Zebra-crossings: public participation to remake the city?

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Introduction

Public art is ‘art which has as its goal a desire to engage with its audiences to create spaces – whether material, virtual or imagined – within which people can identify themselves, perhaps by creating a renewed reflection on community, on the uses of public spaces or on behaviour within them’(Sharp et al 2005:1004). More than gallery art which often only attracts middle class people socialised into engaging with culture (with a capital ‘C’) and art appreciation, public art is reputed to be a way of getting different groups of people and communities together to produce meaningful insights, foster peace and create safer and more convivial neighbourhoods. (Clover 2006). Minty (2006:424) suggests that public art is often considered ‘a driver for social change due to its perceived ability to reach broader groupings than is done by established arts institutions.’ By transforming public spaces in some way artists encourage people to congregate and meet and interact with each other in new ways. Thus, by creating transitional spaces – in the sense of both temporary physical spaces that offer transitions from one place to another and mental spaces beyond the familiar, everyday landscapes of thinking – an art, architecture, design and engineering project may also function as a collective practice that opens further democratic possibilities. While festivals often turn citizens into spectators and audience, public art can ask them to become active participants and co-creators of murals, music events, monuments, festivals, performances. In this way art functions as a vehicle to mobilise citizens around particular values and issues.

This article is based on a public art project that took place in Durban, South Africa, in early 2008. The project sought to motivate and mobilise audiences to become active participants in the processes initiated by artists and remake the city. Drawing on my experiences as a cultural activist and popular educator I had attached myself to the project as a researcher for its duration of its 7 weeks. At various stages I interviewed artists and recorded observations in a detailed journal. I also drew on participant student journals and extensive visual records in order to discover how the visiting artists from Europe would engage with local artists and communities in

their attempt to create more liveable / likeable spaces in the city. Given the history of apartheid and a deeply divided society that is now boasting the largest inequality coefficient in the world I asked myself what kind of practices they would employ in order to humanise scarred and bruised relations between different kinds of people. How would this public art project realise the possibility of activating the imagination of all participants, including local communities, towards re-creating parts of the city into ‘creative commons’?

This paper is in three parts: firstly, I situate the discussion and then describe how one aspect of the project, the parade, lays claim to the ‘right to the city’. However, there are different perspectives on this. Secondly, I analyse whether the parade as a creative practice negotiated encounters between different kinds of people. Drawing on Ellsworth (2005) and Biesta (2005, 2006), I argue that it failed to generate understanding, and activate imagination and ‘new beginnings’. Finally, I suggest that any project of ‘learning to live together’ requires not so much a focus on identities, but both a different disposition, and more democratic practices.

The right to the city

We live in divided cities where difference can generate both vibrancy and excitement, open new possibilities of being and relating, or result in ‘bigotry and divisions, marginalisations and exclusions, sometimes boiling over into violent confrontations.’ (Harvey 2006:86) If cities are an expression of divided unequal societies they can also be changed to become environments that bring people together. The challenge is to re-make the cities, and assert what Harvey (2006:83-4) has called ‘one of the most precious of all human rights’: ‘the right to make and remake ourselves’.

The right to the city (…)is not merely a conditional right of access to what already exists; it is an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our collective needs and desires, and so to remake our daily lives, reshape our architectural practices, and define an alternative way of simply being human.’ (Harvey 2006:102)

People and their living and working spaces are intimately connected, and

we need to evaluate continuously what we might be making of ourselves as well as of others as the urban process evolves. If, with experience and on reflection, we find our lives too stressful, alienating or just too plain uncomfortable and unrewarding, then we have the right to change course and seek to remake ourselves in another image by constructing a qualitatively different kind of city. (Harvey 2006:83-4)

The challenge, writes Harvey (2006:89), is to construct sites that can 'provide socio-spatial bases within which experiments into different modes of urban living can arise and from which struggles can be waged to build a different kind of city.'

In the South African context this challenge is extremely relevant. Durban, a city with a population of roughly 4 million people situated on the East coast of South Africa bears all the signs of historical apartheid planning in that the majority population lives far away from the industrial areas and central business district and relies on public transport to get to work. The transport system is designed to deliver people to and away from the city, thus, moving from the North of the City to the West still requires travel via the centre. Warwick triangle is a busy intersection of roads, markets and public transport on the edge of the inner city. Below a large colourful mural adorning the walls of the station it is noisy and polluted as taxis, buses, trucks, cars, commuters, stall-holders and shoppers jostle for position and compete for space and passage. Here is the main taxi-rank for commuters, the biggest fresh produce market, the largest number of informal traders and, hovering above on two unfinished viaducts over the station the biggest 'muthi market' in Southern Africa [2]. Warwick Junction shows up the glaring differential distribution of economic, social, cultural resources: this is where people without private transport means shop; it is a space to pass through rather than be or live in, and only informal traders and homeless transient people sleep here (illegally) under plastic sheets or in hastily erected temporary shelters.

Hall (2006:23) has pointed out that cities and places are 'configured in the imaginary through the regimes of representation'. Over the years, Warwick triangle has acquired the reputation of 'dangerous' because of high incidents of criminal activity and politically motivated attacks. The traffic hub and markets are seen as a no-go zone for white and middle-class people.

The decision to take charge of remaking our cities and ourselves is also radical because experts and professions in charge of urban planning would have us believe that they know best what's in our interests and that we are ill qualified to shape the

places and spaces in which we live. Yet, as Miles (1998:24) observes,

(I)imagination is not the reserve only of artists and designers, it is the potential of every citizen to foresee a future', and 'those who experience a city through the attachment of meanings and values to spaces (rather than through schematic representations) have much to offer, and are the city's rightful owners.

In February 2008, an international art, architecture and design project took up its headquarters in the middle of the Warwick area, and embarked on a project that sought to re-claim and kindle citizens' imagination and re-configure parts of the city.

Cascoland: activating the city

'Cascoland' (casco is a 'hull' and the name alludes to a shell that needs to be filled, using do-it-yourself technologies, to turn the shelter /house or boat into a home) is the name given to a public art project that seeks to turn public spaces into more accessible and liveable ones, through 'a collage of different projects'. In 2006, Dutch and international artists collaborated with local South African ones in the Cape Town Crossroads squatter camp, in 2007 they worked in the inner city of Johannesburg and in 2008 in various locations in Durban. While the context gave rise to specific foci and interventions the mission and method for all three remained largely the same: Cascoland considers public art 'an important tool in activating and developing public space':

In the kind of public art Cascoland promotes, inter-disciplinary artists engage themselves in communities to collaborate with audiences and members of the communities in shaping their public space through dialogue and participation.

The intention is to motivate and mobilize audiences to become an active participant in the process initiated by the artists and in which the eventual artwork is not as much a physical object but a change in perception of public space with the audience. (www.cascoland.org)

In practice, Cascoland works in two phases: during a five week 'laboratory phase' international and South African artists, architects and designers work together,

often using found materials and recycling discarded objects, and define their particular projects and execute their ideas, drawing in members of local communities and students, Visiting artists also host workshops as ‘a means to transfer and exchange skills and experiences’ on ‘recycling’, ‘animation film making’ and other creative skills (www.cascoland.com). At the end of the five weeks the work culminates in a festival lasting eight days during which workshops, performances, events showcase the projects and make space for other invited local artists and musicians in a program that aims ‘to activate public space’. While Cape Town and Johannesburg had operated within one space, Durban was to be a ‘mobile’ project opening up and connecting different parts of the city with one another.

Many residents of informal settlements in and on the periphery of Durban walk to town, especially if they are unemployed or command low wages. One of the commuter routes from Cato Manor/Mkhumbane to the city captured the imagination of a young architect, Doung Jahangeer, who, eight years ago, began walking the route, establishing relationships with ‘loose [cigarettes] and sweet sellers, gangsters, mamas’. His vision, developed along the way when he realised the energy of people, became one of ‘architecture without walls’, and he wanted to ‘workshop the production of space’, ‘workshop the function of space’ believing that ‘people in spaces make places’. (Interview 27 February 08) He realised, as he says, ‘new ways of engagement between spaces and the people that inhabit them giving rise to new notions of citizenship and civic engagement made possible by the intersections in these routes.’ He suggested that ‘These experiences contest the paranoia regarding safety and the ‘politics of fear’ that shape our interactions within the city.’ (www.Cascoland.org) His hope was that the affected change in perceptions would infect the city council, and that ‘after they have left the council will begin to demonstrate a willingness to shift their own attitude about urban development, and wanting it to be a bit more creative and we can only see that if there is an action that is taken.’ (Interview 27 February 08)

The idea was born for a public art project consisting of a kind of ‘performative walk with a group of people’ along ‘imaginary axis of ‘informal routes’ from the peripheric townships, via suburbia, along the N3 highway into the heart of the city.’ (ibid) While he conducts such walks on a regular basis, Cascoland was to open access to the route and the places and spaces alongside it to the public more generally. In this way, Cascoland 2008 proposed to connect the ‘informal settlements’ outside of the city center with the inner city context. Along the way

participants would encounter various ‘interventions’ aimed at mobilising them into engaging with the physical spaces and the people inhabiting them.

The Durban Cascoland happened at five different sites and a detailed description of all the events and projects would go beyond the scope of this paper. All, however, originated from the ‘performative walk’ to which members of the public were invited through press releases and pamphlets as follows:

Cascoland invites you to come and experience an inner city art trip, dubbed the Parade. It will highlight the work of individual artists, architects and designers from South Africa and Europe. You will become part of a festive walking trip which will bring you to not too obvious places in Durban where you will be hosted by Cascoland in collaboration with local people.

The Parade will start each day at Nicol Square Parkade, where you can park your car securely (from Mon – Fri on level 8, Sat/Sun on level 3). From there the Parade will start at 4.30 PM strictly. You will be accompanied by a mixture of guides and performing artists of the Mobile Bin Band.

The Parade will first bring you to Warwick Triangle. You will experience the vibrancy of this transport hub and market place area while you are walking on your way towards Warwick Park, your first festival destination. (www.cascoland.com,)

The parade

The parade first traversed what is known as the ‘Indian area’ of the CBD and then the adjacent African markets. From the perspective of the mainly young and white participants the parade was great fun: escorted by police, every day for a week participant – performers and about 50 people walked from Nichol Square to Berea Park, led by a marching band, armed with vuvuzelas (plastic trumpets associated with soccer supporters), decorated broomsticks acting as percussion instruments and whistles. Some performers pushed a range of ‘pimped’ dustbins on wheels containing music ‘boom boxes’ and video installations. The parade took charge of the spaces with the director climbing up a ladder and blowing her whistle directing the traffic and by creating pathways through rolled out zebra-crossings.

Shoppers and commuters, traders and sweat-shop workers stopped or were stopped

in their tracks and some stared curiously at what appeared like a welcome interruption to an otherwise always-the-same daily routine. Others mumbled with irritation at the disruption of their plans and business. From the windows of a building divided into sweatshops people were smiling and waving down. Some pedestrians turned and talked to each other; others just shook their heads; some craned their necks to see what would happen next, and others stretched out their hands for a pamphlet that had the words ‘free’ written on it in large letters – but that turned out to be no more than an announcement of the daily festival. Meanwhile, the people on the parade took copious photographs, especially in the muthi market when colourful sangomas and herbalists provided exotic picture opportunities.

What sense did paraders make of it all? For most, it was the first and only exposure ever to a part of their city they had never visited or even known about. One described the city as ‘deep in heat and dirt’ and perceived ‘a contentment that exists’ amongst local people.’ (Nirana, 5.3.08) Another noted:

The attitude was great, and the local people either loved it and were amazed, got involved and some people ignored us completely (obviously in a rush or extremely jealous). The people in the Muti (sic) Market stood up and danced with us, and followed us – normally they would have just stared, and hated the publicity, but they even allowed photos to be taken. This could be seen as a sign that there is safety in numbers, but the reason that I think is more acceptable (and nicer to believe) is that the Cascoland artists and participants had developed relationships with the people of the market and of the town, which is awesome to see. I hope it will change mindsets and attitudes in our town’s and outer lying area’s, both the local and not so local people. (Rich, 13.3.08.)

The traders were indeed gracious hosts and most of them wore welcoming smiles; there was little hope that they would benefit from the paraders as potential customers, yet meanwhile their regular customers and clients were obstructed. I hoped the traders’ indulgence was not borne out of experiences from the past: as people in powerful positions whites could always foray into areas designated ‘black’ as they saw fit. Worse, I wondered whether some form of financial compensation had been negotiated in advance and so the relations had already been cast as commercial ones. (Journal, 8.3.08)

A black student observed his colleagues and commented that ‘negative perceptions inform the outsiders, specially white people, to an extent that they find it so intimidating to set foot there’, and that the highlight of the experience for him was ‘observing my fellow white students going deep into the so-called crime ridden streets’ (George 22.2.08) In the process, perceptions changed. As Nonthando (14.3.08) wrote:

We passed judgement on a ‘black” unsafe clutter, where every inch of every surface was utilized for some form of retail no matter how small. Despite the physical barriers, which divide “white” from “black”. We cannot help but notice the invisible barrier, which exists between one and the others. Strangers in a familiar land. But, our perceptions soon changed. The clutter we once saw as a mess, we now see as the residue of a well-oiled economic market.

How did the people whose space was invaded view the parade? Most considered the paraders to be strangers, tourists. Jessica (5.3.08) experienced being treated like a stranger: ‘The line ‘don’t you know I am local’ just doesn’t seem to cut it when a Caucasian is all too often mistaken for a tourist’. I overheard a pedestrian asking for directions to the parade. He was told he should ‘look for white men with dustbins’. Someone else inquired: ‘What’s this about?’ And when told it was a festival (unspecified) he didn’t understand: ‘So, what are they complaining about?’ While demonstrations and marches have a history, parades of mainly white people taking photographs marching through black spaces seem to make no sense. If the parade was the message itself, the messengers were not understood.

‘White men with bins’

The passage was ‘facilitated’ by a mobile zebra-crossing: two men pushed an industrial spindle with a rolled-up plastic black-and-white ‘runner’ which they pulled out at cross-roads to create a ‘safe passage’. For me, the zebra-stripes became a kind of metaphor for the project itself: creating temporary, precarious and somewhat slippery access to ‘other’ territories, facilitating controlled crossing-over. Once the paraders had passed the stripes were rolled up again and moved to another site. The zebra crossing signaled the tentative first steps of mainly privileged non-blacks into others’ places, and though the racial configuration of the ‘crossing over’ had not been intended, it should have been anticipated and prepared for. Minty (2006:423) points out that ‘[I]it is virtually impossible for artists

working in public art in South Africa to escape the burden of history embedded in the landscape.' I will argue that the a-historicity of the project was extra-ordinary, to say the least.

Ellsworth (2005) has argued for a pedagogy where the materiality of time and place counts because it impinges directly on the materiality of the learning self. There is no doubt that all the paraders' senses were activated and that the suspension of the known, familiar in exchange for uncertainty, fear and vulnerability may have allowed instances of learning through the body. However, I am not convinced that the materiality of an experience automatically leads to learning. Ellsworth (2005:16) describes how the encounter with the other may give rise 'to that unmistakable, naked, vulnerable look of simultaneous absorption and self-presence'.

It is the look of someone who is in the process of losing something of who she thought she was. Upon encountering something outside herself and her own ways of thinking, she is giving up thoughts she previously held as *known*, and as a consequence she is parting with a bit of her known self. The look of the learning self that concerns me here gives form to the sensation of simultaneously being with oneself *and* being in relation to things, people, or ideas outside oneself.'

Was there any evidence of this look? Or were the looks from either side more like those in a zoo: being stared at and staring at objectified 'others'. From what I observed the parade did *not* generate an experience of 'being there' – in the same place – becoming a meeting with both the other and the self. The strange other remained both strange and not-part-of-self; the defining of self through the other did not happen, on either side of 'performer' or 'spectator'.

One participant noted: 'Visiting someone only makes sense if the visited shows some interest in your presence' (Philemon, 29.2.08) It seemed to me that locals were curious but there was little opportunity for this to be activated into real interest and engagement. 'Insiders' and 'outsiders' exchanged furtive glances, both as observers, but eyes did not connect, looks did not settle, there was no time to talk, to exchange a story with the other, to relate. There were moments, impressions – but no shared experiences. Sharing would need communication, negotiation, building trust and agreement, even if for a limited time, while here, one group was constantly on the move and the other remained passive onlookers.

I came to the conclusion that the parade turned out to be an invasion, a conquering, subjugation of space and the people within it and in many ways it was a display of everything that is problematic about attitudes and behaviours towards strangers and others' space (what I will describe as disposition, below). Paraders moved through the space with seemingly total disregard for the people in it: the shopkeepers and traders, the shoppers, worshippers at the mosque and church, the sick in search for healing at the muthi market. Local people became no more than props, part of the decorations – especially in the muthi market – they were invisible as human beings, non-people or just black workers, naturalised in their poverty and activities as exploited labour. There was no attempt or effort at finding out, learning about space and people. The attitude displayed (intentional or not) was one of control or ignoring: we control the traffic, crowds at taxi ranks etc, or we ignore, disregard. The *marching through* failed to turn into an *engaging with* – and, I fear, deepened alienation rather than sowed seeds for understanding and the creation of common space, both symbolic and physical.

The politics of public art: some tensions and omissions

The Cascoland parade displayed a peculiar ignoring (ignorance?) of the history and politics of South Africa. The starting point of the parade was not just a convenient parking garage, but a place of historical significance as Nichol Square is the site of famous historical political gatherings and demonstrations during the anti-apartheid era. For many members of the public the main (only) reference point for people walking together making a noise would have been public protests associated with political demands. This was clearly demonstrated by the comment of the man who asked 'what are they complaining about?' and various passers-by who joined in for a bit and began to toitoi, throwing their fist into the air. Ignoring historical connotations meant not just missing opportunities for new, imaginative 'calls' for new common spaces, it meant that participants and audience alike missed the point. Now, six months later, despite those individual experiences that hint at a shift in attitude, the space is unchanged in terms of who uses it and especially white people are deemed to be tourists and consumers.

In an early interview the project director had explained the emphasis on doing rather than talking in the process of working together:

To start a collaboration is always very difficult because you have to mix two different cultures, two ways of working but what we do is to start working and by

working you make an understanding: like I do it like this and you do it like that and you also create respect because it's not that we do it better than the other party it's just that if you start discussing it 'why we do that….' you can talk forever and nothing ever will happen. During working things do start to happen: respect starts to grow, and collaboration starts. But it's always difficult to get people working. You first have to facilitate this space where people are confident to do work. (Interview 2.3.08)

Finding each other creatively and productively through the project assumes equality and a process of ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation of decisions. Working at the 'Dala' centre in Warwick triangle, different artists and designers occupied space variously. Partially, this had to do with the nature of the projects: larger structures being designed and made by white males (!) while women fitted into corners and passages and local black artists occupied the veranda. The fact that it was so clearly gendered and often race-specific suggests socially structured differentials. This is not surprising but it needed to be anticipated, noticed and addressed as social issues! Much of the project discussion, dialogue, decision making happened after hours, and since mainly visiting artists were in residence together most of the local (Black) artists were excluded.

Describing how in 1969 she formed the first mural teams to design and paint 'the great wall' in Los Angeles, Baca (2005:158) calls the collective process of painting a mural 'a choreographed dance between team members, community residences and street life'. Long after the place had been transformed into 'common ground' the paintings still continue to tell the story of the community in which it lives, drawing passers by into the history, present and future of the people that worked to create it, their ancestors and their dreams. 'The work [ie the great wall] became a monument to interracial harmony as methods were developed to work across the differences of race and class.' Part of the methods was a painstaking process of participatory research, dialogue and story-telling in order to arrive at the images.

In Cascoland there were moments when a camera was passed on, when the collaboration was word-less, demonstrating common understanding between artists, when people picked up each others' rhythm on percussion instruments. However, the long and careful process of speaking with each other and listening attentively was sorely lacking. I would argue that the failure to articulate and agree on what constitutes participation amongst visiting and local artists and communities resulted in both tensions around power and decision-making, and, in the end,

unclear purpose.

Strong participation where people take turns in assuming the lead in creative activities requires equality in status, position and confidence but also in living and working arrangements. Local artists rarely challenged the lead taken by the visitors with their heavy machinery and if they did, this did not become evident. How can we explain their failure to intervene decisively, asking to clarify purpose and insisting on putting in place the means and tools to ensure the parade would not turn into voyeurism or tourism at home? Why did the project neglect to deliver a clear message about the question of ownership of the city, and the intention to turn public places into more liveable and likeable ones? Who called the shots about the role of local communities and citizens to be activated?

Clearly, various participants in the project operated with different interpretations of ‘participation’, ranging from ‘consultation’ to ‘collaboration’, but not including collective decision-making. In Cascoland, empowerment of individual and collective participants too often translated into ‘power over’ rather than ‘power with’ others. While the emphasis on action may speed up the output of visible products, dialogue is crucial to the discovery of commonalities and explorations of difference. Arendt (1958:178) has warned: ‘Without the accompaniment of speech (at any rate), action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject.’ Constant and continuous reflection, questioning, probing with the self and others in a process of mutual searching and affirming, experimenting and building of new insights is a crucial part of creating. Beyond the parade, in other projects, artists from both ‘worlds’ and members of local communities did begin to work together across the divides of race, class, gender and culture. Invariably, this happened because there was a greater investment in time spent in one place and this allowed a slow getting-to-know each other, a learning to trust and respect. Here, talking and listening together with action based on shared decision-making managed to ‘set something into motion’ (Arendt 1958:177).

Art and creative expression open possibilities for making people feel more powerful both individually and collectively. By experiencing how they themselves have acted to affect visible and feel-able changes both in their physical and human environment they come to realise that they have ‘voice’, and they are not just consumers of goods and decisions made elsewhere but producers of things and decisions. This, surely, is an important step in the struggle for turning public places into more convivial spaces and, as social movement studies show, these experiences of democratic practice are taken forward into further struggles. Beyond

the artists, what were the lessons for engaging the public?

Dispositions and practices: an ethical disposition

Learning from the Cascoland experiences the final section of this paper asserts that democratic citizen participation, including participation in public art (as creator or co-creator), must be founded on ethical disposition – what Sitas (2008) has called the 'ethic of reconciliation' and what Camus described as basic 'human decency', exemplified by Dr Rieux in 'The Plague'. This *disposition* finds expression in a set of *practices* which combine so that learning and working to live together is not just a 'truce' but an act of social justice. Public art and popular education have a lot in common – in fact, public art that wants to go beyond the symbolic or representational is one facet of or means to do popular education. It is not surprising, therefore, that the following disposition and practices overlap somewhat with what Scottish colleagues have developed as 'propositions and proposals' (Learning for Democracy group 2008).

In 'The ethic of reconciliation' Sitas (2008) has described and explained how nations and individuals have responded to "others" in three ways: Firstly, considering them 'surplus' and therefore eliminable, as in the case of the extermination of native populations/first nations – and now in the continued war in places like Iraq; secondly, regarding them as subjects to be subjugated and turned into beasts of burden, as in the process of social and economic exploitation – now particularly of migrant and migrating women across the globe. Thirdly, Sitas contends "others" are simply considered 'non' – non-white, non-male, non-Christian, non-Hutu, non-rich – and by nature of being non-us they can be marginalised, excluded, omitted or even exterminated. The dominant culture's predisposition to the de-humanisation of people as resources to be exploited, controlled, genetically modified makes it necessary to consciously develop an outlook, a worldview, a belief and way of being and relating that again regards the other as fellow human. An ethical disposition recognises that the others' debasement is also mine, that by exploiting I also oppress myself, that whatever happens to them matters for me and my wellbeing. In South African culture the concept that describes this disposition is 'ubuntu' (a term / concept that has now been taken over/ alienated / used for neo-liberal purposes, too). Paulo Freire called this the human vocation: the struggle of people to become more fully human.

Nurturing an ethical disposition towards other people – both those who are 'the same' as us, and those who are in some way different – requires some shifts: firstly,

towards acknowledging the partiality of our experiences, views and knowledge, secondly, towards vulnerability and deliberate risk-taking, and thirdly, towards a recognition of interdependence and relationality not just as necessities but as virtues.

Firstly, I contend that engaging with unknown territories, including people from other cultures, of other persuasions and preoccupations, is not an act of 'positioning'. It is not about suggesting that any one view is equally valid as another as if there were no power differentials in the way one is privileged over another. Rather, it is acknowledging and accepting that each view is only partial, and partial means both limited, fragmented, incomplete, and biased, preferential, partisan. Many views and perspectives are needed if we want to get a more truthful of people in relation to one another, to nature, to the world as we have made it.

Secondly, really hearing and seeing other ways of being and making sense requires taking the risk of leaving the security and comfort of the familiar and venturing into the unknown, uncertain. As we take the risk and review and reject assumptions and prefabricated answers we experience a humility that shrinks the arrogance of wanting to control. Deliberative vulnerability, that is, vulnerability that has been consciously engaged in the process of suspending beliefs and explanations and opening to the unforeseen unknown involves embracing a fundamental shift in relations of power. Here, a person's sense of power is rooted in the relationship to and with the other.

Thirdly, vulnerability is also the primary condition for imagining other possibilities to the known, mainstream ones: beyond norms that are set in terms of western, white, male, able-bodied, paternalistic, formally employed etc experiences. Envision relations beyond autonomy as a value and binaries as a framework for thinking, and towards accepting a more holistic way of being that embraces relationality and interdependence of people, and people in the world.

Towards ethical practices

Biesta (2006:103) has suggested that 'Difference requires a different attitude towards plurality and otherness, one in which the idea of responsibility is more appropriate than the idea of knowledge, one in which ethics is more important than epistemology'. The common assumption is that with more information people grow deeper understanding and this turns their actions into less racist, hostile or dismissive ones. [3] One popular way of giving information are cultural festivals that

‘celebrate diversity’ by showcasing the different practices associated with racial or ethnic identity. A few years ago I witnessed a range of cultural festivals in California and was intrigued about what I came to call the displays of ‘something-American’: African, Native, Asian, Hispanic American (usually hyphenated), each time with the notable absence of ‘Caucasian-American’ or ‘gringo’ culture. By not making the dominant culture an explicit part of festivals it was not ‘de-naturalised’, it came to be excluded from reflection, it failed to be relativised as just one other cultural formation. There was the danger of another ‘othering’ in that what was on show was difference, here displayed as deviance from the norm that was in no need of question. Putting the music, dance, artefacts, foods of various cultures into a kind of temporary open-air mobile museum as ‘exotica’ also obfuscated deep differences between groups of people in terms of food security, dignified jobs, and access to the means of wellbeing.

An attitude in which responsibility is more important than knowledge is expressed in reciprocal and communal practices rather than displays. The (post-modern) obsession with issues of identity – which I would suggest is in itself a signal of privilege as it suggests the choice to ‘make yourself’ – directs the gaze to similarity or difference, based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, physiological divergences etc. What we should look at, rather, are relations, ways of being *with* as opposed to *distinct from* other people. Wildemeersch et al (2007:28) have argued for the ‘need to shift from the notions of identity and community towards the notions of difference and public space’. However, what is important is not so much the space as we find it, but what happens in it, that is, *how we constitute space through our practices.* If we accept that a person becomes a person through other people, our attention must be directed to the space between people, that is, the actions and practices that constitute them.

John Berger (2006) has beautifully described such practices in the simple actions of finding local vegetables and cooking for the other, of sharing food and celebrations and of lightening the load of a person’s sadness by carrying it with them. In everyday life one example of practices would be social action. Lawy and Biesta (2006) have pointed out how citizenship reveals itself as practice when people interact with each other in common effort and struggle. Another example is the ‘choreographed dance’ of people creating public art together, as described by Baca earlier.

Thus, beyond the ethical disposition, the task of re-making our cities (and ourselves) so that together we create convivial spaces for all, demands a process of

participatory engagement. Some basic principles underlie the practices of cultural activists and popular educators if this is to be a democratic act. Firstly, practice must be *historically rooted and clearly contextual* within the local. There is no generic congenial city and urban space, and there is no one way of interacting and working together that fits any site or any group of people assembled.

Secondly, understanding relations and relationships amongst people in common practices throws up *issues of power* and the multiple ways this is enacted both amongst (different) people and in relation to their context. Beall (1997:22) has suggested that

(Thus) good practice that values difference and works with diversity in urban social development includes an *awareness* of power imbalances, a *willingness* to identify and hear all voices, an *acceptance* of conflict without out and out confrontation and deadlock, a *desire* to learn from our own experience and that of others and the *courage* to confront our own power in 'a city for all'. (author's italics)

Therefore, the shaping and use of public space is a matter for *ongoing negotiation*. Local users and community members within particular geographic locations must be given a voice and say – and not just consulted in a token of participation. Creating the conditions for and facilitating dialogue where everyone feels both safe and able to speak up is important given the constraints of power differentials amongst various participants, and the entrenched belief that professionals and specialists 'know best' what's good for an area or people.

Thirdly, practice demands *taking sides*. The claim of objectivity is always made by those in a position of power. Land and urban places /spaces are political issues and irrespective of claims made these are imbued with power and privilege. The desire to live together interdependently flies in the face of those who wish to divide in order to rule. The supposed neutrality adopted by visiting artists in Durban's Cascoland meant it floated somewhere in 'nowhere-land' without clearly supporting and being supported by progressive initiatives.

Fourthly, practices must be *collective.* It is imperative to relate to others / strangers as human beings whose presence is necessary for our own 'coming into presence' (Biesta 2005), but this can only happen in action (Arendt 1958). This action is a process of working together, described by Baca (2005) as the passing of tools from

one hand to another, and of words that are strung together into a common narrative towards a mutually defined goal.

Fifthly, the importance of *dialogue* was clearly underscored by the lack of common cause in Cascoland. Collective activities are underpinned by common purpose and understanding – and this is built through speaking and listening, reflecting and arguing, meaning-making and re-making. Freire defined dialogue as a collective knowledge-production process and by definition this is not a solitary undertaking.

Finally, and crucially absent in Cascoland, if a project aims to activate the public in order to build something new it needs to *stimulate the imagination*. People have the capacity to imagine alternatives to the actual but constructing visions of what could be instead of what is a process that requires ideas and nurturing.

All of these practices: contextual, historical rootedness, ongoing negotiation, bias, collective action and working with the imagination, need to come together. Holistic practice requires that we are mindful and take care of all constraints that limit our possibilities. Collective public art, I would propose, is a useful strategy for stimulating this process. And here is where the educational dimension of the undertaking becomes clear.

Conclusion

At times when totalising globalisation suggests the survival of only the fittest and richest, what Cherif (2006) calls ‘the terrorism of the powerful’, apathy is the greatest danger. We need to draw inspiration and learn from the ‘success stories’ of newly forged

relationships of understanding between citizens and subjects that are suggestive of new, more flexible, negotiated, cosmopolitan and popular forms of citizenship, with the emphasis on inclusion, conviviality and the celebration of difference. (Nyamnjoh 2007:74)

But even the not so successful projects can become a lesson in democratic citizenship. While the ‘learning society’ is in danger of continuously reproducing itself with all its structural inequalities and biases towards autonomous being, great individualism, competitiveness etc, active engagement in a grassroots project may

lead to important insights. In a credentialising world where even citizenship is thought to be an achievement for which school-children are being prepared and where success is calculated by means of tick-lists with pre-defined outcomes rather than human relations, we would do well to remember that citizenship is learnt by participating rather than through study. (Lawy & Biesta 2006) However, simple participation as 'being there' does not guarantee learning, and since the practices of a group, organisation or action are not always democratic and progressive the outcomes are not automatically a greater commitment to social justice.

Therefore, at best, learning happens not just through participation but also through a deliberate (educational) undertaking. Putting different people into the same space – however convivial – does not magically turn them into respectful co-humans. Finally, then, learning to be democratic and creative citizens is not about zebra crossing-facilitated forays into each others' territories, but rather about imaginative ways of co-constructing common spaces in which our practices rather than identities define relationships and daily living.

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Notes

[1] Community Development Programme
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[2] ‘Muthi’ is the isiZulu name for medicinal herbs and remedies. This is dispensed by herbalists and traditional healers, called ‘sangomas’.

[3] Research has shown that while information is important, it is rather the experience of belonging that allowed people infected with the HI virus to live positively. Endresen, K & von Kotze, A (2006).