

## Voortrekker Road – Street Art as an Agency of Change by Bhongwiwe Hlekiso



Fig. 1 – Cnr. of Fitzroy and Voortrekker Road – Photo by Retha Ferguson (2015)

## **Introduction to Voortrekker Road**

To me, [street art] is a way to experience the deep soul of urban places, a kind of tribal conscience . . . like going and meeting the people who have really lived the towns. They develop something in their rooms they later bring outside into the streets. In this sense, it may be an experience even more authentic than going to visit the MoMA, where paintings are collected from everywhere. And thus, the fact that the MoMA is there and not in Johannesburg is by chance, it doesn't change a lot.  
(Luisa, dweller, Milan)

In the past, street art was always associated with breaking the law. It was never seen as a form of expression and beautifying urban spaces. Artist that used urban spaces and residential areas to express themselves knew they were breaking the law. That is why we find most artist paint during the night trying to protect themselves from the law. Graffiti/street was always seen as something that violates the laws of the city; it was branded as something that is illegal. Nonetheless this has changed street art has turned into a weapon of beautification used in urban areas. The bylaws changed to make provision for commissioned artist in urban street art projects. These projects are encouraged for

their aesthetic elements that can only be presented through street art murals. For these reasons, my aim in this essay is to examine the significance of the GTP project as an agency of change in Voortrekker road. This essay will provide background information on Voortrekker road which will be followed by an account of the research that went into this essay. This will be done by looking at different photographs pertaining to street art in the area. An account concerning the process of the different street art murals and the projects outcome. This will be followed by a brief summary of the different artist biographies that took part in the project.

Voortrekker Road in Bellville, Cape Town is one of the areas that was mostly influenced by the Apartheid South Africa. Based on Marx book the *Oxwagon Sentinel*, the name Voortrekker road originated as a point of departure that was used in 1659. There was a need to travel Pretoria via Transvaal to lay a foundation stone for the Voortrekker monument. Based on the history of CBD the street ended up adapting the name Voortrekker till to date. The same CBD was used for transporting goods and people between Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Strand. And to date most people are still using the CBD to travel between these destinations including Paarl using the public transport via Voortrekker in Bellville. According to Cornille & Verbrugge in

the *Voortrekker Context paper*, the CBD was a space that carried a lot of economic benefits. For this reason, it became one of the spaces that participated a lot in trade exchange between local and international countries. The CBD became a powerful space since it played a big role in Cape Town's economy, it became easy for the ruling party of that time to create sanctions between the whites and the blacks. During this period Voortrekker only presented the White Afrikaner population the African were required to have a pass to access the CBD or to work, and this was strictly monitored through the creation of a work contract. Should the contract end the worker had to leave the city CBD within fourteen days of the end date. This revealed how the city centre was subjected to racial ideologies that not only caused segregation but engraved notions of inferiority into the minds of the oppressed.

The previous whites-only city centre has experienced many changes during and after the apartheid regime. After 1991 it turned into a space that was full of diversity in terms of cultures and race. This was caused by people migrating from different areas around South Africa and neighbouring countries influenced by residential spaces and renting businesses within the CBD. As the result of this change you could mistake the diversity for unity within the area based on the different races

you encounter along the CBD. However, the rainbow nation notion is not celebrated by everyone in the CBD following the comments in Cape Town Daily Photo website, you can sense that there is still some division some groups feel that the changes have degraded the CBD which resulted in property value dropping in the area compared to prior 1991. Some of the comments points out that the changes brought an increase in crime rate which led many business owners to leave the area. Consequently, the CBD is left with a lot of unattended buildings, this led to an increased in abandoned building which created a space of vandalising of buildings and destroying of buildings. The destroyed and vandalised building ended up being targeted as spaces for degrading graffiti which transformed with time into street art. When the Tygerberg/Bellville municipality saw how the buildings were being used by street artist they started to incorporate the art in urban spaces such as the parks and malls trying to remove it from seclusion by including it in the secular environment such as urban spaces. The Greater Tygerberg Partnership (GTP) created this project as way of using street art as an agency of change in Voortrekker.

## My Research Journey



Fig.2 – 112 Voortrekker Road, Salt River. Photo by Bongwiwe Hlekiso (2017)

As a Visual History student, I had the opportunity in April 2017 to take photos on Voortrekker Road in Bellville, Cape Town, a somewhat part of Cape Town that has become subjected to different arguments on how Voortrekker has changed, and how it is no longer attractive to its former residents. As I walked through the CBD, I can testify to the changes that the CBD has undergone, old buildings versus new buildings and this generated an interest in me. While walking I draw near one of the broken-down building in the CBD number 112 Voortrekker Road, Salt River and I fell inlove with what I saw. Number 112 is a building that is located in the mainroad close to Maitland,

prior to being destroyed and abandoned it used to host different businesses such as a steel company, technicians specialising in welding including small tuck shops that sold food to the surrounding area. However, a lot has changed. All the mentioned businesses that used to operate in that building have relocated to different parts of Cape Town, such as Elsies River and Epping.



**Fig.3 112 Voortrekker Road, Salt River – Photo by Bongwiwe Hlekiso (2017)**

Number 112 is a run down building and has become a home to street kids, prostitutes and drug addicts. As I walked inside the building I was drawn to the myriad of graffiti pieces that was displayed on the walls, this art on the walls was surrounded by different coats of dirt, urine and garbage lying around. And indeed, these artworks are murals of a different kind, you are

able to see through the use of spray control that the artist paid a lot of attention to, and carefully tried not to lose much of what he wanted to portray to the public. You are able to see this through the use of flair in some of the murals which is very difficult for a lot of artists to interpret in their work.

I spent two days just admiring the graffiti and trying to find ways that I can interpret what I was seeing into my essay. On the third day I started taking random mural photos. There was no depiction of sadness in the artworks that filled the murals. The art itself was more inviting through the use of different cheerful colours. Somehow the run down building with the dirt lying around was very enticing, forcing you to stay longer and admire what you were seeing around you. It challenged you to formulate an opinion of the art.

### **Greater Tygerberg Partnership Project**

Tygerberg municipal like most other municipalities in urban areas has always been subjected to a dilemma when it comes to street art and graffiti. They have always seen the two as a vandalism therefore fighting those that try to implement their artwork in urban areas. Even though they are supporting the street art as artistic practice however they still find themselves torn between trying to protect the city buildings and trying to



keep them in their original state. At present the municipal and the public are struggling to differentiate between street art and degrading graffiti therefore both end up being labelled as vandalism and destruction of public spaces. Perhaps we can maintain and possibly argue that art vandalises comes from the fact that there is not a lot of public spaces that allows for street art to exist. The artist requires a buy in from city including municipal engagement with artists. Once there is an open dialogue between the two this will help in using the art as a form of agent in increasing the economic conditions directly and indirectly in that particular urban space. Woodstock in Cape Town is a great example of open dialogue between municipality and the community. Once both agreed in how graffiti was going to be used as a weapon to lure young and hip business into the area this boosted the economy and interest grew in the area. Through the implementation of street art Woodstock saw an increase in money coming into the area and furthermore it made the area safer for shoppers including business owners in the area. The change in Woodstock saw an increase in exclusive businesses such as Stevens Galleries, Draft FCB, Robertson and Caine and other hip Coffee Shops moving into to the area. According to an article in *I love Cape Town*, Mkwela states that “street art has played a major part in transforming the area into

a safe and vibrant community”<sup>8</sup>. However, it is important that we understand there are different functions of the use of street art, there is street art that mainly focuses on sending a message to the public through the different murals art pieces they create “street art must interact with the public in a natural, spontaneous and creative way”<sup>9</sup>. This is what Monique argued from GTP. According to her the people that are connected to these areas that have displays of street art should be able to appreciate what they see and understand the underlying message the art represents within the community.

This influenced the municipal of Bellville to use the same strategy as Woodstock through the launch of an Art in Action Project which was introduced by the Greater Tygerberg Partnership (GTP) to turn street art as a weapon of upliftment in the community. According to Monique who works for GTP the idea to initiate this project was motivated by their work with different street artists around the area, she claims that ‘we learned that some of the largest obstacles for artists is the availability of walls and materials to practise their talents’. Therefore, the Art in Action supported these artists by giving

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<sup>8</sup> I love Cape Town – Woodstock Street Art Tour Cape Town-Cape Town Tourism (Accessed 25 May 2017)

<sup>9</sup> Monique Muller – Great Tygerberg Project, interview

them the unique opportunity to paint murals with legal permission, providing quality materials preferred by muralist worldwide and the appropriate infrastructure to create their masterpieces. As a result, this project required a buy in from the community which required the GTP project team to go through special lengths to ensure the buy-in from the whole community, including traders, building owners and the City of Cape Town.

Through this project GTP wanted to facilitate partnerships and activities that enable and sustain public spaces that are an asset to their communities, and collaborate with designers and users of public spaces, to work towards transforming our public spaces into vital community assets that serve common needs. According to Monique the intentions of this project is to improve the general look and feel of the arcade in the short term, and then drive investment to the area over the longer term which is in line with their mandate and role of the GTP. We have witnessed how Street Art has become a powerful tool for urban communication, a way to make people stop, look and think. It's an expression of social cohesion; art for everyone, taking art out of galleries and bringing it to the people. Monique has confirmed how this project has one goal which is to reinvent the old decaying buildings which will help bring a change in the CBD: "In a nutshell, the buildings in Station Road Parow, many of

which are in a state of decay, will be used as ‘canvasses’ for street murals”<sup>10</sup>.

Ian B. Stoughton Holborn’s introduction to *‘Art and Citizen’* becomes particularly useful as his work provides us with an understanding of the concept of citizenship in respects of art in urban spaces and how it is categorised. For him, “the law of beauty and design is the law of being, and citizenship is the art of living”<sup>11</sup>. He questions why it is important to teach men how to make their spaces beautiful and whether if this should not be something that comes naturally. He further argues how the character of a person finds a way of being revealed in his surroundings and in visible object as seen in the case of Voortrekker in the CBD walls and abandoned buildings.

Holborn further makes an example of one of those English old-world villages which have a reputation of being beautiful and argues that the main reason for the beauty of this village is ‘unconscious expression of its own inner character. It is no conscious product of trained artists!’ however when we refer to Voortrekker we able to see how the municipal have tried to use the street art as part of beautifying the CBD luring new

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<sup>10</sup> M. Muller, Great Tygerberg Project, interview

<sup>11</sup> I. Stoughton Holborn, Art and Citizenship, The Art World

businesses and consumers to flock Voortrekker. This project has brought a change in how people perceive beauty based on how Voortrekker looks now and how it looked before. For instance, previously, the CBD boasted about its old beautiful architectural building and the history they preserved, however as the new building structures are coming into the CBD it is slowly losing its own inner character as Holborn argued. Currently the CBD is becoming a conscious product of trained artists through the RTP project as we can see in the below figure 4. This aesthetic piece demonstrates how art is able to transform ordinary urban spaces to galleries through the use of street art.



Fig. 4 Art in Action- 31 Station Road, Parow, (3 August 2015) Mural by Chris Auret. Photo by RGB

Looking at figure 4 in relation to Holborn argument we are able to see how this image was created to dictate the views of the project to the citizenship of Voortrekker. The artist was commissioned to paint a mural that will represent a happy space where everyone gets along as a community. The mural also took on the character of the artist through the appealing style of the artist. We are able to see how he incorporated his own style within the brief that he was provided with by GTP. The artist chose vibrant colours which was to get people to pay attention through the use of the cheerful positive colours. The brief was to make people believe that it is possible to be happy and live together in one space. In the “A Saint in the City Sufi Arts and Urban Senegal” article we are told how the murals and the different visuals used were able to impart certain values that the city wanted to portray to the outside world, which is also the case with Voortrekker. This supported the vision of the GTP which was to express social cohesion, what other way could it be portrayed without having people from different cultures smiling and looking happy. The mural is showing off the young, old in the area and how they are able to work together to build a thriving community.

It is important that we also understand that the role of street art in urban areas and also the influence these types of art have

communities. When we look at the work of A. Roberts and M. Robert *A Saint in the City Sufi Arts and Urban Senegal*, we see how they have engaged with different sources such as Turner and Freedberg to be able to find the different uses of visuals in different spaces. Turner in his writing argued that “we should look at visual images not just as a piece of beauty but look at it as something that instigate action”<sup>12</sup>. This is what I have argued above that the murals created by the RGB require an action from the community and also dictate the manner in which they should respond and see things. The murals become a propaganda of change in the area it is placed in, it becomes misleading in a sense that it promotes hidden agendas that whole community is not aware off.

Freedburg argues that the “literature of representation in which images may be described, in terms of relations between how they look and why they work are almost entirely passed over”<sup>13</sup> looking at figure 4 we see how these three man have been represented and how an ordinary person can somehow pass the hidden agenda that is portrayed by this image. Robert’s further looked at how street art was used as a form of speaking against

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<sup>12</sup> A. Roberts and M. Roberts, *A Saint in the City Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*, African Arts

<sup>13</sup> A. Roberts and M. Roberts, *A Saint in the City Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*, African Arts

the ills that the youth were struggling with in terms of unemployment and injustice. They used the walls as a form of expressing themselves from the inequalities of the Senegal supremacies and this is what we can see being portrayed by the murals in number 112.



Fig 5. 112 Voortrekker Road, Salt River – Photo by Bongiwe Hlekiso (2017)

These murals also reveals to us the same constraints that the youth of Senegal struggled with in terms of feeling marginalised and not being part of the system. This is clearly indicated in the illustration of the image that reveals how people are subjected to the powers beyond their control and are struggling to release themselves from. The mural is of a heartbeat connected to a machine in which we can argue that artist is trying to break loose



from the controls of machines and the state. That is why the line of the heartbeat comes through the eye to show how the marginalised are aware of what is happening. And this is the only space where the artist felt safe to show resistance and rebel from the strains of society and those that are in power. Also, the use of the space indicates how street artist feel marginalised in terms of depicting their work in the public spaces, they are forced to work in spaces where they would not be targeted by the law.

This mural art piece further allows us to reflect on the work of Azoulay in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, where she states that this contract end up going beyond the photographer, the photographed and becomes the property of the public. Therefore no one can be able to lay a legal claim of the mural. The contract between the photographer and photographed disappear as of the new entities that have control over the mural which are the participants or viewers. This contract created a platform for those that are negatively impacted by direct violence through photography. She further argues that we are already subjected to images by our memories the street art that we are subjected to just magnify what was already there. Only when we pay attention to the civil contract between the artist and the viewer can we speak and understand what we see. This is applied to the different art pieces that I have used from

number 112 the artist has disappeared and there is no information about the artist only the work of that artist has become public property. I can use myself as an example of how I was able to use the work of the artist in this essay without getting hold of the artist, the contract has gone beyond the artist and I became the owner as a citizen.



Fig.6 112 Voortrekker Road, Salt River – Photo by Bongwe Hlekiso (2017)

This graffiti wall is basically of different artists doing quick graffiti pieces referred to as “throw-ups”. These throw-ups essentially serve the same purpose as a logo. This is how graffiti artists start putting out their “names” out there. They may be starting out or maybe even be seasoned artists that are placing their names or pieces all over the streets for recognition. These

throw-ups can also be seen as the artists' sketches in a raw sense of how graffiti operates. Vandalism and Graffiti may very well be interlinked but when graffiti artist go out at night to put their names out there, their main purpose is to establish themselves in the eyes of other artist and the general graffiti community. Sometimes the more dangerous the area, the more appreciation that artists gets for doing up such a piece. In this particular area, it is a rundown building that has unsavoury characters roaming around. Police activity is quite high and therefore when an artist gets his time to do a throw-up, "his logo" is there for everyone for visual consumption therefore his place in the graffiti world is being established.



Fig. 7 Art in Action- 178 Voortrekker Road, (24 August 2015) 31 Station Road, Parow, (3 August 2015) Mural by Jack Fox. Photo by RGB

Jack Fox's visual style is one that uses a black and white pallet yet has a playful energy and naïve overall aesthetic. His illustration style, visual language also reflects his young age (17) in terms of how simple and almost naïve compositions and not so proportional balance. His subject matter is directed by the brief which was to make Voortrekker Road beautiful via street art. Although void of colour, one gets the sense that the artwork comes from a happy place. This is evident in the title of the mural (People are people because of other people) which comes

from a Zulu & Xhosa saying “umntu ngumntu ngabantu” which is strongly based on the theory of Ubuntu. This then further entrenches the idea of beautifying the space by creating street-art murals that will reflect the beauty and diversification of the people within the area.

### Successes and Failures of the Project

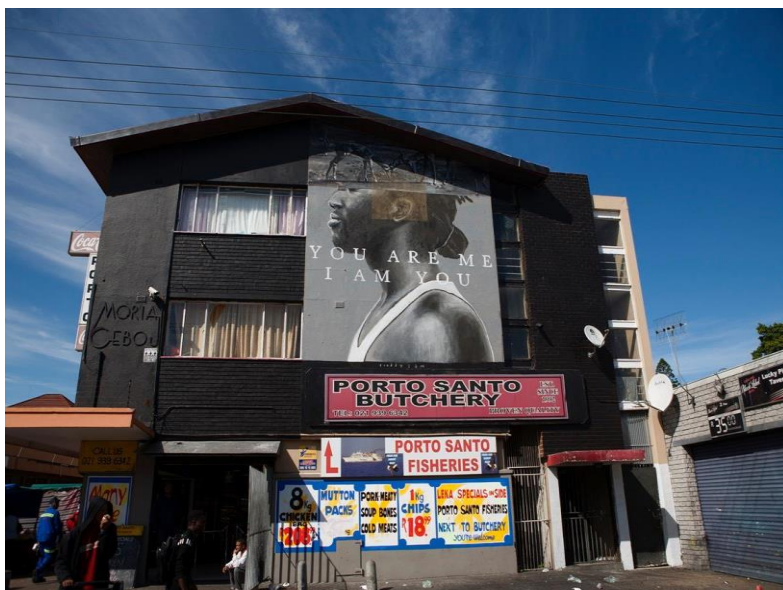


Fig. 8 Art in Action- 11 Station Road & 31 Station Road, Parow (3 August 2015)  
Mural by Ricky Lee Gordon. Photo by GTP

While interviewing Monique, I probed if the intensions of the project were met and whether there were any challenges the

project ran into its initiation stages. She confirmed that the project was a success and there were problems that they encountered. She said “the main aim of the Art in Action Mural Art project for the Parow Station Road Arcade is upliftment of the community”<sup>14</sup>. She further elaborated that this is exactly what the project did, with the theme being “Celebrate Diversity – Celebrate Our People” These art murals managed to reach a diverse audience of local residents and daily commuters and it has become a destination in itself as the upgrade of the area continues. According to her the murals has not been damaged with other graffiti or anything else, “it is still in a good condition, which means that the community has taken ownership and pride in their environment”<sup>15</sup>. Successful public spaces are accessible and provide a platform for activities of all kinds. They are vibrant, comfortable and attractive, and are valued as important community hubs. The Greater Tygerberg Partnership believes that public spaces should be sustainable, considered and equitable places which build community and enhance quality of life, adding value to the diverse fabric of city centres.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Muller, Great Tygerberg Project, interview

<sup>15</sup> M. Muller, Great Tygerberg Project, interview

Two years after the date of inception of the project, which was accepted with enthusiasm, there seems to be slow progress in reaching its success. To date when we walk around in Voortrekker road we do not see much that has changed after the implementation of the GTP initiative. The aims did not bear fruit compared to the Woodstock project. We can argue that Woodstock is in the forefront as a model of how street art can change a perception of an area. Woodstock has become one of the most visited places by youngsters and their families. It is clean, more inviting and more businesses are moving to the area. However, Voortrekker is different crime is still rife and more buildings are being abandoned every day. Instead of new business moving to the area they are moving out. Perhaps we need to give it more time or maybe the project needs to regroup and come up with different ways of making the street artwork for them. I believe if the initiative was for the whole community then the project should have engaged with different stakeholder including using diverse artists to spread the message.

Looking at figure 9 below, we are able to see how there is no diversity in terms of the people that were involved in the project. This could be part of the reason why the project did not yield any results. The message that the project is pushing forward is a holistic community that works together and lives together in

harmony, however this is not portrayed through the people that partook in this project. Also, by paying attention to the below biography it illustrates that there is not much of diversity.



Fig. 9 Art in Action - Voortrekker Road (27 August 2015) Mural by See Saw Do.  
Photo by GTP

### **Biography of the Artists:**

The below biography is able to provide a brief summary in understanding the work of the artists that were commissioned by GTP. It also provides us with a background on the work of different artist who worked on the project. Even though I was unable to interview the artist and ask those questions in regards



of the project and how they understood the brief. I have attached their comments based on my interview with Monique.

### **See-Saw-Do**

See-Saw-Do is a social enterprise founded on the transformative power of creativity and love. See-Saw-Do focuses on the physical transformation of the spaces in which children develop, as well as on the production and distribution of mother-tongue reading material to these facilities. See-Saw Do believe in the formative power of images and the claim of a community to negotiate its own visual environment. It is from this perspective that See-Saw-Do draws beneficiaries into the conceptualising and designing process, not merely as recipients but as close partners

### **Chris Auret**

Chris Auret is a South African artist born in Springs, lived in George and finally settled in Cape Town. He studied Visual Communications at Vega Brand School, Cape Town, where he completed a BA in Creative Brand Communications. At the end of 2011, just as he had officially moved into a friend-run studio called Everybody Love Everybody, he underwent an emergency stomach operation. It was during his time in hospital that he

decided to leave his “real” job and “risk” pouring his creative energy into his own projects, thus starting a career as an artist. Amongst other things, his art aims to portray the playful environment of paint in which he lives and explores. He wants to engage the viewer’s imagination through brushwork, colour, form and content. More recently, he has begun to tell more conceptual stories in his work through painting as well as other channels including video, photography and mixed media

### **Ricky Lee Gordon AKA Freddy Sam**

Ricky is a self-taught artist born in Johannesburg in 1984 and now working and living in Cape Town, South Africa. He is well known for his large-scale murals that can be seen in cities all over the world, from Cape Town to Istanbul and Kathmandu, he paints under the pseudonym Freddy Sam. His artwork focuses on bringing to light relevant social issues, exploring the nature of man in present society, in history and in nature. His achievements in public art have made it on CNN, Mail & Guardian’s “200 young people in SA who make a difference” and National Geographic’s list of “11 street art greats” alongside the likes of Banksy and JR.

## Jack Fox

Jack Fox is a 17-year-old South African artist based in Cape Town. Formerly known as Cashril Plus, Jack Fox has been drawing since early childhood and has been recognised for his comic book art, street art and music production. He has produced murals and taken part in gallery projects in Paris, Berlin, Madagascar, New York, Switzerland, Malaga and Cape Town. His propelling start to an early art career is evident of an emerging career.



Fig. 10 Art in Action- 31 Southern Life Student Building, Voortrekker Road (3 May 2016) Mural by Lwando Lese. Photo by GTP (Last Piece Created in the Project)

## **In conclusion**

Street art in Voortrekker road limited people from drawing their own conclusion of the world they leave in. Unlike the graffiti murals in number 112 that encourages people to draw their own conclusions rather being told what to always think. Therefore, my investigations have allowed me to conclude that graffiti has changed, it is more acceptable in many communities and used as a weapon of bringing communities together and addressing social ills of communities. It has opened up a platform of communication as a medium between the state and the citizens. It also advocates for those that are powerless, who cannot fight for themselves. I believe as we progress the same will happen with street art, it will not just be used as a tool of beautification and bringing money into urban spaces but it become a form of expression that is acceptable in different domains of art forms. It will also be for the people and not against the people.

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