

Curating as a transformative practice [Targeted Candidate III]

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In November 2005 I edited with Zayd Minty an Artthrob issue devoted to art and social development. Those of us involved in editing, collating and contributing to this (including Joseph Gaylard and Gabi Ngcobo) were surprised at the lack of response or engagement with the critical issues put forward around the social role of art, the importance of social development, transformation of the visual arts and the role of VANSA in these processes.

In this context it's noteworthy that few issues have elicited such vociferous debate in the local art community as the call for applications for a trainee curator put out by Iziko Museums in June 2006. The responses, I believe, provide an extraordinary barometer of the local art world, and emphasise the extent to which transformation remains a burning issue in South Africa.

Before examining the debate more closely there are some factors I need to clarify: I take full responsibility for initiating this programme for which the first proposal was submitted unsuccessfully to the Department of Arts and Culture's Transformation Budget in 2004. The second proposal, however, drawn up and submitted in 2005, was circulated to all National Gallery staff including black staff members, who are keenly aware of the issues. This is not to hold anyone else responsible but to make it clear that all staff in the Art Collections Department had the opportunity to input on the programme's content and language and very valuable contributions were made to refining the proposal and call for applications.

Given that DAC's Transformation Budget is expressly set aside for projects that propose to transform the institutions within its control, the Mentorship Programme was devised to address and I quote:

a serious shortage of qualified, trained or experienced art curators in South Africa, particularly from historically disenfranchised groups. This proposal seeks to address the need for black curators in the field of contemporary art and to provide a framework for acquiring the necessary skills and experience.

[Please note that the proposal seeks to address the serious shortage. The notion that there are no black curators is one invented by the respondents and not by me.]

Of the fifteen proposals submitted by Iziko Museums to DAC for transformation funds this Mentorship Programme was one of only 3 that were successful. So you have some idea of

how hard it is to obtain such funds. And obviously DAC will monitor the process and outcomes closely to determine whether to award any such funding in future.

What were the intentions behind this project? Given South Africa's history and the fact that so many institutions of education and culture remain under the control of white leadership, demographic change is imperative. The 5-page proposal argues for the need to expand the field of contemporary art curating in South Africa by offering a mentorship programme to train a black curator in order to "achieve representivity in the staffing of our museums and galleries and ensure that exhibitions and related programmes meet the needs of all South Africans".

Who is qualified to mentor? A wealth of experience resides within the Art Collections Department of Iziko, where many curators are also qualified and experienced educators with over 100 years of experience between us. This may not be good enough for some of the respondents but in the complete absence of any full-time courses in curating contemporary art, this is, without doubt, one of the best training options for potential curators of contemporary art. In fact, the mentorship of the Art Collections Department has been sought after by curatorial interns from around the world. For the better part of the last two decades staff members at the National Gallery have been mentoring foreign post-graduate students who volunteer their services in order to learn about curating. The funding proposal argued:

These foreign students are usually supported by funding agencies in their countries of origin. Very few local candidates apply to be interns as there is no funding to support them. What local candidates require is the equivalent of an annual salary with which to support themselves during the internship.

These internships are always an opportunity for an excellent exchange of skills and the mentorship programme was viewed in the same light – not as a top-down transmission of skills but as an opportunity to work in a team on a range of projects in which staff and trainee work side by side and learn from one another. In fact, I see the Mentorship Programme as very much in line with VANSAs Art and Social Development plan that seeks to "engage with key issues of reconstruction and social change through projects informed and supported by research and training, and shaped and managed by visual artists and arts organisations working in partnership with tertiary institutions, corporates and government".

Finally the proposal budget included an annual salary, provision for a study programme of the candidate's choice and a work station that includes a computer, telephone etc. The educational opportunities are endless with the possibility of attending conferences and participating in museological and professional workshops such as this Curators' Workshop.

Eighteen applications were received from around South Africa. Three candidates were short-listed, one of whom was flown from Gauteng for the interviews. In a rigorous selection process an interviewing panel evaluated candidates on their responses to set questions during a competency-based interview, as well as on a piece of writing and a formal exhibition proposal they were required to submit. Our selection criteria, amongst others, were aimed at identifying the candidate who would best fulfill the demands of contemporary art curating, who demonstrated the greatest commitment to curating and educating and who would stay the course.

Let's consider some of the issues raised in the debate. The stated requirement of a degree qualification either in Fine Art or Art History was premised on the understanding that museum curating is a profession, requiring a knowledge of historical precedents, processes and their implications for the present and a thorough understanding of theory as it pertains to contemporary art. Curating contemporary art is not just about "getting artists together", as one respondent put it, but about understanding the historical, political and social context in which contemporary art is created, placing art in a conceptual framework and being able to convey that verbally and through texts whether they be exhibition texts and labels, catalogues, brochures, media releases etc. These curatorial responsibilities would be very difficult to execute without tertiary education and to set a trainee up for failure would be completely irresponsible of Iziko.

To suggest, as one respondent did, that a national institution is ignorant of the Amended Employment Equity Act of 2006 is absurd. Of course, in addition to formal qualifications, prior learning, knowledge, relevant experience and/or the capacity to acquire, within a reasonable time, the ability to do the job, are taken into account when determining whether a person is suitably qualified for a job.

Iziko is serious about developing indefinite staff members – Iziko is currently paying for the studies of several staff members who did not have the minimum qualifications when they were appointed to a position. However, the trainee curator position is a fixed-term contract so the concept of 'reasonable time' becomes much shorter.

However, to state as one respondent did that "the motivation behind the ad is a strategy to exclude certain individuals from being eligible to apply for this position" is simply untrue. The motivation behind the ad was not only to recruit the candidate most able to utilise this opportunity to equip him/herself as a curator, but to highlight and address the need for institutional transformation. And yes, the need for this programme to result in full-time employment has been recommended to management. In these ways the programme was intended to intervene in the demographic and structural transformation of institutions in South Africa.

As Khwezi Gule put it:

"There needs to be a more sustained and comprehensive programme (not project) of training new curators and empowering the ones who are already in the field as opposed to quick-fix solutions. The larger institutions have to take a greater share of this responsibility by formalizing training, access to training, arranging exchange programmes and collaborations between institutions not only in the same city but across the country, engendering transparency in hiring practices, instituting curatorial workshops and seminars both locally and internationally, ensuring that curators, especially trainee curators are able to attend important biennales and conferences. It helps no one for the same people to be travelling to Venice and Dakar all the time."

I couldn't agree more and that is why the Mentorship Programme (not project, note) was initiated. The South African Museums Association and VANSAs are to be congratulated in this regard for taking up training challenges. But they only offer short courses. Why are these programmes not emanating from other institutions as well? I see only the National Gallery's one year training programme with all its opportunities of on-going learning on the job, gaining experience, and gaining further education both through formal tertiary education and through conference and workshop participation.

And if in Gule's last comment lies a thinly-veiled barb, let me explain unequivocally that hardly a cent of public funding is spent on my travels. I go only where I am invited and fully funded. My travels to Venice and Dakar were by invitation to serve on curatorial teams or biennale juries. Allow me to point out that it is often my unacknowledged work, such as serving on the Advisory Board of the Atlantic Centre for Modern Art (CAAM) in the Canary Islands, that allows curators, artists and intellectuals to produce exciting fully funded projects and to travel internationally. So the notion that I am a gatekeeper is questionable, particularly now that my and other resignations are opening up several curatorial and educational posts at the National Gallery.

With curating becoming a high-profile, artistically and socio-politically engaged critical practice, I would urge all to make the most of the increasing opportunities being offered by local institutions and organisations. It was heartening to see the turnout at VANSAs Western Cape's AGM on Saturday and to witness how many people offered their services in developing the organisation's mandate to serve the local art community. A curating practice disengaged from its local producers and audiences is a very impoverished practice.

Curating is in itself a transformative practice when curators take up the challenge of conceptual, demographic and structural transformation through the kinds of exhibitions and programmes they conceive.

While the discourses around transformation have the power to heal and hurt, and the "potency to comfort and discomfort", as Wandile Kasibe points out, the measure of our maturity as an art community lies in the degree to which we can find humane ways to communicate and practice that focus on the issues and arguments and do not play the *ad hominem* argument that seeks to attack and undermine people. Claims that this programme is a "personal PC project .. to add to (my) international credibility" or that Khwezi and Gabi want to be honorary whites can only be viewed as malicious and damaging not just to the persons concerned but to the art community as a whole.

I thank all the respondents who engaged and are continuing to engage in this vigorous debate. While differences of opinion will always remain and debate is encouraged there is one issue on which we are all in agreement: transformation of the visual arts, culture and heritage sectors in South Africa, is essential to a healthy and productive cultural and social life.

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