

FUTURE - FUTURE?

KEITH ARMSTRONG
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FUTURE

KEITH ARMSTRONG, ARTIST STATEMENT

<http://embodiedmedia.com/homeartworks/future-future>

WHAT IS A MERAKA?

I would like to define the word Meraka as a place or veld where people of different cultures come together and share their values. The translation in the Koisan language is IKE/ XARRA/KE (which means diverse people unite).
(Mary Mofana)

- 1 KEITH ARMSTRONG, *ARTIST STATEMENT*
- 2 RICARDO PEACH, *HUMANITY RE-FUTURED*
- 6 DR ANITA VENTER
- 8 VELILE PHANTISI
- 10 MOKOENA & ELLEN MAPHALANE
- 11 MARY SEBABATSO MOFANA
- 13 THABANG MOFOKENG
- 15 CHRISTINE SCOGGIN
- 17 PIETER ODENAAL
- 18 KEITH ARMSTRONG, *BIO*
- 20 DR MELENTIE PANDILOVSKI,
HIDDEN BIO-POLITICS IN FUTURE-FUTURE?

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Future-Future? is inspired by my sustained engagement within South African communities (2016-17), supported by the *Programme for Innovation in Artform Development* and local community NGO *Qala Phelang Tala (Start Living Green!)*. These two organisations, who have built significant trust within local communities, invited me to work with them in three local South African informal townships as an ‘embedded creative’.

To achieve this I worked with the NGO *Qala Phelang Tala (Start Living Green!)*, led by Dr. Anita Venter, and several local residents (Change Agents), to help imagine and build improved, low cost ‘shack replacement’ houses. We called these ‘post natural’ to reflect the use of natural and waste materials in their construction. I then worked with the same ‘Change Agents’ to instigate three celebratory community-run festivals of stalls exchange, dialogue and culture (‘Merakas’) under the title ‘Seven Stage Futures’. These events were designed to encourage and empower other township residents to initiate their own similarly life-changing projects.

This fieldwork initially inspired me to produce a reflective media artwork *O’Tswellang* which was included in two solo shows: *Over Many Horizons*, at UTS Gallery, Sydney, 2016; and, *The Mesh*, Stegman Gallery, *Vrystaat Arts Festival*, South Africa, 2017.

I am now building upon those outcomes in two planned phases – *Future-Future?* Phase 1 is presented for the Riddoch Art Gallery, Mount Gambier, and *PIAD* Phase 2 is planned for the ISEA 2018 Electronic

Arts Festival, Durban Art Gallery, South Africa.

The exhibition begins with a powerful provocation: “There is no time to complain, the only remaining time is to start implementing change. If not we will perish.” “Ha ho na nako ea ho chacheha ka mohono, nako e setseng ke ea hore re fetothe eseng moo re tla timela.” These words were contributed both in English and South African (Sesotho) languages by Thabang Mofokeng, a South African ‘Change Agent’ and leader of the HOT Rural Workers Foundation. His call is profound. His people and environment are suffering under the weight of the consumption of his country’s wealth and resources in all its forms, both historical and contemporary. So, what kind of future-for-a-future is possible?

Whilst the affluent may typically think about a future in terms of maintaining or increasing an already unjust share of resources, Thabang’s people may

Keith Armstrong and Thabang Mofokeng at Mokoena & Ellen’s Meraka, Caleb Motshabi, 2017 (photo: iFlair)



wonder, is there is any kind of future at all - in a world where their basic needs of education, housing, health and welfare are far from being met?

However, many in his community still have something that has been widely lost in the rush to create unsustainable futures – solidarity, purpose, and meaning, rooted within their melting pot of ancient cultures. Can we assume it is these strengths that have kept them proud, strong and alive in conditions of hardship, all these 26 years after apartheid officially finished – still in conditions that many of us would find unimaginable and untenable?

Future-Future? focuses upon uncovering and promoting these future-sustaining paradigms of change and transformation. Such transformations may lie beyond our own lexicon, because words do not imagine that kind of hunger; and beyond our routine desires, because they have nothing at all to do with the refinement of an existing luxury. *Future-Future?* instead encourages paradoxical desires – stimulated by

(‘under-cover’) Change Agents, who are quietly transforming their ‘future for a future’. Their desires are focussed – positive dwelling, powerful culture, and transformative purpose – working to ‘give time back to the future’.

Future-Future? is the third major outcome arising from the *Re-Future Project* – which aims to initiate a series of transdisciplinary, intercultural collaborative works designed with, or inspired by, the journeys of re-futuring, pioneered by the township residents of Bloemfontein/Manguang, South Africa. The project operates at the intersection of media art, sustainability, community development and creative action, reflecting how the legacies of apartheid, population pressure, economic and environmental decay, compounded by limited access to education, services, secure housing and policing services, have routinely rendered so many in the majority world a ‘lost cause’. Here lay very different leaders – pioneering ‘change makers’ creating their own images, of their own making.

Partnerships: Riddoch Art Gallery, Mount Gambier; Dr. Melentje Pandilovski, Serena Wong, Dr. Linda Walker, Talie Teakle, Michael van der Linden, Brendan Bachman, Dr. Ricardo Peach, Programme for Innovation in Artform Development (*PIAD*); Vrystaat Kunstefees/Arts Festival/Tsa-Botjhaba; University of the Free State, Centre Development Support; Qala Phelang Tala; Dr. Anita Venter; Angela De Jesus; Johannes Stegman Art Gallery, University of the Free State, South Africa; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; The Flanders Foundation; Thabang Mofokeng, HOT Rural Workers Foundation; Botshabelo Township, South Africa; Natascha Meisler; Adriaan Du Plessis (mobile stage builder); Percy; Heidi Morgan. The parent project, *Re-Future* is presented at part of the Programme for Innovation in Artform Development (*PIAD*), an initiative of the Vrystaat Art Festival and the University of the Free State, and kindly supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and The Flanders Foundation. Keith Armstrong is supported by a part-time Associate Directorship of QUT’s Creative Lab Research Centre. Special thanks to doctoral students Christine Scoggin and Pieter Odendaal who are working on the larger *Re-Future* project through their own custom projects. Special thanks also to Prof. Greg Hearn, Prof. Terry Flew, Prof. Mandy Thomas, Prof. Gene Moyle, Prof. Sue Street, Nigel Oram, Blair Walkinshaw, Prof. Roger Dean, Stuart Lawson, Zandi, Julie Dean, Kai Armstrong and QUT Precincts.

Critically we will bring this radical approach and the new knowledge back to Australia to initiate a sorely needed dialogue between international development and experimental art, around creative new approaches to poverty reduction and citizen empowerment.

(Dr Keith Armstrong, 2017)

EMBEDDING CREATIVES

Dr Keith Armstrong’s large-scale *Re-Future* project, of which *Future-Future?* is the latest iteration, is part of the *Programme for Innovation in Artform Development (PIAD)*, a partnership between the University of the Free State (UFS) and Vrystaat Arts Festival situated in Bloemfontein Mangaung, South Africa and supported by the New York based Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Given the significant levels of poverty and lack of cultural access of large parts of the South African population, the *PIAD* and work it supports such as *Re-Future*, is building a radical experiment in how technology, interdisciplinary, and experimental art can better connect with and impact on communities. (1)

A large part of *Future-Future?*, which aims to ‘give back time’ to the future through critical interventions, was created as a result of Keith’s artist-in-residencies in Mangaung over the previous two years, connected to the informal settlements of Caleb Motshabi, Botshabelo and Roodewal Small Holdings. Here he met local change agents and community members who were actively changing their environments and the conditions in which they found themselves.

As an embedded creative within these communities, facilitated by the development agency *Qala Phelang Tala (QPT/Start Living Green!)* and UFS’ *Centre for Development Studies*, Keith has become part of a sustained (and continuing) process of examining how social development and culture can assist communities to regenerate - including housing infrastructure and cultural environments.

What Keith and those who engaged in this process achieved over the last few years has been nothing but extraordinary. The process has resulted in the building of ‘post-natural’ houses, community instigated *Merakas* (cultural gatherings and market places), a mobile stage capable of travelling from site-to-site to host local workshops and performances, and new artworks that have been seen by large audiences both inside and outside of South Africa. These exhibitions include *The Mesh* (Vrystaat Kunstefees/Arts Festival/Tsa-Botjhaba, South Africa and Stegman Gallery, UFS, 2017) and *Over Many Horizons* (UTS Gallery Sydney, 2016).

The impact of these projects has been remarkable, testified by the detailed reports and statements from the change agents and *Qala Phelang Tala* included in this catalogue, the attendances at the three *Merakas*, and the significant successes of the subsequent exhibitions.

ABOUT THE WORKS

There is no time to complain, the only remaining time is to start implementing change. If not we will perish.

Ha ho na nako ea ho chacheha ka mohono, nako e setseng ke ea hore re fetohle eseng moo re tla timela. (SeSotho),

Thabang Mofokeng, Change Agent, 2016

The first work to come out of Keith's engagement with Mangaung was *O'Tswellang* (2016). *O'Tswellang*, which translates as 'sustainability' from

of local *HOT Rural Workers Foundation* leader Thabang Mofokeng. This work started the conversation around regenerative cultural and social practices present in many of the other exhibits in this show.

Blood Sweat Bottles (2017) is an extension of *O'Tswellang* but on a larger scale, referencing in particular the post-natural building techniques employed by Qala Phelang Tala where glass bottles are used as through-wall bricks, and the impressive skills of change agents who work in their informal settlements. The incredible dedication and hard work it

takes to complete these houses and structures under sometimes deeply distressing conditions is testament to the grit and staying power of these agents and activists.

The four projected and screen based works in *Future-Future?* include *HOT Rural Workers Documentation* (2016), *A Shack Is Not a Comfortable House* (2017), *I Hope These Words Will Not Be Forgotten* (2017) and *Three Merakas* (2017).

These works trace the development and thoughts of the change agents including Thabang Mofokeng's philosophy of

collective activism as part of his *HOT Rural Workers* community foundation; the young poet Zandi's impassioned plea for sustainable futures; Mokoena and Ellen Maphalane's success in building a new, comfortable house which they celebrated via their community *Meraka*; and Mary Mofana and Vellili Phantisi, whose post-natural building sites also hosted large scale community *Merakas* linking multiple cultures and traditions.

Inter-State is the only work that does not have its genesis directly in Mangaung, but links significantly to the thematic of the show. Made up of an imagined period table and soundscapes referencing the writings of 'relational' philosophers, it reminds us that if the problems of the world are to be solved we must think outside outdated scientific boxes that do not easily allow the relationships between the boxes to be seen.

Linking culture to development is one example where, if you allow the boxes to connect, lasting and meaningful outcomes can undoubtedly be achieved. Interdisciplinary and experimental art linking disparate disciplines does impact on the world in very tangible ways, as can be seen in *Future-Future?*

And what makes this possible is not large budgets or rigorous outcome based methodologies. What makes this possible is the generosity of people, and trust that together we can achieve more than what we can just by ourselves.

And generosity from change agents, activists and artists such as Michael Sebesho, Mokoena Maphalane, Ellen Maphalane, Mary Mofana, Vellili Phantisi, Natascha Meisler, Adriaan Du Plessis, Angela de Jesus, Anita Venter, Percy,

Thabang Mofokeng, Heidi Morgan, Natascha Meisler, Christine Scoggin, Pieter Odendaal and many others.

This, humanity re-futured, is what will allow us to thrive.

NOTE

1. *PIAD* was launched in 2014 as a pilot project in response to data indicating that the creative industries in Africa contributes less than 1% to global creative output. As increased access to and participation in culture can be linked to increased human development, *PIAD* aims to support intercultural, critically focussed, innovative cultural programs. *PIAD* fosters this innovation in artform development through several streams including a First Nations program; arts/science and interdisciplinary artist residencies; interdisciplinary arts laboratories; production and presentation of challenging new work; and critical debates/forums. (*United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Report, 2010*, quoted in Mike Van Graan, "African Creative Industries, the Sleeping Giant," edited by Anver Versi, *African Business*, no. 405, London, February 2014, p. 16 and Badamasuiy, Sakina, *The case for investing in Africa's creative industries*, Afrimind, 5 Apr, 2013)



Ricardo Peach speaks at Mary Mofana's *Meraka*, Roodewal, 2017 (photo: iFlair)

SeSotho is made up of a large number of miniature glass bottles linked with fibre optics, profiling scrolling text of the words



Dr. Anita Venter, Change Agent/Leader, Qala Phelang Tala/Start Living Green!, NGO, South Africa, October 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)

START LIVING GREEN! REGENERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT RATIONALE

The geographical, historical, and cultural context of South Africa still influences the present directions of housing policies. Ideological differences in the inherent value systems between the different cultures are a contributing factor in anomalies, visible between the approach of the Constitution of South Africa and many formalised policy directions that are not always compatible with the informal realities at the grassroots level. Shown in the historical context, informal

discourses are deeply entrenched in the ideological tenure value systems of the grassroots in developing countries. This begs the question, how can housing implementation strategies be directed to complement and not alienate grassroots informal strategies? Furthermore, how can informal implementation be used to explore the ideological potential of cultural, social and environmental dimensions to gain greater prominence in housing policy debates than what is currently the case.

Using informal settlement upgrading as a departure point, the potential

of sustainable self-help building technologies in housing the poor, the value of skills transfer, technical assistance and the influence of community mobilisation and participation and creative thinking in building sustainable livelihoods, were explored in the qualitative case studies that resulted in three 'Meraka' events that were hosted during the Vryfees Art Festival in July 2017.

Meraka can be described as a cultural place where different generations come together and skills transfer is done between the elders and the youths. This research (the Meraka events) was a constructive attempt to turn theory into practice in order to challenge post-apartheid building codes that are biased to devalue centuries of indigenous building knowledge systems, and that hamper the potential that innovative building has in advancing pro-poor community livelihood futures.

In order to bridge the gap between theory and implementation a concept named *Qala Phelang Tala* (translated as *Start Living Green!*) was created to reach out to grassroots marginalised communities. The *Start Living Green!* concept can be described as a socially engaged implementation initiative that aspires to create socio-ecological change through creative collaboration with various individuals, communities, and institutions. Furthermore, *Start Living Green!* innovative solutions envision a world beyond 'sustainability' that focuses instead on 'regenerative' livelihoods that are resilient to climate change. A regenerative approach involves processes that renew, restore, and revitalize communities. Regenerative

systems boldly aim to better the ecological world by creating positive united living heritages for ourselves and our future generations. The *Start Living Green!* research outputs, such as the Meraka events, were co-created with specific audiences. Art thinking and action were used to advocate critical discourses on the role the built environment can play by engaging with evolving indigenous knowledge practices, while acting as a catalyst for social and ecological change. The Meraka events illustrated the relevance of evolving indigenous cultural practices in spawning housing policy discourses for the future. The creative implementation initiatives specifically embraced grassroots-up principles of informality, showing that educational events based on socially engaged art practices have significant potential to address environmental concerns related to housing in geographical locations like the Free State Province and other rural areas.

BACKGROUND

I am the innovative and passionate co-owner of Jenivile Trading Pty Ltd, from Khotsong township in Bloemfontein, South Africa. In the past nine years I have realized that there is a need for play-parks, multi-purpose sports grounds, and youth development centres in most disadvantaged communities and public schools. I did not know where to start but I told myself that I was going to make a difference in community members' lives. In 2014 I was a petrol attendant with limited resources to networks, and I met Anita Venter, founder of *Start Living Green!*. She introduced me to the sustainable building technology project (Natural Building Collective).

“ Excited! Success beyond my comprehension and expectation. Feeling proud of myself! ”

It was the opportunity for me to learn skills and incorporate them with my vision and I volunteered. I had no other source of income but that could not stop me doing what's best for the communities and public schools. Since then I have been involved in different community projects around the province and outside the province, working with the *University of the Free State*, *Natural Building Collective* (NGO, from Cape Town), *Long Way Home* (NGO, from Guatemala) and their visions of a healthy and sustainable community through creative and reflective learning processes.

MERAKA EVENTS

All three 'Seven Stage Futures' Merakas had one vision – to celebrate our three year journey of natural building while creating awareness on cleaning the environment, bringing communities together, and possible ways to reuse waste materials; we used different ways and methods of creating awareness. The second Meraka that I hosted I used plastic bottles, theatre, poetry passing-the-message, and also different dancing groups and music/artist performances. Based on the vibrancy of the Merakas we drew more than 500 people. Most of the participants had no idea about natural building, and although we had limited time to prepare the Merakas, and it was the first time we hosted the

community events, we managed to complete the events successfully. The experience we got from the Merakas is that nothing is impossible in life as long as you put effort in what you are doing. There were challenges we faced but because of the good

relationship we had with the community members we overcame them. Honestly speaking, these events had a huge impact in communities, and they have changed mind-sets about how things can be done. There is a demand for practical projects so that communities can learn more about natural building.

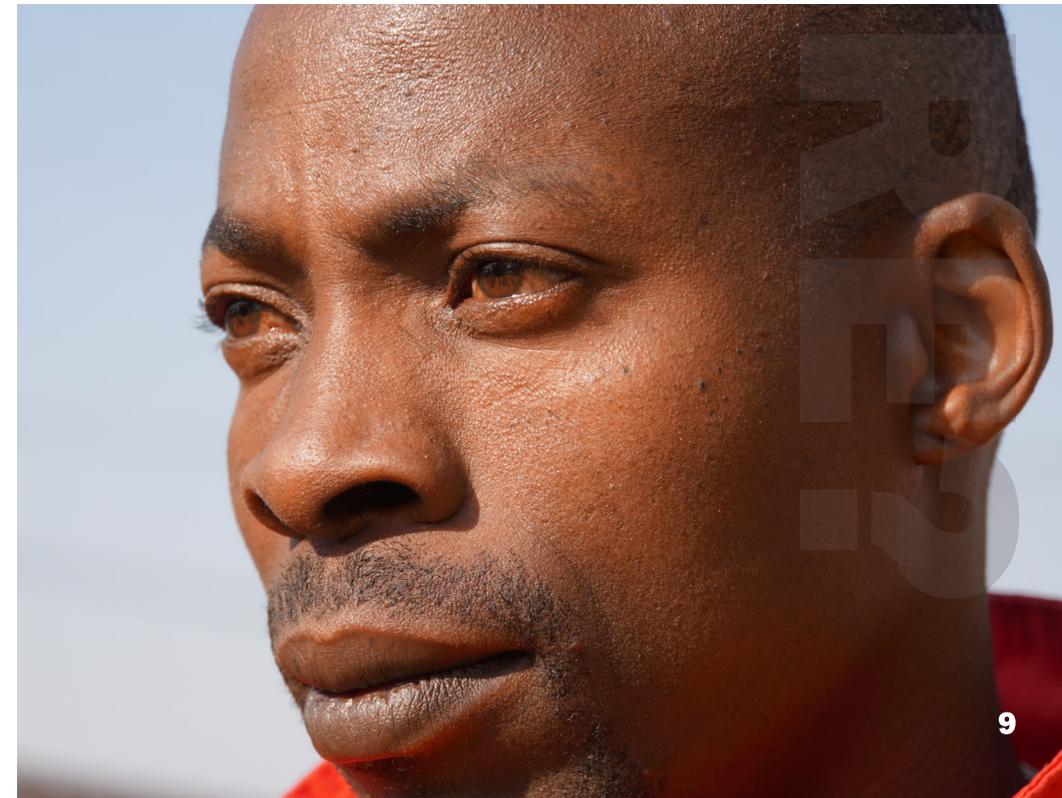
OUTCOMES OF PAST PROJECTS AND VISION

Lots of talent has been discovered from these events; some community elders gathered youth from the age of eight to adulthood to participate in cultural dance groups, and in manufacturing hats

and bags out of plastics. Many people have started using their skills efficiently and ask me if it will be possible to create more projects based on natural building because they want to learn and participate in the next Meraka event. Now, because people are well aware about reusing waste materials, I have adopted a park where I want to transfer skills while rebuilding it and also utilize it as a base for a community art and craft market, so as to create a demand for township tourism, as well

as create market opportunities for local artists. We are still seeking collaborative stakeholders as we need help for the implementation phase to make sure this park is used to take care of the community.

Velile Phantisi, Change Agent, Meraka Cultural Festival, Caleb Motshabi Township, Ipopeng Street, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 19 July 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)



MOKOENA & ELLEN MAPHALANE, CHANGE AGENTS

The story started in 2010, after myself and my mother Ellen come back from a natural building training academy held in East London, South Africa. That was our second training, because we were already part of the shack replacement building of the mud houses in the community called Freedom Square Bloemfontein, where we met Anita Venter as the founder of the *Start Living Green!* We were the first generation and volunteers of that NPC [non-profit company].

As a result of having learned the natural building skills from East London, Anita indicated that we should do something related to natural building in our township. As I was staying in a shack at that time, I came up with an idea of how I could implement the skills that we had acquired. I suggested that we should build our own house with my mother. Anita appreciated the suggestion. We started by first collecting the resources for building a sustainable house. After the resources were collected, we dug up the foundation around the shack that

we were staying in at about tyre depth. From there we placed the tyres in the foundation and fully pounded them with earth. After my house was completed, we thought of opening it officially – to celebrate our building as an artwork. I am one of those who directed that celebration of our artwork, on Mandela

“ Best thing was sharing journey of building house. I see future of young people. I have joy. ”

Day, where we also had a training session (for the community).

The ‘Seven Stage Futures/Refuture Project’ and the University of the Free State provided the funding to make the art festival happen for my project. I want to give thanks to them, because without the funding, the festival would not have happened.

I received huge support from the community on Mandela Day, so I believe bringing a change to my community would be easy as most members from my community came to learn how to make adobe bricks and also to see the good work of our hands. At the moment, I’m staying in my beautiful house with my mother, the house that catches everyone’s eye. I wish the project of housing can spread in my community. I’m grateful. I am somebody, because of the house.

Mokoena & Ellen Maphalane, Change Agents, Meraka Cultural Festival, Caleb Motshabi Township, Stand 921, Bloemfontein, South Africa, July 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)



Mary Sebatso Mofana, Change Agent, Meraka Cultural Festival, Roodewal, July 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)

I am a Change Agent with *Start Living Green!* and the ‘Seven Stage Futures/Re-Future Project’. In celebrating the two-year journey with *Start Living Green!*, I hosted an Art and Cultural festival (Meraka) at my rural property in Roodewal, Manguang, South Africa. The theme for the day was building bridges between local people, businesses and organisations irrespective of race, sex,

I founded, *Lesedi Multipurpose Community Development, Mmetlakgotla Arts Institute, Mmabana Art and Cultural Centre*, under the Department of Sport, Art, Culture and Recreation, to recognise and celebrate Mangaung’s vibrant cultural diversity. The *Seven Stage Futures/Meraka Festival* was fused with natural building, music, art exhibitions and visual art and crafts

“ Different cultural fusions, a vision I had for decades. ”

age, faith, sexual orientation, and social/educational/economic & cultural background.

This became an innovative collaborative project between the NGO organisation

from local groups, Botshabelo and Thaba-Nchu, including ex-inmates (parolees and ex-offenders). I also presented the ‘Herb Project’ in the form of both aroma therapy and a permaculture/traditional gardening space designated for the growing of herbs. I am proud to mention that Mr. Mche, an official from Correctional Services, was present and spoke on behalf of Correctional Services.



MARY SEBATSO MOFANA

The aim of my Meraka was to celebrate the diversity in arts, culture and music of South Africa by connecting South African citizens and the local inhabitants from diverse cultures living, working and studying in Mangaung, and by creating inclusive and innovative partnership platforms for collaboration between big businesses and small businesses, between different faith communities, between the rich and poor, between the private sector and civil society groups to enhance socio-economic development. We aimed to stimulate conversations around shared value themes (i.e. respect, diversity, etc) such that all who live, work & study in the Motheo district

municipality can buy into, and in order to create a socio-economic environment that benefits all. The project sought to change lives and help create employment for artistic cultural practitioners including ex-inmates, keeping their minds occupied with crafts and other artistic and cultural activities in a quest to restore pride and dignity in our community.

By also encouraging the society to accept ex-inmates from Correctional Institutions, we hope to ensure their successful reintegration into the Society and the restoration of their dignity.



Keith Armstrong at Mary Mofana's Meraka, Roodewal, with mobile stage projections, 2017 (photo: iFlair)

My name is Thabang Mofokeng from Free-State Botshabelo, the second largest township in South Africa, the township with an immense talent which must be exploited as much as possible. As a young person, sometimes it is difficult to grow up with a high level of good moral and great sense of hope, as a result of the immediate environment and the people who are always around one's upbringing. How so? – in the sense that what you become in life as a young person gets highly influenced by the community in which you spend most of your time. If they are bad people it's easy to adapt to their norms and values, because you end up assuming that what they are doing is right /correct because they are doing it. It is the same case living with good people.

Back in 2014 I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Anita Venter, founder of *Qala Phelang Tala/Starting Living Green!* (She is advancing a program which is called 'Natural Building & Peace Bench' and as this program uses recycled material, it doesn't cost money to erect it). As a young man looking for pay-jobs, for daily survival, I could see that the majority of our people suffer in a great deal of poverty as a result of unemployment, but because I was also not working and having nothing much to provide to them, this pained me deeply. I then decided to establish a non-profit entity, *HOT Rural Workers Foundation*, as a way to rescue the community of Botshabelo.

Having noted that the majority of our local youth do not have jobs and are everyday wandering around, I then embarked on this project. Two reasons inspired me: it will make our environment look neat and beautiful; and, it will give

our unemployed youth something to do during the day, rather than sitting around and doing nothing. That is how we went about it until such time as we were introduced to the work of Dr. Keith Armstrong.

Start Living Green! has been a great partner since the beginning of our HOT Foundation Project; we've managed to acquire more skills and knowledge throughout our journey with them. As a social entity with an immediate duty to advance and develop our local young people and women in particular, we deemed it pivotal to be introduced to the likes of Dr. Keith, who got us involved in one of his great projects called 'RE-FUTURE INTERNATIONAL PROJECT' – a platform that unites everyone from all walks of life, irrespective of their religion, culture, ethnic group, or skin colour.

During the time I spent with him, when we were busy with the logistics of his project 'Re-Future', in preparation for the community Meraka, I could see the light and the love this man has for his job, but most importantly the love he showed to all of us during the preparations was out of this world. He provided proper leadership to each and every person who was involved in the project. We were all filled with energy and dedication to see that the project was delivered to the satisfaction of the guests and the audience in general, and indeed everything went as we had desired. The most important part of the 'Re-Future' project is that an individual learns a lot about the importance of caring for and loving each other.

Dr. Keith created a platform that unified people from all walks of life and from different cultural groups, and we saw fit



Thabang Mofokeng, Change Agent/Leader, HOT Rural Workers Foundation, Botshabelo Township, South Africa, Re-Future Project Ambassador, 2017

to carry that on; we decided to organize another cultural festival as a continuation of what 'Re-Future' taught us under the leadership of Dr. Keith; he proved to us that unity across the spectrum is key to reproducing a better society. It does not end but assists in preserving our culture, tradition, and the values of our cultural diversity.

The *Re-Future Project* is an idea for which many generations to come must get an opportunity to see, touch, and feel and most importantly we need to guard it. The *Re-Future Project* must continue to inspire and unite diverse cultural groups, and be able to keep the rightful dignity and heritage of humankind.

In conclusion, I would kindly love to submit my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Keith Armstrong for the love and trust he showed to all who worked with his project to collaborate with the grass-roots South African communities. On behalf of *HOT Rural Workers Foundation* the Free-State Community are very thankful for the opportunity, knowledge and skills he has imparted to all of us.



Christine Scoggin, Doctoral Student, Queensland University of Technology

Dust ... Powder-fine particles of dust dance in the sunlight as dirt is mixed with straw, manure and water to form the cobb on a clear, cold morning. The 'cobb' will be used to make bricks, to bind and reinforce repurposed materials, and to create a finished surface for a mud brick house.

Dr. Keith Armstrong and I are in the township of Caleb Motshabi on the outskirts of Bloemfontein, South Africa. We are here to work with *Qala Phelang Tala/Start Living Green's* post-natural builders who will showcase their mud brick building techniques through a series of three Merakas as part of the Free State Arts Festival in July 2017.

Dust ... The cold wind blows through the township whipping the dust from the unpaved roads into 'willy willys'- a familiar site in remote Aboriginal communities across Australia. I wonder what the local Sotho people call them. We shelter in the shadow of the mud brick house to get out of the dust and I look at the shack next door. Cobbled together with sheets

of corrugated iron, I can see through gaps where the dust will permeate, accompanied by cold winter winds.

I was told that the neighbours laughed when Ellen and Mokoena began building this mud brick house. They were told, "Those are primitive ways - those houses are no good today." Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho people traditionally built mud houses in rural villages across South Africa prior to colonisation. When resource extraction, rapid urbanisation and apartheid took hold, self-help housing was encouraged by municipal governments who could not keep up with housing demands in the growing metropolitan areas; however, the traditional, locally appropriate, clay and grass houses were deemed by the municipal authorities as unsuitable. (1) Today, most people living in the informal settlements, or un-gazetted areas, of South African townships still live in self-made shacks composed of iron sheets supported by timber frames.

CHRISTINE SCOGGIN

This is the genesis of my PhD research (2017-2020): to share the stories of the 'lived experiences' of the post-natural builders, predominantly through the mediums of photography, video, and sound. I will establish a process for supporting the builders to successfully construct their digital stories and together we will co-create an exhibition of this media and related photography, built forms, and artefacts to be presented within the context of the *Re-Future Project* in South Africa and exhibited as part of the *Vrystaat Kunstefees/Free State Arts Festival/Tsa-Botjhaba 2019*. The research will further examine how these processes contribute to empowerment, capacity building, and collective identity among the participants.

On the last day of my visit to Caleb Motshabi I am talking to Ellen and Mokoena inside their mud brick house until after the sun goes down. It is quiet and cosy – a world away from the dust outside. As I exit into the winter night air and walk to the car, I realise I had no idea it had gotten so cold outside. We drive out of the township, carefully navigating the gutted dirt road through a cloud of dust in the headlights.

NOTE

1. Venter, A. (2017). *South African housing policy and housing-policy research: Theoretical discourse in the Post-Apartheid era* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

LEFT: Mokoena Maphalane and Keith Armstrong at Mokoena and Ellen's original shack, Stand 921, Caleb Motshabi Township, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016 (photo: Dr. Anita Venter)

RIGHT: Mokoena Maphalane and his new 'post-natural' home in Caleb Motshabi, 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)



Pieter Odenaal, Doctoral Student, Queensland University of Technology

My doctoral research focuses on how artistic practices can contribute to social-ecological resilience in vulnerable communities. Specifically, I will conceptualise, execute and evaluate transdisciplinary poetic interventions in Cape Town and Mangaung, South Africa,

which involve indigenous knowledge practitioners, NGOs, community members, scientists and poets. These interventions will take the form of workshops and performances which will aim to vocalise the needs and aspirations of communities in the face of changing social-ecological systems.

*let the land speak
it already knows the answer -
a tree drawn in charcoal on its face -
it carries the glistening truth
like a lizard in a crow's beak*

*let the dust speak
it embodies the ashes of our dna -
the remains of the day -
our ancestors are the floating specks
that redden the sunset*

*let the soil speak
it nourishes our flesh -
a soup of breathing bugs -
we are plowed fields ready
to receive our tomorrows
like seeds already dreaming
of an untainted sun*



Typical township living conditions, 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)



Mary Mofana's *Meraka, Roodewal, 2017* (photo: iFlair)

Keith Armstrong is an experimental artist profoundly motivated by issues of social and ecological justice. His engaged, participative practices provoke audiences to comprehend, envisage and imagine collective pathways towards sustainable futures. He has specialised for over twenty years in collaborative, experimental practices with emphasis upon innovative performance forms, site-specific electronic arts, networked interactive installations, alternative interfaces, art-science collaborations and socially and ecologically engaged practices.

Keith's research asks how insights drawn from scientific and philosophical

ecologies can help us to better invent and direct experimental art forms, in the understanding that art practitioners are powerful change agents, provocateurs and social catalysts. Through inventing radical research methodologies and processes he has led and created over sixty major art works and process-based projects, which have been shown extensively in Australia and overseas, supported by numerous grants from the public and private sectors.

His interdisciplinary work *Intimate Transactions* received an Honorary Mention in the 2005 Prix Ars Electronica in Austria, represented Australia at the National Gallery of China for Media

Art China (Synthetic Times) during the 2008 Olympics Cultural Festival and was shown in 22 venues including the ICA London and is now held in the permanent collection of ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe Germany. Keith's interactive installation, *Shifting Intimacies*, developed during an Arts Council England residency, was premiered at the ICA, London.

His interactive installation *Knowmore (House of Commons)* was shown at the Mediations Biennial in Poland in 2010. In 2011-12 he directed the Remnant Emergency Artlab project in Australia, New Zealand and India with outcomes including the high-profile Bat-Human Project in Sydney. His work *Finitude* was featured in the 3rd Art and Science International Exhibition and Symposium, Beijing, China at the China National Museum of Science and Technology. Media works *Night Rage* and *Long Time, No See?* featured in ISEA 2013 Sydney, and in 2014 *Light of Extinction* was featured in Thingworld: International Triennial of New Media Art at the National Gallery of Art in Beijing, China.

Through 2011-15 he forged new collaborative partnerships with a range of biodiversity conservation organisations and ecologists across the Australian continent. This resulted in a series of major commissions for works, including the Sydney Powerhouse Museum, the Queensland Museum, Media Art China and Siteworks Festival at Arthur Boyd's property, Bundanon, Australia. In 2016, he presented a major solo show of five new works in Sydney at the UTS Gallery – the *Over|Many|Horizons* project – collaborating with an international team of marine scientists, climatologists and cultural activists. That year he first

travelled to South Africa to instigate a socially-engaged project around sustainability and poverty reduction called *Re-Future*, funded by the prestigious Andrew Mellon Foundation. This came to fruition in 2017 with the presentation of three festival events (*Merakas*) co-created with township residents, under the banner *Seven Stage Futures*.

In 2017, he mounted a major solo show of five works in South Africa (*The Mesh*), exhibited his art/science work *Eremocene (Age of Loneliness)* at the prestigious Ars Electronica Festival in Linz Austria, and began a ten-venue tour (2017-2020) with the Experimenta Make Sense: International Triennial.

Keith was formerly an Australia Council New Media Arts Fellow, a doctoral and postdoctoral New Media Fellow at QUT and a lead researcher at the ACID Australasian Cooperative Research Centre for Interaction Design. He is currently an associate director of QUT's Creative Lab research centre (p/t), author of numerous book chapters and papers, and an actively practicing freelance new media artist.

HIDDEN BIO-POLITICS IN FUTURE-FUTURE?

Dr. Keith Armstrong is one of Australia's most renowned experimental artists. By using radical research methodologies, Keith has created over sixty major art exhibitions in Australia and internationally. I first curated the work *Intimate Transactions* by Keith Armstrong and Brisbane's Transmute Collective at the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide in 2008. The work allowed two people in separate spaces (EAF and Wagga Wagga Art Gallery) to interact

“ The term Bio-politics has been developed in social theory since Michel Foucault, to examine the strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and the processes of subjectivation.

simultaneously by using their bodies and custom designed 'smart furniture'. Participants engaged in a shared sensory intimacy as they navigated their way through a physical interface of digital imagery, multichannel sound and tactile feedback.

At the Riddoch Art Gallery, in Mount Gambier, Keith Armstrong enters the domain of the Bio-political and depicts how participatory practice encourages audiences to imagine collective pathways toward sustainable futures. His project

Future-Future? is clearly motivated by issues of social and ecological justice. It was created as a result of Keith's art residencies in South Africa over the previous two years. During the course of the residencies Keith established networks, and created important bridges in the community. Together with local community members he examines how social development and culture can assist communities to regenerate, including housing infrastructure and cultural environments. In a grass-roots artistic response to major Bio-political issues, the project clearly evolved

through the interactions with the community of people and community organisations, and was aimed at improving the lives of individuals, and even at advancing current social service systems. The results of the project include the building of 'post-natural' houses, and community instigated *Merakas* (cultural gatherings and market places). Keith truly picks up on issues about the sense and disposition of Bio-politics in South Africa, but also globally. The project directly

refers to the great social changes that South African society and individuals go through. Armstrong is also able, by means of an arts project, to successfully reconstruct responses, in great detail, to the negative legacy of the apartheid, as well as of the post-apartheid period. Perhaps the most important aspects of his approach are to be found in the Bio-political questions it brings to the surface, by contextualising artistic discourses developing around Bio-politics, and addressing the possibilities for communities to resist the prevailing

global neo-liberal discourses through emancipation and cultural subversion. In many ways *Future-Future?* reminds me of Roberto Esposito's notion of the 'paradigm of immunisation', as a sort of decoding device in the great Bio-political and philosophical debate about Communitarianism, following the end of the Cold War, addressing the failure of Communism and the alternatives to the neo-liberal conception of subjectivity. Esposito's notion of 'immunisation' acts as a safeguard in both juridical (in respect of the law) and biological (in respect of disease) linguistic discourses. The overall concern in the 'paradigm of immunisation' is the fact of existence

(e.g. the 'protection or negation of life'), and it thus exposes the paradox, whereby what saves the individual and political body from harm is also what obstructs its growth. Armstrong's project *Future-Future?* is able to provide practical and aesthetic insights into this philosophical debate. But most of all it creates a very strong reference as to why no system of political thought can fully grasp the essence of Bio-politics. (1)

NOTE

1. Esposito, Roberto 2008. *BIOS: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, by Roberto Esposito (trans: Timothy Campbell), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

Light shines through the bottle bricks of Mokoena & Ellen Maphalane's post-natural house in Caleb Motshabi, 2017 (photo: Keith Armstrong)





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