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Tributaries and the Triennial: Two South African Art Exhibitions *

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The large-scale, nationally-promoted, often competitive, exhibition has featured prominently in South African art historical writing.¹ Attitudes received and conveyed by the exhibitions, especially through historical texts, inevitably tend to become encoded into a body of knowledge about these exhibitions, which in turn plays a contributory role in the transmission of cultural values in a wider sense. Art historical writings in South Africa, in their approaches to such exhibitions, have tended to deal mainly, and somewhat narrowly, with the content of the exhibitions, obscuring the possibility that in a multiplicity of ways the exhibitions may signify patterns of cultural dominance. This is not to suggest that either the exhibitions or the contributing artists in some way consciously foster that cultural dominance, but, rather, that the ways in which art exhibitions reflect the structuring of social relations could form a part of the content of art historical writing.

Two such exhibitions, each distinctively impressive in scale and scope, were mounted in 1985. These were the Cape Town Triennial, initially in the South African National Gallery and thereafter

* (A shorter version of this paper was read at the annual conference of the South African Association of Art Historians, Stellenbosch, September 1987, under the title: *The Competition for History.*)

several other public galleries, and the BMW Tributaries, mounted in a then unoccupied hall of the Africana Museum complex in Newtown, Johannesburg.

Both exhibitions drew sizable audiences, and attracted extensive coverage in a range of publications, newspaper art columns, and in other media. A large number of South African artists were represented in one or both of the exhibitions, and substantial financial support from commercial sources was made available to the organizing bodies.

The Triennial, in keeping with the general pattern of large-scale competitive exhibitions, set out to attract works from artists engaged in some contemporary currents of artmaking, and the Tributaries exhibition aimed to demonstrate the range of current art production in South Africa, including art from rural areas, through a process of gathering from widely disparate sources. Works on the Triennial exhibition were selected by a panel of adjudicators, whereas Tributaries consisted of works chosen by one person, acting at times on advice. Selection processes, of whatever sort, inevitably impose limitations on the compass of an exhibition, and, therefore, ultimately its meaning. Limits to the ranges of stylistic expression which each of these two exhibitions might convey were of course in some measure also governed by practical factors such as transportability, or durability of work, and sometimes its geographic location. This point will seem self-evident, but in the light of some generalized, and sometimes unqualified, claims made for the inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of the exhibitions, perhaps needs to be put.

In their published contexts, confident observations, such as Marilyn Martin's 'The Cape Town Triennial is the finest show of contemporary South African art ever assembled'² are explainable as a part of the promotional tone often adopted for topical published criticism. But the apparent necessity for published criticism on national exhibitions to arrive at, or more usually commence with, unambiguously judgmental assessments, is unfortunate, for it probably reflects sets of reader expectations. The object of this paper is not to survey current art criticism in South Africa, but this point is perhaps not merely incidental, for such criticism inevitably forms part of the range of documentary sources which contribute to the production of historical knowledge, and the evaluative role of art history is in any event in itself an issue of some complexity. The historian's difficulties in making correct analyses of the import of

work included in exhibitions which have been subject first to the evaluation of adjudication panels and then of media scrutiny are considerable.

And these difficulties are compounded by the nature of the response to a large-scale exhibition, especially a competitive one. Broad media interest and involvement, large audiences for art, and, probably partly consequential upon the audience's interest in the aura and acclamation that attends competitions, commercial willingness to be associated with a cultural activity, are all generally welcomed by many involved in art production as well as in its distribution.

Some cautionary notes have, however, been sounded from time to time in relation to the nature of the work exhibited on large-scale national exhibitions and its reception. Ivor Powell, for example, in a published criticism on the Cape Town Triennial, refers to 'The artwork as media object, as excellence rather than a reflection of experienced reality.'³ And a similar point made by American critic Donald Kuspit confirms the possibility of artworks conforming to sets of conditions determined in part at least by the external expectations of media and audience: 'Doesn't the media dependence on an increasing amount of new art suggest that the audience's expectations have actually become part of the art?'⁴

For the historian then, whose historical account both follows, and attempts to account for, the fact of the production of the artwork, the limitations or qualifications of a selection process which may attend such exhibitions, the circumstances of the reception of the artworks, and the process of evaluation that has already taken place, represents a dense network of interwoven influencing threads that needs be unraveled to give a sense of the meaning of the exhibition. On the other hand, the apparent order and organization of this matt of threads offers a very tempting distillation of information to the historian. The sifting process which precedes a major national exhibition, and the subsequent response and extent of coverage may conveniently coalesce the production and reception phases of the artwork's history into a manageable 'package'. For the historian this represents a consolidation of data which may facilitate its incorporation into history or indeed elevate its importance in relation to other fragments of knowledge. Esme Berman, for example, uses selection for a national or international exhibition and, particularly, awards received at such exhibitions, as primary determining criteria for inclusions in her dictionaries of South

African artists.

The tradition of the large, sometimes competitive, national exhibition as a ready barometer of current developments in the visual arts is of course a long established one. In South Africa the number of national exhibitions increased steadily from the late 19th century onwards and by 1924, artists were able to submit work to one or more of four major national exhibitions held annually.⁵

These were in Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg. The Cape Town based South African Society of Artists probably provides the most direct lineage for the Triennial, for its annual exhibition was mounted in the South African National Gallery, after 1930, as the Exhibition of Contemporary South African Art.⁶ But that which appears to have drawn the greatest support over the longest period of time was the annual exhibition of the Natal Society of Arts, in Durban, for, following Melanie Hillebrand: 'Almost every practicing artist in South Africa exhibited there between 1918 and 1940'.⁷ (Hillebrand notes, incidently: 'The selection process was limited to the elimination of the more grossly unfit ...' The principal architect of the Natal Society of Arts exhibitions, Leo Francois, is quoted by Hillebrand as having pronounced, in 1924:

*'... this exhibition is now recognized throughout the Union as the leading art event of the year to which, not artists alone, but a large number of the public also, look forward to with special interest.'*⁸

Later in the same announcement Francois anticipates the historical relationship that the large national exhibition was to acquire with the notion of a nationally-identifiable art form, in saying:

*'In order to create the proper understanding, the public must be made acquainted with all the different styles and outlooks which are the characteristics of South African artists who are striving for a distinct nationalism in art.'*⁹

Francois' probably not-misplaced confidence that those large annual exhibitions could contribute significantly to particular historical stances on South African art underscores the role of such exhibitions in the formation of art history. His bald contention that South African artists strived towards 'a distinct nationalism' is, however, highly suspect, at best a regional view, and would now be rather undermined by the catholic scope and diversity of exhibitions like Tributaries.

Issues of nationalism aside, the perceived importance of these kinds of exhibitions for historical accreditation remains as pronounced now as in the 1920s. Comments such as Christopher Till's: 'The Cape Town Triennial Exhibition, the *most important* exhibition of South African art, ...' ¹⁰ (my emphasis) or Martin's: 'This exhibition (the Triennial) is the finest of contemporary art ever seen in South Africa' ¹¹ or Andrew Verster's (on Tributaries): 'After the BMW exhibition opens nothing in our art world will ever be the same again. I can be so certain for this show does what no other collection of South African art has every done' ¹² do characterize contemporary critical writings on the exhibitions. Such comments are, intentionally, judgmental. Indeed, this was noted earlier as being a chief expectation of their vehicles of publication. From the emergence of the Salons and great international exhibitions of the 19th century has developed a pattern of critical writing on such exhibitions in which direct, comparative judgment tends to be the expected form. The competitive nature of the exhibition in any event proposes such assessments. Kuspit, writing on the nature of criticism on 19th century Salons, observes that in some ways conditions for critical writing were easier then but in other respects the problems attending the exhibitions were very similar to those experienced by critics now:

*'Comparisons, the springboard for judgment, were ready-made; the politics of the exhibition were self-evident, and the general sense of having missed nothing--which didn't mean one wanted to treat everything--made for a certain self-confidence in comprehension. Not that the critic wasn't caught up in the same complex, ambiguous role that he is today: part analyst, part polemicist and part publicist.'*¹³

Kuspit's own critical position has, consistently, been to attempt to avoid the publicist role of criticism, or, as a reviewer of Kuspit's writings puts it:

*'... his concern is to reclaim the radical elements of art from the deceits of the market place--deceits to which art criticism normally contributes, for in both England and America most art criticism is little more in function or ambition than descriptive advertising copy.'*¹⁴

'Descriptive advertising copy' is, however, as Kuspit himself concedes, integrally a part of the greater process of mounting the ex-

hibition and anticipating its subsequent reception.

The 'package' available for historical incorporation includes then the preselected exhibition, or, in the case of Tributaries, the pre-determined categories for comparison; the nature of the audience and audience response; and the content and even the tone of the writings on the exhibition. The exhibition itself is in part reflectively analytic in that decisions about inclusion or exclusion were made on the basis of particular interpretations of South African art; for the same reasons sets up a polemic; and inevitably publicizes certain interests. The body of work exhibited, and the critical response which it draws, are, for the historian, therefore already sufficiently inter-dependent entities to make emphatic distinctions between them undesirable, and to justify the incorporation of the reception of the work into the larger historical account of the work.

Because of the inescapable limiting conditions imposed by, for example, the availability of work, selection procedures, physical characteristics of some works, and so on, applicable equally to exhibitions like the Triennial or Tributaries, for the historian to accept too enthusiastically the packaged convenience of the national exhibition as a clear marker along an historical route, might be problematic. But, by shifting the perspective marginally, from the exhibition as a vehicle for historical analysis, to the process of exhibiting, these limitations are modified to become but elements, among many others, to be accepted as partly governing this process. The other problematic issue, that of the historian's involuntary acceptance of the judgmental element present in competitive exhibitions, is also lessened in importance by accentuating the process over the product. The acts of ranking, important in competitive exhibitions, instead of being ratified by incorporation into history in the form of criteria for individual artist's inclusion in the body of data, become, rather, factors in a broader inquiry into cultural relations. The tendency of South African art history to engage in normative critical judgments and to establish hierarchies of artistic merit at the expense of discussion about the relations of artistic production, may be a consequence of the manner of art history's treatment of the major exhibition.

In a relational view of artistic production, and of the competitive exhibition, emphases will move from intrinsic, or hierarchic, values, toward a consideration of the means of transmission of these values. A fuller account of the process of transmission will want to

examine ways in which the exhibition as a whole acts to legitimate or to criticize existing authority structures; to evaluate the effect of the circumstances of presentation of the artworks, and to attempt to quantify and explain the reception of the exhibitions.

If Lawrence Alloway's contention that '... artists and their work have changed less than the system by which their art is distributed'¹⁵ holds true here too, then clearly a closer examination of the system of distribution should form part of an historical inquiry.

An important phase in the dissemination of information on a national exhibition is the physical presentation of the work in the art museum, for both the circumstances of exhibition and the audience reception of the work may contribute significantly to a reading of the work. Although information about works on the exhibition will subsequently be re-distributed via the conventional art publishing system, and therefore potentially be available for re-evaluation, the initial audiences tend, in practice, to be far larger than any subsequent audiences for the work, thereby consolidating the museum's position as an important one in the interpretative cycle. As an indication of the difference in size between the first, gallery-going, audience and the possible later audiences, the organizers for the Cape Town Triennial put the audience for the 1985 exhibition at more than 85 000, whereas American publishers of serious art books apparently assume a specialist readership of no more than about 3 000.¹⁶

This limited readership notwithstanding, the written commentaries tend to remain the eventual repositories of art historical values, conveying an assimilated and sometimes rarified version of the content of the exhibition. The format of the museum exhibition often contributes to the process of rarification which histories then perhaps inadvertently foster. The ease of absorption of a major national exhibition into historical lore is in some measure a result of the separate acts of selection and presentation being conveyed by the museum format as a unified whole. This carries with it a sense of authority, which continues when the work on the exhibition is later taken into public collections and is available for further historical absorption. This is not in itself an especially unusual condition of the large, competitive exhibition, indeed it is a thoroughly conventional route for artworks and their consequent histories to follow. But when historical accounts ignore or understate the circumstances of distribution of the artworks, then the potential for

partiality and selective production of art historical knowledge, is heightened.

The notion that the museum can, and should, provide an environment for viewing artworks, or any other expressions of material culture for that matter, more or less unencumbered by the awkward complexities of social relations, has for some time been subject to a searching re-appraisal. This re-appraisal has at times led to the expression of sharply critical views on the very idea of the continued existence of the museum, so fundamentally unyielding an institution is it sometimes perceived to be. A published review on the opening of the new Musée d'Orsay in Paris earlier this year concludes, very negatively, that:

*'... the real issue is whether this sort of monolithic nineteenth-century institution is worth preserving anyway. Should we be bothering to radicalize a form that seems largely irrelevant to most people's needs and desires?'*¹⁷

The question is probably consciously dramatic in tone, for earlier in the same review the writer, Nicholas Green, does propose some alternative practices for museums. But the blunt basis for his disenchantment with museums is intriguing: '... there is nothing on the walls but the pictures, nicely spaced out at eye level to facilitate the proper appreciative dialogue with the individual image.' He then contends:

*'What is totally absent is any attempt to explain the connections between these cultural products and the rest of society. Culture, of course, is still given in terms of a repertoire of privileged genres, though now expanded to take in photography and design. And in its presentation culture is still sealed off hermetically from any kind of relationship with other social forces—economic pressures, state intervention or popular culture.'*¹⁸

The Tributaries exhibition attempted to avoid precisely these kinds of stereotypical presentations of cultural activity by being mounted in a space which carried little of the aura of authority which public museums often do and also by freely juxtaposing works from widely differing cultural contexts, and by raiding terrains as diverse as toymaking, ritual garment creation, and artmaking which is cognisant of international currents. Works were selected in approximate conformity to the four areas which had been set up beforehand as working guidelines; rural traditional, rural transi-

tional, urban black and urban white, provided they met the overriding criterion of '... the exceptional rather than the typical.'¹⁹ The mounting of the exhibition, however, made no reference to these categorizations, for works were hung or placed so as to draw attention to unexpected contrasts, or similarities, of execution, of content, or of medium, and thereby aimed to forge new perceptions about what may constitute meaningful activity in the visual arts. Although this approach provided relief from the often stolid practice of more or less ethnographic classification, at least in so far as the 'rural traditional' works were concerned, the extent to which this kind of essentially visual, formal, even fortuitous, juxtapositioning of artworks satisfies Green's call to '... explain the connections between these cultural products and the rest of society' must remain doubtful.

From some time before and certainly at an accelerated pace soon after the mounting of the Tributaries exhibition the acquisition, and presentation, policies of many of South Africa's art museums were subject to close scrutiny, so Green's specific arguments may in any event now be somewhat redundant locally. But the general point about the Tributaries and Triennial's exhibition formats and exhibition venues warranting historian's attention as integral components of the greater meaning of the work, remains.

An historical study of cultural expression which focuses primarily on the works exhibited, that is, which understates the process of exhibition, will probably ultimately limit the interpretation of the work. Exhibitions are part of the process of cultural distribution, and discussion of work exhibited might therefore usefully be widened to include discussion on the reasons for those exhibiting artists having access to such processes, and, by extension, the reasons for the limits of access. If not the artworks themselves then the mechanisms which control, or influence, their production and their distribution, will tend to signify broader relationships within the social structure and in the competition for historical attention such relationships ought not to be ignored.

An element in the structuring of social relations which is reflected in the composition of exhibitions such as the Triennial and Tributaries, especially in so far as it determines the limits of access, is the provision of art education. This is closely attended by the issue of professionalism, a more difficult one to adequately quantify.

The educational element present in the exhibition process is important in two respects: firstly, the general provision of educational

opportunity in South Africa is so dramatically skewed that, inevitably, opportunities to contribute to exhibitions are remote for many, as is the likelihood of gaining significant access to the conventional organs of artistic control. Secondly, the advanced levels of education enjoyed by the majority of participants in competitive exhibitions tends to ensure that something of a self-regulating mechanism governs the form of artwork exhibited. (Based on catalogue entries, approximately 95% of the exhibiting artists on the Triennial would appear to hold a tertiary qualification in art education, in many cases a higher degree or comparable qualification, and around 55% teach at tertiary institutions.)

In a paper on the role of cultural institutions in the organization of artistic production, John Clarke comments thus on the process by which cultural traditions are established:

*'This process is one of continual re-evaluation, selection among the whole range of artistic production and reinterpretation, and is a process which is almost totally in the keeping of the professional guardians of our cultural inheritance, i.e. those who have already been thoroughly socialized into the established form of artistic production and evaluation.'*²⁰

The linking of education and professionalism, implicit in this comment, and the trusteeship notion of the professional, finds several echoes in South African art writing. Hillebrand quotes Francois, writing in 1928 that: 'In the case of a painter, one generally looks upon him as a professional when, after a course of study in art colleges or under a master, he follows art as a means of livelihood.'²¹

Frieda Harmsen, in 1972, rather similarly observed,

*'During and after the Second World War many of the country's established and potential artists went abroad, and somewhat indirectly, but nonetheless decisively, became acquainted or even involved with art overseas ... More and more people went to art schools as serious, committed students, and this initial training was inevitably followed up at recognised art schools abroad. The result is that today South Africa has a large group of professional artists.'*²²

The Schutte Commission of Inquiry into the Promotion of the Creative Arts reporting in 1984, and no doubt cognisant of South Africa's educational circumstances, was careful to underplay the educational

element in their guarded conclusion that professionalism can at least be recognized if not defined. The relevant, rather curiously-worded, paragraph reads:

*'An artist is a person, who, whether he has had academic or formal training or not, produces creative work of an original nature. This creative work must show technical skill and originality. Experienced art experts and artists must accept the work as professional. Only artists who produce or exhibit works regularly should qualify for help from the Arts Council.'*²³

Spread as they are over more than half a century, these quotations nonetheless project a common view. That is a view elaborated by Clarke that the artist operates within a system of largely internalized referents, at least in so far as personal advancement is concerned, for in vocational matters, well-established professional conceptions of artistic production will tend always to prevail.²⁴ The association of museums with 'professionalism', with statutory authority, with the instruments and institutions of education will tend too to be reinforced by these referents, and ought properly to also inform historical analyses of the artworks.

Cultural institutions, in mediating art to an audience, play a part in the structuring of social relations, and equally important a part is therefore played by the agencies supporting such institutions or supporting the exhibitions presented by them.

Both the Tributaries and Cape Town Triennial exhibitions attracted substantial non-statutory financial support, and although in South Africa the issue of commercially obtained funding, and its potential relationship to cultural control mechanisms, is rendered especially complex by the discomfiture which the alternative prospect of state-provided funding may generate, a concluding comment on this aspect of the distribution system should perhaps be made.

The position in the United States, where corporate funding of museums can be extensive in comparison to South Africa, has, on occasion, led to the usurping of curatorial responsibility by corporate interests, as for example in the Pierpont Morgan Library's exhibition of Holbein drawings in 1983. Douglas Crimp, editor of *October*, described the circumstances thus:

Last year the Pierpont Morgan Library, that staid and scholarly institution, staged an exhibition of the drawings of

Hans Holbein from the collection of the Royal Library, Windsor. The only publication produced for the occasion was a handout brochure containing a checklist, together with a preface by self-styled art historian Rawleigh Warner, Jr, Chairman of the Board of the Mobil Corporation. Here is the opening of that text:

'I find something particularly congenial in the selection, for Mobil's first collaboration with the Morgan Library, of this truly multinational artist—born in Augsburg, married and settled down in Switzerland, a journey in search of opportunity to England, and even that final expatriate stage of his work in London with wife and children left behind in Basel. Holbein's might have been an oil career.'

One can only imagine the chagrin of the Library's director upon reading this absurd and self-serving analogy, but he nevertheless allowed it to be printed beneath his own brief statement. And if a museum director is willing to accede to such a repulsive, if comic travesty of history, where will he then draw the line?'²⁵

The unacceptability of artist Hans Haacke's work *Manet - PROJECT '74* to the director of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, in the well-documented incident to do with Haacke's exposure of commercial manipulations underlying the circulation of *Manet's Bunch of Asparagus* (1880),²⁶ represents for Crimp, a similarly problematic circumstance. He discusses that museum director's rejection of the work in these terms:

*'This rationale—and the acts of outright censorship or deliberate falsification of history which follow from it—has come almost entirely to dominate contemporary discussions of art, as those willing to brush history against the grain grow ever fewer.'*²⁷

Other works of Haacke's, such as those referring directly to Alcan (*A painting for the boardroom*, 1983), to Mrs Thatcher and the Saatchi advertising agency (*Taking Stock* (unfinished), 1983-84), and to the German industrialist Peter Ludwig (*Broadness and Diversity of the Ludwig Brigade*, 1984), and the works' typically provocative and problematic exhibition histories, are used by Crimp to demonstrate what he refers to as '... the corporate control of culture ...'.²⁸ He goes on to claim:

*'When museums now organize exhibitions, their plans must generally take into account whether or not they will be attractive to the boards of Phillip Morris or Exxon, United Technologies or Chase Manhattan. Needless to say, this affects the kinds of exhibitions undertaken and the kinds of art shown, for it is unthinkable that a corporation would be willing to fund a show that does not enhance its image, even if indirectly.'*²⁹

Not dissimilar sentiments have been expressed in South Africa on occasion, though generally with an awareness of the problems peculiar to the local art distribution system. Rayda Becker, for example, on the symposium *Art at Work*, held under the auspices of the Patron's Trust, comments thus:

*'... the implications of business attitudes towards sponsorship were made more explicit during the afternoon and in a way that could be regarded as problematic for the art community as a whole. Responses such as 'Art must get its act together', or make itself 'marketable', or come to business with 'profitable ventures' are provocative to say the least.'*³⁰

Powell, in the review of the Triennial quoted earlier, on the specific issue of sponsorship, writes:

*'Now none of this is necessarily a bad thing for art--until you take this into consideration: like all institutions of culture, the art competition has its own rules and its intentional goals. These only partially coincide with those of art in general and where they diverge, it is in favour of the goals of sponsorship, of public relations and of public acceptability.'*³¹

The issues are clearly difficult, not readily reducible to definitive or casually-drawn conclusions, and in any event not universally shared within the art community. For example, a markedly contradictory view would seem to be expressed in this extract from an editorial in the South African publication *Gallery*:

'If certain people feel that the arts must contain political messages, maybe they would explain why these messages must always follow one line of thinking only. Without beginning a debate on the subject I believe that his art is the artist's own free expression of what he wants to say or depict--whether

*this be political or whether he simply wants to express joy, beauty, happiness and colour. Let us therefore leave politics to the politicians.*³²

For all its apparent confidence of expression, such a view suggests a certain uneasiness about the direction and vigour of some of the elements of the current art critical debates. The overriding issue, however, is that accounts of cultural expression simply cannot now concern themselves solely with the distillation of that expression in the artworks. The historical accounts might range over fields such as the determinants of social relations, educational structures, and the nature of institutions housing and displaying art objects, and would need include in their ambit the support structures which maintain and develop particular interests.

'Commercial sponsorships' role in the maintenance of such interests, is, as has been noted by Powell, and Crimp, above, likely to be emphatically in the direction of 'public relations and public acceptability', following Powell's phrase.

A public relations officer of the Standard Bank, a principal sponsor of the annual Grahamstown Festival and of several other arts activities, probably crystallized several corporate attitudes when advising arts bodies intent on seeking support that:

*If there is one key point to be remembered in approaching business houses for funding, it is this: no business owes anything to anyone, other than its shareholders and its employees ... Any moral responsibility of business to the community has been, and probably always will be, a highly debatable issue.*³³

The debate has indeed sharpened in intensity over the past few years and shifts in attitude on the part of both potential donors and seekers of support have become evident. With the heightened level of intensity of the debate has come a growing complexity of the central issues, exaggerated now by the greater variety of means and promotional vehicles employed by sponsoring agencies. There are, for example, awards now made for bodies of work produced by artists over given periods of time, regionally-specific awards, awards for particular age groups, for students at recognized teaching institutions, and so on, and loose generalization are inadvisable. However, one general characteristic of much, though not all, of the kinds of funding available is that it is directed toward artworks of a physically substantial nature.

This is not an inconsequential point, for works which have a more-or-less permanent physical presence facilitate the further phases of dissemination of the content of the work, including, for example its eventual deposition in museum or corporate office. To date, very little opportunity or encouragement, by way of funding, has been provided for artworks of a temporary, or less durable nature. Performance pieces, works which involve collective, perhaps spontaneous, community involvement, 'billboard'-type presentations of material of a, usually, socially-oriented nature, or any of the many forms of temporary assemblage and installation are not likely to be strong candidates for inclusion in sponsored exhibitions.

Practicalities of transportation, exhibition, and documentation aside, a chief inhibitor of sponsored support for non-permanent forms of art production is that the artworks are less well integrated into standard competitive structures. Few performance pieces work to fixed or scripted formats, frequently adapt the content of the piece to the specific audience, in a reflective way, and are patently unsuited to the complex administrative procedures which necessarily characterize adjudication of sponsored competitions. As the vehicles for publication and exposure of current art practices tend to relate closely to the publicity which attends major competitions, such as the published catalogues, reviews, articles, and media focuses, the influence on art historical documentation is once again skewed.

The competition format is an attractive one for sponsors, principally because public interest once secured is readily sustained, and consequently little funding tends to be channeled into ventures which carry lower public profiles, such as exhibitions or projects mounted by community arts workshops. But other, more problematic, reasons for corporate reluctance to become involved in a wide range of, usually, non-competitive exhibitions, obtain too. Sponsored competitions in large measure determine and foster their own, particular, contexts, whereas community arts projects exhibitions, exhibitions which set out to publicize clearly-defined social issues, or issues within the art world, are already rooted in strongly-developed contexts. That these contexts would at least weaken and interfere with the projected range of meanings of the commercially-funded competition is inevitable, and in all probability the nature of the association could prove wholly unacceptable to most of the traditional sponsoring agencies. Examples of exhibitions mounted on a large-scale and which have included artists of some

prominence but which would not have been likely to satisfy potential sponsors criteria for involvement might include the Womens Exhibition in Johannesburg in 1984, spread over several venues, and the Detainees Parents Support Committee exhibition mounted at the Market Gallery, Johannesburg, in January, 1988.

While it may be argued that, ideally, such exhibitions would be in receipt of state-generated support current state practices in the transmission of culture make such a notion patently absurd.

Experience elsewhere does not, however, always offer any special encouragement. The nominally autonomous, state-funded, Arts Councils of Great Britain, for example, have balked in the past at the public presentation of work deemed, arbitrarily, to contravene some or other canon of acceptability. English artist Conrad Atkinson's work *Anniversary Prince: A Children's Story (For Her Majesty)* was withdrawn from public exhibition in London in 1979 by the Arts Council, who maintained that they were 'exercising inescapable editorial duty as the body ultimately responsible for the exhibition'.³⁴ The work in question explored, and deplored, the relationship between the Distillers Company (manufacturers of Thalidomide), and the Royal Warrant granted the company for several of their other products.

Neither statutory nor commercial sponsoring organizations in South Africa are very often subjected to so direct a test of their expressed willingness to remain disengaged from the content of work exhibited. And for some artists the outcomes of such testing actions are probably considered sufficiently predictable for them to avoid participation in the formalized structures of art exhibition, or at least the major competitions.

Some of the inferences which may be drawn from this non-participation by a significant segment of South African artists relate directly to the processes of exhibition and subsequent reception of the works. Selection processes for nationally-organized exhibitions are generally dependent on voluntary submission of works which conform to pre-determined physical criteria or formats, but outside of art-involved circles there is probably only a limited awareness of the fuller implications of the process. As long as South African art histories and criticisms accept unquestioningly the large competitive exhibitions as legitimately accurate reflections of a comprehensive range of activities in the visual arts, then distortions in the reception of the exhibitions will persist.

The creation of a climate in which a critical audience for art can

be developed is partly a matter for broad social and educational restructuring. But a responsibility rests too on those institutions and individuals concerned with the presentation and documentation of artworks to develop ways of assembling, displaying, and writing about artworks which, in themselves, contribute to and encourage broader critical engagement. Art history and art criticism, as important generators of knowledge about art production, might play key roles toward the democratization (that is rather than the present, frequently superficial, popularization) of this knowledge, particularly as non-formally trained artists in South Africa are largely denied access to many of the sources for knowledge generation. Organizers and sponsors of exhibitions must seriously attempt a wider community of artists to engender a purposeful debate about the accreditation of artistic knowledge. (While challenges have been leveled at the form of artistic consecration which is perceived as taking place through the competitive exhibition, these have chiefly been in forums where little inclination is now felt to engage authority structures which are already held to be remote from the critical sites of cultural discourse.)

A component of any artworks' meaning may be said to lie in what Bourdieu has termed its 'social definition':

'Whatever he may want and whatever he may do, the artist has to face the social definition of his work, that is, in concrete terms, the success or failure it has had, the interpretations of it that have been given, the social representation, often stereotypes and oversimplified, that is formulated by the amateur public.'³⁵

This emphasizes the relative importance of the various legitimizing agencies, including the 'amateur public', all the more as this public's formulation is based on fragmentary information conveyed, selectively, by galleries. Little information about a corpus of related, but not publicly represented, work is accessible. This mode of dissemination tends to create a sense of such exhibitions being representative, and superior, samplings of a diversity of work currently being produced. But this derives in part from a weight of cultural tradition carried by galleries as institutions, which also reinforces their exclusive authority. (Hence the BMW Tributaries attempt to evade these sorts of associations.) If, however, these exhibitions are to attain their presumed objects of reflecting and fostering artistic achievement via the present distribution system, the mechanisms may need to be altered significantly if a broad credibility is to be won.

Over and above adopting an altogether more active process of searching, in contrast to the more orthodox but passive and therefore conservative role of recipient of works, where the constitution of the exhibition is concerned, organizers might more generously engage the participating artists and other interested persons in the very processes of the exhibition. Where regional submissions and selections take place prior to final assembling of the exhibition, for example, there would seem no reason not to make all works submitted available for public scrutiny, as a kind of short-duration, unselected, exhibition. When the eventual pronouncements were made and the subsequent smaller exhibition mounted, the gallery-going public would have an earlier set of references as at least a limited context within which to precipitate debate. Consequent influences on the reception of the work may in turn have a bearing on the production of work, for, again following Bourdieu, (and with the emphasis on the final few words):

*'... the relationship between a creative artist and his work, and therefore his work itself, is affected by the system of social relations within which creation as an act of communication takes place, or to be more precise, by the position of the creative artist in the structure of the intellectual field (which is itself, in part at any rate, a function of his past work and the reception it has met with).'*³⁶

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