

Afrapix: Some Questions

Email interview with Omar Badsha in 2009 conducted by Marian Nur Goni for a Master's Thesis.

First, I'd like to ask you if the Culture and Resistance Festival held in Gaborone in 1982 and Afrapix setting up are linked?

Yes. Afrapix and the Botswana Festival were linked. In some accounts, on the formation of Afrapix, it is argued that Afrapix was formed as a result of the Botswana Festival - that is not true. I remember seeing a document / a report which claimed that Afrapix was established by the ANC – this is also not true. Some people in Afrapix were underground members of the movement and/or sympathisers, but Afrapix was an initiative that arose out of our own internal needs and independent of the political movement, but I am sure that Paul Weinberg or some other member would have discussed the formation of Afrapix with people in Botswana. I discussed it with people in Durban.

Afrapix was formally launched early in 1982. What Botswana did was to act as a platform for Afrapix and other progressive photographers to meet and develop closer working relationships.

Afrapix members were closely involved in the organising of the Festival and in organising the photographic component of the Festival. Paul Weinberg and I were part of the internal organising network. We were in charge of making the arrangements for contacting photographers, collecting work and sending it to Botswana. Paul was involved with an organising group in Johannesburg and I was involved in a group around Dikobe Ben Martins in Natal.

When we first met, in late 1981, to discuss the need to establish an archive and photographers collective at a meeting that I initiated, in Johannesburg, we discussed the proposed Botswana Festival and saw it as an opportunity to build a broader network. When Afrapix was formally constituted in early 1982, it, as a collective, took over the arrangements for the Festival. Paul Weinberg was a member of the committee which made the selection for the exhibition, which, by the way, constituted the largest visual component of the Festival programme. Afrapix members were also involved in contacting photographers and other visual artists to submit work for the festival.

It must be understood, at that time, we did not discuss our relationship to the ANC. That was not done. When you worked under the political conditions that we found ourselves in, we did some background checks on people but did not question peoples' actual involvement. We knew broadly where people belonged but did not openly discuss peoples' links with the exile movement. Paul and I did discuss what our relationships to the movement should be and the need to ensure that the collective was not infiltrated by police agents, but the recruitment of members was largely based on people whom we knew and could vouch for their political reliability.

Yes. Paul Weinberg and I took a decision to serve the media/propaganda needs of the ANC and the broader anti apartheid movement - but we did so with the understanding that for security reasons we would supply the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) and the ANC indirectly through an independent international agency. We did not discuss this formally in an open meeting. People understood how our pictures were being used and by

whom, but that was not the only outlet for our work.

The panel discussion, at the Culture and Resistance Conference, was made up of Peter McKenzie, Lesley Lawson both of whom were members of Afrapix. Peter presented a paper on the role of photography and photographers under apartheid. The views were his own, we read the paper prior to its presentation and most of us endorsed it. The paper reflected some of our views but not all. At least four members of Afrapix attended the conference - Paul Weinberg, Lesley Lawson, Peter McKenzie, Jeeva Rajgopaul and Myron Peters. I was unable to attend because I was one of those who for many years was denied a passport to travel.

How did you, founder members, meet and decide to create Afrapix? Were you all already photographers or some of you take the camera to be involved in this movement against the government? Can you please give me some information about the situation of that time and the past career of the members?

Late in 1981 I visited Johannesburg and discussed the idea of establishing a photographic archive and a group to train people to document the struggle and police brutality against protesters, with Lloyd Spenser who worked at Raven Press, the publishers of Staff rider magazine.

Lloyd knew other photographers in Johannesburg who he felt would be interested in my proposal and agreed to convene a meeting. A day or two Lloyd Spenser, Lesley Lawson, Paul Weinberg, Mxolisi Mayo, Bidy Partridge and I met at the Raven Press, Staffrider offices. The only person who I knew at that meeting was Lesley Lawson. I knew her as a student at Natal University who had attended a work camp that the late Rick Turner, I and others ran at Phoenix, Gandhi's first settlement in South Africa.

When the idea of establishing a photographers' collective and agency was accepted, Paul and Lesley were asked to explore the possibility of finding office space etc. They went to see Bernard Spong, the head of the media division of the South African Council of Churches. He agreed to give us space and other administrative assistance - in return we were to provide them with photographs. That was how Afrapix, the agency, got off the ground.

Paul and I drew up a one page document which was Afrapix's aim and objectives. We were advised to set up a closed corporation and Paul and I were the two directors.

Almost all the members of the first group were politically active, and almost all of us were involved in or worked closely with the alternative media and independent progressive educational or cultural organisations. All the white male members had done their military service but were then involved in avoiding the call and camps. Two of the people closely involved with Afrapix later on, Billy Paddock and Dave Hartman were conscientious objectors. Billy was sentenced to nearly two years imprisonment and Dave was charged but managed to leave the country and went into exile. Lesley and Bidy were involved in the South African Council on Higher Education (SACHED). Paul was active in the Open School which was established by the Institute of Race Relations. I came from a student and trade union movement. Jeeva Rajgopaul and Myron Peters were initially Black Consciousness and later Congress activists from Durban. Jeeva was a fulltime teacher and Myron worked as a librarian. Peter McKenzie, Cedric Nunn and Rafique Mayet, all from Durban, were politically aware - influenced by the wave of the Black Consciousness movement but not active in any political structures. We all were involved in training young photographers and or artists and

this informed the character and ethos of Afrapix.

It was therefore natural that one of the aims was to promote documentary photography and the training of young people especially young black photographers. We all came from a collective, cooperative ethos and so it was natural that we would establish a collective where all decisions would be democratically arrived at. We were committed to education and so it was natural that as photographers we would be interesting in ploughing all our energies and resources to promote documentary photography – and find ways to use our photography to reflect our abhorrence and opposition to racial oppression and minority rule. All of us at that first meeting other than Lloyd were photographers.

Afrapix was a photographers' collective and an agency. The collective organised exhibitions, workshops and the agency's job was to market and sell the work of the collective. The agency was registered as a company with Paul Weinberg and myself as directors. The head office was in Johannesburg, headed by Paul and I ran the Durban office which was essentially my Darkroom. Later we opened an office in Cape Town and we had members in the Eastern Cape.

The agency had a fulltime coordinator/ secretary with Peter McKenzie as the first full time coordinator, after which we had a number of secretaries / office coordinators and at one stage a fulltime marketing person.

Initially we agreed that Paul should run the agency and I would be in charge of exhibitions, publications and training. In practice the exhibition part was shared by us as a group..

Around each office the photographers would meet and work out assignments, discuss the building of the library etc. I had very little to do with the day to day running of the agency or the Johannesburg office because I was based in Durban and after 1987 in Cape Town. But I travelled to Johannesburg from time to time and that is how we kept contact.

The collective met once a year or at specially convened meetings to discuss progress, finances, exhibitions etc. This meeting coincided with the annual Staffrider exhibition, a joint project of Afrapix and Staffrider magazine. The collective ran workshops, established a magazine, organised travelling exhibitions, participated in conferences etc. The collective exhibition programme was one of the largest independent ventures in the country and the exhibitions brought like minded people together and had a profound influence on the development of photography and documentary photography in particular.

Many people labelled us as the leading proponents of “struggle photographers” now that term needs to be unpacked because it implied that all what we did was document the struggle, meetings and street battles. While we were part of a broad revolutionary movement which wanted to overthrow apartheid and replace it with a state that was non racial and democratic - some of us also believed that we would create a society where the artistic potential of every citizen would be realised.

Some of us were also grappling with developing a new aesthetic, as to how people and black people and communities in particular were represented. My own work and first two books were a response to these issues.

The white liberal establishment and photographers, many of whom we worked with were

very quick to criticise us. But what they forget is that all of us, were very young or self taught or novices unlike them, whereas people like Goldblatt and others had three decades of experience and many doors opened to them because of their colour and class backgrounds and had the luxury of having work which cross subsidised their projects - talk about race and privilege which is an issue that is not discussed at all by the arts and academic establishment, even today. But they are quick to criticise us for taking on national oppression.

Coming back to Afrapix, at the end of the day we developed an organisation that straddled two worlds and reflected the collective and broad anti apartheid ethos of the time. There was always a creative tension between the needs of an agency and a collective with political goals. We were able to constructively deal with this until around 1989 / 1990 when these tensions became very sharp. Paul, Guy Tillim and Steve Hilton-Barber started a move to break away to form their own agency. This translated itself as the tension between the professionals and the original aims of the collective. They broke away and what was left was a group around Cedric, Santu Mofokeng, Rafs, and others, which continued for a year before the collective formally disbanded in 1991.

What kind of discussion did you have about photography? I mean, for example, did you have discussion about what a good photography should be to move people, to let them try to understand what was going on in South Africa? What kind of aesthetic choices did you take?

We did meet and discuss each other's work but this was not done in a systematic way. People learnt by looking at each other's essays and books and books like the *Cordoned Heart*, essays like the *Domestic Workers* by Lawson, *Imijondolo* and the work of Goldblatt and others. Then there was a slow stream of books that came into the country which also played a role in informing peoples' practice. Some of the photographers were able to travel abroad and this exposed them to what was happening especially in the United Kingdom.

There was a great deal of one to one discussions amongst photographers. On the other as the agency we struggled with the issue of quality photographs – we had people who had been trained at art and photography schools and others picked up skills in workshops. So there was unevenness in the quality of work.

Besides your common activity and your political ideas against apartheid, was there something else that could really linked you together?

Photography and the need to tell our stories.

Who were the main interlocuteurs of the collective?

Other than Paul and myself, I would say that Lesley Lawson, Cedric Nunn, Santu Mofokeng, Guy Tillim, Chris Ledochowski, Paul Grendon were the, main interlocuters as you put it, and they continue to work as documentary photographers and produced work that is relevant and thought provoking.

How did the activity of the group change over the time, almost 10 years, isn't it?

There was a consistency in our activity – we just became better at what we did over time individually and collectively. There was the gap between those who had the ability to get assignments and were able to deliver quality work and those who plodded along. Then there

were people like Santu who had in a very short time developed into an extraordinary talented photographer. His real break came when he was employed by the Wits University History Project as a documentary photographer. This gave him the space to develop his skill as a documentary photographer without having to make a living chasing stories. The group started breaking up with the division between the professional and community or talented activists began to emerge. This coincided with South Africa beginning to become the story after the unbanning of the liberation organisations and the release of Mandela. These divisions like all the South African realities corresponded with the issues of race. The non racial character of Afrapix was skin deep. Individual advancement became paramount and so in a society where class corresponded with colour, many, but not all white members, split along lines of colour.

And finally, why did Afrapix stop its activity in 1991?

There were many reasons but the prime reason was the tension between those who were professional and who by now had become tired in carrying the newcomers and who wanted an agency which they believed would be more professional. There was a line between those who argued for a more professional organisation and those who argued for the continuation of the collective. While it may seem that the split was along racial lines, it was not so. Class and colour coincided but what motivated them to split I am not totally sure. The jury is still out on that one. I was not involved in Afrapix by then so I cannot say

What kind of legacy did Afrapix leave to young South-Africans, photographers or not?

By the end of the decade documentary photography had become a dominant photography force and largely due to the work done by Afrapix, Goldblatt and a few others. Photography was the most important vehicle for the struggle and also had a major impact on the rest of the visual art. Many of the young photographers in Afrapix went on to make a name locally and internationally and continue to do so and continue to inspire the new generation of photographers – you just have to see the work coming out of the Market photo workshops and other centres.

A proper assessment of the impact of the organisation still needs to be made but I think that the photography movement in the 1980's did break new grounds and changed the way people looked at our society. What is most significant is that the collective joined with others and produced a body of work outside the commercial media that is a remarkable record of the times. Some of the books and exhibitions broke new ground in how we now see our country and ourselves. More importantly the collective gave a handful of photographers the opportunity to grow and become confident as photographers. Some of them have made a major contribution to South African and world photography and culture.