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Narrations of a nation: the “art of the possible” ***Narrativas de uma nação: a “arte do possível”***

Celia de Villiers

Resumo

Apresenta-se a importância política e econômica de vários projetos de artesãos sul-africanos em têxteis e reciclagem nos quais as circunstâncias pessoais geram um ativismo social. Exemplos de ativismo fomentam a transformação social, apesar de não mostrar a estridência de artistas engajados acadêmica ou conceitualmente. A mais marcante destas iniciativas foi realizada pelo Intuthuko Project. O resultado foi uma interpretação comovente do movimento contra o apartheid, do processo de reconciliação e da celebração de dez anos de democracia através das imagens bordadas pela cooperativa. Conclui-se que artistas acadêmicos podem estar “entre” territórios culturalmente distintos e colaborar com artesãos auto-didatos.

Palavras-chave

Artesanato; ativismo social; Intuthuko Project; África do Sul.

Abstract

This paper presents the political and economical relevance of several projects from South-african artisans, particularly in textiles and recycling fields, in which some personal circumstances are used as tool to create social activism. Examples of this movement are shown as engines for social transformation, despite the fact that trend is not taking resonance among artists academically or conceptually. The most relevant action in this regard is the Intuthuko Project. The result was a touching interpretation against apartheid, in the process of conciliation and the celebration of ten years of democracy throughout images produced by a cooperative of embroiders. In conclusion the paper shows academic artists working in “between” culturally distinct territories, collaborating with enthusiastic artisans.

Keywords

Craft; social activism; Intuthuko Project; South Africa.

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The aim of this research paper is to introduce the political and economic importance of a number of textile and re-cycling craft projects involving the narration of personal circumstances as a form of socially engaged activism. These expressive textiles and ‘treasures from trash’ form a strong component of South Africa’s visual culture. I concur with Nicholas Mirzoeff the Professor of Art History and Comparative literature, (in Thompson and Sholette 2004:144) who points out that “politics consists of transforming the space of circulation into the space of manifestation”. He argues that visual culture serves as the interface between these territories.

It is essential for creative individuals to find a visual interface for restructuring internal values based on self-management, self-healing and the discovery of meaningful truths within the contemporary social order. Art historian Lucy Lippard (1984:349) writes: “political art tends to be socially concerned and activist art tends to be socially involved.” Since true democracy in South Africa in 1994, a different form of activism has risen from a new struggle: that of working to ease difficulties created by poverty, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, violence against women and children, ethnic prejudice, crime, and political brutality. It is the task of forward-thinking persons such as the facilitators discussed here not to become paralysed by the emotional consequences of past oppression, but to step forward and claim a voice, while enabling others to do the same.

South African textile crafters have created cloths and banners that transcend the divergent territories of our history, customs, traditions and social groups. The undervalued traditional mediums of embroidery and knitting have become authentic communication vehicles to assert and explore the inner symbolic lives, cultural heritage, and political identity of the artisans. Embroidery collectives in South Africa have enabled thousands of previously unemployed women to gain self-esteem by becoming breadwinners. Mapula, Keiskamma, and Intuthuko are examples of such projects.



Figure 1 - UNISA, Intuhuko and Boitumelo Projects, Journey to Freedom (2004).

Social activism of an entirely different nature has been conceptualized by the creative knitter, Carolien Saayman who staged an extraordinary interventionist artwork. With this project she manifested acknowledgement of the unknown homeless people in the urban environment. Her work reminds us of the Homeless Vehicle Project of the Polish artists Krysztof Wodiczko in 1989, the ParaSITE project by Michael Rakowitz in 1998 and the Habitent garments of Lucy Orta in 1993 (Tompson and Sholette 2004:17-20).

* It is often said that politics is the “art of the possible” – a phrase attributed to Otto von Bismarck in conversation in 1862 (Knowles, E. 2000 Sv. Politics)

In addition, the creative re-cycling of waste materials has become a way of life for many marginalised individuals in South Africa. Many disadvantaged



Figure 2 - Thembu Mabitsela, Journey to Freedom (2004).

¹ The Department of Art history Visual Arts and Musicology were invited to join the University of Mississippi in a celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the civil rights legislation in the USA and the tenth anniversary of the democratization of South Africa in 2004 (Anderson:2007.vii). The Journey to Freedom Narratives involved an international conference, artworks and three concerts. The story teller Gcina Mhlope provided the narrations, Prof Mandla Makhanya, the UNISA Executive Dean of Human Sciences at the time guided the process. Staff member Thembu Mabitsela developed the choir performance proposal. Gwenneth Miller and Dr Wendy Ross from the Visual Arts Department developed the concept of a multimedia collaborative project with the Boitumelo embroidery group and the Intuthuko embroiderers from Etwatwa in Ekurhuleni, Eastern Gauteng. The embroideries were created under the guidance of artist-facilitators Erica Lutich, Sonja Barac and Celia de Villiers. [...]

individuals are being empowered by the Kommetjie Environmental Action Group (KEAG), the Magpie Design studio both in the Western Cape Province and the WasteArt Foundation in Johannesburg. All three these projects promote the transformation of junk into desirable objects. They all traverse class, financial, cultural and geographical boundaries.

Art activism as reflected by these projects is about going beyond a comfort zone to encourage social change. The aforementioned artisans don't have the confrontational, radical, subversive or critical aims found in some academic or conceptual artworks. Many successful embroidery collectives in South Africa render "lived or witnessed experience" (Naidus 2007:143). The embroiderers portray elements of their lives to create an awareness of their difficult circumstances and sometimes their celebratory moments. The crafters are given the opportunity to transform perceptions about these issues by tapping into their own authentic experience and in turn reveal it to their viewers.

1. The Intuthuko Project

The best example of such an artwork is the award-winning commemorative multimedia project, The Journey to Freedom Narratives (2004), comprised of music and digital animations of embroidered narratives ¹. The Journey to Freedom Narratives was created by the embroiderers of two projects: Intuthuko, from the rural town of Etwatwa, and Boitumelo (Boitumelo is a Tswana word meaning Joy) situated in urban Hillbrow (Johannesburg). This artwork was conceptualized and created in collaboration with the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology at Unisa, and is worthy of further comment. Intuthuko means to advance or make progress.

The work was a unique rendition of the apartheid struggle, the reconciliation process and a celebration of ten years of democracy. Miller (in Anderson 2007:76) points out that the conceptual underpinning of the project was the ethics of remediation. The embroidered narratives, depicted in 64 30cm x 30cm vignettes, contextualized freedom songs and were combined into two large quilts validating authentic, personal accounts of ordinary citizens.

The Journey to Freedom Narratives (DVD and embroidered quilts) toured in the USA from 2005 to 2008, it and was shown in seven museums as part of the exhibition Weavings of War - Survivors Tell Their Stories which was curated by Michigan State University Museum. Since this unique collaboration, the Intuthuko embroiderers (facilitated by Celia de Villiers, Susan Haycock and Clarence Nkosi) have gained a greater sense of self-worth. The group has won further acclaim in South African national art competitions, such as the Thami Mnyele Fine Arts Award. Intuthuko embroideries were exhibited at the annual Fibre Art

convention in France in 2008 and 2009. Their artworks have been acquired by corporate collectors such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

In most community groups, many members have not completed their education. Living conditions are worsened by unemployment (80%), HIV/AIDS and an untreatable strain of TB (Flynn 2008:1, 3). Embroideries on the HIV aids pandemic, and poverty in the townships make them facilitators of survival in hostile environments and perpetuates their role as survivor artists and 'grass roots activists'. The members of such projects discover their leadership qualities, share their personal stories, faith and creative skills, and gradually a common identity and sense of community evolves. For economic survival, they continue to make wall hangings, bags and corporate gifts, often using these as a further opportunity to convey political meaning. However, images embroidered by these groups are not always overtly political, but their commission work has increased the visibility of their abject situation. Flynn (2008:2) points out that "community embroideries have given the artisans recognition and support, extending their self-value. Consequently, their artworks have becoming symbols of resistance in the face of harsh daily realities, "defying boundaries and despair." Their activism embraces the territories of culture and commodity because their creative output helps to support the community financially.

2. Mapula Embroideries

The Mapula ² Embroidery project is situated in the impoverished Winterveld district, forty kilometers north-west of Pretoria. The art historian Brenda Schmahmann (2007:3-18) explains the hardships experienced by the people of the area, due to political and social circumstances, such as the 'homeland' system enforced by the Nationalist government on the residents in 1977. (All the following projects were affected by this imposition). For these women, their needlework and lived environment are intertwined territories and provide the visual grammar for their artworks. The Mapula embroiders sometimes work collaboratively, but often produce individual, socially-engaged works about events in the news, and bio-political issues. Schmahmann (2007:4) believes that many of the embroideries "offer critical commentary on the mass media, and draw attention to the ideological underpinnings of the sources from which they are derived."

Assistance has come from various organizations, churches and individuals, including the facilitator Jannetje van der Merwe. The members have become successful craftswomen; their self-referential embroideries, such as those of Rossinah Maepa and Elizabeth Maletse, are an example and inspiration to those community projects aiming for sustainable development and rural re-



Figure 3 - Mapula Embroideries, Commemorative Cloth, The Women's March to the Union Buildings (2009).

[...]The digital animations of the embroideries were projected on a 9m screen during the celebratory concerts. The digital artwork together with the large commemorative quilts won the national FNB Vita Gold Award in 2004 (Anderson 2007:vii, 76-81). A publication about the project was released in 2007.

² Mapula means 'mother of rain' indicating a blessing.



Figure 4 - Keiskamma Trust, Keiskamma Guernica (2010).

generation. Mapula won the FNB Craft Gold Award in 2000 and their work is sought-after by local and international collectors: one more example of a form of everyday activism through the community's ability to pass beyond difficult circumstances, bolster confidence and feed hundreds of families.

3. The Keiskamma Trust

The social, cultural and economic development of the Keiskamma villages in the Eastern Cape has benefited from being part of the Keiskamma Embroidery Project. Nokwanda Makubhalo, Noseti Makubhalo and Caroline Nyongo fill management positions in this project. Like the groups discussed above, the Keiskamma group (consisting of more than 100 women) embed meaning into their works, referencing the discomfort of their lives.

Keiskamma's large textured and evocative tapestries are initiated by Carol Hofmeyr, an artist and medical doctor. An important work by the group is the Keiskamma Altarpiece, which has toured churches in the USA. It is a large piece with multiple panels, composed of embroidery, appliqué, beadwork and photographs. It was inspired by Hofmeyr's work with women living with HIV/AIDS, and linked to her interest in German artist Matthias Grünewald's medieval Issenheim Altarpiece. The Issenheim Altarpiece, completed from 1505 - 1515 in celebration of the end of the bubonic plague in Europe, served as an excellent conceptual template. This artwork reflects social circumstances in the Eastern Cape village of Hamburg.

Likewise, the Keiskamma Guernica, based on the 1937 painting by Picasso relating the event of a bombing of a small village in Spain, has been used as a template. As all the community projects discussed here, Keiskamma is afflicted by contentious matters such as petty crime, alcoholism, unemployment, and death due to HIV/AIDS, leaving grandmothers to raise orphaned children. Hofmeyr (2010:1, 2) states in an exhibition catalogue that:

Unlike the original Guernica this artwork depicts not an instant of horror, but a slow eating away of the whole fabric of a community who are digging countless graves and ceaselessly mourn people who have died of AIDS. It tells the story of individual grief and struggle and also the resilience, courage and strength of the people we know.

Another example is Keiskamma's History Tapestry, 120 meters long and containing images of traditional Xhosa, Khoi and San cultures. Purchased by Standard Bank, significantly it hangs in the Parliament Buildings in Cape Town. L Pembroke (2007:769) a British activist artist, remarks: "survivor acts such as these can be a powerful tool to shift perception and reach people in a di-



Figure 5 - Carolien Saayman. Tree Blankets, Urban Intervention (2010).

fferent way to academic papers and statistics”.

4. Tree Blankets

According to Nato Thompson (2004:17), contemporary street action groups and interventionist artist’s “cultivate the participation of community groups and the general public by creating a forum for discussion, open sites to new readings and possibilities”. On a very

cold Nelson Mandela day (18 July 2010), Carolien Saayman, a journalist who has a desire to envelop Johannesburg in knitting, created a ‘new vision’ for daily commuters of a busy street in Johannesburg and hopefully offered some comfort to homeless individuals in that particular part of the city. She reconfigured the conventional territory of professional and social action by involving the community in a non-traditional sense. Saayman created a generous anonymous gift by attaching four rows of richly decorative ‘knitted rainbows’ to tree trunks on the sidewalk of a main arterial into Johannesburg (the ‘blankets’ 50cm X 80cm each contained the word PEACE in South Africa’s 11 official languages). Saayman is hoping that underprivileged people will take possession of the blankets and perhaps realise that they can weave them together, creating their own artistic compositions to provide warmth and shelter against the cold night air of Johannesburg. Conceptually the gradual ‘displacement’ of the blankets will fulfil Saayman’s ambition to cover the whole city in a warm blanket as a gesture of reparation. In this way she is providing a new form of social intervention; drawing attention to the plight of many displaced people in the city. The blankets are the first phase of an ongoing project. It is her wish to remain anonymous due to her humility and also because this type of intervention can be regarded as trespassing or graffiti. I agree with the artist who concurs with the Center of Tactical Magic (in Thompson and Shollette 2004:149) who points out that the navigation of effective concealment in such projects involves “self control, manipulation or adaptation of time and space as well as attention to timing”.

5. Magpie Design Studio

Magpie, a design studio located in the Klein Karoo village of Barrydale. Producing creative and eccentric lighting concepts, home fineware, and lifestyle articles they frequently use materials and methods meant for other purposes or products (Figure 22). Magpie design studio, systemically link art and design with community development. Magpie design and art centre’s social action framework is focused around three critical issues: AIDS, alcohol abuse and waste, which are the most pressing issues in their region.



Figure 6 - Magpie Design Studio, Re-cycled bottles, Chandelier (detail, 2008); Figure 7 - Steven Brett Russel. Wearable Waste, Fashion show (2008).

This humble social responsibility project has managed to supply some 48 stores in the European Union. Most of the junk transformed by the Magpie design studio finds its way into the high end of the market, thus they focus more on sophisticated design principles and less on folk art. In this, they are setting a trend. They have found a way of selling and exporting South African waste transformed as art, while working within a social action framework (Figure 23). The contemporary 'soccer ball' designed by Scott Heart for the hand-over ceremony of the FIFA soccer cup in

Berlin during 2006, is a good example of the potential of interlinking the territories of economics, education, sport and ecology. The president of America, Barac Obama purchased two chandeliers from the Magpie studio while re-decorating the White House in 2009. Magpie chandeliers were exhibited in the South African pavilion at the World Trade fair in Shanghai and in Ireland in 2010.

6. The WasteArt Foundation

The waste management company EnviroServ registered the WasteArt Foundation as a public benefit organization in 2004. The WasteArt foundation organizes bi-annual exhibitions and workshops of ecological concern to create an awareness of responsible waste management. The foundation endeavours to encourage the principles of sustainability through the creative use of waste on all levels of society. In addition the foundation provides opportunities and vocational training to promote entrepreneurship and life-long-learning programmes for emerging artists who work with found and recycled materials in South Africa.



Figure 8 - Carolien Saayman. A rainbow of Tree Blankets, Urban Intervention (2010).

These examples of 'quiet' collaborative activism signify critiques of existing societal structures. It can be deduced that there is a need in our present society for non-aggressive re-formulation of identity and a wish to activate therapeutic cultural growth.

After South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, the concept of the 'Rainbow Nation' has been fostered. Within this ideal is the acknowledgement of the diversity of our cultures and a celebration of our eleven official languages a national pride in our cultural differences has evolved. The notion of *communitas* refers to a cer-

tain form of social interrelatedness, which in the South African idiom is best expressed as Ubuntu. All the described community projects echo the value system of Ubuntu.³

7. Conclusion

Artists who have had the privilege to study art on a formal level can cross territories to assist informal artists such as the artistsans discussed here to create strategies that go beyond aesthetic pleasure and to use their work for quiet political activism. Through this type of mediation they may all broaden their creative endeavours to create compelling visual narratives.

The individual artists and collaborative community groups discussed here are involved in aspects of visual culture. They negotiate and mediate between personal politics and contemporary culture, to form the interface between the locus of social and historical change. Through their art practice and making processes, these artists/crafters begin discovering their own 'voice', often by unearthing rich unexamined aspects of their past, which has spiritual resonance in the present and may impart therapeutic qualities.

The artworks of the embroidery projects make visible the undercurrents of existential anxiety in South Africa today, yet transform these into spectacular visual narratives. Personal narratives become a tool for significant participation in politic issues, giving bargaining power and sometimes, economic transformation.

From the perspective of the Projects' facilitators, most of whom do not 'belong' to the community; their mediation has subtle political connotations, as crossing a territory to initiate another's empowerment becomes a different form of activism. Discovering one's validity through visual narration within a contemporary social order provokes a new sense of identity and belonging, not only for the artists/crafters, but also for the facilitators. Such activism is a quest for care and concern, survival and emotional equilibrium, which mediates reparation and opens up the 'can be' of existence.

The author of *Dreaming with open eyes*, Michael Tucker (1992:99), suggests that one should respond to "a call to take wing beyond the familiar look and sound of things. At the same time it is a call to dig deep in to the ground of being. ... In beginning to surrender our boundaries, our sense of belonging in the world may both deepen and broaden us".

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³ The traditional meaning of Ubuntu, an African word which transcends any written definition and is best expressed as "I am a person because of other people" and is characterized as unselfish allegiances and relations to others (Forster 2006:252).

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