

**ABSENCES AND VISIONS :  
SOUTH AFRICA SEEKING THE FOUNDATIONS OF DESIGN MODELS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Colonial discourse marginalised African knowledge systems with adverse consequences for the colonised. The colonised ceased to be the subject of his or her own history and became the construct of the dominant coloniser. During this hegemonic phase the African accepted the colonisers entire system of values, attitudes, morality and institutions. Even after the attainment of independence the new regimes disdained indigenous knowledge and values. In the search for new paradigms for change it is crucial that acts of recovery and diversification of sources of knowledge be embarked upon. The reclamation project we are suggesting acknowledges that no past can be recovered in its pristine form. Our paper seeks more to raise questions than to suggest a definite agenda for the use of African knowledge systems as counter hegemonic discourse.

How do we achieve the African Renaissance when Africa is caught in vicious cycles of war, famine, corruption and dictatorship? Who is to spearhead this project? Is it black people only? Is it the intellectuals or business people or is it politicians? Is the African Renaissance a new concept or is it Pan Africanism revisited? These and other questions will be addressed in my talk.

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The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.

Michel Foucault, "What enlightenment?"

**ART CULTURE IN A NEW SOUTH AFRICA: A search for an identity.**

We in South Africa are entering an era or phase in our development generally known as the African Renaissance. It is an era in which we begin to examine our role in the Southern African region, in the continent as a whole and in world affairs. As a new democracy we are

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faced with the task of laying the parameters around which new meaningful policies in all areas of our society can be constructed and how to implement these policies. The field of Art and culture is one such site through which a contribution to change can be made. My paper will examine the philosophical ideas that underpin our search for new paradigms and explore some of the critical sites in which Art and Design can find ground for self-exploration.

We are emerging from a dark period in our history, a moment through which the genius of our people had been suppressed; yet despite that our artists, designers and cultural workers found the impetus, the will and creative ability to make significant contributions to the change we are now experiencing. We will in our paper tease out some of the innovations made by our artists and designers and examine how these have been enhanced or suppressed in our new dispensation. We will also examine how in our being retrenched the Department of Fine Art and History of Art (University of Durban-Westville, KwaZulu Natal) sought to address the issue of curriculum change.

First we will lay out the context. In 1960 the then South African government banned all opposition, forced the liberation movement to operate underground. It was during this period that the role of art and culture surfaced as the main arena or site through which our struggle was waged. The black consciousness phase emerged. The revival of our past in dress, speech, programmes and themes in art, poetry, theatre and dance took on a strong African accent. Faced with repression - deaths in detention, assassinations, house arrests, massacres and exile - our artists responded with powerful images that refused to give ground to the activities of nocturnal beasts.

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Visual artists responded with Peace Parks - constructions or installations on sites where activists had been murdered. These would be instant monuments celebrating the lives of those who were gunned down by state police. The police would immediately bulldoze these monuments only to see new ones surface the following day. The theatre that was escapist was replaced with theatre-engage. Themes and apparently obscure names would be invoked that the state will not recognise yet the general public would know the references.

The role played by artists and designers in the mass democratic movement covered a wide spectrum. Artists designed T-shirts with slogans, banners, mugs (some of which were banned!). Demonstrations took the form of theatre, and a new dance, the Toyi-toyi, seen worldwide during demonstrations marked a peculiarly South African invention and flavour.

Much of the art that was created was not marked for the market. It was a statement of rebellion and defiance. Whatever the regime had defiled the artists usurped and converted into a visual statement. Church songs that only yesterday made Christians weep with longing for the new Jerusalem were converted into songs of freedom, appropriating their spirit into the spirit of political defiance. Abroad, our musicians and theatre made major contributions to popularising our struggle and raised the consciousness of the general European and American public and this spread into every corner of the globe.

Where are we now? We have so far produced two Johannesburg Biennales in 1995 and 1997. The organisers of Africus '95 invited 60 foreign curators to work in collaboration with local trainee curators and artists. This form of tutelage didn't work out well in many instances. A clash of worldviews was inevitable. The artists were young and

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inexperienced. They had been kept in the dark during the period of the Cultural boycott. The older artists who had travelled abroad were suspicious of the foreign curators. The question they raised was "How can a young inexperienced curator work with the controversial Hubert-Martin of Magicien de la Terre?"

In large the spirit that helped to bring about change was seen to be lacking in our art. During the course of our struggle our people demonstrated their ability to turn sad and painful moments and sites into areas of beauty and creativity. Many townships witnessed the conversions from death spots where youth were murdered into monuments.

However, during the Biennale our artists produced works that sought to imitate Western trends. Some of these trends had their roots in our traditional art practices - installations, performances and use of found objects - but had been emptied of all content and context. Artists from white art institutions reproduced ideas current in Europe in the 70's, exhibiting empty rooms! This was a sad commentary on the teaching of art in our institutions.

Broadly speaking that is the context through which we have to examine our options. We will now give an outline of the courses offered in our university, the University of Durban-Westville. (It is important to note that South African universities are undergoing changes, structural adjustment changes, many art departments are threatened with closure and others are closing.) It may seem ironic that whilst the rhetoric is about an African Renaissance, it is the flowering of the arts that is under threat. In giving this outline we will point out the diversity of the offerings in terms of practices and the spectrum of cultural

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divergences. We will also spell out our programme for community Out/ In reach.

The University of Durban-Westville was established in 1972 as an Indian only institution in the apartheid era. In the eighties, at the height of the Mass Democratic Movement the university underwent significant changes in its demographic intake. This has had an effect in the number of courses offered, content and method of teaching. Our department offers courses in Fine art, History of Art and carries out a number of Community Outreach/ Inreach programmes creating murals, some of which have been designated 'historical sites' as in Ladysmith in the KwaZulu-Natal Province.

### **History of Art:**

Our province KwaZulu-Natal is a microcosm of the broader South Africa. It has a large concentration of people of African, Indian and European origins. Within each of these ethnic groups can be found a diversity of religious and cultural practices that make it the envy of other provinces. To cater for this community and the country as a whole our course covers Islamic, Indian, European and African art histories. The emphasis in our teaching is on locating art within a religious, political, social and philosophical ambience. At the heart of this exercise is a search for our common identity. From the above it becomes clear that the issue of identity is a vexed and critical one. All our identities have become hybrid.

It is through celebrating diversity, difference and similarities that a firm principled identity can be arrived at; an identity that will allow other identities to prosper and flourish. Theoretically, our course covers ancient civilisations and their artistic finds, we examine the social and

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political, religious and philosophical ideas that informed these societies and their arts. We also explore and examine current Western theories, post-modernism, postcolonialism, deconstruction and post-feminism.

In dealing with these cultures we pay particular attention to the signs and symbols that characterize them. It is our belief and conviction that to be able to be innovative we must create a repertoire of images that are particularly South African, in its diversity, if we are going to be competitive in a fast globalising world, that if we appropriate images from abroad they must be distilled from our own context and add value to the genre.

A few days ago our country was at the polls to decide who was to rule us for the next five years. And the ANC has won the election. Our concern, however, is what will this victory mean to the artists, designers and cultural workers on the ground. I will briefly touch on some of the promises made to the arts community in the period leading to the first democratic election and what followed after that. I will also examine some of the steps taken to meet these promises. I will also, in my talk, examine the implications of the challenge President Thabo Mbeki threw to the country and the continent to strive for the rebirth of Africa. I here refer to the notion of the African Renaissance.

Central to the African Renaissance is the project of redress; the redressing of the socio-economic and cultural imbalances of the past brought upon us by colonialism and the apartheid regime. We are emerging from three and a half centuries of discrimination and forty years of legalised discrimination that effectively and consistently (with rigour and demonic vigour) under-developed black communities and left them with a bitter legacy, both materially and psychologically. Now that the grand narrative of legitimation has legally pronounced

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apartheid dead, the process to redress imbalances of the past has begun. We still have to navigate the treacherous terrain and sites left by our past. This site of contestation, however, is marked by a remarkable degree of tolerance by the erstwhile victims of apartheid. (A point has to be made here that apartheid victimised both perpetrator and those on the receiving end.) The issue, however, is of who controls the resources?

There are creative resources, material resources these include art galleries, museums, heritage sites, the art media and ultimately the intellectual force necessary for the creation of a healthy climate for creativity in the country. The visual history of South Africa was marked by absences, silences, distortions and mis-representations. Monuments as visual texts tell stories of missionaries and generals. Post apartheid South Africa has not changed, At least not that much. Centuries of prejudices and bigotry still rule and the new rulers are still learning the ropes. With little, if any experience in the field of art and design they still have to be guided by those they seek to replace; an unenviable position! What is being done to redress these visual texts?

We are faced by a plethora of challenges and debilitating legacies of, for instance:

- a) Colonial notions of Art were in conflict with those of the colonised African.
- b) Art history has always been a white history of Art, black institutions were not allowed to teach art/ art history for natives had no art but only craft.
- c) Practising African artists were mainly self-taught or were taught by individual white artists who spoke for these artists. They could

not articulate their feelings and ideas about art. However, left alone they did.

This points to the need for art education that will bring about a new crop of art administrators, artists, designers, critics and curators.

- **Art & the Cultural Boycott.**

Who benefited from the boycott? Who lost out?

The cultural boycott was meant to isolate South Africa from the rest of the world, to highlight the plight of the people of the land. In reality this meant that black artists could not travel to other countries and of course they would not receive passports unless they were on the side of the repressive regime. White artists who were anti-apartheid could also not travel. Those that traveled and studied abroad gained skills to run these institutions and are benefiting twice. The vicious cycle of denial persists.

Another casualty of the cultural boycott was the cross fertilisation of ideas with the rest of the world. This had serious and curious implications for art practice in the country. As late as 1995 we would witness the emptying of art galleries and the exhibition of space as novelty. Art practices abandoned in Europe twenty years ago were still a sensation here. On the other hand those artists in the villages who need no Western stimulation continued to produce their unassuming work, innovating, as of necessity and others developed through contact with tourists. The latter produce work that, I think Peter Wollen described as "para-tourist art," but when you critically examine this art against the backdrop of Western cannons it fits the "postmodern" slot. But then by some sleight of hand postmodern art can only be 'non-Third World'

- **The re-emergence**

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Since liberation South African artists of all colours find themselves included in a variety of art exhibitions like the Venice Biennale, "The Southern Cross" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Africus Biennale, and Trade Routes, (South Africa) the Havana Biennale and others. The inclusion of artists of colour in these exhibitions were not without long debates within the art community in South Africa. Who represents who when, why and who decides were some of the ingredients of the debates. Contact with the Western Art World was usually through the 'establishment,' in the form of art directors, curators, and artists. In other words, those who brought the beast home decided who and how to divide the spoils. These divisions were not without their own power games.

- **ACTAG and The White Paper.**

To ensure as wide a debate on the arts as possible in 1994 the Ministry of Art, Culture, Science and Technology established the Art & Culture Task Group to facilitate discussions within the art community to prepare a way for art, culture and heritage legislation for the country. This involved setting up meetings, public hearings seminars and a conference. Different art groups, community art groups, academics and administrators made their contributions.

The result of this exercise was the drafting of the White Paper, a progressive paper in print. Articles 25-36 Spell out the government's vision for the Art, Culture and Heritage and Art Education. The role of Art, Craft, Design and Heritage are extensively discussed. According to the Ministry of Art, Culture, Science and Technology the ministry..." will actively promote the constitutional right of every learner in the General Education and Training Phase to access equitable, appropriate life-long education and training in arts, culture and heritage to develop individual talents and skills through the transformation of arts education

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within formal school system and the development and extension of community-based arts education structures...."

On paper this is a progressive step for the ministry. To achieve this objective a massive programme of training educators, administrators and curators is imperative. One would think that art departments in the country would be thriving. Nothing can be farther than from the truth! We will return to address this issue.

- **Tertiary Institutions.**

Tertiary institutions in S. Africa like their counterparts in the Britain of the Thatcherite regime, are faced with the necessity to transform themselves in line with the economic needs of the country. Retrenchments, early retirement packages and a general gloom pervade every facet of our institutions. Science and technology are privileged over the arts. The arts are seen as luxury and an irritation. Art departments are required to restructure themselves out of existence. Some departments have already closed down or are in the process of closing. In our province (KwaZulu-Natal) attempts are being made to create a school of arts involving all tertiary institutions in the region. This has its own difficulties.

Faced with massive enforced unemployment and demands for a 'relevant' education system one would think the arts would be seen as an area in which jobs could be created; jobs that would, at the same time, help focus the minds of the nation on issues of the much vaunted African Renaissance as this would unleash the creative potential of the

people of South Africa. There is a large pool of popular forms of cultural knowledge that can be exploited. Writing in 1987/8 Green & Mort (Block 13) seem to have anticipated this for us in S. Africa. They write:

"The rise and rise of magazine markets, TV documentaries even quiz shows point to know-how, skills and competences which owe little to higher education. " How can these opportunities be exploited? They reply: "In the first instance, it means winning the arguments about breaking down the separateness of humanities-based higher education: getting rid of culturally constructed divides between academic and vocational courses; bringing courses into dialogue with cultures and economics outside the institution; and on a different level, transforming the relation between knowledge and educational consumers."

Cultural policy, tourism, leisure management and other areas that require art and culture training scream for action! The need for a partnership between the state, the business sector and higher education in reviewing issues of cultural management in all areas of society are crucial.

- **Art in the 'Community"/Public Art.**

In the beginning I made reference to Peace Parks. These parks were alternatives to colonial visual texts or visual texts of empire. During the apartheid era public walls were sacrosanct. Any mural was seen as subversive. This art form was, however, used by women in the rural areas who made an art-form out of it. Their messages were often misunderstood. The AmaNdebele, BaPedi and Southern Sotho are some of the main exponents of this art-form. The history of Ndebele wall

painting is steeped in controversy and distortions. Was it always subversive, subliminally?

The work of Nicky Blumenfeld and her group (Arcwork) is remarkable. Downtown Johannesburg is adorned with their sculptures. People who were not exposed to such works are now discussing them.

The RoadWorks Project, in scale and conception is worthy of an in-depth analysis.

- Economic aspect
- Aesthetic dimension
- Cultural dimension.
- Scale
- Political

Harnessing the spirit of the African Renaissance.

For designers in South Africa where is the laboratory of ideas to be found? A visit to the villages of the AmaNdebele one would see how innovative designers' function. The AmaNdebele have two main art styles: Itshefana (razor blade design) and isRayton (The Rayton style) this style refers to designs marked and influenced by streets and streetlights. Both these motifs are alien to Ndebele traditions yet they harness these to amazing effect. The Sotho house painting designs are another form. The designs are not as ostentatious as the Ndebele but more controlled and poetic. South Africa beadwork, baskets, and other crafts are beginning to make strong impacts internationally.

There is a great need for our designers to carry out the archeology of their past in search of the spirit that sustained creativity even in bleak

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moments. We must learn from the Western logocentric mindset and fuse it with the spiritual and holistic approach that marks the indigenous strand.

Africa, indeed South Africa, seeks to position herself in favourable light in the emerging global village. Our dress/fashion designs ala Nadipha Madikizela or Lindiwe Kuzwayo and others are beginning to redesign the 'ethnic' onto catwalks of the world with minimum alterations but maximum impact. This is the challenge facing our young designers. They must cross ethnic boundaries, interact with each other, visit the crafters and learn weaving skills, traditional carving skills or work in partnership with crafters to produce goods that would be challenging to the eye and heart and take the markets of the world by storm.

The postmodern movement is about the study of the 'Other' - us. Westerners learn and appropriate our designs and fashion them with their own meanings whilst these gems that we treat with disdain surround us and must be utilised.

## **CONCLUSION**

The line that separated art, craft and design is fast disappearing. There can be no art or craft without design. Design must have some art and craft in it. The greatest challenges facing our young designers is about transcending our divisive history and embrace our common Africanness and learn the valuable gems of thought, emotions and the spirituality that surrounds us.

