

# The Community Arts Project (CAP): The Role of the Arts in Building Community and Artistic Development.

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**Sub-Theme 3:** Arts as an expression of cultural diversity in the context of globalisation.

## Abstract

*The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa asserts that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of artistic creativity. Furthermore, the South African white paper on arts and culture states that, "rooted in freedom of expression and creative thought, the arts, culture and heritage have a vital role to play in development, nation building and sustaining our emerging democracy". Education in South African township schools are seriously lacking in any form of art education. This being the case, how can we expect individuals from the townships to be able to enjoy the above mentioned rights? Within the history of South Africa community art centres have played a vital and indispensable role in giving people a voice, and in addressing the cultural and educational imbalances brought on by Apartheid. However many art centres collapsed with the withdrawal of foreign donors in 1991, and the problem of funding remains to this day. According to Lize van Robbroeck, "some of the fundamental ideals of community arts need to be revised to enrich, democratize and diversify [South Africa's] cultural practice." The aim of my paper is to investigate this statement in relation to the contribution the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town (1977-2008). Centres such as these offered a rich space for multi-racial sharing and the creation of communities centred on the arts and for many was a healing space in the midst of a traumatic South Africa. Further, this paper will consider the role community art centres have played, and can, indeed, continue to play in addressing the educational and cultural problems which beset this country. With South Africa's reincorporation into the international art scene, the work of grassroots organizations has been overlooked and underfunded. These centres offer a rich opportunity for continuing the process of democratising the South African art scene, which remains an elitist practice that is alienating to many. The democratisation of art is essential to the diversification of the field, and to the development of a more locally reflective arts scene that can engage, on its own terms, with the international interest in contemporary 'African art'.*

Within South Africa there have been many artists who have come from disadvantaged communities and have greatly benefitted, or even relied on, the presence of community art centres to begin their artistic careers. By focusing on the Community Arts Project in Cape Town, I will argue how such centres encourage an expression of local cultural diversity in the context of globalisation. Some of the artists which came from this project include: Xolile Mtakatya, Tyrone Appollis, Soloman Siko, Billy Mandindi, and Mandla Vanyaza.<sup>1</sup> Lize van Robbroeck (2004:41) reminds us that

Anyone familiar with the historical development of South African art would recognize that arts centres played a decisive – in fact indispensable - role in the establishment of modern 'black' art praxis in South Africa. Pioneer centres such as Polly Street and Rorke's Drift, and the later, independent and highly politicized centres of the struggle era provided a current of cultural output that ran parallel to, and at times vitally intersected and dovetailed with, the dominant mainstream of academically trained and institutionally validated 'white' art.

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1 Other artists include: Lionel Davis, Hamilton Budaza, Thami Kiti, Ishmael Thyssen, Dathini Mzayiya, Willie Bester, Cameron Voyiya, Siphon Hlati, and Thembinkosi Goniwe.

In the course of my research I have come across many stories of individuals from the 1980s to the present that had no formal artistic training at school, nor were encouraged in any way to pursue art, but had the desire to become artists nonetheless. Community art centres gave them the space, materials and input needed to develop their talents, and contribute to the local artistic diversity of South Africa. In this paper I will argue for the importance of art centres for social justice, as spaces for creating community and finding healing. I will also suggest a few things that can be learnt from the history of the Community Arts Project in Cape Town throughout its long years from 1977 until 2008.

When Mike van Graan presented a paper at a SIDA conference in 1991 he claimed the following:

Development priorities such as housing, health care, infrastructure, etc. which deny the importance of culture generally and art in particular and which are not linked fundamentally to human rights and democracy, still regard people in two-thirds of the world as essentially physical entities with little, if any, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic or psychological needs...The non-prioritisation of culture and the arts in development perpetuates....the lack of artistic skills and resources for the majority to find and maintain identity, to make meaning of their world and to articulate their aspirations, fears and ideas...if development is designed to overcome the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, then it must have its philosophical premise, not self-serving economic or political interests, but of human beings as holistic and equals...

In theory the ANC government seems to agree with this statement. Paraphrasing former president Thabo Mbeki, Gerhard Hagg (2004:58) says that, "it is generally agreed that without the arts we run the risk of becoming a nation of houses and taps only." This is further affirmed by the South African white paper on arts and culture according to which the arts have a vital role to play in development, nation building, and sustaining our emerging democracy. The contribution of art centres was recognised by the ANC government and plans were made from 1991 throughout the 1990s to have them continue playing a central role (Hagg 2004:54). However with the legal apparatus of apartheid being abolished in the 1990s, many of the centres suddenly found themselves without funding as the arts were no longer seen as serving the anti-apartheid struggle. Many art centres collapsed and only a few managed to recover and adapt to the new funding environment. The ANC government put R50 million into the establishment of 40 new art centres in nine provinces (Hagg 2004:55, Gaylard 2004:70). The independent art centres, however, were not included in government funding or programs and continued to struggle on (Hagg 2004:55) Most of the new art centres became defunct, since as Joseph Gaylard (2004:71) explains the centres were erected without having anyone with the leadership and passion to lead and manage any of these spaces effectively. Many of the centres became used for other functions or were simply closed.<sup>2</sup>

Writing on the role of community art centres before the end of apartheid Gerhard Hagg (1989:n.p.) states that

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2 For a more in depth discussion on the problems faced by community art centres in the last 15 years I highly recommend the two most recent studies done by Gerhard Hagg and the one text by Joseph Gaylard in my bibliography.

Community Arts provides an outlet for self-expression, an opportunity to develop an alternative culture and to create new symbols as well as to provide educational and economic networks. Centres allow people to participate at grass-root level, with an emphasis on workshop process rather than end-products. Ordinary people can become participants in efforts to redefine culture and bridge the gap between First and Third Worlds. Participation in the arts breaks down barriers, thus making the art centre an important means of intercommunity communication.

The function these centres served for intercommunity communication is worth elaborating on, since it is that which brings the 'community' together for the purpose of networking and art making. Marschall (2002: 16) writes that the term "community" is a fluid concept and it is neither homogenous nor a clearly circumscribed or static body. Further, the fluidity of the concept makes it particularly problematic to say something is done for 'the community'. She continues by explaining that with any attempt to empower a community, "there will always be some who dissent, others who do not care and perhaps a few who may actually be disempowered/ disadvantaged by the venture" (Marschall 2002:17) This was recognised at CAP in the 1980s and Shirley Walters<sup>3</sup> (1986:10-11) asks,

what does the word community mean?...we wanted to believe that [the] community is the 'oppressed' and 'exploited', but is that true? One organisation can't serve all the 'oppressed'....We decided that in reality [the organisation's] community is its members- the students, staff and all who use it

CAP was recognised as a place where people from different areas could meet and share in a safe space, and it brought a lot of diverse people together.<sup>4</sup> CAP's community consisted out of people from Mannenburg, Michell's Plain, Khayelitsha, Guguletu, Nyanga and other township areas<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the ages of participants ranged from 12-72 and the participants were, housewives, township youth, unemployed workers, nurses etc.<sup>6</sup> and included all 'races'. Owen Kelly, a participant in the British community art movement further complicates the idea of community when he writes that it is

not an entity, nor even an abstraction, but a set of shared social meanings which are constantly created and mutate through the actions and interactions of its member, and through their interaction with wider society...The community is not available for "development" by funders or "management" by externals. Rather it grows by member participation...One does not work "with" a community. One participates in bringing a community into being. (Peffer 2009:169)

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3 Shirley Walters was very involved at CAP at a time when there was a push for democratising the organisation and there was no director. The quote is taken from an educational recourse she developed for community centres and tells the story of a fictional community centre. It seems however that CAP came to the same conclusions.

4 Interview with Mpathi Gocini (27/05/1997). Conducted by Heidi Bolton.

5 Interview with Hamilton Buduza (08/05/1997). Conducted by Heidi Bolton.

6 Interview with Hildur Amato (09/12/1996). Conducted by Robyn Denny

Peffer (2009: 152) writes that alternative art spaces “facilitated a pattern of cross-influence and interpersonal relationships between artists that brought a *community of artists* into being”. These spaces “allowed the possibility of thinking beyond immediate needs of the present, beyond producing art for a market (or a political program) that made demands on content in black artists' work. A door was opened about thinking what else art could be [by the community created around it]” (Peffer (2009:169). Lize van Robbroeck (1991:18) also explains that these centres democratised art by allowing, “equality in access to the means of cultural production and distribution”. As such they facilitated communication between artists causing a cross-fertilization of ideas and shared experience, thus acting as an empowering force and producing a locally relevant aesthetic which did not necessarily conform to the mainstream (Van Robbroeck 2004:50). For many artists these spaces would be the only place that allowed them the space and materials to develop their artistic abilities. These centres have benefitted and developed people by creating artistic communities for nurturing the talents held by many people in disadvantaged communities.

When the Community Arts Project, also known as CAP, started running classes in 1977 the use of the centre was largely determined by the community<sup>7</sup>. A request could be made and the organiser would try to facilitate a course in the area in which interest was expressed. Priority was given to art, but the centre also ran karate and yoga classes at times. Due to the part-time nature of the teachers there was always a high turnover of teaching staff that equipped learners in the ways in which seemed best to them. CAP was established in response to the lack of suitable accommodation and facilities to run workshops and provide opportunities for creative expression. This was at a time when there was a spontaneous growth in the arts, much of it which was related to the burning social and political issues of the time. As such CAP played a largely facilitative role by responding to requests around it. One of its greatest strengths in the early years was the way in which it remained relevant by attempting to be largely defined by the needs of the community. As such it developed in an ad-hoc fashion in accordance with the numerous demands that were made on it for services and training in the arts. As a result of this however CAP often tried to take on too much and had no clear vision of its own. Jacqueline Nolte (n.d.:4) writes

People came together at CAP in an effort to change the circumstances of their lives and to share skills with those denied them, to change themselves through creative encounters fuelled by a belief that the creative process is a transformative process, and thus linked to the process of transformation and liberation. What was evident in the 1970s was a belief in the inherent power of individual creativity, associated with recognition of both intuition and political awareness.

Christine Walters, the assistant organiser in 1978 explains that, “The whole idea is that there is a relaxed atmosphere and no rules. Although the classes are structured we are not a school or an institution but a place where people can come and develop their creativity” (Blumenthal, Sally). An artist’s residency was established whereby, “emerging black artists were provided with space and an allowance to pursue both their own work and pass on their skills to others” (De Wet et al. 2001). During these early years and throughout the 1980s, CAP students would also teach one another since it would not be unusual to have already-skilled individuals joining specific workshops, including teachers from other departments in CAP (Pissarra 2009). As De Wet et al (2001) explains:

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7 As noted earlier this refers to the people who used the centre, and not necessarily the people within the immediate vicinity of the centre.

The principles of 'learning by doing' and 'each one teach one' informed the character of these activities, and represent the first formulation of one of CAP's enduring concerns: the development of learning processes rooted in participatory democracy.<sup>8</sup>

CAP also provided a space for networking and a cross-pollination of ideas and techniques between a community of artists which allowed people the means to try and define artistic practice in their own terms. Jacqueline Nolte (n.d.:3) writes that

It was a training ground for understanding the meaning of artistic production in relation to struggles for political freedom and basic human rights. It was an attempt to understand the meaning that art has for building community in a country which had made it its task to intentionally destroy black community life and to make impossible a cross-flow between communities of different cultures and racial designations.

Peffer (2009: xi) further explains that, "from the 1930s and well into the 1990s, the art scene, particularly the black art scene, was one place where black and white, rich and poor could meet and together form the kernel of a different society". It was such 'grey areas', outside apartheid ideas of racial segregation, where progressive art was often made (Peffer 2009: xxi).

Hamilton Budaza and Lionel Davis are both individuals who received their first art training at CAP during 1978. CAP continued to be a very vibrant space in the 1980s, which passed on artistic skills and produced a number of now well known artists. However, from the very beginning there was a concern with qualification. Dimitri Fanourakis<sup>9</sup> said at the end of its first year that it is, "not offering any degrees and a lot of people want concrete results" (Swift, Keri 1977). Throughout CAP's history there was a mix between offering full-time and/or part-time art training. While these were successful, the qualification itself was not worth anything. In the 1990s the establishment of the NQF framework by the new ANC government attempted to rectify the problem of qualification in all areas, including the arts.

The perceived role of community art centres changed after the end of apartheid. Peffer (2009:88) writes that this was because, during the 1980s,

political groups were banned under successive states of emergency, [and] cultural groups such as churches and art organizations became conduits for laundering money into the country from overseas donors. Cultural events also became a platform and a cover...for more directly political actions...at a time when there were few other avenues open for free expression

Once the objectives of politically motivated funders were achieved, they withdrew financial support for community art centres. It was also erroneously assumed that the government

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8 Theorists of community-based arts projects, such as Owen Kelly, stress that teaching processes are often "reciprocal, and democratically organised...a mutual education in which there are no trainers and trainees" and that one must avoid the situation of "the externally validated teacher imposing [his/her] will on the class, and is never a participant in a democratic group" (Van Robbroeck 1991:19).

9 He was CAP's first organiser in 1977.

would take on the task of art education and that the role of such centres would become redundant. CAP was now challenged to reposition itself and define its role in a way that would make sense in the new socio-political environment, so that it that both contributed to the development of South Africa, and drew money from funders. As such they focused on people would be left out of the school system and targeted the unemployed. The two issues that were prioritised were qualification and income generation and CAP looked at career paths for which they could equip learners. However, there were problems with implementation on the side of qualification since they read policy documents on the NQF and saw the arts falling through the cracks.<sup>10</sup> Mario Pissarra who was passionately pursuing this direction and who was the CAP director until 1999 felt that he had been able to achieve very little in terms of their goals in his years there. He said that it was very difficult to receive any tangible support from the government and that extensive motivation for their role was required.<sup>11</sup> According to Hagg (2010:169) this was as a result of an ideological shift

from socialist to market-driven principles, as formulated in the Growth, Equity and Redistribution (GEAR) policy... In order to obtain state funding, the centres had to back up their demands by increasingly arguing for their utility in terms of social and economic investment... The shift to market-related utility was highly problematic due to the location of the RDP centres in African townships [that were far from art markets].

To try and satisfy the outcome-based nature of the NQF system CAP began taking a far more 'scientific' approach to art. It was run like a business and the focus was on results in response to the market driven nature that centres took on. There was a very conservative emphasis on how to achieve spatial depth, or how to mix paint as opposed to the exploration of theme and subject matter to try and define a new and personal aesthetic.<sup>12</sup>

In recognition of the need for individuals to do casual work, different classes were run each day of the week from 9am until 5pm. Hence if you wanted to learn to paint, but not to make prints you would come on Tuesdays and not on Wednesdays. CAP managed to benefit a number of people at this time and sent some through to Ruth Prowse for further training. However, the director, Mario Pissarra is not sure how many artists they trained. In the later years of CAP's history, from at least 2001, the qualification systems seemed to be effective and once again and successful artistic individuals such as Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi emerged. However, many complained that CAP had become more like a school and had lost the vibrancy of a community centre.

According to van Robbroeck (2004:45), art centres during apartheid were all, "to a greater or lesser degree concerned with redressing educational and cultural imbalances wrought by decades of systematic neglect and marginalization under the system of apartheid". Many still suffer from educational marginalisation especially with regards to art education within schools located in townships and rural areas. Art centres can still play the essential role they have played in the past through using informal as well as formal education. At every

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10 Personal interview with Mario Pissarra at the University of Cape Town, 28 April 2009

11 Ibid.

12 While teachers of this later period did develop creativity there was a strong emphasis on achieving specific results such as the ones mentioned. This is in contrast to a 1989 profile of Mike Rautenbach, who involved with CAP, which explains that he grapples "with difficulties such as knowing when to give direction and when to allowed learners' creativity to emerge" and that he "believes that direction should be kept to a minimum and that it is his task to create the right conditions to convince the learner that she can draw and be creative" (CAPtions 1989: 07)

stage of CAP it seems that there was a concern to give people the technical and mental skills to engage with the art world in a critical and informed manner and enabling them to embrace it or reject it<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, both formal and informal education strategies throughout CAP's years allowed people to develop their artistic talents. However, in a conversation I had with Lionel Davis he noted how the problem with a qualification system for the arts is that the qualification does not make you an artist. Rather it is what you do with the space and resources you are provided with, because more emphasis is placed on the quality of one's work rather than on your formal qualification.<sup>14</sup> In every phase of CAP, those who succeeded as artist were those with the mindset to make the most of the space and opportunities given to them.<sup>15</sup>

It seems evident that it is possible for such centres to use the NQF to equip learners for career paths, however questions remain as to whether this is the best path for the fine arts. The complex qualification criteria are crippling to many small art centres who do not have the capacity or experience to deal with the bureaucracy. One example is the Xolelanani Youth Centre in Port Elizabeth which in the short five years of doing ceramic training from 2000-2005 was able to equip 40 youths with the means to become creative, employable individuals. This centre struggled to conform to the government criteria for funding, and despite many efforts, the project was never able to give students learnership qualification. Those who were qualified were those who were streamed through PE Technikon<sup>16</sup> from the project. This demonstrates how the learnership qualification was not an essential part of success of the project. Two factors that were vital however were the passionate leadership of Meshack Masuku and effective budgeting and financial management.

Artists such as Meshack Masuku and Lionel Davis are grieved about the current lack of art centres to act as a safety net for those youths who have dropped out of school and have nothing constructive to occupy their time with. These youths often end up in crime-related gangs, and spend much of their social time at shebeens.<sup>17</sup> Masuku explains his motivation for using the arts through Xolelanani in the following way,

I deliberately focused on people who are not just unemployed but people who have to change their mindset [i.e. change the way they think about themselves and others]. That was my target group. I was targeting the young, the vigilant, the dangerous, that was my target, to work with those minds...you can't just ignore them, because the more you ignore them the more you push them into crime<sup>18</sup>

Although the youths were not motivated for an art education at first, he felt that he just needed to persevere with them, "because when you persevere they do learn, they do change slowly, some later than others" He personally went out and found people to come and learn ceramics, persuading them to try and change their lives. The emphasis of the project was not merely on qualifications, but on providing a space for people to be transformed.

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13 Graham Falken interviewed in Vuyiya. V & Magee, J. 2003. *The Luggage is still labelled*.

14 Personal interview with Lionel Davis in Muizenberg, Cape Town on 02 February 2010

15 In my interview with Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi he noted how he has become a successful artist partly because he put in extra time with friends to develop their work and give each other input. Other students simply did the bare minimum to get the qualification.

16 Now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

17 Personal interview with Lionel Davis 02 February 2010 and Personal interview with Meshack Masuku 16 September 2008.

18 Personal interview with Meshack Masuku, 16 September 2008.

Lionel Davis also testifies to the therapeutic nature of his time at CAP which helped him recover from seven years of being imprisoned on Robben Island and the years of traumatic house arrest which followed. Elise Eggart (2008) writes that in the community arts project

through drawing and painting, many of Davis's students were able to freely think and create for the first time in years. Often, this opportunity set [his] students on the road to attaining a much stronger and more profound sense of self. 'Through the medium of art,' Davis explains, 'you can begin to dignify a person.'

Masuku shares this sentiment and experienced how, through his project, the arts dignify people. He says the following:

I still believe that if you've got your hand on yourself and still re-educate, and that is what I set myself to do, and the record speaks for itself, I had less unsuccessful people that I had taken out of the township and tried to change them. To be quite frank ... I can only count three people [who didn't make it]. The rest of the changed and got their education

This testifies of the need of such projects and possibilities for successful development. What seems to be widely agreed upon is that government needs to play a facilitative role to create an atmosphere wherein it is possible to gain qualification and apply for funding. However, what is also agreed upon is that formal qualification in the arts is not the only route that is worth funding. It is the lack of money for these projects is the single biggest threat to their survival. What has been suggested by those formerly involved in CAP to help art centres navigate the unstable nature of the funding environment is a small flexible unit that is able to hire teaching staff and offer courses on a part-time basis as the funding allows. In addition to this, a passionate and skilled leadership and financial manager are needed to explore ways in which to be relevant to the community while drawing money from funders. (Minty 2010, Pissarra 2009)

There has been, and can still be great benefit for people in an informal meeting place for the creation of community around the art. Jacqueline Nolte (n.d.:3) writes that "the concept of a 'community arts project' implies a place of access for all people who wish to exercise creativity, bound neither by academic nor economic strictures. It assumes, as well, a cross-flow of ideas between people engaged in all manner of creative activity." These centres can greatly enrich the life of those around them, even if they never become professional artists. As I noted in the beginning, by only focusing on economic needs it presumes that people in two-thirds of the world have no cultural needs. However, as has been demonstrated, informal training is also able to give artists the space, mentoring and materials needed to develop their creativity and to expose them to art networks. David Koloane, co-founder of Thupelo, speaks about the fundamental ideals of such workshops as well as, by extension, community art centres when he describes it as

a collective form of learning and teaching which is sensitive and adaptable to the social conditions which are found within the communities. Our objective is to inspire artists to research and experiment with medium and technique so they are able to expand their creative vocabulary (Peffer, 2009:151)

Lize van Robbroeck (2004:50) argues that these ideals need to be revised, “to enrich, democratise, and diversify [South Africa's] art practice” If we desire to see art practices which are relevant to their local context, art centres will be essential, not only to give those who do not study through universities the needed skills, but also to allow sharing of opinions and ideas between artists. Sidney Kasfir writes that the key to creativity lies in encounters with unfamiliar cultural models and artistic practice, and that art workshops enable artists on the periphery to engage with local and international networking and practice, facilitating such creative encounters. (Peffer 2009:152-3). Many benefitted from the presence of community art centres, not only to start their careers, but also to build community and to find healing. To deny the existence of such spaces for the use of future generations will not only impoverish our local artistic diversity, but will also be a social injustice.

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