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South African independent self-organised art institutions, funding models and its effect on institutional programming

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Internal Examiner's Report

Student: Kabelo Malatsie
Degree: Masters in History of Art
Supervisor: Nontobeko Ntombela
Internal Examiner: Reshma Chhiba

Title of research: Autonomy? South African ~~Independent~~ Self-organised Art institutions, funding models and its effect of institutional programming

Recommendation
My recommendation is to award a degree with distinction for both the dissertation and practical components of the research.

Dissertation

The research presented is an important focus on how self-organisation within the arts can be used to mitigate the lasting effects of systematic bias, that is a product of apartheid South Africa. It allows for a critical look at how funding operates in self-organised spaces and the effects of external funding on the autonomy of both individuals and institutions within the arts. It offers an important discussion on the role of privilege in the South African art context. It is a well-articulated study that I believe offers an expansion to the area of research. There are parts of the dissertation that I found to be a bit repetitive, thus making the writing a bit redundant, which becomes cumbersome to read at times. This, however, is merely in relation to the citing of spaces, people or other research but is not written in a manner that affects the reading of the core ideas, themes and concepts detailed in the research. I would therefore not recommend any changes to the dissertation.

The introduction to the dissertation clearly outlines the key areas of research that will be explored with a mention of core concepts or terms that are threaded through the research i.e. autonomy; self-organised; systematic bias; fill the void etc. The overview of the methodologies used and structure of both practical outcome and textual analysis of the research defined in the introduction is clear and concise.

Chapter one is an expansive discussion on defining the term autonomy; the research unpacks a wealth of existing material to leave an open-ended definition of the term. Added to this, the candidate's personal expansion of the term, which I believe ensures that this research enables a progression of the term in a South African art context, is the central focus on the role that systematic bias plays in both individual and institutional autonomy. Definitions are unpacked as application to The Bag Factory (institution) and also a closer look at the individual autonomy of artists William Kentridge and Blessing Ngobeni (and brief mention of Benon Lutaaya). While I find this comparison interesting,

I find it curious that the candidate did not choose to look comparatively at the variations of autonomy between Kentridge and David Koloane (this could have perhaps drawn a clearer comparison of autonomy, with a time-based look at systematic bias, as both worked under apartheid in very different ways, more so than Ngobeni), however, this is not to say that the artists discussed does not successfully make the point.

Chapter two unpacks self-organised spaces as used in this research and allows a deeper understanding of various kinds self-organised spaces, particularly on the continent. The candidate offers this definition by thoroughly unpacking the various terms already used for such spaces i.e. artist-run space; independent art spaces; alternative art space; and collectives and collaboration. The use of the term 'fill the void' helps unpack these spaces better and further emphasises the need for their existence. While the chapter focuses clearly on the loss of institutional autonomy, it further also operates as a moment to reflect on the different obstacles faced by various institutions on the continent. This addition to the research allows an expanded context of looking and application, which is both necessary and successful. The discussion also pre-empts the possibility of the South African based self-organised institution, NGO, as perhaps being an autonomous institution, however quite carefully does not commit to this suggestion.

Chapter three moves strongly into discussing the crux of the research, which looks at funding models used in South Africa and the reliance that some self-organised art institutions have on this, which in turn results in some loss of autonomy or difficulty. One of the strengths of this chapter is that it starts to ask questions about the motives of foreign funding models/organisations that are used by South Art institutions (and individuals); an expanded critique on soft power is an important discussion to be had generally in the South African art space, which is started in this chapter, and could lead to broader discussions. While it was not the core focus of this chapter to offer new funding models that could deflect the loss of autonomy and mitigate meritocracy, I think it should be noted that the candidate does start to explore this briefly. This exploration is encouraging as it could possibly be the beginning of an extension of this research (as a separate project and not required for this particular research), however, one that should be applied in very practical terms to an institution in the local context. In particular, thinking about notions of gift economy; symbolic capital and symbolic power; and the cultivation of audiences.

Chapter four outlines the conceptual framework of the practical component of this research. It quite cleverly also offers a different kind of self-proclaimed moment to "fill in the void" which allows this kind of material/discussion/research to be accessible outside of the academy. I believe that this is successfully achieved in the practical component. This chapter also offers a wonderful call to practitioners to continue to seek autonomy as a goal, as "the more we seek autonomy the more we resist unsustainable models of practising, that only cater for a few individuals." In my view, at a stretch, this statement offers a basic solution to the problems highlighted in this research, as it calls

for a continuation of the project of self-organisation, which will in turn enable autonomy to find ways to exist.

Practical component

The online publication not only serves as discussion on various models of self-organised art institutions, which may or may not allow for a retaining of autonomy, but also, very importantly serves as a archive of the various spaces that exist in the South African art context. These spaces are only really gaining traction in recent years, but it is also important that these works/institutions (started up by black practitioners) are recorded in both the academy and in more accessible forms of research i.e. the online publication. This component is not only accessible because of its availability online, but also offers a lighter and relaxed engagement with the spaces, in the form of interviews with the founders of the spaces, and also offers a more open-ended discussion in the two forms of round table discussions with external practitioners and participants. This would be appealing and easily understood by younger practitioners who may not necessarily be familiar with particular forms of weighty academic discourse and may simply want to engage this component as part of their own research about methodologies of self-organisation. In this way the practical component is successful on many levels and is not simply an application of research methodology, but offers something much more nuanced and historically important.

Both the dissertation and practical component of research display a thorough and well-articulated engagement with the topic and demonstrates a very good understanding of this area of study. The outcomes serve as important additions to the area of research with a clear and concise central argument that is successful. The quality of presentation is excellent throughout. The dissertation also offers the possibility of furthering the research, either by the candidate or anyone who may have interest in this area of study.

Minor grammatical corrections:
Page 29: line 4…large number [of] black practioners [are] ~~is~~ mostly…(insert 'of'; insert 'are' and remove 'is')

Page 53: line 28…Another ~~a~~ major loss…(remove 'a')

Page 84: line 17…Upon reflection ~~upon~~ [of] the round…(suggested rephrasing, insert 'of' and remove 'upon')

Reshma Chhiba
June 2018