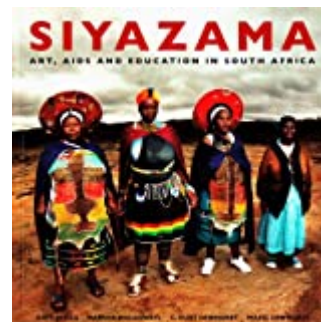


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kate Wells, Marsha MacDowell, C. Kurt Dewhurst, Marit Dewhurst. *Siyazama: Art, AIDS and Education in South Africa*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012. Illustrations. 170 pp. \$38.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86914-222-3.



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Craft Education: Empowering Women, Addressing Needs in Kwa-Zulu Natal

This beautifully designed publication is a joint project of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Michigan State University (MSU) Museum, and represents one outcome of their multiyear, institutional collaboration on Siyazama, an arts-based health education project involving female traditional artists in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. Community-based needlework and craft projects established to alleviate poverty have a long history in South Africa, contributing substantially to the country's contemporary cultural production in the process.[1] In the mid-1990s, Kate Wells, a faculty member in the Graphic Design Department at the M. L. Sultan Technikon in Durban (now DUT), organized a series of workshops at the African Art Centre and elsewhere in the province to address the dwindling market for the region's crafts. By the late 1990s, it had become clear that in the face of the mounting AIDS epidemic, economic empowerment had to be joined with HIV/AIDS education. In response, Wells launched a new arts initiative in 1998, which the women named âSiyazamaâ (âwe are tryingâ in isiZulu). Still active fifteen years later, Siyazama exem-

plifies the value of creative community-based projects in ameliorating problems generated by poverty and disease. This volume celebrates Siyazama's sustained contributions to poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS education, and confirms its premise that arts-based strategies can be used to address real needs in our worldâ (p. 8).

The body of the text consists of seven essays on the history and impact of Siyazama and eleven individual artist interviews with the project's long-term participants. The essays by Wells and by a range of her collaborators are designed to support the second premise of the book: that collaboration is central to a project's viability and to the development of approaches that can be adopted beyond national borders. Although informative, these essays are short and quite general. Clearly, the book is meant to reach a broad audience, and is not intended as an academic publication, despite the impressive qualifications of the writers. As the preface makes clear, the goal of the book is to âbring to wider audiences ... the lessons learned through the Siyazama projectâ (p. 8). To avoid any suggestion of singling Siyazama out

as the most significant of such efforts, Wells and Marsha MacDowell have included an addendum, "Selected Craft, Health and Economic Projects in South Africa," which summarizes twelve projects and which increases the book's value as a resource.

The "Opening Essay" is jointly authored by Wells; MacDowell, curator of the MSU Museum and professor of art and art history at MSU; and Marit Dewhurst, director of art education and assistant professor in the Art Department at City College in New York. The essay details the innovative strategy that Wells developed to introduce HIV/AIDS education into a culture whose gender relations were governed by *hlonipha*, which "forbids open communication about issues of sex" (p. 14). Wells's approach was to cast a wide net and to increase the efficacy of the workshops by including theater activists, health practitioners, and traditional healers. As the lines of communication began to open up, the women received guidance on incorporating the messages about the disease into their wirework baskets, beaded dolls, and narrative sculptural tableaux. As the essay points out, the organizers found that the tableaux offered the best opportunity to depict the women's experiences with HIV/AIDS. These included scenes of negative behaviors, such as domestic violence, rape, and child abuse. Although the project's original funder, Tony Reilly of the British Council office in Durban, wondered if such works would prove saleable, in fact the works with messages about HIV/AIDS, however disturbing in some instances, created new audiences and expanded markets. In short, the women were empowered by their new knowledge and enjoyed increased status in their communities through income from sales of their artwork. Once the success of the linking of health education and craft had been clearly established, Siyazama's methodology was successfully imported to projects in Uganda and Kenya, and its message spread widely through international exhibitions. These developments are detailed in subsequent essays.

I found it curious that while acknowledging the importance of the sculptural tableaux in narrating the women's personal experiences with HIV/AIDS, there are no images of those works in the book. In addition, few of the numerous details of single figurative dolls highlight the dolls' beaded AIDS ribbons. It is likely that the authors chose not to single out individual makers' artworks in order to emphasize the collective nature of the project. However, surely the works collected for the MSU Museum could have been illustrated. Instead, the photographs seem to have little relationship to the text.

Apart from the fine portraits of the individual artists in the "Artists' Profiles" section, the majority of the photographs are close-ups of beads, depictions of the region's landscape and houses, and portraits of children. One or two images for each of these subjects would have been sufficient to provide the ambiance of the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

The essay "The Siyazama Project in Museum Exhibitions: Impacting Art Education and AIDS Awareness in Communities around the World," authored by MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst, director of Arts and Cultural Initiatives and professor of English at MSU, discusses the origin and dissemination of their exhibition *Siyazama: Traditional Arts, AIDS and Education in South Africa* (MSU Museum; exact date not supplied). The objects collected by Marit Dewhurst for the museum beginning in 2000 formed the core of this traveling exhibition. The text also mentions several other important exhibitions and their attendant programming that took place in the early 2000s and contributed to the increasing role of museums as "agents of change." Neither MacDowell and Kurt Dewhurst's essay nor Marit Dewhurst's piece, "The Siyazama Project: Art for Communication, Understanding and Advocacy," offer information on how the collaboration came about or how it was structured. Again, the emphasis throughout is on informing a general audience about the ways the arts can move beyond factual medical information about HIV/AIDS to understanding and advocacy within a given culture.

The rather rote essay by Kenneth Fhatuwani Netshiombo, executive dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design at DUT, praises Siyazama for empowering women and for serving as "an exemplar [*sic*] of how an engaged university responds to both local and global needs" (p. 47). More information about the ways the university supports this project would have been welcome, as the fit between an academic institution and a grassroots economic empowerment project can be an awkward one, despite the opportunities the latter can offer for engaged learning and research. Fortunately, DUT Associate Professor Ian Sutherland's survey of the changing curricula in design education discusses the establishment of the research area, "Appropriate Design Education for Sustainable Development ... with Siyazama as its flagship activity," and its value for practice-based research by both students and faculty (p. 57).

As useful as the essays are in providing a general sense of the scope and impact of Siyazama, the heart of the book is found in the "Artists' Profiles" section: the

portraits, biographies, and statements by the individual artists. Their comments speak to their pride in their ability to use their art to share their knowledge with their communities. However, the women rarely refer to the resistance to their messages that they include in their tableaux. Another topic concerns the competition that has surfaced among the women, which has led to design innovation and more creative approaches to their craft. For example, Khishwepi Sithole observes that “competition helps because it inspires you to come up with new ideas” (p. 113). The strained relationships that without doubt have also resulted are not addressed. The portrait of the most widely known of the artists, Lobolile Ximba, hints at the text’s goal to emphasize collectivity over competition. In 2004, Ximba received the Brett Kebble top Craftsperson Award for her beaded crucifixes symbolizing the sacrifice of women’s lives to the disease, yet she is depicted with one of them slung across her leg as she sits on the floor adjusting an anklet. Surely the crucifixes could have been shown elsewhere in this lavishly illustrated publication.[2] In the end, the courage and initiative of these women artists would have been more apparent if they had been encouraged to talk about the obstacles they had to overcome. The often painful process of social change is only possible when a project is sustained over time, and it is to Wells’s credit, that her collaborators and, most of all, the women themselves were able to communicate across the multiple barriers of language, race, and culture to work together as a productive and supportive group for over fifteen years.[3]

The format of *Siyazama* is similar to current and previous publications on this topic, including Brenda Schmahmann’s edited collection *Mapula: Embroidery and Empowerment in the Winterveld* (2006) and Kim Berman and Jane Hassinger’s *Women on Purpose: Resilience and Creativity of the Founding Women of Phumani Paper* (2012). A major precedent for all three is Brenda Schmahmann’s edited collection *Material Matters: Appliqués by the Weya Women of Zimbabwe and Needlework by South African Collectives* (2000).[4] All of the publications are associated with museum exhibitions, and balance essays by the project’s organizers with the biographies and voices of the participants. However, the essays in *Material Matters* address head on the challenges of collaboration and collective voice that are glossed over in the publication under review. Noting that because in rural communities, labor is often shared, the craft collective would seem to be an especially appropriate structure for an empowerment project, Schmahmann is constrained to ask “how readily can a structure that delimits

any stress on personal talent be accommodated within an art market that stresses individuality?” (p. 4). Acknowledging potential problems from the outset, the scholarly analysis of the projects is clear about what challenges were and were not met. It also investigates in greater depth the role of gender and the overwhelming problems faced by rural women. However, neither *Material Matters* nor the other texts address in any detail the issue of race: in southern Africa craft projects have for the most part been founded by white women to empower black women, resulting in gaps that can be hard to bridge. The founders rarely live near their projects and collaborators functioning as outside experts are often from abroad. The scholarly literature on arts-based empowerment projects is growing steadily, but there is much work left to be done.

All of these publications are important because together they demonstrate the centrality of arts-based projects to economic empowerment and social change in South Africa. Arguably, the African National Congress (ANC) led government has shown little interest in supporting the arts, dissolving the National Arts Council in 2006, and permitting its public museums to wither. The texts and portraits in *Siyazama* offer incontrovertible evidence of what the visual arts can offer to a society burdened by crushing poverty and its attendant ills, assuming the creative projects can be sustained over time.

Notes

[1]. For a survey of these projects, see Liese van Robbroeck, “Community Arts in South Africa—A Brief History,” in *Inheriting the Flame: New Writing on Community Arts in South Africa*, ed. Graham Falken (Cape Town: Arts and Media Centre, 2004), 41–52.

[2]. The crucifixes are illustrated in Allen F. Roberts, “Break the Silence: Art and HIV/AIDS in Kwa Zulu-Natal,” *African Arts* 34, no. 1 (2001): 42. They are also reproduced in Pamela Allara, Marilyn Martin, and Zola Mtshiza, *Coexistence: Contemporary Cultural Production in South Africa* (Waltham: Brandeis University, 2003), 81.

[3]. Publications on sustainability include Kristin Helmore and Naresh Singh, *Sustainable Livelihoods: Building on the Wealth of the Poor* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2001).

[4]. See also Kim. S. Berman, “Agency, Imagination and Resilience: Facilitating Social Change through the Visual Arts in South Africa” (PhD diss., University of Johannesburg, 2009).

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