

Hot air: COP17 and the art of climate change

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Greg Streak



Greg Streak, *Fake Empire, Blue Monday*, 2011

COP17 (full name: Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), held from 28 November to 9 December 2011, descended on Durban like a lot of hot air. There may be a lot of claims of increased temperatures across the globe, but those who live in Durban will quickly tell you, 'This is always how it is this time of year'. Delegates were treated to some spectacular downpours, only to be followed by eThekweni's trademark murderous humidity, all of which seemed quite fitting given the debates around the extremes of climate.

The two weeks prior to the opening of COP17 the city of Durban began in earnest. Rotten palm trees along the beach front were brutally uprooted by bulldozers and covered over, recycling stations sprang up along the length of the beachfront promenade, and a massive beach rehabilitation planting programme got underway from the old Snake Park pier down to Bay of Plenty.

All of this was part of an attempt to show how 'green' we are, and to make a good impression for all our guests.

There has no doubt been a lot of activity in this time. Seven Greenpeace protesters were deported for attempting to suspend a banner from the Protea Hotel Edward. They were fined R500 each at a special court, and then Home Affairs weighed in with their deportation, declaring that 'their actions contravened the conditions of their visa-free entry into the country'. Okaaay... One has to be amazed at Home Affairs' insanely speedy response here, given that they couldn't process the Dalai Lama's visa, which was applied for months in advance to his visit.

Similar behaviour was evident in eThekweni Mayor James Nxumalo's response to the clever intervention of a bunch of artists lead by Lesley Perkes. They 'borrowed' 240 road names and substituted every one of them with the name Sutcliffe – the surname of the soon to be ex-City Manager. Nxumalo said, 'What they did is not only a defamation of Sutcliffe's character, but whoever put up those signs has also defamed the city'. This is a slightly confusing statement given its diverse possible interpretations. Streets are often named after significant people who to all intents and purposes have made a major contribution to the place in question. So, is the Mayor saying that Sutcliffe is just not worthy of this gesture made by the artists – which in itself could be deemed a 'defamation of Sutcliffe's character' – and in what way would Easy-Peel-Off Resistance Tested Stickers defame the city? Seems like the crabby humidity has affected some people's sense of humour. For the most part, I think the 'Sutcliffe' signs made people laugh and think a bit about its implications – which was precisely the intention! Naturally, the artists' interventions were also tongue-in-cheek, given Mike Sutcliffe's key role in the controversial road name changes in Durban, a case still playing itself out in the courts.

My own contribution to COP17 came via a commission from the Department of Arts and Culture in cooperation with Environmental Affairs and the City of eThekweni. I was approached by VANSa Johannesburg to make a temporary, site-specific work for the duration of COP17. The work consisted of an inverted cnc routed plywood and plastic cityscape, attached to a steel grid structure, with indigenous plants growing out of it. The pursuit of capitalism appears to be a major obstacle for environmental sustainability. The month of September 2008 marked a collapse, in many ways, of the world economy, and shook many of its underlying assumptions. The artwork was structured around the fluctuations in the Dow Jones Stock Exchange during this period, as reflected in a graph, and then superimposed onto the visual device of a cityscape. This structure was then literally inverted

and indigenous plants grown out of them (all the plants were rescued, orphan plants - discarded and brought back to life). The plywood and steel grid is a direct reference to the materials used in city construction. The white plastic facades refer to an anaemic, detached and unemotional position. The indigenous plants grew, using the cityscape below as metaphoric compost. A thin red line traced the city from behind as a linear marker, plotted from the original stock exchange graph. The backdrop to the work itself was the Durban city skyline. The work was titled *Fake Empire (Blue Monday)*.

The visual contributions to COP17 as a whole were impressive, and were mostly underpinned by more VANSAs involvement and coordination. There were several Art Booths located at key hotels throughout the city and these served to highlight the work of several art and craft organizations and institutions in the city. These included Africa!Ignite, ArtSpace Durban, African Art Centre, The Collective and the KZNSA Gallery.

Heath Nash worked with local craftspeople at the beachfront on a project called Busy Tortoise. The idea was to take the crafters' skills, ranging from crochet techniques to wire work construction, and move them in some new directions. The end results were not so much articulated finished products but read more as assemblages of process.

A 'clean graffiti' project involving numerous KZN-based artists ran throughout COP17. The project involved urban street artists Dutch Ink from eThekweni working together with rural artists from the St Lucia Wetland area, a world heritage site. Together they made images reflecting environmental concerns and these were then transferred via enlarged stencils onto various sites in a process of 'clean graffiti' - where dirt is removed to reveal the image. This project, facilitated and managed by the Durban-based collective Dala, took place at several strategic venues in the city and will remain evident until the dirt and grime find their way back and smother these interventions once again.

VANSA also facilitated the *SCAPE* exhibition at the ICC, curated by Koulla Xinisteris. The exhibition, which was adapted for the COP17 Climate Change Summit from an initial showing at the South African Broadcasting Corporation in Johannesburg, explored the theme of landscape in South African art.

One of the very few projects not directly under VANSAs umbrella was the massive Baobab Tree (15m high) situated near the Amphitheatre on the Durban beach front. It is one of the few works that currently still remains in situ. The tree is made out of recycled wooden pallets set against a metal frame with LED lights fixed to the branches and lit night and day. The general public is asked to pedal on cycles located adjacent to the tree, in order to light the tree. A simple and powerful example of how participation leads directly to quantifiable results.

There have been daily doses of heated debates on SAfm, highlighting the complexity of the issues surrounding climate change in general. Respondents range from those convinced we are destined for doom, to others who claim that the extreme climate changes we are seeing are no more than cycles that have occurred throughout history. And then there are even those who claim that a big part of the problem is the NGOs who skirt around real climate change issues and are merely in pursuit of funding.

Major events always come with an impetus that often results in an anti-climax, as all efforts are focused on the duration of the event itself – not much before and very little after. Whilst I was dismantling my work, an elderly lady came up to me and asked, ‘Why aren’t these things left up for us to enjoy? Now there are just going to be these empty spaces again!’ There seems to be a need for the activation of the public space. Let’s hope that the city of Durban can put behind a legacy of abysmally politicized history of public sculptural interventions and begin to engage the public space in a meaningful way. They will definitely need some expertise in facilitating this process.

The marquees, once kept chilled to 18 degrees through banks of portable air-conditioning units (one wonders how this slipped past the delegates rattling on about reducing carbon emissions), are being collapsed, the concrete barriers - cordoning off sectors of the city and creating traffic jams - are being loaded onto trucks and transported away, and slowly Durban is returning back to normal, but only for a week or so, until the holiday season comes charging in at full tilt. Then, as seems to the way we do things around here, notwithstanding a few brief and meager concessions to environmentalism, it’ll be business as usual.