilometers away from the capital. If the South Africans hadn’t lost that war, even today the Congo, Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe would be apartheid nations. Along with the emergence of the extreme right wing in European parliaments and the resurgence of Nazi ideologies, this would be quite dangerous. So Angola has participated profoundly in this change. That’s why when I hear of revolutions in South America or Europe, and without a single allusion to African independence movements as a vector for the end of fascism in Europe, I grow demoralized.

It must be understood that the leaders of the April 25<sup>th</sup> *coup d’état* in Portugal, when fascism finally fell, became aware of atrocities committed in Africa, and worked in conjunction with Africans to dismember the colonial system. Similarly, it should be understood that when the Russians and the Cubans were summoned by the MPLA (the Angolan

People's Liberation Movement) to fight off the South Africans, it might have seemed that Angola had become a Russian satellite. I was in school then with Cuban professors but we also had colleagues that came from Bulgaria, and I personally went to the airport with an Angolan and an East German flag to receive the ex-president of an ex-country.

Agostinho Neto, the president who declared independence, was a poet. Most African politicians then came from cultural circles (Neto was a poet, Dos Santos a musician, as well as Amilcar Cabral), as they had acquired political consciousness through cultural knowledge they had of their own people, but as well because of ample knowledge of universal culture. It's because of all that there is a full generation of African artists, and what one colleague proposed yesterday—that one or another curator is responsible for putting Africa on the world art map—is untrue. That is the most ridiculous thing anyone could say in light of the cultural and political past that we have in Africa. It may also be appropriate to mention here that although people are quite impressed with the fact that a mixed-race person like Obama was elected president of the United States, in 1975 the Angolan Minister of Culture was a white man, Antonio Jacinto, and was also an Angolan poet in the colonial period. In colonial times people like him—white, black, mixed-race—were imprisoned for twelve years, as evidenced in photos from the first days of independence in 1975, but have



Fernando Alvim, Mbutu. Photography, 1997



since been forgotten. On the other hand, everyone points to photos of the accords made between South Africa and the rest of the world that awarded the peace prize to those who were imprisoned 27 years in South Africa as well as those that liberated them, but who had left them there for dozens of years. I think this sort of injustice is one of the issues that concern us in the Luanda Triennial project.

I wanted to say that the responsibility for the emergence of a discourse on contemporary African art lies exclusively, privately, particularly and autonomously with African artists who stormed the gates of European museums twenty years ago. There are texts about Africans by Catherine David or Jan Joet, the Belgian and Swiss curators, that are terribly prejudiced and that I placed in exhibition spaces ten or fifteen years ago. They said that contemporary African art did not exist, accompanied by a phrase from Hitler about other cultures that said, “other cultures exist but are inferior.” It’s interesting to see that for Hitler the “other” need not be nullified, only inferior, and yet for contemporary curators Africans do not exist. But that is to be expected because I think in Europe there are vestiges of the Nazi aesthetic in European minimalism that reduces us to being a “Mandelian” culture. We can consider both figures, Hitler on one hand and Mandela on the other, due to their impact and the transformations they provoked in society: they are people who altered human history, that altered aesthetics, and that altered culture as well. I am closer to the South in this instance.

Returning to the Angolan war, let’s say it was a sort of peaceful guerilla war, since in 26 years of war culture, well...you learn a thing or two. We did a school program with video and photography, and worked with 100 schools, in buses donated by a bus company, and with snacks, in order to dedicate at least three hours a day to kids from three to twenty-four years old—more than 40,000 students—in a chaotic city. Ultimately, it was seen the colors kids like are the colors of their clothes, because they choose to wrap their bodies in these colors and in such a way transmit the colors. So we put together an educational program that is one of the project bases using work by local artists.

In my presentation I only use images that can be found at the Sindika Dokolo foundation—works that come from its collection. This is because when we did the first Triennial we ran up against a problem:



How to bring works by African artists to Luanda. We did a quick calculation and 600,000 dollars were needed to bring in the artworks we wanted. Coincidentally, a collector who had done a great deal for the development contemporary African art, Hans Bogatzke, died: he was a German businessman who patronized a number of African artists' projects during at least fifteen years.

I began to work at the end of the 1970s, on a project in Brussels, CAMOUFLAGE, that was a sort of satellite to a hypothetical center for contemporary African art. Keep in mind that in Europe there are only ethnological African art museums and that contemporary African history appears in no textbooks and is still not studied in schools. At the end of his life, Bogatzke's idea was to give his collection to an African nation. But when he died, his widow requested we return the collection. We had ended up with it because I had done much of the last additions to the collection. There was another German collector who wanted to buy the dead husband's collection. So it was then—and this is where I speak of politics—that we made an important political decision. We talked with Sindika Dokolo, a Congolese collector who lives in Angola, so he would intercede and give us some time to raise enough money to buy the collection. At that time it comprised 470 works. They gave us ten days and for ten days we went to see a banker friend of ours and he managed to do something crazy that meant two months later we had four containers with eight of Kentridge's films, Incachonibare's photos—everything we'd bought for Bogatzke in the previous fifteen years. It's all currently in Luanda.

I want to mention that the foundation collection, from 2005 to date, comprises more than 3500 works of contemporary African art. This was a rescue project as well. Because of the fragility of the African continent it is not possible to recuperate the past, within societies that do not have access to the aesthetics of the past. Since yesterday Cuauhtémoc spoke of what the French call "fetishes" from the north of Angola, the Bakongos, that are a de facto writing reference, i.e., from when those societies were completely dismembered—because children stayed with their grandparents and societies were utterly decapitated—there was an emergence of objects that at root are assemblages, because the nails in the mirrors are Portuguese, but the sculptures, the forms, were done by Africans. Since European countries didn't want to donate these items, we invited thirty

contemporary African artists to go to those museums around the world and create a much more contemporary work based on that aesthetic, by means of photography, video, or whatever medium they chose, so we'd have a rereading in Luanda of an aesthetic that was taken from the continent three centuries ago. We think it's a much more understandable and intelligible way to approximate that aesthetic, because the young people of Africa are much closer to us—to all of us here—because they are all post-exotic. If you were to put up a photo of Europe from a century ago, say on the streets, and then below it put up a photo of Africans from a century ago, and then off to the side a photo of Africans today, today's Africans and today's Europeans are more like the aesthetic of the Africans from a century ago than the Europeans of a century ago. That's why I don't understand this discussion of a South with complexes, especially when the South has brought a tremendous affectivity to human history.

I'd like to go a little deeper into the experience at the Venice Biennial because I think it's important you understand the reference. I believe artists need not wait twenty years to go to Venice. In many cases, we had artists who first participated in the first Young Angolan Artists' Triennial do their second exhibition at the Venice Biennial—something most people consider art's most sacred cathedral. I should explain how in the end it's really quite fragile.

The Italian ambassador in Luanda came to our office during the Triennial to say, "Listen, Fernando, there's a worldwide contest for the first African pavilion at the Venice Biennial." One hundred twelve years had to pass before they thought of it. But juries are really quite incompetent. I don't understand how you can form a jury to judge contemporary African art with people who will die in Paris. Imagine for two seconds if Zimbabwe were to define the aesthetics of Germany. But Africa is the only continent about which everyone can have an opinion. I rejected the idea, but Simon Njami thought we should enter the contest. The six-person jury voted unanimously in our favor, but apparently the American curator Robert Storr wasn't happy. MoMA was going to give us 100,000 dollars, but even though we'd won the contest, and had been chosen, they didn't give us the money because they said we were corrupt. What we did there seems like a fetish for the Venice Biennial: they said we are corrupt, but most the

people that speak of democracy is not elected: the G-8 is a private club that has been screwing up the planet for thirty years running now, and in a country where prime ministers have had to flee to Tunisia because they were working for the mafia—Italy—we were accused of corruption. Venice was a sort of terrible conspiracy containing people from the art world. They made us appear before people from the British Council, hoping to speak about a collection and a foundation to which none of them had access.

So we went to Angola and spoke with the government, publicly on Angolan television and radio, in newspapers; it was a political act to go to Venice. We raised 1,200,000 Euros in twenty days and we did the show. Unlike the Biennial, which waits two years before paying its employees, ours was a project where architects and the entire Angolan team, all the African artists—60 people—were paid in advance and at levels never before seen in the history of art. Forgive me for speaking this way, but it needs to be said: I believe the manipulation of history and art history constitutes a terrible act of violence. However, differently from others a lot of us do not forget our history. They said to us, “Why is a private collection like the Skindika Dokolo Foundation’s invited to do a project” at the same time that all of Storr’s crates came from galleries in New York, Miami, and I don’t know where else. There is a terrible cynicism and hypocrisy at work here. The difference is at the pavilion a third of the works belong to a private collection, a third were specific commissions, and the final third belonged to us—the artists. Even so, what they said was that ours was a private collection. I waited almost two years for a signal from the art community—from curators and pseudo-curators—for a sign of solidarity, or for an attempt on the part of the press to understand the reality of these artistic projects. The project architect was 28, Angolan, educated in Brazil; she is clearly black. The chic thing is that we put a collection of portraits of Africans on the outside of the building, where people wait to get in. This was obviously before Obama’s election. The portraits weren’t just of people who fought for African independence but also those who participated in global processes, in South Africa, or in North America, or throughout the world, so humanity can be considered as such in every corner of the world.

In conclusion, I’ll say that in the south of Angola, in the city of Namibe, we are building a new kind of cultural complex: a 6000 square-meter facility

with very simple projects, where, for example, movement is diagonal, in imitation of how Africans move.

We are studying ways of adapting the space in the same ways people function.

One of our latest projects, currently showing in Luanda and named M2A (*The African Memory Movement*), that involves people from all over the world, consists of buying every book we possible can on African history, art, culture, science and politics. Our goal in the next five years is to have 300,000 books in Luanda, along with documentation. The first thing we did was to buy the archives of *Noir* magazine, a pioneer in the diffusion of African culture: we have two thousand photographs and every archive and book that documents *Noir*.

We also just founded the first cultural radio station in Africa. As regards the South-to-South axis, we are negotiating an agreement with Salvador and São Paulo in Brazil to create a gallery that will be directed by an Angolan friend who's married to a Brazilian.

Right now we are financing residencies for Angolan artists that will open with an inaugural exhibition on 5 February 2009. Thank you for your attention.