

Recalling The Natal Visual Arts Organisation: a roundtable conversation

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Proceedings of a 2017 conversation with Sfiso ka Mkame, Thami Jali, Paul Sibisi and Zamani Makhanya, moderated by Mario Pissarra, with contributions from Scott Williams and Russel Hlongwane.

Editorial note: Participants arrived at various times during the morning, leading to certain points being revisited with different inputs.



NAVAO Members (left to right): Thami Jali, Zamani Makhanya, Sifiso ka-Mkame & Paul Sibisi

Mario Pissarra: Welcome Sfiso, thank you very much for agreeing to reflect on your involvement in the Natal Visual Arts Organisation. How did you first get involved in Navao, when did Navao enter your story?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: I think Navao was formed in 1987. I had been working with Zamani [Makhanya] and Tiki [Dumisani Phungula] at that time, so we decided to form this group. We met at Marianhill Monastery. We invited some African artists because we felt that there wasn't any artist body that was catering for African artists. We had people from as far as Eshowe in Zululand, and from the South Coast.

Mario Pissarra: There's not much of a public record about Navao. It's never been clear to me whether you operated as an informal network or whether you were actually an organisation. Did you have a constitution, did you have membership, or was it just a network of people who supported each other?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: We did come up with a constitution. As Navao we were also involved in this project of Natal University called Culture and Working Life. We used to go there and teach Cosatu worker members on Saturday. We also initiated some exhibitions at the Natal Society of Arts (now KZNSA) as Navao.

Mario Pissarra: We interviewed Nise Malange yesterday. She was explaining how the Culture and Working Life Project used to interact with the unions and with the University of Natal. We spoke a little about the visual arts workshops. Were you one of the facilitators in those workshops?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Every Saturday I used to go to Bolton Hall, that is where they did those classes. There was poetry, drama, music, and then me as a visual artist. I used to teach them fine arts on Saturday. I think from eight until two or one, I can't recall (*laughs*). It was a long time ago. Tiki also used to go and teach screenprinting. I used to teach oil pastels.

Mario Pissarra: That would have been Culture and Working Life drawing on Navao as a network?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja.

Mario Pissarra: And the exhibitions that Navao organised, what can you remember about those?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: We had them at the NSA art gallery when it was the old NSA at Overport City. I can't recall how many shows we had as Navao, but we did have some. Also when I went to Canada, initially it was Tiki who was going to go and then he had a family commitment. He asked me to fill his space. It was under Navao that I went to Canada. [1] It was with a group of traditional healers, social workers, health workers and artists. We had Martin Stevens and Stacey Stent from Cape Town. [2] It was also under Navao that Thami Jali and Menzi Mcunu went to the Zabalaza Festival in London [in 1990]. [3] Menzi Mcunu is the artist who disappeared. The BAT art gallery is named after him – Menzi Mcunu art gallery. He was a young star, who disappeared a few years after coming back from Zabalaza. And then also Tiki. Tiki went to Amsterdam to the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference [in 1987]. [4] But, I think because of the logistics, money-wise, Navao didn't really survive that long.

Mario Pissarra: How would you say you were able to support each other because organisations like Navao didn't have funding, right? So it was really just a kind of solidarity that you could provide. What did that mean for you as a young artist at the time?



Sfiso Ka-Mkame, 2017

Sfiso ka-Mkame: You know, at that time... You see, I grew up in Clermont, as part of the Clermont Youth League. Youth leagues from different townships would help each other. [5] I wouldn't get paid to go to Port Shepstone on the south coast or wherever to teach them how to print t-shirts. They'll just give me bus fare to take a taxi and come to that area, or they'll send three artistic people that they have in their group to come to my place in Clermont. I used to stay in a room, I stayed there forong 23 years, paying rent in that small room. We printed, we made T-shirts, we went to distillers and breweries and we asked for their posters and we turned them around and we printed on them. We went to my mother – we asked for flour to paste them on the wall. It was our contribution, we didn't get paid. In these groups you get paid by being with Mario, you see, you learn from each other. That was the enrichment, the payment that you got from these groups. So maybe that is why, because of money, we didn't survive that long. To be able to organise workshops you have to have people coming from different areas. You have to hire a hall and buy materials and stuff like that. I think that is why we never had any workshops as Navao. But we as artists who were able to meet, we worked together, initiated those exhibitions like at the NSA. Also, being part of these youth groups in the townships, we would have people like Mafika Gwala – I don't know if you guys know Mafika Gwala the writer? We'd have him come and address the youth or read from one of his works and talk about the importance of culture. The KwaMashu people or whatever would be invited to come to Clermont. And then from the Clermont Youth League was born the Clermont Art Society, which I was also a founder member of. It was focused on enriching people in the township, culturally, and artistically.

Mario Pissarra: What did Clermont Art Society do?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Clermont Art Society would organise cultural events in the township where there'll be music, drama, poetry and also silk-screen printing. We would write on the poster that people must come with their blank t-shirts. We'd print the Clermont Art Society poster that we had put up and some other designs. Thami

and other guys would make designs for them, of anything that was relevant at the time. People didn't pay. Every December 16th we had a big cultural day at the Clermont Community Hall. People would come there – there was no payment. We just did that on our own, people never got paid. If we invite a person like Mafika, we'd only provide bus fare, he's not going to get paid for coming to address us. Also other youth groups like gum-boot dancers and stuff like that, they wouldn't be paid. There was also another function at Diakonia Council of Churches. There was a big gathering there that was initiated by the youth of Natal University. We as the Clermont Arts Society participated in that function. It had a lot of different youth groups from all over Natal. We contributed music and gum-boot dancing and I exhibited some works there.

Mario Pissarra: Was Clermont Arts Society politically affiliated?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Clermont Youth League was. That's why we felt the need to establish the Clermont Art Society. The reasoning was that when we talk politics at the Clermont Youth League gatherings and whilst we are having these meetings the police are outside. People would go toyi-toyi and run around the township and get shot with rubber bullets and stuff like that. It wasn't productive as we saw it. So we decided that we needed to have a separate cultural group. Hence, after the meeting was over of the Clermont Youth League we went to my place. My place was just down the road around the corner from church where we used to have meetings. We went there and then we talked about this need of having a separate entity. People can know that when the meeting of the Clermont Youth League is over, it's over. Anyone can run around doing whatever they want but when we have the Clermont Arts Society gatherings that is just for the purpose of artistic development. That is how the Clermont Arts Society came about – it was from the people who were leaders in the Clermont Youth League.

Mario Pissarra: Okay, I'm imagining that Navao had a similar dual function to the Clermont Art Society because on the one hand you were mostly (if not all) UDF activists, and Navao was also part of the Natal Cultural Congress which was aligned to the UDF. [6] But then you were also an artist's organisation, so there's a bit of a blurred line in terms of being a bit more open than a political organisation where you would have to take sides, are you part of IFP or are you part of UDF? You can't really sit in the middle. But as artists coming mostly from a UDF space, with Navao you were working more inclusively than that, am I correct?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja, there was also some other stuff, we were also writers. Tiki was manning the Congress of South African Writers offices here in Durban so we were also part of that. We would go to conferences at Wits University as part of Cosaw. [7]

Mario Pissarra: Did Navao ever contribute in terms of banner painting, did you do that kind of work for political meetings as Navao or did you do this through the Clermont Arts Society?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: As you were saying, the lines were blurred at that time (*laughs*). Being part of this you were also part of a youth group from KwaMashu, from Amanzimtoti... We were all part of the umbrella body of the UDF. In our small corners we were doing this stuff you see. Like I was saying you'll have people invite

me to come and teach them how to do silk-screen printing because t-shirts were printed a lot in those days. So we painted banners for music festivals that were initiated here in Durban, also political banners. This was from the 80's until the early 90's. Navao was there from I think '87 until maybe '91, I can't really recall. Maybe when Paul [Sibisi] comes with the minutes and other guys can help because I really can't remember (*laughs*). That was a long time ago.

Mario Pissarra: A point that's really interesting is that at the time people were not naming, you were not claiming spaces as organisations – like you say, the lines were very blurred. You were doing that work and it's only when you look at it in retrospect and you try and put a name on it that you can ask was this 'this' or 'that'? It didn't really matter at the time, that wasn't really a question.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Like Maphoyisa Magwaza, he went to Cape Town. He was at the Community Arts Project, that was also through Navao.

Mario Pissarra: That's the only document we've found. I don't know who wrote it but I think it was produced in order to support his motivation to be accepted at CAP. Maphoyisa went for a course that was training cultural workers that had links with community organisations. So we've got a four and a half page document that summarises Navao. It's the only piece of paper I have personally ever seen about Navao. We've scanned it and put it online. We don't have much on Navao, which is why we want to have these conversations. But also in terms of dealing with the politics at the time, when you talk about not being sure when did Navao end, I think for a lot of organisations that line is very blurred. As we've already said, some of the activities were merging with other organisations' activities. But also, can you think back to that period after 1990 when the organisations were unbanned... how did that affect the question of whether you needed a Navao, whether Navao had finished its job, whether Navao needed to change its job?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: As you are speaking I'm recalling something that I shared with Musa Ndwandwe. He worked for the newspaper South in Cape Town. [8] When I was in Cape Town I stayed with him in Wynberg. Musa was also a founder member of the Clermont Art Society. When this thing happened, this coming of the ANC, the side-lining of the people who were involved in it just happened. You suddenly had people that you had never known that existed in this struggle whereas I was part of Clermont Youth League when it was formed. You had these people mushrooming up, claiming to be leaders of this area and that area. We were side-lined. As I was saying, every December 16th we had this cultural event which was huge! The hall would be filled. It was filled with mothers, kids, even elderly people-because we'll have music, drama, poetry, art exhibitions. We'll invite people from different townships to come and put their works up. When this coming of the new leaders, community leaders if I may say, we just stood there, you see. I didn't want to pay so much for an ANC membership. I never bought it even now, I've never been an ANC member. It just irritated me when we wanted to register for houses that you had to have an ANC membership card. It irritated me because it was not only ANC people that were oppressed. We all deserved to be written down and then put on the waiting list for houses. I just didn't like that, it's like a bribe. I've been struggling here all the time and then when I go to register for an RDP house I'm told that I have to show my ANC card. [9] I decided 'no I'm not going to do that'. That is what happened, you

see. We just stood by and then the show just went on. The ANC Youth League formed in Clermont but I didn't see anything happening that was organised by the Clermont ANC youth League per se. [10]

Mario Pissarra: I'm also just trying to draw links with what happened in Cape Town with organisations like the Visual Arts Group that was in some senses quite different from NAVAO. It was from the beginning quite an integrated organisation. It didn't have a specific mandate towards African Artists. But it was very similar in the sense that it was part of the UDF. It was a way of getting artists to contribute to the struggle, it was also an organisation that never had any money. That organisation also fell apart in the 90's. When the exiled political leadership asserted itself there were many people inside the country looking to the ANC for leadership. There was an expectation that the ANC would perform certain roles. That was part of how the environment was changing. So existing structures fell away. The other thing was that the state institutions started to change. They started to create more opportunities particularly for Black artists to exhibit and to be part of certain programs whereas there were less opportunities before. And then as an organisation with no money, you couldn't compete with those organisations. So the question of what you offer your members, you had less to offer. Maybe in the 80's it was a kind of solidarity. I think solidarity was a key part of what these organisations were providing because it was a safe space for people that were alienated from mainstream institutions to support each other. I'm trying to establish to what extent did the art environment change? Did access to art galleries and the art world change in the 90's? What did this mean for Navao?

[Thami Jali arrives]

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Like when we exhibited at the NSA, we had never exhibited there before. When I started exhibiting, African artists were exhibiting at the African Art Centre. That was the only venue that we exhibited at, also the University of Zululand Art Festival. Then we started working closely with Paul Mikula and we formed a group called Zasha Arts Group. [11] Thami, do you remember iZasha? Were you part of iZasha Arts Group?



Thami Jali, 2017

Thami Jali: No not really. Because I was in Johannesburg when that happened.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja, He was in Johannesburg. But me with Paul Mikula and Zamokhwake Gumede who did sculpture, and Terry-Anne Stevenson and some other artists ... and also Mpolokeng Ramphomane. You [Thami] were in Johannesburg at the time, and I came down with Mpolokeng who is an artist from Dube in Soweto. So from those initiatives at Paul Mikula's place we exhibited there. We asked Paul [Mikula] how do we get to exhibit at the NSA in Overport? We asked if he could go there with us to ask. Then Paul said no. We went there with Mpolokeng and asked to have an exhibition there. Then they said we must come with a portfolio of our works. We felt that we shouldn't be exhibiting at the African Art Centre. There was also this big gallery [NSA] that we always read about in *The Daily News*, and *The Natal Mercury*, but we never read about people like us exhibiting there. We went there after speaking to Paul and Paul said, 'no, you see, he can't accompany us to go and ask for an exhibition'. They said we must come with portfolios and then we came and they liked the work. Then they said they got some frames we can use. We were actually putting the exhibition on the floor. You [Thami] were also part of it. That is how we went to these white establishments. For the young stars after us, it was now easier because we had exhibited in those places.

Thami Jali: Sfiso mentioned Mpolokeng and I always think that his role here in Durban as an artist has not been taken seriously. Mpolokeng spent a lot of time here in Durban as an artist. It's not something that just happened. At that time we wanted to create an exchange between Durban and Johannesburg and we had Mpolokeng that we knew. I met Mpolokeng at Rorke's Drift actually. [12] When I went up to Johannesburg to teach at Mofolo Arts Center, Mpolokeng came down here and he then worked with Sfiso living with him in Clermont. But there is also Gordon Gabashane who was very much part of that exchange. That was happening here and both of these artists exhibited with these groups. They exhibited with Navao in the exhibition we had at the African Arts Centre.

Mario Pissarra: When was this?

Thami Jali: Late 80's. I think '89 to be exact.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: No, I think '88. I came down with Mpolokeng.

Thami Jali: That's the first one you're talking about. I was still in Johannesburg.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Thami had recently gone to teach at Mofolo Art Center. I had gone there to visit him and then I met Mpolokeng. Mpolokeng wasn't working at the time. Mpolokeng shows me his work and I felt this guy is too talented to not be working. I asked him if he would go to Clermont and work with me, Mpolokeng said 'sharp'. We really initiated some stuff with him. We went together to Dave Wilmot in Hillcrest, where we painted watercolours and learned how to make paper, and we were also the first people to go to Malcolm Christian's place in Howick [Caversham Print Studios]. [13]

Mario Pissarra: Is this also all around that time, late 80's?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja. We also exhibited at Grassroots in Westville, there was a gallery there. I think it was before we went for the NSA. From Paul Mikula's we went to the Grassroots art exhibition. It was me, Mpolokeng and Zamo who did sculpture.

Thami Jali: That's the Zasha period. I came back from Johannesburg just after that exhibition and then the NSA one happened which was more like Navao.

Mario Pissarra: Okay, but then into the early 90's was it pretty much the same environment in terms of exhibiting as you had in the 80's or were there more opportunities in the early 90's?

Thami Jali: It took time to change, for the transformation to happen. We exhibited at the NSA, but that didn't mean that they would have Black artists exhibiting there often. For quite some time it was a repetition of the same artists exhibiting there. It's not that flood doors opened immediately because the African Arts Centre kept its status as the gallery for Black artists. Even at the Durban Art Gallery, only recently have they started giving Durban's Black artists a chance to exhibit there, so it's something that didn't change, the change didn't happen over-night.

Mario Pissarra: It's interesting for me to hear that because I think in Cape Town the situation was different. I think there was a degree of opportunism on the part of the white art establishment that recognised that things were going to change. So that early period from 1990, we're talking before '94, it was clear that the rules were going to change. The National Gallery for example; their acquisitions policy changed a lot at that time. Part of it was about buying work by Black artists but it wasn't only that – it was also buying work by younger artists, because it wasn't just that there were white artists exhibited there before, there were mainly dead white artists shown there before. So there was very much a shift in terms of what kind of work was being exhibited.... And also the influence of exhibitions like 'Art from South Africa' which went to the UK and which Navao was also a part of in terms of putting the selection together. I was in a meeting in Jo'burg and Paul [Sibisi] was there and other people

from different parts of the country. [14] And there was the Navao list from Paul –the artists who Navao wanted to be included in the show. I hadn't heard your name before Thami, I remember hearing your name for the first time in that meeting. So the question of beadwork, of wirework, of wood sculpture, a lot of things that one maybe associates with African art or popular art, those started also to enter the National Gallery which before that would not consider exhibiting work like that.

Thami Jali: I think if there's one person that I think took the opportunity to work with Black artists from the late 80's it was Terry-Anne Stevenson. She started putting together group exhibitions which were mainly Black artists. I'm trying to remember one ... Vula'mehlo [open your eyes] at the Durban Art Gallery. I think Terry-Anne took advantage of the situation. I think she's just about the only person who did that. Because of her history working for the African Arts Centre, she obviously had quite a lot of contact with Black artists. But then she started putting together big exhibitions at the Durban Art Gallery. But there would be like 20 artists there which worried me a lot because, if Black artists only got the opportunity to exhibit in a group exhibition, then nobody stands out. ... It's like 'oh we had an exhibition' and then somebody would write a report about hosting big exhibitions. But those things did not really benefit Black artists, you know...

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja, but *Velobala* was open to anyone, The *Velobala* exhibition was not only for Africans. [15]

Thami Jali: Yes, there were exhibitions like *Jabula Art Competition* that was mixed. Things were happening but very, very slow.

Mario Pissarra: I want to take this back to the question of Navao because if you allow me to refer to the history I know something of which is in Cape Town, I am trying to establish whether there were similar concerns here. The Visual Arts Group had a loss of identity at that time because before the lines were quite clear: this was a progressive or a conservative establishment. You worked with them or you didn't work with them. Suddenly, when you had organisations like the AVA, which is equivalent to KZNSA – historically these were the two liberal branches of the state-funded SAAA. [16] I spoke about the National Gallery's acquisitions policy changing in the early 90s, but at the same time AVA started opening up. It wasn't called AVA then, it went through a process of re-branding in the same way the SAAA Durban branch (now KZNSA) went through a process of re-branding. But before that it was quite clear if you were a member of the Visual Arts Group, you were not part of the Association of Arts. There were maybe a few members of the Visual Arts Group who were quietly part of the Association but mostly you were not a part of it because that was a state funded structure and this was another organisation that was aligned to the UDF. The lines were drawn, it was very clear. But suddenly these liberal organisations were offering exhibition space, and some funding to support exhibitions which we could not do. We didn't have resources, the only resources we had was ourselves. We started to suddenly be outflanked by these other initiatives. So you start to lose your sense of purpose because when it's a political struggle it's clear, you are mobilising with like-minded people.

Thami Jali: With Navao I think the lines were straight. All the decisions were informed by politics. It was the UDF line, with Navao that was clear. Navao didn't

really work directly with NSA, but they then invited artists that were part of Navao. I think more as individuals, not really as Navao. I mean if I remember well Sfiso, with the exhibitions at the NSA there wasn't really strong mention of Navao.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja, because we went there, me and Mpolokeng, to ask for an exhibition. After that, I think they are the ones who approached us for another one or we came with a proposal of also involving guys from Johannesburg.

Thami Jali: It was just by coincidence that most of those artists were from Navao. I think with the NSA exhibitions, it was just artists getting frustrated with fact that they are not getting a chance to exhibit at the NSA.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja, but we did have an exhibition there I think as Navao. Me, Tiki and Zamani. I think you [Thami] also.

Thami Jali: So this is what I'm saying. All of us were Navao but I don't remember any politics there, it was the opportunism that you talking about that white institutions suddenly wanted to exhibit Black artists.

Mario Pissarra: I'm really interested in trying to push this idea a little bit further because Thami you mentioned that when these galleries started to be interested in exhibiting more Black artists they didn't necessarily identify people with the organisation. Yes, there was a Navao exhibition but it seems like there was a general lack of recognition of the role of an organisation like Navao. Because it's difficult when you look at membership based structures like Navao that didn't have money and you say what did the organisation achieve against an organisation that had money that could run programmes or whatever. So there's a kind of an intangible solidarity which is difficult to put a price on in terms of the value of it at a particular point in time. I'm interested in terms of organisations like Navao to try and get a proper understanding of what they really contributed for artists at that point when there wasn't a home, particularly for Black artists or for artists that aligned themselves politically, and having to create that space. So when things start to change then yes, on the one hand there might be an undermining, there might be people who say, 'now let's not talk about that organisation anymore, let's just approach the artists'. But what I saw happen was because organisations like Navao and the Visual Arts Group couldn't offer people opportunities, you couldn't exactly say to someone 'don't work with that institution because they've got this history, they've got these politics'. Because they're still offering an opportunity for you as an artist to exhibit. And that starts to be a process where the purpose of the organisation starts to get lost because the lines are not clear anymore, the politics are changing, slowly more opportunities are emerging. So I'm not trying to put words in your mouth or trying to change the story of Navao. I'm trying to see to what extent similar things happened. There's two things that I'm trying to get to: the one is to get to a proper understanding of the value of that organisation; and two, to look at how the organisation struggled to retain that value when the goalposts changed.

Thami Jali: I think what you experienced in Cape Town actually happened here as well. Institutions like the NSA and the Durban Art Gallery didn't really care whether there was a Navao. As I said earlier on, there was nothing political about the exhibitions at the NSA. That's why I think Navao sort of disappeared, because

Navao did not have the power that the NSA had. As an artist you'd find that one of your major challenges would be your workspace or the gallery space. These organisations always had these facilities.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Because we never said when we approached them for an exhibition space that...

Thami Jali: We never said we are Navao. [17]

Sfiso ka-Mkame: We never said that we are a collective, because we didn't see the relevance of telling these people that. We came as a group of artists. But we would have discussed about approaching them as a Navao group. When we approached them we wouldn't come and say okay 'we are a group called Navao', 'we're looking for a space'...

Mario Pissarra: I think even the word you use, 'group', is quite interesting. Because on one hand it falls between 'organisation' which is a formal entity with a constitution, and a 'network' which is more open-ended and organic; people who know each other work together. Even in Cape Town, what were we called? Visual Arts Group. Okay, but I think for me the interesting thing is the network is still there, it's still here today. It hasn't really gone (laughs). What was interesting for me is I commissioned Paul to write something on Navao. What I said to him afterwards was; you didn't tell us anything actually about the 80's, it was all about the 90's when I thought Navao no longer existed. I think that this is the network because some of the mural projects that happened, I know that some of you were involved with Community Mural Projects here, did these draw largely on the Navao network?

Thami Jali: No, not at all.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: We were working with Terry-Anne, Thami was.

Mario Pissarra: So it's coming out of that history you were talking about with Terry-Anne earlier?

Thami Jali: I think if ever there's a link between Navao and the Community Mural Project it is that... remember Sfiso, when I went to London and this was 1990? That was through Navao. We went there to paint murals. [18] I think Terry-Anne took an opportunity to just start Community Mural Projects and that's how we began. I worked with her for many, many years. But still some of the artists, I think Maphoyisa was involved, were from Navao.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: And uS'thembiso Sibisi.

Mario Pissarra: Was he also part of Navao?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Ja, who are the others who did murals? Also, who was part of Navao? Trevor Makhoba? You see there at Mkhumbane, he did a wall there.

Thami Jali: What we're talking about is after Community Mural Projects was already in existence. It's definitely the first group of mural artists in Durban. It had nothing to

do with Navao. I'm just trying to remember the names of artists who were part of Navao who worked with Community Mural Projects right at the beginning.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Maphoyisa and Joseph Manana were also part of Navao.

Mario Pissarra: So when you say people were part of Navao – how do you define that, was it participating in attending meetings?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Yes.

Thami Jali: Yes, we used to have meetings.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: At the Marianhill monastery.

Mario Pissarra: And would you have a meeting when there was a particular issue to discuss or were you meeting on a more regular basis? Or how did you function as Navao? Was it a meeting because some opportunity had come like Zabalaza and now we need to send people to London; or the 'Art From South Africa' exhibition, now we need to recommend artists. Was it like that or was it more like a political organisation which had a meeting every Sunday?

Thami Jali: We met regularly but also whenever there was a need for action to happen, then Navao would meet.

Mario Pissarra: But did you function as a collective or did you have portfolios? I mean did you have a chairperson, did you have a secretary or was it just a network, I mean a collective?

Thami Jali: Yes there was some kind of management. Tiki was at the top of it, he was the one running things.

Mario Pissarra: I have to meet this guy. I hope he comes today. Everything just goes back to him. [19]

Thami Jali: I think he should have been here because I think Navao was his idea. I wasn't here when it was formed. I came back to Durban in mid-'89. Navao was already in existence. My only involvement in art as Navao is through the exhibitions that we had at the NSA, and that's basically what was happening in the 90s.

Mario Pissarra: You say 90's, what sort of period?

Thami Jali: The exhibition at the NSA happened in 1991.

Mario Pissarra: So it was one exhibition?

Thami Jali: I think Navao was quite active in the middle of '89. It's mainly those exhibitions that were the activity that I saw, and of course the murals. I kept going back to the Community Mural Projects. Maphoyisa was very much Navao. He's one of the first artists to work with Community Mural Projects, but he immediately broke away from Community Mural Projects and started his own thing, doing murals in

KwaMashu. That's how he started doing murals. Mario was asking about the structure in Navao. I don't know much about that Sfiso, because when I came back from Johannesburg the group was already in existence. And all that I saw was just exhibitions that we took part in. But definitely Tiki was in charge.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Did we meet monthly or weekly? It was a long time ago (laughs). I really can't recall if we met weekly, monthly or if there was something to report and then we'd send letters to artists to come.

Thami Jali: What happened at the meeting, because I wasn't there at Marianhill, how often did you guys meet?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: That's where we had our meetings on Sundays.

Thami Jali: My experience with Navao, we just gathered when there was a need for action. I remember when the Zabalaza festival wanted a delegation from South Africa, we met and Navao as a group voted for the people who were sent to the Zabalaza festival.

Mario Pissarra: In terms of that example, I mean that was also a very short period after CASA, where because the ANC was pushing for representative structures on the ground there were these international opportunities. Then they would say 'who's the organisation in KZN for visual artists?' And then you would effectively have that mandate to select the delegates for Zabalaza. But what was linked to Zabalaza was the exhibition 'Art from South Africa' as well. David Elliott came as a curator wanting to select but he found that he was having to accept lists of people from every province which made his life miserable because he didn't feel that he could work that way. The irony was he was praised for that (laughs) in the end for being inclusive. He got a lot of praise but he was miserable. That's how I met Paul [Sibisi]...because I came from Cape Town from a similar process. We held a meeting there to select artists. I get sent to Jo'burg and then stayed in the same house as Paul, in Shelley Sacks' house, she was representing Joburg Artists. So that's how I met Paul. We were all coming to give David Elliott a hard time to tell him who he must include on his show (all laugh). And similarly when there were attempts to build a national structure at the time that the cultural desk closed. There were attempts to build FOSACO, Federation of South African Cultural Organisations, so the Natal Cultural Congress would come from this province and Paul would be there representing the visual artists. So I would see him in meetings in Jo'burg and I remember meeting him here at UDW. Again, it's a particular role that was played by organisations like Navao that created the space for some artists to exhibit and to attend workshops. I mean Maphoyisa as well, he went to Cape Town because the Community Arts Project was asking organisations to recommend delegates. You couldn't come if you didn't have a mandate from your community structure. I mean it was a little naïve because there was this expectation that you would come back and work for Navao, but what do you do with someone when they come back? You don't have your own space, you don't have money for programmes. I mean not just here, it happened for everybody who attended, they came from civics and the Women's League, all sorts of organisations. They went back and there was not support for them. But it did create opportunities.

Scott Williams: Sfiso, you said that when you made the prints, when you made the lino cuts, you got the old posters from the breweries, right? And you printed on the back of the posters and then you asked your mothers for flour to glue, did you cook the glue?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: No (*laughs*). We just poured the glue in cold water and then just stirred and then we had this paste.

Scott Williams: Flour and cold water?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Yes, and then we'd just use a brush on the poster and then paste it on public walls.

Scott Williams: What was the content of the posters?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: We as the Clermont Youth League, if we're calling for a public meeting as Clermont Art Society, or if there is an Educational Crisis Committee meeting, and even funerals. If there's a memorial service for whoever was shot, we would meet at the Diliza Mji. Diliza Mji was also part of UDF, so we'd meet there as Clermont people who are affiliated with the UDF. We were coming from the Clermont Youth League because we were the ones who did the printing. We would do memorial services for people like Mrs Mxenge when she got shot. I did the printing and also the putting up of posters because these youngsters from school they didn't pitch up to come and take them and paste them and time was running out. So I had to go around Clermont putting them up by myself. I also did the printing at my place. We would do the printing on the floor with silkscreen. We printed hundreds of posters. We had them in the passage and also outside on the line, the washing line, and we'd take them and walk around the township with a bucket of this flour.

Scott Williams: So when you put up the posters did you put them up during the day or at night? When did you put up these posters?

Sfiso ka-Mkame: It depended on when we finished.

Thami Jali: But it was mainly at night because the police would have been there. It had to be very, very quick because you don't have to apply the glue on the wall. You just put the poster on the wall and you paint.

Scott Williams: You put the glue on the poster?

Thami Jali: Yes, on the poster. If you need to put up ten posters...

Scott Williams: You must move quickly.

Thami Jali: Very, very quickly.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Some were confiscated by the police while we were putting them up.

Thami Jali: Actually Clermont Art society is before Navao. I think it's 1983, the Clermont Arts Society.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: 1983.

Thami Jali: I was fresh from Rorke's Drift. I finished at Rorke's Drift in 1982 and then coming back to Durban I joined the Clermont Youth League. Almost immediately after joining Clermont Youth League we formed the Clermont Arts Society.

Scott Williams: Who were your peers at Rorke's Drift?

Thami Jali: Avhashoni Manganye, Tony Nkotsi, Lionel Davis, Velile Soha.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Sandile Zulu.

[Paul Sibisi and Zamani Makhanya arrive]

Mario Pissarra: What will be interesting now is that on the one hand, we are dealing with memory, we're all human and our memories are fallible. We've had the benefit of Sfiso and Thami talking about Navao. But we also have the question of when is Navao 'Navao' and when is it something else. Which is about our different understandings of the nature of the organisation and what it did. So let's swing the mic to Paul and Zamani and we can see how the story comes together with Sfiso and Thami and we might find different memories. So I'm going to go back to the beginning if I may, because we asked Paul to write something on Navao to help us prepare for this. Paul you wrote that the origins of Navao start with the Natal Cultural Congress. Can you give us a bit of that story. Where did Navao come from?



Paul Sibisi, 2017

Paul Sibisi: From my memory it was with Tiki Phungula. The Natal Cultural Congress had suggestions of advancing the political struggle, because during that time there was a lot of turmoil which was going on in South African society. We had

Inkatha which was pushing their own agenda of culture which was looked at as if it was also from the state organ. The state was fuelling what Inkatha was trying to organise. I think the Natal Cultural Congress came with the idea that let us work together in Natal. Let us try to establish something which is common. In actual fact, it was the creative disciplines and not only the visual arts which they were trying to encourage. The creative disciplines included performing arts, music, drama theatre, poetry, writing and visual arts. If the Natal Cultural Congress could have an influence in establishing these disciplines in this manner, they could then collectively fall under one organisation. Natal had cultural workers during those years, they were in every society, it could be in Newcastle. In Newcastle there was a cultural worker who was organising local visual artists, local performing artists, and local literature. Poetry was one of the many ways of advancing what we had in our mind, of saying our thoughts as they are. You remember *Staffrider* magazine? If you go back to *Staffrider*, those were the voices of the voiceless. This was how the Natal Cultural Congress acted in a positive way, in order to advance our culture and our cultural workers. During those times, it was the posters which were voicing the concerns of the disadvantaged. This is why the posters and the banners, they were in the forefront of the visual arts. The banners were saying what we really want from the government of the time, saying our thoughts, no matter how they interpreted them. This also coincided with Don Joseph who was working at the Ecumenical Centre. He was working on posters there at the initiation of Navao, although he was working on a professional level.

Mario Pissarra: Paul, you've put a broader context in terms of the mobilisation of cultural workers trying to work in an inclusive way, at the same time the people within the different disciplines were trying to support each other and contribute to the struggle. Zamani, for you where does the story for Navao begin?

Zamani Makhanya: What I remember very well is that in Marianhill we had meetings almost the whole year trying to form this thing. It is where I met Sfiso. That's what comes to me clearly. My take is that the thing came from overseas, from the culture desk of the ANC, if I'm not mistaken. They were preparing for the come-back. You remember we were launched almost at the same time as the organisation that was based at the University – Culture and Working Life. Do you remember that organisation with Nise Malange? We were organised by Mi Hlatshwayo. **(20)** We didn't do much. We spend a whole year meeting trying to form this thing but the organisation didn't take off. The important thing that happened is that it brought us together, as black artists we began to know each other; where Thami is, where Derrick Nxumalo is, where Shakes Buthelezi is, where Moses is. We used to meet every Sunday.



Zamani Makhanya , 2017

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Thami was trying to recall artists who were the first people who did murals. Shakes Buthelezi was also amongst the first.

Zamani Makhanya: We didn't have an office. Everything was done at Tiki's office because he was working for IDASA at the time. So he's the one who was very active politically. Everything came from Tiki.

Mario Pissarra: Zamani, it's interesting how you formulate that because before you came I was trying to get the conversation around that point that with organisations like Navao it's hard to put a value on their contribution because we talking about an organisation that did not have funding, that couldn't compete with a well-resourced organisation in terms of programs. But you can't put a price on the relationships that were built in that process, like you talk about a year of meetings. On one hand it may seem like a lot of energy for what? But actually the "for what? Is deceptive. How many years later, when you are sitting here today you have relationships that are how deep? And while that process wasn't necessarily the beginning of these relationships – some of you knew each other before that – but it provided a focal point at a very critical political time when it was very necessary as an artist to say how do I relate to what is going on in society ,when in the ' normal' art world that would not have been the question, it would have just accepted the inequality. So I think you talking to, for me, of the value of that process.

Zamani Makhanya: We didn't do much after the launch except that we started doing murals. I think we were becoming a threat to the status quo here in the city. Hence people like Terry-Anne started to become part of us. I don't know how, I just saw her becoming one of us and taking guys, working with the guys. In a way I felt like it was dividing us. It was a strategy, I don't know, I might be wrong. The fact is we were becoming a threat because we were becoming organised now and we were doing our own things. We only had one genuine exhibition at the NSA, at the NSA there in Overport, the rest were murals, we were busy with murals.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: And banners.

Zamani Makhanya: We were used by the organisations for the posters that you talking about. Creating those posters, that carried a lot of messages, they were not just simple posters.

Paul Sibisi: We worked throughout the night when Mandela was going to address us for the first time. He was going to address us after his release, he was going to address Durban locals. Then we did that poster which was very big, I think it was from here to the end of the gallery. We painted that poster for the whole weekend in one of the cinema near Himalaya. We worked for the whole weekend, sleepless nights. The one who had organised us was Kessie Govender. I asked Tiki what about Govender, is he going to give us anything? Tiki just laughed at me and said 'it's for the struggle, you are working for the struggle'.

Mario Pissarra: But the other thing is, what happened to those banners?

Paul Sibisi: Well, they were used.

Mario Pissarra: But after the rally what happened to them? In Cape Town those banners would disappear.

Paul Sibisi: We don't know.

Mario Pissarra: You produced this massive thing and nobody ever paid you anything for them. Afterwards you don't know where it is. It's just disappeared. So somebody hopefully has got a big collection of banners under their bed somewhere.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Somewhere... (*all laugh*)

Paul Sibisi: No, we never questioned and we don't know really. There was that craze of the release of Mandela. There was that craze that now we are going to be liberated. It was as if you're going to get anything from Heaven as manna, as if you're going to get whatever you had wished for. There was a story in our neighbourhood and even at the school where I was working, that a lady went to the white suburbs and then she chose a home. She waited outside the home, demanding that it must be given to her during the release of Nelson Mandela. The old lady was seriously waiting for the occupants of the house to vacate, so that she could take over. She was very serious. There was that craziness, that belief that everything was going to be positive, and you are going to receive whatever you had wished for.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Paul, do you have the constitution of Navao?

Paul Sibisi: No.

Zamani Makhanya: I have it. I was trying to look for it this morning but I was late. I think I have it. I saw it sometime last year in my documents. It was white and it looks brownish now. I will look for it.

Mario Pissarra: But tell me about that constitution, was it not promising artists everything? Because I'm thinking about when you talk about a year of meeting... With the Visual Arts Group we had about 15 objectives. Realistically an organisation with no money promising 15 things! We're going to change everything from art history to the art market. What were Navaos aims? Was it promising everyone under the sun or was it more focused?

Zamani Makhanya: Not really, our main problem was exhibition space. We didn't get recognition at galleries. Accessing the galleries and the workshops were our main aims. Here we knew about Thupelo via Navao.

Paul Sibisi: And also just to add to what Zamani has just said. Unfortunately, I did not bring the document of Thupelo. When I read it, I re-read it because it's just like an annual report. When they mentioned Natal, they would say "...in Natal it seems there's no organisation of visual artists.." It's written that they still have a problem with Natal when they are trying to accommodate Natal into Thupelo"... I think it's a document of 1986. It was pre-Navao. We were known as the province which is the only one which is still disorganised.

Mario Pissarra: I wonder who wrote that report and how honest they were being because was Natal more of a problem than anywhere else? Yes, you never organised everybody, it was impossible, it will always be impossible. But you did make some strides in doing it.

Zamani Makhanya: It was workshops, exhibitions, and the network. We wanted to know who is doing what and where in the rural areas of Natal.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: Yes, because I remember we had people coming from as far as Eshowe, Newcastle and so forth.

Paul Sibisi: Coming down to attend the meetings, yes.

[Russel Hlongwane joins the meeting]

Mario Pissarra: Okay, so we have a sense of why we needed Navao then but now that there is no Navao, is there a need for something similar today? Do you ever feel like there was a purpose that was being fulfilled by Navao that today there is a vacuum? That maybe something is not being addressed, something is not happening? Or do you think other organisations have taken over from what Navao was doing? Are there any vacuums or gaps where you feel you need the kind of political understanding that maybe Navao had? Is there a need for something similar to Navao now, or is Navao just part of history?

Zamani Makhanya: I think there is a need.

Mario Pissarra: But to do what?

Thami Jali: I mean it's about being organised, I don't want to say Natal is the most disorganised province. But I'm saying I feel that collectives have a better chance of achieving things and networking. You need to network all the time as artists. I'm not

sure if whatever happens needs to be political. I think these guys know, I really believe in people forming themselves into some kind of group. Look at Amasosha, I think they are doing what should be happening. You open up your opportunities, your chances, that is why networking is very important. Things become difficult if people think as individuals.

Zamani Makhanya: By the way, years later we were using a house here in Clermont. You remember Crart Art Studios in Crart Avenue? So it was just a coincidence that me and Sfiso visited Gabi Ngcobo there. We started going there every day. Then young artists started coming there from the Technikon – Khwezi Gule, Thando Mama, Langa Magwa, Zama Dunywa, lots of them and we formed another collective called 3rd Eye Vision. We don't see each other often because people moved to other provinces but that spirit is still there. We have contact on Facebook, WhatsApp... but that spirit, the 3rd Eye spirit, still exists. And it came as a need, like you say, there'll always be a need to organise each other. So I'm trying to answer the question that there's still a need. To get organised, because artists cannot write proposals to get funding.

Mario Pissarra: Wouldn't there be an argument to say that organization like KZNSA can play that role? So what is it that an organisation like KZNSA can't offer you, that you feel the need for an alternative network?

Zamani Makhanya: It needs to transform first and gain trust from people like us. We've been marginalised here for a long time. We do exhibit here, but there's still that thing that we don't belong here.

Paul Sibisi: May I also add to what Zamani and Thami have said. You know, we especially from the disadvantaged group, we are still in the same (though not wholly but partly), we are still in the same situation in which we were during the past government. The reason is this: you know the KZNSA is established. By the way it was the Natal Society of Arts and then it was consumed without us. We were not consulted when the name changed to KZNSA. I don't know if anyone of us, even one of us was consulted. This has been done by the eThekweni Municipality without any consultation from the artists who had been working, who had been at the receiving end of Apartheid. We had been on the receiving end of Apartheid for a long time. Let me quote, I won't be long. I was with George Msimang from the 60s to 70's. George had some very good drawings and then George said 'let us go and find a gallery so that we can sell these works or exhibit these works'. I accompanied him. I was still a teacher during that time. When we went to Neil Sack Gallery and then the gallery curator looked at the works of George and then he said to us, 'well this is good work from Black artists, from African artists, but let me tell you', he said to us, 'let me tell you people you are still not yet recognised as South African Artists. You belong to the Black artists', as it was during those years. A divide was vehemently stressed. It was just said 'these works cannot be exhibited, go and find a place where you can exhibit these works under African'. We asked, which artists work do you take? He said Gregoire Boonzaier George Boys had a work also at that Neil Sack Gallery. He said these are established South African artists. George [Msimang] was already known, his work was already recognised, though it was during the beginning of the recognition of his works. When we went out with George we were so disappointed. When we were walking we said, 'ei, we can really feel the pain exactly of being

discriminated, we are feeling it.' Why? Is it because these artists have studied in the so-called established educational institutions which are regarded as the High Schools of Art. They've been to Universities where we are not allowed. We were mentioning that, but we're not allowed to go to UCT. We're not allowed to be at Wits. Their educational background affects their work. Our work cannot be held on the same par as George Boys and Gregoire Bonzaier, we are below them. Ei, when we discussed that we were going to the African Art Centre, we were heading down West Street. It was sort of as if now we have accepted that we are not accommodated with all other established white artists. They've established KZNSA, but that was the Natal Society of the Arts. Though it changed at some time to accommodate our art. Miss Jo Thorpe, I would say was the reason why I say so. Jo Thorpe. Also, Paul Mikula, Jill Addleson, Melita Nermivorski who was also a curator at NSA. **(21)** They were impressed by the works of African or black artists. It's not that it was said that these are artists on par with all South African artists. They were impressed they were pushing that these artists should also be recognised. The NSA accommodated for the first time the African artist, not that it was a national policy that, 'oh now we can exhibit at NSA'. No, it's because of what they liked, their own taste, what they appreciated. But now KZNSA has been formulated by eThekweni Municipality. When I saw KZNSA written, I wondered how it came into being. Then I remembered it was from NSA. They established KZNSA, but have they consulted the Black community which has been disadvantaged for years? Have they informed people that post 1994, the NSA would have to be on par, that we must all be recognised on the same level? This is why most of us as Black artists we are not attached to KZNSA. Sfiso and Zamani they established the resident art studios for all artists. They invited me also, they invited all other artists and this was facilitated by the eThekweni Municipality. But the same eThekweni Municipality rejected the residencies as it was beginning to mature, because there were no white artists who was participating in those residencies. The NSA committee did not come to the rescue. They didn't say stop the eThekweni Municipality, and suggest re-installing those studios at Umkhumbane. We fought our own battle and we lost it. If you are Black you must struggle ten times in order to get your rights. There are whites, the eThekweni Municipality consumed them easily. They said no, we are accommodating you now, it's KZNSA, they can receive funding here. We can't receive or get any funding because we were not organised. They will point at us and say these artists are not organised. Whilst they know that they destroyed even the organisations which had been formulated. They are just looked down upon to say no, these are still the same as the artists of the 50s, 40s who were working on an individual base. This is what we are, my colleagues, my fellow artists. This is why we are not part of the KZNSA. I mean the eThekweni Municipality can 'blackanise' it. They can Africanise it, while saying to themselves we're trying to woo the Black Artist. But we're not consulted. I walked far, traveling with public transport. I live near Dalton, there's a hostel down there. Then when I go up here I travel for at least more than 15 minutes' walk up to here. Can you say that at any time I can come here and say I'm attending a meeting, or I'm attending anything which is happening? Even if they invite me, I can't just come here because it's not centralised, there's no transport. It means that I must travel to the city, and then a taxi must drop me at Davenport. The problem with those taxis, if there are three people during the day you can wait for at least an hour, because you cannot just be transported when you are three. They say no we can't rush you to NSA because you have got to attend a certain meeting even if you complain. It is still out of reach of our own zone where we are staying.

Russel Hlongwane: Does a place like the Durban Art Gallery perhaps feel more welcoming and inviting to black artists, does it feel more inviting and welcoming and does it support ...



Russel Hlongwane, 2017

Paul Sibisi: No, one thing it's centralised, it's not that we don't feel more comfortable with it. But, it is that it's centralised.

Russel Hlongwane: So maybe if I put in two words. The geography, the location of the institution which makes it accessible to a lot of people, that's the one thing. But even if it is accessible to a lot of people in the physical sense it does not necessarily mean that's it is accommodating and welcoming and supportive of Black artists. Is it accurate for me to say that the Durban Arts Gallery, although it's centralised, it's still welcoming and supportive of Black artists in the way that it should be?

Paul Sibisi: Yes, to me that's how I look at it.

Russel Hlongwane: What kind of practical things can be done by institutions like DAG and the KZNSA to welcome and support black artists?

Paul Sibisi: Firstly, it has to accommodate Black or African art on the par of all South African artists. DAG did not do this because of the government policy during the 1960s. But it has accepted that we are on par with all other South Africa Artists.

Russel Hlongwane: Speaking specifically of KZNSA?

Paul Sibisi: KZNSA is accepting that we are on par – although I don't know their constitution but it accepts us. The fact of the matter is here; this is how I see it. It's actualising the provision of whatever facilities they have to us as Black artists. Let me say, if at the Durban Art Gallery there was a director and a policy that encourages change through a new constitution, if they opened the space by inviting Black artists, consulting with us... These are things that DAG could do. Talk to us

and ask, what are your needs? Do you need a space for exhibition? Are you falling short? How are you coping being an artist in the art-world especially here in Natal or in Durban? Can we discuss, why are you not coping as well as you wish? Are you producing enough works? Do you have space? Do you have all the amenities?

Mario Pissarra: Can I come in here. I think Paul I'm struggling with the way that you are identifying the problem. You still using Black artists as a general category that applies and I wonder to what extent there's not a big generational divide? Because, in my own understanding, and I could be wrong, a lot of the young Black artists have had the opportunity of going to universities, actually know how to write funding proposals, can access money. If you look at how Amashosha are working they've got an entrepreneurial spirit. The conditions under which they working are completely different to when you were their age. The battles that you had to fight they are able to take advantage of that and I don't mean it in a negative sense but they are able to build on that. So they are in a very different space and I am not sure to what extent you can generalise about the position of Black artists in Durban. Is it not a generational thing? And noting the age differences here as well, there's roughly 15years between you and Sfiso. But broadly as an older generation that didn't have those opportunities, that weren't able to access the universities etc, is it not that its more your generation that one can make an argument for and say to what extent has there been a programme of really trying to bring you guys into the mainstream in terms of a principle of redress, in terms of acknowledging that the battles you had to fight... now arguably special cases should be made in terms of bringing you in so that other artists can learn from you because you achieved a lot with a lot of obstacles, right? And that's where I'm going back to my original questions as well, because I wasn't trying to focus on KZNSA, although I'm not saying we mustn't talk about it. But I think it's also what Russel says, if you're going to talk about Durban there are a couple of pivotal institutions; there's Durban Art Gallery, there's KZNSA and there's the African Art Centre because, and I think Sfiso was raising important question about the role of the African Arts Centre, how historically that was the space for Black artists, so where did an NSA fit in relation to that? And yes, I think the question of the transformation of KZNSA... it happened very fast, I mean transformation... I am using the term quite superficially, I mean it in terms of the name change, the new constitution, the break from the Association of Arts... Because a similar thing happened in Cape Town with what we now have as the Association for Visual Arts. But it happened here faster. I remember that, and it was a political decision taken by the leadership of the people here, to break from the South African Association of Arts which was seen as being too conservative, and wanting a new beginning. And maybe in doing that they did not do what you would have liked them to have done in terms of making a point of ensuring your participation in that process. For whatever reason, whether they were being naïve, opportunist, or whatever, or was it just an oversight or whatever? But I want to go back to this thing of is it not a generational thing that needs to be addressed? If you look at the work we do with ASAI, we get criticised for the opposite of that, you look at most of the artists we feature, most of the artists we feature are mature. We have very few younger artists because at the moment if you are a younger artist the opportunities for you are phenomenal, you can get a book of artists' residencies with 50 residencies you can apply to internationally if you are under 35. If you are 36 you've missed the boat, never mind 66. Unless you're Kentridge. So that's where there's another problem because then it's a matter of you're just left to find your way

in this environment that is not catering for, if I can put it crudely, older Black artists. So I'm just wondering whether the generational factor isn't at the heart of what you're saying and whether you can generalise in that sense about the position of Black artists.

Russel Hlongwane: Yes, I was ultimately trying to lead to the generational gap which I personally think exists. There's very little, or superficial, engagement between senior and junior artists. For example, if you say that this place [KZNSA] does not accommodate Black artists, I can bring up the names of at least 15 names of Black artists who have exhibited here in the past year. But these are also guys in my age category, its people that I engage with, its people that I know. Some of them I didn't know but got to know about them through their exhibiting here and these are people that I'm constantly trying to keep a very close contact with because we definitely bring different skill sets. I know that through that we can form a fairly strong initiative among Black artists. But I do know that I have more difficulty reaching out to senior artists. I guess there's a collision between your points I'm trying to address; is it a matter of Black artists or a matter of Black artists from a certain era that they are not being reached out to or being engaged with?

Mario Pissarra: What I'm hearing, to link back to what Paul was saying, if there's an acknowledgment on the need to be more inclusive in terms of transformation and also to learn from the older artists who have more experience, then one has to be more proactive in that process. So whether it's this institution or DAG or whoever, it goes back to this question Paul is raising about needs. Because if space is a need, if there is a need to create residency programmes, as just an example, one has to be very proactive in terms of fundraising, because in general the older generation is hopeless at fundraising. The older generation operated with no money, they survived with no money and have not in general been amongst those who have been applying to the National Arts Council, the National Lotteries Commission, etc. They generally just stood outside of it. It's the younger generation who've managed to get that system to work. So it goes to a political understanding of what is redress and transformation mean. And it goes to a political analysis, not politics in terms of party-politics but in terms of social justice.

Thami Jali: I think it's a generational gap thing. It's terrible. I've worked with senior artists here in Durban and now I find myself working closely with Amasosha. I see this guy, I mean those boys are making headway because they know how to use the information that is in front of them, as you are saying, they are beginning to exhibit all over the world. I don't know, it's just important that we bridge this gap somehow. Then things will happen for everybody.

Zamani Makhanya: In fact you know how they came about, this Amashosa? – At the BAT centre we found these boys, they were young and they didn't know anything about art. Then it was Mthobisi [Maphumulo], uSthenjwa Luthuli, uWonder [Buhle], Sphephelo Mnguni and others. There was a class of about 14 youngsters. We taught them, we organised workshops, we called Gabi Ngcobo to come down and show them videos. So we really shaped their careers. Sphephelo went to Technicon and the other guys remained at the BAT centre. You know, they were doing portraits, trying to imitate the camera. We worked on them, we worked on them, we introduced

abstract art. We had about six months with them, we were teaching them for six months.

Mario Pissarra: Were you resident at the BAT centre at that time?

Zamani Makhanya: No, they had this project, I don't remember what it's called but they wanted older artists to come and mentor these guys. I called Sfiso. Thami was not around at the time. So with the experience of Thupelo we introduced new ideas of expression. Hence you see them like this, they didn't go to any formal institution. So I'm not sure about this...

Thami Jali: But they have this consciousness that you talking about, which we need. Peter McKenzie once said, 'what should the artist be doing right now?, what is it, what kind of work should we be producing right now. Should we be painting cats and dogs and flowers when there is so much that artist can think about? What is happening in the country?' I mean there is some kind of consciousness that will make artists realise that they are the voice of the masses, they are not only individual artists. There's so much that is happening in the country that artists should be addressing, in the same way as we were addressing our experiences that had to do with the Apartheid regime. I think all the time, we need to have this kind of revival of our consciousness, you know. It becomes the engine of whatever is happening in the arts.

Russel Hlongwane: I think for me too, perhaps I didn't push for it but it was an obvious choice because of our working relationship over the last few months to have this discussion here. There was an opportunistic edge that I applied because I saw what this could eventually bring out for the KZNSA and for the continuance of this discussion outside of this project. Already there are those connections that I am trying to make. I mean I have been talking to Mdu[duzi Xakaza, director of DAG] quite a bit, about what kind of partnerships we can start developing over and above the primary objectives of the institutions that we both work for. I am trying to form this connection. I've got a fairly strong connection with my generation across disciplines in film, theatre, literature etc.. There's this connection that I feel is missing in Durban, so chances are our generation will fall into the very same traps that the people who came before us did if there isn't this kind of engagement. As it stands it's either very skewed or very difficult to have. I mean Amasosha are not the only collective in KZN, there are other collectives that cannot participate in the city centre so how do you connect to those. At the moment I am trying to work-out a model in which the KZNSA from the profits of these people who are having lunch right now can begin to facilitate conversations that cannot be funded but do need financial stimulus in order for them to happen. So there is an effort that I'm trying to bring to the table and this has been a perfect opportunity to bring the cement and bring it all together and strongly.

Mario Pissarra: I want to talk about the African Arts Centre, and again I'm at the risk of going into a broader transformation discussion. The point that you made about how historically that's the space where Black artists exhibit. I wonder to what extent the fact that it's there doesn't perpetuate that status quo because that's where you must go. That's your home. The thing that I struggle with them, and it's a very complex thing, I'm not pretending that I've got the answer. But we've got different legacies and different histories we're dealing with. On the one hand we have

different concepts of art historically. You have things like easel painting that historically come from a western tradition, and then you have beadwork that comes historically from indigenous traditions. And then you had a moment in the late 80s/early 90s where people were really trying to mix these and were trying to cross the boundaries. But somewhere the axe fell again and we got Art and we got Craft. So on the one hand the African Arts Centre maintains that division because you got this tradition of crafters who are mostly Zulu (maybe they are not all Zulu but in the public imaginary they are Zulu-crafters), and then they also have 'Black artists'. But if you consider the concept of African art, that idea has been kicked from so many angles for the last 50 years where internationally the meaning of African Art is very different from what it means in Durban in 2017. So there's a complete paradigm shift. I'm not trying to pick on the African Arts Centre because I think it's just a symptom of a lack of broader thinking in terms of how institutions and practices need to evolve and change. I think to some extent it might be something that people aren't aware of. It's just playing a historical role and it must continue to play that historical role, and then it has an impact... because why are you here Paul? We don't need to accommodate you here because you can walk into the African Arts Centre, you have a 30-year history with them. I'm saying, again not wanting to pick on individual institutions, this to me would be going back to the question of what is the role of a Navao today, without having been a part of Navao and not being able to speak from a position of being a Black artist. But from the position of an organisation [ASAI] that has political principles and that is trying to address historical imbalances and create social justice. So for me that advocacy is not happening. We may have a Visual Arts Network of South Africa, we might have an Arterial Network, we might have a whole host of organisations that on paper are doing all of this. But I don't see anybody driving a political analysis of how arts is managed, and I don't mean managed in the commercial sense, I mean conceptually. There's no home for that, maybe there is... I'm just not a part of that or I'm not aware of it. But to me that would be a gap. And therefore that need for lobbying for advocacy for that kind of education which I think for an organisation like Navao it was part of the imagined objective and maybe it was difficult to fulfil, but I would think that would be one of the gaps that is happening now. I don't know if I'm clear, I'm seeing a few people nodding but... it's like a lot of things are historical relics. We have a lot of what I call historical accidents, things become something because of certain decisions taken and practices sustained and we kind of need somebody who can climb above that and look down and say 'hey there's big holes in this thing, there are certain things that are not happening.' It's not a question, it's a whole rambling set of observations (all laugh). But it goes back to this question to what I call political consciousness. Not party political but having a political analysis of history and how history has played out in terms of power relations. Because it's difficult to challenge any institution when on paper it is democratised, it's up to the members, anybody can join etc, but the heart of it is not beating in that way that is acknowledging what needs to be done.

Paul Sibisi: I'll be very brief. May I be apologetic (all laugh). Why am I apologising for my recent speech? I'm apologising because, you know the Amasosha... myself, I've got a minimal knowledge of it. Now that this has been explained by Russel and also Zamani. I'm to blame because the one who is exhibiting in the galleries [Mthobisi] he introduced the Amasosha to me for the first time. I suppose it's because I'm not in contact with the social media. He introduced it, suppose he thought I knew when they were exhibiting, and he said 'we are Amasosha', then he

did not even tell me what Amasosha was doing. I thought it was just a young group of artists who were organising themselves. I did not know that they've gone so far as Thami has said that they are. They've done exhibitions and organised exhibitions, access to funding and to whatever is in the art world, I wasn't really aware about that. Suppose I'm to blame or... my knowledge has been very minimal, I only know the word Amasosha [isiZulu for soldiers], I did not know what was happening. I did not even find out, he did not even explain it to me. This forum has provided knowledge for me now.

Russel Hlongwane: We couldn't get this conversation going, probably would never have happened if it wasn't for ASAI and this project. [22]



Paul Sibisi, Mario Pissarra. 2017

Mario Pissarra: But I've been trying to find out about Navao for 30 years because (*laughs*)... It was through Paul as I said earlier. Meeting Paul at national meetings, a few places and hey there's this Navao and because I was involved in a similar process in Cape Town in terms of trying to organise artists, thinking I want to know about this thing. In a sense we're still dealing with that time... because we'll be having a conversation in PE after this. I don't know how many of you know about Imvaba? Imvaba was also an organisation similar to Navao and Visual Arts Group... also similar situation – used COSAW, COSAW being an organisation that had an office so it could be used to mobilise all sorts of people, all disciplines. In their case, contributing a lot to political meetings – banners, stuff like that. Also a short period, also involved in Art from South Africa, that exhibition, you look and you'll see Imvaba there. There was about 15 or 20 of them that were doing this, with strong links to the trade unions. It was a period in which we didn't have social media, we didn't even have cell phones and it was expensive to phone somebody. But just trying to get that information... because unless you create this kind of space, where are the records? Maybe you've got old instamatic photographs, remember instamatic cameras? You know, probably some blurred picture somewhere, maybe it's the only record of that activity, some of the posters you talk about, the banners... There's very little hard evidence of this history and unless we create a record it disappears from the

historical archive because there's nothing for people to hang onto. The thing I always saw with Navao, people were very proud to claim Navao, so when you saw a CV in the back of a book you will see 'member of Navao'. I think okay, so I know there's Navao now and it's not just Paul but where is it? (*laughs*) So for me it's also been a long journey to try and understand. And that's why I'm asking very simple questions. Was there a constitution because... and not to put too much value on that but to understand how the organisation actually worked, how people came together. How on the one hand there was an attempt to formalise, but it was much broader than that. The lines get very blurred in terms of when does this organisation end and another one begin, because it was not very important. There was no logo, organisations from those times didn't design logos. Nobody forced anybody to pay membership, maybe it was in the constitution because you know that you must put a membership fee there. But there is no treasurer, what's the job of a treasurer... the treasurer must find the money (*laughs*). I think it goes back to the question of okay, how much of this is nostalgia and how much of this is relevant? So that's why I keep pushing this question of what would be the role, what is the relevance of this information? I think that's the hard question for me at the end because, yes I've got a personal attachment to this history, but it's the legacy of that history, I mean it's real people, it's real relationships and it's where are those people now in terms of the art-world and where are they situated? So that's where we get into these discussions about what needs to happen in terms of bridging those kind of gaps.

Russel Hlongwane: I think there's a strong focus in today's dispensation around professionalising the sector and less importance that's applied to the living archive if you will. That I don't think is a strong focus of arts and culture. But I think projects like ASAI who are interested in the archive begin to provide platforms. Perhaps the modern equivalent of this organisation. I wouldn't say a project, perhaps it takes a different format, a different shape to a static organisation with a constitution with this and that. VANSAs are not engaging like that, but ASAI is. Institutions like the KZNSA and DAG are not addressing that as a primary objective, they've got other mandates which they should address that attracts them money. How then do various organisations and structures pull their resources together to hold, as you say, these organisations which were not things that just exist on paper, they are individuals and community of people. It's the community of people I guess, that I'm trying to say, is more important than the organisation and structures that it exists in. It's on all of us to take the initiative to get together and create this documentation. I think the youth with the prospects of the future, forgetting the importance of the archive and chasing other opportunities. From my point of view, I see the importance of this conversation. But I don't know if it's going to go any further than this.

Mario Pissarra: Look, I think certainly when you talk about going further what's important is on one hand we talking about that network, so we keep going back to questions of Navao. But as Russel says, organisations are made of people. So that's where we've started with Paul, we've started with Sifiso, documenting them on our website, and we'd really like to start with the two of you as well. Because it's your individual stories we also want to document. The thing is unless you give faces to organisations it's too easy for it to become some really abstract entity. I mean, I mentioned this, we interviewed Nise Malange yesterday about Culture and Working Life Project. At some point I mentioned the Cultural Desk, the Cultural Desk for so many people is just this anonymous monster. But it was very famous people; it was

John Kani, it was Nadine Gordimer, it was Sipho Hotstix Mabuse, and that history is not well known. It was a part of that same process you took us back to in terms of the mobilisation of artists to contribute to social-change. Nobody is bothered with that for various reasons. For many people it's a stereotype, it's a caricature, it's quite a negative thing. Yet if people knew who was sitting there, who was going to these meetings in different parts of the world and taking positions on the cultural boycott and all of this. It's when you historicise and you give a face to these things, then it comes alive. It's very important to document the network, but also to follow the individual stories. You intersect with that network but you've also got your own stories, you coming from different places, you going on different journeys. That is just as important in order to give value to this history as well.

Paul Sibisi: This question you have asked about the African Arts Centre it just reminds me- if Sfiso can bail me out, I think it was just in the last four or five years that we were in conversation with Sfiso. It is as if Sfiso knew that Mario was going to ask this in 2017. Sfiso said to me Paul, 'I've been questioned by Kay Hassan, to take our art, and put it next to the beadwork at the African Art Centre?' We were exhibiting our work next to crafts. Were we saying to ourselves that our products, our art work is on a similar basis to craft? Then I said to Sfiso that Kay is questioning something which I suppose we ignore because African Arts Centre was formulated when I first came. My first foot in the office of Jo Thorpe was in 1968 after I completed my Ndaleni art specialist, art teacher's course. I stepped into her office in December. It was a very small office. She was the secretary of the Institute of Race Relations. I was introduced at Chesterville because I'd brought some art that did not get sold at Pietermaritzburg. Then, somebody wearing khaki's (during that time if someone wore khaki's, they were working in town), he said, 'there's a lady who will fall madly in love with what you have just brought. She was our neighbour in Chesterville.' Then he said he was going to take me to that lady on Monday. We spoke during the week and then I accompanied him with the sculpture. He said this thing, they don't know of it here in the township but that lady loves it. Then I took it to Jo. Jo was impressed. She had a radio which had been carved by an African. It was from then that this African Art Centre was born. It was born from the Institute of Race Relations. Sfiso, when we were discussing this after so many years, then he said to me 'ey Paul please think of this because Kay has asked me, how do we put our Art next to the craft?' Then I said 'eish, it's something which really we must question'. But I did not question it until it comes up now because it was just left like that and we did not even go back to it and inquire in our minds. If there was an organisation as you say, as my art colleagues have said, my fellow artists, as Zamani and Thami have said, there is a need that we must be together because that should have been interrogated.

Mario Pissarra: I have a theory that ... African art centre it's I don't know Kay well enough to fully interpret or know exactly everything behind what he is saying, but there is this sense that because craft is very commercialised that therefore one doesn't want that association. But there's another question, if you want to talk about decolonisation, you actually have to think about the origins of art, you have to look at the fact that there are different historical traditions, which is not to say that they must be kept apart but a lot of what we now devalue as art is coming from another tradition of making art. And I think that what was happening in the late 80's and early 90's, people were questioning that. They were questioning whether there's a

difference and trying to actually create that interaction. So if you look at exhibitions like *Art From South Africa*, you were starting to get people saying, let's bring all of this into the same conversation. But it's a short period in which that happened. And then when the ANC came, and what did they do? One of the things they created was the Cultural Industries Strategy and in that process they drew the line again and they said there's art and there's craft. And that is still there, if you look at the DAC website you will still see that. They have this concept of African art which is very much what we will call craft. They don't know what to do with visual arts still to this day. You can see it on their website. It's easier to deal with literature, music, theatre, dance, they're fine with all of that but they are still struggling with this question of visual arts. And actually what I found was that we are not unique in this story. The same thing happened in Mozambique, when Frelimo took over. Frelimo looked at easel painting and said this is a western thing. So if you look at exhibitions that happened there's a certain period in which wood sculpture becomes important and all kind of craft become important but it lasted five years, in five years the whole thing was reversed again. Suddenly it was craft and a separate exhibition... So it's a complicated thing, it's not saying the one is better than the other or ... you know creative traditions are dynamic and they evolve. But there is this attempt to try and engage with the fact that very broadly we have traditions that we can call African or indigenous and we have others that we can call Eurocentric and the question of how these relate or engage, and then we fall back into this historical power relation where this is Art and this is Craft. And it's little periods in history where people try and upset that dynamic and engage with that dynamic. But I think it goes to the question of critical thinking because you know, I often wonder, I don't know if I'll be able to exhibit at the African Art Centre.

Sfiso ka-Mkame: There was a time at the African Art Centre when they had a space for just the Fine Arts. I think it's a question of space that makes them have these exhibitions mixed with these tourists' beadworks. I think if they had someone with a vision who could get a bigger space... They have been here for a long time and they have got these clientele.

Zamani Makhanya: Yeah that's the main thing Sfiso. We went there because that's the only place in Durban where artworks were sold. Here [at KZNSA], I'm telling you these will go back to where they came from after the exhibition. But at the African Art Centre, if it's not sold, it's put aside and will be sold later. We knew we had, every month, on the tenth of every month you get something from the African Arts Centre to feed your family. (laughs). That's the reason we went there.

Russel Hlongwane: I'm starting to see something quite important here, that these kind of narratives are popping up now and it's only because cards have been laid on the table and we now begin to see how we've been going down the rabbit hole. You see, so these reasons that you state right now it's quite obvious that they make sense and they are valid. The other question is – should we keep going down that route? I think if this conversation did not happen, 20 years from now this question that we ask right now would still be important and urgent. So the lack of these conversations feed into the agents that cripple the progress of culture.

Mario Pissarra: Is there a danger when you have a so called inclusive organisation that there's a fear of alienating people, which means that you don't have a

discussion that might upset people? Whereas if you have an organisation that starts from a very clear set of principles that is arguing certain positions one can do that. I'm phrasing it very generally because I'm trying not to keep the conversation on KZNSA. But I'm just thinking that we have lots of inclusive organisations out there, we have Visual Arts Network of South Africa, we have the Arterial Network etc. but you know Arterial Network is invested in the creative economy. I'm not sure what else they are doing. But in terms of really... you know I'm thinking about the student movement or movements and how the question of decolonisation was brought alive after people said it was an old discussion, and suddenly it had a new relevance. But where were the art institutions having that conversation, and would it be seen as divisive conversation in an inclusive organisation? Would an inclusive organisation be scared of having that conversation? Because it's a complex discussion and it's potentially a dangerous discussion because it can be very polarising. But on the other hand we are living in a very polarised environment, and to not acknowledge that is to be in denial and therefore one has to have difficult conversations. But I'm not sure which of the inclusive organisations we have are having difficult conversations. In the interest of maintaining some kind of unity or harmony, are people ducking talking about things or are they just not aware of them?

Russel Hlongwane: I think inclusive organisations don't want to perpetuate the illusion of inclusivity. Perhaps they are trying to form new ideas, bring together new ideas that may perhaps conflict, but members are mature enough to live with conflicting ideas. I don't think a cultural institution that is inclusive shouldn't tackle difficult questions, because it's not driving forward, it's not progressive and its thinking is not progressive in the reality and the context of which it exists. I think it should be critical. I don't have the word for this, but it's ignorant for an organisation to think that we can't have this conversation because it might be divisive and split our membership. People should have these conversations, people should be mature to exist with other people with conflicting views, if the conversation is not to divide people but to bring new narratives to the table. What is the motivating reason to have the conversation: is it to divide or to bring people together? It's to explore different ideas. I think the need for culture and cultural production to progress we have to have these conversations.

The roundtable discussion was held at the KZNSA gallery on 2017. The recording was transcribed by Jedi Ramalapa. The transcript has been edited by Mario Pissarra, assisted by Tasneem Wentzel and Fiona Mauchan. Photographs by Scott Williams.

The KZN roundtable was the first of three convened by ASAI for the Community Arts Legacy Archive project funded by the National Lotteries Commission.

Notes.

[1] Sfiso ka-Mkame was part of a group of South Africans who went to Canada as part of a programme to train community workers to implement Aids education programmes.

- [2] Martin Stevens worked for the CAP Media Project. Earlier he completed a visual arts course at the Community Arts Project.
- [3] Arranged by the (then still exiled) Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) of the African National Congress (ANC), the Zabalaza Festival was conceived as a skills training programme for South African cultural workers. Cultural workers organisations within South Africa were invited to nominate delegates.
- [4] CASA was organised by the ANC's DAC and the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement. Delegates were nominated by cultural structures within South Africa. One of the outcomes of CASA was a directive to form discipline based arts organisations within the country.
- [5] The Clermont Youth League was formed in 1983 by members of the United Democratic Front (UDF), a broad alliance of anti-apartheid organisations.
- [6] The Natal Cultural Congress was an umbrella body of cultural workers organisations that was affiliated to the UDF. Apart from Navao, organisations affiliated to the NCC included COSAW (Natal), The Musicians Alliance of Natal, The Theatre Alliance of Natal, Culture and Working Life Project, several locally based cultural collectives, and cultural wings of community and religious organisations. Prominent members included Kessie Govender, Ronnie Govender, Ari Sitas, Darius Brubeck, Myron Peters, Tiki Phungula, among others.
- [7] Formed in 1987, COSAW was one of the more established cultural workers organisations, with seven regional offices. COSAW offices often acted as a central point for less resourced cultural organisations. COSAW closed down in the early 1990s.
- [8] A weekly newspaper, *South* was part of what was then termed the alternative press.
- [9] House built for low-income groups, conceived as part of the ANC government's Reconstruction and Development Programme.
- [10] After the ANC was unbanned, ANC structures replaced existing many community organs, including those which had been established to mobilise the youth.
- [11] Paul Mikula is an architect with a long history of involvement in the Durban art scene.
- [12] The Evangelical Lutheran Arts and Crafts Centre at Rorke's Drift, in rural (kwaZulu-)Natal, played a pivotal role in advancing art training opportunities for emerging Black artists in the 1960 and 1970s.
- [13] David Wilmot is now known as Martin Wenkidu
- [14] Reference here is to a final consultative meeting at COSAW, Johannesburg where a handful of representatives of local arts structures met with curator David Elliott of the Museum for Modern Art Oxford. Among those in attendance were David Koloane (Thupelo workshop and South African visual arts co-ordinator for the Zabalaza festival), Shelley Sacks (Transvaal Cultural Desk), Rayda Becker (Artists' Alliance, Johannesburg), Eric Lubisi (Pretoria), Paul Sibisi (Navao), and Mario Pissarra (Visual Arts Group, Cape Town). Louise Almon (Imvaba, Port Elizabeth) was unable attend due to problems with her travel arrangements.
- [15] Velobala is a workshop based project run by the African Art Centre.
- [16] Historically both the KZNSA and AVA were branches of the state-funded SA Association of Arts (SAAA, now SANAVA)
- [17] Thami Jali's CV on the KZNSA website lists an exhibition titled 'Five Friends' (Paul Sibisi, Mpolokeng Ramphomane, Sifiso kaMkame, Gordon Gabashane and Thami Jali), NSA Gallery, Durban, 1989.

https://www.kznsagallery.co.za/artists/thami_jali.htm

[18] Visual arts delegates from South African arts collectives painted a mural at the ICA, London. Others involved included Helen Sebidi (Johannesburg Art Foundation), Sophie Peters (Visual Arts Group), Tshidi Sefako (Community Arts Project), Mpumelelo Melane (Imvaba), among others.

[19] Tiki Phungula was invited to the meeting but was derailed by other commitments.

[20] Mi Hlatshwayo, poet and activist, was the coordinator of the cultural unit of the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

[21] Jill Addleson later served as the director of the Durban Art Gallery.

[22] Russel Hlongwane is President of the KZNSA, and a board member of ASAI.