

Original founding statement (2005)

With the lifting of the cultural boycott of apartheid South Africa in 1990, South African art re-entered the international community. That, we have heard many times. However the half that has seldom been told is how South African art did this at the expense of reconnecting with the African continent. Consequently "international" to most in the South African art world has got little to do with Africa (or the rest of the 'developing' South for that matter). It is true that many of our 'international' artists have participated in exhibitions alongside fellow Africans, but this has almost always been with those artists of African origins based in the West. In recent years there appears to be a growing awareness that while the African diaspora *is* an important part of an inclusive 'Africa', it is debatable to what extent most of these artists 'represent' the kind of art being made in Africa, and the interests of and challenges faced by artists working on the continent. It is also true that there are various cultural exchange projects that do feature artists (and associated professionals) on the continent, but these usually don't attract much funding and tend to lack visibility. Certainly such important initiatives are usually ignored by the media, including the art media. Recently there have also been several high profile initiatives that purport to 'reconnect' South African art with Africa, and it remains to be seen how successful these projects will be in developing the discourse of what it means to be postcolonial, post-apartheid and postmodern. Indeed the 'norm' that prevails in South Africa is one in which 'African art' is something that happens north of the Limpopo. Alternately it includes art made by some South Africans, particularly those categorized 'African' under apartheid, and particularly that which conforms to 'craft'. In other words there is a strong tendency to view "African art" in very narrow terms, shaped largely by the taxonomies of apartheid.

The founding of ASAI represents a modest attempt to raise awareness of the incomplete liberation of South African art, and to develop both education programmes and resources to contribute towards generating a truly critical discourse on what it means to be an African artist today.

ASAI is a new kind of organization. It has grown out of a history of cultural activism and is driven by a developmental agenda. I took the decision to form ASAI after I found that there appeared to be very little space to address the kind of issues briefly touched on above. I also found that the debate on transformation in the visual arts tended to be limited to the question of increasing black representation in institutional structures, with seemingly little concern for issues of neo-colonialism, class and personal agency. Consequently we have some 'transformed' institutions that continue to view Africa as a marginal if exotic location that is 'other' to the South African self. Every time I have raised the need to prioritise engagement with Africa I have received some positive responses, and yet Africa appears to continue to be a marginal discourse within the South African art world. In such a situation one really has no alternative but to create a new platform. Three things have become clear to me: i) the need to identify and work with people with whom there is a similar commitment towards a non-racial afro-centrism; ii) the need to develop a programme using existing resources, modest as these may be; and iii) the need to develop at least one programme that has the potential to generate enough income to sustain the core activities of a new organisation.

Following fairly extensive consultations, mostly with artists, ASAI has begun to take on a unique shape: a 'business' that markets the work of artists and earns income from commission on sales; a lobby for postcolonial afro-centric transformation; a forum for public education and debate... essentially a partnership between a so-called self-proprietor and a number of artists, educators and writers. For practical purposes participation is presently centred on Cape Town. The present structure is by no means perfect and will evolve over time, depending on the nature and extent of participation in the project, and also depending on responses from parties who are not directly involved in ASAI. In the longer term ASAI's legitimacy and sustainability is contingent on the quality and participation of contributors. For now ASAI is simply opening up a new space for a debate that has barely begun.

Note that material can be submitted for publication in Forum, and this can come from anywhere and articulate any position, provided that it contributes towards generating a critical discourse on African art, particularly modern (or contemporary) African art. Cape based artists, educators, writers and curators are invited to actively participate in developing public education programmes that focus on specific aspects of art in African countries.

Africa South, that's where we are. Art, that's what we do. Initiative, that's what we need.

Mario Pissarra , 30 November 2005