

# Guest Editorial

## *Bisi Silva*

As I prepared to write this text, I undertook a search for publications on women artists in the Nigerian section of CCA, Library.<sup>1</sup> To my dismay there were barely a dozen solo artists' catalogues and brochures wedged between the more than 300 publications in the section. Almost half were solo publications of male artists, with the rest being catalogues and brochures of group exhibitions.

My consternation arises because I relate this experience to my specific context and location which can lay claim to a history – though chequered and largely undocumented – of academically trained woman artists since the middle of the twentieth century. With the relatively significant amount of documentation existent, could this lack of visibility be what art historian Nkiru Nzegwu observes as the way in which women have been **'long marginalised in the process of historical narration'**?<sup>2</sup> Nzegwu critically examined – through the work of Ndid Dike – the way in which African women artists have **"transgressed"** in order to overcome obstacles in a society that assigns well defined personal and professional roles and abilities to women.

However today, the artistic practice of many Nigerian, African and African Diaspora women artists have come to the fore and continue to gain momentum in exhibitions which are being organised locally and internationally. There has been an exponential growth in the visibility of a new generation of women visual artists on or from the continent of Africa as well as a diversification not only in the medium but also in the breadth and complexity of the themes and issues with which they engage, including the body, sexuality as well as questions of history, culture, patriarchy and post-colonialism. They have been producing work which questions and challenges both their contemporary situation and their complex histories. Their works are being seen by a wider audience, while the artists are increasingly engaging and interacting within a global art circuit through participation in mega-exhibitions, biennales and residencies.

An important development in less than decade is the proliferation of independent art organisations across the continent in the absence of government interest and support of art and culture. In West Africa alone these include Nubuke Foundation, Accra; Ker Thioassane and Raw Material, Dakar;

CCA, Lagos, Nike Art Gallery and Terra Kulture all in Lagos, and of course the twenty year old Doual' Art in Douala. In the past twelve months others have opened Zimbabwe, Uganda and Congo Brazzaville. What unites many of these organizations and other initiatives too numerous to list is that they have all been started by or are headed by women curators and cultural producers. The question therefore is with so many women directing visual arts organisations, does this signal the beginning of new trend? In any overview of their programmes, it is difficult to discern the way in which this trend has impacted significantly on the presentation, documentation and the visibility of women's artistic practice on the continent.

In spite of these positive developments, many all encompassing exhibitions have obscured in-depth study of individual practices, as well as ignored local specificities and histories and the resultant impact on the work created. This volume seeks to highlight the work of women artists from Africa, Europe as well as North and South America. The articles here take different approaches to engage individual concerns and practices to give an overview of a local artistic scene and history. The aim is not to attempt to give a definition of feminist practice across such a vast geographical region but to open up new areas of research and engagement that address the specific conditions in which these women's art practice in relation to definitions of feminist practice in the region. If as Nkiru Nzegwu, states that **'One can easily imagine many Nigerian men protesting vehemently that the issue of gender equity in art historiography is a feminist line of defense that lacks cultural legitimacy.'**<sup>3</sup> Consequently the objectives of *n.paradoxa* to widen the platform for how knowledge is produced remain timely.

1. Bisi Silva, guest editor of this volume, is the founder and director of Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos. It houses the largest independent visual art library in West Africa with over 4000 books, journals, art videos and ephemera.

2. Nkiru Nzegwu 'Subverting the power of masculinity' in N. Nzegwu (ed) *Issues in Contemporary African Art* ( International Society for the Study of Africa, Binghampton University, 1998) p. 117

3. Ibid p. 118