



ABOUT “+/- MEMOIRES DE BATTERIE”

Introduction

Neusa Thomasi, Arnaud Rabier and Éric de Sarria created an artistic project in Kliptown, with the support of the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS), the Association Française d’Action Artistique (AFAA) and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the complicity of, among others, TV5 and the Agence Le Noury. It made a very strong impression on the people of Kliptown.

Today, we are looking for ways to prevent this impression from becoming a faint memory for lack of infrastructure, skills and follow-up.

We discuss hereunder “+/- Mémoires de batterie” and its synergy, a project made in three parts and intended for three different types of public:

1. Participation of Arnaud Rabier – plastic & video artist

Rabier’s pictorial interventions on the walls of the Community Centre of Kliptown have not only embellished its daily and rather dull environment, but also made it possible to create an instant awareness of our presence. In this light, Rabier’s colourful work promoted contacts with a large part of the local population, making the concept of “what is renewable” a tangible notion.

After Rabier spent time painting flowers all over the area – spreading like a rumour, like a handful of rainbow dust – no one could no longer say: “In Kliptown, nothing ever happens...”. Like a metaphor, the painted flowers helped to repaint people’s mind and defeat the certitudes of those who thought that nothing would ever change in Kliptown.

Rabier’s interventions enriched the project considerably, influencing even the shape and content of the show: the characters of the show went as far as proclaiming that “all

human beings were flowers”, allowing each person to find his/her unique value and to recognise his/her own human condition.

Rabier assumed responsibility for the visual part of the performance, giving the whole show a pictorial homogeneity that could not go unnoticed. His pictorial work gave him an opportunity to think deeply about his approach and reflection on the use of flowers.

Rabier’s presence enabled a few local artists to take a position in the project without them ever feeling excluded. On the contrary, his presence stimulated and enriched them. Their work on the 4m-high puppet Aywa even allowed them to show their best.

In short, Rabier’s presence in Kliptown helped transform the scenery – tangible signs of change – make direct contact with the population, brought about everyone’s desire to embellish the environment, respect the work of others and acknowledge the uniqueness of each and everyone. Not to mention his video work as well as the training he gave to a few adults.

2. The show

Entitled “+/- Mémoires de batterie”, it deals with the political history of the country as well as individual stories gathered by Neusa and Eric in 2003. Around fifteen tableaux give a few marking features of the collective history of Kliptown from the 1940s to today, via the dark 1950s, the rioting 1970s, and the end of apartheid in the 1990s. The show is original, dynamic, entertaining, educational and can be performed outside as much as indoor (streets, schools, theatres, halls, etc.).

Four girls and seven boys, aged from 13 to 24, underwent a three-week acting training, rehearsing around six hours per day to create a show combining dialogues, acting, singing and dancing.

Half of the team had the opportunity to work with us before. Two of the youth came from another district of Soweto. To this day, the show has been performed around 15 times to the delight of the urban public in particular, and is quite suitable for festivals and other major events.

The rhythm of the show going back and forth through time, with its succession of images and its fluidity, helps actors structure their mind as the show requires them to be focused, to use precise body language as well as develop their sense of improvisation within specific frameworks. The development of their work allowed the actors to increase their self-esteem, making them more aware of their value and that of others. The work allowed the actors to gain self-respect, respect for others and to develop a team spirit.

3. Aywa, the puppet

The symbolic character of Aywa, the central character of the first show, has now become a 4m-high puppet. Designed and built partly in France by plastic artist Nick von der Borsch and Eric de Sarria (and thanks to the support of TV5 and the Agence Le Noury), the puppet was completed in four weeks, in Kliptown, with the invaluable help of

wardrobe mistress Beauty, before parading in Johannesburg. Aywa's telescopic spine (from 1,80m to 4m), her weight and her base (1,50m x 90cm) make it difficult for manoeuvres.

But she is worth it! She is impressive, she attracts attention, her arms, head and eyes can move. She requires four operators and one coordinator. She holds in a bakkie but can also be dragged or pushed on a cart.

Her first outing was in Joubert Park and her first walk on the Mandela Bridge on the 18th of July 2004.

Aywa is not part of the show “+/- Mémoires de batterie” but is part of the project “+/- Mémoires de batterie”. It is intended for the ownership of the Soweto Kliptown Youth (SKY), headed by Bob Nameng, an association with which we have been working for the past three years. Aywa is thus meant as a federating character, promoting contact and exchange with other associations, whether artistic, sportive or social.

Aywa is the headlight of the association in the face of interlocutors: she speaks on behalf of the association, expresses her thirst for development, change, renewal (a reference to Rabier's murals) and new perspectives in Kliptown that recently benefited from the construction of the Walter Sisulu Square and, more generally, tourism development in Soweto. To these challenges, Aywa answers “present”!

The puppet was completed in Kliptown thanks to the collaborative work of various adults. This allowed unemployed adults to work for a while and thus to help provide for the community. The puppet and the whole of the project have thus represented an economic and prestige tool for the association.

A few words need to be said concerning the limitations of the project. Indeed, we did not wait for the SKY to be sufficiently structured to give it this double tool (the show and the puppet). Rather, we created a tool that made the need for legal, accounting, administrative and commercial structure inevitable. Members of the association have no other choice but to mobilise for the development of the project “+/- Mémoires de batterie” and at the same time that of the Association itself.

Aywa is here to answer artistically to future calls, as must the SKY. To give the SKY an artistic tool without giving it the means to train for managing a cultural structure is nonsensical.

At this stage, we would like to highlight the prolongation of the artistic project within a training context. We wish to see the SKY become a qualified local interlocutor that will be in a position to answer in a dynamic, pertinent and rigorous manner all future calls in the social and cultural domains brought about by Soweto's new expansion. We wish to see the SKY employ an administrator able to compile files, collect money, run projects and work budgets in order to remunerate fairly those South Africans who become part of, manage and/or supervise projects.

Our priorities:

Where the project “+/- Mémoires de batterie” is presently limited because of the incapacity of the SKY to structure legally, financially and administratively, we would like to propose the following:

- Incorporating a French person within the SKY to advise members of the association. Such an Advisor would be knowledgeable about legislation on cultural associations in South Africa.
- Training a SKY manager in cultural structure management and administration (theoretical and practical training). Candidates for selection should undergo a file review as well as interviews with those persons in charge of financing the SKY and with two members of the SKY who are not applying for the post.
- Training to be received in Johannesburg, to answer positively to tourism and art developments in Soweto, and give the SKY the means to work on its own to finance future projects and insure its members against occupational hazard.
- We support the interest the French Embassy has shown in finding a French volunteer able to help local associations with their own structuring.
- Finally, we think it is important that we should extend our artistic work by showing it in the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2005 and in Cape Town as well as a few townships, giving the opportunity to the SKY to develop its exchange and dissemination networks. The field work of Neusa Thomasi and Eric De Sarria, enriched by the presence of Arnaud Rabier, is an artistic and social tool intended not only for training youth but also those who will have the difficult yet exciting responsibility of managing such work.