

Open doors - The Department of Visual Arts goes beyond education

JULY EDITION - 'VOLUNTEER MONTH'

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The Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria is in the business of producing not mere artists, but entrepreneurs in the arts. In 2020, the first BA Fine Arts group worked as volunteers at the UP initiative Moja Gabedi, which is a community garden in Hatfield, Pretoria. In affiliation with Reliable House, creative volunteers who aim to be agents of their own learning, is offered a vibrant space for multi-disciplinary service-learning.

Service-learning is a community-based approach that enhances students' education by facilitating not only what they can *know*, but what they can *do* (Baca 2012: x). Creative types know the worth found in working with a view to facilitating improvement. Community gardens such as Moja Gabedi offer a range of opportunities to learn new skills. For example, the Angus Taylor sculptures erected on the site provided art students with an opportunity to learn about the process of constructing large-scale sculptures *with* the community at a professional level.

The Pigments Art Studio is a workshop space where students can conduct and participate in arts and craft classes. Here artists can 'play' with art. It is also a space where professional confidence can be developed as new problems emerge that need to be solved, such as how to navigate bureaucracy, communicate ideas to artistic and other audiences, and develop sensitivity toward social injustices.

Volunteering at Moja Gabedi broadens the experiences of art students by allowing them to employ new skills and knowledge, meet other artists and work with students from all disciplines. Artists tend to be jacks-of-all-trades. Creative volunteers may learn skills they never thought could be relevant to their particular fields. In the academic simulation, one's efforts can exist far removed from everyday activities. Moja Gabedi and Reliable House

allow students to work in a real-world setting, directly with the community, which gives them a sense of purpose and moral and civic responsibility. They also experience being part of the community and see that when people are treated with respect and kindness, they respond positively.

After the initial contact, some Fine Arts undergraduates continued engaging with their communities and have taken it upon themselves to arrange volunteer opportunities that meet their course objectives and treat fine arts as a research model. Artist, Suzanne Lacy (cited in Birchall 2012: x), defines new-genre public art, as artworks that are less concerned with producing objects and are intended to rather shape participants' headspaces through interventions and encounters-as-art. Art encounters are a hybrid form of action research that promotes art practice as a type of inquiry that is based on the notion of knowledge as performative (Irwin & O'Donoghue 2012: 222).

Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000: 768) argue that there is a lack of academic writing on the community's role in generating service-learning outcomes. Art-as-research under the banner of relational art can fill those gaps by keeping the community at the forefront of all activities. Roland Barthes' (1968: 43) notion of the death of the author offers a collaborative experience through the arts, where all parties are authors. The term relational aesthetics was coined by Nicolas Bourriaud (cited in Irwin & O'Donoghue 2012: 231) to denote a research-oriented, community-based art approach that aims to reconfigure social relations between individuals and communities. Relational artists stage scenarios, events-as-gifts, that activate audiences and facilitate new ways of being together (Irwin & O'Donoghue 2012: 231). Lucy Lippard's (1973: 3) comments about the dematerialised artwork, documents the shift in contemporary art to a less object-oriented approach, opting rather to stage interventions, often blurring the boundaries between art, activism and the everyday. Air-art is the popular derogatory term used for such art practices. The academic environment is poorly suited to the evaluation of such ephemeral and abstract products. Service-learning gives this art model a backbone in academia by reinforcing it with a space of activation, an applied research approach, and realistic outcomes that affect the physical realm.

The first art encounter to reach Moja Gabedi was a portable, outdoor bead-making workshop. While rolling beads made primarily from salt, students, staff and community members discuss what it means to be an individual within a community. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, Moja Gabedi has offered a collaborative environment for art students who would otherwise be making art from home, with minimal input. Fine arts students are accustomed to working in collaborative spaces on campus where their projects

are shaped to suit a service-learning modality which elevates projects from mere academic endeavors to actions that can positively impact lives. The communal nature of these activities teaches both parties what it means to be an entrepreneur as the students often know the theory while the community has the experience.

At the beginning of 2020, Moja Gabedi was a rubbish dump where homeless men gathered and abused harmful substances. Those men are now growing food in the garden as part of their occupational therapy while they recover. They have had the opportunity to work with students on the eight artworks that have thus far been erected in the lush urban garden and have attended countless art workshops facilitated by art students. The value of paying it forward is contagious as the Reliable House community takes part in various projects to keep the city clean and improve public parks. Volunteering by creative intellectuals can be an empowering experience for all parties involved. Creative minds can see the actual effects of their efforts by facilitating their own learning in a space that welcomes all who ask: Where can I help? The result is that the doors of possibility are swung wide open.

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