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REPLY TO STORR by Ben Davis

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, **Sigmund Freud** quotes an old German joke about a man who borrowed a kettle from his neighbor. When the kettle is returned damaged, the man responds to the neighbor's complaints by claiming, 1) that he returned the kettle undamaged; 2) that it already had holes in it when he borrowed it; and 3) that he never borrowed it at all. As **Slavoj Zizek** recently noted, the point is that "an enumeration of inconsistent arguments of course confirms *per negationem* what it endeavors to deny." It is the symptom of a guilty conscience.

Since the announcement that the art collection of Congolese businessman **Sindika Dokolo** would represent Africa at the **52nd Venice Biennale**, June 10-Nov. 21, 2007, and Artnet News' report summarizing controversies surrounding Dokolo in Africa [see [Artnet News](#), Feb. 23, 2007], Biennale curator **Robert Storr** has addressed the issue several times in the media, including in the pages of *Artnet Magazine* [see "[Biennale Without Barriers](#)", June 29, 2007]. He has relied on a battery of arguments that can't help but recall Freud's anecdote: 1) the controversies in the original report do not refer to Dokolo at all, and are therefore irrelevant; 2) the accusations may be valid but are hypocritical, since no one writes similar reports about Western patrons; and 3) whatever their merit, the accusations need not be addressed at all when considering the art itself.

These arguments on Storr's part have successfully framed discussions of the Dokolo collection in Venice. However, Storr's talking points misrepresent both the nature and the significance of the matter, and require correction. They are worth addressing individually in detail:

1) "The controversy is about the father and father-in-law of the man who owns a lot of this art -- it is actually not about him," Storr told **Lavinia Filippi** in an interview that was published in *Artnet Magazine*, echoing a claim he has made elsewhere. This statement seems to reflect an interest in damage control and minimizing the importance of the report rather than any honest attempt to assess the facts.

First of all, it misrepresents the information summarized in the original piece. The largest section of the Artnet News article deals neither with Dokolo's father -- the businessman **Augustin Dokolo Sanu** -- nor his stepfather -- Angolan president **José Eduardo dos Santos** -- but with the woman he married in 2002, **Isabel dos Santos**, herself one of the richest people in Angola, with enormous business holdings. As the Sindika Dokolo Collection is based in Angola's capital, Luanda, information about the place Dokolo's wife holds in Angolan society is clearly relevant.

In addition, while the original report mentions scandals concerning the origin of Dokolo Sanu's wealth, it does so in the context of a contemporary dispute over the distribution of this money to his living heirs. The report also highlights the -- admittedly brief and cryptic -- statement by an official who accuses Sindika Dokolo and the other Dokolo heirs of "mafia-like" activity.

All of this indicates little desire on Storr's part to assess the Artnet News report honestly, let alone to clarify realities on the ground in Angola or the Congo. Admittedly, the twists and turns of the Dokolo controversy are complex. However, evidence of the numerous claims against the Dokolo family, as well as the family's counterclaims in its defense, are all available online. As to Storr's contention that the scandals around the Dokolo family in the Congo are "actually not about him [Sindika Dokolo]," I would direct his attention to an article published in *Le Soft* in June 2006, which states things rather concisely: "In the Dokolo affair, things are simple and can be traced back to a person who is the common denominator in this unhappy situation, Sindika Dokolo."

2) In the same interview with Filippi, Storr states, "it's striking to me that those questions are not asked about the financial resources of **François Pinault**, who also has an exhibition in Venice," echoing Mr. Dokolo's own letter to *Artnet Magazine* [see [Artnet News](#), May 18, 2007] in which he questions the quality of the journalism of the original report, stating, "Would this basic journalistic work have been neglected if I had been a European or American collector?"

First of all, and again, Storr seems not to have read the original piece, which clearly puts the controversy into the context of larger questions about patronage ("Of course, even in the United States, institutions of high art can be synonymous with robber barons, from the **Rockefeller Family** and the **Museum of Modern Art** to **Alice Walton's Crystal Bridges** museum today.")

Second, contrary to Storr's claim, there is no taboo on examinations of the business practices of European and American patrons. Not too long ago, MoMA -- where Storr was a curator -- found itself featured in many embarrassing news reports on the scandal involving **Global Crossing** chairman **Gary Winnick**, who was a trustee. More recently, the Mar. 3, 2007 issue of the *Economist* -- otherwise a bastion of laissez-faire ideology -- reviewed a book about the family behind Madrid's **Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum**, stating that the "collection of paintings has invested a family name that might otherwise be stained by economic exploitation during the second world war with a kind of fragrant immortality." My own recent article "**Power Play**" makes a modest contribution to the genre with respect to New York collector **Aby Rosen**.

Scandals surrounding François Pinault have been quite widely reported in the art and non-art press; information surrounding Dokolo, on the other hand, had not yet been highlighted, even as he was being thrust into the spotlight and championed as an exemplary patron by the Venice Biennale. The background of patrons is clearly one -- though certainly not the only -- angle to investigate in writing about art.

Importantly, Dokolo has seized upon the occasion of the selection of his collection by the Venice Biennale to promote both himself and his image as ambassador for his country and for Africa. The Spring 2007 issue of *Whitewall* begins an interview with Dokolo about his collection with the following profile: "He is one of those men whom one meets underground while walking by candlelight through the dark foundations of a country. One of those stowaways of history, vagabonds of honor, an anonymous figure in the revolutions of the shadow. A quiet man of courage who changes the future of his country. . ." If this kind of nonsense is to be the journalistic context within which the art press presents the Sindika Dokolo Collection, surely facts that challenge this image are relevant as well.

3) Finally, Storr says, "why don't we talk about the art first and if there are significant and provable things about the background we must discuss them secondarily." In the *Art Newspaper*, he writes that "it is too bad that these issues have clouded the situation so far as the main object of the initiative goes -- and that is to show art from Africa in concentration at the core of the Biennale for the first time, and to have the exhibition also give the view of a curator from Africa or from the African Diaspora as distinct from that of someone from Europe or the Americas."

This is perhaps the most insidious of Storr's justifications, because it sounds, on the surface, so high-minded. Yet the line between taking the high road and having one's head in the clouds is a thin one. In essence, Storr implies that it is a disservice to the African art community -- and by extension to Africans in general -- if we allow the collection's European presentation to be polluted by its African context.

As a side note, it's important to point out that when Storr says that one of the two main objectives of the African pavilion initiative was to "give the view of a curator from Africa or from the African Diaspora," he is letting his desire to win sympathy get in the way of an accurate representation of his design for the show. Storr specifically -- and controversially -- initiated an "open call" for proposals, so that the process would be "an open one that anyone with a good idea and the resources should be able to participate in," as **Olu Oguibe** (a curator and also an artist featured in the Dokolo show) puts it in a **letter** defending Storr from concerns about the process expressed by **Salah Hassan** and **Okwui Enwezor**.

But the above remarks are particularly disingenuous considering Storr's own statement to the *Art Newspaper* about the selection process: "I did raise the issue of the Dokolo collection being a private one, and the jury's feeling was that it [the Dokolo collection] was in part significant because there were so few private collections in Africa and that this counted for rather than against it." In other words, one of the reasons that this show was selected out of the 37 proposals that were considered was precisely that it involved a private patron. And yet investigating the actual circumstances of private patronage in Africa is somehow "secondary," or a disservice to the Biennale's public. If Storr wanted to present an exhibition that was not "clouded" by issues of patronage, he had the opportunity -- in fact, he had 36 other opportunities.

Robert Storr created a committee. This committee picked a proposal "to represent the African continent" (as the Biennale's official website currently puts it). A large part of Storr's reluctance to take responsibility for the problems engendered by the process he put in place seems to have to do with a belief that "representing Africa" via art is a general good that can be separated from the value conferred on this art by its given context. When he sacrificed his participation in the Venice show, Cameroonian artist **Barthelemy Toguo** stated things clearly in this regard: "What guides me is a constantly evolving

aesthetic but also a sense of ethics which makes a difference and structures my entire approach." The esthetic dimension cannot be separated from ethical -- political and historical -- questions.

Making generalizations about an entire continent is probably a fool's errand. What is certain, however, is that vast segments of the African population have been subjected to several centuries of imperial intervention, foreign-backed civil wars, looting by international corporations and extortion by Western financial institutions. This has created the conditions for some pretty nasty stuff. Stating these facts does not mean that one consigns Africans to the permanent status of victim, or that this is the only topic that African artists are "permitted" to address -- it is simply to point to a reality that many have to live with. For Storr *deliberately* to sideline these unpleasant questions when they emerge is to make his initiative an instrument for precisely the evil that it purports to combat: ignorance.

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