

Connecting artists ... promoting opportunities

A visit to the Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA) offices in Johannesburg, South Africa reveals a quiet buzz, heralding a changing of the guard and hinting that, even in challenging times, opportunities abound for the visual arts in this country. Africalia spoke to outgoing Director, Joseph Gaylard about VANSA's evolution and what lies in its future.

VANSA formally came into being in 2006, as a membership-based organisation that sought to be the voice and vehicle of the visual arts sector in South Africa. It was established by Mike van Graan, described by Joseph as "someone who casts a long shadow among the Africalia-supported organisations in South Africa".

In 2001, at an international conference on cultural policy held in Johannesburg, ministers of culture from governments around the world met with a broad spectrum of civil society organisations to explore best practice and areas for development in the sector. During this gathering, a concern was raised that while there were many organisations in South Africa, representing a wide variety of visual media, there was no formal structure to represent this cohort or to lobby on its behalf.

A fundraising campaign saw funding being obtained from the national ministry of arts and culture, the National Arts Council and international donors for a conference of the South African visual arts community – the first since 1978. Delegates included artists, museum curators, gallery owners and government. The fledgling VANSA was debuted, and received a warm welcome.

Shortly thereafter, with funding from the National Arts Council, Bandile Gumbi was appointed to coordinate the project, under the guidance of the steering committee. The focus at this time was on an annual project to develop a specialist area of practice – getting black South Africans – and promising youngsters from other African countries – into master classes to focus on developing and nurturing scarce skills in the visual arts.

The inaugural session was on curatorial practice and took place over two weeks on the iconic Robben Island, where former President Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned during apartheid. "I think, from the beginning, we knew that continental engagement is of great importance to South Africa as a whole, and would be particularly so for me. There is a disconnect between South Africa and the rest of the continent, so for this first interaction, we were at pains to bring in both South African and international curators and specialists," says Joseph. The second class was also in Cape Town and

focused on art writing, presented in collaboration with an international association of art critics. The third took place in Johannesburg in 2009 and public art practice was the chosen theme.

In late 2009, Joseph spearheaded the submission of a funding proposal to the South African National Lotteries Board on behalf of VANSAs, in response to a call for applications relating to the upcoming Soccer World Cup. VANSAs's project related to the development of Soccer World Cup-focused public arts projects in small towns in South Africa – and rather to the astonishment of all involved, not only was the application successful, it resulted in almost R2-million in funding (approximately €200,000 at the time).

At this critical juncture, the VANSAs co-ordinator position became vacant. There was a need to expand the VANSAs operations quite rapidly, and by coincidence, Joseph had been working on a freelance basis for some time and felt the need to consolidate aspects of his work in the contemporary arts field. This fortuitous set of events resulted in Joseph formally being employed by VANSAs as Director early in 2010. His first task was to implement the Lottery-funded project, which culminated in a book, titled *2010 Reasons to Live in a Small Town*, that chronicled the many ways in which South African visual artists plied their craft in small towns across the country, giving locals and visitors alike a blueprint to accessing a smorgasbord of creativity. During the year that followed, Joseph generated many new projects, with one of the main priorities of this period being the development of online information services, based on giving accurate, useful information on a regular basis, at no cost.

The sharing of accurate, relevant information lies at the heart of the website, with a focus on constant updates highlighting professional development opportunities, employment and internships, for example. The other priority was developing the organisational infrastructure – within a year, the staff complement had gone from one to five, with the majority of these having been interns whose internships had been made possible by funding from Africalia.

It is not only VANSAs that has benefited from this, several organisations have found this funding opportunity invaluable, bringing in young, inexperienced people into projects, allowing them to learn, reveal their strengths and shape a meaningful role around the skills of the intern and the needs of the organisation.

Joseph explains that this strategy has been consolidated to provide five core areas of interest:

- Advocacy, lobbying and research, creating a common thread that runs across all of the focus areas;

- Involvement in and support of the emergence of the Arterial Network – extending the cross-sectoral aspect of the arts sector, presenting a united front, particularly when lobbying;
- Developing and nurturing professional practice among stakeholders through training and internships, and facilitating access to information;
- Market development, both locally and abroad, for South African artists; and
- Creatively developing contemporary visual arts in the country.

Some of the initiatives falling under the focus areas include working with various local and international structures, such as the South African Department of Trade and Industry, the British Council and Business and Arts South Africa, to generate research that informs policy development and revision; establishing a vibrant internship programme to strengthen the human infrastructure in the arts sector; and engaging with the Department of Trade and Industry to facilitate better access to trade missions, international trade fairs and conferences. A particularly interesting development has been engaging with the South African banking sector and government around the provision of zero-interest loans to individuals wishing to invest in art.

When asked about the future focus for VANSAs, Joseph says that its role is to explore new ways to think about and execute contemporary art, and to work in the public realm, through collaboration and engagement with people who are not necessarily artists, but may pave the way for the creative process. In so doing, VANSAs aims to make these relationships artistically meaningful, rather than charitable or paternalistic, professionalizing artists' interactions with their audiences and stakeholders.

Joseph's hopes for VANSAs? While his time has been around generating possibilities, it has sometimes come at the expense of developing organisational infrastructure. "The wide range of projects being implemented at the same time is punishing on capacity," he says and adds that he sees the coming period as one of consolidation and strengthening human resources.

He also highlights a need to 'sharpen' the image of what the organisation does – structuring its offering into a more coherent suite of interventions, to ensure that its constituency knows exactly what it does, and how it can assist them.

"I think it's a strange organisation," he muses. "We're not an artists' organisation, and we're not a training or a research institute. There is fundamental value in bringing these elements together, but

we must be aware of the danger of losing the plot – becoming like a headless chicken of an organisation. The challenge lies in retaining this complexity, but having focus and priorities within that.”

Joseph has left VANSAs to head the SADC office of Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts. He leaves VANSAs in the capable hands of Molemo Moiloa, who joins the organisation from Johannesburg’s Market Photo Workshop.