Special Section: ArtScience/Watershed

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 this paper, the artist reflects on her practice as a visual artist and social ecologist working in public spaces, and the iterative process which she adopts to connect thriving informal sector and formal systems, impoverished and wealthy publics. The paper commences with a description of the Hyena Sculptures, upcycled of found wood (Fig.1) and 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 Watershed (Johannesburg, 2018), and were supplemented by a short stop frame animation video, produced by the artist and animator Henk Coetzee to capture the hyenas as they ‘walked’ along the inter-oceanic watershed at the beginning of the work day.

In addition to the sculptures and video, the artist 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, the artist explained to participants how the watershed functioned, clarifying imagined ecologies and 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.

Rather than translating science for an assembled public, as discussed in this paper, art-science practices have the potential of public experiments, so 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]. The author draws 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. Art is described as a means to connect people to eco-systems 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 open up new avenues for further interventions. In one long term and continuing project, the artist works 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, Water for the Future Collective, which she co-founded, the artist works to further this, building 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, it is argued, have the potential to bring together populations. The eco tree seat marked the moment when the city took note of a co-designed citizens’ initiative that can help adapt to climate change [5].

What makes art a unique contributor is its freedom to respond to climate change and increasing 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 thinking a way forward and drawing on embodied interdisciplinary experiences, the paper concludes, we need to co-design adaptable cities that are co-maintained by informal and formal sectors, the rich and the poor. The future needs more out of the box thinkers to solve such wicked problems.

References and Notes


3. See for example William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things (New York: North Point Press, 2002).

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 (JDA), ‘Our City Our Block’ initiative, during a stormwater upgrade on that street. The City also invited the Water for the Future for the Future City 2018 Workshop at the University of Johannesburg, and are incorporating the NGO’s input supporting experimental interventions. See <www.instagram.com/waterforthefuture_globalsouth/>.


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Fig. 1. Hyena Sculpture, upcycled wood, glue and screws, 88 x 183 x 33 cm, 2018. (© Hannelie Warrington-Coetzee. Photo: J.P. Hanekom.)