ABSTRACT OF: THE THEORY OF NON-THEORY: MINDFUL ART WALKS AND HEALTHIER FUTURES

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An artist has the freedom, at least in theory, to move between sectors and spaces and, in the process, to connect economic and political silos. In my paper, I reflect on my practice as a visual artist and social ecologist working in public spaces and the iterative process that I adopt to connect thriving informal-sector and formal systems, impoverished and wealthy publics. The paper commences with a description of the Hyena Sculptures, upcycled found wood (Fig. 1) developed in response to Nathanael Johnson’s discussion of the urban wilderness [1]. The exhibited sculptures were a key component of the artist’s participation in the Watershed program and were supplemented by a short stop motion animation video, produced with animator Henk Coetzee to capture the hyenas as they “walked” along the inter-ocerian watershed that runs through Johannesburg, South Africa.

In addition to the sculptures and video, I led guided walks along the watershed, delineated and mapped using digital elevation data so that participants were able to follow the high ridge running through the city at the point at which the drainage divides. On these walks, participants romanticized what was beneath their feet, imagining a massive underground river. In the conversations that took place while walking, and in relation to the sculpture and animation, I explained how the watershed functioned, clarifying imagined ecologies and geologies, highlighting the precarity of the city’s water supply and the country’s fragility. The aim was to develop a sense of custodianship of the city and to provide examples of citizenry in public spaces through immersive experiences.

Rather than translating science for an assembled public, as I discuss in the paper, art-science practices have potential as public experiments, transforming art, science and the public. Climate geographer Karen O’Brien describes this approach as implying less attention to altering or manipulating people’s behavior and more to creating the conditions that promote the development and expression of social consciousness and futures consciousness [2]. I draw on theories of cradle-to-cradle design, the circular economy, biomimicry’s design by nature and design thinking [3] to work at multiple scales as a public artist. I describe art as a means to connect people to ecosystems and the issues that impact on them. The interconnections during and after the walks created a space for dialogue about how people live in cities, disconnected from nature, provoking more questions than answers. What creates sustainable living in cities where nature is constantly pushed out? How do we achieve this? How can we make climate change adaptation accessible in participatory processes that contribute to the change?

The sculptures, animation and walks at Watershed followed from and opened up new avenues for further interventions. In one long-term and continuing project, I work with ecologist Sally Archibald and other savannah ecologists, including conducting a live controlled burn as a performance by Working on Fire (a government firefighting initiative) [4]. Concurrently, through an NGO I cofounded, Water for the Future Collective, I work to build collaborations and interventions with people from environmental science, urban renewal, engineering, architecture, landscaping, art, design, sustainable development and finance. The Johannesburg Climate Change Adaptation Framework (CCAF), for example, included an “eco tree seat,” a pilot intervention designed to address stormwater management, provide shade and street seating, and maintain the local environment while providing young people with skills and supporting community inclusion. Such small-scale interventions, I argue, have the potential to bring together populations. The eco tree seat marked the moment when the city took note of a codesigned citizens’ initiative that could help us adapt to climate change and reduce flooding [5].

What makes art a unique contributor is its freedom to respond to climate change and environmental precarity through the pursuit of open-ended explorations through an ever-expanding set of practices not dependent on finished “outcomes” or “solutions” [6]. In deliberately conceptualizing ways forward and drawing on embodied transdisciplinary experiences, we argue the need to codesign adaptable cities, comaintained by informal and formal sectors, rich and poor. We need more out-of-the-box thinkers to solve such wicked problems.

References and Notes

Based on a paper presented at the 2018 Watershed: Art, Science, and Elemental Politics program at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, September 2018. The full paper is available with the online supplemental materials.


4. The #Firegrazer burns were plotted and researched on a very controlled site post-burn. For further information, see www.hanneliecoetzee.com/2017-locust-and-grasshopper.

5. The first intervention, the eco tree seat on Viljoen Street in Lorentzville, Johannesburg, was funded by the Johannesburg Development Agency’s Our City Our Block initiative, during a stormwater upgrade on that street. The city also invited the Water for the Future team to Jukskei Catchment Workshops and are incorporating the NGO’s input supporting experimental interventions. See www.instagram.com/waterforthefuture_globalsouth and www.waterforthefuture.co.za.