

# Chapter 12: The Ruse of Political Neutrality: Critical Research, Value Creation, Graffiti and Political Intervention at an Art Institution in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

**Ingrid Bamberg**

## Introduction

In this chapter,<sup>1</sup> I discuss how critical research can contribute to shifting perceptions of institutional value and challenging social hierarchies and power structures in the context of the KwaZulu-Natal Society of the Arts (KZNSA) in Durban, South Africa. As a community-based NGO, the KZNSA aims to promote the visual arts and support the careers of emerging artists in KwaZulu-Natal through educational input, exhibitions and public engagement (KZNSA 2022). This is critical due to the decline of support for the arts within South Africa and the city of Durban specifically (Forbes 2021). While art and educational spaces of the early post-apartheid years espoused narratives of inclusion and transformation, the normalisation of European culture and models for art organisations and educational institutions still imposes knowledge systems that marginalise epistemologies and aesthetics from the Global South (Simbao 2017) and perpetuates legacies of structural inequalities. Despite intensified calls for decolonising institutions by dismantling their 'White' colonial ethos in recent years (Heleta 2018; Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni

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2021), frustration with the ways in which “Black”<sup>2</sup> South Africans continue to experience subtle exclusion in historically “White” spaces persists. Here, “Whiteness” does not refer exclusively to a skin colour, but also to a mindset, an ethos and an unconscious discriminatory and oppressive behaviour (Fanon 1952) embedded in coloniality and social positions of unjustified privilege and power (Biko [1978] 2017: 20).

The call for decoloniality implies ‘[to reconstruct] global narratives on the basis of the empirical connections forged through histories of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation’ (Bhambra, as cited in Badat 2022: 77) and to recentre the experiences of those kept at the periphery of the dominant discourse rooted in the coloniality of power, in which the way knowledge is produced and diffused is intertwined with economic and political power (Badat 2022). It serves hegemonic forms of thinking and doing that perpetuate the marginalisation and disenfranchisement of those who do not assimilate (Quijano 2007). Considering the postulate that art is knowledge, it is, therefore, not politically neutral.

There is no clear evidence of the KZNSA interrogating its legacy as a historically White organisation centrally positioned in the historically White suburb of Glenwood. Founded in 1905 as the Natal Society of the Arts (NSA) for the benefit of the White artists’ community, the gallery changed its name and its constitution in 1996. While it considers the need for redress in terms of promoting Black artists, it fails to grapple with its history beyond the political correctness of the 1990s. As such, it seems to mistakenly ignore the socio-political significance of its legacy and retain a belief in neutrality. No specific political or ideological positionality appears in its vision, its mission, or its curatorial framing. This results in the frustration of many of its members and impacts the capacity for the organisation to create value in a decisive and socially relevant respect.

As an engaged scholar, I am committed to addressing the epistemic violence caused by persisting colonial hierarchies in knowledge production (Grosfoguel 2007). This struggle for change and social justice implies to dismantle hegemonic forms of geopolitics of knowledge production and diffusion in which critical research can play a role on the ground, to mobilise and guide action, in any space of

2 In this paper, “race” refers to the social construct and experience of groups based on their physical features typical of the apartheid context of racial, spatial and institutional segregation and still prevailing in the post-apartheid era. By “Black” I mean social groups and individuals who were not classified “White” by the apartheid regime and who were discriminated against by the ruling “White” minority. When I speak about “Whiteness”, I am cognisant of the fact that one does not need to be racially categorised as “White” to promote and naturalise “White” values. Similarly, the fact that someone is racially categorised as “White” does not mean that they are ignorant of their privilege and the history behind their racial categorisation. In the rest of the chapter, these categories are capitalised and do not appear in inverted commas for stylistic and editorial purposes.

knowledge production (Mignolo 2015). This chapter illustrates how scholars' critical engagement can permeate 'extra-university institutions' (Badat 2025:41) when they are active in such organisations and committed to scholarly unpacking the complexities of power structures 'to advance the interests and ideas' of those who are marginalised by cultural institutions (Piven 2010: 808). Here, I write as a critical sociologist who is also a member of the KZNSA council.

Considering a study of value creation, I conducted at the KZNSA in June 2023 and reflecting on an incident of political nature that occurred in late October and early November 2023, when the graffiti tags, 'Free Palestine' (Figure 12.2) and 'from the river to the sea' (Figure 12.3) were added to an existing mural on the KZNSA exterior wall, I show the challenges and the dynamics in that space and the issue of political neutrality. I unpack the political intervention that ensued and how it lays the foundations to pursue further activist research with the members and the council members at a later stage. I demonstrate how critical research can lead to processes of meaning-making, destabilising deeply rooted social hierarchies while creating value.

## A critique of value at the KZNSA

As a non-profit membership-based organisation typical of the cultural and creative industries (CCI), the KZNSA creates tangible and intangible value by offering an experiential space to its society members, audiences and to local artists and makers (South African Cultural Observatory 2022). As Figure 12.1 shows, its activities, the wide and complex networks of stakeholders, organisations and relationships that contribute to creating value also attest to its central and influential place in Durban, in the KZN province's creative sector, and Glenwood in particular. The KZNSA is a unique institution providing a diversified offering with the gallery, the gift shop with its 100 per cent local artisanal products and the café. Sales account for the monetary value created through these three streams, while intangible value is created through the social interactions made possible in this safe and pleasant space and free art programming in a spirit of community-building. Despite its almost 120-year longevity, the KZNSA struggles in the face of a significant decrease in its membership numbers and its revenue in a challenging local environment. Compounding this, access to public funding is more competitive and scarcer than in the past, and several affluent White people who supported the organisation have left on bad terms due to a change in the rules of the popular annual members award.<sup>3</sup> Other members of this demographic have either left the province or the country or "semigrated" to other parts of KZN (eThekweni Municipality 2023).

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3 In 2020, the annual members' award exhibition changed from being open to all members to a strict selection process, without clear communication to members. Many of them were turned down when they brought their artwork to enter the exhibition.

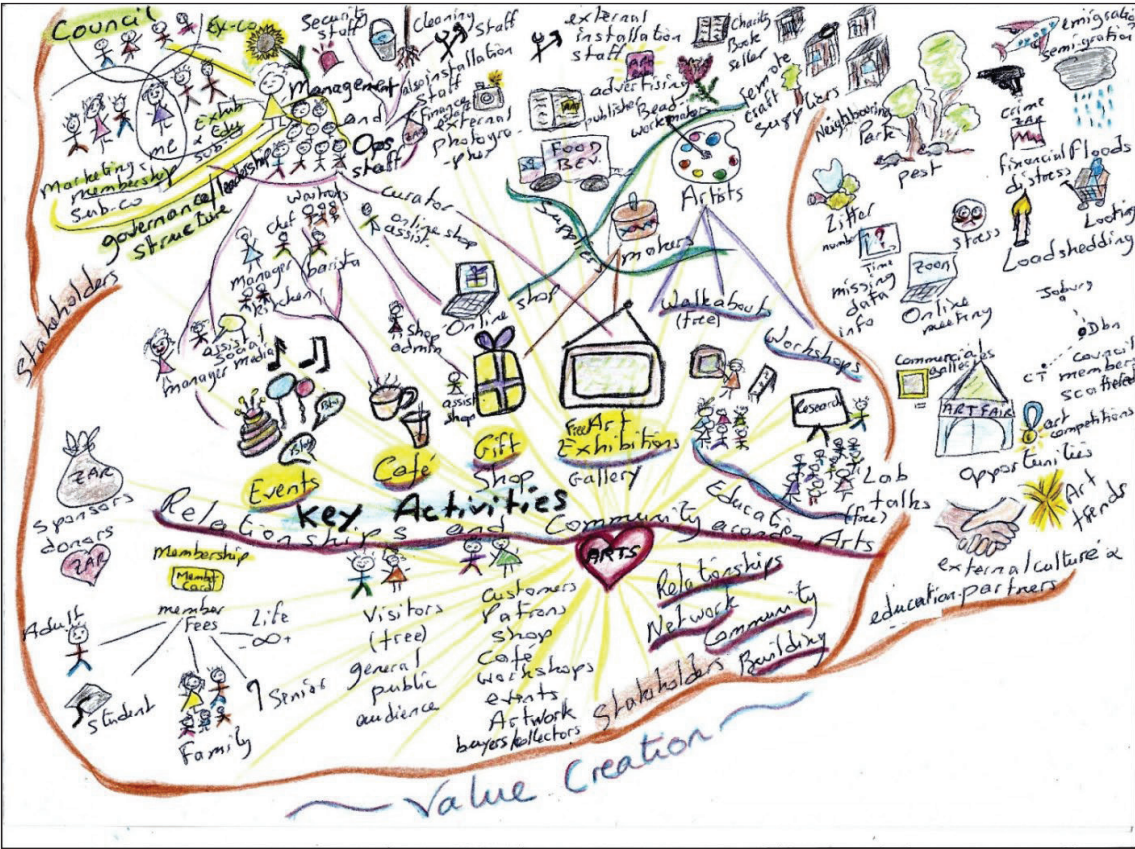


Figure 12.1: Ingrid Bamberg, 2023, The “rich picture” depicting the context, key activities and the rich variety of stakeholders involved in value creation at the KZNSA

The notion of value is central to critical research as it rejects the idea of political neutrality and “value-free” research processes in which the researcher is an objective agent of knowledge production, disconnected from the socio-political context in which they operate (Badat 2025). Critical research aims at producing knowledge with a cognitive, intellectual and practical value (Badat 2025). To deconstruct social hierarchies and structures of oppression and foster social change, I explore how the KZNSA relates to the notion of value. How does it create value and how do those familiar with the space perceive its value? The study I conducted in June 2023 focused on organisational value creation and explored

these questions through interviews with staff, society members, and members from the leadership team including council and management.<sup>4</sup>

Rooted in a utilitarian and liberal paradigm, simple definitions of value creation imply that value is created when the gains from exchanging goods or service exceed the cost involved in its production (Thakor 2000).

In the context of a cultural and creative organisation, the profit made from artworks sales represents only one aspect of the value created (Carlucci and Schiuma 2018), alongside the aesthetic experience, the social and professional interactions, the various processes of knowledge and meaning-making of the world thus produced. Value also occurs when diverse intellectual discourses and cultural imaginations meet in the context of an art institution. Whether they find consensus or reveal conflicting mental models and sociological tensions, they are indissociable from the culture, ethos, historical and geographical legacy of the art institution as a space that inevitably carries a political identity (Dikeç 2009). How does the KZNSA create value in a South African context of cultural pluralism and social fragmentation?

According to Thakor (2000: 8), the first step to being a great value creator requires 'a clear definition of the meaning of value for a specific organisation'. The question of value had not been previously discussed within the KZNSA, and most interviewees struggled to clearly define it.

While members interviewed were generally positive about what the KZNSA offers in terms of opportunities for artists, there is a definite sense that the gallery is not accessible to everyone. One participant pointed out that the organisation has a 'very specific footprint' and 'visitor base' partly since 'taxis do not run' in the direction of the KZNSA (Member 1 interview, 18/05/23). This aspect keeps afar those who live in the periphery and do not have their own transportation, like students or most Black people. A staff member recognised the need for 'more events which are attractive to the ... Black community' (Staff interview, 7/06/23). Overall, there is a sentiment that the gallery is yet to sufficiently transition from its history of appealing to a primarily White audience. While positive examples related to intangible value creation (such as the social, educational or aesthetic experience of attending an exhibition, a walkabout or simply enjoying a coffee at the restaurant), they referred to what the KZNSA "visibly" produces. Negative comments related to the symbolic violence borne of what is experienced as poor communication, a lack of transparency, and vertical relationships embedded in an ethos of "Whiteness". These are sentiments that do not align with the value that the organisation intends to bring

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4 A sample of 22 interviews conducted mostly face to face and three online (looking at the participants' understanding of value, how the KZNSA brings value and their value to the KZNSA), complemented a desk review of the financial accounts and policy documents, participant observation and visual data. I use "leadership" when I refer to interviews with council members or management.



to its constituents. As one member asserted, 'people feel scared about the gallery, to come in. They feel stupid, not knowledgeable, that they need to know more' (Member 5 interview, 11/06/23). Another stated that when 'you have power ... you need to be very sensitive and mindful of how you use that power' (Member 4 interview, 8/06/23). Interviewees who are emerging artists expressed the desire for 'professional feedback' on artworks that are submitted for exhibitions or competitions to be part of a greater conversation and reflect on their practice, and for opportunities to provide art workshops to the public and show their value as knowledgeable individuals and not only as artwork producers (Member 3 interview, 8/06/23). Interviewees recognise the positive aspect of having ties with prominent artists or curators. However, some express that 'there has been a view that the KZNSA at times is opportunistic. It's able to leverage on the social currency of an individual well and run with that. Somehow, there's a relationship that's been brokered' (Member 6 interview, 8/06/23). Consequently, they regret that '[the KZNSA is] unable to ensure that more people benefit from this relationship with [prominent artists or curators]. So, in this way, [the KZNSA] become[s] a gatekeeper as opposed to a kind of enabler' (Member 6 interview, 8/06/23). The value expected from the relationship with the gallery is broader than an exchange platform for exhibiting, consigning and selling art. While the NGO aims to empower and support the careers of emerging artists, it does not seem to see its value to them beyond the fact that 'it gives exposure to artists who would not otherwise get a platform to gain credible experience in the industry' (Staff 1 interview, 18/05/23). Some artists are left feeling unwelcome and devalued.

At the KZNSA, value is essentially measured from a financial perspective. The fact that the organisation ignores indicators of members' engagement or satisfaction is an indication of the value attributed to its non-profit identity: besides artworks sales, what is intangibly produced by art is not assessed or questioned by the institution. Comments from members point to the fact that they are not invited to participate collectively in creating value (for example in the programming) and thus, their experience is one of 'what you're paying for is a programme of activities and a space and that's what you get' (Member 2 interview, 6/06/23). This is despite the fact that the leadership recognises that members who 'invest in the institution' need to feel that their 'investment is rewarded' (Leadership 2 interview, 9/06/23). Interestingly, the semantics of members of the leadership team depicts in liberal and commercial terms the KZNSA's value as a meeting point for makers, artists and the market where 'the market is the audience' (Leadership 1 interview, 2/06/23). This is considered the primary way to ensure that members get 'a fair return on their investment' (Leadership 2 interview, 9/06/23). In this approach, the value of the human experience translates into monetised capital, not into what the human has gained cognitively, intellectually and practically. The value created is unidirectional and top-down, whereas members seek to create value for meaning and purpose.

The study captured the relationship between the institutional identity, the business model and the financial situation of the organisation as a system, showing that they are intertwined, and must be considered simultaneously to make meaning and value: it laid the foundations for a strategic workshop I conducted in February 2024 in which steps for transforming the institution were specified, and a special general meeting open to the public in May 2024 (KZNSA 2024). Here, what art produces in terms of personal and collective experiences, of potential for new narratives and knowledge-making is not fully considered a valuable ‘asset’. This enables the naturalisation and legitimisation of epistemic violence. It contributes to silencing the voices of those who are relatively new or “outsiders” to the KZNSA. It takes for granted and generalises the experiences of those who have a deep sense of belonging and entitlement, due to their historical relationship with the gallery. This pattern occurs not only with members and the public, but also with council members.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the organisation does not have an explicit values statement that would allow for an assessment of its espoused values (Kabanoff and Daly 2002). How does the KZNSA align with the desires, hopes and values of its members? Who does the KZNSA consider as part of its community?

## Legacies of “Whiteness”

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My engagement with the KZNSA reveals that the legacy of the White cultural broker and its related subtle power dynamics continue to prevail in this space. Sylvester Ogbechie (2010: 2) describes the ‘role of cultural brokerage in determining which objects gain value and which do not’. Thus, the cultural broker is involved in determining ‘how value is created for cultural commodities’ (Ogbechie 2010: 2). In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, we are still negotiating the historical legacy of the White cultural broker and the ‘paternalistic’ role that was played by White South Africans working in the arts (Peffer 2008: 176). By framing Black artists as inferior to White artists and actively excluding them from galleries, museums, art schools and universities, the apartheid administration ensured that the space of Fine Art was a White space (Peffer 2014: 176). The distinction between “Fine Art” (a term used to describe work that aligned with a modernist European discourse) and “craft” (the term used to describe the work of indigenous artists) devalued the work created by Black South African artists. Committed cultural brokers played a role in identifying talented and promising artists and working to promote them and their work

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5 Half of the council was newly appointed in October 2023, bringing generational, racial and gender diversity to the leadership team. It is beyond this chapter to describe the many parameters that intersect (seniority at the council, inhabiting Glenwood, networks and friendships, knowledge and expertise in the art sector, understanding of management and leadership practices...) to give an accurate account of their profile.

during apartheid. However, this required them to represent and speak on behalf of Black artists who were largely considered uneducated and inferior to White artists. While many cultural brokers worked with good intention, problematic power dynamics persisted.

Part of the challenge faced by the KZNSA lies in its ongoing 'blindness' to understanding the impact of 'Whiteness' in historically White institutions (Steyn 2015: 37), a phenomenon not unique to the KZNSA (Southall 2022). The KZNSA is supported by a diverse network of artists and supporters of the arts. It is free of charge and open to the public. However, the sentiment of members demonstrates that the KZNSA is still experienced by Black South Africans as a White cultural organisation. The individuals who do feel a sense of ownership, entitlement and belonging, are predominantly White. Often blind to their privilege, they are the ones who perceive the organisation to be creating value in their communities. This disjuncture in members' perceptions and experiences became evident in a recent response to graffiti on the exterior wall of the KZNSA.

## Graffiti and the wall

In October 2023, the KZNSA received three complaints about the addition of graffiti reading 'Free Palestine' to the exterior wall of the building. The original mural (titled *Many lights make hands work*) was created by the street artist and activist Iain EWOK Robinson through an interactive collaborative workshop on street art. The council was informed about three email complaints from individuals who perceived the graffiti as "antisemitic" and "pro-Hamas" and demanded that it be removed. These complaints reveal that this graffiti was a matter of public debate from the onset; discussions inside and outside the organisation naturally infused each other, mirroring a debate taking place beyond the KZNSA's microcosm.





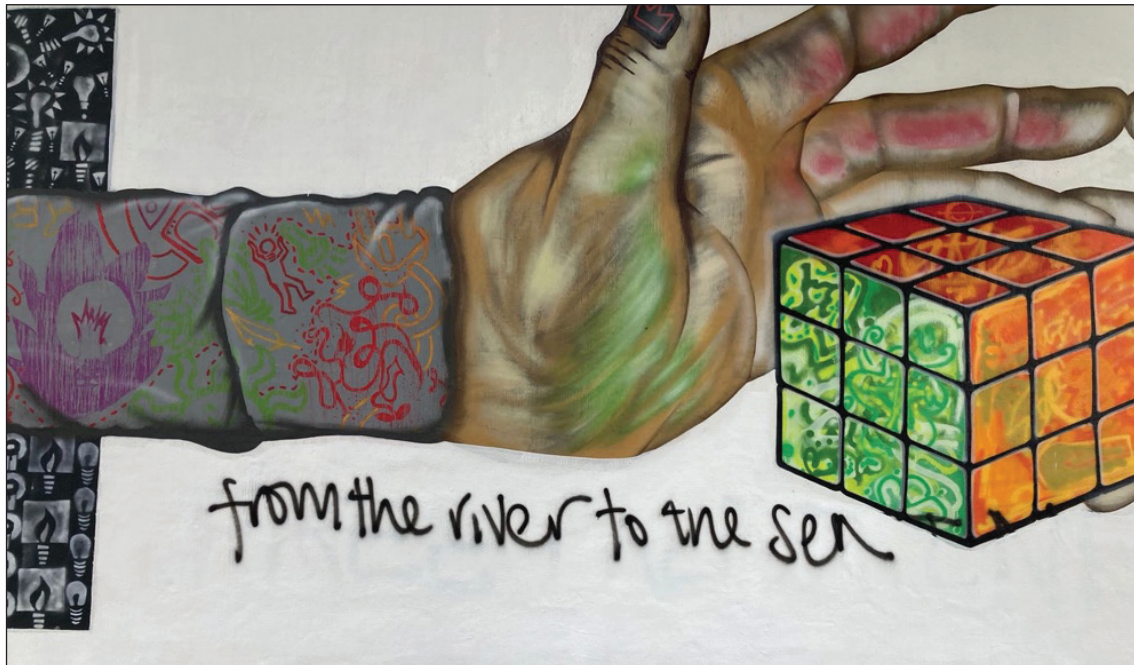
Figure 12.2: Photographic documentation of the exterior wall of the KZNSA depicting the mural painted by street artist EWOK (Iain Robinson) and the Free Palestine graffiti tag that was added (photograph by Rachel Baasch, 2023, Glenwood, Durban)

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The council was asked to vote on this issue which resulted in a division of opinion regarding the interpretation of point 2.5 of the KZNSA's constitution which states that 'the society shall not align itself with any political movement' (KZNSA 2018: 1). Members of the council motivating for the removal of the graffiti described it as "vandalism" and evoked this clause in the constitution, arguing that in leaving the call for Palestinian sovereignty on its wall, the KZNSA was aligning with a "political movement". They were also concerned about offending members of "the community". Those defending the graffiti and insisting that it remain argued that calling for the freedom of the Palestinian people was not akin to aligning with a political movement and did not represent support for the actions of Hamas. They also called for institutional coherence given that the gallery was hosting an exhibition titled *Kumnyama Kubomvu: The Land is Ours*.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, a staff member painted over the graffiti without knowledge of the debate taking place; pictures of the removed graffiti and comments subsequently circulated in the public opinion questioning this erasure and the KZNSA's position. With the degradation of the situation in the West Bank, some council members called for issuing a statement to express solidarity with the Palestinian people and condemn the war; there were also suggestions to submit this idea to a vote of

6 This exhibition of work by Clive Sithole focused on the complexity of belonging in relation to land dispossession in South Africa.

the larger membership. Following this, another piece of graffiti reading 'from the river to the sea' was anonymously painted onto the wall (Figure 12.3).



**Figure 12.3: Photographic documentation of the mural by EWOK with the addition of a graffiti tag reading '*from the river to the sea*' (photograph by Rachel Baasch, 2023)**

While some council members motivated for the KZNSA council to leave this second graffiti on the wall and to respond with a statement, clarifying its collective position and by extension, responding to the emails, others advocated for removing it and expressed substantial fear on taking a position on this matter. Concern around losing business by taking a clear position became a central issue and source for debate and disagreement which caused public opinion to consequently question the origin of the funding received by the gallery. While the KZNSA management and staff seemed to be approached only by individuals hostile to the graffiti, different perspectives circulated around Durban. EWOK reminisced that 'if [he] was hearing anything about the graffiti, it was just like positive reinforcement coming from people. And then that got picked up, you know, some people saying, "Hoh, great, someone's saying something"' (EWOK interview, 5/09/24).

The council was unable to agree on the matter and tensions escalated resulting in a decision to address the issue in a strategic workshop in November 2023 and mobilise knowledge. In this workshop, Rachel Baasch, art historian, and chair of the KZNSA exhibition and education sub-committee, presented her fieldwork and long-term critical research on walls and borders and the way in which artists respond to structures of division and exclusion in the contexts of the Israeli Occupied West Bank Palestinian Territory, the North African border of “Fortress Europe” and the US/Mexico border fence (Baasch 2017). Elaborating on the history of apartheid in Palestine and the significance of visual activism, Baasch explained to council that, in such contexts, the graffiti tags form part of a global ‘visual activism’ that expresses itself on walls (Chapman 2019: 12). She described the close resemblance between Israel’s and South Africa’s apartheid system. She also contextualised the statement ‘from the river to the sea’ and unpacked its meaning. The full slogan reads ‘From the river to the sea...Palestine will be free’ and refers to the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river where historic Palestine existed prior to colonisation and apartheid. The slogan forms part of a larger conversation that calls for the decolonisation of Palestine and an end to the Israeli military occupation and apartheid. Baasch explained that while the slogan has been misinterpreted as “antisemitic”, and in alignment with Hamas, it has been widely used as a call for peace, “freedom and coexistence” of the Israeli and Palestinian people and not as advocacy for political groups and platforms (Nassar 2023).

EWOK counterbalanced Baasch’s presentation by sharing his experience working with the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and activists dedicated to Palestinian freedom. He articulated the risks associated with taking a decisive position and releasing a statement, referring to negative experiences of harassment and aggression from members of the Zionist community. As conceptions of the wall and the mural as private property, public space and canvas for art and engagement were conflicting with each other, EWOK also refocused the debate on his mural and the role of street art in society. As he says, reflecting back:

When you put something on the street, people are allowed to react to it. And that’s ultimately why we do it. There’s a conversation that needs to happen. And I wanted to be there and say I absolutely agree we should be saying something we should be doing something, even if it means my piece is being ‘defaced’ if that’s what it takes, then that’s good because this is that moment. So, I just wanted to be there to reaffirm that the gallery was taking it seriously, that there didn’t need to be a position, and that this was the position. (EWOK interview, 5/09/24)

Several dimensions of value resulted from presenting Baasch's critical research on borders and visual activism in the Global South. EWOK explains its impact:

It recentred the concept of what a wall is and what a barrier is in terms of a physical and also a social sort of construct. And so, it definitely recentred my own principles and values when it came to why I'm involved in the sort of struggle you know for Palestinian liberation, and the broader sort of human rights questions around, yeah, I guess, the wall. It recentred the conversation on how access is controlled and how particular peoples are controlled, in terms of power relations. (EWOK interview, 5/09/24)

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Baasch's field research not only depicted the lived experiences and struggles of people on three continents, it also grounded the scholar as a direct engaged witness, reasserting the humanitarian cause behind the graffiti. It brought forward the common empirical experiences of domination and oppression, showing that the situation was neither remote nor peripheral to South Africa's society. The presentation resulted in a dialogical and dialectical relationship embedded within the humanitarian issues raised by the graffiti: it opened a conversation around institutionalised racism, creating a space in which council members could express their own experiences of racism in a post-apartheid context, including the covert racism that continues to characterise the KZNSA. It also manifested in council members reaching consensus over issuing a statement (except for one member who later resigned) and EWOK painting a new mural. As the artist recalls, 'this was a moment of creating a real value, the significance of the gallery as an arts institution taking a very clear stance, which was not happening, that still hasn't really happened, in the arts sector in South Africa' (EWOK interview, 5/09/24). The statement was drafted collectively by council members who took ownership of the research shared and offered valuable insight as producers of knowledge in this context. Another few external complaints, attempts by some in council to organise a vote by members and invite a neutral mediator to explain the situation to stakeholders from a neutral perspective led to further internal tensions around the modalities of the statement release and delayed the process. The statement was finally issued in the name of the council as a collective in December 2023 and received support from members, without any form of retaliation. In February 2024, the KZNSA was approached to support creative initiatives promoting peace and humanitarian aid in Palestine. Interestingly, this occurred at a time when the International Court of Justice issued provisional measures against Israel, after South Africa filed an application before the Court in December 2023, for the protection of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip under the 'Genocide Convention' (International Court of Justice 2024). These initiatives attracted new audiences to the KZNSA who also



registered as members. Beside the monetary value of memberships, this attunement to social issues and different perspectives of the world increased the KZNSA's social relevance.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail how Baasch's research impacted EWOK's semiotic and aesthetic process that resulted in a new mural in June 2024. However, the presentation 'helped [him] focus on what a wall actually is and how we're trying to kind of attack the wall as a physical structure and as a social structure' (EWOK interview, 5/09/24). EWOK painted a new mural with slogans relating to social justice and activism (Figure 12.4) offering a dialectic between the initial graffiti and activism through a firm, but pacific and poetic approach of the mural (Figure 12.5). Later that month, the artist Robin Moodley collaborated with him and added his sculpture to the wall to bring life to the realities of displacement and death, and to honour the Palestinian people (Figure 12.6).

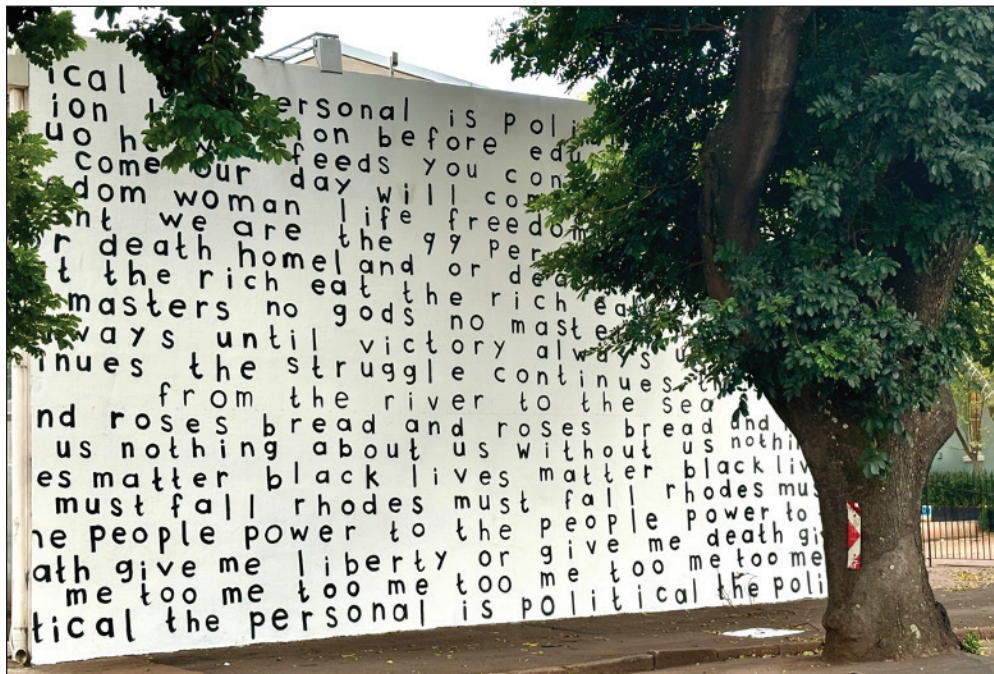


Figure 12.4: Photographic documentation of the new mural by EWOK showing slogans advocating for social justice, including '*from the river to the sea*' (work in progress)  
(photograph by Rachel Baasch, 2024)



Figure 12.5: Photographic documentation of the new mural “The cracks are showing” by EWOK.  
Photograph by EWOK, 2024





Figure 12.6: Photographic documentation of the new mural by EWOK, and the installation of concrete sculptures by Robin Moodley addressing displacement and death, in honour of the Palestinian people (photograph by Rachel Baasch, 2024)

### Art, fear and political neutrality

In this process, it became clear that those opposing the graffiti and resisting the statement and its release were afraid to engage with political concerns. In effect, invoking the organisation's constitution and a potential alignment with a political party or movement (namely Hamas) revealed the narrow understanding of the notion of "political". While some were looking at it from the perspective of "politics", merely in terms of power and conflict between factions and political actors, others were looking at "polity" and at apprehending the graffiti as a language and symbol of struggle to exercise the KZNSA's citizenship as an artistic and cultural organisation (Cotta 2023). Instead, the political realm was

contained within and limited to organising a general meeting with members and asking them to vote for or against the release of a statement. In other words, the value of political action was embedded in vetting, an idea of power subtly disguised behind the invocation of democracy and economic pragmatism. As the KZNSA's financial situation and the conversation on the graffiti and the statement conflated, the latter were seen by those opposed to them as potential obstacles to funding and revenue if donors and patrons were to take offence to it, although there was no evidence of this.

This posture showed the difficult equilibrium the organisation wants to maintain: being purportedly neutral while being relevant in contemporary South Africa. This positionality is emblematic of two paradigms in which South African "Whiteness" is embedded: threat and neutrality. In fact, the rhetoric of "*gevaar*" (danger) was instrumental to the apartheid regime (Baasch 2017: 77). The idea that Black people represented a threat to the White minority was used by the apartheid government to justify its oppressive and segregationist policies. This indoctrination has had long-term effects on social perceptions, biases and relations in South Africa (Southall 2022).

In the context of the KZNSA, this discourse of a potential threat serves to eliminate initiatives and engagement originating from those who are not representative of traditional power figures. These "outsiders"—novices (new council members), women, new generations, Black people—disturb the established order by not paying allegiance to structures of power and not fulfilling the roles assigned to them by the principles of the coloniality of power: submission and internalised oppression.

The discussions and arguments relating to the graffiti were based on three messages emanating from individuals who are not members of the KZNSA, but who were, however, considered representative of the "KZNSA community".<sup>7</sup> This way of apprehending this imagined community showed a sense of ownership and entitlement referring to Whiteness and to the gallery merely accommodating audiences who are not White, rather than considering them and their experience as an integral part of the gallery's social identity. Moreover, the fact that no other members of the society or of the so-called community engaged with the issue of the graffiti on the wall was not an element taken into consideration by those opposing the graffiti and resisting the ensuing process. The "KZNSA community" is still perceived through a socio-spatial and racial lens that is normative and functions as a mental border contributing to mechanisms of othering. Beyond this community's worldview, there is little consideration for those whose aspirations and values challenge coloniality in its social and institutional forms.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the complexity of the notion of community, the term is used in daily language in South Africa to refer to members of a constituency, be it a neighbourhood, an organisation or a group sharing interests. Instrumentalised by the apartheid discourse, it has a strong racial connotation and illustrates social hierarchies as it refers to racial groups and socio-spatial entities (such as neighbourhood, township, squatter camp) emblematic of the segregation laws passed in 1950. It is considered by some as "the political term" of the apartheid discourse (Bamberg 2016; Thornton and Ramphela 1989).

Additionally, the argument about the community ignored the large section of supporters in the city calling for ceasing the war in Gaza. Despite the financial distress in which the KZNSA finds itself, the potential to secure business from this sector of the community did not occur to those opposing the graffiti. This reveals the persistent coloniality of the social structure in Durban as well as the social hierarchies at the KZNSA that operate as a subtle form of oppressive institutional power.

Invoking the apolitical nature of the organisation to solve the graffiti issue and advocating for the intervention of a neutral mediator to share neutral views of the situation exacerbated tensions amongst council members. The posture of neutrality enables 'wilful blindness' and goes against the impetus of critical research (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020: 389). Neutrality illustrates the choice to disengage and is, therefore, not politically neutral. In this case, neutrality equates to a symbolic violence that mirrors epistemic violence: not engaging with polity is a way to silence people who have a worldview that differs from the dominant one, or the one advocating for status quo, as a political comfort zone and normative framework. This indicated an unrealistic desire to bring to neutrality an issue that is recognised as contentious amongst nation-states and individuals globally. Fear led to the desire to take a neutral approach as a form of protection. The fear was primarily the fear of losing money, instead of grasping that the more in tune the organisation is with its context and the more sensitive it is to what matters to its broad audience, the better positioned it would be to simultaneously ensure financial sustainability and relevance. There was no engagement about the graffiti with emerging artists and this was a missed opportunity for the KZNSA to show its multifaceted value. The KZNSA could have brought the value of political education to the community through art. This attitude towards the political realm is not surprising. Their fear is to lose the privileges to which they firmly hang, whether material or symbolic, like status and power, in the contemporary art arena and in Durban. This fear politics and fear of polity are ultimately foreign to critical research (Shayne 2014).

## Conclusion

The covert forms of symbolic violence experienced by members and public of the KZNSA who do not originate from or assimilate to its historical community is rooted in subtle mechanisms of coloniality of power typical of the post-apartheid South African context. The reality of the collective experience of oppression is still present in the identity of spaces, in social hierarchies, and still racialised and embedded in behaviours, body language and interpersonal interactions often tainted by microaggressions (Zerai 2023).

This acknowledgement brings discomfort and resistance from those who are used to setting the tone of the institutional narrative, a form of defensiveness typical of Whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa (Southall 2022). This resistance and desire for neutrality perpetuate the epistemic violence entrenched in the institutional identity of the KZNSA, in its wilful blindness and discourse rooted in the political correctness of universalism, ‘prominently associated with the modern world-system’ and Eurocentrism (Wallerstein 2007: 38). Translating research to guide action on the ground (Choudry 2022) at an extra-university institution forms an act of ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo 2015) to recentre knowledge, “peripheral” lived experiences and include narratives that are not dominant in the institution. Yet, the critical research and intervention at the KZNSA described in this chapter are but one step towards fostering a mindful, relevant and politically aware institutional identity and praxis at the KZNSA. By constantly practising ‘knowing with’ (Baasch et al. 2020), fully engaging with its social realities and in collaborative processes of knowledge production, the KZNSA would advance its institutional transformation and create value for the larger community.

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