

Summit Views 6

Date: 09/09/2009.

A weekly column by Mike van Graan, Programme Director for the World Summit on Arts and Culture (Johannesburg, 22-25 September 2009), will raise some of the themes and issues that will be debated at the event. These views are not those of the World Summit organisers but are entirely the views of the Programme Director and are intended to be provocative. To join the debate about this topic visit the arts in Africa blog at <http://www.artsinafrica.com/arts-in-africa-blog/world-summit-on-arts-and-culture-views-6>

On Arts advocacy:

“Artists in all countries shall be encouraged and helped to form associations. Their organisations shall receive the support they need to create their own structures and make their action effective.”

This is a quote from the Final Declaration of the World Congress on the Implementation of the Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist held in Paris in 1997. The Recommendation itself - a beautiful document spelling out the ideal working and living conditions for artists, their social status, their vocation and training, their right to participate in creating and implementing cultural policies, etc – was adopted in Belgrade in October 1980, almost 29 years ago.

The Recommendation urges UNESCO’s member states to “take appropriate measures to have the opinions of artists and the professional and trade union organisations representing them...taken carefully into account in the formulation and execution of their cultural policies. To this end, they are invited to make the necessary arrangements for artists and their organisations to participate in discussions, decision-making processes and the subsequent implementation of measures aimed, inter alia at:

1. the enhancement of the status of artists in society...
2. the promotion of culture and art within the community...
3. the encouragement of international cultural co-operation....”

The Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist is very clear on both what should be implemented to allow the arts to flourish within countries and for the optimal conditions for artists to work in, as well as how this should be done i.e. by public authorities engaging with artists and the organisations representing their interests.

However, for most artists in most countries of the world, the Recommendation is simply yet another idealistic document to which their governments may have subscribed (like the more recent UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions or the earlier Universal Declaration of Human Rights that declares that “Everyone shall have the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community (and) to enjoy the arts...), but have singularly failed to implement.

From my experience, other than in very advanced democracies, it is unlikely that artists' organisations are supported by "member states" i.e. government or parastatal agencies like National Arts Councils. Generally – despite government and the National Arts Council in South Africa sometimes lamenting the absence of artists' organisations with which to engage – the reality is that in the post-1994 dispensation, government has largely ignored, or actively rejected representations made by independent artists' organisations as they have been deemed too critical of the failures of the public authorities. Government departments and parastatal funding agencies tend to engage with "sweetheart" organisations, those whose leaders claim to represent their constituency, but who compromise their members' interests in exchange for government support, or for access to various perks or other personal benefits to do with power and status that public authorities bestow on them.

Our recent history is littered with letters and emails to different levels of government and to the National Arts Council and their provincial equivalents making proposals, suggesting alternatives to current policies and practice, pointing out – quietly at first – the incompetence, mismanagement and corruption that undermine the sector, only for these to be ignored. Then, when activists and arts organisations go public with their criticisms, government is embarrassed into taking some action or goes on the defensive and the arts organisations and activists are made out to be the problem – the messengers are shot as racists, as anti-transformation, as having personal agendas.

Then, along comes an election with new politicians, sometimes new government officials, new National Arts Council boards and there is a brief honeymoon period as everyone tries to improve on the strained relations of the previous dispensation, only for these to be repeated a few months or years later as the same patterns – artists trying to improve their conditions on the one hand and recalcitrant, insensitive public authorities on the other – play themselves out. At best, just when years of education and engaging with politicians and government officials begin to bear fruit, an election takes place or they are redeployed elsewhere or they leave to take up a more lucrative job in the private sector. And then the laborious process of educating their replacement starts all over again! Or gains made under a previous dispensation, are reversed through the ignorance of the new incumbent, often assigned responsibility for the arts since she or he needs to be accommodated politically, rather than because s/he has any real understanding of or commitment to the sector.

However, with regard to the lack of advocacy for the arts, the hands of artists are often not clean either. Many artists are completely disinterested in the macro policies and structures that directly impact on their lives, preferring to leave it to a small coterie of arts activists to fight on their behalf. Or the sector suffers from an inferiority complex, a lack of self-esteem and insecurity from often being told that the arts are not important, that there are more important things on which to spend taxpayer funds (like useless arm's deals, sports events and ministerial vehicles) and so the arts community spends huge amounts of time and resources justifying why the arts need to be taken seriously with our economic impact studies, showing how the arts generate jobs, income and tax revenue.

And yet, as with all other workers in society, artists – creative workers - have as much right as others to assert their interests, to lobby for better working and living conditions, to demand participation in structures and policies that directly affect their lives and livelihood and generally, to advocate for the best interests of the arts.

Artists and creative practitioners who derive from middle-class backgrounds need to learn that their conditions – as artists – will not change by themselves, or by others doing it for them. It will come with struggle, with painstaking organisation, with committed and long term activism. There is little that is sexy or financially rewarding or image-building that comes with such struggle, but it is necessary and is, in fact, the only way in which conditions will change.

We need to advocate for the arts – for better policies, better funding conditions, etc – to government, to parastatal agencies, the corporate sector and even to international development organisations. There are many issues to lobby around, but even just one from the Final Declaration of the 1997 World Congress on the Status of the Artist should be sufficient to mobilise artists globally: “Article 18: In every country, in every year, at least one per cent of total public funds should be allocated to artistic activities of creation, expression and dissemination”.

Perhaps development agencies that provide aid should be lobbied to insist that the governments to whom they provide such aid should allocate at least 5% of the aid budget to the cultural dimension of the arts, not least to ensure that the fundamental human right to participate in and enjoy the arts is not limited to the middle-classes.

We need to advocate to the arts community itself, to show the links between their micro-lives and the macro policies that shape these, to encourage them to read, to be informed, to organise and take action to improve their lot.

And then we need to lobby the public at large – as per IFACCA’s proposed campaign – to support music, dance, theatre, visual art, film and literature a whole lot more! I am always surprised at how many people with disposable income and who think of themselves as being relatively sophisticated, simply don’t go to the theatre or see dance or at best buy a CD or see a Hollywood movie. Yet, just imagine if every artist took responsibility for recruiting 100 people per year to go to a gallery, or see a play, or buy a CD from a local musician, and 500 artists did that nationally, 50 000 more people would be supporting the arts per year. But what is also surprising – given that we are creative people working in the arts – is how boring and traditional (and ineffective) our marketing and audience development strategies are!

There are huge possibilities in building interest in the arts among the broader public and by doing so, potentially increase the general public demand for more support for the arts (rather than limit this demand to a self-interested arts community).

If the arts sector spent at least as much time reflecting on our own culpability for the state of our sector as looking for scapegoats elsewhere, we will have to concede that often, we get – or have - what we deserve.