

The Imposition of Help¹



¹ This essay has been developed from my PhD chapter, *The Artist as Social Worker vs Artist as Social Wanker*.

Advocating for art's functional role in society is not a new proposition, but it has come to the fore over the past decades along with the rise of participatory practices, with theorists like Grant Kester (1995:n.p.) writing:

Both the community artist and the social worker possess a set of skills (bureaucratic, diagnostic, aesthetic/expressive, and so forth) and have access to public and private funding (through grants writing, official status, and institutional sponsorship) with the goal of bringing about some transformation in the condition of individuals who are presumed to be in need.

In Kester's proposition, he merges the idea of Social Worker with that of Artist because of his perception that social workers, and artists who work in 'community' in participatory ways, have the same primary objective: to improve the situation of people who might be 'in need'. I find this idea somewhat problematic.

Firstly, and on a simply practical level, to collapse the two fields into one another, merging aesthetic and social narratives, devalues both; it

disavows the unique but quite different specialities, training, infrastructural support, broader contexts and relationships that are necessary to each. This does not suggest that the separate worlds can never collide, only that it would be dangerous – as Kester suggests – to view them as one and the same thing.

Secondly, it is my opinion that art projects which aim to ‘help’ others, are often conceived and built upon patronising notions of presumed disparity, and further beg the question then, upon ‘whose authority’ does that artist help?

I would like to explore the above points by discussing a project, developed while on a residency² in Johannesburg, titled *Art Cannot Help You*.



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² The residency was part of the Nine Urban Biotopes project, an international, socially engaged art project delivering artistic research and cultural exchange between South Africa and Europe. Nine different socially engaged art practitioners worked in nine different city contexts with the aim being to “establish both a ‘trans-local’ and ‘trans-continental’ dialogue. It did so in order to expose, discuss and share different ‘intentions, methods and techniques’ of imaginative urban practices for building ‘sustainable cities’”. (Accessed at <http://www.urban-biotopes.net/>)

As a newcomer to Johannesburg, the Central Business District (CBD) appears to be an extremely complex place – characterised by its neglect since the flight of white business to the office parks and malls in the North of the city in the late 1980s, and by its crime, poverty, informality, its ‘bad’ and squatted buildings and the fact that it is almost completely devoid of any white daytime pedestrian traffic or residents. On the other hand, and at the same time, the inner city is also vibrant with culture, diversity, a deep and rich history, and is undergoing the patchy and uneven process of urban regeneration and gentrification.

The Maboneng Precinct, in the heart of the CBD, is an example of this latter, and has developed, over the last five or so years, into a trendy and creative cultural and entrepreneurial haven with artists occupying old industrial buildings and joining developers in their drive to rehabilitate, but in my view, inevitably, to gentrify the area in a fairly homogenous way. Under the premise of social and urban renewal, the precinct currently provides a

safer and desirable destination for citizens of Johannesburg to have reasons to ('safely') enter into the edgy CBD to participate in Sunday brunches, rooftop salsa dance sessions, and hot yoga classes, or to visit art galleries, and frequent the food and craft markets, global cuisine restaurants and boutique shops that have sprung up within the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, much of this has happened at the expense of local communities and people who used to live in many of these buildings. They can now no longer afford to live directly in the area and have been quietly forced out by squads of private security guards into alternative housing further afield. The impression that I gained is that Maboneng has become an island of privilege within the more neglected and 'deprived' areas of the CBD that still surround it, but nonetheless is touted as a best practice model of 'art engaging in social renewal', 'helping the local community' and 'making things better'.

I would argue, however, that 'making better' in this particular neighbourhood, actually means making it desirable for an extremely homogenous and particular group of young hipsters and middle-class people with disposable incomes – and that there is very little analysis of what sort of 'renewal' is actually occurring and who it is that benefits from this gentrification.

To probe this I made a large sign reading, 'Art Cannot Help You', and walked from my temporary studio in Braamfontein, through the CBD to Maboneng (about a 4 hour walk) to encourage conversation, debate and dialogue about how art is being framed as 'help' – and to ask questions about whom it was supposed to help. The statement existed as a challenge and over the course of the performance I had various engagements – with the homeless, shopkeepers, police, pedestrians, and residents of the area. The discussions I had with people who stopped to talk to me generally revolved around the notion that art could help if it was used as a means to a financial end. My response to this, of course, was that in this case, it wasn't the 'art' that was helping, but rather the 'money' that was made as an outcome. My performance was only 'helping' by asking questions, and it did

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not change, nor did it seek to change, the socio-economic inequalities that impact on the lives of most citizens of the CBD. My project was not social work, but art; and while the conversations were sometimes discordant, they were generally very civil, the exchanges often ending with handshakes or with thanks for interesting viewpoints and shared discussions.

My experience upon entering Maboneng, however, was that I was sworn at, had offensive gestures directed towards me, and was attacked for apparently presenting an “intentionally provocative and incendiary”³ proposal. These comments and gestures came from specifically white people in the area.⁴ I had imagined my performance as a direct challenge to what I believe to be Maboneng’s current narrow ideological framing; and the hegemony of the social renewal model, and I found it interesting that the challenge provoked such vitriolic attacks within the ‘socially renewed’ area, but no aggression from people within areas presumably still in the long queue for ‘social renewal’.⁵

As an artwork, it was my intention that “Art Cannot Help You” would provoke and challenge accepted power dynamics and expose a lack of critical reflection on who is actually being ‘helped’.

³ Quoted from member of the public during performance, 17th September 2014, Maboneng, Johannesburg.

⁴ It is not known to me whether they were weekend visitors to, or residents of the area.

⁵ The extent of the attack latterly reminded me of the scene in Macbeth where Lady Macbeth’s murderous guilt is insinuated because “the Lady doth protest too much”.

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In this sense, the project aimed to ‘reveal’ the flaws in the system, rather than ‘fix’ them. Art that aims to ‘help’ people and create a situation where individuals are ‘fixed’ is like a utopian type of social engineering where the artist or institution decides on how a society should ideally be, and manipulates people towards that goal. He/she tries to create a common consensus, in the same way that Maboneng is about creating agreement between neo-liberal, middle-class consumers in a neighbourhood that will eventually have no place for the displaced, or the poor. Art in this instance is being harnessed to the creation of a homogenous social order.

In contrast, I would argue that art should be about dissensus: it should be about asking difficult questions about how we all live our lives and the systems that control and sustain that order. This often means,

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however, needing to be a little disrespectful to those in power. In the CBD of Johannesburg, I believe that artists are being co-opted into the service of gentrification, with the unfortunate outcome – more so in the contemporary South African context – of limiting social diversity.

For me as an artist, this is categorically not aligned with notions of ‘helping’. I emphatically challenge those notions that derive from a philosophical aesthetic of ‘niceness’, which insidiously recapitulate normative behaviours of active hegemonies. Art is not always ‘nice’; nor should it have social engineering remits. Ultimately, let it be said: Art cannot help you!

I conclude with a quote by Claire Bishop (2012:26) whose critique of Kester’s ‘social worker’ methodologies are clear, as she states that the flaw of ameliorative art lies in an “aversion to disruption, since [aversion to disruption] self-censors on the basis of second-guessing how others will think and respond. The upshot is that idiosyncratic or controversial ideas are subdued and normalised in favour of a consensual behaviour upon whose irreproachable sensitivity we can all rationally agree. By contrast, I would argue that unease, discomfort or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity – can be crucial to any work’s artistic impact”.

References

- Bishop, C. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso: London: 26.
- Kester, G. 1995. *Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art*. In *Afterimage* 22, January 1995. Accessed at https://slought.org/media/files/grantkester_aestheticevangelists.pdf