

Phfumla! Breathe! Looking for freedom in a place that just wants to forget

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Stellenbosch and the East City of Cape Town seem an unlikely pairing in the imagination of a new South Africa as we head towards the 27th April commemoration of the first democratic elections in 1994. This day has become a celebration of freedom derived from its official naming, if somewhat un-lived experience for many, Freedom Day. The public holiday, however, provides us with a moment to reflect on the many difficulties that major sections of South Africans have had with the unfulfilled hope of freedom in the last 22 years.

Phfumla!/breathe! co-curated by Greer Valley in collaboration with the Open Forum residency participants will show from 25 April to 5 May 2017 at the District Six Museum Homecoming Centre in Buitenkant Street. This is an attempt to bring important and frequently derided contestations about freedom, democracy, access, restitution and ways of memorialisation to the light. The exhibition and accompanying public education programme sets out to encourage intergenerational and intersectional conversations as part of a movement to reclaim places like the East City for those marginalized to the outskirts.

Stellenbosch is still often seen as a bastion of Afrikanerdom, much like the Free State, unable to shed its Apartheid intentions. Cape Town, on the other hand, is more often than not presented to the world as the award winning embodiment of the desired New South Africa: a well-managed City, with clean streets, a diverse population happily living and riding the MyCiti bus together at the foot of Table Mountain / Hoerikwagga, one of the seven wonders of the world, and host to world class events. Continuing this narrative, Cape Town's exceptionalism was fervently displayed in a gloriously genteel manner during the massive mother city march against President Zuma and corruption on 7th April. Watching this spectacle from the third floor windows of the former Sacks Futera building, now the District Six Museum's Homecoming Centre, the march presented itself almost as a direct rebuttal of recent student protests with many commentators across varied media platforms lamenting the behavior of students toyi toyi battling the police in riot gear, conjuring up images of the riots of 1976 as it was then described in the media.

Student activism at Stellenbosch and on campuses throughout South Africa that cumulated in the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015 and 2016 have raised important concerns about the urgent need to make universities genuinely 'public' institutions, accessible to all students across lines of race and class. They have also broadened the scope of transformation from a concern primarily with the demographic characteristics of student bodies and staff to begin to take on larger questions about how students from different backgrounds (intersecting with categories of race, class, gender, disability and sexuality) experience the University as both a place of opportunity and of friction. These concerns speak to the pressing issues of inequality, poverty and exclusion troubling present day South Africa, which are articulated in wider social movements and protests throughout the country but also on a global scale.

Open Forum was formed in response to this to create a space for artistic inquiry where discourses of decolonisation and institutional transformation at Stellenbosch University and beyond could be addressed. It was formed as a collective of artists, curators, students and staff at Stellenbosch University who regard protest as an important site to challenge obsolete forms of knowledge production. By creating a living archive, we aim to create an alternative space at the university that allows for the inclusion of forms of knowledge production outside of curricular and departmental logics.

During October 2016, the Open Forum collective initiated a month-long 'opening' of the university museum and gallery and surrounding spaces in Stellenbosch. This included a month-long programme of film, performance art, poetry events and installations at Stellenbosch University and its surrounding spaces. Taking the form of a micro-residency we invited students, artists and activists to occupy these spaces to produce disruptive and interventionist artworks that reflected on the 2015-2016 #Feesmustfall and #Openstellenbosch student movements.

Open Forum worked with InZync Poetry based in Stellenbosch who launched the programme on 30 September 2016 with an evening of discussion, poetry, music and song. Every Monday night following the launch, we hosted a film night where films dealing with activism and social justice issues such as *Action Kommandant* directed by Nadine Cloete, were shown and discussed with the film directors in attendance. The programme ended on 4 November 2016 with 2 performance art pieces speaking to the violence of the militarized campus environment through the presence of private security firms that have become synonymous with tertiary education campuses throughout the country.

At the closing event, each Open Forum participant shared their inspirations for making the work they did and their ideas about what they imagine for this project going forward. In addition to being a platform for the generation of ideas and artwork, Open Forum developed into a space where students who feel marginalised at Stellenbosch University could talk openly about the struggles they experience. It became a space of refuge, a space to breathe away from the militarized campus environment and the social tension and polarisation this has fostered.

The 2016 Open Forum residency generated artwork that includes performance art, video, photography, documentary, curated text, sculpture and sound installation that became our first exhibition, *Phefumla!/breathe!* Supported by our partners, Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education, The Goethe Institute and the District Six Museum, the exhibition education programme on Freedom Day will consist of a roundtable dialogue and workshop with student activists, art students, Open Forum artists and high school learners.

Kim Gurney(2015) posits in her article, *Performing the Present: The Second Life of Zombie Monuments*, that South Africa has experimented with a sort of "third space" when it comes to public art that references the unbearable past of the country. She states that this third space transcends duality by letting the old sit alongside the new - a "continuous juxtaposition of forward - and backward-looking temporalities". The artwork included in this exhibition raises a set of difficult questions, in terms of art, in the context of the post-

colony, for example: “when does public art monumentalise violence?”, “what role does art have to play in remembering the past?”, “who should be monumentalised?” and most importantly: “who gets to decide these things?”.