

The JAG is the SANG

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by Mario Pissarra

I have long argued that transformation of the South African National Gallery has been badly managed. Thirteen years into democracy it has failed to produce a demographically representative pool of curators. Perhaps more importantly, it has failed to re-orientate its Eurocentric origins by neglecting to prioritise developing relationships with other African countries. Instead, in the name of transformation, the SANG has been absorbed into a seemingly dysfunctional, costly bureaucracy called Iziko Museums, a top heavy administration that has few admirers, even amongst its own ranks.

Recently I was privileged to be hosted by the Johannesburg Art Gallery for a “closed session”. The session was essentially an open ended one, acting to facilitate discussion on international collaboration, particularly (but not exclusively) in southern Africa.

The occasion was the closure of *Africa Remix*, the biggest of what Sylvester Ogbechie has dubbed the ‘Africa omnibus’ exhibitions that have been central in the emergent discourses of contemporary African art. Also, the first such omnibus to have graced an African museum, due to JAG’s initiative in raising the required funds. While I am not entirely convinced by *Remix*, finding it to be flogging the ‘authenticity’ debate that has obsessed African curators living in the USA and Europe, I do welcome the fact that such events can act to stimulate public debate. I also welcome that the JAG recognises this, implicit in the five public panel discussions they convened to accompany the exhibition.

The closed session consisted of a modest sprinkling of museum personnel and miscellaneous creative agents, including professionals from Kenya, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, as well as *Remix*’s curator, the enterprising Simon Njami. Apart from the ‘foreigners’, the gallery also flew in ‘locals’ from KZN and the Western Cape. And being well brought up, the JAG didn’t forget to invite their immediate neighbours.

The absence of the SANG was something several participants noticed, but none thought it important enough to question outside of tea time. In contrast, delegates required assurance that Afronova and Bag Factory, neither of whom attended, had in fact been invited. What this indirectly reveals is a lack of confidence in the ability of the SANG to make any significant contribution to such a gathering.

I have little doubt that collaborative projects will gradually arise from some of the contacts made by participants in the session. That the JAG had both the vision and the tenacity to ‘find’ the resources for such a meeting, demonstrates the kind of leadership I have long expected of a post-apartheid national gallery, and which has been abundantly absent within Iziko.

Revealingly, two notices came into my inbox soon after the closed session. One alerted me to the fact that Khwezi Gule, curator at the JAG, was in Botswana where an international, Africa-centred workshop and exhibition was taking place. The other was from Iziko Museums publicising an “Art Safari”. The safari presents the latest opportunity for Marilyn Martin, probably the most traveled, publicly funded South African art administrator, to enlighten the general public on her most recent trip to three of Europe’s biggest art events. Now I would dust off my pith helmet and join Madame Martin on this virtual safari if I expected her presentation to cover questions I want answers to. Such as how much of her travel has not been to Europe or the USA? Or how much travel conducted by Iziko personnel is done by top management and how little by curators, surely one category of employee who needs to get out more often? I would even haul out my musket if I expected Martin to call on government to facilitate exchange between arts professionals in African countries.

However, I suspect I’d be better advised to pack my hammock, mosquito repellent and tranquilisers since I would expect Martin to call on government to support representation in fora such as the Venice Biennale. I would also expect her to play the flip-side of her hit tune, you know the one that goes ‘how the ANC government fails the visual arts’, which is one song I would have more time for, if the singer accounted for her role in the good old days...

Let’s face it the Iziko/ SANG can hide behind inadequate state funding. Sadly the poverty is not only in the miserable kitty for acquisitions, it’s in the quality of leadership. Even low cost opportunities for public engagement are wasted: over a year ago Iziko’s handsomely remunerated CEO, Jatti Bredekamp, undertook in writing to convene a public forum on issues of transformation at the Iziko/SANG. We’re still waiting, although I for one don’t expect anything so accountable to happen at Iziko/SANG, certainly not while Iziko appears to have such a useless Board.

No, if you ask me, the JAG is the SANG.