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Interview: Cultural Policies and Cultural Activism: the South African Experience. An Interview with Mike van Graan

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ABSTRACT

Mike van Graan is Executive Director of the African Arts Institute [AFAI] in Cape Town, and is the former Secretary General of the Arterial Network. Mike currently serves as a UNESCO Technical Expert on the 2005 UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, and has played numerous roles in South Africa's cultural sector. To many, he is best known as a playwright. He has received a number of awards for his plays including the Fleur du Cap Best New Script Award for *Nag, Generaal* (Night, General) in 2008; *Brothers in Blood*, a Market Theatre production that won the Naledi Theatre Award for Best New Play in 2009; and a Standard Bank Silver Ovation Award for *Rainbow Scars* in 2013, a play that was programmed as part of the Afrovibes Festival and toured the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in 2014. Mike was also appointed the inaugural Festival Playwright at the National Arts Festival in South Africa in 2013, where four of his works were showcased, including a new piece, *Writer's Block*.

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JV: *Mike, you are an executive director, a cultural consultant, a UNESCO adviser, and also a national playwright. How do these roles – if they do – fit together?*¹

MvG: They fit together through *activism*. Each of them allows me a different form of activism. As a playwright, I explore the human condition in post-apartheid South Africa. Prior to 1994 (which is when our historic elections were held), the theatre work I engaged in was very much part of the anti-apartheid struggle, taking place in community halls, in church halls and as part of political rallies rather than formal theatre spaces. Now, much of my work is done at the country's leading festivals and I served as the Associate Playwright of Artscape, one of the six nationally-subsidised theatres, from 2011 to the end of 2014. This has allowed me as a playwright – with a commitment to social justice – to ask some of the hard questions of our society in transition. We may have defeated apartheid, but our society has become more unequal with high levels of poverty and unemployment (at least 25%, by official definitions).

After our first democratic elections and with Nelson Mandela as President, there was a real reluctance on the part of the arts community to ask hard questions – to be seen to be in some kind of opposition to a government that enjoyed political and moral legitimacy. For me, though, as we were a society in transition, we needed to keep asking the hard questions, keep reflecting our society back to itself in order to ensure that we deal with our major challenges. If we, as artists – or citizens – retreat from that public space, we allow others to define democracy in their self-serving image, and we'll wake up in 20 years' time in a society in decline wondering how we got there. So, with freedom of creative expression now being guaranteed in our country's Constitution for the first time, I believe that the best way to exercise and promote freedom of expression is to practice it. Hence the kind of theatre I do is about putting on stage the kind of things that people might feel anxious about, but are too afraid to voice

them in public for fear of being labelled racists, or 'anti-transformation', or whatever labels political elites may use to suppress criticism. Theatre, then, allows me to be a social activist, in a particular way, but it also provides me with credibility as an artist, and which informs a second practice, that of being an arts administrator and a cultural policy activist.

By virtue of my practice as a playwright, I understand and know intimately the challenges of being an artist. This informs my activities and insights into cultural policy, and what needs to change and be implemented at macro-levels with regard to policy, strategy and funding, to change and make more sustainable the practice of an artist at a micro-level.

In my capacity as the Executive Director of the African Arts Institute, I have a platform that allows me a voice within our national cultural and political discourse. With the experience I've acquired in South Africa, I've been able to work with partners across the African continent in advocacy and related issues, most recently assisting the government of Namibia to develop an updated arts, culture and heritage policy. The roots of this experience are in my having been appointed as an advisor to the first minister responsible for arts and culture after the 1994 elections, when I had the privilege of helping to formulate post-apartheid cultural policies. And that has also influenced by appointment as a UNESCO expert on the 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, assisting governments to formulate policies and strategies aligned to this Convention that promotes international trade in creative goods and services. This, and my work as the founding Secretary General of Arterial Network – a pan-African civil society network operating in the arts and culture sphere across more than 40 countries – also provided me with regional and international platforms to learn and to be engaged with policy and related issues at a global level.

For example, there has been an international campaign to ensure that culture is included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are to succeed the Millennium Development Goals after their 2015 deadline. (The MDGs aim to halve world poverty, ensure every child has a primary school education, reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, and so on). As advocates for culture to be recognised within the SDGs, we argue that, often culture – belief systems, values, worldviews, traditions, etc. – plays a

¹ *Acknowledgements:* This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted on Tuesday 5 May, 2015, at Millburn House, University of Warwick. It was made possible by the Warwick Institute of Advanced Study, at which Mike van Graan was a Visiting Fellow. The original recording of the interview was undertaken by Doug Cairns of the School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy Studies, and the transcription was completed by Tomi Oladepo of the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies.

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role in why the development challenges exist or persist, and that strategies to address them, must consider the cultural dimension. Since these SDGs resonate most with a continent like Africa, by virtue of being part of these continental and international networks, one is able to intervene sometimes in the spaces where policy is being formulated, rather than the traditional African experience, which is that we are at the recipient end of policies made elsewhere, (and which we then tend to embrace because of the resources that happen to be attached to them).

This is a long answer to your question, but I hope that the theme of social justice activism has emerged as the common theme in my various practices as a playwright, a cultural policy activist, arts administrator and consultant.

JV: The reason I began with that rather banal opening question is to probe the tensions inherent in the relation between individual creative practice and cultural management – not least when it comes to negotiating with governmental agencies and national cultural bureaucracy. How do ‘politics’ animate or even motivate your cultural work?

MvG: I was born into an apartheid world determined by politics that affected every aspect of our lives: where we lived, which school we could go to, what job we could do, even whom we could – and could not – love. ‘Politics’ also impacted on whose stories were told in museums, in theatres, in galleries, and indeed where these were located, who had access to them, and who governed and managed them. Inevitably then, ‘politics’ – in the same way as it needed to address and transform the legacies of apartheid in other sectors of our society (education, health, housing, etc.), needed to address the inequities in the arts and culture sector. From my high school years, I’ve always had a political awareness, and have worked with political formations such as the United Democratic Front, but I have never belonged to any political party. As an artist, I lean heavily towards political independence, to have the freedom rigorously to analyse and criticise – where necessary – any political or social formation without being prevented from doing so by virtue of being subjected to the discipline and political interests of a party or political entity.

You may wonder then how I came to be an advisor to the minister responsible for arts and culture in Nelson Mandela’s first cabinet? After the unbanning

of the ANC and other parties in 1989, and the movement towards a negotiated settlement, some of us in the arts and culture community said that as political change took place it was highly likely that arts and culture will be ignored – because the politicians would argue that the primary needs were to address apartheid’s major legacies in education, healthcare, housing, employment and the like. For arts and culture to feature, it was up to us to place it on the agenda. So we formed the National Arts Coalition, the first time that an organisation that crossed ideological lines had come into being (not only within the progressive sector where black consciousness organisations and non-racial organisations had seldom worked together, but also between anti-apartheid cultural formations and cultural institutions that had been supported by the apartheid government). While we had been enemies (at least ideologically) during the apartheid era, we began to say that we now needed to come together to assert our independent interests as the arts and culture sector as it was likely that our respective “political sugar daddies” will be part of a new government that would serve interests other than ours. If we were serious about being part of a new democracy, then, as a sector, we had the right to shape policies, structures and strategies that would directly affect our sector, and to do this, we needed to have a strong, organised voice that would assert a politically-independent agenda. I was elected General Secretary of the National Arts Coalition, which was basically the role of national coordinator, or driver. We undertook research into international cultural policies, particularly in democratic contexts, so that by the time the elections were held in 1994 we had fully-fledged proposals for a post-apartheid arts and culture dispensation.

After the 1994 elections, we had a Government of National Unity with three parties that had won more than 10% of the vote entitled to cabinet positions. Each Minister was allowed to appoint two “Special Advisers” to help set up new departments and to develop policy for their respective areas, given that each ministry basically inherited an apartheid civil service. With the profile that we had developed by that time as the National Arts Coalition and my position in it as the Secretary General, the new Minister responsible for arts and culture (he was also responsible for science and technology) appointed me as one of his advisers.

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While many of the organisations that comprised and led the Coalition had been in alliance with the ANC while it was banned, when we formed the National Coalition, we took a very firm non-partisan approach. So, when I was approached to be an adviser to the Minister, I went to the Coalition and asked for their guidance, as firstly, the Minister came from one of the junior political partners – the Inkatha Freedom Party – which had been part of the apartheid establishment; and secondly, this was a kind of political appointment, and I was the Secretary General of a non-partisan Coalition. The leadership said that the very reason we [the National Coalition] exist is to influence government policy, so that I had access to the Minister, we could not ask for a more influential position. And so that's how I got to fill that position till the Cabinet adopted the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage in 1996 – the first post-apartheid cultural policy that still stands today. A few years later, I left that position and returned to play a role within civil society – as the excellent policies that had been developed were being poorly implemented.

JV: The history of the apartheid struggle is well-known, but what is not so well-known is the cultural dimension of that history, and the politics of apartheid-era cultural production?

MvG: As with colonialism, apartheid also had a "cultural" premise: it was that because ethnic groups had different languages, belief systems, values, and so on, they needed to be kept apart, as having them in the same place would be a recipe for conflict. Apartheid was essentially an economic system that benefited the white minority through the exploitation of black people in a cheap labour system; but the way that it functioned was through a 'divide-and-rule' strategy, rooted in this "cultural" premise. Thus, if you were of Zulu origin, you would be required to live in a particular "homeland"; if you were Sotho, you would be located in a different homeland, and so on.

In this way, the white minority came to own 87% of the land, while 13% was divided up between the different black ethnic groups as their "homelands", with the farcical idea that these places would assume political independence and provide the context for black people to exercise their political rights, that is, without having any claim to white-owned South Africa.

The apartheid government essentially established a cultural infrastructure for the white community. Each of the four provinces then (we have nine now) had a Performing Arts Council, a huge multi-theatre complex, and a mandate to present opera, classical music, ballet, contemporary dance and theatre, in English and Afrikaans, which were the official languages of the time.

These particular institutions were governed by boards appointed by the state, so that they ensured the political and cultural hegemony within these institutions of the apartheid state. So, for example, black people were initially excluded from attending these institutions and from performing on the stages, so that even when such "petty apartheid" was removed in later years these institutions were then boycotted by black people. The anti-apartheid cultural movement was generally supported by international funding; progressive artists refused to take funding from the state or "workers' blood money" from the private sector. There were many expressions of anti-apartheid theatre – music, poetry, visual art, and so on – through the 1960s and 1970s, but it was in the 1980s that this movement took on a particularly organised form.

In 1983, the apartheid government introduced the "tri-cameral constitution", an attempt to co-opt "coloured" and "Indian" people into the formerly whites-only political system, and so to create an additional buffer against the political aspirations of the black African majority. This inspired the formation of the United Democratic Front, a broad coalition of civil society forces sympathetic to the banned ANC, to resist this constitution. With this came the intensification of the anti-apartheid struggle both internally and internationally with the gathering of momentum of the disinvestment and sanctions campaigns against the apartheid state. Against this background, the international cultural boycott grew legs, along with the sports boycott, the arms boycott, the oil boycott, academic boycott, and so on. This resulted in the establishment of internal cultural organisations to advise those in exile about which South African artists to boycott internationally, and which to promote as part of raising awareness about the evils of the apartheid system. Then, in the mid-eighties, because of the levels of internal resistance, a state of emergency was imposed, banning a range of organisations and thousands of leaders and activists were detained without trial for

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extended periods.

In that context, culture and the arts became a shield behind which politics began to re-emerge. So instead of the traditional mass rallies to commemorate important dates in the political calendar like June 16 (Soweto students uprisings) or May Day (Workers' Day), there were cultural events, poetry evenings, soccer matches with anti-apartheid music and theatre during half-time, "people's creative spaces".... funding that had been available from international sources for general political activity, with such activities being banned, was now channelled to the arts so that a new set of arts organisations emerged: these included the Congress of South African Writers, Film and Allied Workers Organisation, Performing Arts Workers Equity, the Association of Community Arts Centres. These formations represented in an ad hoc way the internal cultural wing of the ANC (though there were other cultural organisations aligned to the black consciousness movement as well).

There was an incredible amount of anti-apartheid cultural activity at the time – music, theatre, poster-making, graffiti, visual art, literature – and then, in the midst of the state of emergency, a progressive arts festival was to be held in December 1986. It was an attempt by anti-apartheid cultural forces to say to the repressive state, that despite your attempts at suppression we are still alive and well. This was also to serve as a morale booster to activists and organisations that had been decimated and demoralised by the detentions and bannings.

I was appointed as the full-time organiser for this Festival. About 3 days before it was due to open in Cape Town, the Festival was banned by the security police, as it was deemed to be a threat to national security, with some of those in the leadership of the Festival being detained by the security police. In a funny way, the banning of the festival also increased the credibility of arts and culture within the broader political movement. If the state sees it fit to ban an arts festival, then there must be something more to that than just song and dance to liven up a political rally.

After the Festival was banned I went back to university to do a Drama Honours degree in directing at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where I had done my undergraduate degree a few years before. At that time, with apartheid job reservation, jobs in the arts were really only available to white people. I

was classified "coloured" by the apartheid authorities, which meant that I was due to attend the University of the Western Cape (UWC), an institution established by the state for "coloured" people. I wanted to attend the University of Cape Town though, as I believed I would obtain a better education, but for that to happen I had to do a subject at UCT not offered at the University of the Western Cape. And for me, that subject was drama. In the year that I got a permit to attend this "white" university, the authorities determined that the permit subject had to be pursued as a major, (i.e. rather than as an entry into UCT, with students dropping the permit subject after the first year). At the time, this was pretty onerous, as I would not have chosen to do drama as a major – despite my interest in it – yet later it stood me in good stead as I would not have been able to do the Honours Degree had I not done an undergraduate degree majoring in Drama. After completing the degree, I was invited by the Community Arts Project (CAP) to run a theatre course there. CAP provided access to training in the arts, particularly for black people who may not have had the academic qualifications or resources to attend tertiary institutions.

So yes, there certainly was a lot of anti-apartheid cultural activity and there were real synergies between the anti-apartheid cultural movement and the broader anti-apartheid struggle, since both had to do with the struggle for freedom of expression. The apartheid authorities had a censorship board that banned literature, music, films, theatre and the like, which were deemed to be critical of the apartheid authorities.

YH: If I may interject here, the ANC had a cultural desk and had mobilised culture, as you say, very effectively. But when political change finally arrived, there was a tendency not to use culture as a 'political weapon' any longer. It seems to me, that immediately after the 1994 elections, theatre went two ways, almost polarised – what we may call 'entertainment' (with no confrontation or political engagement) and 'theatre' proper. Political engagement remained to a lesser degree at community level, but it was only by the mid-2000s that this issue really began to be addressed. In 2006, for example, your position was a radical one, you protested against cultural conformity, you openly discussed the place of protest in the post-apartheid

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where some felt this was provocative and potentially undermined the new constitution and perceived consensus. You remained impassioned, and insisted that conditions existed that ought to be protested. So where do you position the contemporary artist in South Africa now? To what degree have the older [segregated] institutions of culture – like the theatres – been de-constructed?

MvG: What was interesting after 1994 was the many people within the arts – and in theatre in particular – who were happy to see the back of apartheid, and yet somewhat self-pityingly said “what do we have to write about now that apartheid is gone?” I could not believe that they were staying in the same country as me, because from where I looked, South Africa was actually a much more interesting place for artists *after* the demise of apartheid. But then, we knew the narrative; we knew who the good guys were, and we knew who the bad guys were. There was a clear good and bad, right and wrong, black and white.

Now, though, we are a society in transition; there is so much more complexity and irony and contradiction to explore. This country was a gift to a playwright intent on exploring what the “personal is political” (a refrain from the apartheid era) meant in contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa. This was the path that I took.

Despite us having gone through a historic election in 1994, our country didn't automatically change overnight. In fact, what has happened over the last 21 years is that our country has become more unequal; it has more poverty now than it did in 1994; there are more people who are unemployed now than was the case then. Average life expectancy was 62 in the dying days of apartheid, but because of the ANC government's *denialism* during the Mbeki presidency, life expectancy declined to around 50.

So for me as a writer, as an artist, as a social justice activist, there is at least as much for us to be writing about now in terms of social justice issues as there was during the apartheid era. For as long as the majority of people are still living below the poverty line, for as long as you have unemployment sitting at between 24 and 34%, for as long as ordinary people do not have access to quality education, health care and standards of living that affirm their human dignity, there are social justice themes to explore and injustices to interrogate.

But other artists have chosen different paths.

Many white artists, for example, feel that despite there being injustice, they have no right to criticise the black government now, as they were beneficiaries of apartheid. So for them to critique government would now be inappropriate. And they would most likely be called racists, which is a contemporary form of censorship, resulting in self-censorship.

Post-1994, white Afrikaans-speakers – having lost political power at the elections – were keen to ensure that their language, and their culture would be sustained. So, having acquired the economic means under apartheid, they established a range of festivals that have become the primary producers and distributors of a new and really amazing Afrikaans theatre. Unfortunately, many people – black people in particular – do not have access to this theatre because they don't speak Afrikaans, or because Afrikaans still carries the political baggage of the apartheid era. The audiences at these festivals, in turn, do not have access to the black experience or the stories being told in English mainly but also in indigenous languages by black theatre makers. So, in an ironic twist, there are new forms of apartheid in our theatre culture in post-apartheid South Africa.

Then there is the category of theatre practitioner who has decided that this is *our* government, we voted for them and we are not going to be critiquing them. To be critical would be to give ammunition to “the enemy” who would love to see a black government failing. Black theatre makers are also, now – for the first time – able to access public resources to support their art, and black folk can now run the country's major subsidised theatres, which places them in compromising positions: What kind of theatre can we do that may address some of our challenges while still being funded by the state? (This may have been the case a decade or so ago, but increasingly there are indeed independent and subsidised black voices that are assuming highly critical positions in relation to the current regime).

I think the overriding reality, though, is that most theatre makers are dependent on box office income to pay the rent, put food on the table and so on. Many have decided then to do work that doesn't alienate the existing audience. A few years ago I did some research into why it was, that given our history of political theatre, there were so few mainstream plays that dealt with the pandemic of HIV/AIDs, a pandemic that at one point was claiming on average

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a thousand lives each day! There were many “community” theatre pieces dealing with the theme, but one could count the number of mainstream plays on one hand. The overwhelming response from my fellow theatre makers – emerging from the research – was that they did not do theatre on this theme as it would alienate their (primarily white) audiences, for whom HIV/AIDS was not a direct issue of concern. I suppose this is understandable within the current policy context – with its neo-liberal, market-oriented creative industries approach, where theatre makers are now dependent upon the box office; they tend to give the market what they believe the market wants. Yet so, stories which speak to the experiences of the majority of people are ignored, and what gets staged perpetuates the inequities of our society.

YH: *A lot of interesting work is happening in what we call ‘found spaces’. Last year I saw amazing theatre in church halls, where one pay what one can, with people giving 50 cents or 50 rand, or whatever they want. There is very interesting work being done by young and often female artists, which is not making it beyond these spaces or being programmed in festivals. Who is ‘controlling’ the festivals? Who is included, and who is not? I think that ‘marginal’ theatre is no longer just at community theatre levels, but also impacts on interesting new young artists. Yet, the economics of culture mean that they have to keep their day jobs.*

MvG: Absolutely! About 10 years ago, I had the opportunity to do plays in three different theatres in the same year and I thought at the time I would never have a better opportunity to see if I could make it as a full-time theatre maker as then. Now, I had worked in policy and I knew that it was just about impossible to do, but I thought, let me do it anyway. I think I’m still recovering from that decision....Since then, I’ve always had a full time job (in which I’ve mostly had to raise my own salary) and worked in theatre on a very part-time, almost hobby-like basis. From 2011 to the end of 2014, I was in the very fortunate position of being the Associate Playwright for Artscape, where they agreed to produce at least one of my plays each year. I wrote, they invested in the work and took the financial risks, which was really a very privileged position to be in.

You asked the question about how the theatre spaces have changed. Post-1994, transformation has been one of the biggest features of the subsidised

theatre sector. With apartheid having primarily benefited white practitioners, the process of transformation, with its moral and political imperatives, saw changes to the governance and management structures of state-subsidised institutions so that these now better reflected the demographics of our society with regard to “race”, gender, disability, etc. While this was necessary, many people appointed to management and governance positions weren’t necessarily the most informed about what those institutions were required to do, and they were appointed at a time when these institutions were also facing their most severe financial cuts in their histories. So, “transformation” took on a very formulaic approach: how many black people are in the play, or in the ballet, or in the musical? And so on. This approach to transformation was not peculiar to the cultural sector, and the irony of this superficial demographic transformation of institutions has actually compromised substantial transformation – in terms of the delivery of services to, and changing the lives of, ordinary people, those now tasked with such delivery do not necessarily have the experience and skills to do so.

The impact of this in our subsidised theatres was massive, with the State Theatre for example being shut down and more than 450 people losing their jobs. The former performing arts councils still assume a large part of the national budget, and they are not the nimble decentralised institutions that our country really requires right now to deliver theatre to all our people. We need more community arts centres and support for theatre happening in people’s homes and in backyards, etc., but there is little policy vision – and thus limited funding – for this at the moment.

YH: *This is certainly interesting, and space is so important – public space. I am concerned with how performance can affect the city, open new spaces, create theatre with very little or no technical engineering – and bring the local and the international communities into dialogue: festivals have been instrumental in this. There are around forty festivals currently in South Africa.*

MvG: One of my major criticisms of post-apartheid theatre spaces in South Africa is that we now have these nine provinces, as opposed to the four under apartheid, but the subsidised spaces are still in the

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major cities rather than the less-resourced provinces. In fact, in Gauteng, our country's richest province, they now have three nationally-subsidised theatres, while in five others there are none. So what's beginning to happen, is that over the last 5 years or so people are using local infrastructure to distribute the arts. We are working with a project in a local township for example, where the lounge areas of ten houses also serve as art galleries for local artists. There's the Voorkmerfees, (Front Room Festival, in English), about an hour from CapeTown, which takes place during the first weekend of every September. They use the lounges of people's houses for this festival. As a punter, you buy a ticket for a particular route, and there are seven routes that happen simultaneously. Everyone arrives at 5 o'clock on a Friday and Saturday, and 12 o'clock on a Saturday and Sunday, with the festival usually sold out before it starts. No-one knows what they will see. Two minibus taxis collect the first 20-30 people in each route, take them to a house, (generally located in the poorer parts of town to help spread the benefits of tourism to these areas). Patrons squeeze into the front room of the house and for the next 25-30 minutes, you are entertained by a stand-up comedian. Then you get collected and are dropped off at a second house, where you may see a string quartet; and thirty minutes later you are taken to the final house on your route to listen to, for example, a poet. In 90-120 minutes, you see things that you might not have ordinarily bought tickets for; and you will see it in people's houses.

So local spaces, church halls, community halls, peoples' houses – there's a whole national movement that has jazz appreciation sessions on a Sunday afternoon in the townships where they play the CDs of African and international jazz musicians. "Let's not wait for government to deliver infrastructure", seems to be the approach, with people finding creative ways to access and enjoy the arts. Then there's also an increasing amount of art in the public space with festivals like Infecting the City hosted by the Africa Centre taking place each year, with performances where people are, rather than people having to go to theatres to access performances.

JV: This is heartening to hear, but is it not true that institutions possess a form of political agency that is not available to improvised and provisional

creative production, and with such agency comes opportunities for generating discourse, engaging in negotiation and working with the politics of national cultural production. This is not possible with the kind of creativity you have mentioned here (the 'informal economy' of culture, if you like). How then do we negotiate the apparent contradiction in the evident significance, energy and emotive power of such small-scale, often improvised, art on the 'margins' and the global discourses of development – with UNESCO, debates around the future of the 2005 Convention on cultural diversity, post-2015 policies for culture and sustainability, and the empowerment that comes from solidarity with international movements? Tell us about the work of Arterial Network, which is surely significant in relation to this issue.

MvG: This is an interesting issue: I'll give some background. The Arterial Network was formed in 2007 on Gorée Island, which once served as a centre of the slave trade in Senegal. There were about 60 cultural activists from only 14 African countries at that meeting..Rather than complain about this, we decided to form a network across national, language and other boundaries, and find international and regional partners to assist us as we took responsibility for our own lives and artistic practices. The network now has members from just about every African country. I no longer serve in the leadership of Arterial Network, but concentrate on the African Arts Institute where we build capacity for Africa's creative sector and engage in cultural policy issues at national, continental and international levels.

The reality is that many artists, creative enterprises and practitioners are not concerned about policy issues; they believe that it doesn't apply to affect them, and yet, it does. So, as an institute, and with our links to national, continental and international networks, we are constantly engaging in advocacy around changing policy, changing funding mechanisms, addressing issues in which government is intervening, to the detriment of the sector. And, we also keep the arts and culture community informed of their rights and of possibilities afforded them through international and national cultural policy protocols. As we are located and active within the sector, we are able to engage in policy-making rooted in real conditions and praxis, rather than in government buildings.

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JV: For you, what is the significance of the 2005 UNESCO Convention? Is it a 'living' document – and does it offer a certain legal weight to the political aspirations of 'live' culture?

MvG: Again: a background summary: after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of our bipolar world, free trade became the dominant approach to international economic relations. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) emphasised the removal of barriers to trade, allowing the "free market" to prevail. Governments could no longer impose measures – like import tariffs – to protect their local industries against cheaper goods from elsewhere. So, for example in the case of South Africa, we had a thriving clothing manufacturing industry, but when we signed up to the WTO our government could not prevent retailers from importing much cheaper goods from China. The consequence was that our clothing industry contracted and thousands of jobs were lost.

When it came to trade in arts and cultural goods and services, countries like Canada and France argued that if "the market" was allowed to prevail, then this would lead to greater cultural homogenisation. They argued that – as opposed to, say, toothpaste, cars and T-shirts – cultural goods, like audio-visual materials, films, television, literature and music, are embedded values, ideas and world views. Thus, if we simply allowed Hollywood, for example, to dominate the world through the market because they have superior resources, consumers will imbibe the values and worldviews embedded in these products, so that we will begin to see the world in the way that Americans see it. This led to the idea for an international convention that would provide countries with a *legal basis* to implement policy and other measures to protect their own creative industries, and to ensure that their citizens had access to a variety of cultural products. Examples of measures would be screen or music quotas to ensure local movies and music are broadcast, which in turn would also help with the growth of these and related cultural industries.

African governments signed up to this Convention after its adoption in 2005, even though it hardly had any creative industries to speak about, and, as the UN Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] has shown, the continent's share of the global creative economy is less than one per cent. But they signed up because of the promises made in

the Convention, such as the establishment of a fund for cultural diversity to support the creative industries in the global south, the call for wealthy nations to invest in creative industries within the global south, and to provide preferential access to global north markets for creative goods and services from the global south.

However, the fund – the International Fund for Cultural Diversity [IFCD] – only attracted less than 10 million \$US, which is less than the marketing budget for an average American movie. It was and is as if wealthy countries, once they got the right to have this convention to be able to defend their own industries, forgot about the rest of the world upon whom they were dependent for having the Convention ratified.

After the adoption of the Convention though, "9/11" happened, and suddenly the notion of cultural diversity was disfavoured. The security of countries in the global north became of paramount concern. Cultural diplomacy and intercultural dialogue replaced "cultural diversity" as themes of the day, and Africa – and global south countries generally – often are the recipients of such policies and themes that are created elsewhere, because of conditions that exist there rather than because of the conditions in the global South. We embrace these policies because they often come with resources, and with the lack of support from our own governments, we panel-beat our projects to align with the latest cultural policy theme in order to access their concomitant resources.

The Convention has good political content though, as it points to the use of arts and culture as a means of "soft power". I attended a conference on cultural mobility earlier this year in New York, and one of the speakers said that within the American military there is more money for arts and culture than within their national endowment for the arts. This is, in part, because the military recognises that it cannot win people's hearts and minds simply through bombs and bullets; it employs arts and cultural strategies to attempt to win over citizens in Afghanistan, in Iraq, etc.

Soft power is exerted through the mass media, through the shaping of people's consciousness through CNN and similar international media outlets, as well as through movies and television programming; this is where the contestation of ideas, worldviews, and values takes place, and I don't think

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that African governments have bought sufficiently into that argument, because for me, that would be a much more convincing argument for investment in the creative industries than the supposed economic benefits of such investment.

The truth, is that Africa does not have a problem with economic growth. We've had GDP growth rates of between 4 and 11% in most African countries since the mid-1990s.

YH: *Arterial Network has engaged in 'arts watch' work, as well as networking across the continent, and acting as a policymaking and debating platform. One significant aspect of this network is the extent to which it has given women an opportunity to find their own roles in cultural leadership. This is a huge issue on the African continent, particularly in Kenya. How much do you think women are engaged in discussions around cultural policy, given the obvious demands of their domestic roles? Their place in the theatre is often maintained at the level of actress, rather than writing or directing – never mind policy. Where are the women sitting in this arena?*

MVG: From its inception, Arterial Network pursued the principle of at least 50% participation of women in our training programmes, in our leadership, in our staffing. The first two presidents of Arterial Network were both women (the first from Zambia, the second from Ghana) and it is only with the third election that a man (Moroccan) was elected President. In our office at the time that I worked as Secretary General, two of us were males, the rest of the core of seven staff were women. It's by no means perfect; there is still a real struggle to empower women in leadership positions in the African cultural space, but there are real attempts to do this.

YH: *But that is unusual.*

MVG: It is unusual, but it's precisely because of the conditions in the continent that you mention, where more traditional cultural practices disempower women, that if we are serious about the Millennium Development Goals – which includes the empowerment of women – that we have to be engaged in this arena of work.

I have been fortunate to travel across our continent and to facilitate various training courses and I can assure you that there are some amazing people in civil society, and many of these are women – powerful, dynamic and energetic leaders. Our

continent suffers from incredibly poor, self-serving political leadership. With different, better leadership, we would – I'm convinced – be a quite different, quite amazing continent, and women leadership could probably provide this difference.

In South Africa, our artists complain all the time, and yet our situation is probably 10 times better than anywhere else; to see what people do with what they have – the creativity, the commitment – is mind-blowing and humbling. Huge amounts of work still need to get done; it's a huge continent with 54 countries and one billion people. To bring about change, there needs to be vision and political will and then the resources will follow.

YH: *So, the Arterial Network is creating a model that can be implemented in other spaces and creative places, with peer-to-peer workshops and the growing importance of peer-to-peer learning, developing the skills of leadership for cultural policy and creating art. This is necessary for women.*

MVG: When I arrived here on Sunday, I opened my email and there was a message from a woman in Tanzania; she had been through one of our training courses and now she has been appointed to coordinate the African chapter of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies [IFACCA]. She and two other women who have been through a training course we ran (on the 2005 UNESCO Convention) have been appointed as new members of the expert facility on the Convention. She was writing to thank us for the training provided, and the opportunities that it opened up as a consequence. This is what makes doing the kind of work I do worthwhile; it's the people on the continent. It's neither about pessimism nor optimism. It's not this 'African rising' narrative or that 'African the bottomless pit' narrative. It is all of these and many things in between that make it challenging, exciting and fulfilling, to work there.

A question from the audience: *what is your assessment of the way theatre and arts practice are being used to engage people who are not interested in culture? I am not talking about 'theatre for education', but the role of theatre for cultural education and participation.*

MVG: There's a movement at the moment around arts education within the school context. One strand of this is about learners growing "citizen attributes" –

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creative problem-solving, self-confidence, etc. – through engaging in the arts (music, drama, visual arts, etc). Another strand is that promoted by UNESCO's *Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist*, which speaks about arts education as a means of vocational training from primary school level. I would support both strands, as they help with human development on the one hand and with growing "art astuteness" on the other (people who will grow into informed audiences for the arts). Too often, though, it is people who have had access to more privileged forms of education, or who have disposable income, who are best able to access the arts and the benefits of engaging with these.

I think that a good example of the way in which the arts can engage people is the painting – *The Spear* – by an artist in South Africa [Brett Murray] a couple of years ago.² You may have heard about it; it was very controversial. The artist hosted an exhibition entitled "Hail to the Thief" bemoaning the high levels of corruption within our country, and berating the ANC for having sold out its liberation ideals. The art works were very critical, provocative and satirical, but one in particular was of the South African President in a Lenin-like pose, but with his genitals exposed. The male organ, of course, has quite often been used as a symbol of power, of rape and plunder. While the art work was safely in the gallery, no-one took notice. But after a photograph of the painting was published in a newspaper, along with a review of the exhibition, it caused the biggest outcry that an artwork has ever provoked in our country. Many in the political elite were outraged; the artist received death threats and had to move out of his home, the ANC led a march on the gallery, demanding that the work be destroyed, and other things. But over a 2-3 week period, there was the most incredible discourse around culture, tradition, modernity and freedom of expression.

It's precisely this experience that led us as the African Arts Institute to engage in public art interventions – to move the arts out of the theatres and galleries and into the public domain. This advanced issues to do with human rights and

² It was exhibited at the Goodman gallery in Johannesburg. It depicted South African President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed, in a pose reminiscent of Lenin (insofar as it cites Victor Ivanov poster's *Lenin Lived, Lenin is Alive, Lenin Will Live*). The painting triggered a defamation lawsuit by Zuma's party, the African National Congress (ANC), and was vandalized on 22 May 2012.

democracy. So, the second anniversary of the Marikana massacre where 34 miners were shot dead by police in 2012, we engaged in re-naming of streets in the Cape Town CBD (central business district) after the slain miners, and we dressed up monuments in the uniforms of miners so as to confront people and raise debates about our society in transition. It's nowhere near what should be happening, but we're hoping that this will lead increasingly to more artists being creative and active in the public space for education and participation purposes, with the latter allowing the audience to engage creatively with the works too.

YH: *There was a Zulu artist from Durban (Doung) whose performance in Cape Town – involving painting a pink line along Cape Town's roads to trace the underground Camissa river that runs off the mountain to the sea – was allowed only if he agreed to remove all the traces of the art away afterwards. It 'infected' the city: even the colour pink was seen by some as problematic, as it evoked gay discourse.*

MvG: Yes, this was a performance as part of the *Infecting the City* festival. This is a festival that is endorsed and sanctioned by the City – but which does not mean that the items that constitute the festival are all safe and self-consciously aware of the need not to alienate the City. But when we did the Marikana public art interventions, we didn't apply to the city for permission, because we knew that they wouldn't give it to us. So we engaged with it as a kind of guerrilla activity, putting up the street signs early in the morning so that people encountered these on their way to work the next morning.

One has to make strategic choices about the role you want to play, and how to engage the city and its citizens through art. It is still a kind of activism; you may not get detained without trial for six months, as was the case during apartheid, but there could still be consequences like charges for damage to state property, not being allocated public funds, not being invited to be part of official arts exhibitions abroad, and so on.

JV: *To concluding this interview, please tell us what your current aspirations are.*

MvG: I suppose it's to end where we started... that I would continue but become a better social justice activist through my theatre work, through my work as an arts administrator and cultural policy activist,

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and to do this at a local level, at a national level, within the African continent and at an international level. And importantly, I would be identifying, training and mentoring younger theatre and cultural activists, all with a strong sense of social justice.