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Editor's Introduction - Arts Research Africa 2020 Conference Proceedings

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2020-07
Arts Research Africa (ARA)
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29240

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/9N7YH

INTRODUCTION

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In his closing address to the Arts Research Africa 2020 Conference, the Ethiopian artist-scholar, Berhanu Ashagrie Deribew, catalogued the rich variety of events that took place over the three days of the conference:

> 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 …

These proceedings are an attempt to capture the wide range of responses, listed by Deribew, to the question of artistic research in Africa that were presented at the ARA2020 Conference held in South Africa at the University of Witwatersrand in January 2020, which was organised and planned by Zanele Madiba, Mareli Stolp and myself. Since the question of artistic research in Africa is new and evolving, we structured the ARA2020 Conference to operate as an open-ended, interrogative machine, giving space to the more than 60 presenters who were selected from the many responses to our conference call. We encouraged contributions that tested not only the ideas of artistic research but that investigated new formats for the presentation of artistic research. We also sought to engage with the more than two decades of debates and experiments that have gone a long way towards establishing the field in the Global North. For these reasons, the ARA2020 Conference was opened with both a keynote lecture and a keynote "performance-dialogue". The lecture was delivered by Michael Schwab, the founding editor of the European Journal for Artistic Research—while the keynote "performance-dialogue" was performed by Nhlanhla Mahlangu, the South African multi-skilled performer, director, composer, and researcher. The performance was followed by a dialogue on the work and its implications for research, between Mahlangu and Jane Taylor, a South African academic who works at the point of intersection between scholarly enquiry and artistic practice.

The conjunction of the two forms was intended to emphasise the equivalence of both forms of presentation. The rest of the conference incorporated a wide variety of inputs, from traditional conference paper presentations and panels, to experiments with the staging of other examples of "performance-lectures," which ranged from interactive engagements to experientially orientated workshops. We were also as inclusive as we could be, treating postgraduate student work as having the same potential as presentations by established figures in the field. Our goal was to give exposure to as wide a variety of work as possible, while encouraging experimentation with new formats of presentation, believing that all of this work has the potential to open up new ways of thinking about the relationship between artistic practices and research in Africa in the 21st century.

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released the proceedings as an Open Access publication, under a Creative Commons License.[1] This ensures that the contributors' work is protected and that the authors retain full ownership of their intellectual property. We encourage our contributors to circulate, revise, and republish their work on other platforms. There is an urgency to this project that requires that we utilise all available channels to stimulate discussion and debate about the meaning of artistic research in the African context. The urgency of advancing the debate also led us to drop the time-consuming process of peer-review,[2] and to work to put these proceedings into publication as rapidly as possible.

While not the first gathering on the African continent to explore the relationship between artistic practice and research,[3] the ARA2020 Conference was notable for our strategic decision to use the term "artistic research" as the focus, rather than any of the other terms that have been used to designate the work in the field, such as "practice-led," or "practice-driven," or even the generic term "arts-based." The other strategic decision that we made with the design of ARA2020 was to fasten the theme of the conference to the imperative of decolonisation. Decolonisation is a pressing issue in South African universities, brought to the fore by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests that erupted in 2015 and 2016, and which were subsequently taken up as a challenge to established modes of pedagogy and institutional culture in many educational institutions in this country.[4] We pushed this theme strongly, asking contributors to consider: not just "how can?", but "how does?" artistic research actively contribute to decolonisation? The material gathered in these proceedings might be read as an answer, in a rich variety of ways, to that question.

Over the last two decades or more, artistic research has become more or less established in the universities of the Global North, under a variety of different nomenclatures, and in response to various institutional pressures and opportunities. Beginning in the United Kingdom, where the artistic or creative work PhD has been available since the 1990s, the recognition of artistic research was driven by the imposition of research ratings on institutions. In Europe, the adoption of advanced degrees in artistic research followed the institutional re-arrangement of tertiary education within the European Union. This realignment brought tertiary creative arts education, previously taught in arts academies, into the university system, leading to requirements of advanced postgraduate accreditations and the recognition of PhDs based on artistic research. The several presentations at ARA2020 by speakers from the Global North testified to the fact that, although there are still disagreements over the conceptualisation of the field, artistic research has become widely accepted in the institutionalised tertiary art systems, following along the European and Anglophone traditions.

While considerable preparatory thinking and strategising has been done in this sphere in the North, and it is evident that this experience must inform the institutional strategies that are developed for our continent, it is vital, as several African speakers at the ARA2020 Conference emphasised, to recognise that the institutional context in Africa differs significantly from that of Europe or the Anglophone North. This suggests that a different route must be followed in establishing artistic research in African tertiary education. In contrast to the European context, creative arts departments on this continent have generally been part of post-colonial African universities since their founding. However, as Deribew observes in his closing address to the ARA2020 Conference, the academic leadership and administrators in African universities have never taken creative arts departments very seriously. Creative arts departments were good for decorative purposes, such as providing music at graduation ceremonies or providing a mural for the walls of the student cafeteria, but were never considered as sites for significant research or knowledge production. All too often, arts

practice in Africa has been regarded as a "craft" without intellectual content. The incremental changes in regulations that have allowed some space for artistic research in African universities have been a belated response to international trends rather than a result of deep engagement with the field. Samuel Ravengai, a Zimbabwean professor of Theatre and Performance currently teaching in South Africa, notes in his paper, that university regulations in Zimbabwe have already made allowances for the recognition of creative work, but that nobody has been promoted on this basis. He expresses the hope that the pressure of artistic research will change the situation for the better. Rebekka Sandmeier, a professor of Music at the University of Cape Town, in her close reading of the university regulations governing doctoral study in music at South African universities, notes that they don't "entirely support the requirement that research is embodied in the creative output of the degrees." It is clear that the regulatory framework is changing in several parts of Africa, often in response to institutional trends in the Global North, but the intellectual work to think through the implications of such changes and to make the interventions that will facilitate engaged artistic research on this continent must still be done.

Should the creative arts, when situated within the institutional framework of the research university, produce new knowledge in a manner that is in any way commensurate with the production of knowledge in the sciences or even the social sciences? This is a question that has occupied much of the discussion in the early phase of the debate over artistic research in the Global North. As Stefan Winter, one of the European contributors to the ARA2020 Conference, reporting from the debates in the Global North, stated: artistic research can contribute to broader social thinking "only if it can work autonomously in its own element and is not over-shaped by criteria from other fields." Many of the papers at the ARA2020 Conference questioned, in particular, the commensurability of artistic work with research output. Mark Fleishman, a pioneering figure in performance-based research in both South Africa and internationally, sounded this warning in his paper entitled 'Artistic Research and the Institution: A Cautionary Tale.' Speaking as the artistic director of an independent theatre company and a university head of department, Fleishman's experience led him to advocate that the arts should function as a "minor literature" within the various ethical traps set by the structures of the research university.

At the heart of the radical demand to decolonise the African university is a recognition that the existing structures of knowledge fostered in the colonial university must be critiqued from a political perspective. As several speakers at the ARA2020 Conference aver, the structures of knowledge that have been at issue in the debates over the status of artistic research in the Global North, can be viewed very differently from the perspective of the formerly colonised. Boaventura de Sousa Santos' notion of *epistemicide*,[5] or the murder of indigenous knowledge, is referred to on more than one occasion in the papers. This debate has become more acute as African universities reposition themselves as producers of knowledge rather than as consumers of knowledge from the universities of the Global North. The developments in artistic research in the Global North have, as several contributions to the ARA2020 Conference recognised, also created a common space for co-operation between the development of artistic research in Africa and allied movements in the rest of the world, particularly the decolonial struggles in the rest of the Global South. Mareli Stolp, proposed that the development of artistic research in the Global North has already created a common, anti-Cartesian space where a collaborative dialogue with African philosophies could be possible.

Speaking from his experience as the founder and editor of the first major peer-reviewed publication devoted to the presentation and exposition of artistic research, Schwab chose an arresting metaphor as the opening figure of his keynote lecture. In the first part of his lecture, which he entitled 'Dynamics,' Schwab outlined the ways that artistic research has disturbed what currently passes for knowledge in the contemporary art, as much as settled scientific epistemology. To understand the current state of artistic research, he invited his African audience to imagine themselves trying to jump aboard a moving train from a platform that was itself in motion. The train, he suggested, could be understood as the train of knowledge or even the train of art, because artistic research, just by its existence has changed the fabric of what currently passes for both knowledge production and for contemporary art in the Global North.

The sense that what "currently passes for knowledge" in the African university is a colonial imposition resonates particularly strongly with practitioners on this continent who seek to use artistic practice to reconfigure our understanding of the past, the present, and the future. Yet, as Brett Pyper, the principal investigator of the ARA project, emphasises, echoing Schwab's dynamic metaphor, the notion of art is under question from a thorough-going decolonial critique: "we [must] simultaneously address the coloniality of (much) art even as we recognise its affordances with regards to decolonial knowledge production." To speak of decolonisation is to emphasise the urgency of this approach and the potential for artistic research to actively disrupt the hierarchies of knowledge and artistic practice that were imposed as part of the colonial dispensation.

As we sought to engage with the intensity of the decolonial critique as it has recently emerged in South Africa, we were also determined, when organising the ARA2020 Conference, to reach beyond South Africa to the wider continent beyond the borders of the Limpopo and Orange Rivers. It seemed imperative that the implications of artistic research should be examined not just from a post-colonial, but from a pan African perspective. Two papers by African contributors from outside South Africa explored themes that resonated with the topic of the conference but in ways that reinforce the importance of a pan African engagement for developing artistic research in dialogue with the continent's histories of post-colonial culture and the distinctive entanglement of African epistemologies with ritual and sacred practices.

Moses Nii-Dortey, a composer and music researcher from Ghana, gave an absorbing account of the artistic research tactics he employed to document and perform—and by performing preserve for future iterations—the "dying folk opera," *The Lost Fishermen*. As Nii-Dortey points out, the genre of "folk opera," with its combination of dance, song, and myth, offered the promise, in post-colonial Ghana, that the aesthetic values of the indigenous African arts could be integrated into a new genre of performance. For two decades, the genre was seen as a vital aspect of Kwame Nkrumah's decolonising mission for the arts in newly independent Ghana. Nkrumah's political fall, and the resulting loss of state patronage, combined with the scale and cost of performing such ambitious works, has led to their near extinction. Working with the composer of the opera, Saka Acquaye, at the time of his research an elderly, blind man, and the only extant record of the work (some damaged VHS tapes from the performance at FESTAC in 1970), and drawing on the embodied memories of two surviving actors of that performance, Nii-Dortey was able to reconstruct *The Lost Fishermen* and restage the opera in Accra with a live performance. Nii-Dortey's work was not only a vivid demonstration of performance as a way of producing knowledge, but also brought the complex history of decolonisation and culture into the ARA2020 Conference.

The visual artist-researcher, Sela Kodjo Adjei, also from Ghana, described how he drew on techniques of auto-ethnography and the deployment of his own artistic practice to engage with the belief systems of the Ewe-Vodu practitioners in the Upper Volta region. The research began by questioning Anlo-Ewe elders from an artistic perspective. Simple questions emerged such as: what do you consider as art in Vodu shrines? What does this or that artistic expression imply in sacred Vodu spaces? What are the spiritual dimensions of Anlo-Ewe Vodu sculptures? Artistic practice and spiritual practice were closely intertwined in these discussions with Anlo-Ewe elders; Adjei arrived at an engagement with the deeper sources of meaning in Anlo-Ewe culture through his practice as an artist. His paper traced his personal development through debates in scholarship around auto-ethnography to a realisation that he had to unlearn what he has read in books, in order to approach the sources of knowledge. But, as he discovered, the most potent sources of knowledge in Africa are not necessarily accessible to anyone, nor do the holders of such knowledge believe that it should be available for general propagation. Adjei's work as an artistic researcher suggests a way that such channels of communication can be opened up through sympathetic engagement and an insistence, shared by many of the papers and performance-lectures at the ARA2020 Conference that the aesthetic and the spiritual in Africa are closely entangled.

To bring in other forms of embodied thinking and knowledge production, we experimented with the design of the ARA2020 Conference in order to make "space" for other modes of presentation. In some ways this echoed the decolonial critique of university institutions, and the call for new spaces in which to develop alternative forms of pedagogy and engagement. The South African artist and writer, Thulile Gamadze, referenced this imperative in her contribution to the panel discussion curated by the Johannesburg art collective, MADEYOULOOK. "How do we find ways to bring our entire selves into the space and spaces like the university?", she asked. In our call, we opened the possibility of "performance-lecture" but left the format of these presentations open to the creative inclinations of our participants. The range of events tested the special limits of what was possible in a conference presentation and has also challenged the collection of such events in the proceedings. Some chose to stage an excerpt from a performance or, like Kolodi Senong, to present a selection of paintings from an exhibition, using the context of the conference and the presence of an audience to frame the work as research. Others, such as Balindile ka Ngcobo, deliberately broke with the one-to-many ergonomics of the conference presentation, and used performers strategically placed amongst the audience to disorientate and dismantle the structural dynamics of the conference as a knowledge transfer mechanism. Jason Jacobs, a performer whose practice is rooted in the relationship between dreaming and the brown body, used the space of the performance-lecture to deliver a letter to his grandmother, where he explained to her absent presence how he made use of his dreams about her as a site for developing his dramaturgy. Edda Sickinger, a choreographer who works between Europe and Cape Town, used a combination of video, touch, and the interactions with her conference audience to articulate the experiential outcomes of her practice. Perhaps most provocative of all, the artist and experimental South African filmmaker, Nduka Mntambo, delivered his lecture/paper presentation to an empty auditorium, while his "audience" experienced his deconstruction of the single camera view by walking through an multi-screen cinematic installation on the stage behind his lectern.

What was also striking were the number of presenters who chose to use the format of the workshop to explore issues in a non-hierarchal way with participants. Drawing from a complex mélange of decolonial and black feminist theory/practice, Sharlene

Khan and Fouad Asfour used a series of textual prompts, fixed to the floor or walls of the workshop space, to engage participants in a variety of embodied activities, which they called "parcours," as catalysts for the mental processes of decolonisation at both the group and individual level. Kristina Johnstone, a Belgian-South African choreographer and dancer, used movement improvisation as a way to develop an ethical research method by working with the artist-researcher's body in relation to other bodies.

Unfortunately the re-presentation of the performance-lectures and workshops is the least successful aspect of these proceedings. The limitations of our time and budget has meant that we have, in most cases, only been able to give a brief acknowledgement of the events in this publication. The problem of how to use digital media technology to represent and distribute artistic research is another challenge for the development of artistic research in Africa. We hope that the preliminary steps taken with the organisation of the ARA2020 Conference and the design of these proceedings are a contribution to this challenge.

As professor of art and media theory, Hans-Peter Swartz has observed, digital media technology is not simply a toolbox for the instrumental representation of artistic research; but has been the driving force of the post-modern globalisation of cultures.[6] Many of the debates in Europe and the UK have recognised that artistic research has emerged in relation to the potential of digital technologies to open up new modes of recording and communicating such research. One of the biggest challenges to the hegemony of the written text is not simply from the theoretical critique of "logocentrism"; but because of the alternative platforms offered through digital technologies. A panel discussion at the ARA2020 Conference recognised this crucial development by bringing together the editors of several online journals to discuss the challenge of dissemination of artistic research using the potential of digital instruments and networks.[7] The hour scheduled for the discussion was clearly not enough, and merely gestured towards the questions that must still be addressed around digital repositories; copyright and open access, and ways to understand the effect of digital transformation and representation, particularly in relation—in the African context—to transient artifacts and performance.

These papers should be read, and the representation of the performance-lectures explored further, in order to advance the possibilities of artistic research in Africa. Emerging as a common theme in the majority of this work is a sense that artistic research can and must play a vital role in the development of a truly decolonised university in Africa. However this is not a simple process, and may, as Deribew reminded us in his closing address, require not just the demolition of colonial monuments and the interrogation of the inherited epistemological structures of the research university, but also the deconstruction of many of the most cherished deep mythologies of western art.

Acknowledgements

There are several individuals without whom this conference and these proceedings would be impossible. Thank you to Zanele Madiba, the ARA Project Coordinator, for her steady management of the conference that had the demands of both academic conference and arts festival; Mareli Stolp, our first ARA Postdoctoral Fellow, for her contribution to the planning of the programme and her valuable link to the European artistic research communities; Vincent Truter of Orlando for his branding expertise and online strategy; Debbie Straver, from Kunst Onderzoek, Holland, for her encouragement and advice with alternative formats such as "performance lectures"; Zivanai Matangi for stills photography; our conference venue managers: Bongani Malinga, Bongani Nicholas Ngomane, Lunga Khuhlane, Mahlubandile Hlubi Nontlanga, Nobantu Shabangu, Relebohile Mabunda, Simangaliso Thango, Thembakazi Mdeni, Tshepang Moticoe, and Kamogelo Walaza; Anna Raselomane and O'bidie Maunze from Wits Marketing; Rene Green and Monwabisi Linganisa from the Wits Sports Conference Centre; Emma Ketzie for Financial Administration at Wits; Charl Roberts and Nina Lewin from the Wits Library/Digital Repository; Stacey Vorster for her patience and meticulous copy editing; Ryan Honeyball from Stranger Studio for his dynamic design of the proceedings; Robin Drennan for the additional funding support provided by the Wits Research Office; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the primary funding of the conference and the ARA project in the Wits School of Arts.

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Notes

1 Our licence was based on the Open Access Publishing agreement which was drawn up for the Wits online OA publication, *The African Journal of Information and Communication*, by Dr Tobias Schonwetter, the Director of the IP Unit at UCT Faculty of Law, who was, from 2009 to 2018, the Legal Lead for Creative Commons SA. It is based on a template he had done for the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). Thanks to Chris Armstrong, the Publishing Editor of *The African Journal of Information and Communication*, for his help with the licence arrangements.

2 Reconfiguring the operations of peer review has been central to the development of artistic research, as was discussed in several of the ARA2020 Conference sessions.

3 The first important meeting in South Africa to address this area of practice was the international colloquium hosted by the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD) Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg in October 2009. The papers from the colloquium are available as *On Making: Integrating Approaches to Practice-Led Research in Art and Design*.

4 See the papers collected in Jansen, *Decolonisation in Universities*.

5 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

6 Schwarz, 'Foreword'.

7 The record of this panel discussion has not been included in these proceedings, because the positions and understandings articulated by the contributors are all available online. The members of the panel were Tegan Bristow, the managing editor of *Ellipses*; Michael Schwab, the founding editor of the *Journal for Artistic Research*; Geir Strøm, speaking about *VIS: the Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*; and Nirav Christophe, Professor of Performative Processes at HKU University of the Arts, Utrecht, Holland.

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