Finding Voice
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Published by University of Michigan Press

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The story of Artist Proof Studio (APS) spans 25 years of building an arts organization. As for most community visual arts centers globally, it has had many challenges and achievements. The themes of this journey are, in many ways, the themes of discovering democracy in South Africa. After Nelson Mandela’s release in 1990,¹ the subsequent intense years of realigning a deeply divided society and designing one of the most forward-thinking constitutions in world history were a time of enormous creativity, characterized by an awakening to dream and conjure up a better future for all. This story parallels South Africa’s struggle toward healing and reconciliation, redress and resilience, and ubuntu and renewal, as well as issues of transformation, identity, citizenship, and agency. Each of these themes is evoked in this chapter through narratives of change, using the visual voices at APS to provide windows into South Africa’s transformational transitions.

This chapter also presents a methodology of change in the form of the Paper Prayers campaign. The story of Paper Prayers is set in the context of denialism and shame, resultant from the HIV and AIDS pandemic that had the potential for destroying so many of the gains of Mandela’s vision of a new South Africa. It focuses on the former president Thabo Mbeki’s period of AIDS denialism² and APS’s response to it. Paper Prayers started as a campaign of awareness but has since become a tool for advocacy and agency in building a unique role for the visual arts by showing how the arts are effective in engaging with social and health challenges.
Dreaming: A Story of Self and Finding “Us”

It is not often that one gets an opportunity to implement a dream. Since the late 1980s, when I was making artwork that addressed the oppressive state of emergency then prevailing in South Africa, I believed that printmaking and papermaking were artistic strategies or interventions that could make a difference to the lives of people in oppressed or impoverished communities. I was convinced that visual art could contribute—as music and dance has often done—to political change. In South Africa, during the years of apartheid, art had been unbalanced and distorted. White students learned only about Western European art, while black artists, forbidden from enrolling at South African universities, were only able to enroll in a few mission schools or rural community art centers, where their access to art historical resources was, at best, rudimentary.

In February 1990, on a television screen in Boston, I watched Nelson Mandela walk out of prison. I wanted to be part of building a post-apartheid South Africa. I sold my car and possessions, bought a French Tool etching press—the Rolls-Royce of studio presses—and took home my vision to start a studio in South Africa based on the professional model of the Artist Proof Studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I had been an apprentice for six years.

In the early 1990s, after Mandela’s release, anti-apartheid coalitions, together with the country’s nationalist government, were actively engaged in trying to address the extreme inequities resulting from the oppression of the apartheid years. Once a new, nonracial government, the African National Congress, was formed, it recognized that South Africa could only move forward if the nation as a whole reconciled with its tortured past. It was equally important to redress past iniquities and to strengthen the new democracy through civic engagement. Therefore, teaching at the fledgling APS became far more challenging than simply imparting technique. It was a process of mutual learning and exposure to our different experiences of both life and art.

Indeed, the major challenge that I and the founding artists faced during the first decade of APS’s existence was to address the insidious long-term effects of racism and dehumanization that impeded our efforts to address the lack of opportunities for artistic and educational training. Since the students and almost all of the other founding artists were black whereas I am white, language and cultural differences sometimes made communication difficult. But we overcame this obstacle by using other modes of communication. For instance, one evening when some of us were making monoprints, the late
Gordon Gabashane, who was a musician as well as a visual artist, started dancing to the rhythms created by the color and energy of the work that was taking place. That moment of using a different creative mode of expression became a significant indicator for understanding the value of multimodal arts-based approaches for engaging change.

During the 1990s, the key issue for black South African artists was the struggle for economic and personal empowerment and access to education and training. At the time, only 1 in 10 of South Africa’s black population had a high school certificate. Students were—and still are—accepted into the studio on the strength of their portfolios and their commitment to making a career in art. As a result, the focus of the studio became that of capacity building and income generation. APS was registered as a nonprofit organization in 1992 and subsequently accepted as a section 21 (public benefit) company. It joined a long tradition of community arts centers that have provided facilities access and education to talented black artists.5

Given the exceptionally politicized context of the 1980s, APS was born amid suspicion and division. Co-founder Nhlanhla Xaba had taught at the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA) Academy and had been a student at Funda Community College (Funda)6 in Soweto for a few years. His political allegiance was with the Pan Africanist Congress, the radical black consciousness organization that had influenced the philosophy of FUBA Academy. Despite his reservations about working with a white artist, Xaba recognized APS as an opportunity for building a nonracial arts community and recruited many young artists and FUBA graduates, a number of whom were initially suspicious of a “white-led” facility such as APS. They simply expected a level of racism and exploitation from me, because of the reputed prevalence of inequalities in other white-run centers, such as the Johannesburg Art Foundation and Katlehong Art Centre.7 Gossip and agitation among other students regarding my identity as a white artist and my role as founder and leader in the center often caused conflict and division among some of the first members of APS. Issues of trust and mutual respect for the communal effort were further threatened by a prevalent ethos of “entitlement,” under which the artists believed that they were owed training, access to materials, and commissions, rather than considering these to be long-sought opportunities. Fortunately, Xaba, as co-founder, proved a force for nonracism at APS and was committed to supporting the collective efforts that were clearly in accordance with the socialist aims emerging out of the liberation struggle.

Unifying the different members of APS was the notion of printmaking as a democratic medium accessible to all, without regard to social or economic
status. The principle of commitment to community proved to be significant when those APS member artists who had been drawn from FUBA Academy, Funda Community College, Alex Art Centre, Mofolo Centre, and Katlehong Art Centre returned to some of those centers to teach printmaking. Many are still doing so today. In its early years, APS established itself as a dynamic and creative enclave that proved that black and white artists could overcome distrust and could learn to work together harmoniously. From the beginning, art production at APS was defined as collaborative rather than individualistic. The studio embarked on a range of ambitious projects that promoted this collaborative participation, encouraged a diversity of voices, and characterized the spirit of building a cooperative, democratic, and public culture of art-making. These projects included the vibrant Arts Alive street festival in 1993–94, during which APS artists used a steamroller to make prints on the street. In 1995, as part of the first international Johannesburg Biennale in Africa, APS artists and international partners developed Volatile Alliances, a print exchange linking 10 countries and bringing historically white or black art centers together to work jointly on identity-themed prints.

During the early years of the democracy, the government was eager to promote artwork that would revise history and promote artists whose work had been devalued by the white-run museum system. New public commissions included monumental prints for the Gauteng legislature (1996), the Urban Futures mural prints (2000), adult literacy books (1996/97), and many others. These projects explored collaboration across race and class and used diverse and participatory practices. The prints were often created from found and recycled materials. We created collographs, drypoints on sheets of plastic, and woodblocks made from tomato boxes. Printing inks were donated by commercial offset printers, as were other, nontraditional sources of material.

The five mural prints made for the chamber walls of the seat of the first democratically elected government in Gauteng depicted themes relevant to citizens of the new democracy. Each collaborative team of five young student artists that was involved was led by an established or senior mentor. Some of the artworks created addressed the tensions surrounding race and gender relations. There was a mural on informal housing and poverty, while other murals reflected the euphoric period of the celebration of the “rainbow nation.” Each team arrived at a theme and its representation through group discussion.

APS provided the space for artists to begin to give color, form, and texture to the vision of a “new South Africa.” The country required new forms of ex-
pression to define an artistic identity that depended no longer on a Western-defined aesthetic but on something emerging from the exhilarating sense of freedom from apartheid's oppressive history. While the primary reason for the founding of APS was to compensate for the lack of art education and facilities for the majority of the population, a new collective aesthetic and politics was developing at the organization. APS received requests not only to populate the walls and offices of the government—such as the labor councils (the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration), local government offices, union offices, and training centers—but also from corporations who sought to purchase artwork that would reflect South Africa's new, progressive image. Corporate and government offices that were committed to changing their image in order to brand themselves as part of the new South Africa replaced imported posters of French Impressionist scenes or benign still-life studies by amateurs with work by local black South African artists, including many studying and working at APS. As a result, our printmaking studio became an important source of income generation for artists.

In this first phase, APS focused primarily on specialized printmaking and some drawing skills; there was very little focus on writing and educational training. Instead, through strong international links, an active international visiting artists program was established. Printmakers from the United States and Europe, who had participated in print exchanges such as Volatile Alliances for the Africus Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, were keen to visit South Africa and contribute to redressing inequalities though sharing skills. In this way, APS hosted some extraordinary educators and artists who, through their annual volunteer efforts, offered excellent and highly specialized training. As a result, APS students were given access to an extensive range of skills in print media that very few other art schools in South Africa could offer. These included classic printmaking techniques (e.g., etching, lithography, drypoint, relief printing, and screen printing) and an extensive range of alternative and experimental techniques involving use of photo processes, paper collage, papermaking, and collographs, as well as found and alternative materials. Not only did the international visitors expose APS students to some of the most innovative contemporary processes, but young APS artists were given opportunities to go abroad and teach first-world art students, in Belgium and the United States, alternative techniques of printing with found and industrial materials. Since its inception, APS has facilitated between 20 and 30 international visits by young township-based artists, none of whom had ever flown in an airplane before their visit.
The Fire

On 9 March 2003, Artist Proof Studio burned to the ground, taking with it the life of co-founder Nhlanhla Xaba. Caused by an electrical fault from an appliance in the studio, a fire spread to the chemical storage area, resulting in an explosion and conflagration that destroyed the studio in hours. Xaba, asleep on a couch at the time, never woke up, as he was asphyxiated by the fumes. The tragedy was enormous. Over 100 artists lost not only all their work but also a much-loved teacher, mentor, and friend. (See Plate 1.)

The morning after the fire, people flocked to witness the devastation. There was a sense of shock and disbelief. Those from APS gathered in a circle on the grass across the street from the fire and shared stories about Xaba. Emotions ranged from sadness and loss to anger and fear, as people began to absorb the loss of the space that had become their home. One of the artists expressed his grief by playing a handmade instrument. Galvanized by the music, the students and teachers began scratching around in the burnt rubble, prying off and peeling away the prints buried under the waste. There were moments when the dust and ash clogged the surrounding air, making it hard to breathe. Our coughing and choked stammering contrasted with the clarity and delight of uncovering each new layer and discovering treasure. We laughed and sang and then abruptly became silent in the shock of discovering an article that had belonged to Xaba. The artists gathered the fragments and laid them at the spot where his body had been found, adding a message traced in ash: “I’ll miss you, bra.” I uncovered one of my own prints from the State of Emergency series of 1986. It depicted a body lying in the rubble, assassinated by the apartheid regime. The ironic juxtaposition was eerie, the pathos palpable. The fact that, at the time of the fire, I had been working on a series of prints with the motif of fire, The Fires of the Truth Commission, added another layer of bitter irony.

We laid out all the fragments we had chosen, reflecting on finding meaning in the overwhelming chaos. The group decided to look in the burnt books and papers for fragments and words having to do with celebration and joy, growth and change, which could be symbolically glued over the wounds of our healing body. Together with art therapists who came to assist the artists of the studio, we decided to work on collaborative collages. Part of the process of producing these works involved the voluntary participation in workshops designed to facilitate mourning. There was a general acknowledgment that we could not build a new structure on the shaky and broken ground left by the fire; a different organizational model with different foundations would
have to be created. The period of mourning made it clear that the vision Xaba lived and died for had to continue. The news of his death catalyzed the South African art world to pledge support for rebuilding what had been destroyed. (See Plate 2.)

Six weeks after the fire, I left for an international print conference and fundraising event in Boston. When I returned a month later, the negative “victim of circumstance” mentality had reemerged among the APS artists. I became sensitive to the impact of feelings of disempowerment felt by the artists after the fire, which were compounded by the legacy of trauma and damage inflicted by South Africa’s political and social history. I called a meeting of all active studio members to report back on fundraising efforts and rebuilding plans. At that meeting, we collectively imagined what we would want from a new studio. Each person expressed a dream; these dreams were written down and, collectively, became a visualization of the future. Mobilizing the group’s imagination shifted the stagnant and self-destructive energy into creative action. The dreams that were expressed included the following:

- “I see APS as the best printmaking centre in South Africa.”
- “I see myself as a teacher to the newcomers.”
- “We have an APS minibus for transporting members.”
- “We have a newsletter.”
- “We are well known in the world.”
- “Famous people come and work with us.”
- “We offer qualifications in printmaking.”
- “We have a bigger centre than before.”
- “We have a studio for drawing and a library for studying.”
- “We can go overseas on exchange programs.”

The aftermath of the fire gradually led the artists and students to a process of reconciliation and transformation. Working with the Lefika La Phodiso Art Therapy Centre assisted in relieving the helpless feeling of loss and regeneration, as several of our exercises seemed to turn the tide to initiate transformational work. The first step in that process was addressing the legacy of apartheid through art-making and workshops fostering reconciliation.

For several weeks after the fire, the artists worked in teams to build collages from the remains of the burnt prints. The resulting large-scale panels that were produced comprise arguably some of the strongest work ever to emerge from APS. Three panels constituting one series were titled Past, Present, and Future; the other three panels were titled Conflict, Conversation, and
Reconciliation. The collages were metaphors for the many layers of reconciliation that took place after the fire—repairing damage and bringing together disparate elements that seemed not to belong together but could nevertheless work in harmony. For many years, these works hung in the stairwell of the new APS. Walking upstairs past these collages to get to the studio space on the first floor provided students a simple but powerful daily reminder of past, present, and future.

Another group of artists found scraps of metal that they welded together to create new sculptural pieces. These twisted metal remains, embracing elements of the burnt space, were welded into the security fence of the new studio, providing a shield for the new venue at the Bus Factory, across the road from the studio’s original site. That renovated historical bus terminal in Newtown became a hub for arts and craft organizations.

Ubuntu as Strategy
To achieve reconciliation at APS, the management\textsuperscript{11} introduced the concept of \textit{ubuntu} as an embodiment of the ethos and values of our common humanity. The meaning of \textit{ubuntu} is best captured through the expression “A person is a person through other persons.”\textsuperscript{12} Although \textit{ubuntu} has become something of a South African buzzword and cliché, the concept remains a founding democratic value. It is associated with the image of a healthy society, one in which there is a shared recognition of mutuality, interdependency, and interlinkage.\textsuperscript{13}

Having identified \textit{ubuntu} as a nonthreatening, indigenous concept that embraces the key principles of reconciliation, the teachers designed collaborative projects to help students understand and apply the concept to APS’s rebuilding project. One of the students from a rural community, Nelson Makamo, came to Johannesburg from Limpopo Province to realize his dream of becoming an artist. He told the following story to describe his print:

This is my story, not just a story, but a way of life. This is my interview with my Grandpa. It was the first week of March. I had to travel from Johannesburg to Limpopo to a large village called Avon. It had been a year since I visited my grandparents, and I had only three days, after which I had to go back to Gauteng. I went for one reason: my assignment of \textit{ubuntu}, because I knew that my grandfather was the person to talk to. I knew his point of view made a difference to me, as well as
to others. He had understanding for so many things that involve social issues. He knows how to turn a boy into a man.

The first thing I asked Nelson in response was, “What is ubuntu?” With a smile, he answered, “The quality of being kind to people and making sure they do not suffer more than is necessary.” He then continued,

My son, our world is crammed full of words, images and sounds from our foremothers. What is happening today is too much for us, we cannot breathe. We are always seeking to capture and to understand the contradictions of this diverse continent. Many people are caught between the mistakes of the past and the possible calamities of tomorrow. I was brought up by respect and caring, and also to transfer that to my children, who were brought up with love and respect and caring.

Do you really want to know what is happening today? There is no respect at all. We are putting material things first. That love for one another is gone. No one is to blame but ourselves. We did let things get out of hand, step by step. We were supposed to act from the very first. But if we can plant that seed into someone’s heart to let grow bigger and stronger, making sure that we take good care of it, I’m telling you, it will attract others from the whole world who will be touched.

We had enough of the past. That is gone. Yes, it is gone. If there can be love, respect to us the elders, and pass that on to children, the future will be full of dynamic opportunity, and every child will be proud to be part of this universe.14 (See figure 2.1 for a depiction of the Ubuntu Tree of Life that illustrates this story.)

The collective creative process of the group who gathered their own stories led to a deeper understanding of self and other in relation to the group. It required participants to respect one another as well as the art-making process. Individual spontaneity had to be constrained and negotiated in order to achieve a compromise with the group—one of the key principles of reconciliation.

On 9 March 2004, one year after the fire, the new APS facility was launched in the converted Bus Factory. Our hope was that a celebration of our new quarters would express our organization’s revised collective vision. A sangoma (traditional healer) performed a ritual for the protection of our new beginnings. The mood at the launch was celebratory; large numbers of people attended the participatory and inspirational event. I felt that the day
Fig. 2.1. *The Tree of Life*, group linocut, 2005. (Courtesy of APS.)
was a testimony to the power of art to transform society. It was the opening not just of a beautiful building, a project that had taken hard work and extensive funding, but of a new chapter for APS, with a beautiful space to house a reimagined, reconstructed identity. Our *ubuntu* project could officially begin.

The generosity of our private and public donors and members of the community provided the resources that enabled APS not only to rebuild our studio but also to redefine our organizational structure. Members of the APS’s board of advisors and directors attempted to prioritize the various challenges involved in creating a model of African-centered learning and leadership. We asked ourselves whether the member artists should be supported to develop administrative skills or whether we should bring in new black leadership. Eventually we decided to pursue both options. A range of team-building workshops was offered to assist people in a series of sensitive one-on-one mentoring interactions between teachers and students. In this ongoing process of reconciliation, I found the framework of “appreciative inquiry” to be most useful. As explained by Cooperrider and Srivastva,

> Appreciative inquiry refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action that together are designed to help evolve the normative vision and will of a group, organization or society as a whole.\

Appreciative inquiry has been used at APS to enable the group to articulate themes and dreams of “what could be” and “what will be.” By asking positive questions, the method of appreciative inquiry draws out and highlights hopeful and empowering stories, metaphors, dreams, and wishes that embrace a spirit of optimism. It shifts away from vocabularies of deficit to conversations of possibility and prefigures the future we hope to create at APS. Moreover, appreciative inquiry draws on the creative imagination and the arts to seek reconciliation and empowerment.

Participation in decision-making processes empowers people and, more importantly, fosters democracy. Involving members of the team of teachers and students at APS in the organization’s strategic planning has led to an increased sense of confidence and personal esteem, as well as a collective commitment to the direction and decisions that are being taken for the organizational development of APS. Using creative processes as a means for healing and reconciliation has become integral to deepening the journey of self-creation at APS. The notion of perforating the barrier of fear, shame, and anger can be used constructively in a creative process. It is something that
needs to happen in order to link surface and deep transformations, but it has to be done carefully. The metaphor of the *Out of the Fire* collages was apt: as we pulled the fragments out of the rubble of the burnt remains, the ashes had to be released into the air to prevent a poisoning of the space. The patches or fragments that were stuck onto the surface of the collages represented a facade of recovery. But the damage was deep and toxic. The pain had to be transformed into positive healing through another art-making activity. This was processed through creating linocuts on the subject of reconciliation, and even that brought us only one step closer in the ongoing journey. The process is one of becoming and has no end.

Over the course of the year following the fire, the team of staff members attempted to incorporate a spirit of *ubuntu* into the structure and culture of APS. Our efforts at reconciliation were similarly collage-like, layering symbols and rituals, reorganizing fragments of the old to construct something vibrant, generative, and empowering. The collage process in reconstructing a new APS included the following group processes: elements of the past framing the future, expressed through collaged fragments of burnt rubble in the artworks and in the new building; the inclusion of traditional rituals in the process, such as the healer or *sangoma* restoring balance, blessing the new space, and paying respect to Xaba’s spirit; art-making as both therapy and growth; the collective participation of member artists in branding the studio and making their mark; the workshop processes, including the discussion of relevant themes in the curriculum and the demarcating of professional and learning boundaries in the space; the use of music and dance and the expression of feeling; the telling of stories; the incorporation of performance, public display, and exhibitions; and the creation of forums for listening and sharing conversations and respecting that those using the space needed to explore and make mistakes.

APS was founded in good measure as a response to the challenge of building democracy in a post-apartheid South Africa. The early mission was redress. Subsequently, the fire forced a process of physical rebuilding that exposed a deep need for psychological rebuilding through the process of reconciliation. Other processes of reconstructing APS as a democratic organization extended to the need to transform educational and management processes, such as the collective and creative designing of a new curriculum and the applying of it in the learning programs; collaborative and team teaching across race, gender, culture, and tradition; facilitating the autonomy and independence of program leaders to find their voices; and the implementation of processes to promote accountability and responsibility. In addition, we
redefined management and governance structures that included the dissolving of the existing board and redefining roles and responsibilities for leadership. This required the implementation of a sustainable mentorship process for both students and teachers, with definable goals. We further established long-term partnerships and interfacing with organizations that provided new opportunities for capacity building. Through these processes, adherence to democratic practices in the organization enabled us to find ways to pass on the torch to the next generation of students.

As an APS founder, mentor, author, and researcher, I realized, during the restructuring process that began in 2004, that I needed to distance myself from the daily life of the studio so that the new leadership model could take hold. As a leader of APS, I have now learned to discern more clearly when to act and when to step back and let the process unfold without my intervention. This has included making way for new management and decision making, while stepping in to address strategies of action. My own learning process has involved both developing the ability to set up networks without trying to control the process and allowing for mistakes, which is part of empowerment and self-creation. It has also been necessary to learn to hold people accountable and, as they grow in confidence, to increase levels of expectation.

APS is still grappling with many unanswered questions, including the implications of white authority. By asking these questions, we are opening doors that have rarely been opened before. The issues of race, gender, and authority have not been brushed aside because they are awkward or uncomfortable; they have been presented to APS members and students with an invitation to participate in the process of resolving some of the difficulties we have encountered. It has become clear that it is important for the leadership in APS to keep communication open and honest. When this happens, the trust that is built in the team translates into confidence and shared pride, enabling us to move closer toward our vision for APS as a center of African-centered learning and leadership.

Building Organizational Identity

At the end of some of the ubuntu projects in 2005, there was a shift in institutional policy, spawning a range of new initiatives that built on some of the challenges that emerged. One theme APS identified was the importance of identity. In 2006, author Brenda Cooper asserted about the transformation of South African society, “If new cultural forms are to supersede colonialism and apartheid, then new identities must be fostered and fed.” This raised
the question of how issues of identity or identities contribute to social and individual transformation. Personal and organizational identity has always been a focus of APS. Students are encouraged to explore their traditional and personal roots through researching their families, recording their environment that they journey through daily.

Some curators have characterized the artwork produced at APS as having a stylistic identity with so-called township art, a genre in South African art that has been maligned as simplistic and repetitive in its depictions of township life. While the first group of teachers at APS came from that tradition and transmitted it to the members of APS, strategic books on township art, including publications by Steven Sack (1988), Gavin Younge (1988), and Sue Williamson (1989; Williamson and Jamal 1996), have repositioned this genre as key to the struggle of liberation in South Africa. Countering the tendency of the contemporary art world to dismiss this category and thus marginalize and obscure this important part of South African art history, these studies recognize the validity of township art’s expression of South African identity and culture. In their exploration of issues of identity today, APS artists have found ways to extend and renew the tradition of township art and to reinvent their personal iconography in relationship to their township context.

The APS organization has worked critically over the years to shed the dismissive conception of its public identity as a charitable nongovernmental organization and to redefine itself deliberately as a place of “excellence through possibility.” Central to the concept of identity is that of dignity. I agree with the suggestion of Nigerian-born novelist Wole Soyinka that “the pursuit of dignity is one of the most fundamental defining attributes of human existence.” In my view, dignity is fundamental to the role of art in social change. Dignity and self-worth are aspects that can lead people out of spiritual and economic poverty. Capacities for dignity and self-worth are nurtured through the pursuit of excellence and through contribution to engaging communities, recurring themes in the narratives that follow.

The APS constituency primarily consists of male youth whose values and aspirations initially include material possessions and a hip facade. Some of their immediate goals include the acquisition of cell phones, iPods, and designer clothing as a reflection of status. However, most of the young artists do not have the financial support from their families to satisfy this acquisitiveness. For these reasons, I believe that lessons in leadership, public engagement, social responsibility, human rights, and empowerment must be part of an artist’s education and training, specifically in order to counter the dominance of material values in society and to instill a desire to address social
crises. In other words, APS must work to counter the role models for identity provided by the neoliberal policies of government and to create new ones that continue and extend ideas of community and ubuntu. Another goal in fostering artists as agents of change must be to subvert the traditional patriarchy of “macho culture,” to tap into the sensitivities of the artist as “feelers” in society, and to address the gender bigotry so prevalent in South African culture.

Through innovative programs or interventions, APS initiates artistic activities that can prompt cultural and social changes. As a community-based organization with a democratic and participatory structure, its emphasis is on building a concept of the artist as a responsible citizen. In 2005, APS revised its vision and mission as follows:

Our VISION is a professional studio founded on a sense of shared humanity where people of talent and passion can reach for excellence in art-making to achieve self-sustainability.

Our MISSION is to provide an environment to develop people with a common set of values, expressed in the notion of ubuntu, that have talent and passion to achieve artistic excellence. We focus on print-making and our allied outreach programmes to build the capacity of people to reach self-actualization and make a difference in society.

While this vision of education in the arts is idealistic, I believe that the arts can be effective in preparing youth to be socially responsible and creative citizens capable of confronting the life-and-death challenges for survival facing them on a daily basis. The revised mission implies that APS has developed from a community-based art center into an activist organization, from a community arts center serving primarily as a place of nurturing and social protection to a social movement fostering activism and agency. The change does not leave behind the fundamental principles of community-based art but expands them to include the proactive role of the artist as agent.

In her study of a community-based art project in Silicon Valley in the United States, Lydia Mathews asserts that “artists no longer [simply] create objects; they are simultaneously involved in designing frameworks for social interaction.”18 I argue that to design frameworks for social engagement, there has to be a directed effort to restructure how art is taught and learned. Teaching and learning at APS has been through many iterations over the years and has adjusted with its growth and social positioning.

Previously, APS has been introduced as a “learning organization.” That
means it constantly renews itself through its structure of socially responsive and cross-sectoral influences. This is partly due to my own connecting roles as co-founder and executive director of APS and senior academic at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). One of my core roles at the university is representing the faculty’s profile of community engagement. My fundraising efforts to establish community engagement activities such as Phumani Paper and my research activity in the role of arts in social change, funded by the National Research Foundation, have provided me with the resources to facilitate student engagement in this active crossover and networking between organizations. For example, some of my UJ senior students have chosen their workplace-learning experience at APS and have subsequently developed their work placement in the organization, being contracted as teachers, printers, and managers. Many APS graduates and senior students were hired as trainers and facilitators in the Phumani Paper network, with some attending short courses in teacher training and with others going on to complete their degrees through UJ. In this way, teaching and learning processes are transferred across and influence both organizations. The intersection of the personal and the organizational is bound up in a shared vision of the catalytic role of the belief in the personal. Students I mentored are today leaders mentoring others and sustaining the material and relational webs of partners and collaborators. Like art-making, transformative processes are generative rather than definitive.

The Group Crit at APS

An example of the transference of learning across organizations is the “group crit.” Used as a formative assessment at UJ, all teachers critique the students’ body of work at the end of each term. The students are issued with a progress mark based on what they present, which comprises part of their final summative result. The mode of group assessment has been learned and adapted to suit the students of APS, as many of their teachers are graduates of the UJ system and have both positive and negative experiences in the same process. In keeping with a democratic ethos of learners and teachers as co-creators, the process adapts itself to each situation at APS.

The crit is a public “reading” of the students’ works, posing challenging questions of theme, intention, technique, style, and public purpose. By telling their individual stories through their artwork, each artist is able to articulate how they give meaning to their lives, in terms of what they consider valuable or good. The stories told through artwork enable the group to exchange
ideas and communicate these values to one another. Each art student pins up work in progress that they would like to present. They are asked to talk about what they are depicting, what the work is about, how they have chosen to depict their subject, and why they have chosen a particular printmaking technique (e.g., etching, screen printing, linocut, or monotype). They also indicate where and how they intend to take these ideas and images forward. The class, facilitators, and occasional guests are invited to comment and ask clarifying questions. The viewers are asked whether they are able to see how the image and formal elements of the artwork—such as color, line, composition, or texture—visually communicate the intention of the artist. Participants are invited to suggest changes that might improve visual impact or to reflect on their own impressions. For example, if an artist’s choice to use color arbitrarily does not enhance content or atmosphere, participants suggest techniques that might more potently signify intent.

Students learn the languages of not only formal analysis but also critical reflection and communication. They are required to tell their own stories visually and to research their family histories as part of exploring personal identities. The students’ develop “artist statements” about their own work, the statements and their visual journals are considered in the review process, and the text/letters/words comprising the artist statements are sometimes incorporated into the prints themselves. When the feedback they receive is consistent with their purpose, students understand the power of visual communication. The facilitators at APS often bring in compatible printmaking examples to show how, for example, Goya was able to communicate horror, the physicality of the mark in a German Expressionist print amplified angst or anger, or the contrast of a selective use of light emerging from shadow in a Rembrandt self-portrait could reveal a gentle sense of humanity or empathy. This process that all students go through from their first to fourth years at the university helps to engender confidence and to provide them with the skills, tools, and deep understanding they need to achieve visual excellence.

**Artist Citizens**

Different activities and methods of artistic and social engagement effect positive personal and social change among students at APS. The selected examples in the following narratives and stories give insight into how “learning organizations” mediate the fraught and complex questions of identity through multiple and cross-sectoral partnerships that are fluid, mediating, adaptable, and generative.
Over a number of years, facilitators from Men as Partners or Sonke Gender Justice have participated in two-week community engagement projects with second-year APS students. The project participants attend workshops and engage with gender stereotyping and the roles of men in society. This collaboration revealed some black men’s deep prejudices against women in general and gay men and women. Students involved in these projects are required to debate and to interrogate their own positions. (See Plate 3.)

One December, during the annual campaign of 16 Days of Activism of No Violence Against Women and Children, I was driving in Newtown on my way to APS. I recognized someone who came up to my window as Thabo Motseki, a student from the APS third-year class. He was wearing a T-shirt that read “One Man Can.” I then recognized eight or ten other young men who were stopping cars and handing out brochures to support the campaign of men against the abuse of women. I grinned as I took my brochure, and Thabo pointed outside the taxi rank to a colorful mural that the student volunteers had painted to advertise the campaign in one of the busiest commuter intersections of Bree Street in downtown Johannesburg. Not previously knowing anything about this activity, I asked the administrative staff at the studio who had arranged the project, as classes were over for the year. Thabo later told me that Sonke Gender Justice, an organizational partner with APS that is linked to Engender Health and Men as Partners, was looking for volunteers. Sonke had no money to pay the students but had invited interested people to sign up. Almost all members of the third-year class independently volunteered as activists in the weeklong campaign. I was very proud of these young men and felt that APS had succeeded in training young people to be “artist citizens.”

APS participates in human rights and gender advocacy workshops annually. In addition, every 18 July, which has now come to be called Mandela Day, students identify community projects that they wish to support. They recruit class members, apply for art materials from APS, and go out and make a difference. These activities build students capacities as leaders and achievers.

Another example of activities at APS that contribute to social change through citizenship facilitation is the placement of senior learners in engaged service learning. Opportunities for third-year volunteers to go to after-school centers to teach art activities to orphans and vulnerable children have helped to ensure that the students’ attitudes and perspectives are challenged. Other experiential workplace internships include placements in corporate environments; mentorships with business and professional experts; placements as as-
sistsants to community leaders; research assistantships; positions as translators and facilitators for children’s programs; and placements in a partner NGO, such as the Lefika La Phodiso Art Therapy Centre. All of these placements recognize the value of skills and life experience in the learning process and have proven to be effective in making a contribution to the workplace as well as creating change in individuals. When the APS students engage professionally, they tend to rise to the challenge, shoulder responsibility, and assume leadership roles that prepare them to be proactive and engaged citizens.

Team Building

Another goal at APS is moral engagement, which has been defined by Freire as “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.” Team building through mural painting enacts the APS interpretation of empowerment. Students have painted advocacy murals against gender violence and xenophobia, as well as murals promoting human rights and the celebration of 20 years of democracy or other commemorative moments. (See Plate 4.)

Another way that APS interacts with its corporate funding partners is through exchange and mutual learning. The international law firm of Fasken Martineau, with roots in Canada and an office in Johannesburg, is a corporate sponsor of APS that supports eight students annually; they have a representative on APS’s board of directors and offer legal seminars to our students. As part of their team building, APS was invited to participate in an art activity with the Fasken Martineau employees. During their strategic planning session, the law office staff members were asked to separate into eight teams of 10 to 12 people and to draw out the strategic plans of each unit in the form of a diagram. One artist from the third-year learning program at APS was assigned to lead each unit. The artist leader was tasked with translating the team’s ideas and symbols into images, which the team then painted as a mural on the firm’s garage basement wall.

The artists found themselves working with groups of approximately 90 staff members of highly motivated and competitive lawyers, litigators, financial managers, and corporate relations personnel. One young artist, deeply shy and very troubled (almost suicidal at one stage of his studies, due to devastating personal difficulties and loss at home), found himself appointed team leader for the litigators. He managed to inspire the group, and his team’s mural was judged by outside judges as the winner. The experience boosted his
confidence to such an extent that he became one of the top achievers in his year at APS. He has since been offered a gallery exhibition and has plans to open his own gallery in his rural home. He understands that he can reach for his dreams through his belief in himself and his ability to be a catalyst for change.

The exercise of requiring highly successful corporate professionals to learn basic skills from a young black artist who may barely have had a high school qualification resulted in an enriching experience on both sides. The reversal of power, race, and class dynamics built confidence, humility, and humor and helped participants reach common ground across a chasm of difference. The exchange of skills and exposure to such extreme opposites of social and economic realities became a successful exercise in developing leadership. APS has recognized the value of building leadership capacities as one of its goals.

To take on the leadership of a project, students also need organization and management abilities that require self-confidence. People who depend on consistency and inflexible systems are likely to become highly frustrated, and artists must be conscious of and develop ways to address this potential stumbling block to collaboration. In this experience with the law firm, both sides showed the flexibility and openness needed for a positive outcome.

Trevor Thebe, an artist and facilitator from APS, said of his involvement in creating the Sonke Gender Justice murals,

Painting murals gives power to those who take part in making them. To those who pass by, it works as a constant reminder of the message passed through in the paintings made. One thing that was good during these workshops was how people feel proud of what they see at the end of the project, expressions you see on faces of those passing by and the pride of those who took part in the painting. These are not painters but they end up with the confidence to paint and carry on with what they have started.23

At APS, we have learned that practitioners need to have a range of skills to engage community, business, and corporate partners. Artists must not only be technically proficient; they also need to bring diplomatic, organizing, and partnership skills to the table. They need qualities such as patience, optimism, and a sense of humor. The most important prerequisite for this work is a love for and acceptance of the messy, unpredictable, and complex nature of community arts work.
Artists as Agents for Change

APS has introduced a number of strategies to promote leadership skills among art students through active citizenship, by their participation in social advocacy and community outreach projects. These encounters require specific educational and skills interventions, which are embedded partially in the placements of senior learners in public arts interventions and partially in the development of their own artistic voices. Students are challenged to exhibit moral courage and to take a stand against social injustice. For example, they might participate in a solidarity march against xenophobia or in the organization of an action to demonstrate against inequality and promote the value of interconnectedness. APS encourages the notion of leadership as a collaborative, values-based process. Community engagement is less about service and more about the reciprocal, participatory approach of “co-creation.”

When words fail and silence kills, artists can catalyze expression. Artist leaders can be conduits of creative energy that enable their teams to achieve meaningful results. By integrating the philosophy of ubuntu, as a philosophy of team and leadership building, with artistic methods applied to facilitate real internalization of the philosophy, APS has witnessed the development of a much stronger generation of graduates than before. Another valuable capacity of leadership is the notion of emergence or becoming. Warren G. Bennis, who offers practical advice on the qualities of leadership, has recognized that the process of “becoming” is key: “To become a leader, then you must become yourself, become the maker of your own life.” Themes prevalent in the mission of APS include empowerment through active citizenship and self-actualization. The following stories featuring Nelson Makamo and Thabang Lehobye are two of many that reveal the embodiment of an artist as an agent of change.

Self-Creation: Nelson’s Story

If one person is willing to spend money on my work, it gives me courage and energy to continue expressing myself freely.
—Nelson Makamo

Nelson Makamo, a talented young artist who graduated from APS in 2005 and interned as manager in the APS studio gallery, was returning home to say good-bye to a family member who was dying of AIDS in the rural town
Fig. 2.2. Nelson Makamo, 2008. (Photo by D. Rasiel.)
of Modimolle in Limpopo Province. Nelson was devastated, and I suggested that he talk to the AIDS counselor who works with APS. The studio had just completed a four-month AIDS Action project called Reclaiming Lives, and Nelson, as a recent graduate, had assumed the role of encouraging the younger students to participate in a program of voluntary counseling and testing (VCT).

The counselor informed Nelson of all the options and possibilities of antiretroviral medication and gave him the contact number of a doctor who specializes in HIV and works in the region of Nelson's hometown. Nelson went home armed with a little hope and new knowledge about options for treatment. He also had just received a major public art commission through his APS patron and had taken out health insurance for himself and his dependents. He was supporting his mother and younger siblings from the income he earned from the sales of his artwork. Nelson was able to convince his family about the importance of VCT and antiretroviral drugs. His family member qualified for treatment due to her minimal CD4 count and has since made an excellent recovery: she is on treatment and living a productive and healthy life.

This success was the result of a long journey that started in 2002, when Nelson's art teacher recognized his talent in his rural high school and drove him into Johannesburg to apply for a bursary to study at APS. When he arrived at APS, he was very shy and intimidated by the bustle of Johannesburg, as he had grown up in an impoverished rural family. Nelson has since become a role model and epitomizes an APS success story. He is driven and highly motivated and has been the breadwinner for his family since he was 23 years old. He had a dream of success when he arrived in the “big city,” worked extremely hard, and modeled himself on successful black artists, such as Sam Nhlengethwa. Nelson is an example of “self-creation” in which “the two dimensions of engagement and transformation are constitutively intertwined” (Pieterse 2004: 340). With his talent, dreams, and vivid imagination, he created an image of himself as a successful artist and then fulfilled it. In Nelson's final year at APS, his corporate patron, who believed in Nelson's talent, offered him a solo exhibition in 2006 in Melrose Arch, an exclusive enclave of Johannesburg's affluent community. The exhibition sold out.

Today Nelson sells his artwork steadily and has bought himself a house and car. Nelson was employed by APS in the studio gallery up to 2008. However, once his career took off, he no longer needed a job, as he has had over six solo shows internationally. In 2014, the Everard Read Gallery, one of the largest and most prestigious galleries in South Africa, gave him a solo exhibi-
tion. Nelson claims that his dream came true because of the inspiration and opportunities offered by APS, along with his commitment to his belief that he can succeed. An important challenge for APS has been discovering how concepts of citizenship and social justice can be translated into building a generation of artists who no longer hold onto the mythology of the “poor artist” (the bum, the outsider on the margins, the victim always needing funding, help, and handouts). If transformation is the objective, diversity and democracy should penetrate the inner core of the teaching and learning process.

**Agency: Thabang’s Story**

At the beginning of 2008, I received a phone call from a former student, Thabang Lehobye. “Kim,” he said, “I just received a job offer from Jupiter Drawing Room [a well-known advertising agency]. They offered me a package as art director that I could not refuse. I would like to invite you out for lunch with me.” It is not an unusual phenomenon for a teacher to meet up with former students to celebrate their achievements. This story, however, is not common; the content of the invitation symbolized a testament of economic, social, and spiritual empowerment, and the phone invitation to me encapsulated agency.

I met Thabang Lehobye when he was 15 years old. He arrived at APS in 2001, with some drawings he had made on the back of an old calendar. He came with Bafana Ndlovu, a slightly older school friend, both from the informal settlement in Orange Farm, near Soweto. They wanted to apply to attend the Saturday youth class at APS while they completed high school, as there were no art teachers in Orange Farm. The late Nhlanhla Xaba, my former APS partner and teacher of the youth program, was insistent that we accept them, even though they were the youngest students ever to be registered. Thabang’s drawings were extraordinary, and Nhlanhla and I agreed that we had never encountered such raw talent. APS subsidized weekly transport for Thabang and Bafana to attend the Saturday youth program for three years, until they completed their school leaving certificates.

When APS burned down in 2003, in the fire that also took Nhlanhla’s life, Thabang stayed away for months. He subsequently told me that he had then felt suicidal. He had lost Nhlanhla, his mentor and role model, as well as his studio home, the place that held all his dreams. Six months passed before he was able to come back, to the then—temporary venue in the Bus Factory.26

Thabang subsequently passed his high school leaving certificate and shared with me his dream: to go to university and study fine arts. During that
period, I met Patty Suzman, the daughter of anti-apartheid veteran Helen Suzman. Patty lives in Boston and visited her mother in Johannesburg regularly. A friend brought Patty to APS. I showed Patty Thabang’s artwork and asked her if she would be willing to be his patron and sponsor him for three years to study fine arts at the Technikon Witwatersrand (now the University of Johannesburg).

After meeting Thabang and encountering this 18-year-old’s passion and determination (even though he was painfully shy and could not make eye contact with her), Patty readily agreed to give him a scholarship for three years. Thabang was able to register for his national diploma in fine arts in 2004. Further, through a friend, I received an offer from an arts education youth leadership camp in the United States, for a young South African artist to attend camp for three weeks at no charge. The candidate had to be 18 years old or under and exceptionally talented. One of the APS board members
agreed to assist with some travel expenses, and Thabang was chosen to go to Wyoming. This adventure took place during the July holidays in his first year at university.

Part of Thabang’s neighborhood and extended family showed up at the airport to see him off. This was the first time he and his family had ever been to the airport. He did not know anyone who had flown in a plane, and he was exceptionally nervous. Yet once at the camp, Thabang had a wonderful time. The experience with international youth at an American camp helped him to find his voice, stand up with confidence, and look into the eyes of another person when in conversation, despite the discomfort of breaking a convention of cultural respect that was central in his home culture.

As he entered his second year, Thabang found the university’s academic structure to be daunting. He struggled with traveling two hours from Orange Farm each day to be at class by 8:00 a.m. When he was late, some lecturers did not admit him into their lectures. They accused him of laziness. At the end of the year, he was failing his theory subjects. As he struggled with money, APS employed him as teaching assistant for the Saturday classes, so that he could earn extra funds for his daily travel. Despite the financial and academic obstacles, Thabang survived his second year.

In his third year, Thabang became interested in animation. Inspired by William Kentridge, he made hundreds of drawings for a Kentridge-style animation about moral and environmental degradation in his Orange Farm neighborhood, where Thabang and his family lived in a shack with no electricity. Each drawing frame had to be photographed with a handheld camera. A friend occasionally lent him a laptop computer and digital camera that he could use to work overnight at home until the batteries ran out. Notwithstanding his challenges, the resulting video animation piece was powerful. Thabang achieved the highest mark in his year for this extraordinary work, and although he continued to struggle with theory subjects, extra tuition costs, and the fear of letting me down, he achieved his three-year fine arts diploma with a distinction in art practice.

I once picked Thabang up at his home in Orange Farm. It took me an hour and a half to drive there. He did not want me to go inside, as he was ashamed. The outside yard had a half-built foundation and wall. His mother, a single parent, had started building a house for herself and her three sons six years previously and could not afford to develop it further. She had a menial job in a factory and is partially disabled. Thabang admitted that he used his bursary money meant for purchasing extra materials to buy them food each month. His brother pointed out to me a small corner
of their shack where Thabang worked every night, sometimes through the night. Thabang told me that the first thing he would do when he gets a job is build the house for his mother.

For Thabang’s graduation from the university, Patty Suzman gave him a state-of-the-art laptop computer of his own, and I took him to meet William Kentridge, the artist who inspired his work. After seeing Thabang’s animation and recognizing his remarkable talent, William Kentridge wrote a check to APS for R20,000 (about $1,500) to enable Thabang to further his studies. Thabang wanted to go to Vega School, an exclusive, private advertising and multimedia college in Johannesburg for “rich kids,” and was accepted to do his honors in multimedia with a tuition bursary. Fees cost up to R40,000 ($3,500) per year, a sum of money that is normally out of range for poor black students. In his letter of thanks to William Kentridge, Thabang wrote,

One of the greatest abilities we have at our disposal as human is to dream. Dreams afford us wildest fantasies beyond present circumstances, but the most powerful thing about dreams is that they can come true. The best thing that can ever happen to an aspiring young artist is to be acknowledged by your greatest inspiration. THANK YOU MR KENTRIDGE for seeing my work.

APS disbursed the Kentridge grant as a monthly allowance for Thabang to travel to the college, which is located in the suburb of Sandton. Travel sometimes took up to three hours one way. He often needed help with extra money to do his assignments. However, midyear in 2007, he phoned me, beside himself with excitement. His work, a short animation piece adapted from the work he made in his third year of fine arts study had won a gold award in the student category at the Loerie Awards, the most prestigious advertising competition in South Africa. This award would open up all manner of doors to his future.

On hearing his exciting news, I invited Thabang out for lunch. I picked him up in town, and we went to a restaurant. Over lunch, he told me of his embarrassment when his Vega classmates all went out to McDonald’s. Thabang was too ashamed to tell them he could not afford it, so he used his transport money to pay toward his meal, his first at a restaurant, and walked two hours to a friend’s house in the city that night to ask for a loan to get home.

Two months after completing his honors at Vega College, Thabang’s appointment at the Jupiter Drawing Room was a sign that he had reached his
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goal against all odds. He saw himself as a dreamer, and he made his dreams materialize. An art gallery in Johannesburg offered him his first solo exhibition in 2010. He has since married and continues to flourish with his two children (his new family).

Sustainable Futures

For over 25 years, APS has provided for many challenges and reassessments in its journey as an arts organization, and it has constantly evolved in its joint quest for stability and growth. It has sustained itself through many strategies and partnerships. As has been defined earlier, APS is a learning organization that sees organizing as a form of identifying, recruiting, and nurturing the leadership of others. As Marshall Ganz recognizes and has been the case in APS, a leadership voice emerges from the perspective of the “learner”—one who has learned to ask the right questions—rather than that of a “knower” who thinks he or she knows all the answers.

One challenge for APS has been erratic funding from different donors demanding different approaches. Corporate funders require entrepreneurial business practice from the artists they support, arts and culture councils fund specific educational or advocacy programs, and specific foundations fund outreach to orphans and vulnerable children. APS has developed the capacity to respond directly to a variety of funding priorities as well as varying community ideas, needs, situations, and opportunities. Its partnerships with the arts agencies and corporations concerned with social investment have deepened and expanded the diversity and complexity of its activities and outreach.

Funding at APS is secured through a diversity of sources and commissions; over 60 percent of its funding is self-supporting from sales of art. Many young artists are assigned “patrons” drawn from our corporate or individual partners. This is an active exchange. The art student receives a monthly stipend of approximately R1,200 ($80) for additional materials and transport and is obliged to give their patron three of their best works each year. The patron, who has interviewed and selected their student for subsidy, ideally provides the student with professional mentorship and, in the process, may arrange some exposure of their artwork through corporate or private receptions. The law firm Fasken Martineau, a corporate patron, offers APS four seminars each year on legal issues (e.g., contracts, commissions, and copyright) and provides pro bono legal advice to our board of directors. Individual professional mentors may serve on our advisory committees and give seminars on marketing or social media. Through these reciprocal relationships
with APS, a complex web of exchange contributes to the idea of APS as a learning organization.

Consistent revision of strategies by an active participation of all stakeholders leads to reorganization, which brings renewal. A long-term partnership with the South African Development Fund in Boston, where I volunteered as a student in the mid-1980s, has consistently supported APS since its establishment in 1991. Through Boston networks and friends, APS received in-kind funding for a long-term education partnership and exchange program with the Boston Arts Academy (BAA), a progressive inner-city public high school in Boston that offers training in the arts in and through all subject areas. They achieve exceptional pass rates and results, and through a visit to APS in 2010 by Linda Nathan, the founder and principal of the school, we established a firm personal and organizational friendship that led to over seven years of exchanges. On two occasions, BAA has sent a team of educators to South Africa to engage in strategic workshops, to train APS teachers and develop a revised set of values for teaching. In 2015, BAA hosted APS educator Rene Mathibe (whom we identified to assume a leadership position at APS) to attend creative leadership training for three months and shadow the teachers to learn how BAA applies their philosophy of “habits of mind,” which guides the ethos of their school. APS embraces its own “habits of mind,” which have been developed through workshops with Nathan, who introduced APS to the concept that habits and values should enhance capacities of learning.

The acronym for the framework adopted at APS is ISEE-U, which stands for innovation, self-awareness, engagement, excellence, and ubuntu. By promoting the values of “excellence through possibility,” innovation, and internal and external engagement, we encourage artists to push the boundaries of printmaking, to find their own vision, and to derive inspiration through collaboration. These values develop the capacities for leadership and agency among the students and graduates. In this context, we extend the notion of ubuntu as an ethical guide that “encourages individuals to think of themselves as inextricably bound to others, discouraging people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community.”

This understanding is integrated into the vision of APS as “a professional studio . . . where people of talent and passion can reach for excellence in art-making to achieve self-sustainability.”

The ISEE-U habits of mind, together with the requirements for senior students to develop an independent community engagement project as well as exhibit a body of resolved and technically accomplished work, enable teach-
ers and students to fully connect education with APS’s values and mission in their everyday practice. The foundational base for the model of teaching and learning that is geared to build active citizenship starts with the existing knowledge of the learners or participants. Using these values as a guide for practice and assessment as we conduct our educational and organizational program provides a unique platform for all its students and staff. APS has taken up the challenge of training artists as active and engaged citizens who can use their talents and skills to give color and texture and shape to our emerging democracy, to deepen understanding, and to reframe issues in ways that present new possibilities to the world.

Due to erratic funding, APS is a space that is in continuous flux, which makes for a rich and creative learning environment. All the students and teachers become involved in strategies that generate income and work-placement opportunities, such as public commissions, outreach, workshops, and sales of artwork. In this way, APS is able to support over 25 full- and part-time staff members and interns, to subsidize over 60 students who do not pay fees, and to co-publish print projects with up to 50 artists a year.


Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, that is about all that ever has. Just imagine the potential if we were to all join hands.

—Margaret Mead

In his introduction to the 30th anniversary edition of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Donald Macedo simply and elegantly thanked Freire “for having taught us how to read the world and for challenging us to humanize the world.” I share Macedo’s gratitude and embrace the opportunity to respond to Freire’s challenge that “to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.” An artist always acts in the absence of certainty, and profound possibilities emerge. While APS is a story of economic opportunities and visualizing a bright future, the remainder of this chapter engages some of the serious social threats facing the future for urban youth in Johannesburg. HIV and AIDS affects at least 20 percent of the youth in Gauteng, and the lure of drugs and crime is largely a result of living in poverty and unemployment. Furthermore, South Africa has
one of the highest rates of rape and violence against women and children in the world.34 The needs of the often-marginalized artist membership at APS include ongoing crises of a traumatized citizenry, such as harassment, unwanted pregnancy, jailing, theft, homelessness, discrimination, vandalism, alcohol and drug abuse, and psychological health problems. APS has responded to these issues using a range of strategies that include art therapy interventions, referrals for counseling, HIV and AIDS awareness and support programs, and enabling capacities for redress in the general learning programs.

Paper Prayers is a national arts-based HIV and AIDS awareness and action campaign that spreads its message through printmaking and craft. It was established in 1998 with a grant from the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology, as an arts and culture strategy to address the AIDS pandemic. A paper prayer is a visual poem (or a prayer) on paper. Audre Lorde says of poetry,

Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicated our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.35

The concept of a prayer on paper comes from an ancient Japanese custom of writing or drawing a symbol on a strip of paper as an offering of healing and well-being for those who are ill.

I first encountered the concept of paper prayers at an exhibition at the Howard Yezerski Art Gallery, when I was living and studying in Boston in 1987. For the exhibition, artists had contributed an anonymous artwork on a narrow strip of paper, which was then exhibited and auctioned to raise money for an AIDS hospice. A few years later, I went to Washington, DC, to see the monumental AIDS quilt, which was made from thousands of small, individual memorial panels, each serving as a testament to someone who had died of AIDS. Rarely have I felt as moved by a creative act as the one I witnessed with the unveiling of the quilt across a mile of lawn in front of the US Capitol on the National Mall.36 The memory of that event almost three decades ago has remained a powerful inspiration. According to Julie Rhoad,
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president of the NAMES Project Foundation and custodian of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, “The power of the quilt is the ability to transform statistics to souls, [so] that people can learn from and teach with it.”

A further inspiration for the South African Paper Prayers campaign came from a workshop on handmade papermaking that I gave in 1997 at the Technikon Witwatersrand (now UJ) to a community outreach group of women from Winterveld, in the northwest region of Gauteng Province. A conversation I had with one of the women in the group became the catalyst for proposing a nationwide campaign for HIV and AIDS awareness using handmade paper and printmaking, following the Japanese custom. On that occasion, Roselina Molefe and I were standing at the sink washing paper screens. I asked her how she was doing. She said (in translation), “This papermaking thing, where you can make something beautiful from rubbish, has given me life. My life was rubbish, and now I make something from nothing and can earn money.” Roselina is living positively with HIV and is one of the longest-standing members of what later became the Phumani Paper program (her story is told in chapter 3).

Applying art as a tool for learning has a demonstrated history of effectiveness in South Africa. During the apartheid years, it promoted the healing, growth, self-confidence, and imagination needed to sustain the struggle. In the post-apartheid era, art continued to contribute substantially to confronting and surmounting the HIV and AIDS pandemic, but, as with the resistance art of the 1980s, it could only be one part of a larger political effort.

Over time, Paper Prayers developed from an intensive awareness campaign, to income generation through the sales of embroidered or sewn products, to an accredited program of skills training and activism. A program such as Paper Prayers can serve as a model of adaptability for organizations attempting to combat enormous social challenges. The story of Paper Prayers advances some of the key themes of finding voice and offers a guide to engaging visual strategies for social advocacy and change.

Voicing the Unspeakable: The HIV and AIDS Pandemic

The history of the pandemic of HIV and AIDS in South Africa has been widely documented, and extensive information can be found in the numerous publications and websites on the topic. HIV was largely an invisible disease in South Africa, particularly from 1993 to 2000. The country was distracted by major political changes, and while the attention of the South African people and the world media was focused on the inspiring political
and social transformation occurring in the country, HIV was insidiously establishing itself. Although the results of the political changes were favorable, the spread of the virus was not given the attention that it deserved. During this period, government inaction, denial, and poor delivery of services for HIV and AIDS meant that the numbers of infections and deaths increased uncontrollably, causing enormous suffering as well as frustration and anger among activists, NGOs, health professionals, and civic society in general.

In 1997, President Nelson Mandela established the Inter-Ministerial Committee on AIDS, which recognized that AIDS is not just a health problem but one affecting all sectors of society. Each ministry received funding to formulate AIDS programs that were specific to their mandates. Against this background, which spawned many grassroots projects, APS entered the arena of developing an arts-based program in response to the pandemic. The grassroots struggle that overcame apartheid taught us that not structures but people must take on the big issues. I believed, therefore, that artists and educators cannot be complicit in the collective denial of the nation and that each one of us could tackle the problem of HIV and AIDS. The central challenge explored here is understanding the special capacity of the visual arts that has succeeded in breaking the silence about HIV and AIDS and countering the culture of denialism. The idea that a creative activity could give hope and prospects for the future convinced me that art can heal in tangible and intangible ways. This belief is one of the reasons I turned to the concept of paper prayers that I had first witnessed in Boston.

The deepest challenge for us at APS and arguably for all South Africans during the height of the pandemic was to change attitudes: the despair, powerlessness, and stigma that seemed to go hand in hand with carelessness and abuse around sexual behavior. It was clear that it was of no use to depend on government to address the pandemic. Ultimately the challenge lay with individual citizens. In a small way, the Paper Prayers campaign, alongside hundreds of other initiatives by citizens and extraordinary advocacy work by NGOs such as the Treatment Action Campaign and others, exemplifies the ability of participants to contribute to change in society.

The first application of the Paper Prayers campaign was in Johannesburg for World AIDS Day in December 1997, when the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) hosted an exhibition of documentary photographs by Gideon Mendel entitled *Positive Lives, Part 1*. The curator of JAG at the time, Steven Sack, who was also aware of the paper prayers made by artists in Boston, approached me to conduct a workshop and to curate an accompanying exhibition of paper prayers, similar in format to the Howard Yezerski Art Gal-
lery’s annual event. When the resulting artworks were exhibited, people were invited to give a donation and take a paper prayer home.

Because the concept and exhibition of the paper prayers became such a success, I was encouraged by Sack to write a funding proposal to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology (DACST) for a national campaign. In 1998, at the height of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, APS was awarded a grant by DACST to the value of R350,000 (roughly $30,000), to use the idea of paper prayers as a nationwide visual arts program, with the dual purpose of creating awareness of the disease and of helping to overcome the negative emotions of fear and denial. An organizing committee was set up to plan and implement the program together with other AIDS activists and counselors from various organizations. Because the funding was awarded for a nine-month program that needed to reach all nine provinces, APS allocated some of the DACST funds (R20,000, approximately $2,000 at the time) to the participating partners in each province, to conduct workshops with artists and/or members of local communities. A key objective was to be as inclusive and broad-based as possible.

Initially, the Paper Prayers national outreach campaign at APS began in partnership with the National Association of People Living with HIV and AIDS, Community AIDS Response, and AIDSLink. In the campaign’s first year, the project reached over 1,200 people through printmaking workshops in which each participant produced a series of small paper prayers. In the first nine months of the campaign, thousands of paper prayers were made. Every workshop in each province began with an interactive AIDS awareness workshop with a trained counselor and included role playing, drawing, quizzes, and awareness sessions.

Each artist responded to the challenge question “What can I do as an individual?” Example responses included giving a gift of caring, offering work to exhibit in order to raise money to assist another person, and creating awareness through discussion with neighbors or holding a workshop in a school. The ideal outcome was to have each person feel that they had been empowered to make a difference. Participants were able to keep at least one image for themselves and one to give as a gift. At least two prints were retained by the campaign, to display in World AIDS Day exhibitions.

Paper Prayers has since become an active outreach program of APS and operates as a self-supporting unit of the studio. Workshops have been offered across disciplines and cultures, both in South Africa and across its borders, to highly skilled artists and educators, health workers, street children, and rural women who have never experienced art. In every case, the result is
consistent and gives credence to Audre Lorde’s claim “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.” The aim of these workshops is to encourage people to take responsibility for their HIV status; however, the same structure could be directed to focus on other issues, such as gender advocacy, violence, teen pregnancy, or another advocacy issue. Each workshop is conducted in collaboration with a local support partner or counselor trained on the particular issue.

Since its founding, the Paper Prayers project has recognized the value of the imagination and of insistence on positive imagery, such as living and not dying. One of the most important features of the project was the reducing of stigma of HIV/AIDS and the creating of safe spaces for disclosure and support. We needed to normalize the disease in order to promote the idea of living with it positively and proactively. Subsequently, over the years, Paper Prayers has been used by APS as a tool for employing art, specifically printmaking, as a means to help participants feel that they are involved in an act of healing and thereby are becoming part of the solution to other problems.

As its very name implies, Paper Prayers is about promoting spiritual and emotional healing. However, the original grant proposal for the project contained a requirement to address “sustainability” in the form of skills training for jobs. Using craft as a means for healing the broken self had to be linked to the use of art to earn a living. Although this requirement deviated from the tenets of art therapy, the Paper Prayers campaign recognized that the foremost challenge for poor South Africans is income generation, and with this in mind, the program attempted to bridge this divide by coupling the use of art for awareness and healing with training in the skills of craft production for income generation. As many of the regional partners were not art centers but rural craft facilities, the Paper Prayers project expanded its focus on printmaking to the use of found and recycled materials and extended its range to the making of embroidered cloths with AIDS messages. Some women’s collectives were taught textile printing, batik, and embroidery, while other collectives were taught papermaking. To implement the challenge of job creation with the allocated funds, APS set up five papermaking projects that could make paper from recycled wastepaper in a stand mixer. These projects, in turn, provided the Paper Prayers campaign with handmade paper for printing.

For the national campaign in 1998, thousands of handmade paper sheets were made and purchased from the collectives. These were given to each of the provincial art centers to use in the printing of their paper prayers. Making a printed artwork on paper that was handmade from recycled materials in-
creased the value and beauty of the paper prayer, while being environmentally friendly and supporting job creation. The jobs that were created, however, would later require a significant injection of further funding and development, which led to the establishment of the Phumani Paper project. The first phase of the Paper Prayers initiative, during the height of the epidemic, was only a small step in reducing fear and denial, a small step that succeeded by joining the momentum of many other initiatives. It pointed to some powerful possibilities for future development. This phase focused on providing emotional support and visibility, rather than offering treatment or solutions.

The Embroidery Collectives

Without continued funding, APS did not have the financial or personnel resources to pursue this ambitious vision of an annual Paper Prayers campaign culminating in a national exhibition for World AIDS Day. However, we kept it going locally at APS. We were able to secure small grants and commissions for quilts and exhibitions that kept five small embroidery projects economically active. The campaign reached the rural embroidery and sewing groups in remote villages in Mpumalanga Province (Bushbuckridge and Karos workers in Tzaneen), Chivurika Embroidery group in Limpopo Province (Giyani), and Mapula Embroidery in North West Province (Winterveld). All of these projects had originally been formed as a means of income generation through craft, and Paper Prayers projects were introduced to expand the scope of the groups. (See Plates 5 and 7.)

In the rural embroidery projects we worked with, the introduction of workshops for HIV awareness in 1998 was, in most instances, the first opportunity the women had for an open forum that permitted discussion about the disease. In every rural community we approached, we found a reluctance to acknowledge the impact of HIV and AIDS. Nevertheless, the Paper Prayers campaign required the women to respond to the information provided by the workshops with visual imagery and metaphor—that is, to process their knowledge emotionally. The Paper Prayers program has spawned independent programs such as Kopenang (2000), a women’s embroidery collective that houses an AIDS orphanage; Keiskamma Trust (2002), a remarkable initiative founded in the Eastern Cape by Carol Hofmeyr; and Ikageng (2003), a collective of women in Johannesburg who received training from a Paper Prayers skills program and who successfully make and sell felt toys.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Paper Prayers workshops resulted in a significant change in attitudes for both individuals and their communities.
One example comes from a workshop held in 1998 in the Xisonga village Mphambo, in the area of Giyani in Limpopo Province. The women at the workshop requested that the young men present leave the room, as it was improper to discuss sex in the company of men. The women were then able to speak freely and asked questions that revealed the prevalence of the myths surrounding what was referred to as “slims disease.” Some of the questions included “Can you get AIDS from bathing in the same water, from toilet seats, and from hugging?” Women also asked what they could do if they were aware that the man has multiple sex partners in the city and yet refuses to use a condom.49 How could they protect themselves? How could they organize other women to be aware of the problem and to support each other? One woman shared a story of being beaten up by her husband for asking about condom use.

To counter these fears, the HIV facilitator engaged the group in role playing; humor, laughter, singing, and fun became key strategies for participation. Amid great amusement, the trainer demonstrated the use of male and female condoms and offered examples of women gathering a group of supporters by blowing a whistle when threatened with violence. At the end of the workshop, the women requested Paper Prayers T-shirts and started wearing the red ribbons to identify themselves as members of a group who have the knowledge to help and support others. Some of these women subsequently became AIDS activists and home-based caregivers.

From Awareness to Action, Some Lessons Learned from Paper Prayers

The techniques used by Paper Prayers facilitators are simple and accessible (see the appendix for a description of the workshop structure; see also Plate 6). The pleasure in overcoming the initial fear “I cannot draw, so I cannot do this” is key to harnessing positive creative energy. The feelings of pride and delight in being able to achieve a beautiful image are empowering for participants. To quote one of the facilitators,

Printmaking is a fairly simple activity lending itself to the exploration of a wide range of materials and techniques. This means anyone can be part of the paper prayer activity—like everyone can be part of the solution to changing negative attitudes towards HIV/AIDS.50

Small visual arts strategies such as the Paper Prayers program, the Siyazama Project,51 and the Break the Silence advocacy billboards proved to
be effective in addressing the impact of HIV. This is because they do not function as bureaucratic structures but, rather, coordinate and direct the work of others. The initiatives tap into the talent, ingenuity, energy, and local knowledge that South African citizens have to offer. They facilitate and assist in unlocking the capacity and resources of people to experience themselves as agents of change.

The process of making, as well as the method of learning, contributed to the ownership and application of new knowledge. Testimonies such as “Now I can buy medicine for my sick child” document the positive impact of the craft development program. They show that the therapeutic approach had great value for individuals and communities who had been enduring great suffering and had been in denial about the cause of the disease. By breaking the silence, stigma could begin to be addressed, and divided communities could begin to heal. The Paper Prayers campaign initiated a process of emotional and intellectual change that had the potential to transform lives.

According to Marie Ström, a human rights educator from the former Institute of Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), deep down, people often doubt the capacity of citizens to be real agents of change and prefer to put their faith in the government and other specialized bodies. To counter this belief and find appropriate responses of civil society to the AIDS pandemic, NGOs like IDASA worked with local government officials who set up AIDS councils, training these officials to think of themselves as “organizers not bureaucrats” and to conceive of citizens as “co-creators of community solutions.” Perhaps developing such thinking is a key challenge to present to all South Africans.

Eventually, over the years following 1997, through the extensive arts initiatives in many media (from billboards and posters to art exhibitions and documentary photographs and films), the HIV and AIDS crisis was made visible throughout South Africa. In his notorious speech at the HIV and AIDS 2000 conference in Durban, President Thabo Mbeki declared that there was no connection between HIV and AIDS, as a virus could not cause a syndrome. Instead, he adopted the dissidents’ argument that the world’s biggest killer was extreme poverty. In his response to Mbeki, the South African high court judge Edwin Cameron received an ovation when he criticized the government’s “grievous ineptitude” in its handling of HIV and AIDS. Quoting South African politician, former anti-apartheid activist, and medical doctor Mamphela Ramphele, Cameron stated, “Giving official sanction to skepticism about the cause of AIDS was irresponsibility that bordered on criminality.” When Nelson Mandela closed the conference, he urged the
country to “rise above our differences and combine our efforts to save our people,” warning that “history will judge us harshly if we fail to do so, and right now.”

In September 2008, Mbeki stepped down from his office as president of South Africa. Several ministers resigned, and others were moved into different positions. These appointments were lauded by South African and international activists as offering new hope in the struggle against AIDS.

An important problem associated with the spread of the pandemic was denial. For many people, the knowledge of their HIV-positive status translated as a death sentence due to the lack of treatment, so denial was an understandable response at the time and became an epidemic in itself. In his 2005 book *Witness to AIDS*, Judge Cameron provides a moving account of how the knowledge of one’s HIV-positive status can produce overwhelming feelings of fear, self-blame, and self-loathing. His story draws attention to how fear and stigma can conspire to produce silence and perpetuate denial about this devastating pandemic. The conclusion to his book serves to articulate the rationale for the Paper Prayers program.

AIDS has pitched our continent into a vast agony of mourning . . . And many of us, too many, have reacted mutely. We have responded to the epidemic with silence; and our doing so has rendered it and those who suffer under it unspeakable . . . Our grief is there. It is continent-wide, pandemic. But we cannot allow our grief and our bereavement to inflict further loss upon us: the loss of our full humanity, our capacity to feel and respond and support. We must incorporate our grief into our everyday living, by turning it into energy for living, by exerting ourselves as never before. Africa seeks healing. That healing lies within the power of our own actions.

I contend that the arts have the potential to respond in creative and imaginative ways that can act as “catalysts for unlocking citizen power.” This potential is evident in the confidence gained by participants in the Paper Prayers workshops, from their participation there and from becoming engaged in the campaign. The campaign enabled participants to see themselves as having agency and therefore as becoming part of the solution to the crisis.

Yet it must also be acknowledged that, like other government-funded AIDS education initiatives, the Paper Prayers campaign was not able to go far enough in confronting the epidemic. While many women have earned a living with help from the campaign and have shared with their neighbors’ knowledge about AIDS and how to treat it, the campaign could not rea-
reasonably expect to eliminate denial and fear in communities. Nevertheless, it demonstrated some of the ways in which a program such as Paper Prayers can serve as a model of adaptability for organizations attempting to combat enormous social challenges.

Looking back on the outcomes nearly two decades later, I believe that Paper Prayers played a significant role in breaking the silence and addressing denial for the many participants. As an awareness intervention, the national Paper Prayers campaign and its subsequent programs met their limited objectives. The participants’ statements and actions (as documented in Plates 3–8) demonstrate a significant increase in their awareness, their ability to absorb new knowledge, and their confidence in their ability to seek treatment or to support others to do so. In addition to these anecdotal, unmeasurable emotional benefits, more quantifiable outcomes, such as skills training and income generation, have led to improved livelihoods, thereby putting knowledge into action. Since its first introduction in 1997, the trajectory of the Paper Prayers initiative has been from awareness to advocacy and from female-based education to education involving both men and women. It has adapted parallel to the pace of change of government policy with regard to the rollout of testing and access to treatment.

To keep alive the spark of art as activism, APS conducts at least one Paper Prayers AIDS awareness workshop per year for every class, as part of its required program of study. Apart from increasing awareness, the workshops help to recruit volunteers in the APS outreach program, which supports the design and production of crafts in the Ikgageng and other Paper Prayers outreach projects. APS continues the Paper Prayers initiative as an outreach program, not only in response to the HIV and AIDS crisis but also as a tool to counter social injustice generally. Self-funded through commissions and sales of craft products such as embroidered cloths, quilts, and soft toys, Paper Prayers has, over the years, generated livelihoods for about 40 women infected or affected by HIV.

Once the program had provided the initial base of support for change, it became clear that something more was needed. Building on the concept of agency—the ability to make purposeful choices, to find the conviction to act with conviction on newfound knowledge—was the challenge to any further expansion of the program. A major stumbling block to instilling agency was the limited structure of the first two phases, which primarily targeted women. Except for the APS workshops with students and street children, males were rarely full participants during the first two phases. As van der Vliet notes,
It is one of the ironies of South Africa that a country with one of the most gender-sensitive constitutions . . . should also experience very high levels of violence against women . . . The inability to negotiate safer sex because of gender inequality is a major driving force in the HIV/AIDS epidemic.  

In the South African context, faced with the magnitude of the AIDS pandemic, APS, through the Paper Prayers program, challenges the role of art to reach beyond awareness and beyond communities that focus primarily on women. The compelling issue here would seem to be about life and death, not merely education and emotional and skills support. Can art do more? Can it confront the patriarchy and begin to change behavior?

As Paper Prayers workshops continued at APS, it became apparent that the student population is predominantly male. These young men consistently revealed ignorance about their sexuality and choices around AIDS, despite the fact that many of them have participated in HIV and AIDS awareness workshops or have been exposed to the national campaigns on these issues. Since 2004, APS partnered with organizations specifically directed toward education development with men, such as Engender Health and its subsidiaries Men as Partners and Sonke Gender Justice (One Man Can campaign). In this way, the Paper Prayers program at APS has developed into experiential learning placements and internships for APS third-year learners to integrate HIV and AIDS education and activism into the APS curriculum.

Some students, for example, teach art classes for two hours per week to orphans and vulnerable children at after-school programs organized by NOAH (Nurturing Orphans of AIDS for Humanity) and called “arks.” This engaged-learning project that partners a young artist with AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in a mutually giving relationship aims to achieve a level of growth that has been described by the coordinator of the program, Shannin Antonopoulo, as a “transformation in being.” In the pilot project with teenagers, the evaluations of some of the participants express profound changes in aspects of self and personal values. For example, in interviews with some of the APS senior learners who participated as interns or “big brothers,” there was recognition of personal transformation.

It wasn’t my choice, but by the time I got there I thought this is where I belong. This is where I learned that art does not belong to me but I have to transfer the skills to other people.
Despite the success of these new initiatives, employing Paper Prayers as an AIDS Action program at APS inevitably experienced setbacks. In November 2005, I became all too aware of the limitations of the Paper Prayers campaign in addressing the pandemic. Faced with the death from AIDS of a young, vibrant APS artist and educator, I experienced anger, frustration, and a sense of failure. One of our most talented graduates and teachers had failed to absorb the lessons he himself had taught. The question that I kept asking was, why did he not seek counseling or treatment? It seemed that the strategy we had used in the Paper Prayers campaign was not effective enough to counter the overwhelming effects of denial and stigma he must have felt.

In memory of this young APS educator, I set about designing another intervention with APS artists that would go beyond the therapy-based approach.

The new intervention responded to the question, if art is to contribute to saving lives, are different approaches needed when the audience is primarily young men rather than rural women? As noted previously, approximately 75–80 percent of APS students are young men. Many gender-based issues that have surfaced over the years can be traced to the urban and township culture from which the majority come. The machismo of township youth has many negative manifestations, among them gangsterism and violence against women. Therefore, APS began to focus gender training on men and shifted the emphasis from AIDS awareness to the gender-based issues surrounding this disease.

A Story: The Reclaiming Lives Project

In April 2006, I was one of five finalists who were each awarded R25,000 (about $2,000) by the Sasol Wax Corporation to produce a body of artwork for an annual South African art exhibition and prize. Finalists were required to use wax, one of Sasol’s products, as a theme or medium. I chose to use the significant publicity that this competition generated to highlight the role of artists in the fight against AIDS. Although the award was for individual artists, I decided to use the funds to initiate a new AIDS awareness project. Reclaiming Lives, my project for the exhibition, was a collaboration with the 100 artists active at APS at the time. In this corporate-supported project, our collective discovered that the process of designing and making the work for the installation included the multidimensions of research, discussion, attending awareness workshops, reflecting on the process, and, of course, art-making.

In the course of the Reclaiming Lives project, I wanted to question why
young people who are directly exposed to knowledge about HIV and AIDS are not changing their behavior. Many of the young men in the early HIV and AIDS workshops openly admitted to having unprotected sex, believing that AIDS would not affect them. Some justified their choices by quoting abounding myths, such as that it has not been proven that HIV causes AIDS, that condoms are a carryover of colonial oppression for curbing the black population, that sleeping with a virgin cures AIDS, and that Africans from outside the borders of South Africa are responsible for the spread of AIDS. These beliefs are prevalent among both the older artists and the new students that join APS every year—evidence of the tenacity of the mythology surrounding AIDS. Political leaders and role models in South Africa, whether they be Thabo Mbeki or Jacob Zuma, may not help to reverse these myths and can do quite the opposite. Zuma’s personal life suggested to young people that it is acceptable to have multiple sexual partners, as that is a “cultural” privilege for men.

Art alone cannot change this sort of mind-set, but the Reclaiming Lives project set out to show that employing the attributes of visual art as a component can contribute meaningfully to a campaign. During the first phase of the project, each artist was asked to create a symbolic portrait, an etching that would pay homage to someone who had died of AIDS. Each participant’s choice of honoring someone in relationship to themselves—whether a relative, friend, or neighbor—had the effect of normalizing and personalizing the pandemic. The process of reflecting on the life that has been lost honors the qualities of that person’s contribution to one’s life, and the making of an art image consolidates the acknowledgment of connectedness into an experiential action. The goal was to catalyze each participant’s choice, so that the artists might reflect on their own lives in relation to the pandemic.

Each participating artist made small portrait etchings on steel plates. These portraits were then printed and also compiled into an artist’s book, where each participant was able to honor someone who had died, as well as to honor themselves for making an informed choice about being tested. The process of researching and imaging a life lost is an action that makes visible the invisible and that acts to achieve change. The change can result in a renewed engagement with the impact of HIV and AIDS, and the medium of that deeper awareness in this case is art-making.

As with the Paper Prayers campaign, the process required that each participant attended pre-counseling workshops and focus groups to discuss the process of choosing to undergo an HIV test. An introduction to art therapy, which included some interactive groups using music, was provided, and
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teacher and facilitator Stompie Selibe devised a process he referred to as the “talking drum.” People were given the option of participating in the testing on-site the following week or going more anonymously to a center off-site (a few blocks’ walk from APS). New Start, a mobile testing unit, came to APS for three consecutive days. To include all the studio members’ participation, the APS’s administration offices closed for the few days of the testing period. Each office was used for a counseling room, and the computer laboratory was set up to do the finger-prick HIV test. After eight weeks of personal research, discussion, image making, workshops, and counseling, 50 out of 100 participants agreed to be tested. The response was significantly higher in this campaign than in every other testing program recorded by the mobile testing organization New Start, which indicated (anecdotally) that the average response to voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) at most venues is not often more than 10 percent of the target group. Some participants who indicated that they were not ready to be tested asked for another opportunity later.

Over the course of three months at APS, we countered denial and broke the silence. Studio members were talking to each other, and many felt safe enough to have a test, while the mature artists who had disclosed their HIV-positive status offered support groups and peer counseling. Each person was asked to grapple with their own decision about testing by making a second personal artwork that explored their feelings or personal choices to test or not to test. Their anonymous monoprints were dipped in wax (to protect and/or preserve) and then hinged to the etched portrait tribute plates. The portraits were partly concealed by the transparent waxed overlay prints, which revealed the etched plates underneath them. These plates, with their overlays that could also be lifted by the viewer, were mounted in the form of a five-meter-long (over 16-foot) tribute wall.

My own etchings for the Sasol finalist exhibition were images of “mourning sunflowers,” hung in a series of five panels. (See plate 9.) Mounted on the back of my prints were the tribute portraits that faced the wall of disclosure, or tribute wall. Thematically, the three-part installation moved from Mourning Our Future (my series of sunflower prints) to Honouring Lives (the tribute portraits) to Reclaiming Lives (the etched plates with waxed print overlays), visualizing the progress from the expression of loss to action and change. (See Plate 10.) The fourth part of the installation expanded the project’s reach into the five women’s embroidery collectives affiliated with the Paper Prayers campaign. Students printed their portraits onto cloth, leaving panels for additions by the participants of the collectives. These cloths were then embroi-
dered and beaded and were displayed as an additional component that accompanied the exhibition. They were subsequently sold to raise awareness and funding for the collectives.

The techniques used in the project were symbolic. Etching is a contemplative, slow process that eats away at a drawing to reveal the image. It is visible only after a corrosive destructive chemical reaction on the steel surface of the etching plate. Steel is a permanent, virtually indestructible material. However, through the etching and printing process, artists “bring the image to life” and give the image expression. The process is labor-intensive and requires pushing ink into the etched lines and carefully wiping it away at the surface of the plate, before printing the image through a handpress. Giving more care and sensitivity to the application and wiping yields a more expressive impression. The process can be seen as a relevant metaphor for living one’s life. In contrast to the quick, simple method of making a monotype impression of an artwork constituting a paper prayer, etching requires extended rumination, which is, on a level, parallel with taking the time to gather the courage to be tested. (See Plate 8.)

In August 2006, shortly before the exhibition opened in the garage gallery at Sasol headquarters, Leah Nchabeleng, an activist and organization development consultant, interviewed 3 of the 100 artists involved in the Reclaiming Lives project. All felt strongly about the importance of having an HIV test, not simply for the sake of knowing one's status, but as a journey to understanding and accepting themselves. One interviewee stated,

Until when are we going to run away from this thing? We always have excuses [for not getting tested] . . . [With this project] we didn't have any excuses—you just had to deal with yourself and with what you want from life. I proved that I love myself by going through with the testing. You learn about yourself, your friends, your family, your support system—not just what your status is. You also learn who you really care about and who you really know—and you discover your own strength. It was a healing experience.65

In a statement that accompanied the exhibition, Nchabeleng concluded,

Through the journey presented by participating in the Sasol Wax Award, artists were able to consider their own lives and act in ways to prolong them. They were able to find meaning and peace with the untimely and often unacknowledged deaths of loved ones, and to cre-
ate a catalyst for families and friends to begin to re-examine their own lives, fears, biases and actions.66

The point has been made earlier that art alone cannot change an individual’s mind-set; change happens in concert with other kinds of interventions. The Reclaiming Lives project demonstrates the value of participation and deep engagement with the various processes of creating the images and the skills required in learning new ways of making, all of which can contribute meaningfully as catalysts for change.

For the period of activity during the Reclaiming Lives project, the individuals experienced change, both in themselves and as a collective at APS. The comments recorded in the artists’ handmade book of portraits and statements testify to this change. Motsamai Thabane commented, “I feel relieved and healed because this project helped me deal with my feelings about the loss of my brother and to use this knowledge to empower other people with the understanding of the pandemic.”67

The opportunity to make a work to pay homage to someone who has died was key to the success of the project. The premise of the Reclaiming Lives project was that testimonies and AIDS activism, translated into creative participation, generate renewal and healing and, in some cases, may even save lives. The project demonstrated that art has the capacity to create conditions to foster new, positive habits that can extend and enhance lives.

The recurring theme of this study is that the “capacity to aspire,” as termed by Arjun Appadurai (2004), is a key to freedom. In the context of this project, aspiration, hope, and imagination, as explored in the various stages of researching and making artwork to honor one’s own life and another’s, provide the evidence for the claim that the visual arts can play a role in educating and facilitating the experience of voice and empowerment. The following written tributes and the images accompanying them (figs. 2.4a–c) are examples of this evidence:

A Tribute to my best friend

I pay tribute to my best friend because she lost her life. There are moments in life when you miss someone so much that you just want to pick [an image] from your dreams and hug them for real. It’s true that we don’t know what we’ve lost until we lose it.

My best friend was so brave and had the brightest future. We had the best conversations every day together.
Figs. 2.4a–c. Paper Prayers from APS by Phillip Mabote and Jabu Tshuma, 2006. (Courtesy of APS.)
In every challenge there comes a choice—to let the challenge break you or build you. I have realized what is important in my life—appreciating, surviving and being thankful for health every day.

—Phillip Mabote (December 2008)

A Tribute to my uncle

He never told anyone about his status. So he lost his wife, son and also died from infecting them. He left a daughter behind.

The three “x’s” represent the deaths and the o is his daughter’s life he left behind. (The uncle drove a buggy).

—Jabu Tshuma (APS student, December 2008)

The Reclaiming Lives project was a first step in demanding that the APS students who had information about HIV and AIDS and acted as Paper Prayers trainers address the seriousness of life and death in their own lives. The learning process for the student artist became a journey of discovery to find a balance between reflection and introspection, on the one hand, and, on the other, to come to an understanding that they have the power to act to save their own or another’s life through the choices they make. This learning became more deeply embedded in the establishment of an AIDS advocacy unit at APS, funded annually by the South African Development Fund in Boston. This development enabled the capacity for APS to take on additional advocacy projects, such as expanding HIV prevention strategies, and to include them as a core component of the students’ three-year learning program.

In his 2015 World AIDS Day message, Michel Sidibé, executive director of UNAIDS, stated that for the first time, we can celebrate the possibility of the eradication of HIV and therefore the end of AIDS in the foreseeable future.

The good news is that we now have what it takes to break this epidemic and keep it from rebounding—to prevent substantially more new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths and to eliminate HIV-related stigma and discrimination.68

Mark Heywood, director of Section 27 and National Council member of the Treatment Action Campaign, is more cautious with the declaration of success. In his response to Sidibé’s 2012 World AIDS Day statement, Heywood
confronts the reality of serious problems that threaten the success of HIV and AIDS awareness in South Africa. South Africa is still home to almost a quarter of the world’s HIV infections (affecting 5.1 million people), according to UNAIDS. Heywood acknowledges the significant progress that has taken place, in that 1.7 million patients are currently on treatment, due to a political commitment from the Zuma government. The current South African landscape is almost unrecognizable from that of 2000, when global activists staged the first global march for treatment at the international AIDS conference in Africa.

Heywood warns that because of “insufficient attention to the quality of HIV prevention and treatment programs, dynamite has been built into the edifice of the AIDS response—and the clock is ticking.” He points to a multitude of dangers, such as poor retention of patients on antiretroviral treatments (ARVs), poor follow-up by patients and health workers administering ARVs, unmonitored side effects, the impact of health systems collapsing on people’s ability to obtain their prescribed medicines, depleting drug stocks that are not always replenished, and the absence of publicly financed health messaging and the use of messages that do not sufficiently explain the need for adherence to treatment. Heywood further stresses that social mobilization and respect for fundamental human rights approaches are being threatened.

Julie Ellison expresses the complexity of creative responses to trauma in her powerful article “The Humanities and the Public Soul.”

The arts and humanities have been spoken of as offering “solace” in a time of personal and collective trauma. But solace is complicated, not simple. The public soul needs the expression of grief, witness, and testimony, yes. But it also needs action, including educational action.

As far as the Paper Prayers program is concerned, the transformation from awareness into action and advocacy responded to given circumstances and the growing awareness of those facilitating the program concerning needs that had not yet been addressed. Like any such project, Paper Prayers needed to be able to reflect on and respond to these different needs in order to be sustainable and continue to revisit its initial objectives. No community-based art project can afford to lack such adaptability if it hopes to have the time needed for the communities it serves to gain agency. The one-off intervention of a three-hour Paper Prayers workshop can only introduce a new language for
and way of integrating painful and complex issues. For meaningful change to be sustainable, time and an ongoing, engaged and participatory process using a phased approach is necessary for inculcating agency.

Apart from the traumas and tragic deaths suffered through fire, AIDS, and suicide, loss has also been felt at APS through constant disappointment regarding funding and change of government policies. However, many participants refused to become victims of their circumstances and gained remarkable strength and resilience through these experiences. Artists are able to facilitate the capacity of dreaming and imagination in others. If there is a belief in the capacity to aspire, goals can be achieved. Creative practice and art-making provide a methodology for transforming aspirations into real and practical goals. The idea that people are not passive beneficiaries but active participants in an ongoing process of self-creation is part of the hidden strength of survival and can be offered as a valuable objective for development practice. In this context, empowerment can be redefined as the ability to become an agent of one’s own life and to achieve self-actualization. Agency cannot be given; the concept “I can do” has to be internalized and expressed by each individual.

A “Story of Now”: Paper Prayers Responds

Paper Prayers has become a visual tool for an arts-based response to trauma in a range of situations. During the height of the 2016 student protests against the government’s insufficient response to funding student access to higher education, many universities deployed private security firms that, together with police, used excessive violence on protesting students. Many students were traumatized by the violence and prevented from returning to campuses. An academic from the Department of Social Work at UJ approached me to train her senior students to facilitate Paper Prayers workshops on campus. I had given her students a Paper Prayers workshop and a talk on visual methods some years previously, and at a gathering of concerned academics, we acknowledged that there needed to be more constructive ways to facilitate dialogues that enable students, including those who were not protesting, to be heard. She had seen the statement that our arts faculty issued on the #FeesMustFall protest at universities, the preamble of which reads,

As a creative community and a Faculty committed to community engagement and social justice we are deeply concerned that the right to free expression and dignity is compromised on our campuses, and
we can no longer stand by and be silent. We believe that the arts and design disciplines present unique opportunities for fostering dialogue, as we deal with the practical, political and symbolic elements of spaces, media, identity, and culture.

The lecturer, along with other socially engaged academics, suggested that we offer a series of Paper Prayers workshop on the lawns of the campus. This would provide a safe space for traumatized and other students who are desperate to be heard. An intervention for “creative conversations” through paper prayers was galvanized.