



# Radical practice

The assumption that cultural relations, and arts, culture and heritage practices are valuable is widespread; however, research into what this means in sub-Saharan Africa is limited.

**experimentation |  
exploration | energisation**



GOETHE  
INSTITUT



AFRICAN CENTRE FOR CITIES  
urbanism from an african perspective

PART OF THE **GOETHE-INSTITUT IMPACT NARRATIVE SERIES**

**Imagining Impacts** is a research study undertaken by the Goethe-Institut (GI) and the University of Cape Town's African Centre for Cities (ACC) to address this research gap.

The ACC seeks to facilitate critical urban research and policy discourses – informed by the African perspective – for the promotion of vibrant, democratic and sustainable urban development in the global South. An important aspect of ACC's research has been to understand the role of arts, culture and heritage projects and processes in southern cities.

This study was commissioned by the Goethe-Institut's Africa Regional Office, which supported the research process by facilitating

the research team's introduction to local GI offices, local networks, stakeholders, and programme participants and, together with the African Centre for Cities, co-produced the research objectives. The project was interested in understanding, using the Goethe-Institut as an entry point, **what the role of foreign cultural institutions is in Southern Africa.**

Through a series of workshops, interviews and reflective processes, seven impact narratives were compiled. These impact narratives are summaries of the research findings, drawing on the research team's collective analysis, which are illustrated by project anecdotes and quotes from Goethe-Institut staff and creative practitioners who have interacted with the Goethe-Institut over the past five years.

Radical practice, in the form of cultural experimentation, exploration and energisation, is another critical outcome study participants attributed to the support provided to the African cultural sector by national cultural institutes such as the Goethe-Institut.

Radical experimentation was an impact strand unanimously valued by all study participants.

Respondents noted that whereas cultural grants originating from state entities in Africa tend to require applicants to specify upfront what outputs and outcomes they intend to accomplish with procured funds – with little to no margin for deviation – national cultural institutions (NCIs) generally adopt a different approach. NCIs, including the Goethe-Institut, were recognised to **shy away**

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**“Goethe is really able to understand the messy nature of creative exploration over, for example, state cultural agencies, to whom you really have to justify what you’re intending, and to stick strictly to how you say it’s going to work.”**

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*Quotations have been anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of contributors. Please refer to the Impact Narratives Introduction for an enumeration of study participants.*

**from an instrumentalised or stringent outcomes-based view of cultural production**, conferring far greater scope for experimentation and exploration – even in the absence of a clearly defined conception of the deliverable to be achieved.

Study participants attributed the aversion of most donors to funding radical experimentation to a failure to appreciate the value of the messy, liminal, experimental process preceding (and necessary) to obtain a cogent, coherent cultural output.

In the case of GI, it awarded Electric South funding even before it was a registered entity. With this support, Electric South was able to **engage in a process of trial and error**, putting activities to the test which underwent multiple modifications before being formally adopted as programming. Electric South noted that because GI didn’t require it to have a fixed, corporate identity to be eligible for funding, it enjoyed greater leeway to experiment, without the fear of compromising future funding prospects in the event of an ostensible creative “failure.”



### ELECTRIC SOUTH

Electric South is a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town working across the continent on virtual and augmented reality and other immersive media projects. The organisation facilitates workshops, funds and produces work and assists with distribution and exhibition. The New Dimensions Lab has been running since 2015 where it began at the Goethe-Institut’s African Futures Festival. The lab is residential and brings African artists from different disciplines together to develop VR and AR projects, along with advisors from all over the world. Electric South have also run Immersive Africa summits at some of the labs, as part of an ecosystem and field-building effort. Projects from New Dimensions have screened at festivals like Sundance, Venice, Tribeca, as well as museums and galleries. The 2022 lab was the first hybrid lab in response to the pandemic, with artists and advisors gathering in person and online.

**Above:** Participant working with VR headset in a New Dimensions VR workshop. Photo by Electric South.

Russel Hlongwane of The Hand That Feeds You said funding that supports radical experimentation allows cultural producers to explore different lines of inquiry, not all of which will be successful; but which, in every instance, become “the manure that fuels future creative work,” which is more robust for being unconstrained, exploratory and hence intellectually energising.

**“More often than not, my work is (initially) failed experiments. But these failed experiments are like manure, nurturing and bringing to fruition future successful work.”**

Similar sentiments were expressed in relation to the GI initiative, GoetheOnMain:

**“GoetheOnMain, GI’s multi-disciplinary (non-commercial, application-based) project space in Maboneng that has since closed, demonstrates GI’s responsiveness both to the energy of the time and an expressed need. The space not only reinvigorated artistic expression but also social engagement with it, thereby fueling even more creative experimentation.”**

**“Through GoetheOnMain, GI fulfilled a yearning within the visual arts community for an experimental laboratory space to fuel play without the pressure to sell necessarily...a space for incubating purpose.”**



### THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU

The Hand That Feeds You, a project implemented by thirdspace – a collaborative effort consisting of Russel Hlongwane (Durban) and João Roxo (Maputo) – reflects on the trade of second-hand clothing and highlights how these neutral products are political tools that perpetuate economic disparity between Africa and the so-called north. These products leave the shores of the USA and Europe as “aid to Africa” yet arrive in African markets as products ready for trade. The collective therefore tries to map the macro and micro effects of second-hand trade, with particular focus on self-assembled local networks that operate within peculiar global networks. thirdspace use design and the speculative as methods to interpret local responses to these global politics.

**Left:** *The Hands That Feed You: Fumbatha Khangeza, Detoxification, Durban, South Africa, 2019. Photo by Paulo Menezes.*

### GOETHEONMAIN

GoetheOnMain was developed by the Goethe-Institut South Africa and launched in May 2009 at Arts on Main, in the then emerging urban renewal district of Maboneng, east of the Johannesburg inner city. The space was created to enable the development of a non-commercial, artist-run project space with the mission of providing both established and up-and-coming artists with the platform necessary to develop and or show experimental art projects.

GoetheOnMain hosted projects in multiple artistic disciplines, including visual art, performance art, literature, film, music, dance, and theatre. GoetheOnMain projects explored a

multiplicity of formats, ranging from exhibitions and performances to workshops, events and celebrations.

The GoetheOnMain space operated within a conceptual frame that was informed by its urban location, or a sense of ‘urbanity’ - thus a focus on human relations as much as the built environment. Many GoetheOnMain projects therefore dealt extensively with the politics of space, the stratified city, gentrification, and issues of access, so typical of many world metropolises, as well as the personal as political – focusing on private narratives, identities, eccentricities, and broader global issues affecting the city dweller.

However, study participants recognised that few funders apart from GI have the confidence to commit funding to experimental creative endeavours, which are most frequently vague and process-driven (i.e. lacking a clearly elaborated output or outcome at inception). Grantees contrasted GI's support of the experimental with state entities such as the South African National Arts Council, which requires a clearly delineated objective, modality, and budget to be submitted with a funding application. This was highlighted by cultural producers as a serious barrier to eligibility, since creative exploration often compels a deviation from an originally stated intent.

Radical experimentation was thus acknowledged to enrich and deepen cultural practice, with GI's willingness to lean into and pledge resources to facilitate cultural efforts of this nature deeply appreciated.

The intellectual inquiry afforded through engagement with GI representatives was acknowledged to be an invaluable stimulus for grantee's ideation; however, it was perceived to be a relatively invisible strand of support, which does not get foregrounded to the same extent as GI funding. This critical thinking was deemed instrumental to the genesis and development of project ideas, identification of creative collaborators, and the pursuit of strategic objectives more broadly; hence it was appreciated by study participants.

Innovation requires the widest purview of freedom and creativity, which is why the GI also supports artists to entrench the widest possible landscape of freedom in which to undertake cultural exploration.



**Above:** Theatrical performances from the Unmute ArtsAbility Dance Residency that took place in inner city Cape Town, Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, Western Cape, 2020. Videographer: Eugene Alberts.



## Key lessons and recommendations

GI is recognised as an organisation that avoids a linear, fixed perspective to cultural expression, being more inclined towards, and supportive of, **process-oriented cultural inquiry**. GI is not averse to funding cultural experimentation, which it regards as integral to creative exploration and cultural production. GI identifies the creative process to be as important as the end it pursues; hence it subscribes to the view that even the “manure” generated by radical experimentation can fuel and enrich future creative expression.

This is vital for a robust arts and culture sector and is something that state and NCI-led projects can learn from. GI should be **more vocal about championing its support to this messy, meandering creative process** and foreground value of support to cultural experimentation; particularly as study participants were of the view that there exist few avenues, apart from GI, for this kind of support.

GI perceives and positions itself as a partner to its grantees, with the organisation’s representatives availing themselves to contribute to the conceptualisation and refinement of project ideas and processes. GI should continue to provide cultural producers with as much intellectual and creative space as possible, availing critical inquiry and thinking accompaniment as desired by artists; the organisation should not be tempted to pursue a project management route (to press cultural producers to stick to the parameters of proposals).

**GI support to the cultural sector is interlinked with the facilitation of social interrogatory**, where creative exploration serves as a framework through which to grapple with social dynamics, forge social justice – an interrelationship highly prized by cultural role players. Culture is a medium through which to explore and interrogate social dynamics; however, it should never be constrained thereby.

*Left: The Hands That Feed You: Fumbatha Khangeza, Detoxification, Durban, South Africa, 2019. Photo by Paulo Menezes.*