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Developing a methodology for understanding artistic mentorship in apartheid South Africa: the case of the Polly Street Art Centre

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ABSTRACT

When the Nationalist Party government came into power in 1948, they set about establishing Afrikaner hegemony and destroying all institutions associated with British Imperialism. With the post-war industrial boom, increasing numbers of Africans moved from South Africa's rural areas to work in urban cities like Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban, to mention but a few. To accommodate the ever-increasing number of black inhabitants, townships were built, but these lacked suitable recreational facilities, and hence the public halls were often used. One of these was the Polly Street Recreational Centre in downtown Johannesburg. This study investigates the role played by mentorship as a teaching methodology in art education at the Polly Street Art Centre from 1952 to 1965, the period during which black urban artists emerged. It explores the following key questions:

- What was the role of mentorship in art education for the black artists at Polly Street Art Centre?
- To what extent might this mentorship be understood as teaching and learning methodology during this period?
- Why was this teaching methodology at Polly Street Art Centre never properly engaged in academic research by mainly white scholars?
- To what extent is Cecil Skotnes hero-worshipped by white scholars as the sole crusader in the success of Polly Street Art Centre?

Through interrogation of available literature, as well as pre-existing and my own interviews with people closely associated with Polly Street Art Centre, I argue that mentorship as a teaching methodology has been ignored in favour of an understanding that reinforces the apparently formal academic teaching of art education.