Cross Currents

Contemporary art practice in South Africa
Edited by John Picton and Jennifer Law

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Relatively few books have been written about South African art, and more than a fair share of these are out of print. This catalogue, which was produced to accompany the exhibition of the same name, therefore has the potential to serve as a resource on South African art for some years to come.

According to Len Green, initiator and co-curator of the exhibition, 'Cross Currents does not try to be a definitive South African exhibition, instead it... attempts to show something of the range of contemporary art activity in South Africa and the background of the artists who have created the work.' Co-editor Jennifer Law goes a little further when she says that 'the aim of Cross Currents is to celebrate the diversity of South African visual culture and address the pedagogical history of art practice through which it has been produced.'

In setting out to achieve its agenda, the catalogue begins with articles by the editors who sketch a historical context. In attempting 'to explain a little of why we come to this art in the way we do' John Picton tackles the notion of ahistorical, discrete 'tribes', which features in most exhibitions of African art. His point is given resonance when leading South African art historian Anita Nettleton shows how artists of diverse ethnic origins came to be commonly known as 'Venda' after the watershed Tributaries exhibition in Johannesburg, 1985, which featured untutored rural black artists, particularly sculptors, with mainstream practitioners for the first time. The editors' contributions are followed by artist David Koloane who attempts to map out the phenomenon of 'community art centres'. Individual contributions on a broadly applied notion of 'centres' follow, and co-curator and project cornerstone Robert Loder concludes with an 'epilogue'.

Throughout the catalogue, references are made to Art from South Africa, curated by David Elliott for the Oxford Museum of Modern Art in 1990.

Although references to the MOMA show serve essentially to acknowledge its historical importance, it is tempting to compare it to Cross Currents, particularly as both exhibitions have several common exhibitors. However that may be where their similarities end. Their very different political contexts lead to radically different curatorial processes, and this is evident in the results. Art from South Africa was essentially the first (and last) significant application of the selective cultural boycott as it applied to the visual arts. This redefinition of what had been a blanket boycott had emerged from the 'Culture in Another South Africa' (CASA) conference in Amsterdam,
December 1987, (Organised by the ANC’s Department of Arts and Culture and the Dutch Ant-Apartheid Movement. CASA was significant in identifying the emergence of a progressive cultural movement within the country). Under this revised policy Elliott was required to consult with internally based visual arts structures in order to secure the approval of the African National Congress. This is the reason why the final exhibition was so broadly representative, as Elliott was obliged to accommodate a wider range of interests than normally required of a curator.

In contrast, Cross Currents is essentially a private collection of work by more than forty South African artists. The fact that this is Loder’s collection is not clearly stated in the catalogue, although occasional hints can be found. Arguably the project may have been better served by foregrounding Loder’s role, as in some ways this exhibition is just as much about his engagement with South African art, as it is about South African art itself. Something of this is revealed in Loder’s contribution to the catalogue, where he identifies the web of threads which unite the show. Dominant among these are the links that can be traced from Loder’s involvement in setting up the Triangle Arts Trust with Anthony Caro in 1982; the legacy of the late Bill Ainslee and the Johannesburg Art Foundation which he established; Ainslee and his protégé Koloane’s invitation to the Triangle workshop, and the subsequent formation of the Thupelo Workshop by the two of them in the late eighties; Thupelo’s comparatively recent offshoots, namely the Bag Factory and Greatmore studios in Johannesburg and Cape Town; and not least Loder’s Gasworks Studios in London where several South African artists have been invited for residency programmes. The other major source for Cross Currents is the Tributaries exhibition, and the artists that were catapulted by this seminal exhibition into the mainstream.

Once one grasps the Ainslee/ Koloane/ Loder axis and its intersection with Tributaries it becomes
clear why you will not find many artists whom you may well expect to see in an exhibition of art produced in South Africa over the last twenty years. There is for example very little overlap with the more performance and installation oriented artists who dominate Sue Williamson’s *Art in South Africa: The Future Present.* Photograph is also absent, and there is no acknowledgement of the community mural movement, although ironically Lisa Brice’s article purports to be about public art in Cape Town. Neither is there anything approximating, or drawing on, any of the indigenous ‘crafts’, unless one counts some of Jackson Hlungwani’s wooden representations of chickens. Perhaps more surprisingly, *Cross Currents* includes no print-making at all. The absence of prints is particularly noticeable, given that, as Koloane points out, ‘the lino-print technique appears to be the most characteristic medium employed by most (community arts) centres’, and silkscreen printing played a key part in the culture of resistance. By comparison with *Art from South Africa,* *Cross Currents* is a more conservative exhibition, made up of, as Picton puts it, ‘painting (and assemblage and collage) and sculpture’. These considerations are vital if the aim is to show us something of the range of South African ‘contemporary art practice’ or ‘visual culture’, rather than to showcase a private collection reflecting the interests and involvement of its owner.

Unfortunately the confusion as to whether we are exhibiting the breadth of South African art or telling another story of personal engagement and discovery is evident in the choice of catalogue subjects. On one hand there are insightful contributions including articles on rural sculptors, the Open School and Johannesburg Art Foundation, written by Nettleton, Colin Smuts, and David Trapper respectively, all of which shed light on some of the artists represented in *Cross Currents.* On the other hand there is an article on the Barthel Art Centre (BAT Centre), whereas none of the artists referred to in the article feature in *Cross Currents.* Similarly there is an article on the African Art Centre, represented by a Derrick Nxumalo drawing, when the AAC is best known for beadwork which does not feature in *Cross Currents.* Arguably the project would have been better served by allocating this space to more information on the Thupelo related workshops, and looking at where and how these fit into the South African art world.

Again, if approached as a show based on Loder’s involvement with South African art we do get something of what Law promised us about pedagogy. Loder presents us with a strong, albeit brief, motivation for the workshop concept as a method for artistic development and personal growth, and this is reinforced by psychiatrist and Ainslee family friend Trapper in his lucid account of the Ainslee Art School/Johannesburg Art Foundation and its legacy. The scant information on artists illustrates Loder’s emphasis on workshops, as these are listed in place of collections, commissions, and other traditional indicators of success. It is also worth noting that the Thupelo workshops, which by and large are associated with abstract painting, and which are usually attended by a proportionally high number of black artists, are directly responsible for most of the abstract works in *Cross Currents* coming from black artists. It is almost as if a point is being

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*Penny Siopis, Blood River (Seem, Sieslog, Soem), mixed media, each 76 x 76 cm, 1994*
quietly made to counter the sometimes negative view that the Thupelo workshops depoliticise black artists by encouraging them into becoming neo-abstract expressionists.

Presumably in pursuance of the transformation and pedagogy agendas, the catalogue includes an article by Penny Siopis on tertiary education. An artist as well as professor of Fine Arts, Siopis reflects on the reasons for the few black fine arts students at universities in South Africa, particularly black women. Although she extends her reference beyond the universities to acknowledge the critical role that is played by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's), her contribution could have been strengthened and put into sharper context if the editors had had the foresight to include a chapter on the precarious situation of art education in schools. This in turn would deepen the appreciation of the critical role played by initiatives such as the Thupelo workshops in plugging the gaps in the educational framework, particularly as these apply to black artists. For although South Africa has undoubtedly made progress in making art accessible to local communities, the situation in schools and the NGO sector is far from assured or stable. By not examining these issues, one can see how easily a project like this can create the impression that inequality is a thing of the past.

An interesting feature of Cross Currents, which is not addressed in the catalogue, is the inclusive view of being 'South African'. Artists who have spent significant portions of their lives outside of the country and reside elsewhere are included, with no hint of difference. Certainly South African politics has since the nineties been characterised by tensions in re-integrating returning exiles, released political prisoners, and those that remained behind. In addition the country has seen an influx of other nationals, particularly from African countries, and xenophobia is rampant. Have the arts been untouched by these developments? Even if these issues were not tackled head on, surely it would be reasonable to expect some comment on this silent integration of 'South Africans', particularly since the subtitle of the project is 'Contemporary art practice in South Africa' (my emphasis).

As Cross Currents sets out to represent artistic developments of the last twenty years, one may also have expected some consideration to be given to the impact of the cultural boycott. The first decade surveyed here was a period of international pariahship, and the second saw South Africa's re-entry into the international community, so some comment could be expected. Yet, apart from artist and lecturer Keith Dietrich noting the international agenda of the controversial Johannesburg Bienale, no consideration appears to have been given to the impact of international isolation and exile on the art that was created during these two decades. In reflecting on the last two decades it would be interesting to explore whether the cultural boycott contributed to a culture of self-reflection, or engendered bitterness about isolation. Did it contribute to building a community or did it alienate artists? How did the lifting of the boycott impact psychologically on South Africa's artists, and how did it affect the kind of work made? Or has the controversial boycott been consigned to the culture of amnesia where today it is difficult to find anyone who supported apartheid?

However, where the catalogue really lets the project down, far more than for the looseness of its conceptual framework, is through its many factual inaccuracies. In several cases these even contradict

Noria Mabasa, Three Figures (one of three pieces), painted baked clay, 1995
one of the editors own research. Law correctly
dates the formation of the Federated Union of
Black Artists and the Community Arts Project to
1976 and 1977 respectively, whilst Koloane
erroneously puts CAP's establishment to 1972 and
traces FUBA's origins to a meeting in 1978. Koloane
creates more confusion by writing that "In the
turbulent 1980's... a new breed of community arts
centres emerged, such as FUBA...". Law incorrectly
states that none of the community arts centres were
state funded under apartheid whereas Koloane
correctly cites the Katelehong and Mofolo art centres
as being funded by the local authorities, and
describes how this led to the local community
boycotting the Katelehong Art Centre. Koloane also
contradicts other contributors. He puts the
establishment of the Johannesburg Art Foundation
at Saxonwold to 1983, whilst Trappler puts it at
1976. Koloane tells us the Open School closed in
1996, whereas Smuts, its former director, puts it at
1998.
Koloane also makes several errors in writing about the Community Arts Project. In describing its work he presents an account that corresponds to CAP in the late eighties, and of the eight artists he names as having emerged from CAP, he includes two who owe their training elsewhere. Strangely his list omits reference to two of CAP’s most successful ‘graduates’, Lionel Davis and Willie Bester, both of whom feature in Cross Currents. In making reference to Davis, whom he describes as a tutor, Koloane implies that he was imprisoned for political activities after he went to CAP, when in fact this episode preceded Davis’ involvement with CAP.

Artist Lisa Brice is also less than accurate in attempting to highlight some of the achievements of the Visual Arts Group, a membership based organisation which played a key role in the internal organisation of Art from South Africa. Brice traces the formation of the VAG to a notorious exhibition in 1986, which was banned by the authorities. The exhibition referred to by Brice was organised by activists, mostly associated with CAP and the End Conscription Campaign. The VAG was only formed in November 1988. Brice writes that ‘artists

Billy Mandini, Nude Study, charcoal on paper, 75 x 91 cm, 1999
gathered to form the Visual Arts Group... due to a strong feeling amongst the group that something had to be done about democratising art in the city'. In fact the VAG was formed by members of the regionally based, multi-disciplinary Cultural Workers Congress, as part of a process of restructuring the CWC as an umbrella organisation.\(^4\) It therefore follows that while VAG was essentially a local organisation in terms of its membership, it saw itself as part of a national and indeed, international movement.

In writing about the township based travelling exhibitions organised by the VAG, Brice confuses the Ikwezi Centre (where VAG never exhibited, and which is in Guguletu and not in Nyanga), with the Zolani Centre. Brice also claims that the VAG 'ended with the coming of democracy, when, like many politically conscious organisations, the VAG felt the battle had been won and closed shop'. In fact the demise of the VAG was far more complex than that, as it struggled to redefine its role in the nineties, unable to compete with the better resourced, 'reformed' and (historically) state linked arts organisations. Notwithstanding difficulties the VAG managed to sustain itself until 1997, when it completed an unsung mural at Nyanga train station.\(^5\)

Elsewhere artist and lecturer Lalitha Jawaharlal writes that: 'From the 1980’s the art market changed in response to the new hope for political, educational, and artistic transformation... mixed media, conceptual art, and computer graphics were the order of the day... nationally...'. Presumably she is referring to the nineties, as the eighties was a period of intense repression, and few could have anticipated the unbanning of political organisations on 2 February 1990. Similarly while mixed media and conceptual art is not new to South Africa, the ‘order of the day’ comment, while debatable, must surely apply to the last decade.

Other statements require qualification. Law’s comment that ‘universities functioned as powerful sites of resistance against the apartheid regime’ deserves closer scrutiny. Universities, departments and lecturers varied considerably in their political character. Arguably for every lecturer who committed a ‘progressive’ act, another could be found quietly enjoying state patronage for public commissions. There is also a world of difference between the pledges that accompanied exhibitions to Chile and Oxford. The Valparaiso pledge was a reactive attempt by allegedly ‘apolitical’ artists to appease criticism of their ‘collaboration’ with apartheid, whereas the MOMA pledge to which it is likened was more of a statement of political and cultural principles uniting all participants.

It is also unfortunate that a few of the contributors use the opportunity to do public relations exercises for their institutions. The South African National Gallery’s Education Head, Emile Maurice, paints the SANG as an enlightened and pro-active institution busily transforming itself without any hint of community or government pressure, and artist and lecturer Vukile Ntuli totally ignores the difficult birth-pains of the BAT
Centre. Brice uses the opportunity to promote Public Eye, positioning it as a successor to the VAG, even though the links are tenuous, apart from Williamson's key involvement in both initiatives.

Although the Cross Currents project may lack conceptual rigour, it remains a vivid and evocative showcase for some of South Africa's finest artists, most of whom are represented by work which ably captures their skill and imagination. See the exhibition or view the catalogue for the quality of work and you are unlikely to be disappointed. However, one should approach the catalogue text with caution: it does contain some incisive and reflective contributions, but these are undermined by other contributions that appear to have been hastily convened or dodge the difficult issues. Hopefully the work on show will inspire more rigorous research, so that South African art can be more accurately represented in libraries across the globe.

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1 Co-written with Ashraf Jamal and published by David Phillip, 1996
2 The 'movement' I refer to here includes APT Artworks, the Visual Arts Group and the Community Arts Project and has been visible in urban renewal, health, educational and peace initiatives across the country.
4 Formed in July 1998, partially in response to CASA, the CWC originally recruited artists on an individual basis. It therefore follows that all of VAG's founding members were already members of the CWC.
5 Funded by the Cape Town City Council, this formed part of the process of drawing up an arts and culture policy for the city.