

A life-changing year



2017 was a year of hard work and difficulties as we endeavoured to realise many important projects for the Sylt Foundation. It felt like we were lacking something to make our work a true success. 'Transformation & Identity, Trauma & Reconciliation' was designed as a long-term project to connect different artistic approaches to our histories and our transformations in the seven countries of Cambodia, Chile, Colombia, Germany, Israel, Myanmar and South Africa. Even though we hosted major workshops in Yangon and Phnom Penh and travelled with international writers to Chile, that year it became clear that something more substantial was needed in order for us to dive deeper into the shifting social parameters, to further scrutinise the enormous role historic events still played in the societies that we visited and from which we came.

We wanted to collaborate more closely with communities but, aside from the limited experience that we had through workshops in partner NGOs like Soweto Kliptown Youth (SKY), we had not yet managed to establish a sustainable programme.

South African artist Hannelie Coetzee told me about the Social Entrepreneurship Programme at the Gordon Institute for Business Science (GIBS) in Johannesburg, where she had been a student some years ago. I was immediately hooked, I applied in January and by February I was sitting in my first lectures.

It was a mind-blowing experience. As the field of social entrepreneurship matures, more university researchers should, and will, turn their attention to the systematic, quantitative work necessary to move beyond anecdotes and case studies. When done well, these observations can lead to more productive interactions between academia and practice. We were an amazing class of 70 highly motivated and knowledgeable people from different parts of the industry and the perfect interface between academia and practice.

I cannot tell what struck me more during this year: that I learnt so many new things that were on one hand very practical yet had an academic substance that I really enjoyed, or my new fellow students from whom I learnt a million things during the course of the year.

Social entrepreneurship is clearly favouring mission-driven interventions and is about empathy. Empathy is a

powerful emotion, allowing us to understand other people, their position, and their needs. For anyone looking to start a social enterprise, empathy is vital. To make a difference, you need to understand the communities you will be working in and how your efforts will impact them. And it

was this empathy that was vital to our relationships as students. We became a big family – a family of elective affinities with big hearts and minds.

We came from corporates and banks, from big international NGOs and small private initiatives, we were founders of new enterprises and companies. Each of us had so many important stories to tell – stories of ideas, interventions, innovation and change created by amazing people. I deeply feel that a country that produces such leaders and practical 'dreamers' will face a much better future.

The art world, with its specific role of funding and sponsorship, with its turbo-capitalist art

market, seemed so far away from the experiences and learnings from this course that, beyond everything else, made us study really hard. In these ten months, I wrote eight assignments, two exams and one capstone project, which felt almost as demanding as my master's thesis at university.

Coming out of the specific art biotope made this course extremely beneficial for me as there was almost nothing I had known before. Art for art's sake has long been an imperative that is difficult to demolish. The goal of the artist, in the purest sense of the term, has always been considered the expression of his own artistic talent. Indeed, often us artists seem worried that addressing business-related issues could undermine the artistic value of what we have created.

But here was a new realm of knowledge that taught me different perceptions. So many of our preset beliefs about the economic system, about capitalism and its effects on our societies and on us individually, were tested during this year.

Entering the belly of the capitalist beast sometimes felt like a daunting task and to learn about all those minds who have been working on systemic change, was a crucial experience at GIBS. If you don't know the system, it is impossible to change it, to beat it.

I remember our vigorous fights about the value of CSI (Corporate Social Investment), which I rather understood as a capitalist alibi to make exploitative money-making schemes even more profitable through doing some good. A lie in a beautiful dress is still a lie. The drive to enhance change led to new concepts of capitalism actually and the philosophy of conscious capitalism offers an interesting new direction for a more human and just economic landscape. I reconsidered the importance of BB-BEE and its magic when it comes to changing a country's injustices to create an economic landscape based on human rights and sharing. To compare its impact with the way East German companies were liquidated and sold cheaply to their western competitors, these measures seek for a new way to achieve real economic transformation.

It was the relation between practical work and academic research that made this course such a treasure trove of new opportunities.

Systems Thinking and how it is applied in our societal contexts was an eye-opener and a new tool that I discovered this year; a tool I want to explore more and integrate into my work.

I wish this course could be more affordable so that many more arts practitioners could attend it. I really believe that it could empower artists and enable them to be less dependent on the current art environment and instead create new ways and forms beneficial to them as well.

Environmental thinker Donella Meadows writes in her pioneering book *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (2008), 'No one can define or measure justice, democracy, security, freedom, truth, or love. No one can define or measure any value. But if no one speaks up for them, if systems aren't designed to produce them, if we don't speak about them and point toward their presence or absence, they will cease to exist.'

To find possibilities to integrate these values into our arts projects in a financially viable way will be the task I take for myself as the most courageous and most important mandate resulting from this life-changing year. **CF**



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