

JAY PATHER Cape Town

Lessons from an infection: Temporal forms for elusive and indeterminate futures in the Infecting the City Public Art Festival

Text by Jay Pather

Introduction

Urban public art within the context of a postcolonial city like Cape Town is a multi-layered and complex monster. The differences in what South Africans perceive as the public, as art, and as urban continue to grow, and are emblematic of deepening polarisation across race and class. Most global cities are characterised as transitional, but in a South African city this transitional ebb and flow is neither covert, gradual, nor metaphoric. It is material, palpable and deeply inscribed in the daily workings of a new country, still struggling to realise dreams held at the dawn of democracy, more than 20 years ago.

Outside the comfort, relative homogeneity and controlled machinations of the gallery or theatre, public art in any city takes on the constantly shifting meanings ascribed to it in our increasingly heterogeneous societies. The conception of public art comes with a range of critiques from several players: the artist together with the capital, the commissioning agency, the structures that allow it to happen under conditions that may alter the original conception, the critical community, and the numerous publics – those who don't know and do not participate, and those who do. This is an extraordinary number of gatekeeping eyes involved in the genesis of one work.

As a result, most cities boast brash, generic examples of public art that have tried to please too many of these players, and the works have ended up being monsters that no-one wants to claim. Processes of

commissioning and making public art toe a fine line between creating an enduring, universally loved work, and creating a work that is of the moment, of its time, and which, paradoxically, changes.

A case in point is the shift in context around a bronze sculpture that stands in the Financial District in Manhattan, Charging Bull, The work was originally erected as a symbol of resilience in the face of the stock market crash of 1987, by New York artist Arturo Di Modica using his own resources. Then in February 2017, the asset manager State Street Global Advisors had a sculpture of a young girl erected in front of it, hands on her hips and chest puffed out. This attempt at an evocation of a David-and-Goliath tension foregrounded some of the more pressing concerns of our time. Besides State Street's contention that the work was a comment on the dominance of males on boards (the pinnacle of corporate power), the introduction of a vulnerable yet powerful counter to bullishness seemed to echo the sentiments for a return to the human, in the wake of corporate corruption and the Donald Trump presidential victory. Several twists have followed, with Di Modica, an immigrant, calling foul that he has unjustly been cast as villain, and a revelation by the Huffington Post that women made up less than one third of State Street's own board. And so the counter claims go. I am interested here in the countless ironies that the permanent public art sculpture presents to a dynamic, contemporary, self-reflexive world

South Africa has had its own share of concrete sculptural anomalies in the midst of spaces of turbulent change. Chumani Maxwele, a student at the University of Cape Town, in a performative gesture that has reverberated globally, threw excrement at a statue of Cecil John Rhodes in early 2015. The statue depicted Rhodes sitting on a chair, looking into the distance at Cape Town, regal yet covetous, unshakeable and unmovable. Maxwele's action seemed impotent in force and scale in the face of the concrete statue sitting on a large plinth: he was quickly stopped by university security personnel and the statue cleaned up. But, as a metaphor, the action was so powerful that wide-scale student protests followed. The statue was finally removed and an entire movement – #Rhodesmustfall – was born, and continues to exist.

The empty plinth that remains continues to be re-imagined in a variety of ways, shifting meaning and symbol periodically. In one evocation, the long shadow of the absent sculpture was drawn, the silhouette bringing attention to both the absence of the offending form and a continued abiding presence of colonial tropes and systemic violence in our society. In another evocation, a plastic chair with green fabric and a cross appeared on the plinth commemorating the death of Mgcineni Noki, who was shot in a hail of bullets during the Marikana Massacre of 2012. The plinth has also been a stage for several performances, as well as a range of speakers during student gatherings. This inversion of form and function has in itself become a metaphor for the arduous process of undoing colonial influences in a society that remains untransformed for the majority of its peoples. South Africa is, according to estimates from the World Bank, continually ranked at the top of the most unequal countries in the world.

Sethembile Msezane, an artist living in Cape Town, has created several endurance performances that take the form of a sculpture, very often referencing an iconic black woman. She poses on her own plinth and remains still for several hours. The works are performed in close proximity to Cape Town's many sculptures of dead white men. In doing so, Msezane draws attention to the lack of any public sculpture of, or by, a black woman in the city.

Msezane's work is nevertheless emblematic of the value of the temporal public art work. Transition, idiosyncrasy, entropy and migration are all notions we associate with a city like Cape Town. Tokolos Stencils, an art collective based in Cape Town, includes as one of their works a perversion of the city's slogan, 'This city works for you'. Using their trademark stencil, they have marked several spaces throughout the city with the slogan, 'This city works for a few'. Of late, as with cities throughout the world, South African cities such as Cape Town have been characterised by rapid growth as well as gentrification. Inner city property prices have skyrocketed, effectively keeping out majority of the city's population.

This has seen an attendant increase in attempts at policing and trafficking city dwellers' and city users' movements by the City of Cape Town's managements. The presence of overt control and regimentation and an obsession with visible efficiency and delivery pervades. The rambling creative city based on impulse and improvisation has faded. When the experience of a city is so well-policed, a kind of anaesthesia sets in. The growing and increasingly demonstrative challenge to the anaesthetic by a rebellious citizenry, most of whom are made to feel unwelcome in the city centre, is an impulse that underlies the increasing instances of public art that is temporal and disruptive.

Cape Town

Cape Town, one of the best-known cities in South Africa, was ranked the International Winner of Trip Advisor's Travellers' Choice Awards, the Fourth Top City in the World by the prestigious Travel+Leisure Awards, the Best Destination in Africa by the World Tourism Award, and in 2014 both *The New York Times*' and *The Guardian*'s top travel destination. It is also the city where apartheid was born. The spatial remnants of apartheid continue to be reflected prominently.

The majority of the city's black population resides in far-flung townships known collectively as the Cape Flats. These were holding grounds for migrant workers brought in from rural areas to work in the city during apartheid. The centre has historically been a Central Business District (CBD) surrounded by a number of predominantly white suburbs. The oncevibrant District Six, located close to the CBD, was home to workers who could commute easily. Notorious for the forced removals that occurred in 1966, this derelict and sparsely populated tract of land that hugs the CBD has come to symbolise the intensity of the apartheid government's systemised efforts to keep black people outside the centre, pushed further and further into the periphery.

This topography continues to demonstrate how racial segregation affected the distribution and ownership of land. In 1994 South Africa was imbued with a change in political power, but without significant shifts in economic power or land distribution. In Cape Town this deeply segregated landscape, in which the spatial demarcations of the city remain largely intact and unaltered, is the site of much contestation. Its tensions are material, tangible and spatial.

The city continues to maintain its status as an epicentre of wilful capital and forced migrant labour. Characterised nevertheless by the constant ebb and flow between the desire for cohesion and the realities of material difference, this particular meeting ground for strangers remains contested and uneven. It is with these lenses that I want to look at the Infecting the City festival, a temporary, annual public art festival in this contested city.

Infecting the City

Infecting the City started ten years ago. Produced by the Africa Centre and the Institute for Creative Arts at the University of Cape Town, the festival takes place in the middle of autumn, during the relatively dry month of March. Following a general call-out for applications, a final programme is drawn up, both from this pool and including invited and commissioned works. The programme features artworks from the disciplines of visual and performance art, as well as interdisciplinary interventions. The works take on several forms, including ephemeral performances, temporary installations, projections, sound tours, and moving exhibitions. The range of work from the contemporary and conceptual to the traditional and classical echo the evolution of a society grappling with issues of race, class and gender identity, globalisation and modernity.

South Africa has a limited tradition of public art. Much of the work consists in static sculptures at places of significance, places of public transit or public squares. It is noteworthy that Infecting the City, one of the largest public art initiatives in the country, is performative and temporal. Performing and visual artists, architects, urban planners and



Ilulwane, Athi-Patra Ruga, Infecting the City 2012, Produced by Africa Centre, © Sydelle Willow Smith



Dancenation, 2014, © Sydelle Willow Smith

theorists collaborate or produce work as individuals. While the idea of 'making place' the intention of much public art is pervasive and relevant to the work that will be discussed in this essay, the theme is imbued with a quintessential temporariness, as if the making of place in South Africa is still very much a work in progress. The works are characterised by the processes of experimentation, of interventions with ill-fitting dimensions, of deconstructing, and temporary reconstruction.

Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall point to this indeterminacy:

When it comes to scholarship on Africa, the encounter with what we cannot yet 'determine' because it has not yet become or will never be definite – an encounter with indeterminacy, provisionality and the contingent – assumes the proportions of an epistemological abyss.²

The temporal nature of these works, by artists attempting to make sense of this contested city, both reflects and is derived from this 'indeterminacy'. Some argue that it is also testament to the pervasive force of the colonial and apartheid projects that are impossible to dismantle substantively or swiftly. The recent shift in thinking in South Africa from the 'postcolonial' to the 'decolonial' marks this recognition of the enduring impact of colonialism and the instability of the reconciliation project — that there is nothing 'post' about the colonial; its workings remain deeply inscribed. There is also growing scepticism of the rainbow nation discourse of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, of attempts at forging national unity and the making of a home for all — dominant tropes in government-led imaginaries.

Infection

Infection, a recurring motif in the contemporary moment, is not used lightly here — especially with regards to an arts festival — as the word is loaded with negativity and anxiety about South Africa. As a metaphor for land and country, the use of the body as a sacrosanct yet contested space, intact yet porous, inviolate yet vulnerable, is a recurrent trope in

South African contemporary art across disciplines. The body and the city as metaphors for the constitution, order and the status quo recur. Within the context of a public art festival in South Africa, the active and wilful infection of a city is as much a playful intervention on etymology as it is a conscious, virulent act of unmaking and re-forming place.

In spite of the choice to create a festival without a set theme (in order to open up possibilities for application), themes do surface as a result of the curation and juxtaposition of works. I discuss some of the works over the years of my curatorship, under the themes that have emerged. These are: land; memory; inertia; body; resilience; and dream.

Land

Rootlessness, dispossession and the tensions that come with spatial inequalities play out quite regularly in works at the festival. Transgression etched against the monolithic structures of the manicured public spaces of Cape Town was graphically demonstrated in performance artist Mandla Mbothwe's work, *Uvuko! The Resurrection*. Culled from classical Xhosa ritual and integrated with contemporary performance paradigms, the performance centred on access to water, especially in rural parts of South Africa. Placing this inscription in the middle of an unlikely space — on a concrete surface, under a burning sun outside Cape Town's central train station — the work had particular resonance and power.

Mbothwe used almost the entire forecourt of the station — a sprawling area of about 60 square metres — as a playing field. His cast comprised young performers from the Steve Biko Centre, a centre for arts and culture in the Eastern Cape, as well as the professional Remix Dance Company, a company of mixed-ability performers. Deaf dancers and disabled performers blended seamlessly with the young performers. The result was a semiotically rich text: isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans as well as South African sign language were declaimed over the large space, combined with chants, song, large gesture, ritual and dance. The work demonstrated the potential for site-responsive performance to cut across a range of cultures by virtue of its forms, where it takes place, and



19 Born 79 Rebels, Mamela Nyamza, Faniswa Yisa, 2014, © Sydelle Willow Smith



ConTatto, DaMotus, 2014, © Sydelle Willow Smith

its spectators, who together play a part in making meaning, marking and re-mapping the city.

The 'festival audience' who had followed the Infecting the City programme and arrived at the performance at the designated time as they would for a theatre performance, melded with the informal commuter crowds on their way to catch a train. The latter, predominantly Xhosaspeaking and unaware of the event, quickly found their place inside of it at the onset of the encounter. In those moments this audience emerged as the dominant comprehending force — of symbol and language — in a city where their presence is hardly acknowledged. Moreover, the dense performance sparked interactions between Xhosa-speaking people and those who did not speak the language, and for a few, fleeting moments these shifts in power relations and civic dynamics allowed for an unforgiving space to be remade.

Mbothwe's use of the space was all-encompassing and bold. His performers asserted their presence forcefully – they seemed to make indelible tracks on a cemented ground that allowed no give. The choreography and direction may best be described as merciless: dancer Malcolm Black, confined in the main to his wheelchair, used his upper body to create sharp, assertive movement phrases resulting in a physical presence that was uncompromising and 'loud' under the hot midday sun. Dancers ran as if possessed, voraciously eating up the space of the vast concourse while actor Chuma Sopotela confronted audiences with a voice that pierced the air, reaching the hundreds of people that had gathered. Out of nowhere a dancer with no lower limbs arrived in a wheelchair, propelling himself using his strong hands on the hot cement and stone, an urgency in his presence and unwavering focus in his eyes.

As the performance ended, the cast and technicians quickly gathered their props and packed up sound cables – as was demanded by the city in exchange for granting permission. The measured, controlled movement of people entering and leaving the station took over.

The realisation slowly dawned that for all its aesthetic power and visual allure, the work foregrounded a very temporary taking-over of land. The continued lack of agency and voice that was brilliantly evoked by the performance nevertheless hovered in the foetid, humid air.

In another work that foregrounded the remaking of place, choreographer Tebogo Munyai erected five shacks, removed from their original spaces in the township of Khayelitsha, and brought them into the city. He had created and rehearsed intimate works (solos and duets) that spoke to the experiences of shack-dwellers and staged them inside of these completely closed, tiny structures. Munyai then constructed holes in the walls of these structures (reminiscent of bullet holes) through which the public was invited to look. Like voyeurs, the public could take a peek at what was happening behind the temporary walls of a shack. Incomplete, frustratingly fudged readings of what was happening made the audience more curious as they moved from hole to hole to get a better view. There was another audience that stood back and watched the actions of this audience in turn. Layer upon layer of displacement, alienation and abjection emerged in this unsettling performance, going beyond simply remaking place (the act of turning the central city into a home).

Xolile Mazibuko also referenced notions of land and remaking. The subject of her work, Sacred Stone, was the Shembe religion, which originated in KwaZulu Natal. Although the religion is based on Christianity, worshippers were ostracised and driven out of the churches because they embraced traditional Zulu ritual in worship. Subsequently, Shembe worshippers became renowned for their rituals of worship in open spaces. They created 'temples' demarcated with boulders and stones, painted white and placed in circular formations on abandoned pieces of land, or along the sides of roads. Mazibuko set about creating these temporary spaces of worship all over Cape Town — a city that does not really hold Shembe worshippers — on the city's pavements, on a traffic island, under a tree. She made a particularly wry comment by creating these white-stoned temples around the still-existing statues of Jan van Riebeeck and his wife Maria de la Quellerie, amongst the first Dutch settlers who colonised the country in 1652.



Processional Walkway, Katie Urban, Infecting the City, 2014, © Sydelle Willow Smith

In yet another subtle remaking of place, South African composer Neo Muyanga created an operetta, Thoriso le Morusu, for the grand Groote Kerk in the middle of the city. The Groote Kerk is a large, impeccably constructed Afrikaans church, and was considered a bastion of Afrikanerdom during South Africa's apartheid years. Thoriso le Morusu was inspired by 'Country of Grief and Grace', a poem by Antjie Krog, an Afrikaner who wrote extensively about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the process of confession and healing established soon after democracy. According to Muyanga, the work read 'like an intimate and harrowingly candid conversation between two people, perhaps siblings or even lovers, about the pain they have caused one another'. Performances of this work for Infecting the City, to packed audiences seated in the pews of this historic space, provided several counterpoints for irony and profoundly moving commentary; remaking a place that was an integral part of a violent, repressive history, yet nevertheless one that was also a space where the spiritual was pursued.

Memory

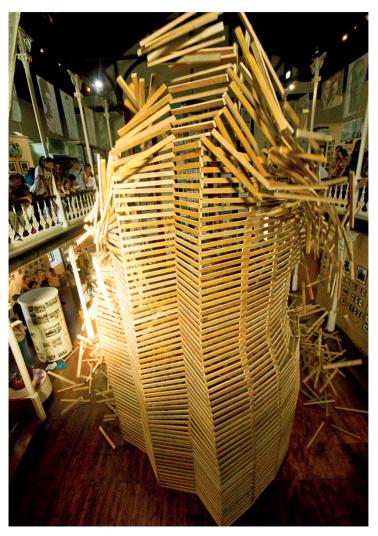
After catastrophe, the pressing need to remember is often articulated in societies that have experienced the upheaval – so that similar catastrophes do not occur once more. In South Africa, due to the lack of change in material circumstances for the majority of the country's people, the need to remember has another layer of intensity. Remembering becomes not so much about the past but about the present; as if current extremities need context and points of reference so that some logic can explain the continued systemic abnegation. Moreover, the erasure and the inscription of oppression were significant features of the apartheid regime, in ways that were so deeply entrenched that the mechanisms remained invisible to those that gained from it. This is of course evident in Cape Town's racially divided topography. So heritage, history and the fear of erasure recur as themes in much of the work in Infecting the City, and provide this recourse as a vision for how the city could possibly be developed to include the participation of all its citizens.

Amongst the many examples, perhaps the most direct was Memory Biwa, Nicole Sarmiento and Tazneem Wentzel's *The Callings*. In this work, the artists identified sites throughout Cape Town where the bones of slaves were buried. They then created a diverse series of performances at these sites, taking audiences on a moving journey of exploration and remembering. One of the most evocative was a performance by Mawande Zenzile at the University of Cape Town. Zenzile dressed in flowing hessian robes and lit large mounds of *imphepo*, a traditional medicinal herb used in cleansing rituals. At the same time, the Cape Doctor – Cape Town's incessant wind – both encouraged the flames and blew the pungent smoke around the campus. It was a moment of great electricity, with Zenzile himself being in danger of being burnt, the constant battle with erasure as epitomised by the flames, and the persistent strong fragrance of the *imphepo*.

Taking an ironic look at memorialisation, Selo Pesa and Vaughn Sadie's *Inhabitant* explored erasure, limbo and lack of agency. The two artists created a moving sculptural performance called *Teka Munyika* (meaning to give and take in the southern African Bantu language Xitsonga) at the Prestwich Memorial. The history of the memorial is layered and fraught. During an attempt at constructing upscale apartment blocks on Prestwich Street in 2003, many skeletons were uncovered that were found to be from the unmarked graves of slaves killed by Dutch settlers in the 17th and 18th centuries. Bones from 2,500 graves were exhumed and a decision was taken by the city to create the Prestwich Memorial Building and park, which included an ossuary – a place where the exhumed bones were stored. It was envisaged that the experience of remembering (through the ossuary) and then reflecting (the little park) would be complete spatially and conceptually.



Under Construction, Aenas Wilder, Infecting the City, 2013, Produced by Africa Centre, © Sydelle Willow Smith



Under Construction, Aenas Wilder, Infecting the City, 2013, Produced by Africa Centre, © Sydelle Willow Smith



Under Construction, Aenas Wilder, Infecting the City, 2013, Produced by Africa Centre, © Sydelle Willow Smith

In front of the memorial is a coffee shop that sells an exclusive brand of coffee called Truth. The coffee shop is frequented in the main by young American and European tourists because of its good Wi-Fi access and good Java. Xolelwa Kashe-Katiya, deputy director of the Archival Platform, writes:

Ordinary South Africans drive or walk past the memorial without understanding what the true meaning of this conspicuous structure is. Those who do understand the meaning tend to not know that human remains are housed within the structure.³(2010)

Drawing from this startling yet covert juxtaposition of a sacred memorial with a commercial venture, Pesa and Sadie created a subtle work that involved three performers committing inane acts such as hairdressing, having a picnic and having a barbecue in and around the site.

The combination of elements – the public space, the memorial, the presence of the remains of slaves in the vicinity, the wafting smells of burnt flesh from the barbecued remains of freshly slaughtered sheep, as well as the slowly festering performances that implied a perpetually disaffected witnessing – was an uncompromising indictment of a society that has submerged and obfuscated access to its contentious past. The combination of an existential meaninglessness in performance style with the über-narrative of the unattended-to history of Cape Town, a history many wish would quietly go away, was disturbing and numbing at the same time.

The body

In this suspended malaise there is an overwhelming representation in the performative work, from dance to vocal soundscapes, of the human as vulnerable, expendable and disposable. The performing body itself has been at the forefront as a site for visibilities, invisibilities and resilience. Several prominent artists have incorporated this into their work, such as Jelili Atiku, Chuma Sopotela, Gavin Krastin and Gabrielle Goliath.

One example of a work that evocatively referenced this without the actual presence of a body is Asanda Kaka and Valentina Argiro's 3600 a Day. This startling installation of 360 sculptures constructed of wooden frames and dresses evoked the 360 reported cases of rape per day in South Africa. The title's supposed exaggeration references authoritative studies that maintain that a staggering number of rapes go unreported. Inside the fragile sculptures were little broken mirrors offering fractured glimpses of one's face.

In the wake of xenophobia and violence perpetrated against immigrants, the alien and vulnerable body was evoked by artists such as Olaniyi Rasheed Akindiya from Nigeria and Maurice Mbikayi and Philippe Kayumba-wa-Yafolo from the Democratic Republic of Congo. These artists coincidentally all worked with the covering of the body in various ways. Akindiya invited conversations with local people while tied to a pole and covered in bright orange hazard tape. Mbikayi covered himself from head to foot in white bandages while slowly riding a horse through peak traffic on the streets of Cape Town. Kayumba-wa-Yafolo, covered from head to toe in newspapers, performed domestic acts with similarly covered tables and chairs — movements that occasionally erupted into short bursts of hysterical and highly charged acts of extreme fear.

Resilience

One can also interpret these singular acts purporting to demonstrate and project vulnerability as acts of defiance and resilience in their hypervisibility. Artist Athi Patra Ruga often uses his own body in his work as a site for contested power. In a work called *Illulwane* (translated as 'bat' in isiXhosa) he performed an initiation ritual in a public swimming pool. 'Illulwane' is a derogatory reference to men who are circumcised in a hospital as opposed to going through the proper traditional initiation ceremony in the 'bush', an open and possibly unclaimed stretch of land that tries the survival capabilities of the young men. Replete with red high heels and a bevy of 12 synchronised swimmers below, Ruga's body, clad in white lace, was hoisted high with a pulley and rope after being dunked in the pool. In this ironic yet spectacular performance, done before an audience

of 600 people to a soaring soundtrack by composer Spoek Mathambo, the spectre of Ruga's drenched, floating body was a profound vision of the body's resilience, reclaiming tradition, sexuality and public space.

The artists Hasan and Husain Essop often use their own bodies in their practice, which comprises performance and photography. For Infecting the City they resurrected an ancient performance and restaged the *Gadat* with hundreds of participants. The *Ratib-al-Haddad* (*Gadat*) is a set of Quranic verses and prayers compiled by the scholar Sheikh Abdullah ibn Alawi al-Haddad. The *Gadat's* melodious sound and tune was the result of slaves not being allowed to pray. They thus pretended to be singing. Restaged in the middle of the city with such an overwhelming presence of devotees was a triumphant display of the power of voice and agency, connecting past and present threats of erasure.

This transformation through sound and music reverberated in the highly respected Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh's *Verbal Mapping Il.* Ogboh explains in his programme notes:

'Verbal maps' are calls made by Lagos bus conductors, melodically shouting out their bus routes to potential passengers or notifying passengers of the next stop. The noisy bus conductor is an icon of the Lagos sonic map, a lyrical wordsmith dishing out Lagos bus routes like freestyle rap. These organic sound marks come together as a chart composed of audio spins to form the verbal maps. Their documentation over time has produced a corpus of work entitled 'Lagos Soundscapes', which has been installed in the public space of Cologne, Helsinki and Manchester.⁴

In Cape Town, Ogboh installed these calls along Adderley Street, the central main thoroughfare and a scene for South African taxi drivers with their own calls to local commuters. This medley (or cacophony) of several kinds of calling and sound, re-made an atmosphere inside a city and a country still reeling from its xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals from other parts of Africa. The integration of soundscape was a subtle shifting of space and ambience.

Dream

There is of course great propensity for play and whimsy within the Infecting the City festival, creating dreamy and surreal spaces amongst the harsh materialities of the city. A clear example of this is Leila Anderson and Stan Wannet taking up residence inside a small shop for two weeks. By night the artists would set off to various parts of Cape Town and stage performances with no-one watching and document these meticulously on camera. By day, they artists would sleep in view of the storefront window, attracting curious passers-by to their shop. Inside the shop were myriad artefacts concerned with archive and archival practice. In a small room at the back, projectors and television monitors quietly replayed the activities the artists had been up to the night before.

Jason Potgieter aimed and put to flight 1,000 paper jets (made from biodegradable paper) from one of Cape Town's tallest buildings. The jets were signed drawings by artists whom Potgieter had engaged with in the build-up to the festival, who gave their time to create original artworks, resulting in what he called "a curated flying exhibition encouraging dialogue around ownership and value of the work of established and emerging artists as well as transforming an ordinary work day into something special and wondrous."

Ultimately, it was the quiet intervention by Wayne Reddiar and his collective, Vuka Ndlovu, that created a public artwork that spanned the dreamlike as well as remaking space in a subtle and moving way. This collective of artists and activists engages with the informal traders who have appeared in increasing numbers in South Africa, due to the unsolved economic imbalances in the country. Without access to advertising, or any larger vision of what their business might be, the spatial and conceptual reach of their business becomes very confined. Severe restrictions in the use of public space by informal traders make this all the more arduous. Members of Vuka Ndlovu conduct research amongst such traders, select a few and then create a large-scale billboard hoisted in full view, high up a building, advertising the traders' work, competing with big-name brands.

There is also bathos here, in the sense that just a few traders will be afforded this opportunity, the billboard won't be up for long, and it will ultimately fall short in competition with the big-name brands. But for a few dreamy moments, it is a valiant gesture of great impact, courage and energy. In this meeting-ground between art, activism and public space, the remaking of space as a space of dreams is both triumphant in making visible the informal trader, and sobering, in that in contemporary South Africa the majority of the population still struggle to survive.

The audience as flâneur

Infecting the City's format is ambulatory. Works are curated on a route, with an average of six routes that traverse the inner city in the afternoon, and at night evoking different atmospheres and possibilities for civic ownership. Audiences are led from one work to another, encountering between six and ten works. In the process, audiences that are aware of the festival and the programme are joined by an informal audience that is not. As if led by an invisible Pied Piper, the crowds swell into an amorphous group of people consisting of a wide range of individuals.

Some of the work is time-based - the audience settles down to watch and experience – while others are installations that audience members may walk through. Navigating the city in the manner of a wanderer or flaneur through spaces one might not otherwise visit, but moving as a collective, creates an interesting dynamic. Watching a work alongside someone you might not ordinarily go to the theatre or a gallery with, and then moving on with them to the next space, also layered the experience with unique opportunities for civic engagement. Much of the work also involved audience participation and touch. This, together with soundscapes, light environments and even smellscapes (in one memorable work an artist captured the scents of the forests that surround Cape Town and infused the city fountains with them), all invoke the city as a tangible, experiential sensorium. This atmosphere, in which alienation and division are momentarily suspended, also conspires to create a communal atmosphere within which the aforementioned works that speak of rupture and abjection may be absorbed and discussed.

Conclusion

The public artists I have outlined here have negotiated indeterminacy through the strategic use of temporal artwork. There is, of course, a deepening crisis around rights and economic equity. This crisis now reverberates in the reactionary and forceful entrenchment of nationalism in the face of prejudices sparked by ignorance and fear all over the world. There is an alarming return to some dark past in the enforced insularity typified by the US president Donald Trump's unbridled proclamations and severe actions against migration and the human spirit to cohabit. Civic society's response to the insularity and fear many of our governments seem to thrive on needs to include some intensive civic re-organisation. This calls on our artists to provide mechanisms, innovative languages of association, and a range of cross-disciplinary, intercultural, and interactive possibilities to enable public spheres where strangers may confidently meet, for the growth of an elusive, common humanity.

As yet these interventions seem overwhelmingly and – in atmospheres of transition and speculation – justly temporal. Due to the systemic inflexibility and failure of the imagination embedded in the infrastructure of our cities and our institutions, they fall woefully short in meeting and facing the impact of such crises. Mechanisms for artists to debate and work with and within urban planning and municipal structures are in short supply. It is these structures that need to be developed with a robustness and resolve.

Pubic spheres, and the threats to rich, intercultural, layered engagement, demand visions of nuance, sensitivity, and – in response to an increasingly anaesthetised environment – an aesthetic that creates the kind of wakefulness we are clearly in need of. Public spheres as meeting grounds for strangers are filled with possibility, as the artists I have mentioned above have shown us. Right now, however, in many countries, and certainly in South African cities, that ground is temporal, uneven, shifting. Vigilant and consistent collaboration across city structures may pave the way. But that's a long road yet.

Footnotes

- Caelainn Barr, "Inequality index: where are the world's most unequal countries?" The Guardian, 26 April 2017, www.theguardian.com/inequality/datablog/2017/apr/26/inequality-index-where-are-the-worlds-most-unequal-countries
- ² Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," Public Culture, 16 no. 3 (2004):349
- ³ Xolelwa Kashe-Katiya, "Prestwich Place Memorial: Human remains, development and truth," The Archival Platform, 27 July 2010 www.archivalplatform.org/blog/entry/prestwich_place/
- Africa Centre, Infecting the City Public Arts Festival 2013 Programme (Cape Town: Infecting the City, March 2013), 33, www.infectingthecity.com/2013/wp-content/themes/itc2013/Downloads/ ITC 2013 Prog FULL lo-res singles.odf



Jay Pather

Jay Pather is an associate professor at the University of Cape Town, where he directs the Institute for Creative Arts. He curates Infecting the City and the Live Art Festival in Cape Town, Afrovibes in the Netherlands. co-curates performance for Spielart in Munich. and is adjunct curator for performance at the Zeitz MOCAA, Jav serves as juror for the International Award for Public Art, as a board member of the National Arts Festival of South Africa, as a fellow at Queen Mary's College, University of London, and was recently made a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. Recent publications include articles in Changing Metropolis II, Rogue Urbanism, Performing Cities and Theatre Journal



Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer. Previously, she was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations, an international arts producing company. For full details on the 15-year period of projects and for access to publications and resources, visit www.situations.org.uk.

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society.

Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications.

Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.



British Council 2018
The British Council is the
United Kingdom's international
organisation for cultural relations
and educational opportunities.

Where Strangers Meet

An international collection of essays on arts in the public realm.

The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that 'the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet'. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

For 80 years the British Council has worked in cities in over 100 countries worldwide. The British Council is now responding through research and programmes to the changing urban dynamics affecting citizens and institutions globally, including the impact of globalisation and technological and political change. Work in cities also forms part of our response to some of the world's current challenges including migration and security. This collection is intended to strengthen our global offer to collaborators and audiences by demonstrating how the power of the arts and creative exchange can be harnessed to make cities more open, dynamic, inclusive and fit for the future.

www.britishcouncil.org



