In 2017, Zimbabwe saw itself back for the 57th Venice Biennale with four artists: Admire Kamudzengerere, Charles Bhebe, and Sylvester Mubayi. The exhibition was entitled Deconstructing Boundaries: Exploring Ideas of Belonging and was led by our veteran sculptor Sylvester Mubayi. The four artists conceived new works incorporating sculpture, prints, drawings, objects, paintings, and sound for the six galleries of the Pavilion.

Deconstructing Boundaries questioned the issue of belonging through the voices of these four artists and their experiences in the ever-changing world. In the face of relentless globalization, physical boundaries are being blurred and challenged. The voices and perspectives of artists in this regard are important, for they are the mirror of society and the mirror of the future. Deconstructing Boundaries allowed these artists to reflect on their own experiences and question boundaries that currently exist in one form or the other. As they cross different borders and boundaries, they carry with them their unique experiences about the different spaces they visit.

When I look back to the 2017 Zimbabwe Pavilion that provided another perspective on the themes of identity, migration, patriotism, and belonging, I see it replicated in events taking place in the world today: South Africa’s xenophobia, migration issues in America, Italy, and around the world at large. The ideas of here and there, seeing and being seen, legal and illegal remain subjects for debate and for this exhibition. Borders are an unavoidable part of life but people continue to cross them, legally and illegally. Deconstructing Boundaries tackled a vast topic which has become a central issue on a global scale, and the 2017 Zimbabwe Pavilion exhibition illuminated some of its diverse perspectives through the works of Admire Kamudzengerere, Charles Bhebe, and Dana Whabira.

As we approached the 58th Venice Biennale with no improvement in Zimbabwe’s economic situation, we thought we were not going to make it to Venice in 2019. We had to work twice as hard with our parent Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts, and Recreation to realise this one. The Ministry’s understanding of what the Biennale meant to the artists and to the image of the country is what enabled us to get there. After years on the third floor in our traditional venue, the Santa Maria Della Pieta church, we opted for the ground floor, which is smaller than the upstairs venue. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise—many people used to get lost trying to find us, and opting for the ground floor increased our visibility and accessibility. The 58th Venice Biennale Zimbabwe Pavilion was represented by Georgina Maxim, Cosmas Shiriidzimonwa, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, and Neville Starling. These artists responded to an epic poem written by our late nationalist Dr. Herbert Chitepo, Soko Ristina Musoro: A Tale Without a Head.

In conclusion allow me to say that the time has come for Africans no longer to remain passengers in their own ship—the time has come for Africans to realize their own dreams, not other people’s dreams. The Zimbabwe Pavilion project allows us to tell our own story, because for years the vocalization and theorization of African art has come from others, from those who want to remain our teachers. I am grateful to Zimbabwean artists for making me stop and think and research. I have a whole new map in front of me as a result of what these artists have shared, and I believe our journey is just the beginning. To Mrs. Doreen Sibanda, the executive director, and the rest of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe team, allow me to say, “What we have started should continue, for the artists continue to work and without them and their work, we will not have work, so let’s value what they do.” They give us their emotions and all we have to do is to create more platforms for them and collect for the future generations.

in memoriam

Sylvia S.J. Kennedy
1937–2019

by Amy E. Futa

Sylvia Kennedy once told me that on the last day of sixth grade, in postwar Honolulu, the teacher made a sobering announcement to the class: when they returned in the fall, they would have to wear shoes. She chuckled at the memory, and I was amused, too, to think how far she had come from that laid-back environment.

As soon as she could, Sylvia, like Huck, would light out for the territory, for the wide world beyond her island. She enrolled at UCLA as an art student but dropped out after meeting her husband, a cultural anthropologist, whose research took them, and eventually their two young children, to some challenging locations. For a year, in 1960–61, the Kennedy family lived in a cave among the Tarahumara of northern Mexico. Sylvia chopped off the head of a rattlesnake that dared venture inside. (Her baby daughter was with her; otherwise, Sylvia was a live-and-let live sort of a person.) From 1963 to 1966, they were in Egypt, mostly in Nubia, where people were being displaced by the construction of the Aswan Dam. Finally, there were two years in Yemen in the late 1970s. During these stays, Sylvia facilitated her husband’s research, cared for their daughter and son, and steeped herself in the local culture. Somehow she found the time to take projects of her own. In Yemen, for example, a veiled Sylvia, with an interpreter, went to villages to photograph and draw henna designs. She also researched the stained-glass windows, made by Yemeni Jewish artisans, that adorned traditional stone houses.

Before, between, and after these research trips, Sylvia worked for the designers Charles and Ray Eames (mid-1950s), finished her BA at UCLA, and went on to earn an MFA in Design (1970s). She was the art director for Ornament magazine from 1982–1990, coming to African Arts soon after Ornament relocated to San Diego.

She was hired in 1993 not as Art Director but as Operations Manager, truly a thankless job. The 1990s was a time of upset for the journal, which was struggling to move into the digital age. All business affairs—advertising, subscription fulfillment, contracts, reprint requests, budget projections, purchase orders
for paper clips—were then handled in-house by the Operations Manager. It was a source of amusement to our staff of three that all of the people who have held this position at *African Arts* have had MFAs, and were sometimes heard to ask questions like, “Do I divide the numerator into the denominator or vice versa?” Nevertheless, Sylvia was a born organizer. She streamlined, pared down, and updated, beheading snakes wherever she found them.

Sylvia’s dislike of the fussy and the extraneous was apparent in everything she did. Verbosity was a pet peeve. Her own office messages, written on Post-its, were economical to the point of abstraction. The most devastating criticism she could level at a piece of writing was “Too wordy.” Sometimes my own writing didn’t escape this judgment.

Despite her gift for efficiency, the world of numbers and spreadsheets was not a heavenly match with Sylvia’s many other talents. She had both a connoisseur’s and a scholar’s interest in indigenous arts, and she collected textiles, masks, cut-paper art, figurines, jewelry, baskets—all manner of interesting and beautiful things from cultures all over the world. After Sylvia came to work at *African Arts*’ notably drab office, she painted panels in the geometric style of Ndebele houses and mounted them on the walls (see the examples above and below this article), along with woven baskets from her collection. When she took the baskets with her when she retired in 2002, it was suddenly Kansas again. However, the panels graced the walls over the windows until the *African Arts* office moved in 2018.

Sylvia was also a fabulous cook and a gracious hostess. She could put together a delicious meal, often Asian or Latin, seemingly without effort. Often she would walk into the office bearing a gorgeous baked fruit tart, still warm, the aroma of pear and cinnamon preceding her. She made jewelry and landscaped her yard with unusual succulents. She sewed, expertly of course; her son says she made every item of clothing for them when they were growing up. You could see her skill and clever mind come together in the little felt cats she made as gifts, often personalized for the receiver. One she gave me when I was still editing for the journal had the words “cpoy cat” stitched on the front, with the transposing editing mark winding around the o and p. As worldly as she would become, the bare-foot schoolgirl from Hawaii is of a piece with the warm, unpretentious person I worked with at *African Arts* for almost a decade. Sylvia took people under her wing and nurtured them with food and friendship. That might have been her greatest talent.

There is so much more I can say about her, but it’s best that I end here.

Amy E. Futa started as an assistant editor of *African Arts* with vol. 6, no. 2, Winter 1973 and retired as the executive editor with vol. 37, no. 3, Autumn 2004.