

ARTS WRITERS AS CULTURAL SUPERHEROES

I am a firm and passionate believer that there is a potent and fundamental synergy between arts writers and cultural and human rights activism. It would be most beneficial to our communities if every arts writer on our continent was more socially engaged in cultural activism. This can effectively be achieved by highlighting the most pressing socio-political issues through festivals with a defined philosophy. It is through our stories, our poems, our visual art, our films, our music, our theatre or our beautiful dance and the exploration of our diverse cultural identities that will lead us to transform, to heal, and to understand one another, regardless of what language we speak.

Cultural and creative development are vital for our emerging societies and in achieving this it is most necessary to establish regular, monthly or annual creative platforms to allow individuals and communities the opportunity to empower themselves.

Poet and English professor Kelwyn Sole reminds us of art's power when he speaks of the work of visionary artist, Ezrom Legae: "Inspired by the story of Steve Biko, Legae produced a series of graphics using the chicken and egg imagery. Yet in spite of its explicitly political inspiration, he avoided any directly political reference either in the content or in the title of this series. Legae used images of birds and eggs as a metaphor for a new awakening of consciousness. For many artists (of this time) art needed to become like music: instead of reflecting reality, it would try to create a new reality, more illuminating and more sublime than the lived experience under apartheid."

With continued socio-political pressures in Africa, there is a need for the arts writer to employ a multi-dimensional role in civil society to continue to uncover new truths. We need to take into serious consideration the stimulation and wider growth of the arts community on many levels. We as arts journalists directly benefit by making a living writing about art, and benefit in being enriched with daily access to new meanings and new truths through witnessing and experiencing the multi-dimensional worlds of creativity through art.

The cultural activism I undertake comes to life in response of the need to develop larger audiences to celebrate art, and most vitally to address key socio-political needs in our communities. The questions I always ask when planning a potential cultural project are: what and where is the need, and can arts journalists as cultural activists who curate contemporary cultural projects, synergise effectively with artists and the media to attract new art audiences and new readers/listeners/viewers? I am also convinced that as arts writers we too need to explore the interdisciplinary in the way we work in much the same way as successful and highly engaged artists experiment and explore it.

Youth pop culture festivals: Red Eye @rt

Red Eye @rt started in 1998 in Durban as a monthly youth pop-culture arts festival founded by myself and a small collective at the Durban Art Gallery. It was a time when there was no budget for new acquisitions at the national galleries. We knew that no new art would be bought to reflect the art of a changing nation unless we did something.

At the time I was an arts editor of a newspaper under the editorship of Kaizer Nyatumba, the first black editor of a newspaper in South Africa. I was privileged to witness art

on a daily basis, but saddened by the lack of audiences for each creative discipline, whether visual art, dance or theatre and I was most disheartened by the lack of young people in these audiences.

The answer, I reckoned, was simply, give them young art. Give them what they love and know and most importantly mix it up with what they don't know so there is something new for them to discover or something old and timeless for them to rediscover. Red Eye @rt as a new arts model made space for live music, DJs, street fashion, performance art, design, short film screenings, open mic poetry and contemporary dance melting into one helluva raunchy tango under a Trevor Mokaba painting.

A young poet read her heart out, a hip-hop artist rapped on the stairs, gospel singers blessed the creative ceremony, a maskanda musician in amabeshu strummed his home-made tin guitar and DJ Siyanda spun phat beats. In a small gallery room a young woman, artist Nicolette van der Walt, dressed in a sheet bathed herself in cow's blood in a bid to cleanse the sins of her colonial ancestors. Short film screenings, photography, comic book art by Nikhil Singh, a live punk band, graphic design by iJusi and art installations by James Beckett were all exhibited and attracted mass audiences.

Every first Friday of the month became known as the night to celebrate art, and people came in their hundreds. Red Eye @rt worked as a highly successful model and was copied around the country and we now have an art collection reflecting the younger generation of artists and a live archive of the issues they have been grappling with during this time of post-independence.

Amani Arts Festival in Khayelitsha

In Cape Town last year a small group of volunteers started African Artists Unite as One to kick-start an annual arts festival to celebrate African Human Rights Day on 21 October. We chose to do this in a community where there is not only a serious need for the celebration of the healing and upliftment of the human spirit, but also for crucial cross-cultural communication in a place where some of the highest incidences of xenophobia are experienced in the Western Cape.

I really love Khayelitsha because there are people living there that are insanely inspiring and I reckon there are more artists and creative people in Khayelitsha than in New York City. In every household of on average say nine in a family, three children will be dancers; two will be singers, one a hairdresser and the other a painter, a jazz musician or poet. And the mother will either be growing her own organic vegetables which she uses to run a soup kitchen or she is looking after 20 Aids orphans and sings in the church choir on Sundays and on the side, beside her full-time job she designs clothes for herself and her children.

After networking on Facebook, we met on Nelson Mandela Day at the Oliver Tambo Hall. I invited everyone I knew in arts media, artists, friends, community activists and leaders and NGOs. A month later after meeting every Saturday in Khayelitsha we started African Artists Unite as One, a small but dedicated and committed community group. Through art and workshops, we seek as artists, poets, songwriters, filmmakers and cultural activists to create conversations about xenophobia.

We explore interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaborations with original African music, poetry, hip hop, film, video, performance art, theatre and dance and a visual art exhibition with established and emerging artists. Performing artists and artwork attempt to explore "the other", attempt to re-negotiate the term African and celebrate cultural diversity. African Artists Unite as One includes poets from Rwanda like Epiphany Mukasano, composers like Patricia Matongo from Zimbabwe, Bienvenue Mambote from DRC who has been playing music since he was nine years old, Cosmos Mairoso from Zimbabwe a performance poet and teacher, animation artists and a gospel choir from Khayelitsha, local theatre groups, traditional and contemporary dancers, internationally acclaimed artist Sue Williamson, respected poet and playwright Malika Ndlovu, Cape Cinnamon of Royal Matabele lineage, Phila Ndlovu, a cultural activist and poet from Gugulethu, Emile da Mic and his hip hop crew from Blue Sky Poetry and Kwamalimi, hip hop artists from Nigeria, Deon Skade an arts blogger and Zizipo Mgobo, a spoken word artist from Litha Park in Khayelitsha.

Some insights from these projects

Working on no budget

Never let money ever stop you from wanting to make a difference. Despite the challenge, the positive news is that these kinds of events can be achieved with passion, determination and by involving sponsors in kind and





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the media. A film production company in Khayelitsha responded to our call to transport all artists and our audience, a sound company responded to our call to supply lighting and professional sound for free, printing companies did posters. Media responded by writing stories, local radio stations were more aware of the need to interview more Pan African artists and artists in Khayelitsha who were previously marginalised in the mainstream media.

A book shop offered us a free venue to hold our press conference, and a retail store sponsored drinks for the artists. We were simply cheeky, asked for it and got it, if someone said no we would just move on to what we knew would be our next potential generous sponsor.

Aligning with existing campaigns

Key for us was to align with experienced NGOs who specialised in this field. We used their studio space to hold meetings and to connect with community leaders and media partners.

Media as cultural champs

Live arts events should be sponsored by the media so the media are seen carrying the torch as cultural champions, of taking ownership to some degree for added marketing value and reaching wider newer audiences. Print media is under threat and should capitalise on such opportunities to develop new audiences. The media then has wider social/cultural cachet. As *Guardian* columnist Simon Jenkins said: "To pay was not to read, it was to join."

Innovation and volunteering are key

Arts writers have the power to potentially create small societal shifts and be responsible and equally respected as serious art critics and cultural activists assisting societies undergoing transformation. But this means reviving and respecting the value of being a volunteer and sharing the many ways we work to create opportunities and network.

An ethos of sharing

It is about sharing contacts, sharing media access, sharing opportunities, sharing stories, mentoring, nurturing and offering meaningful public platforms for artists to engage directly with their communities, empowering them and in doing so creating news stories for the media to report on and most importantly working from a root social cause.

In conclusion, if it is the weight of the artist's responsibility to make sense of the world, the artist's innate responsibility to create order and clarity of vision, then it is the arts journalist, essentially the messenger, who has the most crucial role to spread these messages, of a new truth, a new vision, especially at the height of socio-political changes in Africa's history, like this time, right now, today.

*Excerpted from the paper presented at Africaphonie in Cameroon in March. To read the full version of this paper go to www.isuzybell.tumblr.com
Read more on www.artsinafrica.com and <http://culturalpolicy-economics-africa.blogspot.com/>*

FESTIVALS WITH A DEFINED PHILOSOPHY CAN:

- Offer new platforms for emerging artists to kick-start their creative careers and get them known in their communities.
- Tackle and highlight socio-political issues.
- Shed a positive light on communities in need of healing and transformation.
- Develop new and larger audiences for culture.
- Cross-pollinate artists and audiences with theatre houses and art galleries.
- Raise funds to buy new art collections.
- Stimulate arts stories for the media and create vital cultural debate.
- Provide work for emerging and established arts writers.
- Provide work to mentor young arts curators.
- Develop new audiences.
- Opportunities to explore sponsors to commission dance pieces/art works.
- Create a strong media profile for the venue/art gallery hosting the festival.
- Create a sense of cultural pride among the artist community, a sense of unity and belonging.
- Create cultural ambassadors and more cultural activists among artists and arts writers.
- Create cross-cultural communication and cross-pollination of art genres.