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ADDRESSING ARTISTIC RESEARCH AT THE MAHATMA GANDHI INSTITUTE IN MAURITIUS: CHALLENGES FOR A SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATE IN AFRICA

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Can small island contexts, through the extreme simplification of more complex processes that occur on the continents (e.g., ecocide), provide unique insights into binaries such as artist versus researcher, fiction versus non-fiction, and art-making versus writing?

It is my pleasure to share with you some aspects of the discussions and issues pertaining to artistic research from the perspective of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius. I do not directly engage with the issue of decoloniality, but it forms part of the larger framework underpinning this presentation, which comprises three sections:

1. Some background about my country and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute
2. Challenges of artistic research as they present themselves to my colleagues and myself
3. Zooming out and taking into account broader contexts and questions

1.1 Situating Mauritius

Mauritius is an island off the coast of Madagascar, a Small Island Developing State.[1] It comprises the main island of about 2,000 square kilometres and a population of around 1.2 million people, a second smaller island with an autonomous government, of about 100 square kilometres and a population of a little more than 40,000 people, and several even smaller islands, some of which are inhabited.[2] Taken together, Mauritius and its islands constitute a significant Exclusive Economic Zone of around 2.4 million square kilometres in the Indian Ocean, the 20th largest in the world.

The decolonisation of Mauritius remains incomplete as, during the period immediately before Independence in 1968, an archipelago—the Chagos islands—were administratively detached from Mauritius by the United Kingdom to allow for the construction of an American military base on Diego Garcia, one of the islands of the Chagos. The UK has lost several landmark cases in International Courts of Justice and has been ordered to desist in its illegal occupation of the island.

Interestingly, in the areas around Mauritius, while the Seychelles and Madagascar are proudly independent, the same does not apply to our "sister" island, Reunion, the closest landmass at about 100 km distance from Mauritius. It is happily part of the French state, and part of the outlying lands of the European Union. The same applies for Mayotte, part of the Comoros archipelago, with successive referendums that have made it a French department, and resulted in both Comoros and the African Union decrying the illegal occupation of that territory by a foreign power. This context is intended simply to highlight that, within the Indian Ocean islands, the relationship with coloniality is diverse and postcolonial/decolonial reflexes are not necessarily shared across the islands. Culturally, Mauritius is very diverse, with more than two-thirds of its population having their origins in the Indian subcontinent (Indo-Mauritians), more than a quarter of African and mixed origins (the creole population), about one percent of European origin (Franco-Mauritians), and a little more (2.5%) people of Chinese origin (Sino-Mauritians).

1.2 Post-independence cultural policing

To begin zooming in on our topic, Mauritius became independent in 1968.[3] However, part of the population rejected the idea of Independence, preferring the certitudes of colonial rule as opposed to the economic incertitude and possible communal instability of a country with a majority of Indo-Mauritians. Right after Independence, to ensure stability for a diverse population and as a reaction to colonial cultural policies that emphasised a Eurocentric world-view, the newly elected

government proceeded with setting up (or re-engineering) three key cultural institutions that would roll out the implicit cultural policy of the government. The three institutions would, in principle, cater for all segments of the population, in a cultural policy that would bring out the "rainbow nation" and "unity in diversity," to ensure cohesiveness of an infant nation-state. The three institutions are The Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (national TV and radio), The Ministry of Arts and Culture (MAC), and The Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI).

Here, I will focus on the third, to which I belong, and simply mention that it has a complex role in Mauritian society, as a relatively well-known educational institution; as a provider of cultural content to public events and television programmes; as a centrally located institution for conferences in the social sciences and the arts; and as a centre for exhibitions for performances. It is also the only tertiary institution offering diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate courses in the arts (in collaboration with the University of Mauritius).

The MGI has been associated with culture and creativity since its inception. It has approximately 1,500 tertiary students (300 full-time, 1,200 part-time), and about 100 full-time academics and 200 part-time lecturers. The tertiary section of the MGI consists of five schools: the School of Performing Arts (music and dance), the School of Fine Arts, the School of Indian Studies, the School of Indology and Philosophy, and the School of Mauritian and Area Studies.

2.1 Transitioning to artistic research

Right from the outset, in the early 1970s, the MGI was conceived as a research institute in the humanities and the social sciences (in an island that's often perceived to be a laboratory of globalisation), as is exemplified by the number of conferences and publications in the first decade of its existence. As it took on additional roles addressing the acute need for secondary education in the 1970s and 1980s, providing cultural content for governmental public celebrations, and addressing the needs for an increasing number of tertiary students in the 1990s and 2000s, the focus on research has been diluted. However, since the mid-2000s, there have been discussions on how to change focus from teaching-intensive to more research-intensive workloads, so as to better conform to international trends in higher education.

It is to be noted that the first generation of academics/artists who were active between the 1970s and 1990s, broadly, were unconstrained by academic performance criteria and had the freedom to write (fiction and poetry) and to create art. There were quite a few major figures, and I mention only four: Abhimanyu Unnuth (novelist), Moorthy Nagalingum (painter), Mala Ramyead (sculptor), and Nalini Treebhoobun (painter).

Until the past decade, "research" at the MGI meant standard qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as well as various well-established approaches in the literary and philosophical disciplines. For academics in the creative fields, a list of exhibitions and/or performances/concerts were deemed to be more or less equivalent to a publication track record. However, there has been a gradual shift, as has happened elsewhere, where there is an increasing expectation for academic publications, even in the creative fields.

This poses different challenges for the different schools. For the School of Performing Arts, the focus is on Indian classical music and dance. As such, there is little scope to write about innovation or experimentation. Taking this into consideration, colleagues are developing reflexive processes. They re-consider and analyse

their own compositional practices; Indian classical music in a diasporic context; the impact of Bollywood on classical forms of music and dance; the relationship between *sega* (the music developed by the creole population since the time of slavery) with *bhojpuri* songs (sung by the inhabitants coming from the state of Bihar, in India, to work as indentured labourers in Mauritius) and Indian popular music. These, among others, are a few themes of research.

For the School of Fine Arts, the challenges are different. By and large, the School encourages contemporary art practices, underpinned by an emphasis on individual creative voice and innovation as well as experimentation. There is a range of attitudes: earlier more senior academics argued that research in the visual arts is, and should be, self-evident. Along that line, writing about visual research was considered a waste of time, a distraction from the work. A lack of familiarity with academic writing to articulate their processes in written text compounded the problem.

However, mid-career academics have avoided this hard-line stance and have shifted gears to address key questions: what are the fundamental ideas that underlie their processes? How can one reflect upon these separately from the work of art, if only for pedagogical purposes, so that students do not perceive the creative process as a mystical or worse, mystifying, act? Artistic research is somewhat more directly addressed by early-career academics artists who start with research as an already agreed upon dimension of their work.

The School of Indian Studies, which focusses on the teaching of Indian languages (Hindi, Urgu, Tamil, Telegu, and Marathi, as well as regional languages of the Indian subcontinent) faces different challenges. The academics—some of whom are also creative writers, novelists, and poets—have the option to carry out literary studies in the humanities, or to explore creative writing. There is an alarming decrease in readership: some of the languages of the Indian subcontinent are facing the threat of disappearance on the island (e.g., Marathi and Telegu). There are creative challenges in the sense that print-based media (books, magazine articles, etc.) are losing readership, whereas audio-visual media such as television and radio shows tend to be more exciting media to keep the languages alive in a diasporic context. In addition, activities such as short plays, storytelling competitions, etc., are more engaging than print. Thus, creating or co-creating and hosting talk shows and radio programmes are ways where academics branch out of the traditional teaching route, and mix pedagogy with creative practices, opening up possibilities of reflexive research.

Apart from challenges that are particular to each of the three schools, there are also some shared issues, such as:

- The question of how and where to publish academic research on creative practice.
- The development of a peer review process, a forum, and an academic e-journal as a stepping stone before attempting publication in regional or international journals.
- How we might take into account the slow but gradual restructuring of the fields of culture and creativity as "creative industries," and their implications for creative academia.

3. Zooming out: the broader context

While this may appear to be a discussion around artistic practice rather than on the topic itself, all the aforementioned details form part of the context of the discussion in Mauritius. Because of its small size, changes on the island happen rapidly. Take,



Figure 1. Nirveda Alleck, 2010, *Continuum Chagos I*, acrylic on canvas.



Figure 2. Hans Ramduth, 2013, *Vye Zako, zako zordi zour (Old Monkeys and Present Day Monkeys)*, 11 digital prints on PVC.



Figure 3. Gerard Foy, 2011, *Mwa Sa, Twa Sa, Li Sa (That's Me, That's You, That's Him)*, unregistered metal and PVC number plates.



Figure 4. Krishna Luchoomun, 2001, *The Fight (Dark Side of the Moon)*, collage and painting on board.[4]

for example, the demographic explosion that was reined in within two decades (the 1960s and 1970s). The simplified ecosystem gives rise to unique and unusual lifeforms, such as the dodo. The latter is a poster creature for ecocide as it signalled the onset of the mass extinction of what is now termed the Anthropocene as early as the 17th century.

Due to geographical and cultural distance, the island offers a good vantage point to observe processes happening on the mainland, and we reflexively become aware of how quickly we have adopted unsustainable developmental practices. Display of wealth, in the form of expensive cars, an obsession for many Mauritians, becomes a sign of cultural poverty, and the frustration caused by conspicuous inequality has a toll on the environment and on the youth, where there is alarmingly widespread usage of synthetic drugs. This could be read as a desperate attempt to reach the promised paradise, which the island does not turn out to be for many.

Careful consideration of the relationship between culture and the environment on the island enables the deconstruction of the "Paradise Island" myth. Moreover, it

allows us to go beyond what is called the "all-too-familiar race, class and gender mantra,"[5] by reconfiguring these in more complex but more coherent frames of study. Thus, who we are (*biologies*—homo sapiens, gender, ethnicity, sexualities, age, dis/abilities, etc.); where we are (*geographies*—urban/ rural, national, regional, Global North/ Global South, how we negotiate between place and space, etc.); what we own (*class*—institutional inequality of access to resources, including cultural resources); and, more fundamentally, how we invest emotions (*affective investment* in cultural meta-narratives, namely religions, ideologies, etc.) all weave together the webs of meaning that suspend us to the planet.

How does this relate to artistic research? Creative practices both unravel and weave us back into the texture of the planet at several levels of fractal complexity. If we try to look beyond current crises and try to imagine a situation where the frenzy for more and for novelty abates, one of the rare ways to recapture a sense of embodied meaningfulness is through creative practices, which can be as simple as crafts and as complex as the integration of science, technology, art, and design (as in the work of Israeli-American artist-scientist Neri Oxman, for an extreme example).

It is in this context that the ideas of artist-craftsperson-researcher-art theoretician K. G. Subramanyan (1924–2016) become relevant once again. Belonging to the second generation of the Bengal Renaissance in India, a movement that strove for a contextual modernism (Sivakumar's term describing India's take on modernism) in parallel to the quest for independence from the British, he was versatile in the various craft traditions and popular arts that continue to exist in contemporary India. He infused his own artistic practice with this life-long interest in craft. For him, the crafts and the arts were within the same continuum, a "creative circuit."[6] In that line of thinking, participation in form of creative practice both as consumers and producers of music, art, crafts, performances, and/or contemporary collective artistic practices could and should re-orient culture towards more sustainability and overall "well-being." For fragile Small Island Developing States, this is indeed relevant to steer away from the unsustainable modes that are currently prevalent.

Within recent studies in crafts too, there is an impetus to redefine the relationship between the "ordinariness" of craft and the exacerbated uniqueness of the arts. Relying on the concept of "flat ontologies" as proposed by the New Materialists, Barbara Wisnoski argues that craft "is the ground for all creative practice."[7]

This emphasis on craft is intended to address the latent assumption that artistic research is predicated on the model of the contemporary artist-researcher who imperatively pushes the envelope to bring new insights about practice, and about art itself. As paradigm shifts occur, there are sometimes useful insights that are lost. Thomas Crow's 1996 discussion of the dependence of capitalism on the production of novelty is still as relevant as it was about a quarter of a century ago.[8]

In this view, artistic research has to be broadened to include more pedestrian crafts. In addition, it goes beyond the narrow focus of academic research and is seen as an idealistic means of addressing larger issues, namely unsustainable development and its corollaries.

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Notes

1 As per the definition of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

2 Agalega, Saint Brandon islands

3 And a democratic republic in 1992.

4 All four artists are currently academics at the School of Fine Arts of the MGI.

5 Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 31.

6 This is also the title of his book, a collection of five of his essays on the subject of the relationship of modern Indian art with its others; Subramanyan, *The Creative Circuit*.

7 Wisnoski, 'An Aesthetics of Everything Else'.

8 Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*.

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