



# Twenty Fine Years at the Bag Factory

'At the time it was started, there was nothing like this in the country', says Bag Factory director, Sara Hallatt. Now in its 20th year, the Bag Factory has grown to become an integral part of the art scene both in Johannesburg and further afield. CLASSICFEEL spoke to Hallatt and deputy director James French about the studio's twenty years.

In the early 1980s, legendary sculptor Sir Anthony Caro and Robert Loder, a British arts benefactor, began the Triangle Art workshops in upstate New York. Caro convinced renowned local artist, David Koloane to attend the second Triangle workshop; thereafter Koloane spent time working in Stockwell, London. 'My experience at the Stockwell Depot Studios accorded me the privilege of working in a collective studio situation without any form of discrimination on the basis of colour or culture', enabling me to work and operate on a professional level, as opposed to the necessarily ad hoc approach common among township-based artists' writes Koloane in his introduction to the Bag Factory.

In 1985, the workshop approach was instituted in South Africa in the form of the Thupelo project. 'Thupelo', explains Koloane, 'is a Tswana/Sotho name meaning "teach by example"'. The Thupelo project presented annual workshops attended by artists from different parts of the country, irrespective of race or background. There they were encouraged to experiment with ways and means of making art, exchange ideas, and break away from the style typically associated with 'township art'. Local artists were also given some insight into art in the outside world; at the time South Africa was something of an isolated backwater, at least as far as the arts were concerned.



As Koloane tells it, the Thupelo project was a ‘revolutionary one’, that soon inspired similar movements in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Mozambique, before spreading to the East, and later the Caribbean and Latin America. The workshops, it seems, were immensely fruitful, but only lasted a few weeks. It became apparent to both him and Robert Loder that something more permanent was required; a space in which artists could develop and create, regardless of race, just as Koloane had experienced in Stockwell.

Thus in 1991, Loder purchased what was to become the Bag Factory. At the time, says Sara Hallatt, the director of the Bag Factory, the building was ‘a shell’; originally a hessian bag factory, it had no dividing walls or differentiated studios. The initial artists to occupy the space – among them Koloane, Pat Mautloa, and Sam Nhlengethwa – paid a nominal rent, primarily to cover the cost of utilities and so forth.

‘I think the artists very much contributed to keeping the building in good nick’ says Hallatt. ‘There weren’t really fundraising mechanisms in those days. So one month it would look really shabby, and then somebody would sell an artwork and they’d be able to paint something or fix something’. ‘It was difficult, of course’ adds French, the Bag Factory’s deputy director. ‘Artists get very variable incomes and trying to keep a constant stream of income flowing to keep the studios paid for and running was quite tricky’.

Things changed in 1996, when the Bag Factory attracted the attention of international funders looking for a space in which to run a visiting artists programme and artist’s residency. Funds began to trickle in, and the studios were able to employ an administrator, Lesley Cohn. Cohn began establishing a full residency programme and drawing in funds, and

gradually the building improved: the space was sub-divided into separate studios and a gallery.

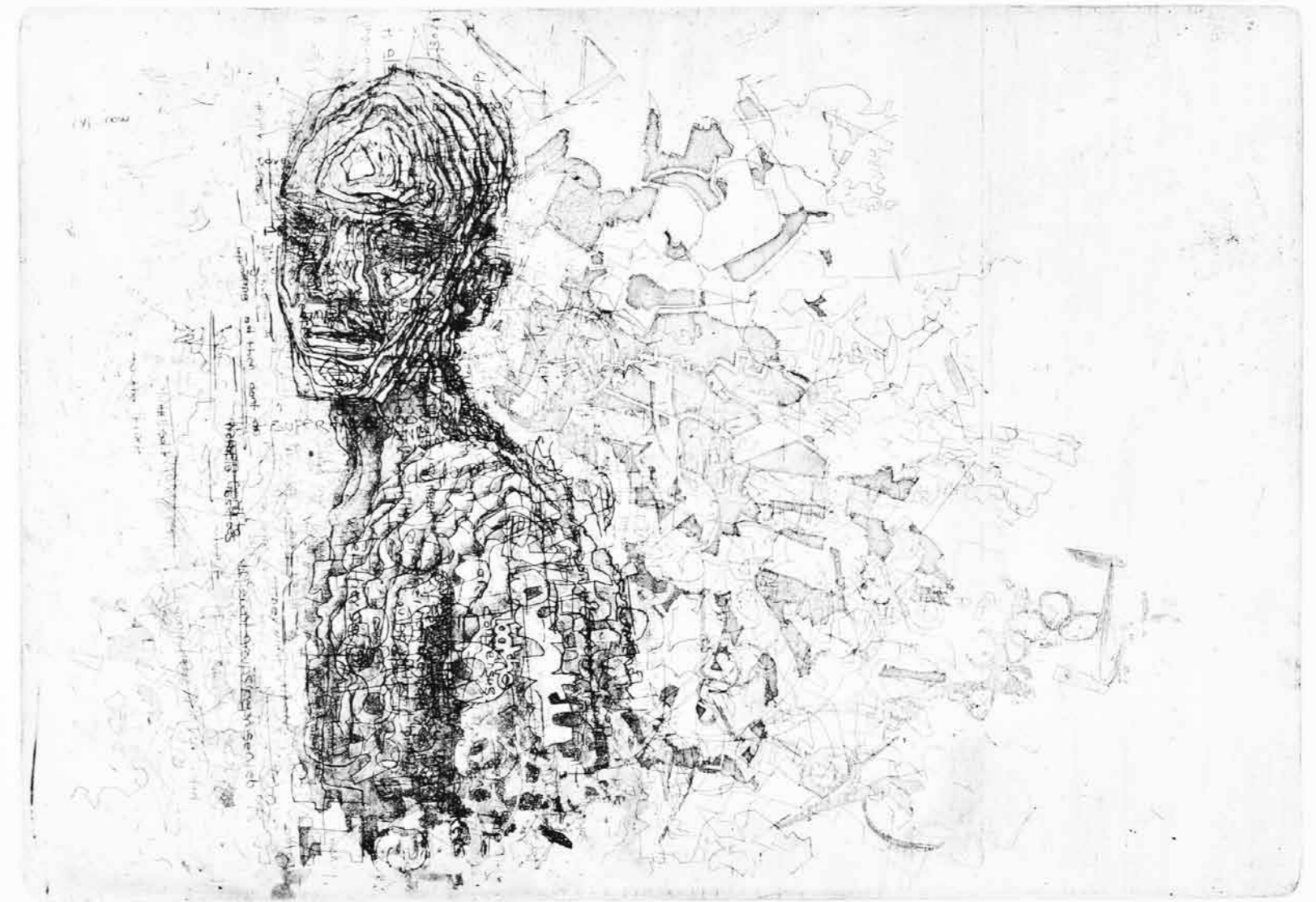
Despite this, Hallatt and French agree that the building remains in constant need of ‘TLC’; it is, after all, ‘nearly a hundred years old’, as Hallatt points out.

‘Like with any non-profit organisation, we struggle to get funds for capital investment [dedicated to infrastructural improvements], so the roof still leaks and there is no insulation to keep out the heat or the cold’, says French.

The Bag Factory offers subsidised studio space to artists; but for many, this may not be the studio’s primary attraction. Rather, they are lured by the opportunity to work among other professional artists – instead of in splendid isolation, which no doubt gets lonely. Moreover, there is the possibility of critical feedback and advice, easily available in such a communal set-up.

‘[The artists] are always in each other’s studios’ says French. ‘It’s like a visual arts jam session... and that’s the benefit of having so many artists in one space, and having a constant passage of new artists. Our residency programme only lasts for three months; we have twelve artists over the period of a year, none of whom come from the Bag Factory, so they bring with them their international experience and skills... all to add to the people that we already have here’.

‘The exchange process also works really well because you see the change in quality. Artists often come here with preconceived ideas of what art is that’ve been given to them by their teachers, or their community. They’re suddenly exposed to this enormous variety, and they get the experience and expand their ideas. We’ve seen some pretty amazing improvements in people’s work’.



The opportunity to work within the Bag Factory is especially invaluable to artists coming from other parts of the country. ‘The visual arts hubs are Cape Town and Joburg – the money is in Joburg’ explains Hallatt. ‘So if you’re in the Free State, and you’re trying to be a professional practising artist, there’s very little scope for you, because you have to be where your audience is, you have to be where people are going to buy’.

‘Also, Johannesburg’s art scene is incredibly vibrant’, adds French.

‘So... you bring [such artists] to a place like [the Bag Factory], they get to meet all sort of exciting artists that maybe they weren’t able to connect with; artists who are professionals, whose sole purpose in life is to create art... meeting these people builds their confidence, and it gets their name out there’ says Hallatt.

So how do rural artists get to hear about the Bag Factory? ‘Mostly by word of mouth’ she says. ‘We have a mailing list, we have a website, a Facebook page, but it seems that especially for the rural artists, it’s by word of mouth’.

Aside from providing much-needed studio space to artists, including visiting artists from abroad and those who selected for residencies and awards, the Bag Factory also offers a wide range of workshops, facilitated by interested artists. They are also involved in the development of curators, and of late, have started an audience development programme. As Hallatt notes, ‘the market is as important as the artist – I think there’s a kind of awakening to visual art in South Africa, but problematically it is not necessarily good visual art... there is actually really good visual art that’s right here, in Johannesburg. You just have to look for it’.

‘Right here’ includes the Bag Factory, where exhibitions are held, and where it is sometimes possible to buy work directly from a resident artist

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(depending on their commitments to various galleries and so on) as well as further afield. Hallatt mentions Artist Proof Studios (an educational centre and printmaking studio) in particular; coincidentally, Artist Proof also began celebrating its twentieth year in 2011. Consequently, Artist Proof studios and the Bag Factory teamed up to create [i]20 Fine Years[i], an exhibition and portfolio of new prints by twenty artists – both well-established and up-and-coming – from the two institutions.

The Bag Factory remains a vibrant part of Loder’s Triangle Arts network, which Hallatt says has grown to include some 50 workshops or residencies worldwide. ‘They come up and go down depending on the funding; the recession has had its impact on a number of them’ she says. ‘And of course, with a lot of the ones in Africa, you’ve got an arts institution and then there’s a revolution and it ceases to exist; and then when things calm down, it re-establishes itself. We’ve been very lucky in that we’ve been going continuously since 1991’.

Here’s to another 20 fine years.

To find out more about the Bag Factory, prints from the 20 Fine Years portfolio, forthcoming workshops, exhibitions and other events, go to <http://www.bagfactoryart.org.za/>. **CF**