



MURALS AS A POPULAR MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Critical reflections

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The flourishing of community mural art in South Africa at the beginning of the 1990s was prompted directly by the demise of the apartheid regime. It was associated with -and spurred on- by the transformation of the socio-political landscape, the liberalization of race relations, the relaxation of city by-laws, and a widely-shared spirit of enthusiasm for the new 'rainbow nation'. Today, roughly a decade later, the mural movement has virtually ceased to exist. It appears that many city officials and sponsors no longer think of murals as creative, vibrant expressions of a new African spirit, but rather as embarrassing, technically and stylistically primitive, low budget manifestations of an unwanted 'Third World' identity. Given the past enthusiasm with which artists, community activists, government departments and non-governmental organizations used to employ the mural medium for a variety of educational purposes and public awareness campaigns, one wonders why the phenomenon has proven to be so short-lived.

This paper aims at critically investigating the effectiveness of mural art as a medium of communication in the current South African context, dominated by low levels of general education and literacy. I argue that there may be large discrepancies between the intended and received meanings of any particular mural and that mural artists, facilitators and sponsors may sometimes have been blinded by their idealism, thus unable to face reality regarding certain characteristics of South African communities as viewing audiences. Local studies focusing on visual literacy and specific research on the reception of selected murals render doubtful the common notion –frequently held by artists and organizers of educational mural campaigns– that 'anyone can relate to pictures'. While raising some concerns about the levels of comprehension and identification with murals, I also want to point out other, perhaps more significant reasons for the recent decline of mural art practice. Finally, I will briefly assess the viability and future of this medium in the South African context.

VIEWERS AS PRODUCERS OF MEANING

In her seminal book *Visual Methodologies*, Gillian Rose (2001: 188; 17-28) distinguishes three sites of meaning of visual cultural products:

1. the site of *production*, which explores how a visual product is made; how it is influenced by technologies, genre conventions, social, cultural and economic contexts, as well as the biographies of individual producers;
2. the site of *the image itself*, which explores how the visual product looks like, focusing on its formal components or visual vocabulary, including composition, iconography, etc.;
3. the site of its *audiencing* (a term she borrows from Fiske, 1994), i.e. how the image is seen; how meanings of visual products are constructed by different audiences, recognizing that there is no necessary correspondence between intended and received meanings.

While much critical writing on public art focuses on the first two sites of meaning, Rose states that a number of authors -notably Fiske (1994)- suggest that audiencing “is the most important site at which an image’s meanings are made” (Fiske quoted in Rose, 2001: 25). Fiske uses the term audiencing “to refer to the process by which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances (ibid). My own research on murals in post-apartheid South Africa has also tended to concentrate primarily on formal elements and iconography, as well as on the intended meaning of the wall images as expressed by artists, mural facilitators, and sometimes, accompanying documentation (Marschall, 2002). Yet, when considering murals as a medium of communicating educational messages and raising social awareness, a shift from the image as object to the viewing subject is imperative.

More attention to the viewer as producer of meaning has also been advocated in other fields of cultural production where visual displays play a key role, for instance in cultural tourism studies (e.g. Craik, 1997). Recent applications of communication theories and semiotic theoretical frameworks to the wider field of museums and heritage studies emphasize how the process of making sense of an exhibition or an image depends on contextual factors, such as the educational level, personal experiences and ideological orientation of individual viewers (Mason, 2005). Connerton (1989) points out that monuments may be often interpreted in vastly different ways when large cultural gaps exist between different sectors of the public: members of different class or racial groups, local residents and foreign tourists, or ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in an event. The same may

hold true for murals and other visual products, especially in a society as heterogeneous as South Africa, potentially resulting in a considerable divergence between the intended and received meanings. Stanley Fish (1980) observed that viewers can often be categorized into 'viewing communities' or 'interpretive communities', i.e. groups of people who share certain characteristics tend to apply similar 'interpretive strategies' and share similar interpretive readings of the public art object.

COMMUNICATING WITH IMAGES

Ironically, post-apartheid community murals in South Africa are inspired more by the Mexican mural movement and by examples from the United States than for instance by murals in neighbouring Mozambique (see Sachs 1983). However, South African murals are also distinctly different from their overseas models in a number of ways. One of the key factors that distinguish most South African murals from their initial sources of inspiration is the prominent role of the sponsor and the triangular relationship developed between artists, community and sponsor. This triangular relationship was encouraged and even initiated by the mural artists or facilitators, who approached potential sponsors from both the private and public sectors as a pragmatic means to realizing their ideas and ideals. In post-apartheid South Africa, a country of high poverty and scarce resources, funding for the arts tends to have a low priority on the agenda of government agencies. The prevailing attitude towards art making and art appreciation as elitist preoccupations, largely of interest to the privileged white minority, forced mural artists to continuously stress the utilitarian and empowerment aspects of their proposed mural initiative, as well as explain how the mural could benefit the agenda of the sponsoring body.

Hence, enthusiastic artists and facilitators tended to describe what murals could achieve for the city, the artists, the community and the nation in the most visionary and idealistic terms. Murals beautify drab city walls. They appropriate and (re)claim public spaces for those previously marginalized in the urban arena. They bring visual art into the streets and make it accessible for new, vastly broadened audiences. They reflect an African identity by representing the concerns and aspirations of those previously silenced. They publicly disseminate new value systems in a transforming society. Most importantly, it was claimed, murals can function as a creative medium of mass communication.

Given the low levels of literacy prevailing in South Africa, murals located in highly frequented public places were presented as an ideal means of visually communicating commercial and educational messages to scores of ordinary people. Murals of the commercial type, for instance the Joko

Tea murals or the Telkom murals, contain more or less subtle advertisement messages, creatively embedded into a larger narrative designed to engage the viewer. For the artists, the advert was a small concession to realizing their creative energies; for the corporate sponsor, the murals were cheaper to produce than billboard advertisement, while simultaneously benefiting the company's image through supporting the arts and providing employment for marginalized artists. Murals with an educational or public awareness message were commissioned by both government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Examples include murals informing people about human rights, health issues, voting procedures, environmental protection, traffic safety and crime prevention. Most importantly, the National Department of Health funded two major mural campaigns aimed at creating HIV/Aids awareness: the so-called Seven Cities project (1996/7) and the Beyond Awareness Campaign (1998-2000).

POPULAR ART

Virtually no research has been conducted thus far to indicate how effective these murals really are in communicating their intended messages. The only step in that direction involves the murals of the Beyond Awareness Campaign, which were critically evaluated by a scholar of communication and performance studies - Louise Bourgault, from Northern Michigan University - commissioned for such purpose. She observed the actual painting process at a few selected sites and conducted interviews, mostly with the artists and facilitators. Although her research did not focus on how passers-by receive and comprehend the murals' educational message, Bourgault (1999) made some useful observations about the selected imagery. Specifically, she pointed out how certain gender and racial stereotypes are consciously challenged in some murals but unwittingly affirmed and perpetuated in others, possibly subverting the intended message. For instance, the large, muscle-bound male character dominating the centre of the University of Fort Hare mural may be considered problematic in view of research reports suggesting that "skewed gender relations and inordinate amount of male power are at the root of the AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa" (Bourgault, 1999: 19).

Mural art is often criticized for its stereotypical imagery, conventional style, didacticism or banal subject matters. It seems not challenging enough to warrant serious engagement by the educated and those interested in the arts, but how do people who don't possess what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital' relate to murals? Community murals are often contextualised as 'street art', 'popular art', or 'people's art', but how popular are they really among ordinary people? The concept of the 'popular' is a contested and ill-defined one, and definitions of precisely

who or what 'the people' are equally differ. Nevertheless, there appears to be consensus about the positioning of the popular in opposition to the 'elite' or high culture, i.e. the realm of contemporary international 'fine art'. In this regard, most urban South African mural art can clearly be characterised as popular art, since it is not painted by one individual, elitist, academically trained 'fine artist', but by diverse groups of community artists, most of them self-taught or informally trained. This classification holds particularly if one defines -as some authors do- the 'popular' in aesthetic terms, i.e. in terms of formal stylistic characteristics (Barber, 1997), because the participating artists' lack of academic training often results in the mural's somewhat naive or 'primitive' visual appearance.

But there also seems to be a consensus that popular art is art initiated by the people -in South Africa, presumably members of the previously disadvantaged communities- in opposition to the elite and the state. Post-apartheid South African murals, however, are frequently initiated by white, academically trained, professional artists. Murals from the 1990s (as opposed to some of those painted in the 1980s) rarely take an oppositional view or a critical stance towards the state's position. On the contrary, they assist in the implementation of state policies and contribute to ingraining new value systems defined by the official order. On the other hand, if we approach the issue from the perspective of the viewer as producer of meaning, we might ask whether the painting is 'popular' with the people who view it, i.e. whether the target communities identify with the murals and find their collective values and sentiments articulated. With respect to South African mural art, it appears that this question can be answered in the affirmative for some murals, but not for others.

RECEPTION OF MURALS: A CASE STUDY

In 1999, at the height of the community mural movement, I conducted a study of viewer's responses at six mural sites in the Durban area (Marschall, 1999). Without elaborating on details, it became evident that there are considerable differences in people's responses to murals, largely dependent on what is being represented and how. In particular, murals with a more profound 'message', for instance the Human Rights Wall, did not appear to really 'reach' people in the manner intended. Most respondents had been passing the murals regularly, but very few had ever taken a closer look, and although they professed to like the images, they admittedly did not know what they were about. Common complaints referred to the mural being "too busy" or "confusing". There appeared to be little ability or inclination to visually inspect the painting, engage with its creatively expressed concepts and personally interpret the meaning of its images.

However, the murals at the main train station of Umlazi township, south of Durban, were highly successful. Here, all interviewees strongly responded to and identified with the murals; most of them understood the embedded educational or social awareness messages, and some felt personally inspired by these messages. The Umlazi station murals are rendered in a realistic style, unified and coherent, based on a clear and plain composition that can be easily grasped at first sight. Human figures are mostly represented life-size, prompting a visual blending between real people and their visual representation. Many familiar elements and landmarks of the surrounding township context are incorporated, providing an element of immediate recognition and perhaps a stepping-stone for further engagement with the image. The educational message is embedded in unspectacular scenes of ordinary life that people appear to relate to easily, sometimes represented with a humorous slant to attract attention.

VISUAL LITERACY

While these findings may be useful, I certainly do not want to suggest that there is a winning formula that can be applied at any site. What these findings do demonstrate is the fact that murals, or other types of visual material, may not be automatically successful and effective in communicating educational messages to semi-literate, working class communities. In the specific South African context, we must take into account that the target audience does not only lack reading and writing skills, but has also been historically excluded from both the production and appreciation of art. Poverty and a focus on the basic aspects of survival instilled a widespread disinterest in art, which is perceived as elitist and associated with luxury –an attitude that can still be widely observed today. The prevailing lack of interest in art is compounded by a lack of visual literacy skills to engage meaningfully with works of art and other visual material.

Carstens' findings from a research project in the Pretoria area (2004) suggest that artists may vastly underestimate the level of visual literacy required for any viewer to 'make sense' of an image, even the most clear and simple drawings. Carstens' study did not focus on murals, but on visual print material about HIV/Aids awareness. Its aim was to determine what difficulties of comprehension urban speakers of African languages with limited reading skills experience when encountering such images. Her conclusions confirm the findings of a range of similar studies conducted in various countries in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world. Frequently encountered problems with the decoding of visual images include, for instance, a distraction caused by too much detail and a

busy background (this is consistent with the responses at the Durban Human Rights Wall). People with low levels of literacy tend to explore the image without finding its central focus; they easily focus on the wrong detail, thereby missing the main point being communicated (ibid: 12).

Misunderstandings may also arise from the fact that pictorial conventions of depth perspective are not understood; for instance, that the size of an object is not interpreted as an indication of its distance from the artist or reference point. Often, relationships between objects are not comprehended, or objects are not recognized. Difficulties are experienced in understanding visual renderings of abstract ideas, and there is a widespread tendency to interpret visual symbols literally.

Low-literate people who have not grown up with comic books, magazines or greeting cards are often not familiar with the vocabulary of signs and symbols and the pictorial conventions commonly used in such media. For instance, people may not know that a heart indicates love, and some of these symbols may be misunderstood if they have a different meaning within the viewer's own cultural context. Viewers unaccustomed to the cartoon style may not understand its specific pictorial devices and conventions: for instance, the difference between a speech bubble and a thought bubble. The entire image may be discarded outright if the style is perceived as inappropriate for serious subject matter and/or the image is thought to be meant for children. In cases where a message is conveyed using a series or sequence of images, visually unskilled people tend to focus on and decode each picture frame in isolation, without seeking a relationship between one frame and the next. They find it particularly difficult to comprehend both cause and effect, and the passage of time in a series of pictures. As Cartens (2004: 11) sums up: "It cannot be taken for granted that people who cannot read, are able to interpret visual communication and that they can learn from pictures what they cannot learn from words."

These observations raise serious questions about the effectiveness of murals in conveying educational messages. However, murals, unlike print media, are site-specific, and a good mural artist will develop a painting guided by key parameters of its context, both in terms of the physical environment and the social profile of the people predominantly frequenting the site. In other words, a mural located on a university campus targeted at students cannot necessarily be compared with a mural at a township train station. When it comes to murals as a medium of communication, however, the key issue may not be whether or not the educational directive is understood, but rather whether it is accepted. For instance, at the Seven Cities HIV/Aids mural in Durban, the safe-sex message was clearly understood by most respondents, even though many admitted never having had a closer look at the mural. However, the safe-

sex message itself was often rejected or criticized, which means that murals might be very effective in communicating educational messages, but fail to induce the intended change of behaviour.

INCOMPLETE TRANSFER OF SKILLS

Is the recent decline in the practice of mural art a reflection of doubts on the part of sponsoring agencies regarding the effectiveness of murals as a tool for communicating educational messages? Although there may be good reason for such doubts, I believe the decline of mural art is rather due to other factors. I want to mention one of those factors here, namely the role of the mural coordinators.

While painting teams were usually multi-racial or predominantly black, the first murals were almost always initiated and coordinated by middle-aged liberal white artists with a long-standing commitment to community arts, and often a history of political or community activism. These coordinators played a key role in originating projects, 'selling' the idea to potential sponsors from the private and public sectors, organizing materials, assembling the painting teams, sometimes conducting training sessions, managing the funding, liaising with sponsoring organizations, and writing proposals for the next mural.

Virtually all of these mural coordinators of the 1990s have meanwhile lost their motivation or moved on to other ventures. A few black artists initially introduced to mural art as participating painters later became mural facilitators in their own right. However, judged from experiences in the Durban area, this shift was often marred by conflict between artists and facilitators, misappropriation of funds and competition and jealousy between artists. My impression is that many black artists would like to participate in painting a mural, but are not motivated or sufficiently skilled to write successful funding proposals and attend to the administrative tasks associated with coordinating a mural. In other words, the transfer of skills from white to black mural artists has been successful with respect to the painting process, but not with respect to organizational and management skills.

This lack of interest and skills in the field of art administration is commonly found among artists of all colours, but it is much more prevalent and serious among black artists as a result of previous disadvantage and marginalization. For many of these artists, participation in mural projects functioned as an important instrument of empowerment, facilitating skills expansion, networking and potential exposure to career opportunities. They now find themselves in a catch-22

situation, whereby lack of interest and skills in administration precludes them from organizing mural projects and lack of mural painting opportunities prevents them from accessing an important system of support. Some strategic intervention, perhaps devised and sponsored by an international organization, could go a long way in addressing this situation. Such intervention could take the form of a mural painting campaign accompanied by a comprehensive training programme geared towards the specific needs of previously marginalized artists.

CONCLUSIONS

The sudden enthusiasm for painting murals during the immediate post-apartheid period promoted the flourishing of aesthetically amateurish murals painted by self-taught or semi-skilled artists, sometimes with the participation of children and enthusiastic, but untrained, members of the community. Furthermore, the need to paint at a low budget prompted the use of cheap paints and insufficient preparation of the wall, as well as confining murals to low sections of the wall to pre-empt scaffolding expenses. These factors rendered the murals unendurable and strongly vulnerable to vandalism and inadvertent defacement by passers-by and street vendors.

While the empowerment aspects of the painting process were often more important than the end result for the artists and facilitators, the viewing public may have not been impressed with the visual product in their midst. Since nobody wants to invest in the maintenance of murals, city officials, sponsors and owners of walls appear to have turned against murals, which will soon turn into eyesores and become a liability. Yet, the example of Philadelphia and many other cities in the United States and other parts of the world demonstrates that an investment in mural art, professionally painted and maintained, can achieve an array of benefits for the urban environment and its diverse inhabitants.

As opposed to fine art, which operates with strategies of ambiguity, opens up complex discourses and often strives to convey lasting, universal meanings, mural art, in its didacticism and desire to communicate, tends to be strongly bound up with a very specific context and community. If key parameters of this context change, the mural can become meaningless or incomprehensible. As a consequence of this fact, complemented by the ephemeral character of the medium itself, murals must constantly be maintained -not only in terms of filling cracks and touching up the paint, but also of updating the imagery in response to critical reviews of the ways in which the mural's subject matter or educational content is received. This constant process of renewal, which mimics indigenous African practices of vernacular mural traditions, notably those of the Sotho-

Tswana and Ndebele, is likely to not only periodically draw renewed attention to the mural, but also over time increase the level of identification with it and comprehension of its imagery. More exposure to and experience with art will invariably increase levels of visual literacy and thus facilitate the comprehension of educational or social awareness messages in future.

If murals are meant to be effective as tools for communicating educational messages, more research on their comprehension and reception, perhaps drawing on comparative data from the international experience, might be helpful. In a cultural context where oral communication has traditionally played a more significant role than visual media, one may need to investigate creative ways of combining visual, oral and performance media. For instance, the topic of a particular mural may be the subject of talk-shows and contests hosted by local community radio stations (Bourgault 1999), or the mural may function as a site for interactive street performances that attract attention and actively engage passers-by, thereby assisting in the comprehension of the educational message or specific imagery. As an anti-elitist, democratic medium, mural art deserves to be promoted as an art practice that is highly relevant to the current spirit and value system of the post-apartheid South African nation.

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