

EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF COLLABORATIVE ART PROJECTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential of visual art projects in negotiating social transformation within the context of a South African higher education institution (HEI). The experiences of students and staff involved in three collaborative visual art projects initiated at Stellenbosch University (SU), Stellenbosch, South Africa from 2013 to 2014 were explored through interviews, observations and reflective writing. It was found that through harnessing the medium of art as critical dialogic tool operating amidst the embedded differences and divides of the past, institutional culture can be re-imagined and aspects of critical

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citizenship, particularly tolerance of difference and democracy, can be realised within the collective university community. In conclusion, it is suggested that visual art projects of this kind seem to have the potential to access what Bhabha (1995) terms the 'Third Space' and to facilitate transformative learning. It can play a valuable part in negotiating social transformation in South African higher education.

Keywords: visual art, social transformation, critical citizenship, higher education, South Africa

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa recently celebrated 20 years of democratic freedom. This feat provided the country with an opportunity to reflect on the transformation that has taken place since 1994 (South Africa Government Online 2014). Within post-apartheid South Africa, the concept of transformation is loaded and complex. It involves continuous negotiation of social relations in a range of contexts that are, because of the deeply ingrained effects of the country's history, defined in terms of difference.

Reflection on the past two decades of freedom, specifically from within the field of higher education, illustrates this complexity, as Reddy (2004, 5) explains:

The state demands that universities contribute towards economic and socio-political transformation, yet the nature of the transition from Apartheid to a democratic regime, its macro-economic state policies, and the constraints of globalisation have led to two opposing tendencies ... universities are expected to perform as viable 'corporate enterprises' producing graduates to help steer South Africa into a competitive global economy ... [and] universities are expected to serve the public good and produce critical citizens for a vibrant democratic society.

This conundrum, along with the position of most South African higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to the country's history of apartheid, is what provides its drive towards transformation. Since the abolishment of apartheid in 1994, the impetus for transformation in higher education has been reflected in a variety of national (e.g., the White Paper on Education and Training (1995) and the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997)) as well as institutional policy documents. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA 1997) has formulated critical cross-field outcomes, which are expected to be demonstrated in all national educational programmes. These outcomes include general qualities and skills, such as: critical thinking; creative and responsible problem solving; effective communication; organisation and planning; collaboration; efficient use of technology; and gaining insight into the complex interactions that dynamically shape society on a daily basis. In 2008, the Ministerial Committee on Progress Towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of

Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions was established to explore discrimination at South African HEIs with the goal of proposing relevant strategies for effective transformation (Soudien 2008, 8). These strategies involved, for example, active leadership and initiative from all parties involved in higher education, namely, government, management, academic and non-academic staff, as well as the student body, 'reviewing the nature of the curriculum [and] ... the relationship of the university with broader society' (Soudien 2008, 134–136).

Despite the detailed goals and strategies continually put forth for transformation in South African higher education, a strong suppressive power remains evident in the predominantly Eurocentric institutional culture/s of most post-apartheid universities (Jansen in Bitzer 2009, 125). This is particularly the case at Stellenbosch University (SU),¹ the HEI where the research on which this article reports was done. The following section will elaborate on the details of this institution's strategies for transformation to provide the specific contextual backdrop that frames this research.

SU's Strategic Framework of 2000 addresses many of the issues mentioned in the Soudien report (2008), but unfortunately, as SU reiterates in its Transformation Strategy and Plan (2013d), '[p]rogressive policies, guidelines, approaches and objectives do however not ensure a transformational impact'. It becomes evident, as is also made clear in SU's most recent Institutional Intent and Strategy (2013a), that the transformation endeavour at this HEI necessitates perspective change from a variety of angles and not only hierarchically from the top down. There seems to be a need for critical dialogue infusing teaching and learning on the greater university campus. In this regard, Waghid's (2002, 457) argument that the key to transformation in higher education lies in 'reflexive praxis' is crucial. This implies that theoretical knowledge should be integrated with 'socially distributed knowledge'. Waghid (2002, 457) holds that HEIs need to engage and act in 'the real problems in society' to 'open up possibilities for greater social relevance'.

SU has addressed the need for critical, democratic dialogue and 'real-life' relevance in the structure of the institution as a whole in a range of ways. In 2011, a study in preparation of introducing a signature learning experience (SLE)² was conducted at SU. The study mentioned the need for developing service to the wider community and academic as well as personal graduate attributes in students (Smith 2011). Graduate attributes became the main topic of discussion at the 2011 Summer Institutional Planning Forum of Stellenbosch University after introduction to Simon Barrie's work (2004, 2006, 2009) at a presentation to the Cape Higher Education Consortium the same year. In response to this, the issue of graduate attributes has become integrated in SU's revised Learning and Teaching Policy (SU 2013c).

SU's (2013b) most recent Strategy for Teaching and Learning proposes a mutualistic relationship between teaching and learning at SU (from the perspective of academic staff) and graduate attributes (from the perspective of students) in working towards the realisation of a range of specific graduate attributes (SU 2014).

SU would like its academic staff to be critical and provide engaging curricula in dynamic and integrative ways to facilitate the realisation of dynamic, enquiring, well-rounded and engaged citizens and professionals that can form part of the global economy.

It is imperative for any large HEI to have a clear vision that guides it. In the case of SU, its vision evidently promises to right the wrongs of its past effectively. Although it promises social transformation, this promise is not as easily realised. It is loaded with complexity due to the inherent role power plays in society. Despite the official end of colonialism and apartheid, neo-colonialism continues to value Eurocentric ways of thinking as superior to any other. This, along with the ingrained perceptions and discourses of the past, continues to exert a powerful force on the way SU, as well as all HEIs rooted in Western ideological frameworks, is negotiating its past in the present. In this light, Foucault's ideas are relevant. He is of opinion that '(e)ducation may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict' (in Medina and Wood 2005, 326). Lefebvre (1991) corroborates Foucault's opinion by saying that powerful institutions often find themselves in a paradoxical position in that they promote democratic ideals – practical acknowledgement of difference – while simultaneously presenting themselves as inherent stable powers encouraging sameness. No HEI in South Africa, with its loaded historical baggage, can avoid this risk, and the pivotal question that must be asked is therefore not how the unequal forces of power operating within a university community can be equalised, but rather how they can actively be negotiated to allow for the realisation of a deep-seated acknowledgement of, respect for and functionality amidst the diversity already constituting the institution. How can the unequal relations of power operating within the institutional culture of higher education in South Africa be challenged and transformed on an everyday level?

Some light can be shed on this dilemma through deliberating what Johnson and Morris (2010) refer to as the difference between 'critical thinking' and 'critical pedagogy' when considering the concept of critical citizenship. According to Johnson and Morris (2010, 77–78), citizenship implies the

promotion of a common set of shared values (e.g. tolerance, human rights and democracy), which prepare young people to live together in diverse societies ... which reject the divisive nature of national identities ... [and] ... promot[es] ... social justice, social reconstruction and democracy.

For citizenship to be realised in this way, it cannot remain a theoretic concept only dealt with on a cognitive level. It cannot be reduced to pure critical thinking,³ as this will not lead to the necessary action to facilitate social transformation. The concept necessitates continuous critical thought, action and reflection for any kind of

transformation to be realised. It is in this light that Johnson and Morris (2010) hold that critical citizenship education incorporates critical thinking as well as critical pedagogy.⁴ Critical pedagogy and praxis are closely associated with the theoretic assumptions formulated by Freire in *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), *Education for critical consciousness* (1973) and ultimately *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed* (1994). Freire argues that liberation is only possible through critical reflection followed by action in the oppressed as well as the oppressor(s), and that education hence needs to develop context-specific educational methods where students, lecturers and any other individuals involved can use dialogue to open up critical consciousness.

We believe that collaborative visual art projects hold great potential in facilitating critical citizenship and social transformation in South African higher education. In this regard, visual art⁵ does not refer to visual art products per se, in other words to art as a ‘noun’, but rather to the *processes* involved in artistic practice – to art as a ‘verb’ (Booth 2013, 24). Booth (2013, 24) elaborates that ‘the aliveness, the true power of art, lies in what people do to make those nouns and in what we do to make personally relevant connections to them’. This is a crucial distinction, specifically also within the context of art education. Focus on artistic practice allows space to think of art education not as mere education *about* art, in other words art education restricted to students enrolled in formal art courses, but as education *through* art. In this sense, the medium of art can be employed in a wider context. It can be used as a critical dialogic tool to practically facilitate a range of diverse processes and skills.

When considering art as a verb, it necessarily includes a range of critical and creative processes and skills working in relation to one another. In line with Johnson and Morris’s (2010) view of the collaborative relation between critical thinking and critical pedagogy, engaging thought and action, art as a verb needs to include processes of thinking and making. This can facilitate experience of concepts and ideas through cognitive, affective and physical means. Art processes can allow ideas to become embodied, and can thus be related to what Borghi and Cimatti (2010, 772) propose as a developmental perspective on embodied cognition theories.⁶

Art can teach through experience (Greene 1995, 379), and this ‘requires an education devoted to the senses, ... to meaning-making activities, and to the imagination’ (Uhrmacher 2001, 250). Ilyenkov (2007) argues that the transformative power of imagination enables us to see what is really there, and not only what we already know. This is most probably due to art’s ability to, according to Gadamer (1990 in Davis and Sumara 2006, 162), simultaneously present and represent – to call to mind something relatively specific, and to allow for a range of interpretive possibilities. In engaging the imagination, visual art therefore seems to be a suitable medium for producing knowledge within the context of transformative learning.⁷ Art provides a playground with a range of cues from which individuals can draw new connections. It can be regarded as simulating aspects of the complex social realities

of which humans daily form part. This can spark dialogue – active negotiation of our current realities, which lies at the heart of critical citizenship and social transformation. Taylor cites Greene (2006, xviii), saying that art education can be a medium through which ‘[w]e may make possible a pluralism of visions, a multiplicity of realities ... [and] enable those we teach to rebel’.

The medium of art and design, because of its inherent multidimensional and open nature, allows for a rich array of processes to function simultaneously in complex interaction. Nicolini (2007, 576) argues that visual practices do not comprise of linear processes, but should rather be seen as ‘a social and material choreography’. Such choreography allows individuals to immerse themselves in situations in which they would not otherwise have placed themselves, and, in the process, can facilitate ‘understanding [of] the interconnections of people, things, and discourses’ (Nicolini 2007, 576). Bourriaud (2002, 22) corroborates this by saying that

artistic practice ... resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.

Such relational and integrationist characteristics of the medium of visual art seem to illustrate its potential in facilitating the realisation of critical citizenship and social transformation – concepts in turn dependent on relation and integration between a variety of complex variables.

Through exploring the experiences of individuals involved in three collaborative visual art projects on the SU campus during 2013 to 2014, we aimed to explore how such projects can realise aspects of critical citizenship within the greater campus community of SU, and so actively contribute to the ongoing process of social transformation in South African higher education. The next section elaborates on the research design and methodology and provides an overview of the details of the three projects on which the current research is based. Thereafter, the data are presented and discussed. The article closes with concluding remarks and a section considering the implications of the research.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research on which the article is based made use of an interpretative lens (Klein and Meyers 1999). An interpretative lens on knowledge requires reflection on how data are socially constructed and sensitivity to contradictions, interpretations, distortions and biases of the narratives generated (Klein and Meyers 1999). A case study research design (Creswell 2003; Denscombe 2003; Yin 1994) was employed. This was aimed at providing an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under question, as it offers a methodical system of examining events and experiences, collecting and analysing data, and reporting results. In this case, it allowed the

researchers to consider why and how collaborative art projects on the SU campus have led to the specific experiences and reactions they did. It provided space to interrogate the relation of these experiences and reactions to the concepts of critical citizenship and social transformation.

Three collaborative art projects were initiated on the SU campus by the Visual Communication Design (VCD) stream within the Department of Visual Arts and the Centre for Inclusivity⁸ of Stellenbosch University, including:

Project 1: Welcoming Culture Campaign

VCD students were given the task of designing and executing a campaign that would contribute to making all students feel welcome on campus. This, for example, could include an occasion, happening, manifestation, festival, art object or game, and had to be supported by relevant visual communication, such as posters, flyers, billboards, and so forth. One of the consequent campaigns, *Making your Private Thoughts Public*, is reflected on below.

Project 2: Women's Day Art Intervention

VCD students were expected to address the lack of presence of women in the visual spaces of the SU campus by designing a public artwork for the campus that would acknowledge and celebrate the role women play at SU. They were expected to exhibit and present their ideas at a Women's Day celebratory function for SU students and staff in large poster and PowerPoint presentation format to be considered for future implementation on campus. One project, *Eva: Sprout, Grow, Blossom*, is reflected on below.

Project 3: Identity Marks: 20 Years of Democracy and Freedom in South Africa

SU's Centre for Inclusivity commissioned VCD students to create a range of visual identities for SU's celebration of South Africa's 20 years of democracy. Each student was expected to develop three logos that communicated something of the manifold perspectives and experiences of the past 20 years of democratic freedom on the SU campus. The students then divided into groups and had to collaboratively use the logos of the whole class to visually compose the country's national anthem in the form of large-scale posters. The logos and posters were then publically exhibited at a celebratory campus event.

From these projects, data was obtained in the form of written reflections of participants, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The formal research sample consisted of the VCD students⁹ involved in the projects,

representatives from the Centre for Inclusivity,¹⁰ and purposively selected students and staff of SU¹¹ who engaged with the projects throughout their course on campus. Informed consent was formally obtained from all research participants. Inductive content analysis (Cresswell 2005) was used for data analysis.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The specific Welcoming Culture Campaign, which is discussed here, involved a group of VCD students installing two portable toilets on the Rooi Plein,¹² inviting passers-by to voice their opinions about SU, themselves as part of the institution and change on campus on the toilets in the form of graffiti (see Figure 1). S1 explained the concept driving the campaign as follows:

[The toilet] became a slightly awkward space because it should be private yet was placed in the most public of settings. We wanted to empower and encourage students to step out of the private box within which they hold their true opinions and thoughts and build courage to share them in public. We believe honesty, individuality and diversity in opinions will be the starting block for creating a welcoming culture.



Figure 1: Making your Private Thoughts Public (2013) (Photograph used with permission of relevant VCD students, SU)

The initiative did not require external motivation once installed, as passers-by intuitively knew what they had to do. S2 reflected that '[t]hey WANTED to voice their

opinions and be heard, they didn't need to be told to'. We believe this demonstrates an inherent need for individuals on campus to have their voice heard and also how a visual art project holds the ability to create a space where this can occur naturally. Writing on the toilets seemed to grant individuals permission to step outside the dominant structures usually governing conversation about important institutional issues and consequently allow more free and honest conversation to unfold. Participant M1 explained that this project was the first step in demonstrating the powerful potential of art initiatives in providing platforms where institutional culture can be challenged; where opinions perhaps usually regarded as not worthy due to it not following the dictated, dominant channels of institutional communication can be acknowledged; and where it can contribute to providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the institution as a whole.

So if information was not obtained from a survey, not related in academic language, or not said at important meetings, then it didn't happen ... [These projects] show that there are different ways of saying things and that management or the people who make decisions can start realising that it is maybe important to read this kind of information to really understand things. (M1)

The content that was written on the toilets also seems to demonstrate this more neutral space for conversation that M1 related. Participants felt free to voice quite strong and potentially resistant opinions:

At face value it seems as though we're all happy and we get along. When, I think, deep down while people still harbour some racism and black and coloured people are angry! No, mad as hell! (C1)

Stop giving people fake smiles; if you don't wanna smile or say anything just walk by. (C2)

Stop trying to attach to an arbitrary determined social identity and be you. (C3)

Don't hate what you don't understand. (C4)

This seemed to lead to dialogue that would potentially not have emerged if there was no platform for honest opinions to be made public:

Stellenbosch is systematically racist. (C5)

That's not really true. (C6)

Unity makes change! (C7)

But individuality is key. (C8)

If you want to change society you need to change the space. (C9)

You must also be aware of the opinions of others like on this toilet. It helps with knowing what others think. Awe. (C10)

I am significant. (C11)

Perhaps, but you are still part of the same compost heap. (C12)

Only if you believe so ... (C13)

These comments seem to lay bare how this kind of art project can facilitate the formation of ‘relations between consciousness’ (Bourriaud 2002, 22) in a lived, practical way. Due to it painting a different backdrop against which familiar issues can be negotiated, it allows for imaginative new ways of understanding and attitudes towards transformation on campus. Participants in the project reiterated this in some of their comments.

As Stellenbosch University students our leverage is education and opportunity ... we must use it. This installation is a good start. (C14)

Afrikans must realise creativity as their natural resource! (C15)

According to M1, the fact that this project sparked a range of similar initiatives on campus during the consequent celebrations of Diversity Week later in the same year served as the strongest feedback relating the value of using the medium of art to create dialogue on campus and so come to know and acknowledge our differences and similarities without merely making assumptions based on the overpowering unconscious discourses of the past. Art projects of this kind seem to have the potential to access what Bhabha (1995, 208) terms the ‘Third Space’ and which he defines as follows:

[The Third Space] represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious ... The intervention of the Third Space ... destroys the mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.

In 2013, the Centre for Inclusivity at SU decided to reinvent the way the University usually celebrates institutional days. Instead of simply inviting a range of relevant people on campus to a formal lecture, they decided to approach the VCD students at the Department of Visual Arts with the idea of designing a public artwork that could acknowledge and celebrate the role women play at SU. The students researched the historical significance of Women’s Day in South Africa, as well as the general position and significance of women at SU. This led to the conceptualisation of creative ideas to address the lack of visibility of women on campus. The official celebrations of Women’s Day on campus then involved a short lecture by a lecturer from the Department of Visual Arts, who provided a theoretical background to visual art and gender, after which, most importantly, the students presented their ideas to a selected group of campus representatives, including individuals of top management structures, the Student Representative Council, the Women’s Forum, as well as academic and support services staff. The motivation behind this approach to celebrating the day was the hope that, through employing the curriculum in the broader university context, the

innovative ideas of students can help the campus to look back and understand the history of Women’s Day, but also to be able to connect it with what we see now and what we want to see in the future. (M1)

Eva: Sprout, Grow, Blossom was one of the projects that was born (see Figure 2). Through using a variety of garden forms – hanging gardens, wall gardens and flower beds – ‘to celebrate women’ and to act as ‘a reminder to women that they have the right and strength to blossom to their full potential’ (S3–S6), students wanted to predominantly ‘promote gender inclusivity through the visual redress of campus’.



Figure 2: *Eva: Sprout, Grow, Blossom* (2013) (Image used with permission of relevant VCD students, SU)

Whereas Women’s Day celebrations on the SU campus have previously often been met with negativity and resistance, the use of visual art as medium to address potential sensitive issues seemed to defuse possible antagonism. In reflecting on their project, two involved students (S3–S4) emphasised that they used their previous experience and broad initial research to consciously design the project to steer clear of any stereotypical controversial associations. They felt that they have been bombarded with negativity in relation to the history of South Africa throughout their primary and secondary education, and this inspired them to ‘really want to do something that would let people look differently at things without necessarily having a negative experience or connotation with some or other issue’ (S3). They wanted to acknowledge the past while highlighting and celebrating the positive aspects of our society. They reiterated that they regard the medium of art as a valuable tool in

this regard due to it being inherently ‘forward-thinking’ and ‘problem-solving’ (S3). It allows one to put forth ‘systems’ and not merely ‘products’ (S4) as solutions that are geared towards involving individuals in collaborative and intimate ways. These students did, however, note that not all art and design function in this way. They felt that art can easily just ‘cover [issues] up and make it pretty’ (S4); it often just ‘sticks a plaster on an issue and not make it heal’ (S4), which can in fact highlight and potentially worsen the problem. This is why they felt strongly that critical thinking needs to be integrated with context-specific, inter-disciplinary, creative problem-solving for art and design to provide a powerful medium to imagine and realise positive hope through tangible experience. ‘When things are integrated in this way; that is very exciting!’ (S4)

M1 believed that it is the fact that visual art and design brings ‘innovation along with looking back’ that enables it to assist in reinterpreting known things in new ways. Visual art can, as Gadamer (1990 in Davis and Sumara 2006, 162) holds, simultaneously present and represent. In allowing a variety of meanings to exist simultaneously, it can recognise and respect potential opposing views and embody inclusivity. This was the case with the *Eva* project. Using the medium of gardens for a variety of purposes on campus will not exclusively serve women’s interests on campus. Although representing the special symbolic significance of women ‘developing their worth and confidence’, of ‘expanding their influence’ and ‘reaching their full potential’ (S3–S6), the project also carries value in a range of other ways. The project can enhance the image of campus in general and address issues regarding ‘environmental sustainability’ (S3). It can also provide opportunities for individuals from all levels in the institutional structure to become involved and take partial ownership of the project. This is surely in the interest of the whole university, irrespective of gender. Gardens also represent life and growth – hope for what is to come, and this signifies the ethos of SU’s Institutional Intent and Strategy (2013a) in general.

This project clearly demonstrates that the medium of visual art fosters imaginative possibilities. Because it was able to make these possibilities tangible through symbolic visual representation, what can easily remain but an empty hope, can be experienced in cognitive, emotional and physical ways. The students’ presentation of *Eva* so inspired the management of SU that funds have been made available to implement aspects of the project in the near future. Putting this inspiration into action, however, remains a difficult task. S3 and S4 said that they thought the creative potential of art and design within the context of social transformation on the SU campus can only be fully reached if the supporting structure within which a project such as this functions allows effective collaboration and integration between various role players. Part of the potential of art and design projects is that it brings together diverse aspects in innovative ways. For the potential to be fully realised, however, expertise, skills and support from a range of fields and factions are necessary. If the institutional culture is

too rigid to allow for the execution of imaginative ideas, transformation may remain on a cognitive level and not be translated into everyday experience.

As with the Women's Day project, the *20 Years of Democracy and Freedom* project demonstrated the value of putting the academic curriculum to use in the broader social context of the university; in what Waghid (2002, 457) refers to as 'reflexive praxis'. This project not only familiarised VCD students with the formal principles, elements and processes of logo design and engaged them in processes of critical citizenship education, but also provided them with an opportunity to practise their craft in a 'real-life' context. In turn, the greater campus community had the opportunity to engage with a range of imaginative and critically inspired perspectives on 20 years of democratic freedom in South Africa in the form of logo design – a symbolic medium we are all familiar with in our current consumer-driven society (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: 20 years of democracy and freedom in South Africa: Logos (2014)
(Photograph used with permission of relevant VCD students, SU)

The symbolic medium of logos proved to be widely accessible to other students on campus. Comments such as 'It's logos, cool!' were heard on numerous occasions when researchers observed students having a closer look while passing through the final exhibition in the Neelsie (the SU student centre). Another participant at the exhibition commented that

it is as if the designers force you to move away from the limitations of old political brands and speak to the new possibilities, future and one's own responsibility for democracy ... I think the logos address our need as South Africans to visually commit ourselves to symbols that represent totally different possibilities and identities. (M1)

The medium of logos seems to have had a strong communicative impact on individuals due to it embodying a sense of belonging to something, but simultaneously representing what we belong to as multidimensional, diverse and under continuous (re)construction and (re)interpretation. M2 commented that seeing symbols traditionally belonging to the struggle of the past being reinterpreted in the present was fantastic. It seemed to give face to – and therefore make real – the transformative process(es) that have been negotiated for the past 20 years. In similar vein, C16 said that art and design ‘speaks truth to the idea that past and present can co-exist, but moreover that it can help us shape our understanding of the future’. C16 elaborated by saying that ‘visual mechanisms’ hold great potential for social transformation, as it can facilitate a shift from a ‘conventional, let’s talk model’ to reflection in action. This once again demonstrates the value of art being able to simultaneously embody a range of perspectives in seeming simple form.

The reflections of the participating VCD students revealed the most significant transformation in this project. Whereas initial discussions revealed that many of them believed that their ‘born-free’ status positions them in a neutral space with regard to our country’s history, various comments in later reflections revealed the realisation that such a neutral space does not exist, and that each individual carries responsibility as a citizen making up part of the greater social fabric of our country. S11 related that she has come to see the role their generation plays in democracy as more important than she did before and that she now has a more positive outlook on the future of South Africa. A few students firstly attributed their transformed perceptions to the project engaging them in a range of diverse processes. ‘We went and did research, we read, we worked interactively with people, and we had many conversations’, S8 related. It was felt that this allowed them to make their own meaning from the experiences and information they had gathered:

The project was based on opinions of us and those students around us rather than what we are taught at school. I think this is an important way of learning about democracy in South Africa as as a nation we should be able to speak our opinions and create our own. (S7)

This opinion echoes that of Ilyenkov (2007), who argues that the transformative power of imagination enables us to see what is really there, and not only what we already know.

In a final group discussion about the project, students S8 to S10 agreed that the power of the medium of art and design lies in the fact that it is geared towards interaction and collaboration. They felt that the fact that the project included a collaborative component, where they worked in groups to compose South Africa’s national anthem with the whole class’s logos (see Figure 4), allowed them to experience democracy in action, whereas designing their individual logos mostly involved only thinking about the concept.



Figure 4: 20 years of democracy and freedom in South Africa: Composition of national anthem (2014) (Photograph used with permission of relevant VCD students, SU)

S9 elaborated further on the topic, saying that

powerful design is design everyone can relate to, and if you design something that is done in a vacuum you're actually removed from those aspects that everybody can relate to ... when you interact with one another, even just small mannerisms someone has, you can visually represent that in a very subtle way, but it can be something that is very effective.

Interaction and collaboration seems to allow for easier visualisation. There are things one can see that are difficult to describe in words, and visual representation enables those things to be shared. Students S8 to 10 felt that the combined processes of interaction, collaboration and visual translation of ideas can thus facilitate a process of really trying to see things from another person's perspective. This echoes critical citizenship, and reminds of what Nussbaum (2002, 289) terms 'narrative imagination', in other words 'the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in the position of someone very different from oneself'. They testified that this has led to a deeper kind of acknowledgement and insight into the differences between one another.

It was felt that the logos as well as the compositions of the national anthem were poignant triggers for much-needed conversations related to democracy and social transformation on campus. It was felt that this project could have involved the greater campus in more intimate ways (S9), and that, should more time for

conversation about emanating issues have been available, more value could have been realised (M1).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND IMPLICATIONS

In South African higher education, and specifically at SU, the concept of social transformation is loaded and complex. This tends to make it appear to be packaged in seemingly neutral, formal language and structures, which seems to isolate it from everyday life. The aim of the current article was to explore the potential of three visual art projects in negotiating social transformation on the SU campus. The results demonstrate that the value laid in the ability of the art projects to negotiate the 'Third Space' (Bhabha 1995), in other words, to function as part of the collective institutional culture while simultaneously facilitating interaction and dialogue free from dominant institutional protocols and expectations. The projects acknowledged the students' innovative and creative skills. They allowed diverse meanings to exist together, and so led to imaginative possibilities being negotiated, represented and experienced by a range of individuals in the university community in a combination of cognitive, affective and physical ways. The collaborative art projects facilitated felt experiences of critical citizenship on the SU campus, particularly tolerance of difference and democracy (Johnson and Morris 2010, 77). This has contributed to the concept of social transformation moving away from its isolated position embodying controversy and to critical consciousness of the concept as a continuous process of which all people are inherently part on a simple, everyday level.

Even though we argue that visual art projects hold valuable potential with regard to social transformation on the SU campus, we acknowledge that potential does not necessarily translate into ultimate change. We admit that due to the open, interactive and collaborative nature of such projects, as well as the specific social context in which they function, unexpected reactions and shifts are an integral part of the process. This necessitates continuous reflection and dynamic reconsideration and adaptation. We, however, believe that having to negotiate sudden shifts in this way can provide further practice in reflexive praxis and hence social transformation.

We believe that the research reported on has opened a variety of avenues for further investigation within the broad field of visual art and art education. Further research on curriculum planning could shed light on how curricula can be structured to accommodate the medium of visual art and to allow for more interdisciplinary collaboration and interaction between all levels in the institutional structure of higher education. Further context-specific research relating to the negotiation of institutional culture can also be valuable. Research is already underway exploring the potential role of visual art projects in the realisation of graduate attributes on the SU campus.

It is our hope that research within this specific field will continuously contribute to strengthening perceptions of the value of art as a medium to negotiate social transformation on an everyday level in South African HEIs, but also in a broader sense.

NOTES

1. SU is predominantly identified with the Afrikaner, the instigator of apartheid, and its associated cultural discourses. To some extent, SU currently still embodies these dominant discourses in the overriding white student and staff population; the predominantly white, male staff; and an inordinate Christian-based religious orientation (SU 2013b).
2. Signature learning experiences can involve the following: (1) ‘the broad, all-encompassing experience of being at a particular institution’; (2) ‘the signature of a particular discipline’; (3) ‘a short activity of some kind in which students are united’; (4) ‘work-integrated learning or service learning’; and (5) ‘develop[ing] academic skills and remov[ing] barriers to student success’ (Smith 2011).
3. Critical thinking is predominantly regarded as oriented more towards ‘apolitical’, ‘metacognitive’ processes of thought and knowledge and, although it is generally agreed that it should ideally include a component of ‘critical action’ too, it often lacks a more emotional and moral kind of component (Johnson and Morris 2010, 79).
4. Critical pedagogy refers to ‘that body of literature that aims to provide a means by which the oppressed (or ‘subaltern’) may begin to reflect more deeply upon their socio-economic circumstances and take action to improve the status quo’ (Johnson and Morris 2010, 79).
5. The term ‘visual art’ within the context of this research is understood as encompassing an interdisciplinary range of visually based, communicative and creative practices. This includes, for example, fine art, public art and the applied arts, such as visual communication design.
6. Borghi and Cimatti (2010, 772) hold that ‘our sense of body is grounded first in sensation, then in action, and finally in language as a further form of internal and external action ... On one side, internal language can contribute to form a unitary sense of body, alternatively words as tools can contribute to extend it, thus representing a bridge between our body, the external word, ourselves and the environment’.
7. Regarding transformative learning, Mezirow (in McIntosh 2010, 45) suggests that ‘[p]erspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our pre-suppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminative, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings’.
8. ‘The Centre for Inclusivity was established in September 2013 to manage, support and monitor transformation at Stellenbosch University’ (Twitter 2014).

9. Referred to as S1–S10.
10. Referred to as M1–M2.
11. Referred to as C1–C16.
12. The Rooi Plein is a public area on the SU campus.

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