

CREATIVE CONTROL ROUND TABLE

"To challenge institutions, we need to look outside of them." -Isaac Kaplan

Dear ALL,

I would like to invite you to be part of a conversation amongst artists living in Johannesburg. I imagine this to be an informal setting, with people having a drink at a table whilst chatting around the topic that I will introduce in this following short text.

The conversation will take place on the 26th of May, 2016 at 18h30 at ROOM GALLERY 23 Voorhout Street, (Cnr 4th Street) New Doornfontein.

I will briefly explain my Trilogy Project and introduce the aim of the talk, which is to invite artists to question their role and their actions in the urban space with which they interact through their works.

The city of Johannesburg is taking on a new fresh position as a popular destination for travel from around the World. In December 2015, an article in GQ Magazine titled "[Get Yourself To Johannesburg, New Cool Capital Of The Southern Hemisphere](#)" describes Joburg as the best place to go south of the equator. Obviously the article has a partial look to the city but the fact that Johannesburg is intensively busy changing its imaginary in the last few years is undeniable. There exists a trend to invest in creativity, culture and art as a way to recover or re-launch the cities in the Global South from a certain decline.

Who are the motors of this trend?

John Howkins first published his ideas on creativity and innovation in his book 'The Creative Economy' in 2001 when he realized that Britain makes more money from music than from its car industry. In an interview he declares, "*The Creative Economy is not about information and the information society. It is about more basic matters, what we humans want and what we are good at. Managing creative people will be fundamental to business success in the next century.*"

The link between creative economy and creative city has been reinforced over the years. To push creative economy it is necessary to invest in the creation of a proper environment for this economy to be able to grow. Since it becomes more and more common for cities to be managed as "private factories", representatives from public bodies, together with private developers, have started to look at creativity and culture as an area to invest.

Depending on the city we are talking about funds addressed to creativity might be driven by municipal or state interventions, using public funds on culture and arts (not so often); private investment through the intervention of some big investors who instrumentalize the power of art and culture to change the urban environment (more often); Public Private Partnership PPP which mix public and private intentions and funds (often); or - especially in Africa - cultural institutions (mainly foreigners).

But watching the topic from a more internal point of view, as a creative class that also creates cognitive capital, it is important to questioning our own position. All these agents depend on the work of artists and creative to develop the creative economy and the creative city they

envision. It becomes crucial to think of what it means to state: *“Managing creative people will be fundamental to business success in the next century.”*

Collaboration among cultural institutions, artists, urban planners, developers and investors in creating a new territory is a relatively common practice worldwide. These interventions deal with different levels of problems. It is not just the realization of the classic gentrification model, where the community of artists are – unhappily - the cause of physical removal of low-income people. It goes more deeply to how cultural policies, and in particular public art, intersects with the processes of urban restructuring and how these are not only contributors, but also antidotes to the conflict that typically surrounds the restructuring of urban space. It engages deeply with the meaning of participation in performance within deprived spaces and communities; with the understanding of reasons that inform the decision for artists to intervene in these spaces. It questions the reason why public art can be perceived as an aspect of cultural domination and become critical to the successful development of inclusion, or at least denounce itself.

In recent years it is always more common to have challenging perspectives on the urban question coming from the work of artists and cultural practitioners. But they *“seem to be concerned less with representing political issues than with intervening in urban spaces so as to question, re-function and contest prevailing norms and ideologies, and to create new meanings, experiences, understandings, relationships and situations”* (Pinder)

Finally it is important to challenge the idea that art and art institutions have been used or are already complicit (wittingly or unwittingly) in the renegotiation of urban meaning for elites and in the redefinition of urban identity spaces. As Martha Rosler says *“Liberals are happy to celebrate artists, or even better, “creative” – that amorphous group of brewers, bakers, urban farmers, and baristas – as long as their festivals and celebrations can be sponsored by banks, corporations, and foundations and their efforts civically branded. Architectural institutes hold meetings and publish newsletters touting “liveable” cities. Art institutions benefit from the attention of governmental agencies and foundations, but the costs are also worth considering.”*

Coming back to Joburg, in an article titled [The Art of Public Space](#), book review of “The Art of Public Space: Curating and Re-imagining the Ephemeral City (Palgrave Macmillan) by Kim Gurney, Loyd Gedye quotes Molemo Moiloa who said:

“The South African art sector needed to explore the extent to which economic forces have captured it. To claim that public art is available to all is to deny the elitism of the practice and to deny the fact that artists are complicit in this vision of a world-class African city, referring to a line that is all too often hauled out by city officials in describing ambitions for South Africa’s largest city.”

Even if *“This is not the picture of ourselves that most of us artists, curators, critics, wish to recognize. Artists tend to want to lend themselves and their energy and abilities to social betterment and utopian dreaming, but not necessarily as participants within the sanctioned institutionalized frames”* (Rosler)

The intention of this talk is to questioning what we all actually do.

Art can be an urban activator, but it also can be used as an embourgeoisement device of

control for cities. In a city such as Johannesburg, which deals with the urgency of repairing social and spatial historical injustice on a daily basis, the issue on creativity makes clear that we are talking about forms of life, aspirations, decisions and power. It may offer the possibility of understanding an expanded field of creative practices that not only look at art as an object but – in a decolonial intention - as an important tool of resistance to the homogenization and pacification of the urban experience imposed by the capitalistic model around the globalized world.

I would like to invite you to engage with me and the other participants that I've invited (amongst which there are artists, thinkers, academics that live in Johannesburg, and most of whom I define as friends), in an informal talk on these issues.

The talk will be audio recorded and it will become part of the collected data during my Phd field work in Joburg/May 2016. Elements of the recordings may be used for my project *The Gentrification Trilogy*, conducted around Johannesburg, Milan, and Rio de Janeiro.

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