

OLABISI OBAFUNKE SILVA

In Memoriam (1962–2019)

Without a shadow of a doubt, Olabisi Obafunke Silva (known as Bisi) was one of the most important independent curators based within the continent of Africa and working across the continent and beyond, up until her recent untimely passing last February. It might be somewhat inadequate to describe Silva as an “independent curator,” as she had established an initiative of ambitious scope based in Lagos, Nigeria, that was recognized as a critically important project of great benefit to significant constituencies in Lagos, Nigeria, West Africa, Africa, and spaces and places beyond. The project was the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), which functioned as a gallery, library, archive, and center of learning, debate, conversation, and exchange. This she had pretty much established single-handedly, an effort reflective of Silva’s drive, energy, commitment, and heightened sense of intellectual engagement. We would be hard pressed to find any independent curator elsewhere in the world with such a singular range of achievements.

Problematically perhaps, we have grown accustomed to benefitting from a particular proximity to exhibitions, debates, and scholarship on contemporary African art, taking place as they so often do away from the continent itself, in cities such as London, New York, Washington DC, et cetera. We now take it for granted that it is through the manifestation of the occasional exhibition, and the presence in Britain, the United States, and other countries of scholars of African art, that modern and contemporary African art is validated. We tend to give little or no thought to the relative paucity with which the African continent gets to host and engage in debates about modern and contemporary African art. Silva made the most astonishing, considered, and energetic intervention into this problematic by operating out of CCA Lagos, thereby creating, in Lagos at

least, the circumstances whereby Africa can more substantially avail itself of what its own modern and contemporary artists are doing. Though based in Lagos, for Silva, “international” meant as much about working in Ghana, Senegal, Mozambique, or Mali as it might be working in cities in Europe or the United States. Silva was, consequently, a truly global operator, well able to bring all manner of international—as in Pan-African or global—perspectives to her work as a curator.

Born in Lagos in 1962, she secured her undergraduate degree in France, with her formal training as a curator taking place in the early to mid-1990s, when she was among one of the first cohorts to enter London’s Royal College of Art Visual Arts Administration Master of Arts Programme (now called Curating Contemporary Art), a pioneering initiative that trained ambitious young curators for the world of work. Thereafter, Silva worked for several years as a London-based independent curator, establishing a project known as Fourth Dial Art, “a non-profit intercultural organization committed to the development, production, presentation, and distribution of the visual arts.” Fourth Dial Art’s four aims were to provide a public forum for the critical examination of ideas and cultural practices in the visual arts; to encourage original, innovative activity that is truly concerned with radical ideas about society and culture, especially as they relate to the rest of the world; to provide a platform that encourages and promotes the artistic creativity of young and establishing artists; and to research, develop, and collaborate with art institutions and professionals in the presentation of the visual arts.

Silva’s Fourth Dial Arts was responsible for a solo touring exhibition, *Heads of State*, by Faisal Abdu’Allah, one of the most fascinating and accomplished artists to emerge from the London art world of the mid-1990s. In the foreword to the *Heads of*



Bisi Silva (center) with Àsikò participants, Piscine Olympique Nationale, Dakar, Senegal, 2014. Left to right: Taiye Idahor, Kitso Lynn Lelliott, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Dana Whabira, Lassana Igo Diarra, Cliford Zulu, Bisi Silva, N'Goné Fall, Rosana Paulino, Serubiri Moses, Eza Komla, Rafiy Smith Okefolahan, and Tito Valery. Photo: Erin Rice

State catalogue, Silva dedicated “this project to my fellow black curators, all over the world, may you keep on keeping on.” Silva was steeped in the theories, histories, and, indeed, complexities of modern and contemporary African art to a degree matched by very few others. She brought this familiarity to her distinct diasporic, or Pan-African, approach to curating. Her work was hugely empathetic in the ways in which it responded to and respected the various manifestations of cultural identity that could be ascertained among the artists and audiences with whom she worked. She moved back to Lagos, from London, in the early 2000s and five years later set up CCA as another nonprofit initiative, based in part

on her previous Fourth Dial Arts project. What was radically different about CCA was that it was very much a bricks and mortar initiative, housing a gallery of contemporary art, a publishing venture, and, of unbounded importance, an archive and library. Being neither a commercial operation nor affiliated with federal or local government, CCA truly blazed its own trail.

In addition to her work for CCA, in 2010 Silva founded Àsikò, an innovative education initiative that, in its own words, was “part art workshop, part residency, and part art academy.” The roving school continued over a number of years to offer support to African artists and curators at various

locations around the continent. This Pan-African itinerant curatorial and artistic alternative school program took place in the capitals of countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Ethiopia, and brought together a number of emerging artists and curators for an intense, residential-style series of seminars and workshops, offering a rolling program of professional artists and curators with whom those enrolled in the Àsikò program would dialogue and interact. With facilitators such as Raimi Olakunle Gbadamosi, Tamar Garb, Teju Cole, and Kianga Ford, this was an extraordinary Africa-focused initiative that was very much dependent on the rigorous administration and organization of Silva and her close colleagues. In August 2017, Silva's CCA published *Àsikò: On the Future of Artistic and Curatorial Pedagogies in Africa*, a publication that reflected on five years of the Àsikò Art School program.

Silva's curatorial work extended beyond Nigeria, across Africa, and, indeed, across the world. Among her numerous projects, she was one of the curators of the 2006 edition of the Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art in Senegal; the 2009 edition of the Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art in Greece, *Praxis: Art in Times of Uncertainty*; and the *J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere: Moments of Beauty* exhibition at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, 2011. In 2013, Silva served on the international jury for the Fifty-fifth Venice Biennale, and in 2015, she was the artistic director of the Tenth Rencontres de Bamako (Bamako Encounters): African Biennale of Photography, the celebrated exhibition of African photography held in Bamako, Mali.

One of the aims Silva had for Fourth Dial Arts—to research, develop, and collaborate with art institutions and professionals in the presentation of the visual arts—was very much manifest in *The Progress of Love*, an international three-way collaboration between the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas; Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, Missouri; and CCA Lagos, taking place in 2012 and 2013. Featuring artists such as Jelili Atiku (Nigeria), Wura-Natasha Ogunji (US), Temitayo Ogunbiyi (US, Nigeria, Jamaica), Valérie Oka (Ivory Coast), Zanele Muholi (South Africa), Andrew Esiebo (Nigeria), and Adaora Nwandu (Nigeria), *The Progress of Love* was a multifaceted exhibition that “explored the

changing modes and meanings of love in today's global society.”

Silva saw to it that the important work of archiving and building an unrivaled library of publications on modern and contemporary art remained at the heart of her mission, and she energetically brought all manner of publications to CCA's library and made this material available to researchers. Silva sat on the editorial/advisory boards of a number of publications and was a tireless supporter of artists as well as a passionate believer in art's ability to make a difference. She always spoke with great fervency about art and artists and took a particular interest in photography. In the Àsikò workshops, Silva consistently encouraged, or pushed, artists to think evermore deeply about their practice and the ways in which audiences might engage with it. As a truly visionary voice in Africa's cultural landscape, Silva's pronounced intellect and unbounded energies were remarkable, and her familiarity with the work of a broad range of practitioners was exceptional. Furthermore, a significant aspect of Silva's work was her role as a mentor, both formally and informally, for those with whom she worked. Such considerate interaction with others is rare among curators of her standing and marked Silva as being a particularly uncommon presence.

Silva has left an extraordinary legacy that has many sides, though perhaps chief among them was her ability as an enabler. She passionately believed that there was much to be valued in the presence of modern and contemporary artists across the continent of Africa, and as much as the continent's emerging and established practitioners had every right to be represented in biennales and exhibitions around the world, she served as a powerful advocate for them to have their work seen, appreciated, and engaged with by audiences in cities across the continent.

Eddie Chambers