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CLOSING ADDRESS

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I am sure you have all had an engaging and productive time during the last couple of days. I would like to thank the organisers of the conference for making this wonderful engagement happen, focusing on the notion of artistic research, which I believe is a relatively new subject in the African context. I feel honoured to find myself here with you, taking part in the conference and actively witnessing the journey towards contextualising the subject of artistic research. Merely having this platform for sharing and discussing knowledge is critical, no matter whether there might be misunderstandings and tensions between different worlds, which I believe are also very productive encounters.

During the conference, I have had the privilege to participate in presentations, discussions, performances, and performance-lectures, focusing on many issues related to African philosophies, endogenous knowledge, embodied experiences, epistemologies, ontologies, cosmologies … Struggles for life and to live with dignity (what Latin American endogenous scholars call … "Good Living"—*Buen Vivir*) … Institutional and educational conditions, challenges, limitations, and opportunities … Decolonising strategies and the role of artists, artist-researchers, artist-fieldworkers, artist-scholars … The power of music, drama, theatre, poetry, storytelling, dance, performance, installation, therapy, architecture … Also dealing with the urban and the township, the centre and the periphery … The intention of journeying to the unknown, to the not known, to the unknowable, to the undiscovered, to the unrecognised, to the unintended, to the unimagined, to the unexpected … Also involving through a process of healing and dealing with the ghosts of violence from the past … Loss, mourning, grief, and indignation … Care and becoming … Relations, translations, representations … The physical, the digital, the spiritual, the dream, the hope, the desire, the memory … Interdisciplinarity, participation, collaboration … The queer, the oppressed, the marginalised, the unprivileged … The personal, the ethical, the political … the logical, the geographical, the historical … Beauty and order … Gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality … The South African, the African, the Global South, the European, the Euro-American, the International …

The conference facilitated a platform for us to come together and engage with issues related to artistic research and ways of decolonising knowledge in the African contexts. I am not sure if this conference is the first of its kind to be organised in the continent, but it is crucial to have more platforms like this to discuss the subject in a way that makes more sense to our causes.

As we know, for many western individuals, Africa is considered to be smaller than it is. I am sure many of African professionals have the experience dealing with such, either ignorance or arrogance. Time to time in different academic and professional platforms in the West, … I have been asked questions related to artistic research practices in "Africa." I always have problems trying to respond properly to such questions. Maybe … a few of us have the audacity to give a clear answer but, for sure, many of us have struggled to make sense of the context from which we are speaking. The reason why I am mentioning this is to remind ourselves to avoid making similar mistakes when we discuss artistic research in "Africa." It's very important to keep in mind that there are different cultural, political, and institutional structures, resources, and understandings that should be negotiated and recognised through such discursive platforms.

As it was reflected during this conference, in one way or the other, artistic research is a subject that is not yet fully clear in its function. Even if the subject seemed to be lively from the outside, I strongly doubt whether it has really been as effective as it is theorised and discussed so far. As one of the trendsetting European countries on the subject of artistic research since the 90s, the United Kingdom is still accommodating

the largest number of artistic research programmes. Even if many European art institutions have already adapted and are adapting the subject of artistic research into their art education programmes, it should also be noted that some of the programmes still have issues of accreditation and nomenclature to be recognised as independent research programmes of study in the arts. There are powerful European countries where there are no PhD programmes in the arts. This is because (of course, among other factors) educational policies even in some European countries do not accept the fact that art can be research or intellectual practice.[1]

This tells us a lot about how far we have to go to make the subject of artistic research recognised and available or accessible as an independent programme of study through our art institutions. We have to understand, translate, and refine the subject carefully and continue fighting for its existence and accessibility. The main question here is, how do we incorporate and activate the subject, considering our own institutional and cultural realities and worldviews?

Having an art institution inside a bigger research university has been considered a sign of institutional advancement in many contexts (inside and outside the continent). And, indeed, it is because a university that is incapable of handling its common and popular departments like Engineering, Chemistry, or Medicine, wouldn't think of adding an art department to the institutional context, which will clearly become an educational disaster. But, unfortunately, that's how we mostly experience the conditions of many art institutions in African contexts.

In a few cases, in the West, art institutions are organised under the structure of an Academy, with an independent University status, such as the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts (where I am currently working as an artist-researcher). There are also other cases where art institutions are part of bigger research universities. I would say, the latter institutional structure is far more common in the African continent, where art schools are subjected to deal with bigger institutional politics of universities, like the Alle School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa, where I teach, and Wits School of the Arts in Johannesburg, where we are having this platform. On the one hand, such institutional structure can be a benefit for art education and research, through which different disciplines can be accessible for collaboration. On the other hand, however, the gap in the system and incapability of university leaders or officials to encourage multi-disciplinary and cross-departmental collaborations has been making it difficult to realise productive engagements.

Some of the components of artistic research are to have cross-disciplinary, dialogic, and participatory engagements. With that, either art academies or art schools under bigger universities in the West have the privilege to decide with whom they want to work or collaborate through different artistic research projects. But, in many of our contexts, the nature of institutional structure has kept art education unable to break out from the stigma that labels it as a craft that does not contain intellectual content. This distorted understanding of art has made art schools a comfort zone for many of those who neglect the importance of updating themselves toward better educational engagement, which should be ethical and political. In addition, the role and function of the arts as critical engagement couldn't claim its position through different research activities performed in the different disciplines under universities;

> Art practice and the making of art represent a unique form of knowledge production, is a huge asset for research universities. Our mission is not simply a matter of unity, of making other disciplines more creative. Rather, to have the possibility to bring interdisciplinary and cross departmental research endeavors.[2]

As you may have witnessed, many university officials or administrators neither know nor care about the role and contribution of art departments in higher education and research activities. Understanding the ongoing institutional realities in the African context, I believe that art schools may function better without being inside bigger universities. I am not saying this to compensate for the incapability of art institutions to demand their positions as part of the intellectual hub. Rather, I am saying this because their independent position would make them deal with the naked reality that they are on their own, without the umbrella of a research university, which, by default, made them part of the intellectual arena. But, even if the institutional structure seems to be hard to change in many cases, what art institutions can do about it should not be limited.

Six years ago, after passing through all institutional and administrative bureaucracies, we developed a new graduate programme at the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design, Addis Ababa University. In the program, we have primarily adopted the subject of artistic research, in a way that works for our context. The programme was formulated under the nomenclature "Inter-Disciplinary Artistic Practices." I was one of the very few staff members who worked hard on the development of the programme. Since the programme enrolled the first batch of students, we have experienced layers of problems and challenges in relation to translation, resources, references, fieldwork, collaboration, creative production, writing about it, … endless challenges. To make a long story short, the programme has consistently been full of moments where disappointments and inspirations continuously eliminate one another. With all the problematics that are and will be, I strongly believe that the programme has been an effective learning platform that should continue with whatever cost it requires.

Beside the experiences I have acquired through developing and working in the programme, I have also been activated myself in multiple research-based artistic projects locally as well as internationally. I am also currently working in a two-year-long artistic research project at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, funded by the FWF-PEEK Science Project Fund. Using my experiences dealing with artistic research projects and programmes, I would like to try to share a few concerns, insights, and directions for our ongoing discussions on the subject of artistic research in relation to the African contexts. I will briefly raise points connected to the questions of "Translation" and "Epistemology," the role of "artists/intellectuals," and the notion of "Participation."

Unfortunately, the formal educational or pedagogical systems in the African continent were mainly generated through our colonial relations, which did not fit with existed epistemological realities in the different locality. The Cartesian understanding is central to the western mode of knowledge production, which is not the case in different African traditional knowledge production systems and worldviews. Adapting such unfit knowledge production structures into the different contexts in the continent resulted in indigenous or local knowledges and embodied experiences to be neglected—brutally so—through many academic engagements and community or place-based artistic and research projects. I strongly believe that artistic research can play a huge role to bring these distorted epistemological conditions (what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "Epistemicide")[3] into intellectual discourses at a wider level.

All western thinking, whether critical or not, is grounded on the Cartesian idea that nature is, as such, an unlimited resource unconditionally available to human beings. The explanation that western thought gives to this conception is weak because it only recognises those problems that can be discussed within the Cartesian epistemological and ontological model. In such a model, there is no accessible room to understand the different non-western traditions that consider nature as though it

has its own agency and rights. How will it be possible for the Cartesians to recognise that there is even a nation in the Global South that provides constitutional rights for nature? How do they understand why people in many places are struggling against extractivist projects? Thus, the Cartesian paradigm does not at all address the fundamental problem underlying questions in the Global South. Moreover, and most importantly, it fails to understand the strength and logic of social movements that have been organised within the relation between nature and society, according to which nature appears as Mother Earth, a living organism to which we belong and which is entitled to her own rights;

> Our knowledge is intuitive; it goes straight to what is urgent and necessary. It is made of words and silences with-actions, reasons-with-emotions. Our life does not allow us to distinguish life from thought. All our everydayness is thought of every day in detail. We think of our tomorrow as if it were today. We have no important questions, only productive questions.[4]

If the notion of artistic research can carefully be studied, understood, and translated into the different local realities, it can work more effectively in the Global South. Artistic practice, as a unique mode of knowledge production, has more legitimate possibilities and spaces in the Global South where there is no singular understanding of the world; where multiple worlds are accommodated beyond the "One-World World" conceptions of the West (the world as a pluriverse), where relational ontologies have been a strong part of cultural understandings, where fear of violence and vulnerability have been societal realities, where there are different ongoing social struggles, etc. All these and other existing dimensions have huge potential to be discussed and incorporated through the translation of artistic research subject into our contexts.

As artist/intellectuals, our struggle should not be about becoming avant-garde through our ideas and creative engagements. The vanguard theory should not be our concern anymore, because it's not ours and doesn't work well for us. We, artist/intellectuals, mainly based inside research institutions, should redefine ourselves differently. Unlike the West, where revolutionary theories are entertained inside reactionary institutions, we must encourage ourselves and our students to go to communities and nature to learn from embodied knowledges that are not yet in books.

With that in mind, through our art education, students must not only be bombarded with a pile of theory books. Communities and nature already speak our languages and have a lot to teach us. The fact that we, as educated professionals, have mainly been baptised through Eurocentric knowledge production systems means that it is taking us too long to realise what knowledges we already have and what is more important for us. We all know that most scientific researchers in the continent have obsessively trusted recorded knowledge from books, through which embodied experiences, knowledge from communities and nature has been neglected thus far.[5]

One of the major reasons why artistic research has been difficult to understand, process, and engage in our contexts is that we have tried so hard to adapt mainstream academic languages and to imitate scientific research strategies. We must understand that artistic research should be critically engaged differently. This can also be a major direction through which we can inspire and invite professionals from different disciplines in the university to collaborate with us. When we manage to maintain a clear stand on such directions, it is not only art education or artistic research that will be liberated as a "practice of freedom,"[6] but also the distorted mentality of research institutions toward local and embodied knowledge production systems and the pedagogy of the land.[7]

The proposal to incorporate embodied experiences through our education doesn't make structured knowledge from books less important. In fact, we can't be able to maintain what Santos calls "the ecology of knowledge"[8] without incorporating structured knowledge and academic platforms. It's just that we have to find a way to negotiate with both knowledge production systems, which takes time. But still, there must be understandings and conceptions that we should accept with reservations, while some should be rejected without reservations because they don't go along with our understanding of knowledge. We know this because we have tried and failed many times. In fact, we have failed so badly, in such a way that we cannot fail anymore. So, the desire to have endogenous or local knowledge incorporated into our curriculums cannot be a project of failure. Instead, it might also bring us alternatives and solutions for our modern problems, which are not resolvable via modern solutions.

So, in that sense, popular theories cannot be the only way to guide and determine our engagements. We have to recognise that theory and practice have ghostly relations. Between theory and action, there may be correspondence, but there is no sequence. As it was very well explained and discussed by influential scholars and educators, like bell hooks, our curriculum and education, in general, should centre itself on what they call "engaged pedagogy."[9] Such engagements are not only about generating the possibility of participation, with which you can stand by what you believe, but also becoming an active witness thereof.

Artistic research engagements usually contain elements of "participation." The question is, how do we understand, initiate, and activate the concept of participation in our artistic research projects. Participatory art, as it has been discussed by many scholars, following the legacies of European art movements as well as the Latin American emancipatory praxis (e.g., Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal), feminism, civil rights movements, and Stonewall in the United States, etc. provided a solid foundation for the "social turn" in the 90s, when artists and art collectives like Suzanne Lacy, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Ultra Red, and many others challenged the division between the artist and the audience, and approached social relations as the subject of their aesthetic concern.[10]

Following that, many contemporary artists around the world have been working intensively on artistic research projects that mainly involve participation in different levels and contexts. But, the fact is that we have witnessed layers of problematics in participatory art because many artistic research projects involving participation have been attached to strong, self-possessed artist individuals, and many dispossessed bodies, struggling with what André Lepecki calls the heritage of participatory art—a "disengaged participating passivity."[11] Participatory art has secured the position of artists as knowing entities—vanguards, creators—while communities, participants, or audiences remain to be known subjects. Lepecki mocks the conditions of participatory art, and asks, "How much in participating and by participating do we actually engage with a kind of moving that takes us no other place than where we are (always) already (properly) expected to arrive at?"[12] Through artistic research activities in our continent, it is very important to find a departure point in the method/ology of participatory art that we should include in our curricula and research engagements.

Santos insisted that the vanguard theory has come too far already, and we need to reconsider it as a more effective strategy through non-Eurocentric conceptions, for which he proposes a "rearguard theory." Neither artists nor intellectuals nor artist/intellectuals should consider themselves as vanguards, creators, or leaders in their different forms of engagement anymore. They can be initiators for an effective

encounter within audiences or communities, but then, they should *follow*–through careful listening.[13]

Through my experience during this conference, I have witnessed multiple forms of engagements, which clearly have the elements of careful listening and the notion of "initiating and following"[14] in their artistic research activities, such as the cultural entrepreneur who worked with young people in the township around the idea of the return, crossings, and remaining.[15] It also includes the Ghanaian artist and educator, who has worked with communities on the Vodu religion and who extended the knowledge he has acquired to develop materials to teach children about themselves and their values.[16] I am simply referring to very few of the presentations of which I happened to be a part, but I believe there are many more.

> How you fight determines who you will become when the battle is over.[17]

Rearguard theories can only validate themselves by their practical results, by the evaluation of the changes made by all their protagonists, among whom artists, intellectuals, and activists are always minor figures.[18] This theory of the rearguard can be adapted and accompanied by different African philosophies, ontologies, and cosmologies. Various embodied local and endogenous knowledge in the different regions—on how we relate ourselves to each other, to the land and nature, how we negotiate with non-human agents in the everyday, how we deal with ghosts, ancestors, and monsters, etc.—should also be considered through the translation process of rearguard theories.

In general, it is very important to recognise that all these might be difficult to achieve, but they are not impossible. But it takes time—time long enough to lose our patience. But our aim should not only be toward the outcome but also the quality of the process.

> What we (societies in the Global South) have in common is that we all have to fight against many obstacles in order to live with dignity—that is to say, to live well … But our struggle depends less on our objectives than on the quality of our actions and emotions in striving to attain them.[19]

After all, we are families, friends, neighbours, and allies of communities who believe that "I am, because you are." Our continuous task and responsibility should be to add carefully, "… so that we become."

Thank you.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Wilson and Ruiten, *Share Handbook for Artistic Research Education*.

2 Colangelo quoted in Otten, 'The Role of Arts Practice in the Research University'.

3 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

4 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 12.

5 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

6 See hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

7 Dannenmann and Haig-Brown, 'A Pedagogy of the Land'.

8 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 115.

9 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

10 Thompson, *Living as Form*; Lind, *Selected Maria Lind Writing*; Kravagna, 'Working on the Community'; Kester, *The One and the Many*; Jackson, *Social Works*; Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*; Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*; Bishop, 'The Social Turn.

11 Lepecki, 'From Partaking to Initiating', 28.

12 Lepecki, 'From Partaking to Initiating', 29.

13 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

14 The notions of initiating and following are borrowed from performance studies as discussed in Lepecki, 'From Partaking to Initiating'.

15 See Motholo's contribution to this volume.

16 See Adjei's contribution to this volume.

17 Taiaiake, *Wasáse*.

18 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

19 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 6.

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