

The Mail & Guardian interviews Brett on Public Art and Infecting The City, Dec 2010

What is the definition of public art? Is any art that appears in an open space, out of a gallery, public art?

Defining characteristics of public art are that it needs to be **freely accessible to all and in a public space** (not an 'open' space); and in general I would probably call most art that is free and accessible to all and that appears in a public space 'public art' (assuming I accepted the particular manifestation as 'art' in the first place, but that is for another conversation...).

I come from a performing arts background, and in curating **Infecting The City (ITC): the Spier Public Arts Festival** I ensure that almost all the works on the Festival have a performative element to them, i.e. human performance or participation is necessary. My emphasis is as much on bringing performance out of the theatres as visual art out of the galleries. Thus rather than feature an exhibition of sculptures on ITC, I would programme an artist sculpting in a public space. In such a case I view the **creative action** of the artist as the artwork, rather than the residue of that performance, i.e. the completed sculpture.

Please tell me where you think public art is "at" in SA at the moment. Does the sort of controversy that Andries Botha has faced in Durban illustrate the general state of affairs, or is it an anomaly?

As far as I know, the saga around Andries' elephant piece is rare. His poor elephants wandered unwittingly into a political mine field.

Some years ago Beezy Bailey's transformation of the statue of General Louis Botha into a Xhosa *umkhwetha* (initiate) outside the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town raised a good deal of reaction.

And when ITC leaked that local sangomas were proposing to slaughter an ox in Cape Town's Thibault Square to open this year's Festival, we faced a barrage of public outrage (and support).

Sadly, few artists really raise their voices against the status quo these days or challenge cultural or political boundaries, and there is not much controversy.

If I were Andries Botha I would summon press, TV cameras, VIPs and supporters and publically dynamite the elephant sculptures in an

event titled: "Cull-ture: an artistic collaboration with the ANC".

Please tell me a bit about Infecting the City. What makes it unique in SA, and why does it matter? What is its aim?

ITC aims:

- To develop sustainable, innovative and exciting public performance art models that speak with diverse audiences in an urban African context about socially vital issues, in ways that challenge and stimulate artists.
- To nourish, stimulate and activate the widest amount of people through the medium of public art in order to help foster an engaged and participatory society.

There are 4 intersecting areas that ITC addresses or engages with:

- Social issues
- New performance models: contemporary African public art
- The artists
- Audiences

Social issues

The reason we moved the Spier Performing Arts Festival into the Cape Town cbd 4 years ago was because we perceived a need to give interesting performing art works an outdoor public platform where they can be accessible to people from all walks of life.

I believe that the arts can be important for the general health of society, but squirreled away in galleries and theatres, the arts is beyond the reach of most people. This can be dangerous in a country like ours where resources are few, and things that are perceived to be less important might fall away. So also I felt this tactic of creating public arenas for the arts was necessary for the survival of a healthy performing arts culture.

I also felt that in a society with as many complex issues as ours has, if one is taking command of the communal spaces of the city, it is not enough merely to provide entertainment for the public. There is a moral imperative to tackle the pressing issues of our day, and to ask artists to apply themselves to these. Because 'moving the arts towards the centre of society', which is one of the objectives of ITC, does not only mean a physical move – to the CBD – but also an orientation towards a position where the arts are engaging meaningfully with society, in a way that people can understand.

Hence the themes of ITC over the years:

- 2009: 'Home Affairs' – a response to xenophobia and human displacement.
- 2010: 'Human Rite' – looking at the living organism of the Cape Town CBD, and asking what requires transformation, integration, healing – who needs a platform, whose stories need to be told.
- 2011: 'Treasure' – the uncovering and valorisation of the under valued and unrecognised cultural manifestations of our culturally diverse society; the challenging of dominant hegemonies of art and performance; the highlighting of the valuable resources that we discard in the trash.

New performance models: Contemporary African Public Art

Community theatre and the protest theatre of the struggle era have both grappled with using the arts as a vehicle for social transformation, and in both cases the art has suffered under the weight of the task. I would never want ITC to devolve merely into a platform for social messaging at the expense of creative vitality and excellence.

I reckon that in the world we are living in today, the arts' potential to transform goes hand in hand with creative innovation and development. If the arts are to touch diverse people and wide audiences, and ask them to interrogate our world; if the arts need to find a meaningful place in our evolving society, and platforms on which they can become sustainable, new models need to be developed.

The art I am talking about does not reside behind the doors of galleries and theatres where it is accessible to the initiated, the well educated, those who have surplus time and money. In the performing arts in particular there is a lot of laziness and fear: because theatre is often an expensive undertaking, commercial, bums-on-seats imperatives rule. There is a clinging to out-dated comfort-zone forms with limited appeal and less power. Most of these forms are too conventionalized and atrophied to channel the energy that is in need of expression in the world we live in.

We need new models to energise the performing arts. They must engage with what matters to us, with what we can relate to. They must transform and heighten our reality through the magic of creativity and the techniques of the trade.

The location for these new forms is the communal spaces of the urban environment. There they will bring people from all walks of life together in the *communitas* of sharing experience. They must infect

the grids of our cities – defined by commuting, trade, ideology and administration – with a more human way of experiencing the world.

They must make our cities sites of creativity, questioning and challenging; of sensorial disturbance, feeling and beauty. And they will captivate new audiences.

Finding new models, finding how to communicate effectively, intelligently, evocatively in these vast arenas, is not simple. It's not a 1-2-3 story. ITC is a public testing ground to this end, to developing a new contemporary African public art. It is a concept in evolution.

The artists

I am constantly reiterating three things to the artists I commission:

- The work must engage deeply with the particular theme of the Festival.
- Without in anyway dumbing down to the lowest common denominator, the work must be satisfying, accessible and resonant on some level to everybody who attends it, from the uneducated street hawker to the culture vulture.
- The artists must push the boundaries of performance and public art.

Obviously these strictures demand a particular orientation on the part of artists, but not necessarily a compromise. I'm propounding an artistic ethos that is creatively experimental, that is not holed up in jargonised ivory towers, and that is socially engaged.

ITC establishes a platform where artists from diverse creative backgrounds can really experiment and break new ground. It challenges them to engage with important material. It takes them out of the dry shell of the theatre box or gallery where art is so often a commodity, and it gives them a captive audience.

The sense of purpose that many artists acquire from this kind of work enhances our sense of the value of both art and the artist in society. It gives the empowering feeling that we are contributing to the kind of world we want to live in, and that our voice matters.

What does having art in shared space do to the community that shares that space, if anything?

The effect on the community of a particular work depends on the work itself: does it beautify the space; does it provoke emotional reaction; does it raise discussion or debate; does it encourage participation? Art in public spaces activates and energises those

spaces, and stimulates people. It brings about engagement with the world around us. It edifies beauty and values and creativity and ideas within a society and thereby fosters civic pride: 'Look!' we can say, 'We are a community that esteems these qualities,'

Who does that art then belong to? The artist or the community? Is the art a gift to the community?

We're talking ownership here?

I'm not sure that this is an 'either or scenario'. If a corporation commissions a public art work from a sculptor, and pays him for it, then the work belongs to the corporation. It is their property whether they choose to exhibit it in the public arena or in their lobby. If a City commissions a work and pays for it with taxes, then it belongs to the City and its people. The artwork is a 'gift to the community' if it is freely given to the community by the artist or by the owner of the work. It all depends on the particular contract.

It is nice to say that because an artwork is installed in a public space it belongs to the wider public, but public attachment to something does not imply public ownership...

At ITC we leave the ownership of any work created or performed in the hands of the artists who have created it.

Where is the line drawn? Surely you can put things in a gallery that you could never put on the street?

Of course the public arena has its limitations. And every society and era has lines that artists cross at their peril. But sometimes it's only when the fools rush in that we know where that line is. And sometimes these fools shift that line and claim more space for the angels to spread their wings in.

What is the future of public art in this country? How do you see it developing? What "help" do the arts in SA need?

The future of public art in SA depends on opportunities: opportunities for artists to test the medium and become articulate in it; opportunities for them to earn a wage making and presenting it; and opportunities for the public to develop a hunger for it. And such opportunities need investment. And investment requires that those who have the wherewithal to finance public art initiatives believe in public art. And it's up to us – the artists, curators, cultural

activists – to make them see the light. But, man, it is an increasingly difficult task to capture their attention ...

Funding? A sad state of affairs, or not?

Why is this important when there are so many other things to spend money on?

How can it be justified to the community at large?

Funding is a very sad state of affairs. In our quest for the funding of ITC – an established and successful festival – we were asked by a local mega-corporation we approached whether we haven't realised that 'the corporate sector is divesting from the arts'.

Accessing funding from the Lottery is a lottery in itself. Provincial and national arts councils are opaque. Recession and swings to the political right in Europe and the resultant arts subsidy slashes have shrivelled international funding.

Why are the arts in general important when there are so many pressing matters in need of money? Education? Health care? Housing? Employment? Sanitation? ...

We all know that this is a difficult sell.

But we also know that the arts give us hope, joy, beauty, stimulation... They can express ideas, emotions and beliefs that we have no other way of articulating or understanding. We have valued creative expression since we gathered in caves tens of thousands of years ago. We are doomed to art.

Public art exists for everybody. In a society as divided and stratified as ours is, such phenomena are vital.