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Notes on Curating
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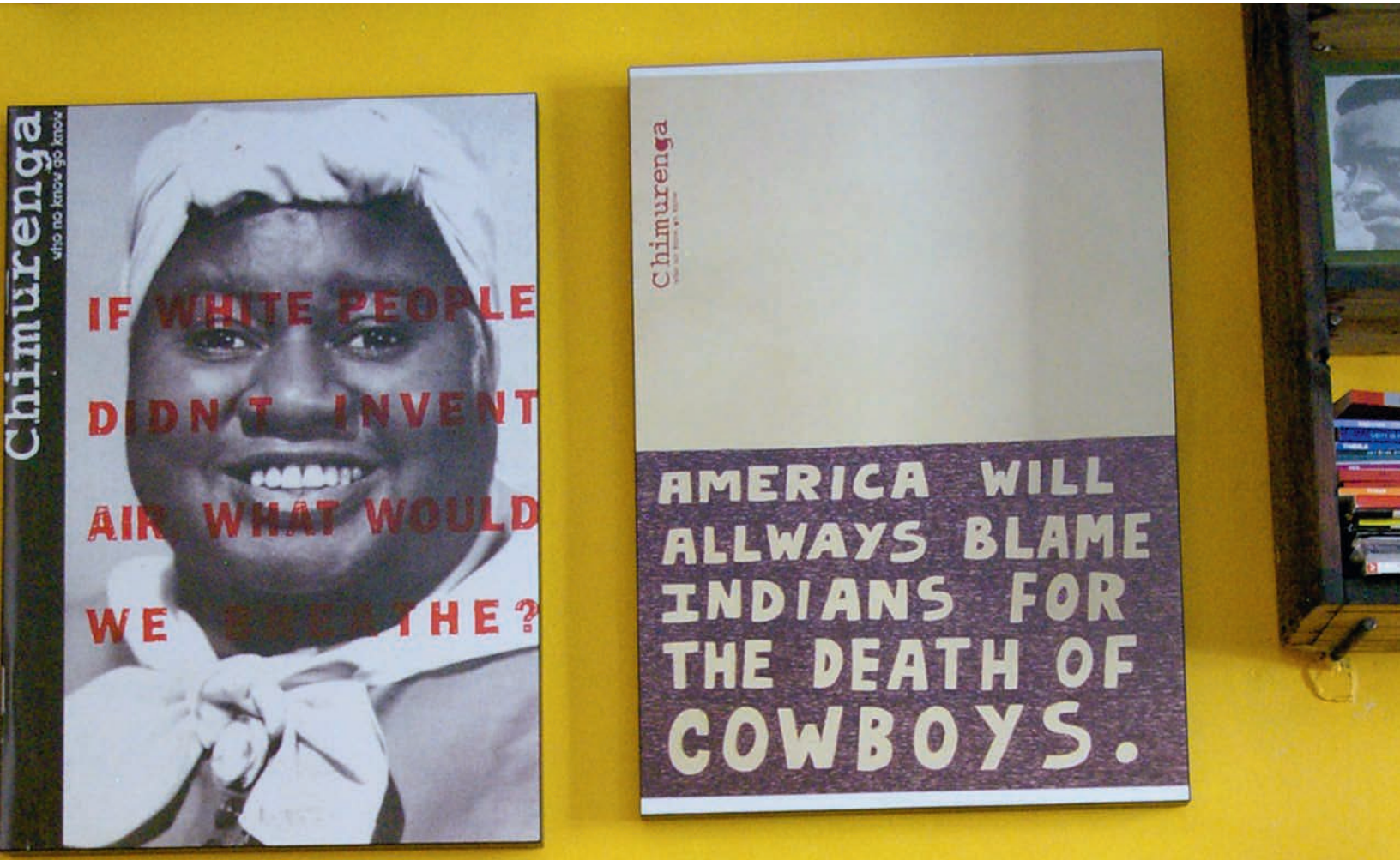
In this Context: Collaborations & Biennials



Edited by Nkule Mabaso

Interviews conducted by Nancy Dantas, Valeria Geselev, Abongile Gwele, Nkule Mabaso, Olga Speakes

Contributors
Ntone Edjabe, Justin Davy, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Misheck Masamvu, Marcus Neustetter, Smooth Nzewi, Daudi Karungi, Iolanda Pensa, Gregory G. Sholette

Contents

02
Editorial
Nkule Mabaso

INTERVIEWS ON COLLABORATIONS

09
Ntone Edjabe of Chimurenga
interviewed by Valeria Geselev

13
Justin Davy of Burning Museum
interviewed by Nancy Dantas

19
Gregory Sholette
interviewed by Nkule Mabaso

24
Marcus Neustetter of On Air
interviewed by Abongile Gwele

PAPERS

33
Counting On Your Collective Silence
by Gregory G. Sholette

43
For Whom Are Biennials Organized?
by Elvira Dyangani Ose

48
Public Art and Urban Change in Douala
by Iolanda Pensa

INTERVIEWS ON BIENNIALS

55
Smooth Nzewi
interviewed by Nkule Mabaso

62
Daudi Karungi
interviewed by Nkule Mabaso

65
Misheck Masamvu
interviewed by Olga Speakes

70
Imprint

Editorial
Nkule Mabaso

This issue of OnCurating consists of two parts: the first part researches collaborative work with an emphasis on African collectives, and the second part offers an insight into the development of biennials on the African continent.

Part 1
Collaboration

Is collaboration an inherently 'better' method, producing 'better' results? The curatorial collective claims that the purpose of collaboration lies in producing something that would otherwise not take place; it has to make possible that which would otherwise be impossible.[1]

In recent history, numerous writers have opened the door to the topic of collectivism and offered reflections on its position in contemporary art history, media, cultural, and visual studies–not as a means of "normalizing" it or representing it as one more genus of artistic practice, but in order to theorize it as a form of production that raises fundamental questions about the nature of artistic and curatorial work, and its complexities.

Intricately linked to the idea of the collective is the idea of collaboration, which is generally understood as a mutually dependent term and has been stretched, so much so that the terms can sometimes even be read as interchangeable, and ubiquitous to the point of obscurity. Being myself situated in Cape Town as the gallery curator of Michaelis Galleries at the University of Cape Town, I was interested in exploring artistic and curatorial collaborative practices that emerged on the continent.

This issue of Oncurating.org looks at the works of a few artists and curators whose impulse to work beyond art's immediately recognizable spheres magnifies the relational aspects that mark distinct and important approaches to the practice within contemporary art. In general, collaboration positions individualistic practice as a problem of cultural form–its use-values–it brings the category of art face to face with it most cherished expectations and ideals–individual authorship and autonomy–and addresses the basis of art's relationship to democracy, the art world, and capitalist relations of production. Thus, it illustrates that art's constitutive relationship to non-art practices and art's post-autonomous status is not a settled question[2]. Because of this, artistic collaboration still raises some interesting and crucial questions about the nature of authorship, authenticity and the artists' relationships to their works and audiences that inevitably disrupt the persistent and popular image of the artist as a solitary figure, engaged in an internal singular dialogue, at the margins of society.

As editor of this issue, it has been for me a very interesting quest to attempt to explore the drive and strategies of collectivist and collaborative practice in the present given the gaps in the history of collectivism and collaboration in African arts, other than the well-documented practices of the Dakar-based collectives[3]. Okwui Enwezor draws the connection to and influence on their practice by the Nigerian musician, performer, political activist, and social iconoclast Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who was very culturally influential in West Africa from the mid-1960s

onward[4]. Since 1989, Le Groupe Amos in Congo have been able to sustain and continue in this mode of shared practice and newer formulations, while short-lived collectives in South Africa like Gugulective and Center for Historical Reenactments reveal the moment of impetus and relevance for this mode of working.

While not dealt with directly in this edition, the inherited histories of the Dakar-based collectives reveal the long backdrop of instituent practices in which Africa-based artists formed interdisciplinary groups of artists, writers, filmmakers, performance artists, and musicians and succeeded in transforming the nature of artistic practice from a "formalist, object-bound sensibility to practices based on experimentation and agitation, process rather than product, ephemerality rather than permanence, political and social ideas rather than aesthetic"[5]. The grounding of practice in the immediate socio-political situation continues in the current positions of the artists interviewed here, present in their strategies when producing shared projects. I look at how collaboration actually occurs in the Southern African context, this part of is evidenced in the collected interviews which examine the manifestos and projects from several artists who have been involved in the production of shared projects, and additionally look at the conditions surrounding the realisation of the shared project or practice.

Every collaboration is unique–composed of a distinctive combination of people in a specific context and is generally understood as raising fundamental questions about the nature of creative labour and the complexities of the authorial voice. Through exploring individual processes in collaborative creative teams and how they enact projects in cross-contextual contexts and other more localised manifestations, this discussion explores the drive to collaborate, and the kinds of authorial voices this produces. Furthermore, it questions what it means to collaborate and asks what is at stake in publicly visible cross-contextual collaboration? What is the context? How is it approached? What does it mean to work with relationships within a context? How are neighbouring communities integrated and where and in what form do works take?

These positions bring forth an understanding of a particular kind of collective identification that is relevant to how the offered examples approach and imagine a "democratic public sphere"[6] that has the potential to debate issues of common concern with a 'collaborating' public, partners, and/or audience members.

To varying degrees, collaboration subsumes under its definitions what we understand to be relational, participatory, community, and collective practices and their varied manifestations. Of particular interest as well has been the socio-political dimension of collaborative creativity, the theorization of a shared space, which, among other things involves perceptions of a crisis in community and collective responsibility that many artists and curators have tried to resolve with greater leniency toward participatory practices that are generally believed to produce a more positive and non-hierarchical social model in a 'unified' public sphere.

Most of the practices represent not collectives in the traditional sense, but practices that follow more self-instituting strategies that incorporate different aspects and levels of collaboration, many of whom rely on one founder (very often a curator) who then works together with smaller or larger groups, which makes the question of what collaboration and collectivity in curating then is, very interesting. Within each interview, there are questions that look at what it means to collaborate in each case and how hierarchies and the dynamics inherent to group structures are dealt with at the moment of occurrence.

Related to this topic are the following articles and interviews:

These would not be possible without the employment and deployment of alternative strategies of organising and practice. One half of this issue looks at

collaboration and includes an essay by Gregory Sholette, a recognised scholar in this field. Nancy Dantas speaks with *Burning Museum*, a collective of artists engaged with historical narratives to produce artworks in the public space that speak against the erasure of certain histories of people who continue to be marginalised in post-apartheid South Africa. Valeria Geselev speaks with N'tone Adjabe of *The Chimurenga Chronic*, a magazine publication that employs counter-narratives to provide a more nuanced reading of contemporary manifestations, based on what would be otherwise discounted or forgotten stories for collective memory. Ionda Pensa and Elvira Ose contextualise and offer their perspectives on the arts in Cameroon and the Douala Triennial organised by Miriam Douala-Bell.

Part 2
Biennials in Third Contexts

Biennials as one more economic and cultural genus of the exhibitionary complex raise fundamental questions about the nature of art, curating, the art market, geography, and all their complexities. Here in Africa, as with other similar contexts, biennials mark the sites of productive tensions between the projection and transposing of universalizing aesthetics, the articulation of critique, and the attempt to arrive at self-realization after traditional modes of institutions have been largely accepted as not being able to support, nor meet the demands of localized contemporary practices in many African countries.

This forms the next point of departure for this issue, which looks at a few Africa-based biennials and how they relate to the conception of collaboration as an administrative and management concept, as "that space of interconnection between art and non-art, art and other disciplines, that continually tests the social boundaries of where, how, with what, and with whom art might be made"[7]. This offers the socio-political dimensions of collaborative creativity, which have been explicated by Bishop, Lacy, Kester, Mouffe, and others, to involve perceptions of a crisis in collective responsibility that many artists and curators have tried to resolve with greater leniency toward participatory practices that are generally believed to produce a more positive and non-hierarchical social model in a 'unified' public sphere. All these affirm the awareness that collaboration entails contact, confrontation, deliberation, and negotiation to a degree surpassing that of individual work, and that this produces subjectivity differently. The designation of a work as the product of a shared practice "in [an] art world that privileges and worships individuality raises a number of vexing issues concerning the nature and practice of art".[8]

The biennials featured here are notable responses to the absence of space for alternative modes of cultural production, and my interest in looking at the biennial format through the lens offered by collaborative creative research and the forming of less orthodox models of authorship forms part of a deeper search for understanding shared curatorial interventions and locating where the stakes lie in the collaboration and the making of large events in some African countries. This question perhaps reflects on the failure of the Johannesburg Biennale, against the continued survival of longer running counterparts like the Dakar Biennale, and how these two examples are the possible futures of some of the newer biennial projects.

The great potential of biennials to function as part of the marketing, capitalist specialization for both art and state curtails the already limited impact of creativity in resisting the dominant systems of power.

In presenting this issue on biennials and the drive to collaborate, my hope is to engage both subjects in locating the larger shifts in the understanding of the potential for both radical and conservative strategies that have the potential to

produce alternative and quite extreme authorial models that problematize straightforward suppositions about artistic identity, national identities, and their intersection within national cultural hegemonies.

Kester makes the assertion that, "Art is uniquely placed to counter a world in which our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition, we are reduced to an atomized pseudo-community of consumers."[9] He further presents that by departing from the traditions of object-making in which a single, instantaneous shock of insight, precipitated by an image or object encourages their participants to question fixed identities, stereotypical images, etc.; artists working in the realm of participatory practices do so through a cumulative process of exchange and dialogue. The biennial projects require and seek to offer a paradigm shift in our understanding of the work of art and a reconceptualization of the current standard definitions of aesthetic experience that is conventionally immediate rather than durational. In their process-based, performative approach these artists and their curators function as "context providers" rather than "content providers," and are all involved in the larger creative orchestration of shared encounters well beyond the conventional institutional boundaries of the gallery or museum.

While this collaborative, consultative approach has deep and complex roots in the history of art and cultural activism,[10] what unites this disparate network of artists, arts collectives, and biennialers is a series of provocative assumptions about the relationship between art and the broader social and political world, and about the kinds of knowledge that aesthetic experience is capable of producing.

The normalization of major art events in countries and states with problematic governments and policies is a double-edged sword that could be productive and perform criticism of social institutions and politics while functioning within them. This emancipatory aspect allows specific politics of creativity to not be geographically restricted, but instead to have the possibility of projecting its aspects to other contexts and other geographical points with similar "troubles" and traditions that reveal artists' self-organisation that problematizes straightforward suppositions about both artistic identity and the state of contemporary art.

A selection of the new spaces and initiatives that have been founded across the continent, and their relationship to their actual publics, are explored in *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, edited by Koyo Kouoh. This collection of interiews extends this conversation to these large-scale events that face similar if not the same limitationss and potentialities as explored by Kouoh with regards to the localised audiences that engage with their activities, programmes, and projects. While these events as spaces claim their intellectual and moral autonomy but are far from commanding the financial autonomy that would envisage programming over the long term, the level of authorship when grouped together with that of other artists is elevated by association and made stronger by the collective voice. The interviews in this section therefore should provide you with an entry point and a honest reflection and insight into understanding the effects these biennials and projects have on their participants and audiences, as well as the impact on social debates that these initiatives have had in their respective contexts.

The interviews in this part of *OnCurating* include interviews on the Dakar Biennale, with some biennials and large-scale engagement taking place in central and west Africa seen through the lens offered by Ionda Pensa on the Douala Triennial in Cameroon and the essay by Elvira Ose of the Doual'art centre in Cameroon run by Marilyn Douala Bell. Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi provides some reflections on the previous iteration of the Dakar Biennale, which while still

struggling with many of the issues that have affected it in the past was a better success than past iterations. We look forward to seeing in what ways and how Simon Njami takes the Dakar Biennale forward with his curation this year. Olga Speaks interviews Mischek Masamvu about his participation in the Yango Biennale of 2014. The Yango Biennale is the brainchild of Sithabile Mlotshwa and occurred for the first time in Kinshasa in 2014. While running into logistical problems, the event was nonetheless a well-managed project that harkens as a bright sign for the future of this Biennale, certainly there is a lot of interest in its function. We also hear from Daudi Karungi the founder of the Afriart Centre in Kampala and director of the Kampala Biennale that takes place under his organisation in this main city in Uganda. These responses from both the curators and artists, and audiences who have participated in these events, give a well-rounded analysis of the experience from both sides of the projects emerging from the heart of the continent.

While at first glance these two sections are both geographically and theoretically dispersed, they are held together by the fact that they are projects happening right now, and their immediacy requires engagement. As John Roberts points out, "Collaboration in art is fundamentally a question of cultural form"[11] This conveys that, "The decision to teamwork with other artists and/or with non-artists directly involves shaping the ways in which art finds its sensuous and intellectual place in the world."

Notes

1 [Cit. 1] Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn" in Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, eds.,*Taking the Matter Into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices.*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2007, p. 204.

2 [Cit. 4] John Roberts and Stephen Wright, "Art and collaboration," *Third Text*, 18:6, 2004, pp. 531–532.

3 Laboratoire Agit'Art, Tenq, and Huit Facettes written about by Clémentine Deliss and Okwui Enwezor.

4 Clémentine Deliss, "7+7=1: Seven Stories, Seven Stages, One Exhibition," in *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*, Flammarion, Paris and New York, 1995, p. 19.

5 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, Philomena Mariani, ed., Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999. Exhibition catalogue. Okwui Enwezor. "Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism," *artafrica*. 2016. Accessed 14.04.2016. http://www.artafrica.info/html/artigotrimestre/3/artigo3_i.php

6 Miwon Kwon, "Public Art as Publicity" in Simon Sheikh, ed., *In the Place of the Public Sphere? On the Establishment of Publics and Counter-Publics*, B Books, Berlin, 2005. Available: http://www.republicart.net

7 John Roberts and Stephen Wright, "Art and collaboration."

8 Okwui Enwezor, "The Production Of Social Space As Artwork:
Protocols Of Community In The Work Of Le Groupe Amos And Huit Facettes," in Stimson and Sholette, eds., Collectivism After Modernism: Art and Social Imagination after 1945, University of Minnesota Press, 3, 2007, pp. 244. Protocols Of Community In The Work Of Le Groupe Amos And Huit Facettes," in Stimson and Sholette, eds., *Collectivism After Modernism: Art and Social Imagination after 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, 3, 2007, pp. 244.

9 Bishop, Claire, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum,* February 2006, pp. 179-185, quoting Grant H. Kester, in another key text, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004.

10 Grant H. Kester, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art," in Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005.

11 John Roberts and Stephen Wright, "Art and collaboration."

Nkule Mabaso, *b. 1988, graduated with a Fine Arts degree from the University of Cape Town and received a Masters in Curating at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK, Zürich. She has worked as Assistant Editor of the journal OnCurating.org and founded the Newcastle Creative Network in Kwazulu Natal. As an artist, she has shown work in Denmark, Switzerland, South Africa, Germany, and Zimbabwe. She has curated shows and organized public talks in Switzerland, Malawi, Tanzania, and South Africa. Currently a PHD Candidate at the Rhodes University as part of the research team SARChI Chair ‹Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa›, and curator of the Michaelis Galleries at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town.*

INTERVIEWS ON COLLABORATIONS

Why you don't see people collaborating on building hospitals and 4 other thoughts on collaboration

by Ntone Edjabe, Chimurenga in Conversation with Valeria Geselev

Try coming to Cape Town with an interest in contemporary, critical, and political creative practice–and see how long you can go before hearing the word 'Chimurenga'. The Shona word for struggle, resistance, and revolution has a few more meanings in its South African context. Based in a small and yellow office on the central Long Street, Chimurenga is an institution for local pan-African cultural production–a quarterly publication, an online radio station, a place for musical happenings and art exhibitions. For a local young, gifted and black crowd, it stands as a synonym for cool.

At first it sounded to me like Cheburashka, an iconic animated monkey character from classic Soviet children's films. When I researched about Chimurenga–after encountering the word enough times in various conversations with artists and writers–I got fascinated and stuck on the list of contributors and their bios on the Chimurenga website. It was a directory of your wishful drinking buddies–an exciting group of cool people. How did they all come together to this magnet called Chimurenga? How do new names keep on adding to the list during more than 15 years of existence?

Judging by their offices, and by the non-existent cultural economy of Cape Town, they are definitely not rich enough to attract their contributors with money. It must be the magic motive of collaboration which attracts Haitian artists, Chilean novelists, Namibian historians and dozens of philosophers, activists, researchers, and poets to invest their time and skills into this project. The spine of it all is answering the name Ntone Edjabe, and sitting on his ocean-view balcony a couple kilometers from the yellow office, he shares a few thoughts on the philosophy and practice of the collaborative magic spell.

1. You either touch a nerve, or not.

"Speaking about contributors, even though people don't come to us for money we do insist on paying a fee for every contribution. There is a long history of exploitation of the 'labour of love' of creative work. It is essentially how many independent, non-commercial projects survive, but it can quickly become exploitative, especially in a country where the hard and soft labour of black people is often taken for granted. We also insist in paying for submissions to try to neutralise the existing power dynamics in the production of knowledge: we don't want to become the activist terrain of professional researchers and academics, essentially the class of high-profile artists and intellectuals who can afford to contribute 'for free'. It's important to continually source work from non-professional sectors, and to make neoliberal concepts like 'exposure' irrelevant. The elitist art-system looks down upon gigs, even though gigs are what we make a living from. Particularly when it comes to black people, we are always expected to be creating work for some higher purpose than making ends meet. I don't care for such bullshit. However, I care for relationships. I like to think that I work with friends—slowly and over a longue durée. We follow each other's trajectories and develop affinities. That's how Chimurenga was born—friends came together and an editorial group developed organically from this. People recom-

mended people, like facebook. My work has been mainly to nurture this organic process. Normally in preparation for an issue, I would circulate an essay, a sort of discussion paper on a theme of interest, among readers and contributors—for instance for the curriculum issue of 2010, the piece explored the question: 'What of the curriculum was developed by people who left school so they could breathe?' And the responses to this query formed the outline of the issue we ended up publishing. People might also not be interested. You either touch a nerve, or not. The motives of our contributors vary, and it comes down to the personal level. It's like the sign at the entrance of the notorious 'House of Truth' of the *Drum* magazine writer Can Temba in 1950s Sophiatown: 'You won't find your place here, you will come in and make a place for yourself.'"

2. Taking the enemy to lab.

"I'm intrigued by the word 'collaboration'. In the context of conflicts and wars, this word comes with negative connotations—a collaborator is the one working with the enemy, in other words, a traitor. In contemporary creative production, it means an ally, and refers to cooperation. The term was turned inside-out. Today in art circles, name-dropping collaborators adds to one's value. The etymology of the word refers to co-labour, working together, but it also brings to mind a laboratory. Working together in a laboratory. I like this shift, from yourself versus an enemy, to a collective experiment that produces something new. That is a different idea of partnership, because it recognises that you can work with an adversary."

3. If one party is desperate, it is not a collaboration.

"We simultaneously work with and contest the power of international and national cultural agencies like the Goethe Institute, Pro-Helvetia, the Department of Arts and Culture, or University of Cape Town. They all seem trapped in a logic of development when engaging with cultural producers on the continent—essentially their mission to help us be more like them, while also extracting resources. Whether it comes with bread, a gun, or the bible, it's the same old colonial mission. If one party is desperate, it is not a collaboration. It means the relationship is fundamentally unequal. One of our responses is to always bite the hand that offers to feed us. We enter such relationships very aggressively and hopefully find middle ground from there. Institutional support is not something that we expect. Rather than filling seasonal application forms, we try to find ways to generate resources from our own work. This is the reason we are working outside the paradigm of 'projects'. Projects always seem tied to timelines and budgets of funding institutions. Once we shifted our work from, say, a once-off publication or festival, to ongoing activities, i.e. things we want to do every day—it became almost impossible to speak with funders. I am also suspicious about the lack of reflexiveness in this rhetoric of 'projects'. When one is raising funds for a project, they have to sell it like the most original thing in the world—and sometimes they start to believe their own hype. You will struggle to find artists who disclose that their project is simply to pay the rent and feed themselves."

4. The valuable aesthetics of together.

"My default position is to work as part of a group. But I also believe all creative work is inherently collaborative—one always creates with other people, even when these people are only on their mind. I prefer to make this process explicit in my work. The sole-creator notion is very foreign to me, whether in writing or music, the channels I am most familiar with. Fela and Miles, the musicians who had the biggest impact in my world, seemed to approach creative work from this group perspective. It is no coincidence that none of them never performed solo—or released a one-person album—even though they were acknowledged as masters of their instruments. I think music, certainly in the jazz aesthetic, has a greater readiness to embrace the collaborative aspect of the creative process. We also seek to realise this through our publishing work; newspapers, like jazz bands, are perfect instruments of collaboration. But I also think there's an aspect of collaboration that can be fetishized—one sees it in the art world today, this tendency to present collaboratively produced work as different. Worse, this fetishization of collectives! I often take issue with the over-emphasizing of the collectivism of Chimurenga—yes, we do work as a group, but our work isn't merely dedicated to working as a group. I have heard people refer to collectives like *Gugulective* or *Burning Museum* with misty eyes, but they couldn't name a single one of their works. This is ridiculous. I think group work can be an ethics, an aesthetics even, but it also almost always a strategy—to do something one might not be able to realise as fully otherwise."

5. **Ambition and speed in times of capitalism.**

"The slower pace of Cape Town—ironically the absence of fluidity in this city forces people to work together. There are so few spaces for black people working here that we huddle together all the time. There is a sense of solidarity (and its flipside, back-biting) that is unusual in cities of this size. I experience this every day, working from the Pan African Market which is a co-operative of traders. I experience it in the many spaces of freedom and invention that come and go—music venues, cultural centres, as well as itinerant interventions. Even in people's homes. Most of these spaces function outside big-money systems—usually they are free to access. In the deeply unequal and divided structure of the city, building community and an aesthetics of conviviality become necessities. Mostly, we collaborate because we need to—as a way to stay human, to feel beautiful. Not merely because it is the hip thing to do. We collaborate because we don't have institutionalized support—and we become the infrastructure on and from which our visions can be realised. Do you see collaboration on new roads or building hospitals? You see it in stokvels, systems that require mutual trust and commitment. Or in tangible co-productions, like parenting, the famous village that it takes…no one gets name credit in those circumstances. We are in times of hyper-individualism, but simultaneously there is interdependence—to work with other people in order to do bigger things. Nothing is made by one person."

Ntone Edjabe *is a journalist and DJ based in Cape Town. He is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Chimurenga, a platform for editorial and curatorial activities. He also founded the Pan African Space Station (PASS), an internet-based music project. He is co-editor of* African Cities Reader*, a biennial publication in collaboration with the University of Cape Town. Edjabe has collaborated with numerous radio stations and publications, including Bush Radio 89.5, Politique Africaine, L'Autre Afrique and more.*

Chimurenga *is a project-based mutable object, a print magazine, a workspace, and platform for editorial and curatorial activities. Chimurenga initiatives include:* Chimurenga Chronic *a pan-African gazette that that documents the way African societies invent themselves;* African Cities Reader *a bi-annual compendium of writing and art from multiple genres, forms of representation and points of view which embodies diversity of emergent urbanisms across Africa;* Chimurenga Library*, an online archive of black periodicals and an exhibition research method, and* Pan African Space Station *a musical platform on the internet and in venues across the continent.*

Valeria Geselev *is a curator and journalist who originates from Soviet Ukraine and Israel. Since 2012, she has been based in Cape Town and conducts passionate research into public and socially engaged arts. She is a graduate of the UCT Curatorship Honours programme. Her practice included curating* The OBS Academy of Inspiration *(a 13-week house-theatre), pop-up exhibitions in public spaces and the South African tour of Halfbread Technique performance lecture introducing post-capitalism with dance. In 2013, she founded Yalla Shoola Curatorial Practice. Her current projects include Social Engineering for Beginners (a travelling lecture introducing public art to high-school learners), White Curtains (site-specific intervention in Sea Point, Cape Town), and Harare Academy of Inspiration in Khayelitsha (as part of Power of Place project by UCT African Cities Centre). Blog: yallashoola.tumblr.com*

Ntone Edjabe in the office of Chimurenga, 2016 Photo taken by Valeria Geselev.

Justin Davy of the Burning Museum interviewed by Nancy Dantas

The *Burning Museum* is an arts collective based in Cape Town, South Africa. This interview the result of a three-part Skype conversation between Justin Davy of the *Burning Museum* and Nancy Dantas, an independent curator and researcher with an interest in recovering the neglected and overlooked exhibition histories and practices of the south.

Nancy Dantas: Perhaps we should start from the beginning, with the genesis of the *Burning Museum*. When did the idea start to take shape and was it a reaction, or a response, if you like, to something you felt was happening around you?

Justin Davy: The *Burning Museum* came together as a collective in February of 2013. We had all been involved or connected to Greatmore Studios in some way, and had been getting to know each other over a period of about six months prior to our formation as a collective. At one point, when someone decided to call a meeting with the five of us, we decided to do something collaboratively. I think what was common between us, why we were attracted to each other, or the thread that brought us together, was our experience of the art world in Cape Town and South Africa. Broadly speaking, that experience was often linked to feelings of exclusion, and this was voiced in that first meeting very, very prominently.

ND: You work as a collective. Does the *Burning Museum* have a fixed number of collaborators–you mentioned five–or is it a more flexible structure, one that is open to collaboration?

JD: It is five people at the moment. After the first few meetings, we were weary of bringing other people in because we had formed a very close-knit unit. To bring anyone else in after that initial sort of bonding phase turned out to be a bit problematic. So in a way we formed a unit fairly quickly. I think those bonds are still in place.

ND: Could you describe your modus operandi? How do your interventions in the fabric of life, so to speak, come about? Do you operate in broad daylight with the consent of the people around you, or is your activity clandestine?

JD: We consider ourselves to be quite independent in that we don't ask permission from people to do our work. We identify very strongly with the images we use. We see ourselves in them. So when we put up images, we are in essence putting up a piece of ourselves, or that's how we feel about it. The issue of authorization is related to the fact that we are often transgressing bylaws of the public space.

ND: I have two terms I would like you to consider: ephemeral and performative. What is the role of ephemerality and performance in the work you do? Are these terms useful in understanding your work?

JD: We don't set out to work with labels or any kind of formulated feelings that need to be felt by anybody. In a technical sense, we are working with wheat pasting, which is a specific medium with a history of its own. It is a way of executing. Wheat pasting does have a sense of performativity in a literal sense. To respond to your question, we are performing ourselves on the streets. We are performing identities. We are also interacting at a scale with authority and with power in the transgressive nature of our work. So that is how I guess I would relate performativity to our work.

ND: Correct me if I'm mistaken, but there seems to be a thread that connects your work: the piercing or burning gaze of the Levinasian Other that interpolates the bystander, the pedestrian, the neighbour or family in the passing car.

JD: We have encountered similar descriptions. I think we tend to agree with the idea, especially of a piercing gaze.

ND: Where do you source your images?

JD: Our engagement with images as a group really started with the Van Kalker archive housed at the District Six Museum. Briefly speaking, the archive is an extensive visual source, mainly in the form of portrait photography of '50s to '70s Cape Town. This period, of course, saw the enforcement of the infamous Group Areas Act, which is an entrenchment of general dispossession and displacement of land belonging to or historically occupied by black people in South Africa. In some of our early work we deal with another such law, namely The Natives Land Act of 1913. We have subsequently added other image sources, such as personal family archives, found photo albums, newspapers, and magazines.

ND: Are you looking into archives, into repositories of the past? Is your practice to some degree a performance of the archive, originally designed, and employed historically as a tool to discipline and to thus domesticate, silence, or suppress?

JD: We are looking into archives, but it's more than that. We are also laying bare archives and creating them. I guess we are reading against the grain of a certain archive, to use a more academic description. The images, of course, can be read as texts, they have a specific period, there is fashion, there are gazes, there are different clues. These are different visual texts that can be read. Indeed, we are also attempting to subvert the archive, appropriating it to speak against the issues of displacement we see happening in and around Cape Town. What has become clear to us is that the atmosphere of forced removals and racial segregation in which the archive of portraits we are engaging were taken forms a continuum with and is an earlier instalment of the economic displacement and gentrification currently taking place in areas such as Woodstock, where many of our works have been put up. In other words, the archive is still relevant, and the issues haven't really changed.

ND: Is preservation of concern to you, and what is it that you wish to preserve?

JD: Preservation is of concern, but not in the sense of the conventional museum and the way a museum would conserve its artefacts or their displays. We are interested in the taxonomy of museums and the way things are preserved. Let's say the overarching ideological systems that underpin museums and the other systems of control that have led to a negative impact on people and society. I am being a bit vague now, but what I am referring to is the colonial project and how museums are inherently part of this, the idea of colonialism as a system of control, of controlling the Other or controlling the Unknown. So the museum is a manifestation of this, but then of course local knowledges and local populations are appropriating these systems, or adapting them and merging them with their own systems of knowledge and control. For example, the way that a sitting room of a black household in Cape Town can often resemble a museum with display cabinets and champagne glasses and photos of family members. We are interested in playing with different taxonomies. We'd like to elevate the domestic taxonomy to the same level as the museum taxonomy or equate them and see what happens.

ND: Does the location have a bearing on your choice of images?

JD: Yes. In relation to the archive or the archives that we are busy unravelling. The space where we are pasting is directly related to the space in which the archive was created, the Van Kalker studios having been once housed in Woodstock. So the Woodstock/District Six/Salt River area is of clear significance and importance to the archive. Additionally, these areas are experiencing a wave of gentrification, which we see as having a direct link to the history of displacement embedded in the local landscape/architecture.

ND: I noticed that you recently did something in the Northern Suburbs. What is the bond between image and space here?

JD: Maybe I should explain the process of how this happened and the circumstances around how the collective formed. What I failed to mention is most of us come from so-called peripheral areas of Cape Town, outside places known as the Cape Flats or the Northern Suburbs, which are not necessarily part of the art dynamic or the Cape Town art world. Many of us still commute every day from these areas, in and out of the city. So the archive we have been dealing with, although relevant to a certain part of the central city, relates to these outside areas, all the more because of this thing called the Group Areas Act. I think we are starting to move outside of the borders of the so-called central city to where the people in these pictures, for example, might have been moved to and where we live. This is why we identify so strongly with the images, because they encapsulate the whole journey in and out, the daily commute. What feels like a permanent displacement that

has happened through Apartheid. So we have started pasting in these peripheral areas. These are our hometowns, basically.

ND: Do you only intervene in the public arena or are you open to other platforms? Does this change the nature of your work?

JD: We are open to other platforms. We put together an exhibition in mid-2013, which took place at a gallery in the University of Cape Town. This was a challenge for us in terms of the meaning of our work. We found that the images accrued another reading because of this space and place. Moving to a gallery space, the so-called white cube, challenged us to rethink or reimagine how we play with the meaning of our work and how we could open it up to other things and other possibilities. Presenting our work in CAS Gallery gave us the opportunity to play with the archival. It gave us a bit more freedom, a blank canvas, literally, to kind of mix and match. There was a dialogue between images but also between audience members. There were more people who could see the work together at the same time. This obviously creates a different energy. It creates a different feeling around the work. I mean, not a completely different feeling; the meaning of the work changes slightly, not drastically. Things happen when you view things as a so-called community of spectators versus on your own or driving in a car. There is something different that happens. I think that has enriched our work. It was a very big learning experience for us. It just allows you different ways of hanging things, different ways of installing the work, which was a great exercise.

ND: Do you know of any other artists in Cape Town working in a similar vein?

JD: There are other collectives in Cape Town who are engaging with public art or so-called street art, not necessarily through wheat paste and also not necessarily saying the things that we are saying. There is Tokolos Stencil and the Xcollektiv. Then there is the Core Crew, who are slightly more traditional graffiti artists. Of course, one cannot forget Faith47.

ND: What is the Xcollektiv? What do they do?

JD: They create socio-political commentary in the form of Facebook memes, but they have also done some work on the street. They take very familiar and popular images and add captions that are ironic or sarcastic. I have seen some of their posters at art book fairs and book launches, so they do have a more physical, tactile presence.

ND: Is paste and the black and white image how you are recognized?

JD: I think we are recognized more by the aesthetic, the portraiture. I think it has become fairly synonymous with what we are doing.

ND: I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on the museum as the preserve of cultural heritage. But also about new museology and the position that museums can offer a critical and reflexive voice with regards to certain pressing and even repressed issues of our time. Do you think museums are in tune with the urgencies of our time?

JD: That is a very big question, but I will try. I don't think museums were designed to continue answering the questions of the contemporary time. Museums are usually founded on a certain principle or ideology, and they try to evolve over time, but I think it is a very difficult and stagnant process. If you look at the model of museums in South Africa, they are essentially colonial. They were established in colonial times. By and large, their collections and obviously the architecture and even the ethos are all still colonial.

ND: What about the new museums that are emerging?

JD: Like the Zeitz MoCAA?

ND: For instance.

JD: That is something that needs to be seen and examined. It is only opening in two years time, but you can tell a lot by the fact that the museum collection is based on a certain private collection of African art by a European, which is still very much in the mode of the colonial collection. I will make a fresh analysis when I see it.

ND: Do you think that museum culture in Cape Town is changing? Are we moving away from the idea of the museum as the patrician of an elite culture, and where, if we are moving, are we headed?

JD: I don't think we are moving. I think there is friction. Before a boulder or a huge stone is moved, there is friction. There is an inertia before it actually

moves one centimetre. I think we are still in that phase. We are deciding which way to pull this rock. We are also deciding who should have the burden/privilege of moving the rock. I don't know if that metaphor makes sense.

ND: It does. What future do you see for museums, not only in Cape Town?

JD: I don't see a future for museums, really. I describe how I see museums in Cape Town, and I am assuming that in the larger post-colonial world there are similar struggles and frictions. I am more excited about how people interact and redefine museums. I am a big fan of what Fred Wilson did in Baltimore in 1992. That single example has been a big inspiration to the way I understand and have interacted with museums of late. I am more excited about the artist or the curator or museum director. Of course, museums are the people that work in them in a sense. I am not necessarily interested in museums transforming, to use a post-1994 or "New South Africa" word. I think it is important to preserve certain aspects of colonial history but also the post-'94, the contemporary trends in art and culture, which are rising. But the agency is in the people.

ND: How do you feel about the preservation of colonial collections?

JD: From a practical point of view, I don't think they should be neglected or discarded or thrown aside. The critique needs to come not only from inside the museum, because that critique is going to become compromised at some point. It is just too close to home for you to be completely objective. This shouldn't be the only voice. As a co-collaborator, that is how I see my work with the *Burning Museum*. Literally, in calling ourselves the "Burning Museum" we are trying, we are referencing this very directly. The idea of burning a museum is a very provocative one. In a metaphorical sense, we are trying to burn the idea, the perception around museums, but we are also dealing with museums that have been burnt. When I say museum, I mean culture, knowledge systems that have been degraded or decimated or thrown on the ash heap of history. We are also trying to build museums, not necessarily the same way as before. We are trying to create something new out of the ashes of museums that have been burnt. When I say I don't mind the colonial structure and physical architecture, it is because I want to build new museums that stand in contrast, that contest and add to history. I want to build my own museum. I want to build a museum in the neighbourhood where I grew up. I want to build a gallery, I want to build a theatre, but I want to do it on my terms. We talked about the Zeitz MoCAA—I mean it's a new museum. It has got this very fresh energy, order, and perception around it, but essentially, if you look at it, it is a European collection of African art. There is going to be a perpetuation, I mean structurally, of that hierarchy to which I am averse personally. I think going forward that it will be a great space for young African artists to express themselves, to have solo shows, et cetera, and that is great. I think that is perfect. But I'm not interested in that type of museum. I am interested in reconstituting museums, museums that have been burnt down.

ND: Are you saying that your museum is not necessarily an institution made of brick and mortar, a container, a sample of perennial architecture?

JD: No, I'm not necessarily saying that because there is a tangible, physical thing that you can touch in terms of the museum that I am describing. For instance, when I was talking about people's living rooms, display cabinets and such. These are real things.

ND: But your posters wash away, your display is ephemeral.

JD: Yes, but I don't see that as contradictory. Where do you see a contradiction?

ND: I am not saying there is a contradiction. I see them as different ideals. Your museum is a roving space, somewhat like a mobile library that travels from one town to the next. Or a portable cinema. I see your museum as light and transferrable.

JD: Yes, but how is that different from the images I've given?

ND: The way I understand it, it is not bounded, it is not fixed. A living room is a closed, private space that you can only access when someone is home. Your images belong to a museum without walls. Your museum is not cumbersome, it does not require management, it isn't a "burden" to the nation–a white elephant–in the sense that you have this collection and you are obliged to keep it.

JD: I get what you are saying. The key word here is we are striving, we are still reconstituting. The form is still a mystery. Actually it is not a mystery;

it's a work in progress. We are using whatever understanding of museums we can. We are elevating. Maybe I am conflating something and using a lot of metaphors, which might be confusing, especially museum metaphors about what the museum is, but I think we are trying to elevate systems of knowledge, control, and understanding of the world, which haven't been deemed important or do not have a prominence in the society in which we live. This elevation can be described as a museum. I think the crux of what I am saying is there is still space for imaging this museum. I think the living room museum can also be seen as fleeting and ephemeral, especially in the context of forced removals/displacement, where homes and by extension the archives housed within them are razed to the ground or the custodians of that archive, a family for example, were removed from it. This type of museum, this repository of personal artefact and memory is the biggest elephant (in the room). It is an absolute burden to the nation, a 'collection' that nobody wants to own and that the nation tends to forget.

ND: Why are the stories/histories of these images relevant today? How is their significance communicated?

JD: They are relevant because they haven't been told. History and culture are closely linked and so the images that we put up, there is a history embedded in them. We are not explicit about it. There isn't a lot of final write-up about the work next to our prints.

ND: I may be playing the devil's advocate, but by using image alone, are you doing that history justice?

JD: I think we work the way we work, and it is an evolving process. I think we see ourselves as playing a role; we are working on a certain front. There are other people who are on different fronts, writing papers and theses about similar things that we are doing. I think we are approaching it from our own unique independent perspective. The medium being a very visual one. I feel we complement other conversations that are happening. And so I don't feel we need to explain what we are saying. If you have questions, we are willing to answer them. We share our blog with an email address. If you have questions about our work, if you don't get the work the first time, that's fine. You'll get it the third or forth time. We are open to engaging people about our work, but we don't feel it necessary to explain it with an accompanying text. It is an image; it will do different things to different people. For us, we feel like we are part of a larger discourse, and we are one front. One frontline. At least we'd like to think we're on the frontline. And we are contributing to that metaphorical struggle. No one has written anything about our work, so I don't know what that means or what it says about our work, but we are quite happy. We have gotten responses. We have had engagements. When we put the work up, people come up to us, and we are very content with that.

ND: Have you had instances of people identifying the images?

JD: There is always something familiar for people. But no one has actually identified someone they know in the images yet.

ND: Would you say there is something uncanny about them?

JD: The same way we see ourselves, I think people see themselves, too. We have had some responses to this effect. We are moving towards another sort of theme we are dealing with, and that is of representation and how people of colour in this city and in this country are represented and represent themselves. I don't know how else to articulate this.

ND: Can you mention names or is anonymity important to you? I ask this because namelessness or effacement could be regarded and adopted by the collective as a means of skirting commodification.

JD: Tazneem Wentzel, Jarret Erasmus, Grant Jurius, Scott Williams, Justin Davy.

Captions

1 Installation view of *Visa takes you places,* a site-specific wheat paste from the mixed media installation *In the Same Boat,* 2015, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid, Spain.

2 Installation view of *Gold foil blanket with Schengen visa lining and Columbus arriving in Bahamas while stabbing an African migrant boat* from the mixed media installation *In the Same Boat,* 2015, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid, Spain.

3 *The Native Land Act,* site-specific wheatpaste, Briar Road, Salt River, Cape Town.

4 *The Boys,* site-specific wheat paste under M5 Highway, Maitland, Cape Town.

The Burning Museum (BM) *is a collaborative interdisciplinary collective rooted in Cape Town, South Africa. Its members Tazneem Wentzel, Grant Jurius, Jarret Erasmus, and Justin Davy move fluidly between the stations of artist, historian, and cultural activist. Whilst their work is primarily street-based, they have also exhibited in white-cube spaces, both locally and internationally. Most recently, their work was exhibited in the solo exhibition Cover Version at Gallery MOMO in Cape Town and in Boundary Objects at Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid.*

Nancy Dantas *completed her MA in Contemporary Art, Theory and Criticism at the University of Essex. She has worked as a curator, independent collections manager, freelance writer, translator, and educator. In 2008, she co-founded MARZ Galeria in Lisbon with partner Carlos Marzia. She is currently based at Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town and is reading towards a PhD in Art History with a focus on Exhibition Histories at Rhodes University, South Africa.*

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Gregory Sholette interviewed by Nkule Mabaso

Nkule Mabaso: Could you tell me more about your experience as an as artist, educator, writer has contributed in the way you view collaborative work?

Gregory Sholette: As I see it, there are no hard and fast lines between my artistic practice, my research and writing, or my teaching or political activism, Nkule. That follows from my belief that there are no sharp lines delineating aesthetics from civics, or art from politics for that matter. Under current global circumstances with wars and dislocated peoples everywhere, and with the extremes of wealth on one side, and a bleak emptiness about our collective future on the other, the very role of the artist is paradoxically an extremely weak force, and simultaneously a practice swept up into all these complex matters. I recommend listening to Okwui Enwezor's interview on Democracy Now with Amy Goodman just last week, where he articulates these relations between art and the world quite well I think [see: http://www.democracynow.org/2015/8/11/political_art_and_all_the_world]. Basically, I think I agree with my friend, the artist Rick Lowe, who likes to say: "Please check your categories at the door." In other words, it is time to stop worrying about what we are, and begin to ask *what we do.*

NM: Would you say there is currently a general resurgence of interest in working together as exemplified by the number of collectives, and artists dou's, etc. that are currently visible? How do you see shared practices evolving in the coming years?

GS: If it is evolving, collaboration amongst artists, to be a serious force for critical analysis and change, it will need to be more than merely collaborative labour but actually move towards communalized collective practices that recognize and seek to liberate the socialized labour inherent in all human endeavours including art and culture.

Collective social form is always first and foremost a fetish—a part that substitutes for the whole, a clerical or lordly or bureaucratic or symbolic epiphenomenon that stands in for the phenomenal reality of lived experience—and that's the way it should be: witness, for example, even such a latter-day scion of that old critical propriety as Louis Althusser, who was certainly right when he proclaimed with uncommon longing, and without any of the technocrat's customary qualification or contempt, that a communist is never alone. The newness of the new e-collectivism, like the newness of the new Arab street, is only a rebirth of intensity, the welling up of spirits from the past, a recall to the opportunities and battle lines of old.

NM: So if the intention of collectivism is to no longer compromise the individual artist in the face of the institution, how should we understand the role of the institution formed by the artist collective? (This address constitutes the experience that forms the community, albeit being divided along the hierarchal line of the affecting/affected relationship.)

GS: My thinking on these new institutional efforts is best summed up with this definition I wrote for this online glossary [http://www.veralistcenter.org/art-and-social-justice/glossary/]: **Mockstitution**, *n*. (neologism) similar to the concept of Artificial Institution (see Marina Naprushkina), or para-fictional institution (C. Lambert-Betty, C. Bishop), a mock institution or "Mockstitution" is an informally structured art agency that overtly mimics the name and to some degree the function of larger, more established organizational entities including schools, bureaus, offices, laboratories, leagues, centers, departments, societies, clubs, bogus corporations and institutions. Mockinstitutions thrive within the voids left by an increasingly fractured social framework whose coherence is faltering thanks to rampant privatization, economic deregulation, ubiquitous social **risk** and day-to-day precariousness. Inserting themselves into these deterritoralized spaces, Mockinstitutions typically sport their own ersatz logos, forged mission statements, and fake websites, all the while engaging in a process of self-branding not aimed at niche marketing or product loyalty, but rather at gaining surreptitious entry into media visibility itself. The Yes Men, for example, embody stereotypical business executives with such uncanny precision that they gain access to "real" corporate conferences, press events, and mass media coverage in order to carry out "image correction" on these same business enterprises. Likewise, the Center for

Tactical Magic mixes together Wicca paganism and interventionist maneuvers in an effort to bring about "positive social transformation." Curiously, the longer a Mockstitution manages to operate the more likely its ironic identity will migrate from the sphere of rhetoric to that of logistical necessity, as if the fictional organization was doomed to re-enter the realm of true institutional authority through the "back-door." One question this giddy confusing raises is whether or not a simulated institution functions as well as, or perhaps even better than, a so-called actual institution? At the same time, the overall spirit of this new, social-interventionist culture reveals a curious similarity at times with the anarcho-entrepreneurial spirit of the broader neo-liberal economy, including a highly plastic sense of collective identity, and a romantic distrust of comprehensive administrative structures (see **Participation**).

NM: What was the impetus for the formation of the groups REPOhistory and PAD/D, and what functions did they seek to fulfil?

GS: In 1979, I became involved with the artists' collective called PAD/D or Political Art Documentation/Distribution, which was co-organized with Lucy R. Lippard, among others. About a decade later, I co-founded the group REPOhistory with another gang of artists, educators, and activists including Jim Costanzo (AKA Aaron Burr Society today), Tom Klem, Lisa Maya Knauer, Todd Ayoung, Lisa Prown, and Neill Bogan, among others. The name is a spin on the 1984 indie film *Repo Man* with Harry Dean Stanton, but our objective was to "repossess" lost or forgotten or suppressed histories of working people, women, minorities, and radicals and then mark these in public spaces around New York City.

In one of the projects from 1992 we managed to get City permission (under Mayor David Dinkins) to install dozens of temporary, metal street signs around lower Manhattan revealing such things as the location of the first slave market on Wall Street, the shape of the pre-Columbian island coastline, Nelson Mandela's historic visit to New York just two years earlier, and the offices of a famous 19th-century abortionist named Madame Restell—once located where the Twin Towers also once stood. One side of each sign had an image. The other told the story.

NM: How does the art collective situate itself inside/outside normative, mainstream ideas and art institutions while simultaneously extending its artwork towards the inside/outside its tropes?

GS: PAD/D and REPOhistory had little relation to mainstream art and still less decades later. Gulf Labor, however, is embedded in significant ways in the art world and in fact requires that entanglement to be successful. It depends on the group. Critical Art Ensemble is a fair example of an inside/outside collective doing engaging work today, as is Gulf Labor Coalition.

NM: When working within a collective, how you do balance your individual voice or style and still operate within the identity of the group? Does the collective approach have the potential to withdraw the limelight from the one-man-show to more discursive models based on reciprocity and exchange?

GS: In a limited way it might work, yes, but probably only by getting beyond ideas of star curators and ideas of artistic success as defined by the global art market exemplified by events such as Art Basel, etc. We live in a highly individualistic society on one level, that masks a very collectivized productivity on another level, so the real task is not asserting one's individual identity or position, that happens regardless; it is learning to not assert one's voice, at least not as often as one is compelled to do normally, but to point to the deeply socialized nature of life under world wide capitalism, and then focus on how to overturn the dominance of the economic sphere over life in order to let peaceful, social, and cultural activity dominate the world of money and finance instead.

NM: Art collectives historically have generally been borne out of a desire to resist institutional endorsement at every level (spaces such as museums, galleries, and biennials), so why has it become necessary or even relevant for these groups to be present/presented in this context?

GS: But it is necessary and relevant for whom, Nkule? For the art world and its institutions, the answer is above in the previous response, for the artists' collectives and groups themselves it could be that they need some level of recognition; after all, it is only logical, and/or perhaps they require more resources to leverage in their work. I think Critical Art Ensemble is a good example of a small collective that uses art world opportunities to do interestingly critical social projects.

NM: How have your various projects been funded?

GS: Primarily by me, as I supplement my art by working, teaching, lecturing, and consulting. But this self-funding also includes untold hours of labour that can never be counted. This is, of course, what the entrepreneurs of neoliberal enterprise culture really covet about what they call "The Creative Class", or so-called "Knowledge Workers".

NM: Do you think having ample resources is a major factor in contributing to success?

GS: It is said by some statisticians that people who are financially precarious are more prone to depression and personal defeat. I would say that is also true for cultural initiatives in the long run if they are not able to sustain themselves and their members. Yes, sometimes, limitations can be joyfully overcome in the short-run, and at the start of a campaign, if one is working in collaboration with others. But to develop a lasting practice of critical opposition, my definition of success by the way, means garnering enough resources to make that possible. Not great pots of wealth, that is not what I mean, but ample resources are needed as you suggest Nkule, yes.

Those I have been involved with have been barely funded at all. Remember that in the USA most funding is private, not governmental. Here is a breakdown of the three major groups I have worked with over the years:

PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution, 1980-1988): we got a few grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, but mostly it was our own labour and some funds raised directly from supporters through letter-writing campaigns asking for money, though it was never enough to pay any members for their work or to hire staff; most of the money was used to cover a modest rental space downtown and for the cost of publishing our journal ***Upfront*** [go here to see back issues online: http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/]

REPOhistory (1989-2000): we also got some foundation money for a few projects and a handful of members were paid token fees for helping to direct specific projects over the years, though most of our minimal funding went to the cost of producing the street projects themselves, as well as to a press person to help get the word out there. So, as with PAD/D, the majority of REPOhistory's support was generated through a great deal of labour by members, especially a core group of about a dozen people who worked very hard to make the group's temporary street projects a reality. More about REPOhistory is here: https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=repohistory

Gulf Labor Coalition (2010-present): most of our projects are again self-funded through personal labour, but for the recent research done with the Venice Biennale, we managed to raise money from several sources including an Indiegogo crowd-source campaign, and this cash went to cover flights, hotels, and a few other things related to our research and public presentations, as well as a modest sum to a press person, but no actual salaries or fees have ever been paid to GL members.

NM: What have your most successful collaborative efforts been, and what do you think has been the main reason for their success?

GS: All collaborations are complicated and riddled with moments of success and longer periods of uncertainty or failure. Right now I am working with Gulf Labor Coalition, and we have had a lot of visibility in our campaign for fair labour practices by the Guggenheim Museum building a new facility in Abu Dhabi. But these are always complicated things, and what is successful today, might be less so in the future. Which is why it is important to struggle, and to celebrate success, but also to be cautious about declaring victory. As Gramsci put it: Optimism of the Will, Pessimism of the Intellect. Or maybe my spin would be: *Optimism of the Struggle, Pessimism of Conquest and Control.*

NM: In general, would you say that working in a group is personally satisfying, or is it more pragmatic? Is collectively produced work more beneficial to one and one's overall happiness?

GS: Working in groups, Nkule, is both satisfying and pragmatic at times, yes, well as at other times very difficult and often very expensive as well! It is exhilarating and frustrating, just like life and love and politics, so I guess the shared work is not simply beneficial, it is fundamental and unavoidable.

NM: In 2015, do you have another movie analogy to describe this experience of collective working?

GS: I also used such pop-cultural examples as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and something you may know from the history of the ANC, which was an American-produced TV series in the 1980s simply entitled "V" about human resistance to invading extraterrestrials that, according to at least one of my

South African friends, used to be splashed on walls as graffiti during the anti-apartheid years?

Captions

1 On May Day 2015, members of the Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) unveiled a large parachute in the Guggenheim Museum rotunda with the words "Meet Workers Demands Now" (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic) .

2 *The Louvre is Born. From in and around Saadiyat Island.* Courtesy of Gregory Sholette Images avail http://gulflabor.org/images/#prettyPhoto

3,4 *The Gulf: High Culture/ Hard Labor*, a book by the Gulf Labor coalition published by OR Books, is launched at the Venice Biennale on July 29, 2015. Background: Peggy Guggenheim Collection, site of the May 8th actions in Venice.

5 An intervention at the Biennale: G.U.L.F and Gulf Labor at Venice. August 2, 2015. Courtesy of Gregory Sholette Images avail http://gulflabor.org/images/#prettyPhoto

Gregory Sholette *is a New York-based artist, writer, activist and founding member of Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D: 1980-1988), REPOhistory (1989-2000). The PAD/D Archive is now available to scholars and artists at the MoMA, REPOhistory began as a study group of artists, scholars, teachers, and writers focused on public signage exploring the politics of history within NYC. Gulf Labor's research about the intersection of precarious labor and high art was recently featured at the 2015 Venice Biennial. Sholette's publications include It's The Political Economy, Stupid co-edited with Oliver Ressler, Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture, both Pluto Press UK, as well as Collectivism After Modernism with Blake Stimson University of Minnesota Press, and The Interventionists with Nato Thompson distributed by MIT. He has contributed to such journals as Eflux, Critical Inquiry, Texte zur Kunst, October, Art Journal and Manifesta Journal among others. His recent art installations include Imaginary Archive at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania and the White Box at Zeppelin University, Germany. His collaborative performance project Precarious Workers Pageant premiered in Venice on August 7, 2015. Sholette is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program in Critical Theory and is an Associate of the Art, Design and the Public Domain program at the Graduate School of Design Harvard University, served as a Curriculum Committee member of Home WorkSpace Beirut education program, and is an Associate Professor in the Queens College Art Department, City University of New York where he helped establish the new MFA Concentration SPQ (Social Practice Queens).*

https://www.tumblr.com/blog/gregsholette
http://gregorysholette.com
http://darkmatterarchives.net
http://www.socialpracticequeens.org/


MEET
WORKERS'
DEMANDS!
NOW!
1


متحف
BIRTH OF A
22 April – 20
2


The
GU
LF
HIGH CULTURE/HARD LABOR
ANDREW ROSS [FOR GULF LABOR]
3


POLLOCK
4


LOUVRE-NYU
-WAGES
5

Marcus Neustetter of On Air on Collectivism and Curating

interviewed by Abongile Gwele

"We never entered into the whole thing saying we are artists and artists only. We entered into the space saying we are contemporary thinkers, we are doers, and we are just going to start something; we don't know what it is."
Marcus Neustetter

The Trinity Session was formed as a response to a changing South Africa. In its early years of democracy, South Africa made huge budget cuts to the Arts and Culture department. Stephen Hobbs, Marcus Neustetter, Kathryn Smith, and Jose Ferreira came together as like-minded individuals, to form the now fifteen-year-old art collective. *The Trinity Session* has functioned as artist, curator, and activist, while public art curating has been the collective's main focus. Working very close with the JDA (Johannesburg Development Agency), *The Trinity Session* has been a part of many public art projects in the city of Johannesburg. And because of its relationship with the JDA, it has been a major role player in the policy making of public art. The collective now only comprises Neustetter and Hobbs, which tends to cause confusion between *The Trinity Session* as a collective and the Hobbs/Neustetter art collaboration. As stated by a few, such as Maria-Alina Asavei (2014, n), that "In a culture like the Western one, in which the acts of individual creation are highly cherished, histories of collective art production and reception would be chaotic, insufficiently documented and difficult to pinpoint"[1].

I sat down with Marcus Neustetter in the boardroom of their artist studios at the Maboneng Precinct, to better understand the distinction between *The Trinity Session* and the Hobbs/Neustetter collaboration, and to hear what *The Trinity Session*'s stance is on collectivism and questions of authorship and authenticity, as well as the relationship of artist and curator within a collective.

Neustetter explains that *The Trinity Session* has become an almost indefinable creature, which adapts and adopts as it progresses. When asked whether the vision they had as a collective at the time of its inception has been realized, he states that, "We never entered into the whole thing saying we are artists and artists only. We entered into the space saying we are contemporary thinkers, we are doers, and we are just going to start something; we don't know what it is."

Abongile Gwele: What is *The Trinity Session*?

Marcus Neustetter: When the State theatre closed down and major galleries closed down, we came together to share our resources, our networks and abilities as creative people. We took on projects that required different skills. Some projects were semi-commercial experiments with some kind of business, and other projects were about art and technology and science. Others were about researching the arts and crafts industries in different African countries. We've gone through many bizarre things like curating art in the *Big Brother* house, where we questioned how do you curate art for live TV? How do you access public media, how do you break the boundary of art being in a museum or a gallery? That shifted more and more, and we got built a gallery by the Civic Theatre and the city of Johannesburg, which was called The Gallery Premises. It was a space we had for about five years and was more of an initiative from our side and not a profitable space. We were the gallery curators, so to speak, showing other artists' works. The idea was to create a project space that didn't exist in Johannesburg; only the commercial galleries existed. We needed a space that was creative, dynamic, and alternative to create platforms and profiles for artists who didn't have the opportunity to do so. It was to a certain extent a curatorial experiment on managing a space. How do you curate a space to be active for a new audience, how do you develop new audiences, how do you deal with the audience that's going into the Civic Theatre

to watch the pantomime versus the audience that we have in Hilbrow or down the road that we are working within our public art projects? How do you manage this mix of people? More importantly how do you think about art in a society and in a context where it is actually an "imposed" notion?

AG: As a collective, how have you set up structures for your projects, if there are any structures at all?

MN: We analysed the fourteen countries of SADC looking at the visual arts and crafts industry, and realized not a single one of these countries has a successful value chain as far as the discipline goes. What was good for us in doing that exercise quite early on was to realize how our actions are part of filling the gap. We just then allowed our own actions to start filling the things we knew were a problem as artists. We realized, too, that we had to bring in many other artists for different projects.

Public art became a really important feature, and in public art developing into something that it is today, generating so much money that it supports artists. I think we've worked with over eight hundred artists in the last fifteen years in public art projects. With workshops that sometimes last for up to two years, showing artists how to work in the public space with engineers, architects, and project managers, developing concepts and then having competitions where they compete against each other as artists; then a committee comes in and selects a work, then we work with the artist to realize the project. We're very involved in long, intense processes where we don't decide who the artist is on a project.

AG: Are collective spaces such as *The Trinity Session*s simply "business" strategic moves for better recognition to fund-givers? Is it then far easier for collectives to get funding as opposed to the individual artists?

MN: It depends what it is you're doing. If you work, as a collective, to take inclusive measures to develop a project, then yes. In the year 2000, we formed as a business with the intention that we are not going to become a begging bowl arts group. The main objective was to say we need to be taken seriously, and we want to take industry seriously. We've survived for fifteen years without government grants, and have survived as a business and supported many artists. This means that we've got a model and a formula that seems to work somehow. Maybe it's an attitude or an aptitude or business sensibility. We take the intellectual property we generate very seriously. We take the cultural and creative capital that people have very seriously.

AG: When working with a large group of artists, do they come in simply as manpower, and is there any loss for artists in such collaborations in terms of ownership and authorship? The young girl who wrote the poem that inspired the Diepsloot *I love you/ I love you not* (fig. 1-3) project, for example, is not mentioned by name in the writings about the project. Does she completely relinquish authorship of that poem?

MN: Firstly, we don't decide who the "artist" is; there is a democratic approach within the collective. In this particular instance, there was a workshop that was orchestrated, of which the young girl was a part, and she presented the poem. It was then collectively agreed upon that it would be her poem that would represent Diepsloot. Now we're sharing ideas; this is where it gets tricky. Everyone is very willing to share in classic creative culture, we start to form a sense of communal practice where everyone sits around a table and says that we agree that we, together, are going to solve this problem. We're going to help you as *The Trinity Session*, given our expertise and ten years of experience, because we know what we need at the end and you have a standard but you don't quite see it. And step by step, the project is nothing like we expect, and that's good.

The sense of authorship is an interesting one because on the one hand, you've got this whole process, and anyone can claim it. The little girl can claim it; the guy that did the steel welding can claim it, because at the end of the day they were all part of that collective process. Similarly, I think every person in the project has disappeared. There's a question of authorship and ownership that needs to be quite flexible, when it comes to certain needs. We're not claiming as *The Trinity Session* that it is purely our doing, we were appointed by the city as curator/ coordinator of public art for the city of Johannesburg.

The twenty to thirty artists that are a part of it own it in their own right. So they can lay claim to it, they can say I was part of this. It's just like any group exhibition, for example. You were a part of that instrumentally, but there was a framework under which you worked. So there is a clear curatorial strategy in that approach.

AG: Why is it necessary to involve local artists in commissioned works in spaces one would consider extremely foreign to you, such as the township?

MN: Let's take the "Drop Sculptures," such as the *Eland* (fig. 4) in Braamfontein for example, that could be anywhere, but the project in Diepsloot can only be in Diepsloot. The entire project in Diepsloot is made of steel, so in theory all that steel should be stolen by now but it is instead being taken care of. If the community takes such ownership then there is a respect for it. If you say this metal sculpture, in Soweto for example, tells the story of the 1976 uprising and reflects the people in the following way, and there were a hundred local artists who were part of workshops that developed it in concept, that then one artist went forward and made the work, there is a sense of ownership in that. This is where the model has changed in curating systems and processes that challenge the norms of how public art is commissioned.

The strategy is not about us. It's about building the capacity of those places where people will be building public art. I can list twenty artists that have gone through our processes and are now doing these public art commissions by themselves or are trying to tender by themselves. So I think our strategy as a company or as an organization has been create the capacity within the place that we do the work and find a strategy that makes sure the work continues to have a life beyond the project being over such as it being vandalized or being stolen.

AG: What was the main drive behind the collaboration of Hobbs/Neustetter outside of *the Trinity Session*?

MN: The collective is in several components, and this is where the branding and naming is so difficult. Stephen is an artist and he makes art, I am an artist and I make art. Stephen and Marcus come together and we like each other's company and we've been friends for fifteen years and we work together, then suddenly we make art together, and our art looks very similar then there's a collaboration that happens. And that's where Hobbs/Neustetter started to evolve as a creative collective. Then there was *The Trinity Session*, which we keep quite defined. Now what's happening is that our creative practice and *The Trinity Session* are almost merging into one. And that's an interesting shift because we're saying: we're all doing the same stuff anyway. It all feeds into each other. We're keeping our own separate practices, but Hobbs/Neustetter and Trinity Session is kind of becoming this creature that we ourselves can't always control. When there are specific projects, for example working with Red Bull on the Social Entrepreneurial Academy, Trinity Session hosts the process, is the project manager of the process, and is the facilitator of these artists.

Many people will only see what it is we're doing many years from now. It's a dedication, because there is the temptation to spend every day in the studio and make art, and live there and just try and find a gallery that will sell all my work. This is the other dream. But the moment I do that, I know I'm going to lose my edge that relates to the rest of the world. And that's why my collaborative projects with Stephen are so important, where we're being invited to other parts of the world to practice what we are doing here but as artists. You start to look for the Johannesburg or the South Africa in other cities. We start realizing that we've got such a wealth of knowledge from our experiences here that we can relate and transfer those quite easily to any context because everyone struggles with similar things. So there's the question of how to engage rather than disengage.

Art collectives shift the focus away from the artist as the "lone hero". Apart from eroding the idea of the "hero artist", the curator too is no longer a figure viewed with the gaze of the "divine." Instead, what one may notice is a tending towards activism in the collaborative output of a collective work. "The development of discourse, not necessarily theoretical, but often socio-political, means that collectivism is frequently 'grassroots' and driven by the politics of a given community" (Laws, 2010: n) (2). These two individuals, artist and curator, are often so inseparable in the collaboration they become one in the same.

In 2011, *The Trinity Session*, alongside three Mozambican artists, four Zimbabwean artists, and nine South African artists, initiated a short project that involved herding goats from the township of Alexandra to Sandton. "But for the M1 highway separating the two, the stark juxtaposition of Sandton Central and Alexandra Township is most demonstrative of the social, economic and racial inequalities in the city. By marching goats, an infinitely valuable commodity in the township, to the five-star Michelangelo Hotel in Sandton City, the performance provoked reflection on the origins of the xenophobic attacks of 2008" (*The Trinity Session*, 2014: n) (3).

AG: Within the art collective space where curator and artist birth projects together, such as the Borderless project (fig. 5-6), would you say the curator co-authors with the artist, as opposed to being a "post-production director"?

MN: The main point about that project was to do it; to create awareness and create some sense of activist action. What I'm getting at with the role of the artist and the curator is: is it an artwork? I don't know. Is it an awareness campaign, maybe? Is it a public service announcement, maybe? The beauty of it is that it gets a new form. What I'm getting at is that art can transcend those boundaries, curating can transcend those boundaries, to make a social difference.

AG: Are you curators?

MN: If you talk about curating art into a public space, I would then say yes. The role of contemporary artists very often falls into curatorial practice. It's very much like art and design, they are crossovers; in today's thinking there are so many crossovers. For the convention of curator in the museum space, there is a clear and defined role. There's another avenue we should explore where we don't have to define, too much, the curator in relation to the artist. Gabi Ngcobo, for example, is someone whom I consider more of an artist than a curator. However she'll tell you that she's a curator, and that's her role. But the projects that you're doing are of an interesting dynamic, and of boundary-pushing elements, which is so nice to see, that the artist comes out of the curator and so why can't it work the other way around? Similarly, I'm an artist. I've thought about spatial practice for all my professional life. I've thought about how to design and organize my own creativity and other people's creativity in a public space all my professional life. If I've gone through that process and I end up laying things out in a space using other artists' talents, surely I'm a curator even though I'm not trained as a curator officially. Stephen had experience as a curator at the Market Theatre gallery, doing an incredible job putting together a post-apartheid program. So you can step back and say he is as much a curator as he is an artist.

For the sake of maintaining the discipline, it is necessary to have set boundaries between artist and curator. In my thinking, however, there should be a breaking down of those boundaries more and more. Similarly, a lot of artists will say we need higher profile artists to compete globally in the biennials. And art is art and we need to respect art. My thinking is, art in today's society, where there is famine and environmental issues and crises, and we don't have people that queue to go into museums to view art in Johannesburg and where other things are more important. Maybe artists shouldn't be so quick to defend their positions as artists, but rather should be incorporating other disciplines into their practice. So my position will be very different to those already in that realm of protecting their position.

AG: How do you measure the success of a project, especially one that takes on an activist approach, and are there any strategies of sustainability in place after the completion of such projects? For example, the Borderless project and Diepsloot project.

MN: The measure is really difficult because it does not have a sustainability angle to it. One cannot see a one-hour project regardless of what it is, as an incident by itself. You need to spend enough time going back and nurturing that relationship. These projects are no different from one another; they are dealing with similar issues. For me, the success is to zoom out and say there are these interventions and this is how we learn from them. For example, we brought artists from Mamelodi for a project we are doing in Solly Mahlangu Freedom Square, artists from Soweto on a project we did on Vilakazi Street, from Alex and Diepsloot, together at a public art conference. This was in order for them to share their experiences and what it meant to work in a public space. This is an exposure to the other. So the success is not whether it happens for one hour or happens for three years, but you can zoom out and allow these things to interconnect, and you start seeing that ten years later Nkosana Ngubeze, who was part of our initial workshops in Wolmerand Street for example, is now running public art programmes in schools in Soweto. He's developing major mosaics and is commissioned to make works in spaces such as Yeoville. You look at that and say that that's not only because of that one workshop, but because he was there, then appeared in many other places, and developed his own projects, and the city has brought him on to be part of other projects. Then his capacity as a producer has shifted all these many boundaries. He's become a project manager, he's become a curator, he's become a teacher, and he's this multi-faceted and skilled individual who is rich with experience. And that for me is the success of one project. And it's difficult to measure that.

Remark by AG: In an article titled "Collectivism–Facts and Curiosities", Joanne Laws questions, "If the internet is the mode of distribution and communication for these groups how can a distinction be drawn between the overload of amateur or subversive collectives, and those with established reputations?" (2010: n)[2].

AG: Is it especially necessary for art collectives such as *The Trinity Session* to ensure engagement on social networks and very public spheres, and how have you as a collective penetrated these spaces?

MN: We haven't. The main reason is, we believe in doing. Very often we use social media to gather people. We only very recently started to publicize what we do, to show what we're doing, and the only reason is because we're low on business. We realize that the clients that are out there that are spending the money, are not spending it on art. They have decided that art is no longer valuable and we're trying to show them why it's valuable. We are showing them that this is how we break new ground and innovate. And that design thinking, the catch phrase, is not something new but has existed for a long time; it's just been positioned differently and is now finding its place. Social media has never grabbed us, almost for the trivial reason of social media. Things come and go so quickly. Social media created something called "slacktivism", a term coined at some conference. There's a Facebook group called Africa aid with over a million followers, which has managed to raise twenty thousand dollars to date, but if each of those followers gave a dollar, there would be a million dollars. I can be a part of a group and I can feel good about myself, but actually in today's time being part of a group is no longer that good. You have to get up and make the difference at home, make a difference in your community, nationally and so forth. You actually need to take responsibility for yourself if you want to survive on this planet. I find social media has, in my opinion, for a long time been a conditioning tool. It is changing now. It has been a vehicle by big media machines to feed us stuff that keeps us complacent, happy and indifferent, and I've been very critical of it. We decided, do I want to be looking at my phone or do I want to be out there talking to people? And yes, I think we suffer. The reason why a lot of what I'm telling you sounds new, and it shouldn't be is because we are not very good at packaging what we do for the public to understand in media. Instead we are reactionary, in that you come and ask and we answer. I know we should be publicizing more. Up until now, it has been the proof of what we've done that has fed us, it has not necessarily been our story to tell.

Neustetter closes our conversation by explaining how the name *The Trinity Session* came about.

MN: The name *The Trinity Session* comes from the name of the testing of the atom bomb in 1945 called the Manhattan Project. When they tested the atom bomb, the scientists said they saw the figure of Christ in the mushroom cloud. And so they called the site, the trinity site. What fascinated us wasn't the religious aspect of it, but the vision that came out of something that's so destructive. So within the destruction and the desolation came the visionary. There's something about that desolation and feeling of lostness that came in the year 2000. Post-apartheid, budgets cut, artists like ourselves asking how do we fit into this system; how do other artists work now; how do you even build an artistic capital in the townships, never mind in those spaces where artists have been trained? If you're going to cut all the budgets how do you manoeuvre that? So out of this trinity site, out of this desolation comes something you must envisage and imagine. So that's how the name *The Trinity Session* came about; and session, like the gig. For us this is symbolic.

Notes

1 Maria-Alina Asavei, "Collectivism," in Michael Kelly ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

2 Joanne Laws. 2010. "CollectivismFacts and Curiosities." Accessed 07. 07. 2015. http://joannelaws.wordpress.com/2010/08/15/13

Marcus Neustetter

Johannesburg based artist, cultural activist and producer, Marcus Neustetter, reflects critically and playfully on his context through his art and collaborative projects. His strategy has been to pro-actively create, play and experiment to build opportunities and experiences that investigate, reflect and provoke. Mostly process driven, his production of art at the intersection of art, science and technology has led him to work in a multi-disciplinary approach from conventional drawings to permanent and temporary site specific installations, mobile and virtual interventions and socially engaged projects internationally.

Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the 14 November 1976, Marcus Neustetter attended the Deutsche Schule zu Johannesburg from 1982 to 1994. He read for his Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, earning his Masters Degree in 2001. During this time he launched sanman *(Southern African New Media Art Network). In the past 10 years Marcus Neustetter has been consistently producing and exhibiting art and, in partnership with Stephen Hobbs, has been active with The Gallery Premises (closed 2008),* The Trinity Session *and in their collaborative capacity as Hobbs/ Neustetter.*

Neustetter currently resides at the Maboneng Prescint in Johannesburg South Africa.

***Abongile Gwele** is a Bachelor of Technology in Fine Arts Graduate of the Tshwane University of Technology. She completed her studies in 2012. In 2010, Gwele volunteered at the Pretoria Arts Museum as an Education Assistant, as part of a team at the museum working with and under Mmutle Arthur Kgokong, who is the Education Officer for the museum. In her training at the museum, her focus was as a Junior Curator to the museum, and she underwent an extensive curating program alongside two other students from the University of Pretoria. They co-curated several exhibitions over their three years as Junior Curators of the Museum. In 2012, Gwele's BTech year at TUT, she became a part-time arts and design lecturer at the British International College for a year and full time lecturer for the two years to follow. She is currently residing in Centurion South Africa and will be joining the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK.*


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Captions

1–3: *The Trinity Session* in partner with the Diepsloot Arts and Culture Network and Sticky Situations Commissioned by the Johannesburg Development Agency, Diepsloot *I love you/ I love you not*, 2013. Courtesy of *The Trinity Session*.

4 Clive van den Berg Commissioned by the Johannesburg Development Agency and the Braamfontein Improvement District, implemented by *The Trinity Session*, *Eland*, 2007. Courtesy of *The Trinity Session*.

5–6 *The Trinity Session* in partnership with a network of Alexandra artists and visiting artists from Zimbabwe and Mozambique Supported by the SDC Program of Pro Helvetia Cape Town, *Borderless*, 2012. Courtesy of *The Trinity Session*.

PAPERS

Counting On Your Collective Silence
Notes on Activist Art
by Gregory G. Sholette

Hi Greg,

As I'm thinking about your questions on collective practice, I'm disturbed but not surprised to sense that it would be far easier for me to speak about the difficulties of collaborative work than to outline the things which draw me to it. Here are a few of the positive aspects...that are important to me: Working as a collective or collaborative means that we can do projects on a scale that one person could only do with great difficulty. Resources, skills, interests, knowledge and ideas are pooled. This contributes to the overall political and aesthetic complexity, diversity and effectiveness of the projects. Working on these projects involves developing collaborative practices which, however problematic, visibly reject a culture of hyper-individualism in favor of other models of "work" and of social (and even personal) responsibility.

David Thorne,
Resistant Strains art collective, NYC, 1999

From the swipe of a plastic debit card at the grocery store to the surveillance of so-called public spaces to the labels in your undergarments, an administered collectivity hides everywhere in plain sight. Every 'I' conceals an involuntary "belongingness," every gesture a statistic about purchasing power, education and the market potential of your desire. A new IBM computer program named "Clever" even detects what its designers call "communities in their nascent stages." Clever locates these web-based fraternities "even before members are aware of their community's existence" by tracing the electronic links "spontaneously" generated between users.[1] Therefor if collective incorporation is so unrelenting that it can be revealed by a machine, onemight question why non-individual cultural activity is treated as the exception? Conversely, how can the artist be defined as an autonomous producer detached from politics, history, and the market?

While postmodernism may have deflated the status of the auteur, the art industry and its discourse nevertheless remain dependent on a litany of individual name-brand producers that circulates like global aesthetic currency. As the collective Critical Art Ensemble succinctly put it:

> "The individual's signature is still the prime collectible, and access to the body associated with the signature is a commodity that is desired more than ever–so much so, that the obsession with the artist's body has made its way into "progressive" and alternative art networks. Even community art has its stars, its signatures, and its bodies. " [2].

By contrast, when a group of artists "self-institutionalize" themselves to produce collaborative or collective work, the critical response if any, falls into

consideration of only a few distinct categories: 1. Art world duos like Gilbert and George, Komar and Melamid or Sophie and Hans Arp, in which a methodology grounded on individual art practice is indiscriminately applied to two; 2. Collective authorship as a backdrop for discussing the evolution of an individual's career: e.g., Kiki Smith as former member of Collaborative Projects or Joseph Kosuth as cofounder of Art & Language; 3. The art collective as representative of an entire historical mis en scene, as when the 1980s became the decade of the activist art group.

In her essay "Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism," critic Suzi Gablik argued for a new kind of artist who understands that "the boundary between self and Other is fluid rather than fixed: the Other is included within the boundary of selfhood." (Gablik 84) However, boundaries both real and imaginary are historically determined and often harshly material. By contrast I understand conflict and difference, rather than "merging," to be necessary for the formation of the collective. Furthermore such incipient abrasiveness must carry over to the routine functioning of the group possibly sparking, violent repercussions both inside the collective and between the collective and existing institutional forms. As anyone who has worked in this way will attest, the effort required to sustain collective work rises in direct proportion to the professional and emotional toll extracted on constituency. Yet it is exactly this state of overdetermination –the heterogeneity of membership, the meetings where too much is attempted or rejected, too much brought to the table and left off the table, the fleeting ecstasy of collaborative expenditure and a space suddenly opened to the unpredictable effects of class, race, gender, sexual preference, age, divergences in ability, knowledge and career status –all of this can never be encompassed within the group identity per se; yet this excess is what makes the collective viable.

Perhaps the central concern of this text is to rethink the way collective practice is apprehended. Instead of the individual opposed to the collective or the artist deciding to work with the "community," my contention is that "collectivity" in one form or another is virtually an ontological condition of modern life. This supposition guarantees that there is no location out of which an individual, an artist for example, can operate alone in opposition to society. While this does not invalidate the irrepressible desire to escape or radically re-write what Thomas Hobbes called the social contract, it does allow us to re-configure the often stated opposition between collective and individual as that of a displacement between two kinds of collectives: one passive and reflexive, the other active and self-valorizing. In his text "Postscript on the Societies of Control" Gilles Deleuze outlined this new world order insisting, "We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become 'dividuals,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or "banks."...Man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt." (Deleuze 5) Furthermore, the narrative of a recent science fiction film, The Matrix (1999 by Larry and Andy Wachowsky) serves an example of how this condition of collective indenture is already figured within mass culture. At the same time it offers insight into why some artists choose to work collectively and others do not.[3]

> "The collective nature of the work can be both exhilarating and exhausting. Working with different peoples strengths; balancing individual needs and interests with collective desires and demands... Problems in maintaining public profile as a collective: making sure the same individuals don't get highlighted again and again in media coverage, allowing different people to speak for the group while maintaining continuity. There is still the cult of the

> individual auteur and we as a collective sometimes become kind of invisible.– Lisa Maya Knauer, discussing REPOhistory at the 10 year mark, NYC, 1999

> What I recall most happily are particular periods of working, entering a sort of "flow" state in current jargon together with others, all of us working towards a common goal. This would have to be the "painting parties" held [at ABC No Rio] for various purposes, mostly for Potato Wolf cable TV productions... I felt like my ideas were begin hyped up and enhanced by others in the group. –Alan Moore, Co-founder ABC No Rio, NYC

In his important re-working of the classical Marxist concept of ideology, Fredric Jameson maintained that "the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are "managed" and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects...such incentives, as well as the impulses to be managed by the mass cultural text, are necessarily Utopian in nature." (Jameson 287) Instead of simply masking the true relations of power as argued by many theorists of ideology these "spurious objects" satiate a concrete need that, referencing Walter Benjamin's famed Thesis on the Philosophy of History, Jameson has termed the "Political Unconscious." If Benjamin insisted that the radical historian must "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 255) Jameson's elaboration requires that we recognize "...figures [representations] for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society" (Ibid 291) even in the "...most degraded of all mass cultural texts, advertising slogans–visions of external life, of the transfigured body, of preternatural sexual gratification–[these] may serve as the model of manipulation on the oldest Utopian longings of humankind." (Ibid 287)

If utopian desire forms a residual political unconscious or figurative narration within mass culture then collectivity must be present as well. Perhaps the most transparent figure of collective practice is that found in certain science fiction narratives that depict a fantasy of organized resistance to collective occupation by hostile "others": aliens, vampires, mutant humans, and even computers. It is a narrative that appear in films such as "They Live" by John Carpenter or George Romero's "Dawn of the Dead" and in television series like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "V," a 1980s made-for-television mini-series in which human resistance fighters sabotage predacious aliens disguised as benevolent visitors. Reportedly "V" even inspired an anti-Apartheid graffiti campaign when broadcast in South Africa. "The Matrix" however is most explicit in the way it narrates desires and anxieties about collectivization and resistance. The film takes place in an apocalyptic near future that looks very much like the present. As the plot unfolds we discover that "The Matrix" is the name for a virtual-reality simulation program replicating the real world that is simultaneously fed into the cerebellum of the unknowing human population by an artificial intelligence. The real world is in fact an enormous "farm" in which humans are grown in liquid-filled vats stacked a mile high. However a small number of humans have managed to "unplug" themselves from the electronic hegemony of "The Matrix" and joined forces to free mankind from its hidden bondage. What is revealing about this story is the way it represents two versions of human collectivization. One is involuntary, consisting of massified bodies digitally dreaming in a cavernous computerized nursery. Opposed to this reflexive collectivity is the militarized multi-ethnic cell made up of both men and women.

"The Matrix," like "V" and other examples of this science fiction subgenre, represents organized resistance to mass control as heterogeneous, self-sufficient and culturally diverse. At times the violence of the enemy holding these micro-

collectives together barely outweighs the collective's internal antagonisms, as when the Judas-like character in "The Matrix" betrays the group in exchange for returning to the comfort of virtual simulation. The most important moment for the occupation fantasy narrative is the de-concealment. The protagonist of "The Matrix" is offered two "virtual" pills –one blue, one red. By choosing the blue pill he will remain anesthetized within The Matrix. Ingesting the red pill however reveals what lies behind its screen except that he can never turn back to the recompense of the simulated world.

For artists who choose collective action (the red pill), an implicit collective state that provides them with an illusion of individuality is displaced by a collectivity made up of partial meanings and irregular shards of history. Taking the red pill also means that the chimera of individual practice will never return at least with its original luster intact. At some level most artists understand this choice.

> The issue of rupture within community based artistic collaborations is an important topic because rupture is an inherent part of the process of working with the community... Communities are not made up of people who are all the same, even if they are the same race. Communities imply a very loose connection of people where cultural, racial and class issues are never a homogeneous mix, and where questions of difference always surface.
> –From "Some notes on rupture" unpublished text by Tomie Arai, Artist and member of Godzilla, NYC: 1995.

The founding or "minting" of any group identity, either corporate or cultural, is always dependent on the material that exceeds the group signature. But while the capitalist, corporate identity aims at purification – a precise profile indefinitely replicated to enhance consumption – the political and cultural collective identity signifies something else: a recognition of the inherently collective texture of the political and cultural that surrounds as well as intersects the group identity at all times. This overdetermination even affects the day-to-day working procedure of the non-hierarchical collective where sudden accelerations of enthusiasm are followed by equally unexpected plunges in spirit. The Marxist theoretician Antonio Negri describes such radical, concentrated excess as a "destructuration," by which I take him to mean both a demolition of capitalist totality and a recognition of the discontinuous nature of the working class (applied here to the cultural collective.) (Negri 63) Negri's formulation also implies that such arrangements are always inherently at risk of destabilization.

Marx understood the complexity of representing new forms of political organizing. Writing about the 1871 Paris Commune he emphasized the way this historic insurrection was less a total break with history and more of an active re-absorption by the masses of their own alienated powers previously turned against them in the form of the state. Although the Commune lasted only three months, Parisians still managed during this time to declare universal suffrage, to install a communal government and to decree that all governmental officials be paid only workmen's wages. It is worth contrasting Marx's re-appropriation of state control with the "Society of Control" described by Gilles Deleuze, which lacks any single instrument of oppression; not the state, the factory, or the prison. He argues that Today a diffused "universal modulation" forces the individual into a perpetual state of mutation as continuously shifting systems of surveillance, education, and work replace any fixed locus of power. Without collapsing these different conceptions of the social body– one analogical the other digital– it is possible to see that each presents us with an economy of forces in which acts of displacement alternate

with routines of administration. In both cases resistance depends upon recognizing its very possibility within the familiar. Marx describes the predicament this way:

> It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations to be mistaken for the counterpart of older and even defunct forms of social life, to which they may bear a certain likeness. Thus the new Commune, which breaks the modern State power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the mediaeval Communes, which first preceded, and afterwards became the substratum of, that very State power.
> –Karl Marx, *Civil War in France*)

For Marx the Paris Commune was a displacement in which a unique historical event outwardly replicates an archaic but well-known form: in this case the medieval commune (recall the deceptive role simulation of the familiar plays in the pop-culture example of The Matrix). Deleuze also understands the challenge of recognizing resistancefrom within the "society of control" when he rhetorically muses "can we already grasp the rough outlines of these coming forms, capable of threatening the joys of marketing?" (Deleuze 7) His question, which explicitly adds the problem of pleasure to the one of recognition that Marx raises, might be provisionally answered with the politically engaged artists collective if this is understood, as proposed here, not as a unity of differences but as the overdetermined arrangement akin to what Negri describes as the "radical, irreducible differentness of the revolutionary movement."

Above all else the activist art collective is a de facto critique of the bourgeois public sphere. Not only does the heterogeneous nature of such groups question the apparent separation of public and private space, but also the process of self-institutionalization itself inevitably assimilates political functions normally allocated to the bourgeois public sphere. Sometimes the act of governing is consciously invoked, at other times simply manifest, but eventually the politics of the collective are thrust into view. For the members of the collective this means deciding amongst themselves what kind of decision-making process they will operate under including what the rules will be regarding membership (should it be open to all who attend meetings, or just active participants?) and voting (do motions pass using a simple majority or through consensus by every member?). Ironically it is often the process of internal politicization that reveals the lack of historical memory among such groups. Consider the following texts excerpted from the minutes of three politically-engaged artists collectives in New York City: AMCC (Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, 1975 to 1977), PAD/D (Political Art Documentation and Distribution, 1980-1986,actively), and REPOhistory (1989-present):

> Our most urgent task right now is to find a more representative method of arriving at true agreement within the group. Not to do this is to doom us to continual tactical maneuvering using these rules–tactics that, as was amply demonstrated last week, lead to destructive polarization and quite palpable disunity...In this group we are not looking for "victory" of one strand of opinion over another. In fact, this machismo, warlike attitude within the group is entirely contrary to everything that we should be struggling towards... –AMCC document: 1/30/77 (collection AnnMarie Rousseau).

> I noticed there were certain men or people who could say just about anything and everyone was 'attentive'. Those who do the most work, those with the most responsibility, those with the most political sophistication and those who have a degree of establishment in the art field have the most

> "power."...We live in a hierarchical world. The fact that some of it translates into PADD is obvious...–An open letter to PAD/D from a member: October, 1983
> KL felt that there was a consensus from the last meeting that membership take active tasks....
> LK felt that analyzing tasks would help redistribute work. She said that some people have resentment because they do not know where the task openings are.
> KL said that tasks will shift given the projects we are working on....
> PL thought we should take a look at who's doing what and why.
> HB wanted to understand how this list would related to project tasks.
> TT thought that the person within a project...could become the delegate to work in a general REPO working group.
> LK felt that certain people end up doing too much of the work and this person would be doing twice the work...It is important that more people get involved in this decision.
> REPOhistory minutes, January 4, 1993

The repetition demonstrated here is all the more remarkable when you consider that the selections span nearly twenty years and that the three group's embrace overlapping membership. Obvious lessons might be drawn from this about the deficiency of not having a history or theory about collective practice, or how the burdens of decision making, division of labor and power sharing are not mitigated simply because people choose to work cooperatively. Because activist art collectives are naturally suspicious of establishment politics, each new group tends to reinvent organizational processes already attempted or sometimes even abandoned by other similar institutions. Therefore what appears to be a blank screen on which to project some new radical form of selfgovernment might better be understood as a surface so overly etched with traces of language, history, knowledge and material conditions that it merely appears empty. These traces cannot be navigated without first recognizing the way in which language and spatial metaphors are used, consciously or not, by the collective. The problem is similar to that characterized by Jacques Derrida in his essay "The Ends of Man: Reading Us," first published in France in 1969. Questioning what paths lead to radical change the philosopher suggests there remain only:

> ...the choice between two strategies: a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain...[in which] one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (relever), at an always more certain depth, that which one deconstructs..." b. "To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside" [risking a form of] "tromp-l'oeil perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted... –Derrida 135

Derrida's solution to this dilemma insists that, "A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once." –But how can we remember and forget, repeat and interrupt, have a history as well as start over again? One possible answer is to map Derrida's musings about ontology onto the very corporeal plurality of the activist art collective, to read it as a variegated body.

> One main factor of this period [early 1980s] was its generosity in trying to include everyone– artist and nonartist, good or bad art, etc. in exhibitions.

> This may be why [Lucy R.] Lippard's writing at that time in my eyes was more documentation (in the sense of listing artists and artworks in a matter of fact way) of this growing subculture away from the art-market, and not criticism directed to judge the quality of a work of art." –Todd Ayoung, NYC, 1999, artist and founding member of REPOhistory and Godzilla.

Certainly the contingencies Derrida enumerates play themselves out within and around the art collective including the unwitting consolidation of prevailing power relations –masculinist authority, overcentralization, bureaucracy– and perhaps even more insidiously what he calls a tromp-l'oeil effect in which an imagined escape route is but a projection of present limitations. Nevertheless the exclusion of the collective, in particular the activist art collective, from within the larger cultural discourse (including what is termed "left" or Progressive) seems to indicate a potential for something necessarily uncomfortably, other and plural. If Derrida's question of "who, we?" were posed to such a group entity the response would come as a shimmer of voices, historical narratives and political positions. Within the overflowingness of collective identity then are both figures of resistance and, something resembling what Derrida has recently termed a "certain experience of the promise."

If Deleuze asserts "there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons" (Ibid) Derrida insists that "one can try to liberate [the promise] from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysicoreligious determination, from any messianism." He also states that "...a promise must be kept, that is, not to remain "spiritual" or "abstract," but to produce effects, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth." (Derrida, Specters 89). This anti-teleological potentiality is not unlike Jameson's Political Unconscious or Benjamin's moment of historical danger. And if the "promise" must be made concrete, it may indeed be glimpsed in the activist art collective's inherent capacity for self-regulation, independent production and control over its own distribution. Undoubtedly this prospect is what is so anathema to the art market and its discourse. And because this capacity is latent within all productive activity, administrators and regulators, including the society of control, recognize and react against it. Ironically, the activist art collective often displays its own self-mastery with unregulated acts of production and aesthetic incontinence: two operations forbidden by an industry that depends upon the illusion of scarcity and the predictability of goods (the consistency of an artist's style and nowadays her persona as well.[4]) Perhaps this more than any imagined threat to a lingering ideology of artistic autonomy is what motivates the exclusion of collective practice from the critical discourse of art. A closer look at the mechanics of what Negri calls "self-valorization" may help decide this question:

> Authorship was an interesting issue and any given piece was undercut by this transindividual author: Blue Funk. The overall result was a strange and liberating experience. We were like some multitracked techno recording that is indistinguishable in a given space. If we followed any model I doubt if we could agree on it maybe a band that is kept together by the tensions pulling it apart. –Brian Hand, Founding member of Blue Funk; a chiefly British state of great terror, Dublin, 1999.

Artistic self-valorization can be read as a re-appropriation directed against the market's need to reign in an artist's production and stylistic trademark. That self-restraint is virtually built into an artist's education and reiterated in one form or another within the marketplace through dealers, critics and even by other

artists. However within the relative sanctuary of the group identity this pressure is meliorated to the point that being part of a collective often means experimenting with different styles and technologies that would otherwise be disruptive to one's career. Even more troubling from the point of view of the culture industry is the way in which self-valorization allows collectives to establish their own criteria about what is art and who can make art. Such aesthetic self-validation is typically extended, like stolen goods, from the collective to artists who have been locked-out of traditional venues for reasons of political or cultural content or simply because of the stinginess of the art market. This pilfered aesthetic aura is even transferable from the collective to non-artists who become ordained (provisionally) as bona fide aesthetic producers.

In 1984 for example the feminist art collective *Carnival Knowledge* invited porn-stars to become artists for their exhibition entitled *The Second Coming* at Franklin Furnace. Group Material went so far as to use the frame of the museum to legitimate this self-endowed collective munificence. Group Material's 1989 project the AIDS Timeline included paintings and sculpture as well as bumper stickers, videotapes, t-shirts and news clippings. Thus the self-institutionalizing group-form offers-up evidence that control over the means of artistic production not only is not the exclusive domain of collectors and dealers, curators and critics, but it is they who have appropriated this role from artists themselves.

Finally, because all issues of aesthetics will ultimately get settled at the bank, we must ask if it is possible to collect the collective?

Which is to say under what circumstances would the group signature–its minting or coinage if you like–be capable of being possessed? Certainly specific objects produced by Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury and other collectives have found their way into museums, archives, and private collections. But this only raises the question differently: how can one comprehend artistic group authorship? The answer seems to depend upon the possibility of even conceiving such a thing as a group signature proper (as opposed to say a collection of signatures or gathering of styles). Such a thing, if it did exist, would openly dispute the fiction of the individual mark–that unique sign that guarantees the authors absence only by virtue of being infinitely repeatable. It leads us to question the economy of this seemingly unique mark, not only within the art industry and its discourse, but its function within all administered forms of collectivity including the Society of Control. If we were to answer that artistic value is determined today by a sphincter-like regulation of the individual mark with all that it represents, then considering what has been said about the excess and instability of group identity a collective signature would by definition be incomprehensible. Not unlike the grotesque truth of *The Matrix,* recognition of the collective condition demands its price, both individually and professionally.

Regarding the practice of collective, activist art, this essay is neither comprehensive nor conclusive. It is an open question as to whether the observations here can apply more broadly to other forms of cooperative work. The self-valorizing art collective, with all of its volatility and repetition may be resistant to Deleuze's Society of Control if for no other reason than its sheer generosity of material, aesthetic and political production. Overdetermined and discontinuous, the collective assembles the needs, affiliations, differences and even afflictions of others in a space suddenly open to the possibility of social equality and self-management. Even under the best circumstances the collective is fueled by these differences as well as destabilized by them.

Still, if not for the intellectual and occasionally rapturous pleasure made available, uniquely I believe, through sustained and voluntary collective activity and

undoubtedly linked to this same economy of displacement and re-appropriation, no one would ever ingest the red pill. After all, the art world is counting on your collective silence.

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Notes

1 Undoubtedly the marketing potential for such a program is enormous, see: Robinson, Sara «Thousands of Undiscovered Web Communities» in The New York Times, (June 10, 1999), D3.

2 Critical Art Ensemble, «Observations on Collective Cultural Action» was originally published in Art Journal, (Summer 1998), pg. 73-85.

3 In this regard my essay is especially indebted to the decades-old interdisciplinary artist's collective REPOhistory whose current membership –Stephanie Basch, Neil Bogan, Jim Costanzo, Cynthia Liesenfeld, Tom Klem, Lisa Maya Knauer, Janet Koenig, Mark O'Brien, Jayne Pagnuccio, George Spencer, and Gregory Sholette– together with former members such as Todd Ayoung, Edward Eisenberg, Betti-Sue Hertz, Lucy Lippard, Carin Kuoni, Kara Lynch, Chris Neville, Liza Prown, Megan Pugh, Tess Timoney, Jodi Wright, and numerous transitory collaborators have informed my thinking and writing.

The questions asked of participants were as follows:

Describe one particular incident –from a crisis to a hilarious situation – that represents some key feature of the process of working with others "beneath" a collective name/project: Other than joint authorship what other aspects of collaborative work– aesthetic, political, communal–-set it apart from individual cultural production? (again you can use a specific example from your experience):

Are there any specific historical or theoretical models –pop cultural references, personal incentives–of collaborative/collective work you feel relate to your own experiences?:

Any other thoughts or anecdotes you wish to add?

4 On the politics of artistic "inclusiveness" see Gregory Sholette, "News from Nowhere: Activist Art & After: Report from New York" in Third Text, Spring: 1999. And for a critical discussion of the tendency by which artists "...embody (or at least speak for) any number of subject positions and identities, simply by virtue of being an artist." see Grant H. Kester in "Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public" in Art, Activism, & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage ed. Grant H. Kester (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1988), p. 126

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https://www.tumblr.com/blog/gregsholette
http://gregorysholette.com
http://darkmatterarchives.net
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For Whom Are Biennials Organised?

Elvira Dyangani Ose

When Princess Marilyn Douala-Bell and Didier Schaub arrived in Cameroun in the late 1980s, they made an agreement: they would have their third child. Princess Marilyn, the second generation of a long dynasty of a prominent family, grew up always knowing that she was part of the local intelligentsia. At the end of the day, she was the daughter of King Bell and granddaughter of Rudolph Douala Manga Bell, key figure in the local struggles for independence, who was hanged in 1914 for opposing German colonial rule. Princess Marilyn studied in Europe, in Paris to be precise, for many years. It was there that she trained as social scientist and met her husband, Didier, a French art historian, critic and curator. Like in any other beautiful story, they fell in love, got married and decided to move to Douala – Marilyn's homeland.

In 1991, their third child was born. She showed a little bit of both parents. Like her mother, she inherited a strong sense of commitment to the community. The aim of any initiative she embarked upon was to reach and involve as many people, and from as many cultural backgrounds, as possible. Her purpose was 'to intervene in people's every day experience, questioning the urban environment we all live with,' as she declared when she became more mature. Like her father, she would soon develop a deep appreciation for all arts, particularly those striving for a new understanding of the collective and the social. She was immediately allured by artistic experimentation, politically engaged practices and cultural forms questioning the public sphere.

There she was, little Doual'art. The heiress of the political legacy of the Douala Manga Bell, but also fabulous whizz-kid, in her own right, open to all kinds of new relational poetics. (And just to clarify, I refer here to artistic practices involved in what Édouard Glissant defines as 'poetics of relation', which recognise the other in ourselves and include the inscription of both the individual and the collective, in one sole social dimension – just to summarise very briefly...).

Here is when the story turns into reality... so you have to imagine, like in the movies, images fading to black... the cartoons turning into real people, and the fictional narrative moving into documentary mode.

The earlier years of Doual'art were marked by the absence of a proper venue. In trying to define its own identity, the organisation staged various actions in the city using mainly the language of visual arts, with occasional incursions into the realm of live and performing arts. Lacking a permanent space, and using that lack as its organising principle, the association worked together with established international venues, local cultural entrepreneurs and artists, but Princess Marilyn and Didier also turned to the public space, engaging with various communities and urban landscapes to disseminate what from then onwards would constitute Doual'art's main *modus operandi*. That incursion in the public space, as well as in the public sphere, proved fundamental in shaping the character of this initiative, a pioneer in the African continent as the earliest experimental laboratory focusing

on artistic practices engaging with new understandings and interpretations of *publicness*. Until then, no one else in the country had engaged in that sort of endeavour.

(Just as a side note: there are obvious precedents to Doual'art's spirit of publicness in the emergence of a trans-disciplinary aesthetics in urban Africa, as defined by artist collectives' initiatives and socio-political movements in modern Africa. This aesthetics is neither a depository of modern ideologies on national culture – as determined by the newly independent nation-states' cultural policies nor does it pursue decolonising or identitarian prerogatives. It is rooted, rather, in a clear commitment to the notion of the social, of the collective, and in the belief that political revolution can eventually be effective in aesthetic terms and that art can bring about social justice.

This aesthetics began in the late 1970s, but only in the past two decades has it noticeably proliferated. Whereas recent scholarship acknowledges international events in the 1990s – such as DAK'ART, the Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain as the source of a significant shift in contemporary African art and aesthetics, I would propose instead that it is in local initiatives led by artist collectives – against cultural narratives and policies proposed by national institutions – that one can find the genesis for change and experimentation within the arts. Fundamental to this equation as well are the cross-cultural conversations of a Pan-African and African diasporic character taking place throughout the twentieth century, but which took on a crucial significance since late 1960s in relation to major international festivals and professional encounters, such as the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal (1966), the First Pan-African Cultural Festival, PANAF, in Algiers, Algeria (1969), and the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77, in Lagos, Nigeria. A historical analysis of these events might provide an alternative narration of history that can assist us not only in understanding the inherent role of art in politics, but also in reactivating our political relationship to the practice of art in the realm of global politics.)

By the mid-1990s, Doual'art had firmly established itself in the city, mainly thanks to the opening, in 1995, of its permanent venue, L'Espace Doual'art. With a programme of roughly a dozen exhibitions per year, the space soon became a hub for visual artists who from then onwards would have a steady opportunity to address diverse audiences with their latest productions. However, interaction with the public space did not cease. In 1996, as a result of a 30-month-long conversation between Doual'art, the neighbours and authorities of the Deido district and artist Joseph F. Sumegne, the monumental sculpture *La Nouvelle Liberté* was inaugurated. A formidable 12-metre-high figure that dominates one of the most transited roundabouts in the city, made of locally-sourced recycled material, the statue prompted a lively and far-reaching debate on the meaning of art and its role in the country's social and political fabric. Art, in that sense, proposed a new reality that interfered with the city-space and its everyday experience, but also with Douala's socio-historical process. Creativity and imagination were necessary faculties for knowledge and change – art that was made with and for its audience. Art was a social fact.

From that moment onwards, the quest for the formation and materialisation of these new urban imaginaries took shape in their support of ad hoc initiatives, such as the Bessengue City Project, led by late artist Goddy Leye, who, inspired by the project, in 2003 opened ArtBakery, a centre for contemporary art in Bonnendale, another district of Douala. ArtBakery's activities included, among

other things, a residency programme for visual artists and a training programme in art and visual culture for all ages, as well as support for young artists, critics and curators, promoting the use of new technologies and establishing ongoing interaction with the community.

Other initiatives included international workshops such as Les Ateliers Urbains, in which twenty artists from Central Africa were invited to interact with the inhabitants of Bessengue for two weeks, resulting in a series of events involving various artistic expressions – painting, sculpture, poetry and music, among others. Later on, the workshops were transformed into two initiatives: a biennial meeting called Arts & Urbis, gathering together artists, curators, urbanists, architects and cultural and social workers, and the triennial Salon Urbain de Douala or SUD, which would constitute the culmination of their initial attempt at public dialogue provoked by *La Nouvelle Liberté.*

There have been four editions of Arts & Urbis, always taking place the year before the triennial, and three editions of SUD. I have had the good fortune to participate in two of them: the first one in 2010, in collaboration with artist Younès Rahmoun, and the second in 2013, when, in collaboration with Marilyn and Didier, I curated a series of ephemeral artistic interventions by artist collective T*he Trinity Sessions*, and dancers and choreographers Nelisiwe Xaba and Faustin Linyekula.

Doual'art's projects and, particularly, its triennial, incorporate two new elements fundamental to that aesthetics I spoke about earlier: the significance of the space in which the art intervention is being produced and a clear reflection on the social relationships established in that space.

In his reading of the city of Johannesburg, urbanist Abdoumaliq Simone first coined the notion of *people as infrastructure*, with which he explored certain activities of the inhabitants of South Africa's main megalopolis, the resourcefulness of these residents' day-to-day experience and their incredible capacity to live multiple temporalities. Under that definition of infrastructure– normally interpreted in physical terms – Simone included primarily the generation of social compositions across a range of individual capacities and needs, and the 'economic collaboration among residents seemingly marginalised from and immiserated by urban life'. To Simone, the ability of the city's residents to overcome precariousness and 'engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices' far beyond the place and time that technocracy provided them with has defined the flexibility and open-ended character, not only of Johannesburg, but also of many other African cities, like Douala. I believe that Doual'art's projects resonate vividly with Simone's notion of *people as infrastructure*.

One could argue that the radical presence of that informality as a way of life and an increased social participation of the citizenry in the public sphere, against the constraints of regulatory systems, is indeed one of the main characteristics of this African city. Furthermore, I believe that this set of combinations functions in the here and now – whenever it might happen, as I said earlier, as residents operate in multiple spaces and temporalities – as much as it ultimately affects the potential social compositions or, to use Glissant's terms, *one-sole-social dimension*. That is to say, the effectiveness of those combinations is the condition of possibility of new social formations and imaginaries.

This is particularly prominent in the context of inner cities, and if you like, in the case of secondary cities in which central governments seem to have less interest or power. It is not by chance that most of the initiatives of Doual'art have taken place in those interstitial spaces between the city centre and the rest, or far away from the centres of power, as in the case of the Rencontres Picha. Biennale de Lubumbashi, my second and last example. Believe or not, I have only spoken about

my experience in Lubumbashi on two other occasions, and whenever I tried to theorise it – not that I have to, necessarily – I find that the rhetoric of my academic research does not do justice to what is indeed a once-in-a-lifetime experience in my career as a curator.

I was invited by artist Sammy Baloji and writer Patrick Mudekereza to continue a conversation that they started as founding directors of Picha Art Centre and the Lubumbashi Biennale, with international artists in 2008 and with curator Simon Njami in 2010.

The edition I curated was based on a notion of *Enthusiasm*, a review of Jean-François Lyotard's paradigms of audience and participation, in conversation with Simone's notion of *people as infrastructure*, mirroring practices, such as those of Doual'art, motivated by the possibility of reflecting on the event, on the experience itself, as institution.

The Biennale, an artist-run initiative, mirrors Picha's programme – that is to say, it is mainly devoted to three media: photography, video and literature. The way we imagined the project, as a project of projects, was translated into workshops exploring the interstitial spaces and blurred boundaries of those disciplines. Thus, *photography* related to a larger sense of visual cultural production and printmaking; *video* stood for moving-image projects; and *literature* reflected on wider nuances of the term text. A fourth workshop on the city of Lubumbashi also took place, assembling a group of architects, artists, geographers, writers, politicians and other professionals and members of local communities, led by Johan Lagae, who provided a walking tour and in turn a peculiar guide to the city. Picha has proven over and over again the strong and long-term commitment to learning as a process in constructing audience and capacity, and as a strategy for developing the local artistic and cultural scene. In addition, many of its initiatives blur the boundaries between artistic practice and everyday experience. The workshops complemented an international group exhibition, spread through various venues in the city, using public spaces and venues as impromptu display galleries or cinemas. We held a two-day conference in collaboration with Gasworks and Triangle Arts Network, co-produced a film by Norwegian artist Bodil Furu, collaborated with Escola Maumaus in Lisbon for Angela Ferreira's public performance and organised a multidisciplinary gathering in which professionals and the public would debate on formulas of participatory art and social practices.

If the two cases above were used to respond to the question 'For whom are biennials organised?', the answer would clearly be 'The public'. You could say that precariousness was, in some instances, the organising principle, that creativity and imagination were necessary tools for knowledge and change. Art was a social act, made with and for its audience. They were experiences that proposed an exercise in participation, abolishing narratives of author versus spectator, organisers versus participants, turning all of us, curators, organisers, members of the press, local authorities and audiences alike, undeniably, to once again use Glissant's words, into the protagonists of a 'poetics of relation', a one-sole-social composition.

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Prior to Tate, she was curator at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (2004–2006) and at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo (2006–2008), where she organised several exhibitions, including works by, among others, General Idea, Viennese Actionism, Alfredo Jaar, Lara Almárcegui, Ábalos & Herreros, and Ricardo Basbaum. At the CAAM, she curated the seminal exhibition Olvida Quien Soy/ Erase Me From Who I Am (2006), presenting works by, among others, Nicholas Hlobo, Tracey Rose, Moshekwa Langa, Zanele Muholi, and Mikhael Sutbozky.

She has curated the retrospective exhibition Carrie Mae Weems: Social Studies *(2010) and the interdisciplinary project* Attempt to Exhaust an African Place *(2007–2008). She was also curator of* Arte Invisible *(2009–2010), guest curator of the triennial SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala (2010), and the Artistic Director of the third edition of the* Rencontres Picha. Lubumbashi Biennial *(2013). Dyangani Ose has published and lectured on modern and contemporary African art and has contributed to art journals such as Nka and Atlántica. She is currently completing a PhD and holds an MA in History of Art and Visual Studies from Cornell University, New York; an MAS in Theory and History of Architecture from Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Barcelona; and a BA in Art History from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.*

Public Art and Urban Change in Douala

Iolanda Pensa

While the doual'art association works on the third edition of SUD, the public art event which aims to transform the capital of Cameroon, an itinerant exhibition exports the event to Europe, passing through Rotterdam, Nantes, Ghent and Milan.

The SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala does what many critics claim the leading biennials and triennials fail to do – make an impact. The world may well find it hard to believe that Africa can produce anything hugely innovative, contemporary and truly international but SUD has transformed Douala.

I don't really know where to start but we can play this like a Gamebook. If you know what a biennial is, go to 2. If you know what a biennial is and you also know where Douala is, go directly to 3. If you know what a biennial is but did not think there were any in Africa, you'd better start from 1.

1. The Venice Biennale was founded in 1895 and with it a type of art exhibition that, by adopting the simple term *biennale*, immediately declared its intention to be imposing and enduring. Actually, it matters not if an event is annual, biennial, triennial, quadrennial, quinquennial or a one-off, the simple reference in the title to a cyclical nature makes people think it is a biennial.

The place-name in the title is another distinctive feature as, one way or another, it is a declaration of a wish to promote tourism. In 1993, Thomas McEvilly (Thomas McEvilley, "Arrivederci Venice: The Third World Biennials" in Artforum International, 01/11/1993) observed an epidemic of major exhibitions in what he calls the Third World. His text does not consider the 1966 *Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* as a biennial despite its desire for four-year recurrence; nor does it analyse the numerous film events; it is based on a selection of partial sources and does not indicate continuity between events launched in the 1970s and those of the 1980s.

1

However, the article is extremely important because it stirred up a whole host of discussions on biennials and, most importantly, gave rise to a recurrent style of analysis, that examines exhibition catalogues on a basis of Western style versus non-Western style, Modernism versus Post-Modernism and centre versus periphery. I do not know how many of you have had the privilege of leafing through the catalogues of the *biennale* of Dakar, Cairo, or indeed the itinerant Bantu one, but we must admit the painstaking care with which Thomas McEvilly conducted his investigation is truly praiseworthy, analysing grainy pictures and turning the pages of often quite makeshift publications in pursuit of comparative data.

2

The fact remains that an exhibition catalogue is not the exhibition and you lose sight of much of the substance when observing an event from a distance. It does not fully convey the Egyptian government's role in the organisation of the Cairo Biennale; you miss the buzz that accompanied the rapid birth and death of the Johannesburg Biennale; and you cannot drink toasts in the mild Senegalese spring along with the large number of artists, curators and critics who come from all over the world to the Biennale de Dakar.

Looking at a map of the world with every biennial marked with a dot, it is hard to make out the links and people, and it is difficult to realise that the Biennale de Dakar has had such an impact on the African art scene, much more than that of Venice.

3

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2. Douala is where the SUD-Salon de Douala has been held every three years since 2007. I hope its citizens will forgive me but, quite frankly, Douala is one awful place. An inhospitable city, it is violent and ugly without having the notoriety of Lagos or Luanda's oil. It is one of the greatest Central African ports, the financial capital of Cameroon and a place of passage where people always seem about to leave, such is the rush to get away. So harsh is this context that it is extreme and symbolic. Producing works of art in Douala's public space involves a striking degree of complexity which includes – to give you an idea – the management of public and private land ownership, working with local authorities and police, the importing and expense of equipment, sourcing materials, training skilled staff, fundraising, security and the problematical issue of photographing public artworks in a place that really is not photogenic. This is an impossible environment to conjure up when strolling through the streets of Münster, to remain on message. The SUD triennial was created with the aim of bolstering the work started by doual'art in 1991 and to transform Douala. No local branding but real and pure transformation. And they are succeeding! In Douala!

Doual'art has produced artworks in the public space by working with the city administration, stimulating public debate, involving communities, launching a triennial and mobilising artists and experts the world over. If this had been started a few years ago, you would understand and admire their enthusiasm but it all commenced more than 20 years ago. Their dedication is the most striking factor

as just getting through the day in the heat and humidity of Douala makes you feel like a hero.

5

3. The critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera has explained it clearly in several essays: working in an area and making an impact in the medium-long term is what biennials find hard to do but what they ought to pursue, to trigger new processes and fully foster cultural production. Many events attempt this with activities in squares, schools and with open archives. The SUD case is very different. doual'art started planning its triennial in 2005, building on long experience already gained in Douala.

6

It was, indeed, in 2005 that Marilyn Douala Bell and Didier Schaub created the Ars&Urbis think tank to gather a group of people that would promote the event and guarantee the required international scope, visibility and continuity. The idea is that doual'art should continue to do what it does best: support artists and produce artworks in the public space. The efforts are not all spent during the event but converge on it; SUD is when what has been produced is presented to the world and the city is celebrated. The first triennial held in 2007 featured permanent and transient interventions; the second time around, in 2010, they refined the selection of the works; and ever larger interventions are planned for 2013. doual'art's expertise is growing, SUD is growing and the desire to involve the city as a whole is growing.

7

Imagine a visitor map of Paris with the Eiffel Tower, Pantheon, Louvre, Champs-Élysées inserted as 3D city icons. Adopting a similar technique, doual'art is working on a 1:1 map of Douala. Research has reconstructed the history of 30 buildings dating from colonial times and 18 have been given signs by the designer Sandrine Dole. doual'art commissioned and produced *La Nouvelle Liberté*, by Joseph-Francis Sumégné, considered a monument to the city and observed by several scholars as a case study on its emblematic impact. It has produced 50 works (approximately half transient and half permanent) in a dozen districts. One of the most poetic installations is a screen on the Wouri River by Salifou Lindou, who used simple metal and plastic to create squares where the fishermen wash on their way back from work. The itinerant SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala exhibition provides an opportunity to meet Douala and experience a visionary and innovative event that is both instructive and surprising. The exhibition's first stop is Rotterdam, for the Architecture Biennale, followed by Dakar for the Biennale de Dakar, Nantes, Ghent and Milan.

Captions

1 Pascale Marthine Tayou, *La Colonne Pascale,* New Bell, Douala, 2010. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2010. Photo by Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010. Above: Salifou Lindou, *Face à l'Eau,* Bonamouti-Deïdo, Douala, 2010. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2010. Photo by Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

2 Lucas Grandin, *Le jardin sonore,* BonamoutiDeïdo, Douala, 2010. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2010. Photo by Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

3 Koko Komégné, *Njé Mo yé,* Nkololoun, Douala, 2007. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2007. Photo Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

4 Philip Aguirre, *Source, Ndogpassi III,* Douala, 2010. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2010. Presentation of the project. Photo Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

5 TiesTen Bosch, *Diving in deep,* Ndogpassi III, 2010. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2010. Photo Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

6 *Arches de la mémoire, Cheminée de Bonakouamouang,* Douala, 2006. Design Sandrine Dole; research and texts Valère Epée, Lionel Manga et Blaise Ndjehoya. Urban design commissioned and produced by doual'art. Photo by Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

7 TiesTen Bosch, *Diving in deep*, Ndogpassi III, 2010. Public art commissioned and produced by doual'art within SUD 2010. Photo Roberto Paci Dalò, Douala, 2010

Iolanda Pensa *(b. 1975) is a researcher and art critic. She holds a university degree in medieval art history from the Catholic University of Milan (Literature and Philosophy, Modern Literature, 2003), a Ph.D. in social anthropology and ethnology and in territorial government and planning at the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) in Paris, in collaboration with Politecnico di Milano Department of Architecture and Urban Planning (2011). Her professional experience includes: researcher for "Africa e Mediterraneo" (2002-2006); founder and board member of iStrike Foundation in Rotterdam (2005-2008); professor of art economy at NABA Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti di Milano (2007-2011); correspondent for Africa for Domus magazine (2011-2012); scientific director at lettera27 Foundation in Milan (2007-2012) for the projects "WikiAfrica: Increasing the Quality and Quantity of African Content on Wikipedia" and "Share YourKnowledge: Creative Commons and Wikipedia for Cultural Institutions". She has also been a researcher at the Laboratory of Visual Culture/ Department for Environment Constructions and Design/ SUPSI University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (2013-), artistic director of Associazione Amici del Museo delle Grigne Onlus (2007–), coordinator of Ecomuseo delle Grigne (2010-), and leader at Wikimania Esino Lario 2016. Her research interests include systems of knowledge production and distributions in Africa; assessment of cultural institutions, GLAMs, and public art; the impact of international grant-makers on culture in Africa; Wikipedia; and the Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Art.*

INTERVIEWS ON BIENNIALS

Smooth Nzewi interviewed by Nkule Mabaso

Nkule Mabaso: Its fundamental objectives are to support and encourage artistic creativity, production, protection, distribution, training, and education in Africa and to promote African artists in Africa and on the international level, through state and private actions. In this way, the Dakar Biennale, DAK'ART, aspires to be an instrument that will integrate Africa through a common cultural market, a platform to allow African artists access to the international art market. These are the historic aspirations of the biennale–how relevant are they in the current climate of production and how can they be reframed to be more relevant?

Smooth Nzewi: These are genuine ambitions critical to creating a system and building its structure. Yet to aspire is one thing, and to actualize is another. To an extent, the Dak'Art Biennale has acted as a sort of fulcrum on the continent, but it contends with a slew of mitigating factors. Because of its longevity as the oldest biennale in Africa, it commands some credibility despite largely failing to accomplish some of these noble causes. From an economic standpoint, it is a platform that promotes the business of culture. It also claims as a moral imperative the necessity to pursue this continental agenda. I want to pick up on the idea of a common cultural market, though laudable it can be viewed largely as utopic. When the idea was pushed forward at the Rencontres et Échanges at Dak'Art 1992 and elaborated further in 1996, it took into account sweeping globalization, the position of modern and contemporary African art at the bottom of the value system of the international art world, and more importantly historical injustices such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, racism, and colonialism, upon which global capital was built and which continues to exploit the African commonweal. In spite of the obvious merits of the Dak'Art position and my convictions, I think it is also necessary to rigorously evaluate the idea of a common cultural market shorn of sentiments and myths in order to arrive at what is possible and that which reflects the reality on ground. Hazy ideals such as the European Union easily come to mind, no less because of its moral bankruptcy and a certain hierarchy of inclusion. I am thinking about Greece's current economic debacle on the one hand; the contingent history of the World Wars, the Greek origins of Western civilization tied to the Frankfurt School, and Germany's current position in Europe, on the other hand. These are all food for thought. Our neoliberal present does not always mesh with myth or fiction. One is mindful of idealism-driven positions that end up serving a lucky few. I am also thinking, more specifically, about other forms of collective agendas on the continent such as the African Union, and the various economically driven sub-regional blocs such as ECOWAS, SADC, etc., or even NEPAD. They are all window dressing, platforms that are yet to mean anything. They are yet to reflect or achieve the reasons they were established in the first plac*e*.

With these in mind, I still think that Dak'Art has tried to fulfil some of its set objectives, albeit in a rudimentary way. It remains a viable platform that showcases African artists and introduces them to the international art world system. One can also think of Dak'Art's role on the continent as being that of creating or stabilizing an emerging African art world; artists, galleries, auction houses, curators, etc. For example, under the auspices of Dak'Art 2014, there was a major conference on Black Consciousness, organized by art historian Salah Hassan through Cornell University's Institute of Comparative Modernities. The curator Bisi Silva brought her Asiko platform, the most important avenue for training the next generation of curators and art practitioners in Africa, to Dakar, to coincide with the biennale. These among other events occurred during Dak'Art 2014 and point more clearly to a more diffused system that the biennale can engender, but more importantly, how a common agenda can still be achieved in other forms and through other means.

NM: Your review of the ninth edition of Dak'Art was positive, if not optimistic. In it you touched on the subject of "the recurring problem of paucity of funding almost jeopardized the staging of the biennale and some scaling back of programming". In your position within the curatorial team, what was your strategy in dealing with this "recurring problem" and how was this transcended?

SN: I am not sure that I suggested that the situation was optimistic in my review. The ninth

edition was the most precarious in the biennale's history. It was competing for attention with the various legacy projects of then president of Senegal, Monsieur Abdoulaye Wade. It was also the moment the European Union, its biggest sponsor after the Senegalese government, decided to terminate its partnership with the biennale. That the Dak'Art administration under the leadership of former Secretary General Monsieur Ousseynou Wade was able to make it happen in the face of government's lack of interest or commitment was admirable. Maybe that was the tint of optimism you read into my review. The ninth Dak'Art was the most difficult in the annals of the biennale.

Like most biennales, Dak'Art suffers from lack of adequate funding. The government of Senegal is the major sponsor, and there are all sorts of red tape and official bureaucracy, as you can imagine. The biggest challenge, however, for the biennale is its lack of capacity as an institution and the fact that a lot of people are interested in what Dak'Art can do for them and not how it can be supported and strengthened to play its role effectively. We encountered similar difficulties in putting together the eleventh iteration. It was a tough situation to work with the Biennale's administration that did not fully grasp the importance of the biennale to Senegal and Africa.

NM: What were some of your reservations going into the curation of Dak'Art 2014?

SN: Having attended several previous iterations of the biennale, I was fully aware of its enduring challenges. I was mostly worried about the biennale administration, if it understood the enormity of its responsibility. With the FESMAN 2010 fiasco in mind, I was very concerned about the treatment of artists and their works. Dak'Art has not always been very effective in handling logistical issues despite its existence for more than twenty-five years. At each edition, it always appeared as if it was the first outing of the biennale, as if there was no institutional memory about previous iterations. As curators of Dak'Art 2014, my colleagues and I were aware of some if not all of these issues. But we were prepared to cut the new administration some slack. As it turned out, the lack of experience became progressively worse over the course of the biennale. What should have been a very beautiful experience for everyone involved became a difficult one. Still, Dak'Art is a festival one holds very dear to one's heart because of its history, longevity, and the selflessness of the government and people of Senegal. It is their gift to Africa.

NM: Taking your curation as a moment for critical reflection on the biennale's impact on contemporary art in Africa over the last twenty years, what are your hopes for the biennale for the next twenty years?

SN: I would say that Dak'Art 2014 was an opportunity for us to re-insert the biennale into the art world's consciousness. I had use the word "reposition" in the past to describe what we set out to do. I am not sure that we ended up doing that not because we did not want to, but because the opportunity to do so was largely distorted by the biennale's administration. Yet at the back of our minds, we felt that it was an opportunity to explore the role a biennale can play in addressing our common humanism. We were thinking about the biennale's history and raison d'être. It was primarily created to fill a void: the absence of a legitimate voice for contemporary artistic production by African and diaspora artists. The year it was founded, 1989, holds symbolic historic value. It was the moment the international art world began to globalize. The Magiciens de la terre exhibition, in spite of its shortcomings, especially operating with a different set of values for Western and non-Western artists, is generally considered as the obvious catalyst. It was one of the few exhibitions that attempted to give prominence to non-Western artists in a period when they hovered largely in the margins. Even more significant, for the purpose of this conversation, is the anthological The Other Story exhibition curated by the respected artist and social entrepreneur Rasheed Araeen, which focused on modernism from a black British perspective. These events can be viewed as isolated, having no direct bearing on the Senegalese government's decision to create Dak'Art. Yet considered together, they were all speaking a similar language of de-centring, of dismantling the Eurocentric vision of the art world at that point in time. In Senegal, the government's rhetoric was that it was the successor of the First World Festival of Negro Arts of 1966, which was part of the first wave of international festivals that celebrated global black modernism in the independence decades of the 1960s and 1970s. We took all these histories into consideration as we conceptualized the eleventh iteration of the biennale.

NM: Could you explain in what ways and why Dakar is different from Venice, São Paolo, and other international biennials?

SN: Every biennial has its individual identity, agenda, and frames of reference. At the beginning,

Dak'Art espoused an emancipatory rhetoric that derived from percolating postcolonial discourses or, at least, it was read in that light. It has focused great attention on African and African diaspora artists as the core of its institutional identity. It is an example of a geographically, and ethnically, if you like, circumscribed venue, that illustrates what Monika Szewczyk describes as a critical regionalism that some biennales evince to ward off global pressure. I am more inclined to say that Dak'Art deploys pan-Africanism (advanced loosely in some of its iterations), which may be deemed parochial as an ideological, organizational, governing strategy, to secure a particular institutional identity that distinguishes it from other art biennales. Biennales such as Venice and São Paulo are much bigger global events than Dak'Art and are also the two oldest art biennales in the world. Both biennales, for the major part of their history, reflected a dominant Eurocentric vision of art modernity. I think where Dak'Art differs from the two, beyond its focused interest in artists of African descent, is its lack of financial means and prestige that both institutions command. Beyond that, biennales these days are a mirror of each other.

NM: While its importance is stressed, Dak'Art tends to be evaluated only on its failings and not its own benchmarks, i.e. the idea that Dak'Art–as the only biennale dedicated to African art–has failed to give artists from Africa a chance to occupy a space and position in the international art scene, and it is reproached for following the trends and structures of the global art community that contribute to an ever flawed exhibition, because in trying to emulate something else it fails to engage its own unique context.

SN: There is always the tendency to expect the worst from Africa. Though Dak'Art has not always helped its case, it is not critiqued for following international trends, whatever that might mean. Obviously one recognizes the critical insights posited by Rasheed Araeen and Anna Stielau in their respective reviews of the Biennale in Third Text in 2002 and in The Postcolonialist in 2014. Both reviews were objective, well-intentioned, and intellectually relevant. But the saying that when one dines with the Devil, it has to be with a long spoon is particularly apt in describing what the biennale is up against. Swim or sink, it has to chart its own alternative path while hoping to remain a credible platform in the international mainstream. I believe that is the least we can expect of it. My own criticism of the Biennale is that it eschews best practices in its organisation.

NM: The structural, organisational flaws and the inability of the Biennale to provide a reliable organisation have escalated to the point where artists refrain from participating in it. How much truth would you say lies in these statements, and with your team of curators how did you engage these perceptions?

SN: Quite to the contrary. In spite of its many challenges, it is still viewed by many as the most credible platform for contemporary art in Africa. In fact, most African artists want to show there because it provides a ready path to the international mainstream. We did not deal with the perceptions you mentioned. Instead, we had a deluge of applications that included serial applicants and those who have participated in several editions of the Biennale. Without mentioning names, some of the applicants are those who you would consider to be big names in the international scene.

NM: The Dakar Biennale in its past episodes has claimed the African continent as its focus. To what extent has its impact been felt, and what is the level of awareness of the Biennale within the continent?

SN: Well, you and I are very cognizant of this fact, and that is why we are having this conversation. A significant number of artists in and out of Africa, in addition to most local art scenes on the continent, know about the importance of Dak'Art. The general public might not be very aware of it. This is usually the case given that high art is not exactly popular culture. Having said that, the scenario you have painted is not limited to Dak'Art or Africa. We can look intently at other biennales such as Liverpool, Sharjah, Gwangju, or Moscow, for example. Beyond the art community (local and international), arguably only a small fraction of the general public in those contexts mark their calendars in anticipation of such events before they happen. Art exhibitions are not music festivals. Bigger biennales such as the Venice or Documenta have become part of popular culture and so would attract greater visibility and visitors. Yet it is important to state that we received more than 700 applications for Dak'Art 2014 from all over the continent and the diaspora. That should give you a sense of the Dak'Art Biennale's impact or reputation. And, of course, a lot more applications sent via snail mail never made it to Dakar.

NM: The Biennales generally combined their art exhibits with conferences that dealt with issues of

contemporary relevance. What were the main areas of discussion in your program and why?

SN: The Rencontres et Échanges, (Dak'Art's official conference meetings) was quite dense in 2014, more than was the case in the past. Its cocktail of panels explored topics including "The artist and the gallery manager", "Contemporary art institutions: fairs, auction houses, museums, biennales", "Art dealers, buyers, collectors, sponsors", and "Journals and magazines of contemporary art", to mention a few.

NM: For the 2006 edition, Dak'Art introduced what it described as a 'college of curators' to determine the selection and to set the conditions for a 'balanced representation' of the various areas of the continent, and the selection process was modified such that, in addition to the traditional approach of inviting artists to submit portfolios, individual curators could propose artists for consideration. In 2014, how was the Biennale and its curation structured? What are the criteria for the selection of participating artists/curators? How much did/were you able to deviate from the much criticised "open call" process?

SN: I have a contrary opinion regarding what you have described as "the much criticised open call process." It is indeed reflective of how people would give a dog a bad name to hang it. As I already pointed out, it is part of the narrative that Africa is set up to fail. The open call process is one of those inventions in the context of art biennials that help to distinguish Dak'Art from a lot of biennials. It gives agency to artists and democratizes the process of selection if it is properly done. It has allowed the Biennale to be able to discover young talented artists who otherwise might have been marginalised, as they are an unknown quantity. It is also a process that allows the Biennale to manage its meagre resources. It does not have the resources of the Venice Biennales or Documentas of this world. The alternative would be that curators would have to visit most African countries and the diaspora to find artists. I think the major down side of the open call process is that the curators may not properly assess the quality of artworks. Some artists are very astute at putting together dazzling portfolios, others are not. There have been situations in the past when the actual works fell short of the glory of the photographs sent as part of the submitted portfolio. Dak'Art's modus operandi combines the open call with curators' invitation of some of the participating artists. That was the case during Dak'Art 2014. My colleagues and I felt it was a balanced approach.

NM: What is the continuing justification for the Biennale? How does the Biennale as it is presently hope to remain relevant in contemporary issues in both African and global culture?

SN: Dak'Art, in spite of all its shortcomings, remains the preeminent platform for African artists. It has either helped to either launch or solidify their careers. It is viewed in that way in the international art world system. It attracts the greatest number of visitors for any art event in Africa. But like I have stated several times in this conversation and elsewhere, it must address perennial issues.

NM: How is this Biennale different from previous ones? What issues did you hope to raise, and what was the depth and level of engagement with these issues?

SN: In our first press interview with Contemporary&, we stated quite clearly that we wanted to reposition the Biennale, re-energize it, and make it once again a force to reckon with. We wanted to think more critically about the intersection of politics and aesthetics in the context of the Biennale from the perspectives of Jacques Rancière and Michael Hardt. We were drawn to the idea of the common as a binding force of humanism, not in the classical sense of commons as collectively held resources, but in reference to the Ubuntu philosophy. As such, our quest was for a deeper understanding of the human common at a time in history where the cult of the individual and the monster of neoliberal capitalism are at ravaging heights, and what art might hold as an outlet. We were thinking about these things and how they can capture Edouard Glissant's Tout-monde. The works we assembled provided a fascinating collage to work through these ideas.

NM: The Dakar Biennale is one of the few biennials that is primarily government-sponsored. How does the Biennale deal with the problem of navigating between the desires of the state and its own critical independence?

SN: I am well acquainted with Dak'Art and Senegal and would say that the state does not shape the outcome of the Biennale's exhibitions and other activities. There is an Orientation Committee, once called the Scientific Committee in a typical European fashion, populated by people who are involved in the Senegalese art world who work closely with the Biennale's administration to shape every iteration of

the Biennale. But bear this in mind: no institution anywhere in the world is independent in the true sense of the word. The so-called independent art initiatives or spaces in Africa have to conform to the funding regulations of their sponsors, and that is neoliberalism for you. The earlier we begin to lose such a delusion, the better for all of us. To be more precise, in the case of Dak'Art, after each edition, there is both internal and external assessment. The verdict that is returned nearly all the time is that the Biennale must wean itself off the government, as if when it is done all of the Biennale's problems will be gone. I have maintained that Dak'Art's problem is a lack of selfless and knowledgeable people interested in developing the much needed organisational capacity. If Dak'Art is to become a foundation, as most critics are arguing for, it might prove inimical in the long term. There are a lot of factors to consider, namely the absence of a real structure, the climate of economic uncertainty, among others. Do not get me wrong, I am not saying the government's involvement is the best-case scenario. One is truly worried that if it decides to be hands off, it would mark the beginning of the end of Dak'Art. For one thing, how can the Biennale sustain itself beyond running to Europe for hand-outs? Are there any persons or corporate organisations in Africa that are ready to put their money where their mouth is? I was in South Africa at the time of the eKAPA Sessions, and we know how challenging it was organising the Cape Biennale that never was, in spite of the fact that South Africa has the deepest economy in Africa and a better art world structure.

NM: In terms of the Biennale and the addressing of the cities' publics, not very much seems to have been written that critically reflects on the last Dak'Art, and is this either a positive sign or a dejected disinterest in rehashing the same criticisms that have plagues the Biennale traditionally?

SN: *T*here is a review of the last Dak'Art titled "Trouble in the Village" by writer Moses Serubiri, published in Africaisacountry, the online platform. Serubiri was very critical of what he felt was our academic approach to the Biennale, and more particularly our theme of "Producing the Common". He felt that it was high-sounding, especially with the citations of Glissant, Rancière, etc., and disenfranchised the local public who may not be familiar with such cultural figures. Fair enough, I would say. Yet is it a fair criticism to imply that the Dakar public, one of the most sophisticated on the continent, is not familiar with such philosophical thought that they live with every day in Senegal? Our curatorial position took the country of Léopold Senghor and the city of Dakar as our points of departure.

NM: How does the Biennale reflect on the achievements of African artists or itself as a platform? Your selection based on the open call and its positives and negatives, merely collecting some artist's works and putting them together and then calling it a biennial are fast becoming a farce.

SN: One can say that Dak'Art is not the only guilty one of what you refer to as a farce. A lot of what we see in biennials these days are heavy on verbiage, trendy on issues, and thin on substance. Biennials tend to mirror each other in terms of intent and in recycling same artists, and occasionally, same works. And as Charlotte Bydler reminds us, they have increasingly become hubs for networking where social capital and not necessarily art is emphasized. At Dak'Art 2014, we wanted to show artists who have never been in the Biennale before. I think our theme was thoughtful and was the basis of our artists' selection.

NM: Can Africa through the Biennale assert its independence or develop its own structures and vision within this context without critically confronting the dominant structures of art around the world today?

SN: To some degree, that is what Dak'Art is about, though I think you are giving it far too much responsibility that it can bear with little or no credit. As I already pointed out, it is always a "Catch-22" situation for Dak'Art in terms of how it locates itself within the matrix of the art world system. A lot of pragmatism is required to navigate the fraught terrain of a West-controlled international art world.

NM: Is it enough to say that it is a biennial representing Africa, or that it is now the only biennial representing Africa, of visual arts showing the works of African artists living both Africa and abroad?

SN: It is not the only biennial representing Africa and has never aspired to be so. When it was created there was no comparable platform on the continent. It has also evolved over the years and varied its exhibitions from one edition to the other. However, its core ideology of serving as a platform on the continent remains unchanged.

NM: Previously there have been many problems–of a material, organisational, artistic, and ideological nature–to which it seems little attention has been paid, and which consequently have prevented the Biennale from fulfilling its historical objectives. The call for critical evaluation based on the platform's crisis of purpose were called for as early as the year 2000 by Olu Oguibe and others. How healthy is the state of the biennial?

SN: As I have already pointed out, some of the issues are perennial. Others have been addressed to some degree. Dak'Art remains a work in progress.

NM: What is our responsibility as Africa-based practitioners to the Biennale and its possible futures?

SN: My hope is that Dak'Art will grow from strength to strength, as it is an important fulcrum for artistic contemporaneity on the continent. Every African artist wants to show at the Biennale. However, we must learn to do things the right way. We must shake of that mentality that, since it is Africa, people must be more tolerant of inadequacies and that there is a different set of rules for doing things in Africa. We should aspire to provide an elevated framework, context, and platform for the practice of contemporary art and its discourse. Our responsibility, therefore, is to hold the organizers of Dak'Art accountable and alive to their responsibilities.

Captions

1 Co-curators of Dak'Art 2014 – Abdelkader Damani, Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi.

2 Elise Atangana Faten Rouissi, *Le fantôme de la liberté* (Malla Ghassra) (Ghost of Freedom), installation with 17 WC in ceramic, 700 x 300 x 50cm, 2012,. Dak'Art 2014. courtesy of the artist and Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi.

3 Installing Dak'Art 2014's international exhibition, Village de la Biennale, April–May 2014. Artists Radliffe Bailey and Tam Joseph in fornt of Bailey's Storm at Sea.

4 Kamel Yahiaoui, *Le Poids des Origines,* mixed media, 115 x 69 x 75,5 cm, 2013. Dak'Art 2014. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit - Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi.

5 Locating the venue of Dak'Art 2014, January 2014.

6 Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *72 (virgins) on the sun,* sculpture and installation, mixed media, variable dimensions, Dak'Art 2014. courtesy of the artist and Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi.

Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi *is an artist, art historian, and curator of African art at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. He holds a B.A. in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nigeria; a postgraduate diploma in Museum and Heritage Studies from the University of Western Cape, South Africa; and a Ph.D. in Art History from Emory University. He co-curated the eleventh Dak'Art Biennale in 2014.*


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Daudi Karungi Director Kampala Art Biennale interviewed by Nkule Mabaso

Kampala Art Biennale 2016 will be held from 3rd September to 2nd October 2016 in Kampala. The Artistic Director is Ms. Elise Atangana.

The theme is "Seven Hills", in reference to the seven hills that circle Kampala city. It will be an experimental territory for local and international artists to explore new forms and ideas.

Related to mobility studies, the Biennale aims to question, with an aesthetic and intellectual approach, the transformation of movements in public space, physically or virtual ('public domain' and technology related) and how it affects the daily life of the population in Kampala and the East African sub-region perspectives.

Nkule Mabaso: What possibility does the position/positioning of this biennale have in defining and/or redefining geographical and cultural regions within the continent?

Daudi Karungi: Art from Africa on the international stage has always been dominated by West and South African artists. Names like El Anatsui, William Kentridge, etc. Also platforms like the Dakar art biennale and Johannesburg art fair have always been the spotlights on the continent as far as contemporary art is concerned. Kampala Biennale seeks to create a continental balance so that something major also happens in East Africa.

NM: Does it produce a counter discourse? Geographical position alone of course cannot do this, so what is the greater potential in another Africa-based biennial in contributing to the de-colonialisation discourse?

DK: Kampala Biennale focuses a lot on artists who have not previously been featured in major international art events. The Biennale aims to break the sameness of artists you find at every major art event. This is done by creating a careful mix of international and emerging and local contemporary artists.

NM: The ambition with the biennial format is always to be comprehensive and representative–has this been the approach for the curatorial direction of the biennale project in Kampala?

DK: The Biennale director's role is to appoint an artistic director, who proposes his or her own curatorial program. Once we have a curator, he or she proposes how comprehensive and representative they plan to be. Since we are in our infancy, we cannot afford to be very comprehensive because of budgets.

NM: Biennale projects suffer a kind of crisis in conceptualisation in that they do not present any new premise or possibility but reassert what is already there and can be seen to gloss over 'real' and 'local' issues in their reproduction of internationality at the expense of the immediate context. How do you respond to this statement in relation to the biennale in Kampala and your role in the conceptualisation process?

DK: I guess all this depends on the choice of artistic director. When choosing one, we look at someone with a proposal that will inspire the selected artists to create works that communicate the immediate. The biennale seeks to be different, so we believe that artists have to be honest and original with how they approach the theme in order to make the desired impact on the visiting audience.

NM: What does it mean to produce a biennale in Kampala: culturally, economically, and politically?

DK: Contemporary art as it is internationally know is alien to Kampala and its people. We set out to position the biennale in Kampala in order to educate and expose this culture of art to the people in Kampala. Increased knowledge about contemporary art will lead to more creative artists, local collectors, and critics.

NM: Biennials and other large-scale art events cannot be separated from the mechanics of capital;

what are the implications and effects of the biennial in the context of Kampala? Is the model sustainable for the context?

DK: Finance continues to be a major issue, of course. We are aware of this and we decided earlier on to build partnerships with sponsors, all our partners own the Biennale and we steadily grow with them. I believe this is sustainable in the long run.

Daudi Karungi

Born 1979, Kampala Uganda

Lives and works in Kampala

Daudi is at the forefront of a new movement to promote Ugandan art inside and outside the country. In 2007, he co-founded START, a journal of arts and culture criticism that is the first ever publication of its kind in Uganda. His a founding member of the Kampala Arts Trust, a coalition of artists and art appreciators in the country and elsewhere who are working toward the dream of establishing a modern art museum in the country. It will facilitate research, exchange programs and training as well as offering a state-of-the-art exhibition space for local works. In 2014 he started the 1st Kampala Art Biennale[1] 2014 and worked as the Artistic Director.

Born in Kampala, Daudi went to the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere University. Afriart Gallery, which he founded in 2002, is now Uganda's leading gallery. It remains devoted to developing and promoting homegrown visual artistic talent and in recent years has hosted readings by local fiction writers and other events that promote the work of Ugandans working in the creative arts. Daudi is involved in a number of innovative cross-media collaborations, such as a project using original art illustrations to promote reading among secondary school students, The paint the music project (a fusion of music and art), All color No color (a project that is aimed at breaking racial barriers), Spear and Shield bearers (a photography project celebrating significant women in Uganda).

www.afriartgallery.org
www.kampalaartstrust.org
www.kampalabiennale.org

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Images courtesy of Dauadi Karungi from Kampala Art Biennale 2014

Mishek Masamvu interviewed by Olga Speakes

Interview with Misheck Masamvu, participant in the 2014 Yango Biennale.

The interview took place over a period of time in 2015 and 2016 via Skype video conversations and emails.

Olga Speakes: You have so far participated in several biennials (Yango, Dak'art, Venice, São Tomé e Príncipe). What, if anything, does a biennial format offer for you that other exhibition formats may not?

Misheck Masamvu: It is sometimes like starting a new relationship, coming in contact with a new space, a terrain curved to develop your own artistic grammar. Often, an exhibition within an institutionalized space is like working within a baby crib, and a biennial pays homage to the artist's process of collaboration with the curatorial concept and the space. Such a setting is worth engaging with, to encapsulate personal stories and concepts. It is the unlearning of the art-making process by deconditioning a platform where experiences and concepts make the heartbeat of the conversation. When an artist goes to a biennial, we look for space for development—personal growth and development—for an opportunity, for a conversation. The biennial, for me though, is an institutional structure. It should be more about the process of creating work, looking for meaningful, helpful, and revealing discussions about the creative process and what you are trying to do. But as an artist you come across categorizations and stereotypes. The invisible barriers do exist, and not only that, people come to biennials in order to look over these invisible barriers but they already have formed expectations of what they want to see on the other side.

OS: Biennials originated in the West but have become an accepted, if criticized, way of, supposedly, providing an overview of where contemporary art is at within a certain region or globally. Do you feel that they have been able to transcend their Eurocentric history and to offer a useful structure for the artists anywhere to exhibit their work?

MM: A biennial is an open salon, where dirty laundry is often left in the open. The criticism that has plagued their existence in some quarters is marked by the scepticism that comes from the unknown intentions of the funders and curators, which are often viewed with suspicion.

OS: Is the institutional structure through which your work gets exhibited significant for you? And, if so, in what ways? What are you looking for?

MM: An artwork, unfortunately, has to be presented within a certain context for it to reveal its strength. I view the institutional structure as one of many layers within my canvas; its role is to provide a transparent link between source and medium hosting the message. Today, I am not interested in spaces to simply exhibit my work; I am more concerned with defining space as the source, itself revealing a certain experience.

OS: Your work is both personal and, at the same time, activist. You said before, that in some cases your hope for your work is to be the voice of the voiceless. Do you find that the biennial format allows for a higher degree of volume in that voice? Some biennial critics might argue that it is a levelling and universalizing force that has the power to drown out individual voices in the service of global discourses about contemporary art. Could you comment on that?

MM: I do not believe in a revolution fought with foreign weapons. In the same vein, pseudo-biennials attempting to speak for the voiceless is like a wolf in sheep's clothing. The language of an artist is both individual and universal, and that does not mean his or her message is for the rest of the world. Currently a global system exists that controls channelling and receiving information, while the consumer is meant to take their poison at will and die alone. When artists speak of death in the presence of their oppressors (those who seek to institutionalize the artist's career), they seek to incarnate their soul above the levelling and universalizing force encapsulated in dosages of news bulletins. I believe every artist knows that; if you have a healthy relationship with death, then, global discourses on contemporary art are just decorated coffins on a shelf.

OS: What have been your worst and your best experiences of exhibiting your work within a biennial context?

MM: Every biennial is an EXPERIENCE, there is no good or bad. After participating in one, all you just need is time to recover and continue working.

OS: The role of the curator, especially the so-called 'star curator', is often debated in relation to biennials. What, in your opinion, is the ideal relationship between an artist and the curator of a biennial? Could you describe experiences, if any, that came close to this ideal?

MM: ART speaks for itself. A curator must be willing to engage in a conversation, the dialog in creating an artwork sometimes needs more people than the artist and their artwork. I met someone who showed me resolved artworks created by an untrained hand from the "Continent". The intention of the man showing me the image, his objective, perhaps, was to show how an untrained painter discovered a solution that contemporary art struggles with. The painter had discovered and was able to diagnose the difficulty he faced in resolving his visual literacy. This viewpoint stands to assume a position that, what is perceived to be naive, is a notion derived from a stereotypical position rather make a prognosis of the true nature of self. This conversation to which I am referring took place in relation to some aspects of my work because it was dealing with today's issues, because it chose to deal with contemporary issues, whereas the work could transcend into the purity of self (he called it pure art). It is an ongoing conversation in my work process that I am inclined to take either way, but it has been a conversation that I could not refute to distinguish the journey and the traveller in which a good artwork embodies both.

OS: On the African continent, there have been examples of both long-lasting, well-established biennials like Dak'Art as well as those that ceased after only a few iterations (I am thinking of the Johannesburg Biennale). What, in your view, is important for the success of a biennial, especially in the African context? Do you believe that these parameters of success are different for each specific country where a biennial is based, or are they similar across the board?

MM: A successful biennial is a kind of space that is open for reinvention. In my view, for a biennial to be successful it must adhere to the geo-social and economic realities in which it operates. There must be an in-country supportive and organizational structure that is needed to keep such platforms in existence. One important aspect to note is to make information about the biennial accessible. Such information must include a program and public forum where interested bodies can lobby ideas or structural adjustments beyond the conditioning of the artist through "unrelated themes" and impractical budgets. There are many pseudo art-related programs running parallel to local arts practices that alienate local audiences, leaving them with no clue as to what is going on in their backyard. There is a need to raise local awareness and interest by lobbying for transparency in the making of the right connections with all stakeholders involved.

There must be more awareness and transparency in the location where a biennial takes place. The connection with grassroots programs is essential in order to come up with a biennial that makes a difference; otherwise, a biennial is like an alien that lands in a location, which is also an alien space to the biennial itself and leaves no lasting positive impact.

The keys are education and a genuine interest and engagement with what is happening on the ground. The primary reason for a biennial should not be just a statistic but the development of the local space and its communities, artistic ones and non-artistic ones. There is never data available to see how many different new kinds of people a biennial managed to attract each time.

Working with grassroots groups means to identify the community and work with them as a module for many years and see how things have changed. What positive changes have come out of this work over the years? Has the art scene developed? Has the community's relationship with art changed? Are there more people taking up art as a career? Has a long-term interest in art developed?

OS: How does the fact of being selected to show one's work at a biennial impact the artist? And what do you think about the process itself?

MM: There are not that many biennials in Africa, so it is hard to make comparisons as to what works and what does not. One often hears the criticism that the selection of artists for a particular biennial was not fair. Curators often have their hands tied and can only have 50% of what they want, and have 50% of what they can live with. Biennials are often not done or created by the artists for the

artists. There is a viewpoint that relegates artists to the outside of the dealings with all the organizational and financial issues. So it is the others who do the selections, and their motivations could be a problem. There is often a lot of dissatisfaction with the selections; and it is claimed that no information is made available to the artists on the ground. The artists are just told, so, as a result of the process itself, artists may feel that they are being conditioned to do what the curator wants them to do to meet their goals as they have that power of choice. The result—what ends up in the show—is never 100% but, nonetheless, it is often 50% acceptable (to both the curators and the artists).

The danger for the biennials in Africa is the promotion of the "fraction", perpetuated by the hunt for the new name, in the context of the recent rise in interest in the art from the continent; of those who are prepared to compromise to give the curator and the audiences that matter what they want and expect. They also forget that an artist comes from a community, is a member of the community, and sometimes that community is a sacred source. One hopes the focus should shift back from the drive to consume to focus on development, self-growth. Biennials on the continent should not be made for geopolitical reasons but should be inclusive of the communities where they operate.

OS: You mentioned that you still see a lot of stereotypes and preconceived ideas about art from Africa. Could you tell me more about your experiences?

MM: Africa is 'Africa' whatever that means.

Misheck Masamvu *lives and works in Harare. He studied at Atelier Delta, Harare, and at the Kunst Akademie in Munich, Germany. Known as the leader of a new school of Zimbabwean painting that has emerged in recent years, Masamvu, together with his wife, Gina Maxim, nurtures young artists through their Village Unhu studio and residency programme, some of whom have gone on to establish great reputations and international careers.*

Masamvu's work became known on the rest of the continent and internationally, which led to his participation at the 2006 Dakar Biennale, and he was confirmed as the eminent practitioner of his generation with his participation in the 54th Venice Biennale [2011] where he represented Zimbabwe.

Olga Speakes *lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa. She completed her Honours in Curatorship at the Michaelis School of Fine Art and Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town in 2013 and is currently writing her dissertation on South African Diaspora art.*

Captions

1 Misheck Masamvu, *Behind locked doors does not feel safe anymore* (2014), Oil on canvas, 150 × 210 cm. Courtesy of the artist and blank projects.

2 Misheck Masamvu, *Chains, shouting, hand clapping and laughing* (2014), Oil on canvas, 103 × 92 cm. Courtesy of the artist and blank projects.

3 Misheck Masamvu at Yango Biennale. Installation view. Courtesy Yango Biennale

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