

STRATEGIES FOR CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE IN A DEVELOPING CONTEXT: THE YOUNG ARTISTS' PROJECT

Storm Janse van Rensburg

My presentation will illustrate innovative strategies, embarked on in the establishment of a platform for experimental visual arts practice in the city of Durban, South Africa, with specific reference to the establishment of the Young Artists' Project (YAP) at the KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts (KZNSA).

Overview of the Contemporary Art Scene in South Africa

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, the visual arts sector in South Africa experienced some radical shifts and changes, the most significant of these being, to date, the opening up of the international art arena after years of isolation, sanctions and cultural boycott. The world opened up to our artists in unprecedented ways and events such as the 1st and 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 and 1997, that contributed to the interest and promotion of our artists. For more than ten years we have had an international art-world interested in our practice.

This "opening up" also exposed our artists to new trends and media and gave legitimacy to marginalised contemporary practice – i.e. artists working in new media, photography, installation and video. It foregrounded neo-conceptual, postmodern practice, and a new generation of artists started to take up its tools and modes of expression.

Institutions and audiences did not respond particularly well, and Jane Duncan comments and quotes on this issue in an anthology titled *Culture in the New South Africa* in an essay on the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, curated by Okwui Enwezor. She states that "The fact that the works were overwhelmingly multi-media installations, videos and photographs – and in fact all the *Trade Routes* exhibitions steered away from "Modernist" media like painting and sculpture – also contributed to the exhibition's contemporaneity. This suppression of painting and sculpture – as media that are arguably more popularly accessible as "art" – was heavily criticised as "neither demotic nor democratic", alienating to South Africans, and "excluding an untold number of artists and artworks", apparently in an attempt to conform to "valid" international exhibitions such as Documenta'.¹

Thus a resistance from institutions, the public and the art market needed, and still needs, to be overcome, and a charm offensive, of sort, is required. That said, the South African art world is a diverse and complex sector, with a vibrant art market, growing infrastructure and increasing State support, with the first Directorate for Visual Arts in the history of the country created in 2004, within the Department of Arts and Culture.

The Durban Context

Durban is a port city located on the east coast of South Africa in KwaZulu Natal province. With its subtropical climate, humidity and moderate winters, it is a popular holiday destination for local tourists. A city with a diverse and heady mix of cultures and influences, Durban is home to approximately three million inhabitants, with an estimated 850 000 living in informal

¹ *Culture in the New South Africa: After Apartheid*, ed. R. Kriger and A. Zegeye, vol. 2, Cape Town, Kwela Books, 2001, p. 296.

settlements.²

Although the busiest container port in Africa³, Durban often suffers from isolation, and culturally is often overlooked. Located off the Johannesburg – Cape Town trajectory, it is still derisively referred to as “The Last Outpost”, a reference to its British colonial heritage, when it was, for a part of its early history, the last colonial outpost in South Africa. It is thus a marginal city, geographical and otherwise.

However, the lack of visibility within the larger South African visual arts sector sometimes leads to bigger frustrations. Media focus on the two other large cities is guaranteed, whereas the ability to generate interest and visibility for local practice, artists and activities often requires a thick skin and persistence.

The irony is that Durban has produced numerous important South African artists and is known as a breeding ground for interesting and innovative work. However, retaining many of these artists is not a regular occurrence, many leaving the city due to a lack of opportunities and a limited art market and infrastructure, to pursue successful careers in other centres in South Africa and abroad.

In comparison to the other large South African cities, Durban has a limited visual arts infrastructure, which comprises the Durban Art Gallery (a museum), various smaller commercial galleries and a Visual Arts Department within the Durban Institute of Technology. Three non-governmental organisations focus on the visual arts spectrum and collectively span contemporary craft, community-based practice and contemporary art. These are the BAT Centre (home to music, visual art, dance and poetry), the African Art Centre (dedicated to contemporary craft development and housing a small gallery) and the KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts, known as the KZNSA, which comprises a complex of four gallery spaces, a gift shop and a restaurant.

The KZNSA

The KZNSA Gallery is a non-profit, membership-based organisation, with its governing council annually elected from its membership. Established in 1905, it is the oldest visual arts organisation in South Africa, and emerged as a force in the visual arts sector in the mid 1970s. Shedding its colonial, Edwardian image and mentality, the organisation has, for many decades, promoted the visual arts in the province and city.

Located in numerous shopping centres and temporary homes, the organisation took a brave and unprecedented step in 1995 and built a custom designed gallery complex in Bulwer Park, close the city centre. Designed by Walters and Cohen, a firm of architects educated in Durban and now based in the UK, the award-winning building catapulted this volunteer-based organisation into a new sphere.

The focus of the organisation has shifted since 1998, with the inclusion and promotion of not only member and locally produced work, but also national and international exhibitors. A high turnover of exhibitions is the norm, with an average of 22 exhibitions hosted annually, many coinciding in the various venues and housed for an average of three weeks. A balanced exhibitions programme is maintained, including some commercial exhibitions, as well as non-selling and educational shows. This diversity also describes practice in many media and genres.

The phrases “contemporary art” and “contemporary visual culture” were introduced into the organisation’s mission statement in 2000, to describe KZNSA’s activities and its aim of promoting critically challenging and engaged work. This shift was met with resistance from some sectors, particularly from artists working in more traditional and modernist modes, on the basis of a misconception, that such terms would exclude their practice and undermine their relevance.

The organisation is largely self-funded, through the generation of sales in the gallery (a small percentage of annual turnover) and, mainly, from the income from the restaurant and gift shop. Grants for specific projects are received from various sources, such as the National Arts Council (nominal) and the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (substantial), as well as from

² Faizel Seedat, (Manager of Planning: eThekweni City Council), ‘Housing Management and Development in the eThekweni Municipality’, October 2005, www.ddp.org.za/ddpprogrammes/lg/lg_conference/Seedat%20updated.pp

³ <http://www.durban.kzn.org.za/durban/about/129.xml>

international donors, embassies and the private sector.

Overview of the Young Artists Project

Durban, with its hot and humid climate is often seen as a breeding ground for challenging and ground-breaking practice, though there is a paradoxical lack of appropriate platforms for the dissemination of such practice. Even the annual programme at the KZNSA Gallery, a space dedicated to the showcasing of contemporary practice, is limited in the ability to showcase experimental and challenging work, owing partly to the resistance and apathy of a broad section of the exhibition-going public and the lack of familiarity with new forms of contemporary art practice, locally and at an international level.

The Young Artists' Project (YAP) was established in 2002, to provide an institutional platform and framework for the presentation and promotion of new and challenging work, due to the absence of such a forum locally and – as eventually became apparent – started to address a national absence, too. Originally framed as a project for artists based in Durban and other parts of the province, the project now also include artists from other parts of the country and further field.

The idea of the Project is to present work in a non-threatening manner, introducing audiences and public to a diversity of contemporary forms and idioms. The Project also encourages debate and seeks ways to engage the public through publications and other communication tools (email, postcards etc.), including public discussion forums and walkabouts. In addition, it attempts to create awareness and larger participation in a local discourse of contemporary art through engaging young writers and critics in its non-exhibition based activities. It creates opportunities for exchange, networking and peer review, thereby establishing a system of interlinked activities, that represents a comprehensive supporting programme.

The YAP issues regular open calls for proposals from artists working in all media, including performance, new media, installation, video or sound, to present a solo exhibition of their work or project, of one kind or other. All artists who have not previously held a solo exhibition are eligible, regardless of their age. Four such proposals are selected, each year. The resulting exhibitions and events are accommodated in the multimedia room, a small space measuring 7 x 4 meters, located at the back of the gallery complex.

The YAP only accepts new work not shown before, and encourages site-specific installations. Participating artists are assisted, financially and curatorially, in realising more ambitious projects and are provided with, ongoing support and encouragement. They are thus relieved of some of the pressures associated with mounting a first exhibition. Unusually, for the African art world, it awards commissioning fees, provides equipment, installation technicians and expert advice, as well as installation and other materials.

To date, sixteen artists have participated in YAP, and the list of participants provides an interesting overview of emerging artists in South Africa. One of the more successful or the early participants has been Thando Mama, then based in Durban and currently living and working in Johannesburg. Mama developed a body of work, which interrogated black male identity, through a series of searing and intense self-portraits. Since his participation in The Project, Mama has developed a considerable profile in the contemporary art world in South Africa, and internationally. His installation, *Back to Me*, first presented in the YAP, won the Prix de la Communauté de Belgique at the Dakar Biennale, in 2004.

However, the YAP is not fixated on producing young art stars, but attempts critically to engage local practices, by focusing on, and harnessing, existing experiments and activities. Equally, it also attempts to bring practice that might not fit strictly into preconceived notions of a visual arts format into the rubric of contemporary visual culture and to provide a platform for it. Thus, practitioners that fall outside, and prefer to work outside, the strict parameters of their given discipline can find a temporary home for their practice at the KZNSA, and are provided with a supportive environment and a critical audience for their work

The practice of Doung Anwar Jahangeer, an experimental architect based in Durban, falls into this ill-defined category of "alternative practices". Jahangeer presented his installation, the *Parking Plot Project* during 2003, and explored in-between spaces in the city and the means by which the management structures of the state and the city control and manipulate the lives of the inhabitants. Jahangeer's interest in, and work with, a homeless community living within the

Central Business District of Durban, has informed his practice for a long time and culminated in the installation he made for the YAP, in conjunction with two leaders from the homeless community. The installation became a site for criticism of the municipal government and its inner city rejuvenation policies, which favour the “beautification” and clearing away unwanted elements such as the homeless, as opposed to long-term solutions incorporating humane and socially responsible programmes.

A collaborative project was presented in 2004 by Dean Henning and Rike Sitas, a team that has produced video and sound collaborations, as DJ. and VJs, in the alternative club scene in Durban. Working as a computer programmer and social researcher, respectively, Henning and Sitas presented an interactive, digitally scripted narrative, that invited manipulations from the audience, through interaction with an-old fashioned control desk. By pushing buttons at random, viewers could manipulate images projected onto a screen and change the narrative elements. The installation, which was aptly titled “*a city*”, constituted a potent and visually compelling, exploration of the urban landscape. It was also accompanied with an especially composed electronic music score.

The presentation of interactive environments is a recurring theme, and offers a challenge to the passive viewing habits associated with the traditional white cube. In 2005, Vaughn Sadie presented *Spill Light*, which required a minimal action from the audience to activate the installation space, by switching on lights in a random grid; whilst Colleen Alborough created a more challenging spatial, aural and visual experience, in her installation titled *Night Journey*, where viewers negotiated a maze of handmade felt screens, activating sound and video elements, to discover an environment reference dream and deep sleep.

Performance practices in a gallery environment are, by their very nature, paradoxical. On one level, the gallery is seen as a public space, but more often it attempts to replicate the “black box” conditions of the theatre. Mlu Zondi challenged these notions with his performance installation, *Identikit* in 2005, by presenting a site-specific work within the gallery, and adding to this a parallel performance project, taking place simultaneously in the public domain, such as the inner city market and the beachfront. Documentation of these public performances was introduced into the gallery at intervals throughout the exhibition, so that the amount of visual material on display increased, as the project progressed.

Peter Van Heerden’s *Bok* (or “goat”, directly translated from Afrikaans), presented in 2006, similarly broke out of the safe confines of the gallery walls, by creating an environment in the public park adjacent to the KZNSA Gallery. This environment, built from found objects and scavenged materials, became a performance space that could also be described as a live art installation, with the artist living on site for the duration of its set-up, engaging with passers-by and residents from the surrounding neighbourhood. Together with a collaborator, André Laubscher, Van Heerden presented a challenging work interrogating masculinity and “whiteness” based on an historic photograph of an Afrikaner being executed by a British firing squad during the Anglo-Boer War. This point of departure led on to an exploration of other political executions during South Africa’s turbulent history, such as the torture and killing of people by the apartheid government, and showed up the links between violence, patriotism and patriarchy.

On completion of each cycle of four exhibitions a year, a small format catalogue is produced, and young, preferably unpublished, writers are invited to interpret and contextualise the practice of the participants and their projects. The editorial process involves a three-way conversation between the curator (who also acts as editor), the artist and the writer, with drafts circulating and being shaped through a process of amendment and discussion. It is a time consuming process, but has paid off considerably, as this is also an empowering process for young writers. The resultant publication is an important resource in the YAP chain of products, and a useful tool for promoting the artists and writers concerned. The publications are distributed to museums, galleries, curators and other VIP’s in South Africa and abroad.

Each new project ended with a three-day seminar, at which the project is examined and discussed in a variety of formal and informal forums – Four prominent South Africa speakers are invited to speak at this, and to deal with an overarching theme related to current trends in contemporary art. The most recent conference, held in May 2005, explored the connectivity of

South Africa with practitioners and institutions from the rest of Africa and went under the provocative title of *Back(s) to Africa: Contemporary Practice and our Links with the Continent*.

This title attempted to articulate the disjointed and complex relationship that South Africa has with the rest of the continent. On one level the country returned to being a part of Africa after the collapse of apartheid policies, and this not only isolated it from its neighbours, but attempted the seemingly impossible feat of cutting it off from them altogether. At the same time, this relationship with Africa had been fraught with xenophobia and distrust, and generally informed by a lack of knowledge and cultural disengagement.

Large South African companies are avidly seeking to exploit the new markets opened up in the region, but cultural institutions and artists have failed to follow suit and continue, instead, to focus on the more easily accessible markets and exhibition spaces in Europe and North America. The potential to explore and develop intercontinental networks is further impeded by poor infrastructure and underdeveloped communication channels.

It is within this context that the YAP and the KZNSA started to articulate their own relationship and position within the context of practices on the continent. This also locates the institution's experience and reach, as something that is not bound by the limitations of geographical location, but becomes an arena for action and intervention within the complex and unarticulated spaces for contemporary visual arts practice throughout the region.

The seminar format has been devised to function as three equally weighted forums. The first of these provides ample opportunity for social and informal networking and is closely followed by a closed session, where the artists themselves have an opportunity to address and present their projects to a small invited audience consisting of curators, gallerists, academics and artists. This allows constructive feedback on their projects and also introduces visiting delegates to the context of the artist concerned. The third, public or open, session is arranged for the last day, when delegates present formal papers to an audience consisting of students and the general public.

The seminar is intended to provide networking opportunities for the participants and for other artists and practitioners, working and living in Durban. Often the invited guests from elsewhere come to Durban for the first time and get an opportunity to engage, and get acquainted, with local artists and practice.

A new addition to the project is the establishment of an annual critical writing workshop, titled *Critical Voices*, which is intended systematically and professionally to empower new voices with the skills for analytical and critical reflection on contemporary art, through writing. The idea for the workshop developed out of a need identified in the process of finding writers for the project catalogue. The course is broken down into eight sessions, over a total of four consecutive weeks. The workshop is led by Sean O'Toole, a respected local journalist and the current editor of *Art South Africa magazine* who also developed the curriculum. Selections of writings emanating from any of the workshops are printed in the form of newssheets, which are then distributed to everyone on the organisation's mailing list.

Over the past couple of years, The Project has been supported by numerous funders, and I would like to acknowledge ProHelvetia and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation for the first grant that kick started the venture, in 2002. The most recent funders include the Royal Netherlands Embassy and the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund.

In conclusion, Sue Williamson, the founding editor of the South African contemporary art website, www.artthrob.co.za and a prominent artist, had the following to say:

"... the YAP project has found its way into the national art consciousness... (it) is being seen, in a country where scraping together the money to pay for the production costs of an exhibition can be almost impossible, as an ambitious programme which offers funding, curatorial support and a showcase exhibition to those young artists putting forward a sufficiently strong proposal... one felt that the YAP process had given each (participating artist) the opportunity to properly think through their ideas, their concept and their presentation, and thus the final work which was put before the public was rounded and satisfying."