

## REVIEWS

Daniel Magaziner, *The Art of Life in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017), 376 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-1-86914-359-6

---

For some years before the introduction of the 1953 Bantu Education Act, South African educational theorists had been debating the requirements of what was then termed 'native' education. Internationally, it was a debate that had played out in the US post-emancipation, and it was arising elsewhere in colonial centres, concerning black African and indigenous populations. Should these groups be pressured to adopt the metropolitan values of the modern industrialised world, or instead be offered an education that encouraged the preservation of their heritage – not only their languages, but their pre-industrial traditions, beliefs and practices? Should education preserve difference or instead actively further the creation of an integrated society linked by shared beliefs? Was there a 'native genius', a collective African identity that a dedicated educational system ought to foster, in order that it did not die out?

In South Africa, many of the early debates were charitable in intent, if patronising. But with the arrival of the Nationalist government and the legislation of apartheid, these debates took on a distinctly negative cast. Under the terms of Christian National Education, dedicated educational systems for different races were envisaged as playing their part in a divinely ordained social hierarchy; separate development meant unequal development. Following the 1953 legislation, many of the leading mission schools that had formerly provided 'native' education were closed, funding for black schools was pegged at pre-1948 levels, and apartheid education policy increasingly began to distinguish between the nation's racial groups on the basis of what was deemed their appropriate social position. Would they ultimately be labourers or professionals? It became clear that the concept of a 'Bantu' education system was driven by the belief that the white population would benefit from an intellectually demanding education while their black peers would not.

These debates concerning the special educational needs of the African had interesting consequences for 'art' education. Whether the argument was driven by a belief in preserving a premodern rural African identity, or by a cruder desire not to waste educational resources on a labouring class, the results were the same: fewer years were dedicated to the education of the black child, academic subjects were limited, and an emphasis was placed on the teaching of practical skills, or *crafts*. In schools for white children, where room was allowed for practical, creative activity, that activity instead took the form of *art* lessons.

In differentiating in this way between art and craft, educationalists drew on a hierarchical distinction that was age-old. According to this discourse, art and craft

were significantly different: craft was understood as work with one's hands that resulted in the production of functional items – chairs, spoons, baskets, fabric – and often multiples of such. It was rule-governed, its process requiring the successful application of technique. The craftsman employed manual dexterity acquired through frequent practice, producing objects that worked and that were simultaneously visually pleasing.

Art, by contrast, was conceived of as the product of the mind – an idea, inspiration, even genius. The translation of that inspiration into physical form was something of an irrelevance when discussing its fundamental nature. Art was that which arose from individual moments of creative thought. It was not repeatable; it involved endless experiment. Originality and innovation were its keynotes, not repetition. Most importantly for the distinction with craft, the art object was not designed for use; its sole purpose was to be looked at. It was the functionless painting, drawing, piece of sculpture.

South African educational theorists harnessed this art/craft distinction to their general mission to differentiate education racially. The practical lessons of white children would involve experiment in painting, drawing and sculptural work in various media. The corresponding lessons for black children, it was determined, would be focused on crafts; the term often used for this element of the syllabus – 'handwork' – was highly significant. Whether the motives were bigoted and repressive or more well-meaningly nostalgic, the results were the same: by mid-century, the creative teaching and learning in black versus white schools looked very different. In black schools, craft or 'handwork' was largely confined to the primary school and involved fashioning spoons, trays or other implements from wood, weaving baskets from grass, modelling bowls from clay. Insofar as two-dimensional work was done, it rarely progressed beyond tracing simple line drawings or copying them from the chalkboard. In white schools, the education was in art. This training frequently extended well into secondary school level, and at all stages children would be encouraged to produce drawings, paintings and three-dimensional objects that ignored considerations of 'correctness' and instead celebrated the freedom of the imagination. For white children, the emphasis was on stimulating the creative mind, while for black children the focus was on obedience to rule and the production of something useful.

Daniel Magaziner's *The Art of Life in South Africa*, a study of the Ndaleni Art School, is an account of a rebellion against this view of black art education, a rebellion from within the system. This specialist art school was founded in 1952 by Jack Grossert, an art inspector from the Natal Education Department. It was formed as an adjunct to the already existing Ndaleni Teachers' Training College, a Methodist mission college near Richmond in KwaZulu-Natal, where a minimal element of training in crafts already formed part of the syllabus. Grossert's aim in founding the art centre was to rethink this part of the syllabus and urge a much greater emphasis on creative education. As Magaziner shows, he was very aware of enlightened international discourse regarding the benefits of art education for the child and was keen to overcome the limitations of the existing curriculum in black schools by offering teachers a richer and freer sense of what this education might involve. Although dedicated to

teacher training, this centre was, until the late 1960s, the only serious adult art education centre for black students in South Africa.

Much of Magaziner's discussion focuses on the sheer struggle underlying Ndaleni's art education. He returns again and again to the shortages – of materials and of equipment – that beset both teachers and students. Clay had to be dug from the ground, wood hewn from cut trees or cadged from local sources, paper sourced from the unwanted leftovers of local businesses. Students were encouraged, in the words of their lecturer, to '[make] something out of nothing' (p. 166). Both the funding constraints at the centre and the certain prospect of such constraints in the 'Bantu' schools encouraged austerity and a working within modest limits. Despite this, Magaziner argues, the centre significantly enriched the lives of its students. His title borrows from a student's way of summing this up: Ndaleni was more than an art school; it was a school which engaged and transformed one's whole life.

A number of teachers came and went from the school in the first years, but from 1963 until its closure the centre was run by Lorna Peirson, and stability was established. Drawing on Peirson's extensive documentation of the syllabus for official purposes, Magaziner makes clear just how thorough this education was. Influenced by the Bauhaus, it offered a preliminary study of media and techniques. From there it went on to offer training in painting and drawing, collage, modelling and sculptural work in a variety of media, including papier mâché, clay, wood and cement.

There was theoretical study too, assessed by essays and exams (and supported by a library that began with Peirson's own collection). Peirson introduced students to theories of child educational development, focusing heavily on the work of Viktor Lowenfeld. And she and her assistant teacher, Craig Lancaster, who joined the centre in 1973, offered a rich survey of art history, in the course of the year covering a wide range of schools, both historical and modern. Meanwhile, visits to local museums and exhibitions further widened the students' frame of reference.

Such a syllabus might have been unremarkable in teacher-training centres for the white population. But it was remarkable for a training centre operating within the 'Bantu education' system. Where the official syllabus called for primary school children to produce useful objects using grass, horn, bone, clay and beads, useful objects scarcely featured in the Ndaleni syllabus. This is a crucial point that might have received more emphasis in Magaziner's history. Introducing the centre, he notes that 'at Ndaleni, they studied grasswork, beadwork, bonework, painting, drawing, woodcarving, and claywork, among other subjects' (p. 3), but what emerges from the archival evidence is a significant *avoidance* of parts of this curriculum, specifically that which fell under the category of craft. In the mid-1960s, Peirson noted that in the space of one year she couldn't cover everything listed in the official syllabus, 'therefore the usual crafts are omitted and emphasis is heavily placed on the expressive arts: painting, modelling, sculpture' (p. 157). The extent to which Ndaleni ignored the narrow prescriptions of 'Bantu education' policy is striking.

This raises the question of Ndaleni's relationship to other South African art education institutions. Given its aim to situate itself within a larger art education network, unconstrained by apartheid policy, how did its educational practice compare to

that of the tertiary-level art schools aimed at a white constituency, and to those dedicated to the training of professional artists rather than art teachers? This would have been a book-length study in itself but it would have been fascinating to hear more about the issue. The visual evidence is interesting – despite the commitment to ‘art’ at Ndaleni, there was a noticeable difference between work produced there and that produced at institutions designed for white art students. Characteristic of Ndaleni – and of other training centres for black students, like Rorke’s Drift or the Community Arts Project – was a dedication to stylistic tropes derived from northern European Expressionism, an interest in biblical themes (not only at the Methodist-controlled Ndaleni), a commitment to figurativeness (human and animal) and a relative lack of interest in radical abstraction.

The latter is especially interesting given the times: in a period of high modernism, when radical abstraction was ubiquitous in the Western art world and within many art schools, it was relatively rare within the South African centres catering specifically for black students. Was there some sense in which the institution’s training shaped itself to the racial identity of its student body? Was it perhaps partly shaped *by* its student body? One of a number of exhibition visits Magaziner records is that of Ndaleni (and later Rorke’s Drift) graduate Paul Sibisi to an exhibition of the radically abstract art of Kevin Atkinson, lecturer at the University of Cape Town’s Michaelis School of Fine Art. Sibisi, while interested in Atkinson’s abstraction, was not motivated to emulate it and Magaziner seems to support this position, noting Sibisi’s awareness of ‘Atkinson’s rather obscure point’ (p. 256). Obscure or not, Atkinson was a highly influential figure in a fellow South African art training institution of the time and many of his students *were* being persuaded to emulate his work. What accounted for the contrast? Magaziner’s tacit argument appears to be that material shortages were a defining feature of Ndaleni’s art education, but there is arguably more to it than this. The disparity in conceptions of contemporary art practice remains an interesting issue and might have been probed further.

As Magaziner notes, to date Ndaleni has received significantly less scholarly attention than corresponding art education institutions like Rorke’s Drift or the various community arts centres. A 1999 exhibition at the Tatham Gallery in Pietermaritzburg was dedicated to the school’s history and output, and an excellent catalogue accompanied it,<sup>1</sup> but apart from this, Ndaleni has featured little in revisionist accounts of the postwar South African art world. Magaziner suggests three explanations for this neglect: firstly, that the school did not foster interracial creative cooperation (teachers were white, students black, but the two groups did not work together on projects); secondly, that it did not produce a body of identifiable ‘protest’ art that signalled its students’ political awareness; and thirdly, that, situated as it was within the apartheid system, producing African teachers for African schools, it came to be seen by some as operating in collusion with that system.

---

1 B. Bell and B. Clark, *Ndaleni Art School: A Retrospective* (Pietermaritzburg: Tatham Art Gallery, 1999).

Why an institution that operates within a hated system should on those grounds be ignored is an interesting question. But it is surely not an operative question, in this case anyway, since what *The Art of Life in South Africa* reveals is just how consistently Ndaleni sought to question the orthodoxy. Throughout his study, Magaziner seeks to counter possible criticism of the 'Bantu authority's' Ndaleni, and to argue for the importance of his history of it, by emphasising the school's vitality and encouragement of creative freedom, its offer of sanctuary from the restrictions of apartheid society.

The book's life-affirming theme gives rise to more biographical detail, perhaps, than is needed, and to some discussions of creative activity that are insufficiently critical, but what emerges from this important study – over and above the rich detail of its history – is a great irony: that the absurd and unpleasant strictures of apartheid education policy galvanised some inspired educationalists to establish within the 'Bantu education' system an inspiring and highly successful art school that, from 1952 to 1981, offered trainee teachers a radical alternative to the system's notion of 'handwork'. The centre was energising; *how* it was energising calls for special emphasis. Magaziner eloquently makes the case for Ndaleni as an inspirational environment. What also needs to be emphasised is that, secure within the system, this training centre promoted a syllabus that ran entirely contrary to apartheid prescriptions.

**Anna Tietze**

*Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town*



