

# Notes on inheritance: threads of socially oriented arts organising in Johannesburg

By Molemo Moiloa

2019

“One of the most effective weapons against our problems should be organization and organizing skill. But the supreme purpose for organizing cannot be achieved without deep social or political awareness. Therefore awareness, in this context, implies the state of being organized; it denotes commitment and conviction; true political consciousness is the seed of collective spirit and democracy.” Thami Mnyele<sup>i</sup>

Yollotl Alvarado and Jazael Olguín Zapata, both artists and members of the collective *Cooperativa Cráter Invertido*<sup>ii</sup>, first introduced to me the idea that generations of organisers might meet, and share their experiences of organising. They described to me a meeting with an older generation collective that shared their own challenges, strategies and political approaches, in a conspicuous recognition of the inheritance of organising in a context like Mexico City. For me, as a very new and very young organiser, the possibility of a similar instance in the city of Johannesburg seemed near impossible for various reasons. For starters, very few of this previous generation of organisers still operated in the independent, non-governmental organising space. Furthermore, very few of these historical entities were even still in place, largely falling away by the 2000s. Perhaps most importantly, I didn't have a sense of a tradition or established practice of organising in Johannesburg that might be passed down from one generation to another. This of course didn't mean an established practice of organising didn't exist, but rather that I might need to go looking for it.

An established practice of organising seemed of value to me primarily as a very new and very young director of the Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA). The nature of VANSA's establishment (circa 2005 – 2007) meant that I regularly bumped into individuals who were part of its founding. Its initial emergence was as a meeting of a number of individuals who perceived the need for a representative organisation that would operate on behalf of the visual arts. This group then arranged the first inaugural VANSA conference in 2005. This conference was held in Cape Town and attended by many arts practitioners from across the country, who were the founding members of VANSA. A number of regional offices were set up to make up the network, which again gathered a wider group of arts practitioners as founders. As a director in a later period of the organisation's life, I thus found myself to be one in a large group of individuals who affirmed a collective ownership of arts organising.

As a network, VANSA also sought to operate as a coordinating point across various organisations and collective entities around the country. As a 'national organisation' with limited capacity, its primary strategy was to extend organising across various entities with on the ground engagement, and to coordinate (and fundraise) for efforts that were driven from and valuable to, a range of these said entities. A significant strength of VANSA, especially within the South African landscape where this remains very rare, was the ability to connect to and drive relations between entities across racial, economic and geographic divides and across hierarchies of creative practice. This pointed to the range of forms of organising across the country, and the varied ways in which people approached organisational structure and practice. These ranged from small community-based organisations (CBOs) in small villages, to established commercial galleries or museums of more than 100 years. A large part of VANSA's mandate was to work in a cross-cutting way as a focus on support to, and development of the sector as a whole.

Through the VANSAs internship programme, a support system that enabled funded internships at organisations across the country, we also got some small glimpse into the operations of a few organisations. When called on for support, advice or just through relationships with organisations, a number of trends emerged in the lives of organisations. Very few of them had established decision making models beyond the yes/no of an individual at the top, even fewer had institutional policies or even established an open practice around issues such as remuneration, conflict mediation or financial processes. While, for example, commercial galleries might have stronger financial processes and established hierarchies, they often didn't follow organisational best practice, and were largely process-opaque even with their own staff. CBOs often had very established structural titles and documentation within the frames of best practice – partly in fulfilment of state registration requirements that are deeply hierarchical – but the actual functionality of these frameworks were limited and operated largely in rhetoric only. Many really interesting collectives and project-based entities were working outside of these overt, state defined, structures such as constitutions and mission and vision statements, but were largely self-taught in what an alternative might be. Across the board, organising seemed to be self-taught, unstructured and outside of some basic established practices that have overtime, come to be the foundations of organising in other fields. It seemed that often, each entity was reinventing the wheel, many times over.

Another one of the ongoing practices of VANSAs was to develop a Joburg Art Map each year, which physically mapped out art spaces of various forms across the city. In some years this included other cities such as Durban, and the artmap also had an online life<sup>iii</sup>. By working on the artmap year on year, one was able to track the shifts in art spaces over just a few years. Very evident was the limited lifespan of artist run spaces and/or alternative exhibition spaces which struggled to stay afloat in a challenging financial climate. Each year more of them closed shop, with very few new spaces emerging. Many spaces – specifically state subsidised entities and commercial galleries – remained open, with a number of non-profit organisations hanging on. Limited funding, burn-out by dedicated and visionary founders, and the broader precarity of the sector (among other issues) have not served as rich ground from which to develop healthy, established organising practices<sup>iv</sup>. And very few entities have remained around long enough, and healthy enough, to engender new generations of practitioners able to learn from a grounded and well-oiled infrastructure, from which to build and improve.

One of the deepest institutional losses has certainly been of spaces outside of state (public) and commercial entities, particularly those of a political persuasion oriented towards access and social justice through the arts. It has left a significant hole that has driven artistic practice toward commercial viability, resulting in a very limited range of practice being accessible to the public. Public institutions, subsidised by the state, should serve as spaces for the exploration of artistic practice outside of the commercial arena, however this has not largely been the case. Instead, public institutions in South Africa often take their cue from commercial galleries, going so far as, in some cases, large scale retrospectives driven by commercial galleries, being exhibited at said commercial gallery together with the local state gallery, and the local university gallery, all coordinated over the same period.

The precarity of this intermediary part of the broader contemporary art infrastructure is not only a concern within South Africa. Common Practice is a network of small arts organisations based in the UK. This network has sought to determine a clear understanding of the kinds of value that small organisations bring to the ecosystem in the UK. Through commissioned research<sup>v</sup> they have pointed to the concern that much of the impact and value of these groups happens on quite a small scale due to the budgets and capacity they have. However, they are able to take on risk, capitalise on networks and relations, and have additional affective labour that results in

very low costs for quite high yields. Furthermore, these groups afford flexibility, experimentation and careful development of creative practice and, therefore, are in a position to develop work in ways that formal and market driven spaces are not. A similar argument can certainly be made for the South Africa context, where the lack of more experimental spaces, and an organising aimed at more exploratory processes, results in a lack of more experimental work.<sup>vi</sup>

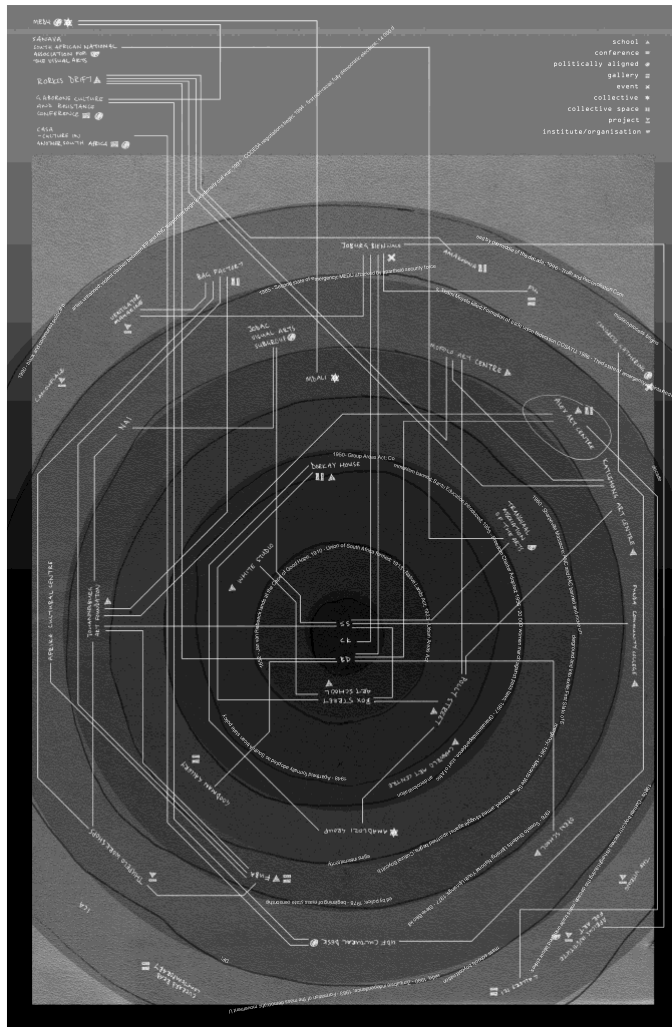
This lack, together with a shift away from socially engaged art after the 1990s – towards a more identity-based practice focused on reckoning with what South Africa means post-1994 – has also left a significant conceptual gap, I argue. This gap is a kind of organising supportive of, and directly aimed towards, a social justice oriented art practice. Importantly this is a political kind of organising that undertakes a broader social engagement, rather than limiting itself to artworks that have politically oriented content. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>vii</sup>, this refers to a kind of practice not limited simply to a welfare-type orientation, but rather speaks to the very nature of an organising that folds the aesthetic/artistic/intellectual process into the social, and therefore also into the political. This is not about creating a differentiation between “autonomous and heteronomous practice”<sup>viii</sup> but rather as an important point at which intersections exist.

This gap exists despite a long period of development of forms of socially oriented art practice, and particularly art education, since at least the 1940s. And it is especially for this reason, that an intergenerational conversation becomes necessary to understand this history, this kind of practice’s development and the reasons for its predominant demise (save for a few notable exceptions). An initial attempt at this was undertaken in 2016, with the research project *Territorios* – a collaborative project between a number of arts organisations within the Arts Collaboratory<sup>ix</sup> network, including Crater Invertido. This process resulted in a series of discussions among younger organisers, a residency programme and other elements. However, an intergenerational conversation with various organisers of different generations is perhaps the core element, relevant for this discussion. In particular, the discussions with Mam’Bongi Dhlomo and Steven Sack illuminated an often invisible inheritance, that requires some level of reorientation in order to see a very definite established organising practice within a socially oriented arts tradition.

Mam’Bongi Dhlomo is an artist and organiser, long established in the South African arts landscape through her roles in Durban and Johannesburg. Her career in Johannesburg spans roles in some of its foremost organisations including the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA), Goodman Gallery, Alexandra Arts Centre, Thupelo Arts Projects and the Johannesburg Biennale.

Steven Sack too has played a significant role in the development of the city's art practice, including significant roles in state entities such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery, as well as more senior bureaucratic positions in local government, as well as the local university. Before that he was involved in collective and non-profit work within the non-racial practices of the 80s, including a stint as the director of the Johannesburg Art Foundation. On different occasions, a conversation was had with each of them that presented some of the key entities, present in the

map at figure 1, that might inform our understanding of historical arts organising practices in Johannesburg, and particularly thinking through histories of arts organising that had political imperatives.



Map by VANSAs with Nolan Dennis

This starts, primarily with the White Studio and Polly Street Centre. The White Studio was established by John Koenakeefe Mohl in 1944, behind his home in Sophiatown. He is said to have told Bantu World newspaper, on its founding, that “It is for Africans themselves to unearth [South African’s artistic talent], train it and enable it to make its full contribution to the culture of our country. What is more, African artists will be among the foremost interpreters of our people to the other races”<sup>x</sup>. Mohl indicates an immediate sense of arts education’s political potential, both in terms of access but also in terms of representation and ‘interpretation’. The White Studio is said to have remained until the destruction of Sophiatown<sup>xi</sup>, and served as a training ground for some key South African artists both in Sophiatown and in its afterlife in Soweto, including artists such as Makgabo Helen Sebidi.

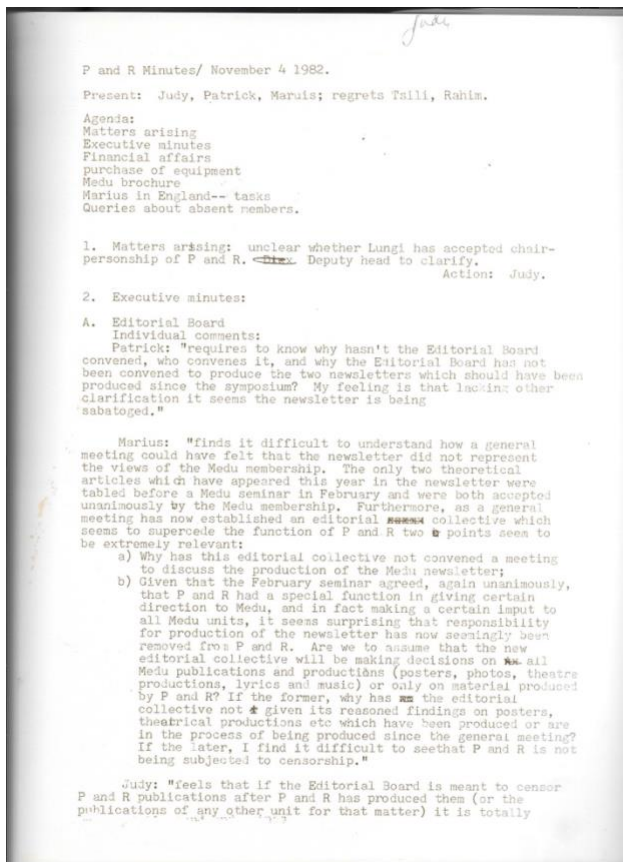
However little remains regarding its structural form, staffing or pedagogical approaches. Some<sup>xii</sup> have argued that it serves as the basis from which Polly Street Art Centre’s artistic and pedagogical approach is built. Polly Street Art Centre was established in 1948 by the government and ran arts programmes from about the year after, with its peak period for the visual arts beginning in 1952 with the arrival of Cecil Skotness. After the change of laws<sup>xiii</sup> limiting black artists’ movement within the white-zoned city, Polly Street moves to the Jubilee Centre and then to what becomes the Mofolo Art Centre where this kind of organising continues, though in a different frame. Within townships their coordination moves to a black organising leadership, though within apartheid-state created arts centres. Referred to as ‘assistant cultural officers, organisers of township art centres continued important education and collectivity for black artists, impacting many future black artists’ careers. Importantly these organisers included the likes of Ezrom Legae and Dan Rakgaothe, who are often thought of only within the frames of South Africa’s modernist greats, but rarely as arts organisers. This tradition of the artist also as

organiser is vital to re-enter into our understandings of this history, to understand the dynamics by which such important artists were also organising, and actively enabling access to other black artists.

The 1960s and 70s have been argued<sup>xiv</sup> as a shift in particularly politically oriented artistic practice due to the banning of black political parties in 1960 as well as the limitations of movement mentioned above. Out of this emerges a more township based, and black consciousness oriented creative practice. This marks a more overtly political intention, directly associated with arts potential for social justice, a marked shift from the more non-racial access-oriented approaches of the likes of Polly Street Art Centre. It also drives a shift to artistic collective organising not only within the frame of arts education, as had been the case in the past, but to creative expression and consciousness raising. Collectives such as Mhloti Black Theatre, established by Mongane Wally Serote and which later becomes part of the Music, Dance, Arts and Literature Institute (MDALI), enable artists such as Thami Mnyele who organised specifically within townships. Together with Mhloti and MDALI, Thami is involved in organising festivals and exhibitions together with Fikile Magadla and Ben Arnold at sites such as the Donaldson Orlando Community Centre, Dube Young Christian Workers Association, the Nokozweni Centre and Regina Mundi<sup>xv</sup>, as well as attending and even performing at events organised under the Black Consciousness banner by politically motivated students. Again little is documented of the nitty-gritties of strategies of community mobilisation, collective working processes or any other such organising methodologies, and thus little remains for a following generation. Mnyele had, for example, worked for some time at the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED trust)<sup>xvi</sup>, a progressive education institution organising to address the crisis in higher education access for black students but not much is known of this entity's impact and influence on his own organising.

Later, Mnyele goes on to help found Medu Art Ensemble (registered in 1979) in exile in Botswana, cementing the direct link between an emancipatory and social justice oriented approach and creative practice, through a directly anti-apartheid state positionality, bringing together a Black-Consciousness cultural mobilisation orientation and the role of the ANC in exile. Though much has been written about Medu, it has largely focused on the creative practice that emerged out of the collective and the extraordinary artists, poets and musicians that passed through its programmes over the years. However less is dedicated to understanding Medu in terms of organising. Sergio-Albio González, former Medu member and co-editor of the formative publication on Medu<sup>xvii</sup>, does give specific presence to the complexities of organising and includes documents that speak to some of their process and even conflicts, such as minutes etc. One document by Medu from 1983, for example, references the fact that Medu is made up of a number of other collectives and that it “drew heavily on the experience of these disbanded associations”<sup>xviii</sup>, an interesting referencing of the lines of arts organising that build upon one another. The document also points to an elected executive and various organising units determined by discipline. González himself refers to the writing and research unit as serving as the coordinating unit, and to the various ways in which Medu made decisions to determine their programming and ensure their own security under quite dangerous circumstances<sup>xix</sup>. Some interesting points emerge, including that despite having an elected executive, Serote is heavily emphasised and present across various units, with a strong determination in decision making, partly through his direct connection with ANC structures. We see also that the units had largely overlapping members, with a number of individuals floating across disciplines and ‘helping out’. Minutes provided by former member Judy Seidman (see figure 2) point to significant organising challenges as regards responsibility, decision making strategies and financial oversight, with the tone of the minutes overtly emitting a frustrated air. Towards the end of his text González also points to burn-out post organising the Culture and Resistance Symposium in 1982, and the

inability to maintain its energy with the loss of key members. These would all be very familiar challenges to contemporary organisers, and valuable to see mirrored even within a collective of such esteem as the Medu Art Ensemble.



*Medu Meeting Minutes part 1/3*

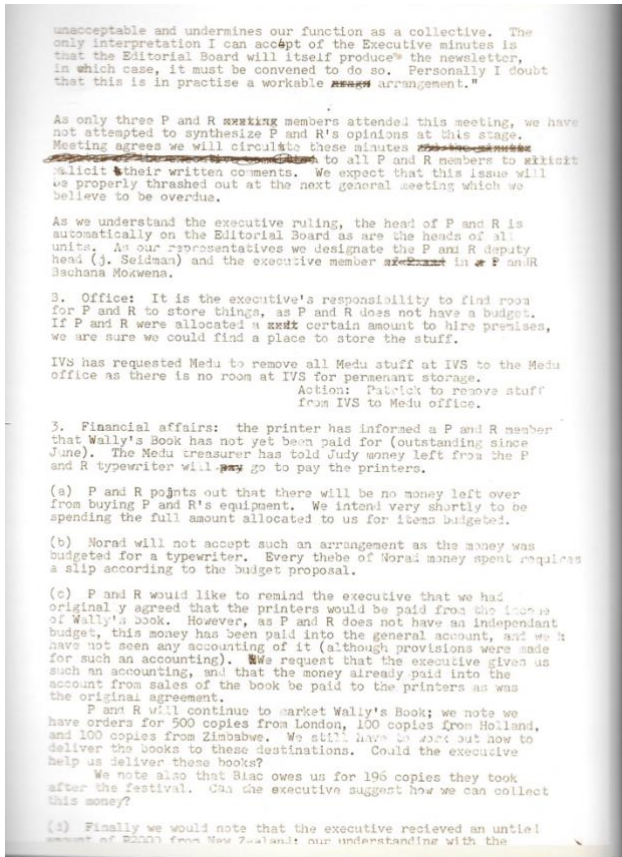
Th organising of the Culture and Resistance Symposium has significantly political and security impacts on Medu and its organising, as the apartheid state begins to turn stronger and more punitive attention on Medu. This changed the nature of organising, making meetings more difficult, distribution less safe, and a number of members no longer taking part. This culminates in the raid on Gaborone targeting Medu members, and the killing of 12 people. The untimely and traumatic end to Medu obviously impacted the extent to which this tradition and its learnings could be continued into a post-1994 South Africa. This said, key artists particularly in writing/poetry and in music went on to play significant roles in their fields, especially creatively. In terms of organising, a number of these individuals played roles in post-1994 institutions and even in the government and its entities. Many of that generation of the Culture and Resistance Symposium speak to its energising and unifying impact, resulting in significant impulse for arts organising back within South Africa. A number of

Medu members, and individuals who attended the Culture and Resistance Symposium, went on to start new entities or to support young people looking to learn from the Medu experience. Keleketla! is one vital example of a younger generation of organisers that have looked to Medu to engage this established practice of organising, working closely and over a significant period of time, not only with Medu's content and approaches but also with former members such as Judy Seidman.

Another generation of social justice oriented arts organising in a somewhat different tradition to Medu is present in the broad network of entities and individuals associated with the Johannesburg Art Foundation (JAF). There has been quite a lot of writing on the JAF itself, primarily on the creative production, non-racialism and pedagogical approaches. Some discussion has also gone into the challenges of the structure – based primarily on the individual figure of Bill Ainsley, and particularly how this doomed the continuation of the JAF post his death. JAF operated primarily within the organising tradition of non-racialism, enabling black and white artists to learn and teach together during a period when it was illegal to do so. A number of those who studied at JAF went on to work there, often as trainers. This political position, and commitment to access and the imaginary of a different south Africa, places JAF and those who organised there, very much within a framework of arts organising committed to a social agenda. According to Elizabeth Castle, connections also were drawn between the JAF and other socially oriented organisers, and “Ainslie, Dhlomo and [David] Koloane [were] among

others who gathered at the Culture and Resistance Festival in Gaborone in 1982”<sup>xxi</sup> hosted by Medu. JAF played a distinct role in training some key artists and organisers who would go on to continue development of key arts organisations, and to support an ongoing commitment to accessibility and education.

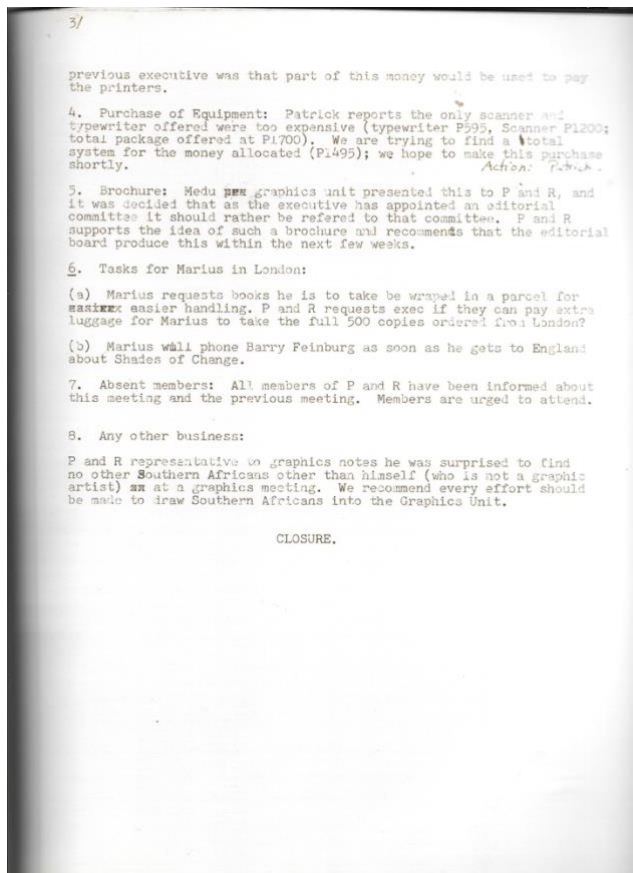
Part of this heritage is the organisation of JAF offshoots such as the Funda Centre and the Alex Art Centre. Much less is recorded of the organising and approaches at these centres. There is potentially much to learn here as organising dynamics took on a very different tone within the townships, particularly in the 80s, during the ungovernable period of significant self-organisation but also very challenging destabilisation.



*Medu Meeting Minutes part 2/3*

We know for example that they followed similar open pedagogical strategies to JAF, including enabling trainers to include their own personal experiences into their training practice.<sup>xxii</sup> There was also a collective drive toward developing more formalised training strategies and even full curriculum development. There is also some discussion of the challenges of moving sites, seeking space for the Alex Art Centre, as well as the challenges of organisers in staffing the centre, organising its materials and even the furniture.<sup>xxiii</sup> Anthusa Sotriades refers to a sense of fear she felt travelling to Alexandra through the road blocks<sup>xxiv</sup>, and to ‘visitors’ who came to inspect the centre from the security police. Bongzi Dhlomo<sup>xxv</sup> points, for example, to threats made to the centre by local activists who were suspicious of the centre and its funding sources. Though a relatively regular occurrence<sup>xxvi</sup>, the threat and potential violence took a significant

toll on the centre and also on Dhlomo herself. Both Dhlomo and Sack point to the challenges of funding at this time, both from a political perspective but also how it impacted the arts post-1994. The Alex Art Centre had primarily been funded by the Swedish Government which had an anti-apartheid agenda and funded arts programming (including Medu), and how this funding had been an approach to fund anti-apartheid programmes that weren’t explicitly political or anti-state and therefore under less state scrutiny by security forces. This also meant the Swedes were less stringent about regulation on reporting etc, which would change significantly post-1994, together with a significant drop in funding which then went directly to the newly formed government for the development of the ‘new South Africa’. Sack and others point to the expectation that many anti-apartheid arts organisers had believed that the government would support their efforts post-1994, and the very real impact on the sustainability of organising when it emerged that this was not the case.



*Medu Meeting Minutes part 3/3*

Nonetheless the organisers of this period have played a significant role in contemporary organising from the 1990s until today, including the Joburg Biennale (Bongi Dhlomo among others), the development of the Bag Factory (David Koloane and Pat Mautloa among others), the development of the Artist Proof Studios (Nhlanhla Xaba), as well as much work within state infrastructures such as the Joburg Art Gallery and national and local government. Of this period of the 70s and 80s, only the apartheid created centres such as Mofolo Art Centre and the JAF founded Funda still exist, and only as shadows of their former selves. Commercial spaces initiated in this time also remain. Individual organisers have continued to make a significant impact in the arts scene, but the entities, collectives and organisations they worked in no longer remain.

It's important to note this limitation of longstanding infrastructures of socially engaged practice, because it means that the institutional memory and training that

long standing entities should provide is also missing. Young organisers, therefore, have limited spaces within which to hone their skills and develop important organising experience. Importantly, a number of the entities established in the 1990s – the Bag Factory, Market Photo Workshop and Artist Proof Studio in particular do remain and have served as key points for a new generation of organisers to gain experience.

An established tradition of arts organising in Johannesburg definitely exists. However it has been invisibilised to a degree. This visibility is stymied by the loss of the entities themselves, and the institutional memory and potential learning ground they might offer to younger organisers. It is also stymied by the very real need to write black artists and their artworks into the canon of South African art history, to the unfortunate detriment and silencing of their work as organisers. But perhaps most importantly it's the voices and roles of former organisers that are missing most – particularly in contributing to the activities of younger organisers. There is not a tradition of older organisers stepping in to share their experiences with younger organisers, as in the example of the Mexican collectives. This is not because there isn't much to share. And we can posit a number of reasons why this is the case. But seeking out the history, searching in the words about art, for the organising, does begin to leave clues that are traceable. And perhaps it is up to young organisers to seek them out, and to call on a previous generation for greater support.



- iv For a case study-based engagement that discusses this in some detail, see French, James (2015). *VANPO Sustainability: The Impact Of Requirements For Economic Sustainability On Visual Arts Non-Profit Organisations In Johannesburg*, MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand
- v Thelwell, Sarah (2011). *Common Practice: Size Matters, Notes towards a better understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations*. Common Practice, London
- vi For a more detailed discussion of these limitations see Moiloa, Molemo (2019). *Organising: collective, collaborative organizing in Southern Africa*. VANSa
- vii Moiloa, Molemo (2019). *Organising: collective, collaborative organizing in Southern Africa*. VANSa
- viii Thajib, Ferdiansyah. *Holopis Kuntul Baris: The Work of Art in the Age of Manifestly Mechanical Collaboration*. Published to accompany Discipline No.4, Spring/Summer 2015
- ix Artscollaboratory.org
- x Elza Miles, *Lifeline out of Africa: The Art of Ernest Mancoba*, Human and Rousseau, Cape Town, 1994, p56.
- xi Sophiatown, and a number of so called "black spots" where designated for destruction by the apartheid state under the 1950 Group Areas Act, to remove black people from the inner boundaries of the white-designated city. Sophiatown residents where primarily moved to the newly formed Soweto, a township designated for urban black dwellers to remain outside of the city.
- xii Ansell, Gwen (2016) *Uncovered: the hidden history record sleeves tell about South African music* in *The Conversation*. Accessed at <https://theconversation.com/uncovered-the-hidden-history-record-sleeves-tell-about-south-african-music-65132> Accessed 15 October 2019
- xiii From the 1950s onwards it became increasingly difficult for black south africans to move within white designated areas. As black spots where removed, pass laws were tightened forcing all black men over the age of 16 to carry a pass book which determined whether, and at what times, they were allowed into white areas. Getting permission into white areas was determined by employment, and so artists or students where not permitted into white areas such as the inner city. This was strictly policed, and many were harassed and detained.
- xiv Peterson, Bhekizizwe (2016) *The struggle and the arts' flowering* in *Mail and Guardian*. Accessed at <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-06-02-the-struggle-and-the-arts-flowering> Accessed 15 October 2019
- xv Kellner, Clive and Sergio-Albio González, Eds. (2010). *Thami Mnyele + Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*. Jacana Publishing: Johannesburg P14.
- xvi Wylie, Diana (2010) *Thami Mnyele and the Art of Tragedy* in Kellner, Clive and Sergio-Albio González, Eds. (2010). *Thami Mnyele + Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*. Jacana Publishing: Johannesburg
- xvii Kellner, Clive and Sergio-Albio González, Eds. (2010). *Thami Mnyele + Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*. Jacana Publishing: Johannesburg
- xviii Kellner, Clive and Sergio-Albio González, Eds. (2010). *Thami Mnyele + Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective*. Jacana Publishing: Johannesburg P77
- xix Operating in exile and under the banner of the ANC, Medu had to consider and negotiate both the potential backlash of political organizing from the Apartheid state, as well as the concerns of Botswana who were under consistent pressure and threat of violence from the apartheid state for supporting anti-apartheid activists. The apartheid state did eventually raid Gaborone including a specific targeting of Medu, in 1985, killing 12 people of which 4 were direct Medu members
- xx <https://keleketla.org/>
- xxi Castle, Elizabeth (2015), *Encounters With the Controversial Teaching Philosophy of the Johannesburg Art Foundation in the Development of South African Art During 1982 – 1992*, MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand
- xxii Castle, Elizabeth (2015), *Encounters With the Controversial Teaching Philosophy of the Johannesburg Art Foundation in the Development of South African Art During 1982 – 1992*, MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand
- xxiii Interview with Anthusa Sotriades in Castle, Elizabeth (2015), *Encounters With the Controversial Teaching Philosophy of the Johannesburg Art Foundation in the Development of South African Art During 1982 – 1992*, MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand
- xxiv The centre was operating in the midst of the state of emergency which resulted in significant securitisation, both by the state and by communities who were at war with each other and limited movement and controlled space accordingly.
- xxv Personal Interview, 2016
- xxvi For more discussion on the young lions practices of the 80s, and the myth of the 'lost generation' see Seeking, Jeremy (1996). *The Lost Generation: South Africa's youth problem in the early 1990s*. in *Transformation*. V29. P103-125