Kim Gurney

Panya Routes

Independent art spaces in Africa

Independent art spaces on the African continent have flourished, particularly over the past twenty years in tandem with a youthful population in fast-urbanising cities. This book takes the reader on a journey to discover their DIY-DIT working principles: horizontality, second chance, elasticity, performativity and convergence. The itinerary begins at an empty plinth in Cape Town to closely track the performative and artistic afterlife of a colonialist statue whose toppling turned public space into common space. Next stop: Nairobi, Accra, Cairo, Addis Ababa and Dar es Salaam — all rapidly changing cities of flux. The author visits five non-profit platforms that build narratives in public space by stitching together art and everyday life. They create their own panya routes, or backroad infrastructures of divergent kinds, in response to prevailing uncertainty. Working largely in collaborative economies and solidarity networks through refusal and reimagination, these "off-spaces" demonstrate institution building as artistic practice. By thinking and dreaming beyond the status quo, they fast-forward to creatively inhabit city futures that have already arrived in the global South.

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Independent art spaces in Africa

For my dad, John Joseph Gurney
(1940–2019)

Use caution. Walking directions may not always reflect real-world conditions.

— *Google Maps*

ENTRY: PANYA ROUTES

I travelled to five cities on the African continent at intervals during 2018 and 2019 to visit an independent art space in each. *Panya Routes* is an invitation to join this journey and discover how such spaces work, think and navigate conditions of constant flux. These independent art spaces form part of a larger family of small-scale platforms, often artist-led or with artistic thinking at heart, whose numbers have flourished in recent years although their existence can also be short-lived. This book focuses upon five case studies of such spaces that have all been active for more than a decade, thus offering compelling tales about sustaining non-profit and innovative practice in an increasingly commodified world. My visits, conducted as part of the African Centre for Cities research project Platform/ Plotform, were timed to coincide with emblematic programming, predominantly art in public space. And, where possible, other independently curated events and spaces from a street art festival to an "off-biennial" were considered in parallel in order to glean another reading on art in each city.

Despite significant contextual differences among the five case studies, many of the challenges are shared and the imaginative institutional experiments assembled by art spaces form the subject of this book. Artistic thinking in response to prevailing uncertainty manifests as collectivity, including collaborative economies and building intra-continental solidarity networks. The fieldwork informing this book was conducted prior to the 2020 onset of the viral pandemic, but this paradigm shift has only accentuated the relevance of Platform/ Plotform as indeterminacy is now a global condition, albeit an inequitably distributed one. Future imaginings in an aesthetic register are all the more urgent, to help articulate social realities beyond prevailing biological, economic and algorithmic logics, and to help recalibrate the public sphere. *Panya Routes* should appeal to practitioners in a variety of fields and disciplines also engaged with instituting differently conceived city futures amid constantly shifting ground because independent art spaces, as one director put it, already live life on the edge and have innovated valuable coping mechanisms and strategies.

The research for Platform/ Plotform began its early conceptualisation in 2017, during collegial discussions with A4 Arts Foundation, an independent not-for-profit art laboratory in Cape Town. At the time, A4 was hosting its inaugural exhibition, *You & I* (2017–18), which looked at how people come together, asking after the conditions and dynamics of the collective. The show was curated by Ziphozenkosi Dayile and Kemang Wa Lehulere, who themselves belong to a local collective called Gugulective. One of the exhibited artworks, *Give Us a Poem (Palindrome #2)* (2007) by

Glenn Ligon, comprised a neon sign where two words are illuminated in turn: ME and, directly below it, WE. In the artwork typography, the M and the W are inversions of one another. Independent art spaces bring this dynamic interpellation between "me" and "we" to life; their institutional experiments are a reimagination of what this relationship could be. As the world battles Covid-19, the social contract governing relations of the individual to the collective is under renewed pressure and looks set to be rewritten. Persistent structural violence is more visible in the public sphere. Art in public space is increasingly a vector of much needed debate, disruption and collective search for common space.

The key events, spaces and their host cities in Platform/ Plotform comprised:

- *Nai Ni Who*, an annual public arts festival facilitated by the GoDown Arts Centre (b. 2003) in Nairobi, Kenya; the 2018 festival iteration centred upon neighbourhood-led walks and linked into a forthcoming rebuild of the centre and a larger public conversation about urban development;
- *Future Museums*, an exhibition that forms part of an ongoing investigation that includes the Mobile Museum, a roving platform, convened by ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge (b. 2012)[1] in Accra, Ghana; researched alongside the 2018 iteration of the annual Chale Wote Street Art Festival in James Town, one of the oldest districts of Accra, organised by ACCRA dot ALT;
- *Building No. 12*, an exhibition by Imane Ibrahim hosted at the Townhouse Gallery (1998–2019) in Cairo, Egypt, a few months after a collaborative rebuild and re-opening; research also included the 2018 Cairo Off-Biennale hosted by Darb 1718 Contemporary Art and Culture Center;
- The completion of the newly rebuilt Zoma Museum (b. 2002) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, constructed using vernacular architectures; research was preceded by an international academic workshop held at the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design reconceptualising Africa as a theoretical category and a prism to examine the contemporary world; visit to Addis Ababa also coincided with the annual Timkat religious celebration and procession; and

1 ANO started as a concept in 2002 but first took physical operational form in 2012.

- A one-day multidisciplinary festival, Asili ni Tamu, that included the opening of the visual art exhibition *How did we get here?* curated by Valerie Asiimwe Amani at Nafasi Art Space (b. 2008) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and visiting the artists in residence at Nafasi.

The fieldwork coincided with cusps of significant and dramatic change in the trajectories of these independent spaces, and these transformative thresholds revealed interesting linkages between space and imagination. In most cases, such changes manifested physically in the buildings they inhabited. The GoDown Arts Centre was preparing to relocate prior to an ambitious rebuild on the same industrial site in Nairobi. This new version of the GoDown is expected to comprise the most significant cultural build in Kenya since the country's independence in 1963. Following the fieldwork period, GoDown went on to vacate its premises and prepare the ground for the GoDown 2.0. The ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge in Accra had just expanded into new lodgings across the road. This reflected a significant shift in its programming, poised on the verge of institutional pivot points. Shortly after my visit, ANO's founder and director Nana Oforiatta Ayim curated Ghana's first national pavilion at the 58th Biennale di Venezia. When I visited the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo, it was just a few months along from reinhabiting its physical space following a government raid, collapse, demolition and rebuild. The following year, Townhouse permanently shut down after more than two decades of existence and was replaced by Access Art Space — a new gallery in the same building and run by the same team. Zoma Museum in Addis Ababa had relocated and was putting the final touches to its newly constructed premises built from vernacular architectural techniques on a recently acquired and rehabilitated site. It officially reopened just a couple of months later. And Nafasi Art Space in Dar es Salaam was benefiting from new regional partnerships and preparing to launch an innovative art academy, which it went on to successfully accomplish in early 2020.

What is more, many of the cities encountered in this study are experiencing intense conditions of flux. Partly, this has to do with the fact that Africa as a continent is dealing with accelerated rates of modern urbanisation and change with a dominant youth demographic and a growing middle class. Asia and Africa are urbanising at rates the West has

never had to fathom, according to Aromar Revi.[2] A conflation of social, economic and political questions thus needs to be worked out at speed and scale, he said while speaking to a Cape Town audience, emphasising everyday lives and local solutions as the way forward. Urbanisation happens every four to five thousand years, Revi pointed out; in the global South, however, this time period was being truncated to every fifty to one hundred years. After 2025, the big move from a rural to a predominantly urban existence would be sub-Saharan: "Can we build the institutional capacity, understanding, culture and technologies to use this opportunity for change and for good?"[3]

All of the spaces in the case studies were able to shapeshift as the need arose; indeed, this mutability of being able to transpose from one set of circumstances to another was part of their survival strategy. This shapeshifting capacity reflects Rosi Braidotti's notion of nomadic thinking, "open to encounters with others — other systems of thought or thinking environment".[4] Further, it involves constituting transversal alliances "as discursive and dialogical links [...] beyond the quest for consensus", Braidotti adds.[5] Notably, all five participant spaces had been running for at least a decade in physical or conceptual form, which is quite an unusual achievement given the general paucity of support structures and public funding and the volatility of operational contexts. Their shapeshifting capacity helps sustain their practice while also reflecting the constant movement and myriad unforeseen upheavals of city life.

The whole notion of sustainability is up-ended by these spaces: it is less about how to get from one day to the next and more about helping to sustain a more equitable life for the majority. Terms like sustainability can become tired due to institutional wieldings, as Heidi Grunebaum pointed out, and aesthetics offers "an opening with which to think".[6] Independent art spaces look beyond what is given in order to institute new contexts and alternative infrastructures. Through a combination of strategic refusals and creative reimaginations, they reach for social imaginaries in excess of the status quo. Such reimaginations must move beyond systemically perpetuating what already exists and find feasible ways to do so.

2, 3 Aromar Revi, "Putting the Urban at the Heart of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals", Kapuscinski Development Lecture, University of Cape Town, 5 November 2014. Author's notes.

4, 5 Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Polity, Cambridge, 2006, p. 139.

6 Heidi Grunebaum, "Leaving Zion: Notes towards a possible itinerary", online seminar, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, 14 September 2020. Author's notes.

Shapeshifting can even include dying when the time is right, as Townhouse dramatically demonstrated when it closed down in 2019. Radical refusal involves being "wise enough to know when and how to pause", according to Gabi Ngcobo in a book about institution building in Africa.[7] In 2010 she co-founded an independent space in Johannesburg, the CHR–Center for Historical Reenactments, which decided to publicly commit "institutional suicide" after two years of existence. CHR took a metaphorical leap out of its own August House building window in Doornfontein when it felt its work was done.[8] Strategies of resistance like withdrawal and detour are sometimes required when building independent spaces. It may become necessary to walk away from the people, institutions or situations that are harmful, as the co-founder of Zoma Museum Meskerem Assegued points out, and sometimes things need to stop, or fail, or just change shape.[9] In fact, Zoma Museum began life with this kind of refusal: an art event in a well-known public space in Addis Ababa, Meskel Square, that culminated in deliberately burning down a temporary pavilion as commentary on the politics of the time. Out of those embers grew Zoma.

These examples of shapeshifting point to a key value of small-scale visual art spaces. At a conference organised by Common Practice in London on this very topic, Kodwo Eshun said value was "not a matter of size but rather of 'nested capacity', of 'platforming' or 'plotforming' (holding durational conversations that form plots which solidify over time while simultaneously questioning themselves)".[10] Eshun also framed this dyad within notions of care, and through a paraphrased rendering of Silvia Federici's theories of reproduction he elaborates on it as "forms of attention, to the nurturing of ideas, in the building of interpretative communities, to the forming of plots and the plotting of forms, to new forms of disappointment, which are inseparable from new forms of satisfaction".[11] His words inspired the title of my research project, Platform/Plotform, which investigates how a platform becomes a plotform that is able to institute new contexts. The stakes are neatly articulated by Koyo Kouoh, at the time heading up RAW Material Company, an independent

7 Gabi Ngcobo, "Endnotes: Was it a question of power?", in *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, ed. Koyo Kouoh, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2013, p. 67.

8 Center for Historical Reenactments, *After-after Tears*, New Museum, New York, 22 May–7 July 2013, https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/center-for-historical-reenactments-after-after-tears-1.

9 Meskerem Assegued, interview with author, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2019.

10 Quoted by Carla Cruz in a report on the 2015 conference *Public Assets*; "Practicing Solidarity", Common Practice, London, February 2016, p. 10, https://www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PractisingSolidarity.pdf.

11 Cruz, "Practicing Solidarity", p. 7.

space in Dakar. What is particularly important, Kouoh said during a lecture, is that the practices of independent spaces provide pathways to understand pan-African reality and forms that should be embraced; in turn, independent spaces cement theoretical, practical and local knowledge to an international outlook. Further, there is an unprecedented energy in the African contemporary art sector that is contagious: "We are still very much trapped into defining ourselves to others. I am convinced we have to define ourselves to ourselves also. [...] Different canons are being established, different economies even. [...] This is where the big shift is happening: a wealth of practitioners who are highly educated, assertive and astute. This is a strong trend in our continent."[12]

The stakes extend well beyond the artworld, as Simon Njami points out. "It is not about art," he said, somewhat surprisingly.[13] At the time in 2018, he was curating Something Else–Off Biennale Cairo, an independent event created in response to the Egyptian state closing down the official biennial in 2010. He explained that art is obvious and anyone can make an exhibition anytime; instead, it is about people, discussions, challenges and exchange: "Africans do not know Africa, so everyone thinks their situation is unique. It is physically complicated [to get around]. They are functioning as an island. Biennales are moments where people gather, talk and discover they have the same issues, and exchange solutions and strategies. Because even if the basic issues are the same, the way to fight it is different because the background and the environment is different. So, this is basically for me the role of a biennale on this continent."[14] Njami's assertion about art creating dialogue — to discover shared issues, exchange solutions and strategies while acknowledging contextual difference — is key to Platform/ Plotform. It is less about building consensus and more about building communities and networks.

A brief definitional detour. What is meant by an independent art space? Also called autonomous spaces, or off-spaces in artworld lingo, the terminology varies but generally refers to small-scale organisations often located in mixed-use or industrial areas and repurposed buildings; in this study, they mainly inhabit former warehouses and car repair workshops.[15] They operate collaboratively, with a regional emphasis and on a non-profit basis that is formalised in a cooperative structure to work towards common

12 Koyo Kouoh, "Being Africa: Narratives of Contextualizations of Artistic Environments", Centre for Curating the Archive, University of Cape Town, 16 September 2015. Author's notes.

13, 14 Simon Njami, interview with the author, Cairo, 31 October 2018.

15 In this text, I use these different terms for independent spaces interchangeably. Further, I understand the "artworld" as a social institution, as posited by George Dickie's institutional theory of art, which advocates that an artwork has its status conferred by a larger context rather than its innate properties.

and more equitable social ends. Such spaces are often, but not always, artist-run. Either way, artists are the main constituents, and art practice and process drive the organisational thinking. Relative programming autonomy due to their independence from mediating frameworks helps produce experimental endeavours that are often less supported by purely state, commercial or developmental agendas. Public sector support in these contexts is negligible or non-existent.

The underlying premise in the Platform/ Plotform research is that independent art spaces innovate ways of doing that relate to material realities of everyday life on the continent, and this in turn has broader resonance beyond the artworld for others facing comparable conditions of flux. "I cannot see art as separated from society", an artist on Cairo's Off Biennale discussion panel said. Or: "I have to reflect reality", as Tom Mboya told me in his GoDown studio in Nairobi, describing a painting underway of a migrant towing a suitcase and standing in front of a barred entrance. In these contexts, art is not venerated as static, isolated, on a plinth in an elite white-cube environment. Its valency comes from elsewhere. It is roving, participatory and embedded with quotidian actions and artefacts. Art is part and parcel of ordinary life where the aesthetic is latent not only in objects but social relations. Art exists in a living sociopolitical context and has a reciprocal constitutive relationship with it. As Assegued remarked: "Art is everyone, art is everything. It is the food you eat and the clothes you wear."[16]

While observing installation for a *Future Museums* exhibition, calligraphic text around the ANO gallery wall was elegantly transcribed by signwriters. "The past is brought into the present through dance, gesture, poetry, music, re-enactments, and ritual", the ANO wall script read, reflecting art's multidisciplinary nature and fluid temporality. In Ghana, there is a way of creating "total works of art", said Oforiatta Ayim. This idea of a total work of art (also known in aesthetics as *Gesamtkunstwerk*) is where different artistic disciplines all occur together at once, accessible and dynamic. The poet and Senegalese statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) also writes about a total art, which integrates all of the arts while making them co-operate: "Any ceremony, any public manifestation is, at the same time, an artistic activity."[17] Senghor says this is one defining characteristic of so-called *art négre* ("negro" art) in his book on *négritude* (Negritude) and modernity.[18] "For south

16 Meskerem Assegued, interview with author, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2019.

17, 18 Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Negritude and Modernity or Negritude as a Humanism for the Twentieth Century", in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001, p. 152. Negritude is "a philosophy that postulates a cultural action adapted to the spiritual and sociological conditions of the black man" (Senghor, p. 144).

of the Sahara, the two worlds — visible and invisible, material and spiritual, profane and religious, technical and artistic — are but the two sides of the same fabric: the same reality. When the weaver weaves, he sings. And his words are his feet and hands at work, doubling the work of the shuttle and the stretcher", Senghor adds.[19] The other defining characteristic he offers is technique, described as a dynamic relation between theory and practice or between useful and beautiful. "The weaver's pulley is at the same time a sculpture. [...] The calabash, a household piece of equipment, is an engraving, and the loincloth, garment par excellence, is a work of tapestry."[20] Senghor's point being that "in Africa one separates the form even less than in Europe. For it is the form that will lead me to the substance".[21]

This dynamic relationship is foregrounded in the research method of Platform/ Plotform, which makes correlations between art and the city, between curatorial and artistic strategies on the one hand and urban innovations on the other. As Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga writes on sciences and technology in Africa, it is the ordinary innovations borne out of quotidian realities that are notable, and these are heightened during moments of stress or crisis.[22] Five key working principles emerge, common to participant independent spaces in fast-changing African cities, namely Nairobi, Accra, Cairo, Addis Ababa and Dar es Salaam. I use the term "working principle" to describe organisational logics in the spirit of an artist's sketch or a working brief that is adaptive, multilayered and flexible in response to changing conditions. The key working principles comprise a constellation of cross-pollinating ideas rather than discrete and definitive characterisations.

The first, horizontality, reflects a collective and non-hierarchical organisational approach. It also informs a curatorial ethos, which shuns a single authorial voice, instead encouraging polyvocality and multivalent forms. Horizontality can also be understood as an epistemic disobedience that privileges local know-how. Ideas of reuse, recovery and repair generate both literally and symbolically the next principle of second chance. This is evident in artistic practice, which often repurposes found elements into new recycled combinations and extends to giving people and situations another shot. Mobilities of different kinds inform the third principle of performativity, which is understood as the agential capacity for contemporary art to not only represent but also instantiate new realities. In short: for doing things with art. I derive that phrase and understanding from John

19, 20, 21 Senghor, p. 152–154.

22 Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (ed.), *What do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa*?, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 21.

Austin's seminal work on linguistics, *How to do things with Words*, wherein he posits certain words as "performatives". Such forms change the world by the force of their utterance. "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother", as occurring in a will, is one example Austin offers.[23] Performatives do not "describe" or "report", he says, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action".[24] Contemporary art can be performative in this manner. The fourth principle is elasticity, a flexibility in response to fast-changing conditions and variables. Elasticity is also a conceptual reimagination and, when circumstances demand, a creative refusal. The fifth and final principle of convergence is largely temporal, fusing the past and the future into an intensified present where all the tenses are coterminous. It is also about cohabitation of disciplines, forms and objectives.

Binding these interlocking working principles together is collectivism: rhizomatic ways of collaborating in order to figure out new hybrid strategies when faced with prevailing uncertainty. Independent art spaces stitch individuals into a larger collective, leveraging collaborative structures such as social economies for systemic change. In Platform/ Plotform, this mode of working becomes institutional in the sense of formalising collective practice with physical and structural traction. The research does not closely investigate more informal art collectives but notes they are an increasing phenomenon with much shared ground. In formalised collectives, individual artists can generally strike a balance between autonomous production and a collective affiliation that offers structural advantages such as subsidised studios, economies of scale, interdisciplinary collaborations, and systemic impact and participation. It is a blended approach between "me" and "we". The participant spaces in the research conducted offer novel ideas around future organisational forms that deploy these principles in context-specific solutions. Collectively and incrementally, these platforms assemble their own infrastructures, material and immaterial, and in this way instantiate new contexts and possibilities. En route, they disrupt conventional notions of sustainability by ditching the status quo to better inhabit a future that has already arrived. Otherwise put: DIY-DIT institution building as artistic practice.[25]

For example, standing outside the ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge is the Mobile Museum designed by architect Latifah Idriss. It takes as design referent the trading kiosk, which is a ubiquitous urban form in

23, 24 John Langshaw Austin, *How to do things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962, p. 5.

25 DIY-DIT elaborates upon the concept of "do it yourself" by amending it with the notion of "do it together".

Accra as well as other African cities. A kiosk is accessible, nomadic and multipurpose; it could house a hairdresser's salon, a hardware store or a trading store. The Mobile Museum is designed as a collapsible and permeable kiosk structure and represents a larger ongoing ANO project that investigates the notion of a future museum. In 2018, the Mobile Museum Tour visited the ten regions of Ghana to canvass people about what art and culture meant to them and how they would like to see it represented.[26] Their answers challenged white-cube notions in ways that reflect art as imbricated with everyday life, as well as the fluidity of time. Conjoining art and life is at the core of DIY-DIT institution building as artistic practice, or "a device capable of organising a context", as David Adjaye described the mobile pavilion that he built, which was adapted in five participant African cities to create site-specific responses.[27] Independent art spaces can be understood in a similar vein. They are an art form in and of themselves but also short-circuit public deficits to become nodal points for larger transformations. They fuse the artistic and the structural, offering an alternative model for institution building. As Brett Pyper told a public panel in Accra: "We think the definitions of arts being practised on this continent are important to be attended to. Ritual sits comfortably next to contemporary production. It is not hierarchical or exclusionary. That is important. Academics can learn a lot from this."[28]

Platform/ Plotform grew out of an earlier body of research I conducted exploring artistic thinking in a Johannesburg atelier at a time of prevailing uncertainty; the building had been put up for sale and an extended period of limbo for the August House residents ensued.[29] New collectivities, collaborations and solidarity economies emerged in response. Most notably, artist Gordon Froud went on to develop his new studio in Nugget Square, an industrial precinct near August House. The development included his founding of Stokvel Gallery, which operates on the principles of a merry-go-round economy. Member artists pay a small fee and rotate gallery access and related benefits, just like the South African stokvel financial savings clubs where members rotate financial rewards from regular contributions that are pooled. The stokvel has comparable versions in other cities of the global South.[30] In Platform/ Plotform, I built upon this earlier work by looking beyond South

26 In late 2018, following a referendum, a further six geographical regions were added to the existing ten regions in Ghana.

27 David Adjaye, "The City Pavilions: Pop-ups for Art", in *Visionary Africa: Art at Work; Une platforme itinérante en Afrique*, Bozar Books, Brussels, 2012, p. 19, https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/file/14798/download?token=w063tibW.

28 Brett Pyper, panel discussion, Chale Wote Street Art Festival, Accra, 2018. Author's notes.

29 See chapter 5 for more on this prior research.

30 See chapter 4 for more on "merry-go-rounds" as a sustainability strategy.

Africa's borders to learn from continental kin. The basic idea was to find out what other independent spaces in other cities on the African continent were doing, relative to their own contexts, and thus deepen an inquiry into artistic thinking as a response to uncertainty. Who is assembling these off-spaces? What are they doing? How are they operating? Where are they located? Why are they valuable?

It turns out that despite important differences, these continental kin also have collective strategies of resilience that take their cues from social praxis and ubiquitous urban forms, including collaborative economies. Such pre-existing solutions for daily life are the raw material for DIY-DIT modes of institution building. Much groundwork has already been laid over the past two decades on the broader topic of independent spaces and why they matter through many bodies of research, events, symposia, talks, journals, books, texts and interventions. A review of this relevant literature in chapter 5 summarises the key contributions focused upon the African continent that helped to inform Platform/ Plotform.

The participant spaces encountered in the case studies all start from where they are and use whatever is to hand, but this hyperlocal starting point is not the end point. They become transformative nodes that allow for other, more expansive connections to be made. Their agential capacity should be clearly differentiated from a broader instrumentalisation of the arts in public policy on the African continent (and elsewhere), where the sector is increasingly viewed as an industry and its value measured in economic terms. Independent spaces, in contrast, are non-commercial platforms that run collaboratively according to non-profit motives. This book underscores the value of their artistic thinking, which is an entirely different kind of indicator. "It is about how we valorise what we are already doing," said artist Emeka Okereke during an online panel discussion before adding, "all of these artists, busy, erecting spaces here and there [...] but who is valuing it, writing about it, without disavowing its form?"[31] *Paṇya Routes* is in part a valorisation of such knowledge-building, putting an emphasis on less visible and under-acknowledged sources from non-hegemonic locations.

Increasingly, as *Paṇya Routes* makes clear, the operational strategies of independent spaces involve hybrid funding schemes. They are stepping away from reliance upon a single-donor model and moving towards greater local support from communities and philanthropists and boosting regional

31 Emeka Okereke, "Urban Imaginaries, Mobilities and Why So Many Borders", panel discussion, Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 17 September 2020. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/6vPQsDQeon8.

networking. Such strategies make innovative and increasing use of the digital sphere and crowdsourcing strategies. These operational strategies also repurpose, for public good, financial structuring mechanisms borrowed from the private sector (retail) and the institutional investment sector (firms managing large pools of capital). These mechanisms include collective investment vehicles, like trusts and funds, to hold assets for the future, as well as turning existing intangible assets towards new forms of income generation to help forge less reliance upon a waning donor model. In some cases, the reasons for this restructuring are also political, triggered by regulatory shifts. All in all, hybrid funding strategies offer better resilience and self-sufficiency in what is a continual balancing act for viable futures. And, interestingly, it turned out that all of the participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform were led by women.

In short, independent spaces are forging self-made pathways, or "panya routes" in Kenyan lingo, to which this book's title refers. The phrase was inspired by and borrowed from exterior signage that was on the studio of artist Dickens Otieno at the GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi. His hand-painted list of rules made fun of the devil-may-care highway code, including panya routes that are used to avoid the law. In such a context, panya routes refer to border crossings initiated by smugglers using *boda bodas*[32] — these motorbike taxis are a common sight in most African cities as they nimbly transport people and goods around. Panya routes are understood more generally in this book as alternative back routes made by people themselves to get around officious obstacles, literal or otherwise, or to bridge a void. They express a desire for mobility and a DIY-DIT attitude. It could be a reaction to the design of the urban built environment, or bureaucratic measures, or lack of infrastructure. The point is that people make their own detours in response. Urban planners understand such pathways as desire lines, makeshift routes that people tread out for themselves.[33] Writer Robert Macfarlane defines desire lines as paths or tracks made over time by the wishes and feet of walkers, especially those paths

32 Boda boda is a play on the word "border", as these ubiquitous taxis offer less formal ways of getting around and even crossing borders. Boda bodas are a quotidian innovation for greater mobility, with parallels in the artworld. Carlos Castellano has called a turn in contemporary art in Uganda "the boda moment", prone to project itself into public space while deepening the terms of the collaborations set into motion (Carlos Castellano, "The Boda Moment. Positioning Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary Uganda", *SJ Magazine of Contemporary Arts & Culture in East Africa*, 15 February 2018, https://startjournal.org/2018/02/boda-moment-positioning-socially-engaged-art-contemporary-uganda).

33 South African artist Igshaan Adams has made artworks about collective pathways that leave traces over time, which he transcribes into tapestries that are also beaded mobility maps. He says of such desire lines or community pathways: "They stand for something [that is] designed for you in a certain way but you find your own way" (https://www.in-review.net/kim-gurney). The local paths he mapped in his artworks are traversed by people to catch taxis, transport goods, buy alcohol, or move recyclables or contraband around.

that run contrary to design or planning: "Free-will ways. Aka 'cow-paths' and 'olifantenpad' (elephant trails)."[34] The panya route is the back route. It is the hacked route. It is a route in the grass rather than the official highway. Such routes are not only made by humans; geologists talk about preferential pathways in the terrain. Whatever the term, panya routes are collectively willed into existence and in the process reveal a previously unmet need. At first these may be improvised but over time panya routes can offer a substantive alternative: the shortcut trampled through the brush becomes a legitimate pathway.

The panya idea of self-made infrastructures, pathways and workarounds that are collectively and incrementally built is central to this book. The participant spaces in the research informing this text all "autoconstruct", a phenomenon explained by Teresa Caldeira following the Latin American term for it.[35] Caldeira says that autoconstruction is the way residents in cities of the "global south" build their houses and cities step-by-step, according to the resources they are able to put together at each moment.[36] They are "in the making [...] never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated upon".[37] This incremental self-build process, achieved collaboratively and when resources permit, is the same kind of ethos that infuses independent art spaces in Platform/ Plotform. They are collectively erecting over time the institutional equivalent of the bamboo scaffolding so ubiquitous in the construction sites of fast-urbanising African cities. Another characteristic of southern cities in the making is transversal relations with official logics, which they unsettle.[38] The state, while present in multiple ways, frequently "acts *after the fact* to modify spaces that are already built and inhabited", she adds.[39] This too is evident in the participant spaces informing this book's findings. To have a proper relationship with the state, you have to first build your own state by yourself, according to Assegued: "You need to understand what you can afford to do. The initial thing should be: if you have a small house, a living room, how do you turn it into an art space? You need to really turn what you have into value".[40]

It is about taking local context seriously. "Always start from where you are", as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o phrased a guiding principle in a public lecture

34 Quoted in Ellie Violet Bramley, "Desire paths: the illicit trails that defy the urban planners", *Guardian*, 5 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/oct/05/desire-paths-the-illicit-trails-that-defy-the-urban-planners. Original Tweet: Robert Macfarlane (@RobGMacfarlane), Twitter, 25 March 2018.

35, 37, 38, 39 Teresa PR Caldeira, "Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 1, 2017, p. 5, 7, original emphasis.

36 The term "global South" is qualified in chapter 6 in a section on southern urbanism.

40 Meskerem Assegued, interview with the author, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2019.

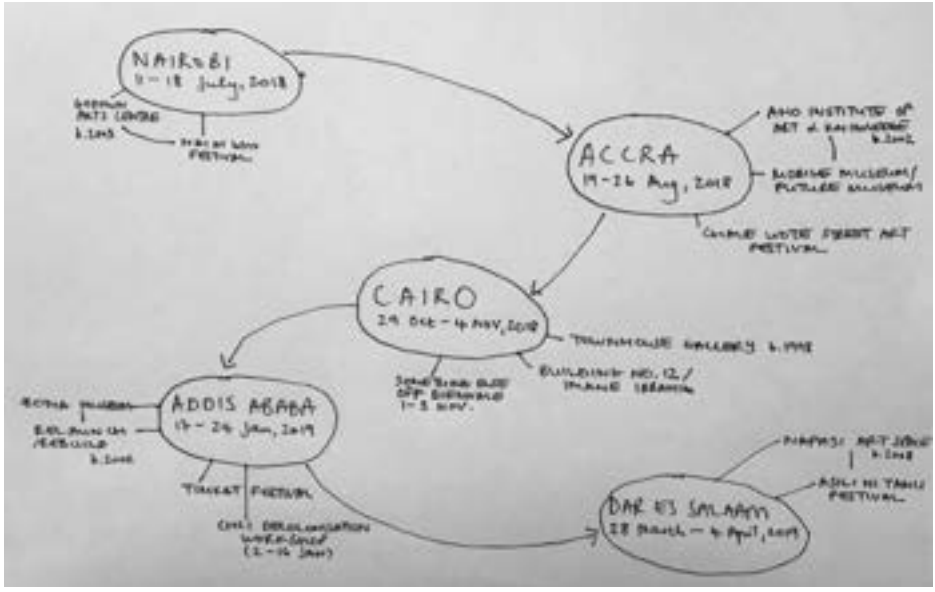
on "decolonising the mind, securing the base".[41] By securing the base, he meant making Africa visible in the world, "making it our own, not in isolation but interacting on the basis of equality".[42] That dictum heralds a deeper contemporary imperative to decolonise institutions and knowledge-making by working from the ground up. Colonialism distorted that basic process for the colonised, as Ngũgĩ phrased it, of working with our own economies, resources and knowledges, and then connecting from there to others. He underscored his point by showing a single illustrative slide for the talk's entire duration: the map of Africa, inside of which much of the rest of the world nestled, including the United States, China, India, Japan and Europe. This visual strategy made evident how Africa is the largest continental mass on the planet with more resources than any other; so, he asked, why is it still the poorest? Such deep imbalance of power was symbolically disrupted by the 2015 removal of the looming statue of the colonialist and former statesman Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902) from its plinth on the University of Cape Town campus, a public institution. But, Ngũgĩ added, so long as the resources of Africa are still controlled from the outside, the reality is that Rhodes's proprietorial dream of building a railway from Cape to Cairo lives on. "We want an Africa that is economically, politically, culturally and psychologically empowered. An Africa secure in its base even as it engages with other people and continents."[43]

The next chapter reflects upon the artistic and performative afterlife of this statue's toppling and its broader effects on the public sphere. This reflection first of all sets out some possibilities for public art, a genre predominant in Platform/ Plotform, as a powerful vector to help to reimagine and recalibrate the public sphere; in so doing, it posits public space as common space. This imperative is evident in newly urgent global debates about revisiting African archives, restituting cultural artefacts to previously colonised countries, and reviewing colonial-era commemorative statues as part of a deeper reckoning with systemic racisms and inequities perpetuated from the past. Chapter 2 also takes up the spirit of Ngũgĩ's words to start *Panya Routes* from where I am located, in Cape Town, and offers up my own positionality in the process. It shows how art is part of life with a powerful capacity to speak far beyond the artworld itself, an important takeaway from Platform/ Plotform.

41, 42, 43 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Decolonising the mind, securing the base", public lecture, University of Cape Town, 3 March 2017. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/1bl-2F8Nj7U.

Always start from where you are.

The rest of the book unfolds as follows. Chapter 3 deals with the key findings of the Platform/ Plotform research, articulated through five pan-African working principles of independent art spaces as potential tools for assembling forward-facing cultural institutions. Chapter 4 extends these key findings with closer consideration of institution building as artistic practice and whether an institution can function like an artwork. The chapter includes extended interview transcripts about the origins of participant spaces and how they are innovating future forms to sustain their practice. Chapter 5 covers the backstage processes and conceptual compost informing the research fieldwork for Platform/ Plotform. This includes a section on artistic thinking, a review of some relevant literatures that helped to inform and contextualise findings, and notes on research method. Chapter 6 is about the broader implications of the Platform/ Plotform findings. It concludes the book with thoughts about off-spaces as urban indicators or ways to think about reconfigured city futures, and posits the notion of "plotform urbanism" to bring about the same. A short coda offers an exit from *Panya Routes* with a rumination on the unforeseen, circling back to home context with an anecdote about a blue elephant.



Travel log for Platform/ Plotform, sketch format after Simon Njami's *Art at Work*, 2012

Zombie monument: A visual journal

Various artists, *The performative afterlife of the Rhodes plinth*, 2015–20, ongoing series, plinth, imagination, time, dimensions variable


DESIGN
HERE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76
IT IS MY RIGHT


doesthisoffendyou


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THE IMMENSE AND
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Campus


HEAVY
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FRAGILE
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UMHLANGANO


LISTEN

Second Life

When student Chumani Maxwele threw shit on the bronze statue of Cecil Rhodes in March 2015, he told onlookers at the University of Cape Town (UCT) that he felt suffocated by the overwhelming presence of colonial names and memorials. "Maxwele complained that most black students could not breathe on campus because of the claustrophobia produced by English colonial dominance at UCT", write Shannon Jackson and Steven Robins.[1] Rhodes, who died in 1902, was a mining businessman and politician from the United Kingdom who played an outsized and contested role in South Africa's twentieth-century history. His commemorative statue sat chin in hand, in a central and elevated position in tribute to his bequest of land for the university, gazing pensively over Cape Town to the north.

A month after Maxwele's action, following the sustained student protests it triggered, the statue was hoisted by authorities onto a flatbed truck and taken away to an undisclosed location, where it remains at time of writing. The statue has meanwhile earned a second life as a digital meme, a vector of public debate and an instigator of structural change. What is often missed in accounts of this recent history is the empty plinth's transformation into a public platform that is not in fact empty at all, for it hosts a rolling series of impromptu interventions by the public and students alike. These ongoing performances contest and reimagine the whole idea of public space as common space — no-man's land that is contested, negotiated and performed anew. This text and the visual journal that precedes it articulate some of these artistic engagements and their significance in service of gaining deeper insights about the public sphere.

The first thing to appreciate is the deliberate political act that is embedded within Maxwele's choice for his protest action, which consisted of throwing human faeces from portable toilet cannisters. The same tactic had previously been used by local social justice activists in the Western Cape, drawing attention to inadequate sanitation such as the bucket system and chemical toilets that are rife in high-density townships. This made the point that such neglect of basic services is a form of infrastructural violence, a kind of neo-apartheid that perpetuates past inequities in the present. Academics like Jacklyn Cock call this slow violence. Violence is often understood as an event or action that is immediate in time, and explosive in space, she writes. "But much destruction of human potential takes the form of a slow violence that extends over time. It is insidious, undramatic and

1 Shannon Jackson and Steven Robins, "Making sense of the politics of sanitation in Cape Town", *Social Dynamics* 44, no. 1, 2018, p. 70.

relatively invisible."[2] Cock gives the examples of environmental pollution and malnutrition, following Rob Nixon's notion of "long dyings", "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight".[3] To make this kind of violence visible, and bring the so-called periphery to the centre, activists previously spilt toilet cannisters from townships in prime locations across Cape Town. These included the city's international airport, a major highway, the steps of the provincial legislature, and outside a financial company's headquarters. Local government elections, just prior to Maxwele's protest, had also been fought over the issue of sanitation, dubbed the toilet war.

Slow violence in turn relates to both wealth and income inequality in South African society, which has a notoriously high Gini coefficient. This reality persists despite remarkable democratic gains since the end of apartheid in 1994, including political franchisement for all, social housing and welfare payments, greater electricity and water access and free primary schooling. What is less well understood is how racially driven inequities get spatially replicated in the present tense. This phenomenon is connected with urbanisation: as the population grows apace, cheaper land values on the outskirts of economic centralities means more geographically dispersed housing investments. This dynamic exacerbates race and class exclusions through continued urban sprawl. Speaking about South Africa's National Development Plan, a blueprint set of aims to 2030, Philip Harrison said spatial dysfunctionality is an important contributor to inequality.[4] His point was underscored on the same panel by Alan Mabin, who said the grand plan of apartheid was about power but the subtext was space. This reality relates back to a series of apartheid spatial segregation laws through land dispossession. What Harrison and Mabin are describing is slow violence.[5] Taking this kind of sociology of space into account helps conceive of the voided Rhodes sculpture as drawing attention to other kinds of dispossessions and continued absences. Flinging excrement from a chemical toilet cannister (colloquially, a portapotty) at a statue was about objecting ideologically to exclusion. The act drew attention to the daily accommodations that black students still had to make every day in response to

2 Jacklyn Cock, "The Vocation of Sociology — Exposing Slow Violence", *Global Dialogue* 3, no. 2, 2013, https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/category/volume-3/v3-i2.

3 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 2–3; Cock, "The Vocation of Sociology".

4 Philip Harrison, "Panel discussion on Urban Research in South Africa", *Faces of the City* seminar series, University of the Witwatersrand, 18 August 2015. Author's notes.

5 For a succinct visual overview, see: Christina Thornell, "Why South Africa is still so segregated: How centuries of division built one of the most unequal countries on earth", *Vox*, 12 April 2021, https://www.vox.com/videos/2021/4/19/22391869/why-south-africa-is-still-so-segregated.

institutional dominations, whether in the aesthetics of the campus or the architecture of the curriculum or the social realities of everyday life. As one student said in 2015, while passing by the statue when it was still standing and attracting daily protestors at its feet: "It's psychological. We do not want to be dominated. [...] Transformation is changing the psychology of white people." For such passers-by, the centrally placed statue was not historical but reinforcing a lived reality. Maxwele's protest makes a deeply subversive point about society's body politic and that is why it ignited a much larger tinderbox. The protest first birthed the social media hashtag storm #RhodesMustFall, which then became a political movement. In response to ongoing protests, the statue was removed by authorities in April 2015. Its final fate is still being debated because the campus is a public heritage site, so the decision is not only up to university authorities. The statue's former plinth remains covered with a painted wooden crate that is deteriorating over time. Nonetheless, Maxwele set in motion an ongoing call and response on the voided plinth itself. These artistic experiments have ranged from graffiti to poetry, a collaborative video artwork, a performance piece. They in turn inspired protest occupations, a pyre, and a neighbouring statue's decapitation but also more enduring institutional and legal reforms.

The second key aspect to appreciate is how these subsequent interventions on the plinth took their cue from Maxwele's original act of defiance, which he deliberately framed as a piece of performance art. Maxwele wore a bright pink construction worker's helmet and blew a whistle — these same props were later replicated in student demonstrations. He hung two placards around his neck and bare torso: "EXHIBIT WHITE ARROGANCE @ U.C.T" and "EXHIBIT BLACK ASSIMILATION @ U.C.T". When security guards arrived at the Rhodes statue, Maxwele said he was doing a performance art piece and he was allowed to carry on. He later explained to interviewers how he timed his protest action to coincide with the opening day of *Infecting the City*, an annual public art festival that activates Cape Town's streets. That festival was co-hosted at the time by UCT's Institute for Creative Arts on the satellite campus for Fine Art and Drama students. This wily strategy granted Maxwele artistic latitude to complete his performance. Since the statue's removal a month later, other unsanctioned performances, statements, interventions and enactments have continued on the voided plinth, transforming it into a public stage. In spite of its physical disappearance, the banished statue has paradoxically entered public space in an entirely new way with continual mutations of its

meaning. These performative contestations offer new suggestions of what public space as common space might be.

I will briefly summarise some of these key engagements and their ripple effects before concluding with their joint significance. After Maxwele's intervention, the site of the Rhodes statue became a stage for debate and the expression of varied sentiments for and against its removal. Students gathered daily at its feet and held heated discussions there. The sculpture of Rhodes was wrapped in black plastic garbage bags and bound with packaging tape, incidentally creating a pair of devilish ears. This aesthetic evoked the monumental wrappings of the famous artist Christo Vladimirov Javacheff (1935–2020), who covered well-known buildings around the world and other large-scale objects with bindings. The garbage bags formed a symbolic shroud for Rhodes.[6] The words of a protest poem, *The Time of the Martyr* by David Diop, were plastered at the stone base of the plinth. "Rhodes Must Fall" read a cardboard placard hanging on the statue's back. That phrase instantly became a Twitter hashtag, and ultimately a new protest movement. A visual cartoon stuck to the base depicted a layer cake of oppression topped with the words: "white privilege". The Rhodes statue was soon covered for protection with a large rectangular crate. This concealment emptied its base of daily debating students but did not stop the conversation. The crated plinth became a forum instead. "#MaxMustFall" quipped one contribution in reference to the university's then vice-chancellor Max Price, and other slogans followed. A nearby newspaper billboard strapped to a traffic pole correctly predicted: "The Inevitable Fall of Rhodes".

The removal of the statue electrified the student body. Assemblies physically relocated from the base of the statue to a section of the university's administration block and later other campus sites in protest. Signage proliferated, alongside stencils and posters about decolonisation and fliers for meetings. In tandem with these physical interventions, the disappeared Rhodes statue earned an online afterlife and became a meme. Contestations around commemorative statues, memorials and institutional racism fuelled cartoons, dominated media space and conversation bandwidth. #RhodesMustFall soon spread to other university campuses. Stellenbosch University, also in the Western Cape, replaced an apartheid-era plaque with the country's democratic flag. In time, the #OpenStellenbosch movement

6 This effect was later replicated in Charlottesville, Virginia, when in August 2017, a statue of the American Confederate general Robert E. Lee in the now re-named Emancipation Park was shrouded with a black tarp. The intervention was in commemoration of a woman killed while protesting against a gathering of white supremacists during a time when Black Lives Matter was gathering momentum.

launched around racial transformation issues, mobilised by an online video going viral.

On the day of the statue's removal a UCT student, Sethembile Msezane, performed an artistic intervention called *Chapungu — The Day Rhodes Fell*.[7] Wearing a black leotard and wing-like appendages braided with animal hair strapped to her arms, she stood on a plinth of her own amid the crowd gathered at the statue's base. Her face was obscured with a beaded headdress. Her back turned to the statue, she was physically immersed in the audience who were watching the removal of the Rhodes statue primarily through their mobile phone screens. As the statue was hoisted off its plinth, she raised her wings to coincide. In pictures of the performance, it appears as if the tip of one wing is lifting the statue off the plinth. Msezane makes explicit reference in this performance to a different statue of a Zimbabwean bird that Rhodes wrongfully appropriated, which today sits on his former estate. *Chapungu*, she adds in her artist statement, was about reclamation of space within an African locale that continues to be in flux; "It was never just about a statue".[8]

A graffiti artist rendered the shadow of Rhodes cascading from the now empty plinth down the steps alongside, hand under chin to mimic the voided statue's former pose. Other interventions soon followed. A collective of artists was one of the first to stage re-enactments on the plinth, which they reconfigured into a video installation attributed to Ubulungiswa/Justice that revolved around various characters. The collective was comprised of artists from UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art, artists from other African countries, and an arts-based programme for youth in conflict with the law. They responded in 2015 to two key sites: the Rhodes plinth, where they created video scenarios on the plinth itself; and an elevated area in the township of Khayelitsha called Lookout Hill. The collective was playing with the idea of toppling on the one hand and looking things over on the other, as one participant artist Elgin Rust told me. Their collective statement says the work is a response to the statue's removal combined with the re-eruption of xenophobic attacks and the proliferation of racially-fuelled discourse in South Africa. It was "an attempt to confront the nebulous, often uncomfortable experiences of the past and present that we are struggling to reconcile".[9]

7 Sethembile Msezane, "Rhodes must fall UCT to Oxford", 29 December 2015, https://youtu.be/GX6IVagb0-s.

8 Sethembile Msezane, artist statement, *The Art of Disruptions*, Iziko South African National Gallery, 1 January–2 April 2017.

9 "Ubulungiswa/Justice", Artcollab studio, https://artcostudio.org/pages/project-ubulungiswa-justice.

I first came across Ubulungiswa/Justice as a gallery installation of video, prints and artefacts at UCT's Michaelis Galleries as a collective output under twenty-three names. This body of work was submitted in partial fulfilment for Deborah Weber's postgraduate degree on the topic of collective practice as artistic strategy. This broke new ground for the school and gave it an institutional headache; it had to re-evaluate its conditions of appraisal.[10] In an accompanying dissertation, which includes the collaborative Ubulungiswa/Justice project, Weber elaborates: "The idea of problematising individual authorship is the central tenet around which all collective practice revolves. Collectives use the decentralisation of authorship as an artistic strategy to shift paradigms of thinking in relation to power structures, be they institutional, political or ideological."[11] Indeed, collective practice represents a non-hierarchical way of working that is highly significant right now on the African continent and elsewhere, and it is reflected in Platform/ Plotform findings. The next time I saw Ubulungiswa/Justice was inside a former prison in James Town for the 2018 Chale Wote Street Art Festival in Accra.[12] In this new rendition, the video installation was reconfigured for a prison cell and spoke more explicitly to broader themes of systemic oppression. The images of the Rhodes plinth re-enactments juxtaposed against the prison's cement wall took on more direct connotations about enclosures and the ongoing battle for emancipation.

A more spontaneous intervention in September 2016 turned the still crated and empty plinth at UCT into an interactive installation with an empty plastic chair replacing the former seat of Rhodes. Passers-by clambered atop and hammed it up, creating re-enactments of their own. One man turned the chair around and sat with chin in hand gazing up at the mountain instead of the city below, his copycat tactics creating mirth for passers-by. A discarded note on the ground warned: "Sit at own risk". That same chair was later draped with a green blanket and white cross — objects that remain potent symbols of the 2012 fatal police shooting of thirty-four protesting miners at Marikana outside Rustenburg in a wage dispute, as well as the deaths of two security guards and police officers. A man wearing a green blanket, a leader in the protest, was one of those killed by the police. An information board alongside the plinth listing campus heritage sites that formerly included the Rhodes statue was erased to a blank slate.

10, 11 Deborah Weber, "How does collective practice function as an artistic strategy?", MFA diss., University of Cape Town, 2019, p. 73, 69. Available: https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/31776.

12 "Chale wote" means flip-flops or sandals; also "all, let's go!".

In 2017, a poster was stuck to the plinth by the local Scouts troop that listed the Morse code alphabet, an apt provocation about trying to find common language to communicate across differently embedded positions within the fraught climate.

To that end, formal processes were convened within the university to try to address nested issues. These included alternative dispute resolution and a task team to review institutional artwork collections, a process that is ongoing. Recent activity by the Works of Art Committee has included an exhibition of a sculpture previously displayed in the main library, which is located up a large flight of stairs leading from the empty plinth. The sculpture by Willie Bester is of Sarah Baartman, a Khoi woman who in nineteenth-century Europe was paraded as a freak show attraction. The artwork was covered up with cloth and protest placards by students who objected among other things to its positioning near the science literatures section. The new exhibition of Baartman included a sound installation featuring a poem, visuals of the robed sculpture interventions in the library, and discussions around the vulnerabilities of representing the black female body. Later, the main university hall adjacent to this library, which was named after Leander Starr Jameson, a colonial-era administrator and a contemporary of Cecil Rhodes, became Sarah Baartman Hall.

The university also formed an Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission (IRTC).[13] This was loosely modelled on the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a lengthy series of public hearings about gross human rights violations that was conducted after apartheid came to an end. The TRC sought a restorative model of justice rather than a punitive one, offering amnesty in exchange for truth. The TRC broke new ground and its model has been replicated internationally, with numerous adaptations. But the TRC is also strongly criticised for shortcomings, particularly the lack of subsequent prosecutions and for inadequate reparations. Students refer to UCT's ongoing institutional process as "Shackville TRC", in reference to the makeshift structure of an informal shack. In February 2016, almost a year after the Rhodes statue fell, protesters assembled a shack along with a chemical toilet on the main campus plaza. The stated aim was to highlight inadequate student accommodation and other related resource issues. The shack was also part of the project to disrupt the architectural tone of the university, according to social media posts. It was soon destroyed by an armoured vehicle, re-assembled by

13 For more information on IRTC, see: https://www.news.uct.ac.za/news/debates/irtc.

students, and broken down again. This incident was dubbed "Shackville". At the same time, other statues on campus were spray-painted with red paint, and students took a selection of portraits, photographs, collages and other artworks deemed colonial from residence halls and burnt them together with a wheelie bin. Just before midnight that same evening, the vice-chancellor's vacant office and two university vehicles were petrol-bombed.

The crated empty plinth as a performative platform continues to trigger new responses and other interventions. On a return visit in 2019, I took some visiting students to a nearby venue to see an artwork by Diane Victor, which is part of the UCT public collection. The artwork called *Pasiphaë* was formerly positioned on a wall in a popular student hall. It depicted a bull, inside whose stomach lay the figure of a man. A (black) man leads the bull by a rope, and a small (white) girl is positioned in-between. Metaphorically, the artwork is based upon on a Greek myth about the sexual awakening of a girl, and intends to comment upon the patriarchy of white male farmers. But in its specific deployment of figurative forms, protestors saw another denigration of the black body. After Rhodes fell, Victor's artwork was also boarded up while a review of all artwork holdings in the university's collection was initiated. Just like the plinth, its crated form then became a spontaneous canvas where students expressed their varied opinions. Some digital curatorship students started a blog in 2016, *Does this Offend You?*, to voice opinions about censorship, re-curation and preservation with the web address advertised directly on the crate.[14] Victor's crated artwork, like the crated plinth, stopped representing its original subject matter and became something else: a vector of contestation and discussion. In early 2020, an empty space marked the place where Victor's artwork once hung, taken to storage with dozens of others as part of the internal review of artwork holdings by UCT. In the void was a small handwritten note lamenting its recent removal: "This is the way the world ends; not with a bang but with a whimper. T S Eliot. 1925. 'The Hollow Men' R.I.P. 'Pasiphaë'." Conversely, on the floor tiles directly below, there was a celebratory message written in large block letters: "SA EDUCATION FREE AT LAST 2018." This commemorated the fact that as of February 2018, the government declared that undergraduate education would be free for students unable to pay tuition fees. Coeval with #RhodesMustFall, another national movement had been generated, #FeesMustFall. It highlighted financial access and related inequities, which for some months brought various university operations in the country to a standstill. Decolonisation, free

14 For more information, see: https://doesthisoffendyou.wordpress.com/gallery.

education and the insourcing of contracted-out university workers were the key protest refrains during this time. Those demands were met with varied degrees of success, but the protestors' goals and the efficacy of their methods are even now subject to a range of understandings and resurgent debate. The struggle has its own problematics, internal divisions and objectors. Francis Nyamnjoh wrote a book on #RhodesMustFall that among other things points out how the student protests for decolonisation were preceded by xenophobic protests against foreign nationals. He links these two events together, arguing in his conclusion for a more fluid and open-ended idea of citizenship, common humanity, mutual accommodation and nuanced ideas of belonging.[15] Others see it as part of a global fight. "The struggle is about all of us," said Namane Kutekani, a student leader of the Economic Freedom Front.[16] He was part of a public gathering in October 2015 outside the Cape Town Magistrates' Court to support other students detained on protest-related charges. Either way, the "fallists" caught the public imagination. A splinter group of protestors during 2015 took over a supermarket in Khayelitsha, a township about thirty kilometres from central Cape Town, under the banner #BreadPricesMustFall. Protests spread to public squares around the country. Related dramatisations soon took place on statues of former presidents and other statesmen, many splashed with brightly coloured paint.

The enduring significance of these ephemeral events is that the protesting students were in effect bringing a differently configured future into the present. Leigh-Ann Naidoo described the students in a 2016 lecture as "time-travellers"; she said that "their particular, beautiful madness is to have recognised and exploited the ambivalence of our historical moment to push into the future. They have been working on the project of historical dissonance, of clarifying the untenable status quo of the present by forcing an awareness of a time when things are not this way. They have seen things many have yet to see. They have been experimenting with hallucinating a new time."[17] This quality is shared in *Panya Routes* with independent spaces that each in their own way hallucinate a new time.

Right next to UCT, another bronze bust of the former colonialist looks out over the expanse of Cape Town from the slopes of Table Mountain called Devil's Peak. The Rhodes Memorial is an imposing stone and bronze

15 Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, Langaa RPCIG, Bamenda, 2016, p. 239–50.

16 Namane Kutekani, interview with the author, Cape Town, October 2015.

17 Leigh-Ann Naidoo, Ruth First Memorial Lecture, University of the Witwatersrand, 2016. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=979065482218868.

commemoration comprising statues either side of a long stone stairway that ascends to a bust of Rhodes, colonnaded and looking out over the sprawling city below. It is a popular photography spot for visitors and wedding nuptials, and it is just a short walk away from UCT campus. In September 2015, a few months after Rhodes fell at UCT, this bust on Devil's Peak had its nose angle-grinded off in the dead of night. It was also set alight, as dramatic burn marks above the head still attest. The pupils of its eyes were painted red and graffiti was sprayed onto granite walls: "YOUR Dreams of Empire will Die" and "RACIST, THIEF, MURDERER Philanthropist". Immediately underneath the Rhodes bust: "THE MASTER'S NOSE BETRAYS HIM". The latter was in apparent reference to Nikolai Gogol, a nineteenth-century Russian writer, whose absurdist novel *The Nose*, written in 1836, features a protagonist who wakes up one morning to find his nose has left his face. The nose goes on to develop a life of its own, and the character's misfortune can be read as his own downfall brought on by pride. An anonymous email sent to an art collective in Cape Town at the time of the disappearance of Rhodes's nose suggested that adventures were in store: "The nose of Rhodes (Gogol) has left his face and developed a life of its own. It now goes on a journey. Where will the nose show up next? Time will tell".[18] Several months later, a new nose had returned to the face, restored by a local artist and historian. The visible outline and colour mismatch looked comically odd and seemed to comment instead on the nature of the unsalvageable. Nonetheless, the reunion is in alignment with the script of the Gogol play where the nose ultimately returns to its humbled owner.

The maladjusted nose was not left in peace for long. In July 2020, while the world was distracted by a pandemic, the self-same Rhodes statue was dramatically and anonymously decapitated overnight. Three days later, the head of Rhodes was found in some shrubbery about fifty metres from the base of the memorial; not that surprising, since the hunk of bronze reportedly weighs over eighty kilograms. An independent group, calling themselves the Friends of Rhodes Memorial, clubbed together to lobby the government to return the head to its shoulders rather than exhibit it in a mooted theme park for colonial and apartheid artefacts, as proposed by a consultative task team. Two months later, the head of Rhodes was welded back onto its bust just in time for Heritage Day celebrations on 24 September 2020. The Friends of Rhodes Memorial not only restored the Rhodes head but made a 3D scan of the bust and built a replica, just in case the original

18 Jan Cronje, "Where it's gone, no one nose", *Independent Online*, 27 September 2015, https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/where-its-gone-no-one-nose-1921504.

went on a future walkabout. They also added a GPS tracker and alarm, and the sculpture is now filled in with industrial strength cement and thick iron rods to make it more resilient. This bust of Rhodes is back on its elevated stone plinth, albeit looking rather green with its new patina and suffering from its tribulations. A visible scar from the angle-grinder runs all the way down the cheeks and the nose is cracked and chipped; his (mis)adventures have given Rhodes a somewhat exhausted demeanour. Following the restoration, the Friends of Rhodes Memorial issued a statement claiming the decapitation was actually all in aid of a threatened indigenous chameleon.[19] Gogol would no doubt be envious of such a fantastical script.

Only eighteen months after Rhodes fell at UCT campus, student protests flared again, triggered by the government's decision to give universities discretion to selectively increase fees. Activated under the name Umhlangano (the gathering), a group of students effectively turned the university's satellite campus of Michaelis School of Fine Art into a live art installation as a site of protest for two months. The occupation did not garner much attention in its understated tone, yet remains for me one of the most provocative and moving interventions. From October 2016, the vehicle entrance was barricaded and classes were suspended for the duration. Umhlangano's strategy was a combination of protest art, subversive play and physical vulnerability. Their aim, as described to me on a visit, was to break down silos of disciplinary knowledge and move into a fourth dimension. Predominantly, the group comprised LGBTQI+ students. In response to increased security on campus, which included armed security guards, Umhlangano created costumes, installations and visual artworks from whatever was to hand — found objects, everyday materials and physical interactions. Some of these artworks, including balloons, were deemed illegal structures according to a court order, and in one quite farcical moment, clutches of balloons were reportedly carried away by security guards. Affiliated arts campuses, after this incident, hoisted multicoloured balloons in support.

Language was a major concern for Umhlangano, and in particular the naming of people, places and institutions. Students masked existing signboards on the art school campus with black tape and renamed them. The Drama Rehearsal room became Thoko Ntshinga Lab; Arena Theatre became Winston Ntshona Theatre; the school itself, named after

19 Rhodesmem, "Rhodes statue protest — is to save the Cape Dwarf chameleon not RMF as imagined", Friends of Rhodes Memorial, 28 September 2020, http://www.friendsofrhodesmemorial.co.za/2020/09/28/rhodes-statue-protest-is-to-save-the-cape-dwarf-chameleon-not-rmf-as-imagined.

its benefactor Max Michaelis (1852–1932), a mining magnate, was rechristened after the artist Helen Sebidi. The student protestors also assembled an exhibition of artworks in UCT's Michaelis Galleries, which doubled during the shutdown as a sleeping area for the live-in protestors. Facilitated discussions with staff were held, which included artistic interventions. The premise of Umhlangano was to create a safe space from which to work, live and create artworks, performances and talks on how to move things forward. The first point on a declared agenda was "the politics of space". The fraught occupation finally came to an end in late December 2016 when students reached a broader agreement with UCT. The abiding image and implication of the shutdown could be summed up by an artwork banner strung across the campus thoroughfare with a single hand-painted word: LISTEN.

Maxwele's concerns of claustrophobia from colonial dominance at UCT, which opened this chapter, bear a striking relevance to current affairs five years on. The phrase "I can't breathe" has ricocheted around the globe — the last words repeatedly uttered by an American black man, George Floyd, killed in May 2020 by a white policeman holding a knee to the back of his neck.[20] It has resonance, too, with the 2014 case of Eric Garner, whose repetitions of the phrase "I can't breathe" also preceded his death at the hands of police. Or any of the seventy documented deaths over the past decade detailed recently by the *New York Times* where "I can't breathe" were the last words uttered in law enforcement custody.[21] These deaths are suggestive more broadly of other unknown smotherings of majority black bodies, as articulated by the Black Lives Matter protest movement that has since gained traction. *ArtReview* magazine placed Black Lives Matter at number one position on its 2020 annual "Power 100" list and states: "Both an explicit movement and a dispersed idea, Black Lives Matter has come to symbolise a global reckoning on racial justice and a paradigm shift in contemporary culture".[22] It is the circulation of ideas and values rather than individual artists or entities that are changing how we think about and engage with art, *ArtReview* adds. This kind of circulation of ideas is powerfully rendered in a short video created by Arthur Jafa in 2016, which combines a relentless collage of stills and video footage depicting both the annihilation and emancipation of black life. *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*

20 In April 2021, Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder and sentenced to 22.5 years in prison.
21 Mike Baker, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Manny Fernandez and Michael LaForgia, "Three Words. 70 cases. The Tragic History of 'I Can't Breathe.'", *New York Times*, 29 June 2020.
22 "Who's in charge here? Power 100", *Art Review* 72, no. 8, December 2020.

is set to the soundtrack of Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam", a track inspired by gospel and hip-hop. Saidiya Hartman said the video conveyed "the visual frequency of black life in the graveyard of white supremacy [...] and the miracle that we live at all".[23]

Returning to the larger topic of this book, it is important to recognise the ways in which independent art platforms offer some respite for any body but for the black body in particular. As Simon Njami described it, such spaces can offer a "parenthesis", or "a moment when people can breathe".[24] Speaking during his co-curation of the 2018 Off Biennale in Cairo, he elaborated on the potential impact for participants of such independent events: "No matter what [the state] is doing to them, no matter what the police is doing to them, they have this parenthesis, where they can breathe, where they can get a bit of strength to keep on going."[25] The working principles of independent platforms, elaborated upon in the next chapter, is indeed about creating breathing space by broadening the public sphere; or, what Achille Mbembe has recently termed "the universal right to breathe".[26] This idea of breathing space echoes throughout *Panya Routes*, as potential places of refuge.

The empty Rhodes plinth has come to symbolise the unfinished business of South Africa's past, but it also offers a provocative experiment for other comparable contexts in how to reimagine public space as common space. This interpretation is informed by prior work on artistic explorations of public space in Johannesburg, which posited an idea of common space instead as belonging to nobody and to everybody.[27] For that reason, it is also continually contested, negotiated and performed anew. The common, or the practice of commoning, is generally understood as collective and non-commodified, "off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations".[28] Otherwise described, it is "the common wealth of the material world — the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty — [...] to be shared together. We consider the common also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages,

23 Saidiya Hartman, "Writing Black Social Life", seminar, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 9 May 2019. Author's notes.

24, 25 Simon Njami, interview with the author, Cairo, 31 October 2018.

26 Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe", *Mail & Guardian*, 24 June 2020, https://mg.co.za/opinion/2020-06-24-achille-mbembe-the-universal-right-to-breathe.

27 Kim Gurney, *The Art of Public Space: Curating and Re-imagining the Ephemeral City*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, p. 149.

28 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Verso, London, 2012, p. 73.

codes, information, affects, and so forth".[29] This "artificial common", Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri add, "runs throughout metropolitan territory and constitutes the metropolis".[30] Paul Chatterton expands upon this complex set of social and political ecologies: "Rather than a simplified, monolithic entity, the common is complex, and relational — it is produced and reproduced through relations weaving together a rich tapestry of different times, spaces and struggles. [...] The common is full of productive moments of resistance that create new vocabularies, solidarities, social and spatial practices and relations and repertoires of resistance."[31] Common pool resources and public goods share what economists call the "difficulty of exclusion" — for instance, having peace and security in a neighbourhood applies to everyone in it — but the difference between the two is "subtractability", according to Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012). She says that common pool resources refer to "a wide variety of resources in the world where it's hard to exclude people from them but once they are in, and if they use or harvest, what they harvest takes away from others. An easy example is to think of a fishery — it's hard to get a boundary but if I take out a tonne of fish, a tonne of fish are not available to other fishermen".[32]

The plinth offers a novel exemplar of how a common space could be forged amid difference and disruption. As the visual journal demonstrates, the plinth is in fact not empty at all. The university, largely through stasis rather than design, has left the publicly accessible vacant plinth of the former Rhodes statue to its own devices, and over the past few years, it has morphed into a rolling performative artwork. Much like the empty Fourth Plinth on Trafalgar Square in London, with its invitational public artworks on rotation, the crated platform hosts a smorgasbord of temporary propositions. The latter are unofficial and unsanctioned collective attempts at trying to figure out the messy business of what a decolonised public space might actually comprise.

29 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. viii.

30 Hardt and Negri, p. 250. In a separate publication, Hardt and Negri differentiate between the common and the commons by placing an emphasis on contemporary agency: "The common we share, in fact, is not so much discovered as it is produced. (We are reluctant to call this *the commons* because that term refers to pre-capitalist-shared spaces that were destroyed with the advent of private property. Although more awkward, 'the common' highlights the philosophical content of the term and emphasizes that this is not a return to the past but a new development.)" (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Press, New York, 2004, p. xv).

31 Paul Chatterton, "Seeking the Urban Common: Furthering the debate on social justice", *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 14, no. 6, 2010, p. 626.

32 Elinor Ostrom, "Sustainable earth: Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom, on how we can manage common-pool resources", OECD, 28 June 2011, https://youtu.be/D1xwV2UDPAg.

The story of the plinth also suggests how art can be a vector for both resistance and recalibration of the public sphere; it does not only represent things as they are but also has the power to institute new social imaginaries. This insight runs through *Panya Routes*, where independent spaces have agential capacity to create new contexts in which other things become possible. Maxwele's action, which instigated the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) social movement and concomitant call for decolonisation, is directed not only at the university and its curriculum but society more generally. In late 2020, the South African government announced a full audit of public statues, symbols and monuments to guide the identification of proposed theme parks across the country as part of a more general and ongoing reconsideration of the country's heritage landscape. According to a government statement, the audit will help ensure public spaces reflect the constitutional values of a postcolonial and post-apartheid democratic order.[33] It also became clear that RMF had global implications for any country still haunted by racist histories perpetuated in the present tense. One reverberation in June 2020 came when the governors of Oriel College at Oxford University decided to remove its own statue of Rhodes, which stands above a doorway. However, following an inquiry, they backtracked in May 2021, citing regulatory and financial challenges. Nonetheless, the fate of other colonial-era statues in various global cities are being re-appraised. The toppling of various other statues formed part of this wave, including that of Bristol's merchant and slave trader, Edward Colston, which was dunked in a river. In 2020, Boston protestors decapitated a statue of Christopher Columbus.

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's injunction — to always start from where you are — was delivered during a public lecture in Cape Town in the wake of removing the Rhodes statue, which was a symbolic act that signalled the need for much deeper, systemic work. Yet its significance was also acknowledged by Mahmood Mamdani, who stayed away from UCT for sixteen years following an institutional dispute but returned, "because Rhodes fell", to deliver an invited lecture in 2017. There, he described the university in general as the original structural adjustment programme, creating universal scholars who would stand for excellence regardless of context and serve as the vanguard of this "civilising" mission. He said: "If you regard yourself as prisoners of this ongoing colonising project, then your task has to be one of subverting that process from within through a series of [acts]

33 "Audit of statues, symbols and monuments to be done", Government News Agency, Republic of South Africa, 10 September 2020, www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/audit-statues-symbols-and-monuments-be-done.

that sift through the historical legacy and contemporary reality, discarding some parts and adapting others to a new-found purpose — in short, decolonisation."[34] In addition to offering this helpful definition, Mamdani reminded listeners that knowledge is a coin with two sides: the local and the global. The Rhodes case triggered a movement with continental and global resonance that opposed the veneration of zombie monuments and revealed their structural force.

In 2017, Hennie van Vuuren set out in forensic detail how current political corruption links to a highly sophisticated web of economic crimes going back to the apartheid era.[35] This journalistic investigation is a timely reminder that institutions have stubborn memories, their operating systems are created with sustained effort, and such inertia can prohibit deeper transformations. Apartheid's enabling tentacles did not just die in 1994, nor colonialism at independence. That is why city futures may be dependent upon how well bureaucratic systems of institutions are truly transformed, and this process requires both refusals and reimaginations. The hard work to reconsider what a more inclusive public sphere might look like is structural, but it is also the daily and everyday task of people in their own personal space to consider how to segue these private reconsiderations into a worldly reality. Former boundaries between those two domains are increasingly becoming fudged, making public what was previously regarded as private, and vice versa. This returns us to the introductory hinge between Glenn Ligon's "me" and "we", an interpellation at the heart of institution building. The next chapter details the key working principles of how some independent art spaces on the African continent navigate this kind of oscillation: creating DIY-DIT institutions as artistic practice.

34 Mahmood Mamdani, TB Davie Memorial Lecture, University of Cape Town, 22 August 2017. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/vKFAYXf05N0.

35 Hennie van Vuuren, *Apartheid Guns and Money: A tale of profit*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2017.

This chapter conveys the core findings of Platform/ Plotform, a research project conducted during 2018 and 2019 in five independent art spaces (platforms) located in different fast-changing African cities. Despite their specificities, some shared organisational logics emerge in response to similar challenges, distilled into the five key working principles of horizontality, second chance, performativity, elasticity and convergence. These principles have been identified through making correlations between artistic strategies evident in these art spaces and everyday innovations in the urban fabric, using juxtaposition rather than comparison in order to acknowledge contextual difference. The underlying premise is that such platforms are innovating strategies that relate to the material realities of everyday life on the African continent, and these in turn have wider resonance for institution building in conditions of prevailing flux. The focus is placed upon independent spaces because these autonomous entities generally operate as non-profits in the public interest, frequently positioned outside the mainstream, and encourage experimental forms and pathways. In so doing, they also forge alternative institutional models based upon modes of collectivism and crowdsourcing. The collaborative economies at their heart help to turn "me" into "we" — a core philosophy of DIY-DIT practices.

The case studies for Platform/ Plotform comprised:

PLATFORM: GODOWN ARTS CENTRE
LOCATION: NAIROBI, KENYA
DURATION OF FIELDWORK: 11–18 JULY 2018

- *Nai Ni Who?* (*Who is Nairobi?*): a citywide annual public arts festival by the GoDown. The 2018 iteration (sixth edition) focused upon guided walks curated by local residents in several neighbourhoods. The annual festival in turn informs a forthcoming rebuild of the GoDown into a major cultural hub, as well as larger urban development conversations.

PLATFORM: ANO INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND KNOWLEDGE
LOCATION: ACCRA, GHANA
DURATION OF FIELDWORK: 19–26 AUGUST 2018

- *Future Museums*: The installation of this exhibition by ANO, which materialised part of a larger project to reconsider the form and concept of a museum. This included a roving Mobile

Museum designed with the ubiquitous trading kiosk as referent that went on a nationwide investigative tour exploring the nature and role of art and culture.

- The annual Chale Wote Street Art Festival in James Town coincided. It was held in 2018 on the theme of 'para-other' and convened by ACCRA dot [ALT].

PLATFORM: TOWNHOUSE GALLERY
LOCATION: CAIRO, EGYPT
DURATION OF FIELDWORK: 29 OCTOBER–4 NOVEMBER 2018

- *Building No. 12*: An exhibition by Imane Ibrahim at Townhouse, which engaged the dynamics between people and space. The exhibition was hosted just a few months after the gallery reclaimed its original premises with the help of its neighbours, in a timely echo of the exhibition theme. This act of resilience followed a series of challenges that began after a government raid in December 2015, a physical collapse of the building a few months later, and then forced demolition within twenty-four hours. Townhouse opened again in September 2016, initially in a subsection of its premises, and moved back into its original space in April 2018 after rebuilding; it subsequently closed down in 2019.
- The independent Cairo Off Biennale titled *Something Else: What if*? coincided. The Off Biennale was curated by Simon Njami with Moataz Nasr as artist director, held at multiple venues in Cairo.

PLATFORM: ZOMA MUSEUM
LOCATION: ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA
DURATION OF FIELDWORK: 17–24 JANUARY 2019

- Relaunch of Zoma Museum: Co-founded by Meskerem Assegued and Elias Sime, the art centre had recently moved to a new location where it launched a museum hub that had been built using vernacular architectural techniques and deploying an ecological ethos.

- This fieldwork coincided with a three-day Timkat religious festival in public space. The Zoma visit was preceded by my participation at a two-week academic workshop hosted by the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes on "*Africa as Concept and Method: Emancipation, Decolonization, Freedom*" at Addis Ababa University's Alle School of Fine Arts and Design.

PLATFORM: NAFASI ART SPACE
LOCATION: DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA
DURATION OF FIELDWORK: 28 MARCH–4 APRIL 2019

- *Asili ni Tamu Festival*: An inaugural one-day multidisciplinary public festival at Nafasi Art Space. This festival comprised contemporary expressions of traditional dance and music, including a youth group Shine, a public art workshop called Chap Chap and the opening of a group visual art exhibition titled *How did we get here?*. The exhibition explored change, transformation and the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Reflecting upon Platform/ Plotform, which largely involved multidisciplinary art forms in public space, the aesthetic domain is understood as latent in daily interactions, materials and forms; it is accessible, porous and mutable. It is also not about art per se; rather, it is the capacity for art practice to speak beyond itself and make relevant interventions in other worlds. Contemporary art in this context is not only representational, it has productive capacity. Hence, *Panya Routes* is about doing things with art: alternative institution building as artistic practice. The five principles at the heart of this chapter offer keys to artistic thinking infused by a continental reality while also providing innovative organisational models and strategies for alternatively configured city futures. It is notable that all the participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform have been in existence for at least ten years in concept or form. They consequently have something valuable to offer about sustainability while simultaneously up-ending that very idea. It turns out that serial metamorphosis is part of a successful strategy in response to a constantly shifting milieu. This elasticity, which also involves necessary refusals, enables more durable objectives to be kept in sight. Participant spaces invent their own material and immaterial infrastructures; these in turn can forge new contexts. They make plots for a public sphere that exceeds the status quo, and through a series of refusals and

reimaginations help to bring that future into the present by reconfiguring the very idea of "instituting".

The research is informed by formal interviews, visual notes and urban sound scrapes as modes of inquiry, complemented by other types of close fieldwork observations and arts-based modes of working.[1] The central method is to "follow the things themselves" because, as Arjun Appadurai posits regarding the social life of things, meaning is inscribed in their forms, uses and trajectories.[2] The things I follow are artworks, which take the shape of festivals, events, exhibitions or engagements in public space in order to observe the curatorial and operational strategies at play. I was sometimes a participant-observer, picking up cues from the artworks and urban surrounds. My modus operandi in this part of the work resonates with Ato Quayson's search for "expressive fragments" that encapsulate a larger social totality, flashpoints where "spatial practices reveal themselves".[3] In his book on Accra's Oxford Street, he later calls these flashpoints "spatial aggregations of social forces".[4] Quayson gives the example of having to navigate pavements in zigzags because the pavement as such does not exist. It has what he calls a determined evanescence that is colonised by spillover from the interiors of shops, vendors, parking, manufactured goods and more. Pedestrians end up walking in zigzags, understood as an expressive fragment of a larger reality.[5] Just walking the street offers spontaneous events that follow sets of "performative scripts" or irruptions that reveal and also produce certain important spatial logics.[6] Serendipity, Quayson adds, is just as important as lengthy hours in the archives.[7] Indeed: I go out for coffee one day on the very same Oxford Street in Accra and end up meeting an artist in a kiosk-turned-studio, receive a spontaneous lesson on the drums, and engage in a game of owari, or "long time". I am told I will learn as I play, and that is how things unfold. The game is played with beads on two conjoined wooden boards with scooped-out pockets. The crux is that a solitary bead cannot progress, only groups of beads have mobility — a collectivism that later reveals itself as a fundamental principle. For my findings in Platform/ Plotform, I make correlations between artistic strategies and such performative scripts in the city fabric. I refer to this oscillation between contemporary art and the urban as "geo-aesthetics".

1 See chapter 5 for detail on method.

2 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value", in *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 5.

3, 4, 5, 6, 7 Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, p. 21, 31, 14, 17, 9.

My method also borrows from Teresa Caldeira. In her analysis of some cities of the global South, she uses juxtaposition rather than comparison, "to use difference and estrangement as modes of analysis and critique".[8] The process is inductive: Considering all five case studies in juxtaposition and reading across them allows for surprising resonance and dissonance. This approach acknowledges their specificity while also considering shared challenges and common ground, which are expressed by the five key working principles. These principles characterise artistic thinking as installatory thinking that lends itself to self-assembled infrastructures and the instantiation of new contexts. The working principles are intended to serve as DIY-DIT tools. Centrally, Platform/ Plotform also builds upon Caldeira's idea of "autoconstruction", following the Latin American term, which describes how residents in cities of the global South self-build their homes and structures. They do so collectively and incrementally, she observes, with transversal relations to official logics.[9] This autoconstructed solution in Platform/ Plotform could be conceived as a "panya route" that is collectively forged, as defined in chapter 1. Autoconstructed pathways in response to uncertainty is central to the warp and weft of this book. The rest of this chapter sets out these self-styled routes of independent art spaces, each working principle informed by a constellation of key concepts that cross-pollinate one another.

8, 9 Teresa PR Caldeira, "Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 1, 2017, p. 5, 4.

Horizontality

The GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi is a hub with subsidised art studios and other entrepreneurial work spaces, a gallery and performance arena. Music, contemporary dance and visual art are its multidisciplinary concerns. "It has been a lifeline for artists", is how a visitor described it while waiting for an event to begin. The GoDown is a non-profit entity that emerged when artists and organisations came together to form a collective, established in 2003.[10] GoDown is registered as a non-profit limited company, its primary operating vehicle, and includes a trust so that it can think about the future and hold assets, according to its executive director, Joy Mboya. These assets include ownership of its premises. Concepts like collectivity and dynamic circulation are built into its very ethos, infusing an idea of horizontality this section will invoke in different ways. Horizontality in turn is closely informed by the concept of polyphony, or multiple voices, and the epistemic disobedience this generates.

The GoDown is located in the industrial area of Nairobi, in a former car repair warehouse; "the only space we could find", as Mboya said. It is named after the "godowns" or warehouses that populate this part of the city. The centre started out as a warehouse-like compound but is currently on track to transform itself over a projected thirty-month period into an iconic cultural hub. At time of fieldwork, the resident artists and other tenants were facing imminent relocation ahead of this planned rebuild. The future GoDown is an impressive architectural feat.[11] What is more, it has been designed in an extensive collaborative process between a Kenyan architectural practice, PLANNING Systems Services, and a Swedish architectural firm, White Arkitekter.[12] The redesign is deliberately multivalent, lending itself to a sense of dynamism and animation, of having a story, of embodying a presence and the notion of multiplicity, said Mboya.[13] It is also about being able to combine the modern and traditional while being both of those things at once, dropping the idea of binaries, she added. Intersecting these ideas is the fractal form, which is multiscalar and multifunctional. Local artists including Denis Muraguri, Dickens Otieno and Peterson Kamathi engaged with the collaborating architects and other

10 The origin story and development of GoDown is shared in chapter 4.

11 For more information, see: "The New GoDown: Fly Through", GoDown Arts Centre, 8 December 2017, https://youtu.be/ciDHH47UxEA.

12 White Arkitekter shares with GoDown an ethos of collectivity: it is owned by all its employees who work holistically with a team comprising not only architects but anthropologists, environmentalists, and more.

13 Mutheu Mbondo, Joy Mboya, Catherine Mujomba and Garnette Oluoch-Olunya, group interview with the author, Nairobi, 16 July 2018.

stakeholders on the redesign. The qualities of the rebuild reflect the organising ethos of GoDown, which can be summed up in an overarching principle of horizontality.

The redesign project is also informed by a macro urban interrogation project called Shukisha Nairobi, a ten-year process that preceded and paralleled the idea to rebuild GoDown. *Shukisha* means "let me off here", a common request to a taxi driver. The forthcoming rebuild, referred to by GoDown as "Transformation" or "godowntransforms", is symbolic of GoDown's relationship with its host city. In fact, the trajectory of GoDown reflects the story of Nairobi, as Mboya told the audience during a public lecture: "We have been a part of the process of unfolding the city."[14] No surprise, Mboya is herself an architect and musician, well positioned to head up this crossover vision that she describes as "design with people". Perhaps most significantly, Shukisha Nairobi deliberately feeds into the city's high-level plans for urban redevelopment. Nairobi has a relatively new Integrated Urban Development Master Plan, which was devised in 2014. Following GoDown's initial engagements with the railways sector that then segued into Master Plan discussions, the centre's rebuild and its own perspectives on city planning are now an integral part of the city's redevelopment and dialogue with the state. GoDown's newly envisioned hub belongs to a proposed axis that will in fact reconnect the central business district grid, north and south.

Wangui Kimari finds scepticism among the majority for urban master plans and the like. She stresses that the so-called "messy labours" (following AbdouMaliq Simone) of the urban poor is what should be driving urban policy and planning, and not neoliberal ideas of world-class global cities imported from elsewhere. Kimari calls upon "stories of urban entanglements — of innovation, violence, loss, resilience and redemption — in order to historicise urban spatial management in Nairobi" and to show how "alternative urban histories and subjectivities [...] direct us towards a *truly* more just city, and one that is altogether more inclusive than any master plan can ever conjure."[15] This, she says, is principally the work of young people. In particular, "barefoot activisms" of residents working to create more liveable spaces.

14 Joy Mboya, "Unfolding Together: The Story of one Arts Centre and its City", Vivienne Japha / Len & Gunnel Hicks Memorial Lecture, University of Cape Town, 24 May 2017. Author's notes.

15 Wangui Kimari, "'We do not want any more masters': ruins, planning and the 'messy labours' of the urban poor", *Mambo!* 14, no. 5, 2016, p. 1–2, original emphasis, https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01461496; AbouMaliq Simone, "It's Just the City after All!", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 1, 2015, p. 5.

Indeed, large-scale construction and urban development raise a complex set of issues, particularly fraught in working-class environments where artist studios are often located. Construction sites are prevalent in Nairobi, both active and in hiatus. The latter often stand as shrouded monuments to the hubris of speculative urbanism. An example was right outside GoDown, a partially completed multilevel building that stood in limbo. Large-scale developments can put cities on a global map, attracting foreign investment and interest. They can also increase spatial and social inequality, as Vanessa Watson pointed out in a critique of what she called the "cut-and-paste mentality" often used by developers of African urban fantasies.[16] The fallout from this sort of speculation was evident in the many signboards around Nairobi that revealed contested property ownership: "Buyer Beware! This plot is not for sale!" Or: "Please please! This lot is not for sale. Beware conmen." Land may get sold and resold, sometimes in fraudulent transactions, creating ambiguity about ownership, and land guards are sometimes installed on such sites to protect against property claims.

The new GoDown, however, is planned to be something altogether different. It is a bespoke and collaborative design that is the antithesis of cut-and-paste. The ambitious multiplex with an initial fund-raising target of two-million US dollars has a pointed emphasis on activating local communities and philanthropists. Horizontality is reflected in design features, which helped win an award from the World Architecture Festival in December 2019 in the Future Projects (Culture) category. One such feature is the planned porosity of the centre's wall to interface with the public street, allowing visitors to enter and exit along its perimeter. This makes the building an integrated part of its surroundings, in contrast to a common building practice in Nairobi of constructing fortress-like walls around a new development. The new build will not be like that, Mboya said: "It will send out a signal that, if you are developing, build right up to the street and allow the street to flow in and flow out".[17] The mixed-use (infra)structure is another distinguishing feature, with some of the new facilities offering much needed income-generating opportunities. The design includes galleries, a library, auditorium, a museum, offices, restaurants, dance studios, visual art studios, a boutique hotel, music studios, training labs, conference facilities, an underground parking facility and more. The new GoDown is in fact an interesting experiment in participatory design, or "design with

16 Vanessa Watson, "Making African Cities of tomorrow inclusive", discussion panel, Africa Real Estate and Infrastructure Summit, Cape Town, 3 November 2016. Author's notes.

17 Mboya, group interview with the author.

people", that involves neighbourhood residents in making the city home and cultivating a sense of belonging. The redesign in turn informs GoDown's engagements with the local government to help draft a different urban blueprint informed by majority residents rather than an elite, particularly the views of young people.

To that very end, GoDown's annual *Nai Ni Who?* (*Who is Nairobi?*) public arts festival handed over curatorial authority to residents of several participant neighbourhoods — from the sprawling township of Kibera to bustling Eastleigh and more privileged areas like Karen. *Nai Ni Who?* festival led visitors in 2018 on locally guided walks. This ambulatory method gave a candid introduction to what residents see as "the good, the bad and the possibilities" of each area's urban entanglements. The underlying impulse common to both of these interlocking GoDown projects — the festival and the rebuild — is to understand the city and work with it rather than imposing ideas.[18] This is in fact a key consideration of all the Platform/Plotform participant spaces, which look to already existing everyday innovations for both curatorial and organisational cues. The GoDown considered what already existed that needed enhancement, what was new and exciting to develop, and what was missing, as Mboya elaborated in a video about the festival's origins.[19] It is important to note how the GoDown's redesign, in tandem with the horizontal curatorial process of *Nai Ni Who?*, offers a productive interface to engage the Kenyan state on issues of urban development and influence its trajectory in a transversal way.

At the heart of this engagement is a desire to be able to better inhabit the city with a sense of home and belonging. Since taking ownership of its premises in 2010, GoDown considers itself a proprietor in the city and vested as stakeholders in its future. Mboya pointed out that Nairobi is a contested site, arguably more divided these days by class than by race; she said it was a question of the city finding itself through the people that are now the owners of that city: How do they make that city?[20] An historical context of racial segregation, exclusions and inequities still inform the present, Mboya added: "For me, the language of gentrification — moving in, moving out, or keeping it the same — is really not what the process is about. It is about a postcolonial city, now, that still has these tensions around the rural cultures and spaces where we come from, and a city that seemed impersonal

18 Joy Mboya, "Unfolding Together".
19 Joy Mboya, "The Story of the GoDown", GoDown Arts Centre, 12 December 2017, https://youtu.be/221uYwdmVEg.
20 Mboya, group interview with the author.

and not us, that never wanted us in the first place, but it is becoming home now. And how do we make it home? So, these processes are about making home, for me, rather than gentrifying something or imitating something."[21] Mboya explains in a joint article with Garnette Oluoch-Olunya that most people just want to get an infrastructural foothold in the urban fabric.[22] In that respect, tropes about gentrification directly transposed from elsewhere tend to flatten out local debates.

Yet GoDown studio artist Dickens Otieno was concerned in mid 2018 about having to find a new studio when the rebuild began and expressed some ambivalence about the pending change. It would be positive for the area, he said, but artists would have to wait and see whether the centre's new incarnation remained a feasible space for makers.[23] Indeed, my own understanding of the planned rebuild before visiting GoDown was tempered by the disruptive experience of observing residents prepare to vacate a shared studio building in inner-city Johannesburg when the former textiles factory was put up for sale. Visiting GoDown offered me a new perspective: Why not build an aspirant art centre in Nairobi's industrial area? Why does an independent art space have to inhabit a former warehouse? And, if so, why should it necessarily stay that way? An independent space in a fast-urbanising African city also has the right to aspire, like any other space in any other global city. A place that feels like home in Nairobi could also be *that* kind of space.

Shukisha, the GoDown redesign, and *Nai Ni Who*? festival together triggered in Platform/ Plotform the first finding of horizontality as a working principle. *Nai Ni Who*?, in its annual manifestations, deliberately takes art to reach new audiences beyond predictable expat and middle-class patronage, and does so by engaging various Nairobi neighbourhoods in order to better reflect their preferences, perceptions and feelings. The festival asks participants what the city, culture, heritage and art production mean to them. And instead of GoDown "curating" those answers, it defers this authority to the neighbourhoods themselves to decide what that festival programming will comprise. The festival framework is adaptable and any community can repurpose it. The 2018 iteration pivoted around guided walks of twelve participant neighbourhoods that highlighted different aspects for festival participants — a new addition to the annual programme. The walks offer a mapping exercise of meaningful sites, spaces, buildings, events, everyday culture and connection. Mboya told a public audience: "We

21 Mboya, group interview with the author.

22 Joy Mboya and Garnette Oluoch-Olunya, "*Nai Ni Who*? Exploring Urban Identity, Place, and Social (Re)construction in Nairobi", *Critical Interventions* 11, no. 1, 2017, p. 59.

23 Dickens Otieno, interview with the author, Nairobi, July 2018.

are interested in looking at this question [of the future] from the grassroots, the people themselves. How does the ordinary Kenyan interact with the arts to interrogate identity and belonging in the city and even possibly futures? [...] The audiovisual is our daily experience. *Nai Ni Who?* allows people to use multisensory experience to ask and investigate and question [...] whereas the arts tend to segment. The community reminds us that sometimes [segmentation] is not that useful."[24] She described this multiplicity of voices as having epistemic disobedience, a concept that is fundamental to all of the case studies in Platform/ Plotform and their knowledge-building imperatives.

The whole premise for *Nai Ni Who?* originally emerged from a callout for proposals that were aligned to an exhibition model; over fifty responses indicated this format was inadequate so the idea of a festival where neighbourhoods curate themselves was born. The pivot for deferral of curatorship considered context and relevance, Mboya said: "Should [programming] be happening in a space like this or in the neighbourhoods as well? And if in the neighbourhoods, what are the platforms and how does that work? Also how are people consuming art? [...] So we were looking just as much as staging and experimenting."[25] During this sixth edition of the festival, week by week, each participant neighbourhood curated their own events. One difference to earlier iterations was an emphasis on public spaces that were open and accessible. The festival culminated in a celebratory day of games that brought all of the neighbourhoods together, hosted in a public park called Uhuru Gardens celebrating Kenya's independence — a popular recreation spot for families. More specifically, they were hosted in a dedicated area called Dream Kona, which is run by TICAH–Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (b. 2003). Eric Manya, creativity curator of TICAH and a former GoDown resident artist, described Dream Kona as a public space they activate in different ways. Games are a kind of knowledge that is collectively authored and embodied, or "knowledge-made-in-common" as Clapperton Mavhunga terms it.[26]

The guided walks of the 2018 *Nai Ni Who?* festival took participants on foot to key nodes in the locality. Participants were heterogenous: an entrepreneur who sold *mitumba*[27] (second-hand clothes), an accountant,

24 Joy Mboya, "Animating and activating citizens", conference keynote, University of Cape Town, 2 February 2018. Author's notes.

25 Mboya, group interview with the author.

26 Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (ed.), *What do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?* MIT Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 28.

27 Second-hand goods go by various names from *mitumba* in Kenya to *Tokunbo* (Yoruba: "from over the seas") in Nigeria to *obroni wa wu* ("the white man is dead") in Ghana.

a Brazilian foreign correspondent and a Finnish dancer were among them. On my first day, we visited Kibera, Nairobi's largest informal settlement and by some estimates the largest in Africa. During the neighbourhood walk, we witnessed the oldest Nubian homestead, the educational charity called Shofco, dedicated to the issue of clean water supply, an art gallery set up in a kiosk, and a self-styled outdoor cinema. The main impression I drew from that walk was horizontality. There was no single curator or head figure giving out instructions; there was no obvious authorial hierarchy; neighbourhood residents decided the programming. As Mboya described it: "When we started, we tried to be invisible. What you do is you give a platform."[28] A key moment during that Kibera walk was standing in a kiosk gallery crammed full of paintings, including depictions of futuristic cities, and hearing the neighbourhood guide talk about the importance of acting locally but thinking globally. This was evident in the fact this kiosk gallery used a pricing model common to any top-tier commercial gallery anywhere in the world: sixty percent to the artist, forty percent to the gallery. However, our guide was in fact referring in her observation to the graffiti artist Zola 7, known for finding small spaces, putting up a sign and making himself visible to the world, as she described it. Zola 7 is best known for his "peace wanted alive" signage around Kibera, instigated during a time of post-election violence in Kenya.

Stepping outside, I saw another embodiment of acting locally and thinking globally, commonly referred to as "glocal". Parked just beyond the gallery door was a group of *boda bodas* (motorbike taxis), including one striking example with a football field for a seat. The artificial turf included centre line and goal markings and extended to cover the footrests. The timing coincided with the climax games of the World Cup soccer tournament. Later that evening, while watching one of those games at a public venue, I learnt from my host that these self-same bikers use Taxify to find clients because the Kenyan version of this ride-hailing app includes a boda boda option.

Such "quiet defiance" of digital disruption in cities was the topic of a public talk by Nancy Odendaal, where she expained that technological agency was relational, intertwined with human and social networks, creating nodes around which relationships form.[29] This phenomenon is called "platform urbanism", following Sarah Barns, whose book by the same title

28 Joy Mboya, "Animating and activating citizens".

29 Nancy Odendaal, "Platform Urbanism and Hybrid Places in African Cities", seminar, Cubes–Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, 18 August 2020. Author's notes.

explores the organisational logics of digital platforms. According to Barns, platform urbanism increasingly looks not only at the digital but also the infrastructural nature of platforms, including "the largely unseen social and technological forces governing public action".[30] She adds: "I [...] try to pay attention to the co-constitutive natures of urban institutions, actors, governing tactics, modes of expertise, training data and ways of knowing and designing cities."[31] In support, Odendaal pointed out that digital platforms have become a banal part of everyday urban life and their impacts are inherently spatial. She gave the example of a Ugandan app called Safe Boda that professionalises and expands the business of package delivery by motorbike to encompass airtime sales (talk time for mobile phones) and the delivery of medicine and food from local vendors. Such services also gave rise to glitches, or what Odendaal called "platform cracks", which can be generative fissures to explore possible urban futures. Indeed, the name boda boda connotes spatiality as it is a play on the word "border", where motorbike taxis literally crisscross boundaries using so-called panya routes. This idea of making one's own way is very prevalent in the social fabric throughout the Platform/ Plotform research study. In every participant city, the boda bodas also drive on the pavements in zigzags and signal their approach with a hoot. They are well suited for roads that are impassable for cars. They move freely, making up their own rules as they go, and are adorned with a sense of humour in elaborate signage that often mocks the vicissitudes of life — *All be lie!* — or invoke a higher power — *Thy kingdom come*.

A handcrafted sign on the exterior of the GoDown studio of Dickens Otieno made fun of this open civil disobedience: "No. 4 Use panya routes to escape the law", it read. Panya routes are more generally understood in this text as the back routes that people make for themselves. Customary in any city, these DIY-DIT routes are a form of autoconstruction, and this is also what is meant by horizontality: a hacker's pathway or workaround. Hacking in this context is also a subversion of the incoming, as Mavhunga writes about science and technology in Africa. He explains: "The most inspirational and urgently needed innovations derive from people who respect and thoroughly understand local modes of knowledge and build upon them. They are not just looking at the local as a problem that tech (specifically, the inbound) can solve but as a source of technologies that they can synergize with incoming materials to unleash opportunity from

30, 31 Sarah Barns, *Platform Urbanism: Negotiating Platform Ecosystems in Connected Cities*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020, p. 1, 21.

what people are already doing."[32] By incoming, he means manifestations of globalisation, things and ideas from motorcars to robots. It is the ordinary innovations that are notable, borne out of everyday realities that also subvert the incoming.[33] Examples he cites include eSoko, M-Shamba, iCow and HelloTractor. The latter, for example, is a Nigerian-based social enterprise "that addresses the shortage of rural draft power and labor shortages among rural famers by creating a network of 'smart tractor' owners from which farmers obtain tillage or tractors via SMS".[34] These examples show that globalisation is not always dominating local modernity; these incomings can be turned into instruments "for exercising being in the world, especially as prosthetic devices with which Africans help themselves to the global", he adds. Mavhunga explores technology from "the site of ordinary people and their innovations or creativities, things that few would consider technological [...] our choices of the subject of study and the starting points matter".[35] Part of the challenge "to decenter the North and the colonial library in narratives of Africa", he writes, is to see the African as a "spatial traveler whose mobilities are not merely conveyances across geographic space but transient workspaces".[36] The laboratory, then, is no longer the Western building where science is practised, but "the crop, the field, the forest, and other 'open' and (en)closed places where knowledge is made and turned into tangible, practical outcomes".[37]

His observations play into an evident culture of modifications, a type of urban hacking through disobedient design.[38] This ranges in Platform/ Plotform from the prosaic to the profound. Residents in newly constructed neighbourhoods in Cairo live in buildings with unfinished top floors to avoid paying tax due on completion. A knock-off of the Kentucky Fried Chicken logo is hacked into a church banner with its instantly recognisable red-and-white to advertise instead a religious initiative in Accra, all the while playing on a local food: Kelewele (spicy fried plantain) For Christ. In other disobedient design, eviction notices on wooden boards with "REMOVE NOW" emblazoned across them just get recycled into new buildings. Some boards still bear the order "STOP WORK NOW" while simultaneously being repurposed to construct makeshift work stations. In

32, 34 Mavhunga, *What do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?*, p. 21.

33, 35, 36, 37 Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, *Transient Workplaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 12, 16–17.

38 Disobedient design takes everyday objects and puts them to other uses; it encompasses "design ingenuity and collective creativity that defies standard definitions of art and design", according to an exhibition on the topic: *Disobedient Objects*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 26 July 2014–1 February 2015, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/disobedient-objects.

certain contexts, urban hacks extend to deliberate encroachment as a strategy. Tactics like "squatting — the process of occupying and incrementally building urban inhabitation on land or in structures to which residents do not hold legal title" are part of the way urbanism is enacted in autoconstructed Southern cities, writes Gautam Bhan.[39] He uses the example of a *mohalla* (neighbourhood) clinic in Delhi. This is a state intervention in the delivery of public health, "built simply, cheaply and quickly, usually with prefabricated materials. In both process and form, they hold more than a passing resemblance to auto-constructed, incrementally built homes that dominate the low-income neighbourhoods they serve".[40] Owing to lack of space, the mohalla clinic has squatted on a pavement, alongside a street vendor. This squatting is illegal but the clinic has done so for legitimate purpose, writes Bhan. Its mode of practice is to "build quickly in a material form that can come down as quickly as it goes up, and in the interim, survive as long as possible, knowing that the longer you survive, the more legitimacy you gain".[41] He adds, "squatting as a practice has a set of logics that makes it effective and necessary for reaching certain outcomes in the specific historical and spatial contexts of Southern urbanisation [...] a mode of practice that embraces uncertainty, measures itself against limited temporalities, and operates to move forward incrementally in any way it can".[42]

Pertinently enough, during that same week of the Kibera walking tour, a section of the sprawling neighbourhood was subjected to forced evictions by the government, related to accusations of encroachment. Affordable housing, health, agriculture and manufacturing are the "big four" current concerns of the state, Mboya mentions in conversation. Unsurprisingly, land is an underlying contested issue and along with it the division between private and public. For *Nai Ni Who?*, GoDown had to find accessible venues to host events, which inevitably raised such issues. As Mboya explained: "The spaces people were identifying as public spaces either belonged to a church or school, so they were semi-public. Also, just the notion of the street being public. [...] A number of the neighbourhoods almost always have a parade and it was interesting to see how easy or hard it was to do that in terms of permission."[43] It was not only private-public tensions that complicated art events in public space. Catherine Mujomba, GoDown's administrative manager, pointed out that trauma following prior terror attacks in public spaces resulted in precautions, and induced

39, 40, 41, 42 Gautam Bhan, "Notes on a Southern urban practice", *Environment and Urbanization* 31, no. 2, 2019, p. 643, 644, 645. Available: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956247818815792.

43 Mboya, group interview with the author.

what she termed "a hesitancy".[44] Hesitancy also relates to a city built upon segregation, affirmed Mutheu Mbondo, a communications consultant for GoDown, during the same discussion. Mboya thinks it is young people that are more likely to break that barrier — "that generation for me is the generation that owns the city".[45] The younger generation of artists such as Osborne Macharia, Thrift Social and Jim Chuchu (artist and founder of the Nest Collective and East Africa's first creative economy fund HEVA), want to define themselves distinctively; they draw upon certain aspects of heritage but not with laboured depth or nostalgia, Mboya added, "they are in a different space". Mboya said: "It is a remix without the reflection a scholar might have — it is not laboured. Self-taught in the digital space and created based on other things they are seeing. For me, it is pointing towards new meanings."[46]

Take Msingi Sasis, for instance, a former journalist turned photographer. We met at another independent art space in Nairobi called Kuona Trust. Kuona comprises artist studios made out of containers and a gallery space. It used to be based at GoDown's hub in the industrial area but moved in 2008 to its own premises in a residential suburb. Sasis told me that filming often aroused suspicion for various reasons in addition to the fact that navigating parts of Nairobi is fraught: some people think you are making money off them, or they might be superstitious about losing a part of themselves; others are traumatised by terrorism aftershock and there are related security restrictions. Sasis enjoys taking photographs at night because that is a space "that belongs to everybody and to nobody", as he put it.[47] Strikingly, this phrase chimed with Mboya's earlier description of Nairobi as "no-man's land and everyone's land" as well as my earlier characterisation of common space in chapter 2 as belonging to nobody and to everybody. At Kuona, Sasis showed me his latest body of work on a laptop, seated inside a friend's container studio: *Nairobi Noir*, photographs captured at night around the city. Sasis has an eye for key moments, for signage, for juxtapositions. He does not crop. He works to capture a mood. He writes poetry alongside his images and has made audio compositions to accompany some visual works. Instead of exhibiting in physical space, he chooses to work online to create a "different kind of placemaking", as he termed it.

Back in the analogue world with *Nai Ni Who?*, another walking tour took us to Eastleigh, a predominantly Somali neighbourhood with a rich history and lively mixity. Eastleigh is a globally connected hub,

44, 45, 46 Mboya, group interview with the author.
47 Msingi Sasis, conversation with the author, Nairobi, 13 July 2018.

according to the neighbourhood guide Clive, who said the main problem is infrastructure. The pavement, when there was one, often becomes a performance space for preachers and musicians and oral poetry. Everything you want you will find here, he added, legal and illegal in parallel markets: "There is always flexibility on the prices, a margin for negotiations." This helps give the neighbourhood its flair. Eastleigh is a known shopping hub. Unremarkable exteriors belie intriguing interiors. Trump Business Centre showed off its denims and suitcases. The Gulf Hotel punctuated our journey with a round of camel milk tea. Once again, the participants on this neighbourhood walk were a diverse group that reflected GoDown's outward-looking stance. They included a musician laying down tracks for his imminent EP release and a lawyer who helped to run a copyright advisory course at GoDown.

The curatorial horizontality of *Nai Ni Who?* was evident in other participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform. Most notably, the ANO Institute engaged a similar kind of devolution and crowdsourcing mission during the Mobile Museum Tour when its team conducted a nationwide tour of Ghana's ten regions to ask questions to people they met along the way about the nature of art and culture and its meaning.[48] Zoma Museum was likewise inspired in its origins by a countrywide tour through historical villages to observe and learn from vernacular building techniques that had persisted over time. This common deferral of curatorial authorship derives not so much from the egalitarian impulse that everyone is an artist but rather the expansive idea that the potential for the aesthetic is latent in everyday moments and ordinary materials.

What is more, people are also regarded as repositories of cultural knowledge and their stories are respected sources, forming the basis for curatorial crowdsourcing. In fact, all the spaces in Platform/ Plotform described their work in terms of storytelling. Institution building is largely about narrative building in a variety of modes. Speaking about *Nai Ni Who?*, Mbondo said: "The platform gives us the opportunity to tell stories. We have dinners where people come and tell personal stories, or not. We go for walks where there is historical storytelling. You go to neighbourhoods where they tell stories about what they like and what they dislike. So, as an event, it is actually a storytelling event."[49] ANO's *Future Museums* was likewise a storytelling project developed in parallel to ongoing efforts to compile a cultural encyclopaedia in multimedia form. ANO describes the

48 In late 2018, a further six regions were added after a referendum.
49 Mbondo, group interview with the author.

multivocality of art forms in Accra — oral, musical, performance and visual — as a "polyphony of different ways of telling".[50] Townhouse Gallery actively built critical discourse through workshops, including rewriting art criticism, hosting an art library and building up an archive, which are all different modes of storytelling. Contemporary Image Collective, a neighbouring off-space in Cairo, manifests a conversational dynamic in its approach towards photography in the larger sense, from film to advertising posters, "the relation of visual culture to memory, and particularly dissident or alternative forms of talking about those memories or those histories, [...] a popular history approach to images and to storytelling. It is actually as much moving image as it is photography, and as much archive or research-based things".[51] Zoma Museum also described its curatorship in storytelling terms by understanding that art needs to be put in the context of a story rather than national framings: "It is a collaborative story. I take what the artist has, and recreate that story."[52] And Nafasi Art Space cited one of its main objectives as "building counter narratives", even founding its own art academy in 2020 to further this ambition.[53] Stories are also a kind of currency; they get swopped every day in exchange for credit in carnivalesque improvisation, points out Quayson.[54] In this sense, storytelling is a daily life skill. Jesse Weaver Shipley explains how "in Accra's vernacular spaces, authority is conferred through a performer's fluency in multiple symbolic registers", and identifies how "fluid code-switching delineates the possibilities of multiplicity as critical practice in daily life of Accra".[55]

Horizontality is not only a curatorial imperative, it is also a more inclusive and less hierarchical management style, which the participant spaces espoused in different ways. Nafasi, for example, had "a fluid division of responsibility", according to Jesse Gerard Mpango, one of its staff members who subsequently became the visual arts manager.[56] This kind of fluidity also helps continuity because dispersal of leadership gives the organisation a greater chance of longevity beyond original founders. Continuity is a particular challenge for independent art spaces that are often started by a visionary individual upon whom it can become too reliant. Garnette Oluoch-Olunya, an arts and culture consultant for GoDown,

50 Excerpted from a script hand painted onto the walls of the *Future Museums* exhibition at ANO Institute.
51 Andrea Thal, interview with the author, Cairo, 30 October 2018.
52 Meskerem Assegued, interview with the author, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2019.
53 Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 1 April 2019.
54 Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra*, p. 16.
55 Jesse Weaver Shipley, *Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2015, p. 226.
56 Personal communication shared with the author, 2019.

underscored the imbrication of art and everyday life that is at horizontality's heart. "Art is intrinsic to everything really," she says, "we may be in the city now but Africans come from a deeply cultural space and the culture informs everything that they do, [...] it is there in the everyday. So the GoDown is just extending and enabling a lot of this desire. [...] Art is right in there, it is right in there."[57] Horizontality is not a panacea, however, and has various limitations. David Harvey explains that horizontality is an excellent objective but he cautions that pure horizontality and non-hierarchy can become "a fetish of organisational preference", and that these principles "can work for small groups but are impossible to operationalize at the scale of a metropolitan region, let alone for the 7 billion people who now inhabit planet earth".[58] Indeed, scalability is an open question.

As these independent art spaces continue to expand, it will be interesting to see how their organisational principles translate or transmute. That being said, there is another important aspect to consider that offers an amelioration to this scalability critique. Horizontality conflates two often contrarian approaches to urban scholarship: the top-down dynamics of urban planning, agencies and international organisations with the bottom-up infusion of everyday life and ordinary people; or "the relations of complicity and overlap between top and bottom that have constituted the African city", as Quayson writes.[59] This messy middle space manifests in Platform/Plotform as polyphony, an epistemic disobedience that allows for new possibilities to emerge, such as nuanced shifts in practice over time. By way of example, Mboya described how the process of forming a collective space began in 2001 amid conversations between artists, arts organisations and Ford Foundation, a core initial funder that was primarily interested in the arts as a democratic pillar. This notion has since shifted as GoDown has concretised its vision and begun to understand its context and audiences: "I now prefer to think of agency, feeling empowered, feeling that you can self-express in a very local way, [...] taking charge, owning your space, being aware of your space and being an agent of how your space works for you."[60] Scalability can also work sideways.

57 Oluoch-Olunya, group interview with the author.
58 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Verso, London, 2012, p. 70, 125.
59 Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra*, p. 8.
60 Mboya, group interview with the author.

Second chance

The second key working principle derived from the participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform is a philosophy of second chance, of coming around again. It emerges from a cluster of concepts characterised by an ethos of repair and redirection, or "repair-ation".[61] This principle could be giving a person another chance, creating a kist (chest) from bits of metal parts at the famous jua kali[62] (hot sun) metal market in Nairobi, or giving second-hand clothes a new life in their for-sale piles at a roadside stall. It is also the cart doing noisy rounds in downtown Cairo collecting used goods for recycling. Appropriating space in surprising ways, like Bhan's earlier example of squatting, gives people who have been forced out of economic centralities a second chance for a sought-after foothold in the city. It is the literal transformation of a former garbage dump in Cairo into a cultural venue, the El Sawy Culturewheel in Zamalek. It is about rewiring relations between old and new, rural and urban. Second chance does not equate to second best. It could be a premier build such as GoDown's planned architectural transformation. Second chance is connected to the liberatory potential of panya routes that gives people another shot at something or a fugitive means of escape. In the words of a DJ speaking on a public panel at the 2018 Chale Wote Street Art Festival: "It is about my home. How to start something and navigate your way through; the music is my escape plan, [...] I am trying to find my own path."[63]

Cyrus Kabiru, a Kenyan artist known for his futuristic oversized spectacles-as-artworks made out of trash, grants a second chance for the future with his artistic vision.[64] Kenyan contemporary artists are exciting, Mboya offered, because they are not looking back at history but trying to imagine a future. Second chance is likewise reflected in the artworks of Dickens Otieno, who creates new sculptures from the aluminium scrap of used drink cans that he cuts up and reweaves to create intricate sculptural figures and forms. Sitting in his GoDown studio, cutting metal strips, he describes his technique as giving these forms "new life". "I do not know where these works will go", he says, but expressed hope that this former trash would end up in a better place. Second chance was also reflected in

61 Emeka Okereke, "*Urban Imaginaries, Mobilities and Why So Many Borders*", panel discussion, *Radical Solidarity Summit*, Zeitz MOCAA, 17 September 2020. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/6vPQsDQeon8.

62 The expression "jua kali", which means "fierce sun" in Kiswahili, has come to denote the informal sector in Kenya.

63 "The LABS panels: Women in Music Making", Chale Wote Street Art Festival, 21 August 2018. Author's notes.

64 Joy Mboya, "Animating and activating citizens".

the method and medium of an installation by Nafasi resident artist Flora Robinson. She spent her six-week stay in Dar es Salaam combing the beaches for waste and making micro sculptures from her finds, travelling from usefulness to uselessness and back again to engage the journey of the discarded object. "I like to use unconventional materials in my art practice, experimenting with what is already there, accessible elements that I can recycle or buy cheaply."[65] The urban everyday posits a concept of repair as an "ethico-aesthetic attitude" weighted towards the future, "through movements of fracture and reweaving, breakage and re-assembly, and the remaking and undoing of material and symbolic possibilities", according to a statement by *Third Text*.[66] The co-editors of a *Third Text* issue advocate keeping a lookout for practices of care and repair that often go unnoticed; "of considering what is salvageable from a situation rather than succumbing to the temptation of a replacement, of holding heterogeneous fragments in relation without subsuming them under one majoritarian bloc, and of negotiating the tensions between the closure of wholeness and the openness of ongoing acts of becoming."[67]

In Platform/ Plotform, contemporary art is not only reserved for something newly made that is pinned to the wall or placed on a plinth, although it might very well take that form. Mostly, its life force comes from the materiality of everyday practices, repurposed and amplified in their logics. These imbrications of art with social life are reflected in the platforms themselves. GoDown, for instance, includes in its studio compound an NPO (non-profit organisation) focused on youth that provides training in ICT (information and communication technology), graphics and web design and included an internship in its year-long course. NairoBits has been based at the hub since its inception in 2003 and intends to return after the rebuild. Other small business tenants hosted by GoDown range from music production to television programming and graphic design. Nafasi has a similar multidisciplinary mix with studios that have been converted from damaged shipping containers from the port of Dar es Salaam, which now host weavers, a graffiti collective and a dance troupe alongside resident visual artists. Not only that, its very name underscores the principle of second chance:

65 Flora Robinson, *How did we get here?*, artist's statement, Nafasi Art Space, 20 March–27 April 2019.

66 *Third Text* flier: "Announcing our forthcoming Special Issue for January 2018: Ethico-Aesthetic Repairs".

67 Theo Reeves-Evison and Mark Justin Rainey, "Ethico-Aesthetic Repairs: Introduction", *Third Text* 32, no. 1, 2018, p. 15. Available: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09528822.2018.1448516.

nafasi means both "space" and "opportunity" in Kiswahili and its strategy emphases the connections between those terms. Townhouse Gallery got a second chance, literally rebuilding itself with the help of neighbours after a partial collapse. And Zoma Museum salvaged a formerly polluted site in its own rebuild while adopting a pre-existing kindergarten into its operations in a radical extension of what a future museum could be.

To further understand the significance of this repair and recovery logic evident in both artistic practice and in the urban fabric, it is helpful to turn to Simon Njami, curator of the 2018 Off Biennale in Cairo. It is a non-profit visual arts initiative, which began life as an independent event in response to the Egyptian state closing down the official biennial in 2010. The Off Biennale aims to connect from Cairo to the rest of Africa, the Middle East and Gulf countries. In 2018, it was curated by Njami with Moataz Nasr as artist director. That second edition was titled *Something Else* and posed a question: "What if it did not happen?" Participant artists were invited to question certitudes and imagine a world that would be different because history took another path. "What if art history was not European and if the most contemporary practices were not to be found in London or New York?" was one such provocation. "What if colonialism never happened?" was another. Or, "What if Christopher Columbus did not 'discover' America?" and "What if Socrates did not have to poison himself?"[68]

What if... The main idea was to conjure parallel worlds. "We know from Walter Benjamin that the conqueror is the one who is writing history," Njami explained, "so if there is something you want to change, change it. The process is also quite interesting. People have to make choices and select which pieces of history to question or re-envision. It opens a lot of rooms".[69] In the context of that particular sociopolitical moment in Cairo, when people could become passive, it was more important than ever for events like the Off Biennale to exist, Njami added; the intention was to create "breathing room". This evocative phrase has ricocheted in my mind, amplified since the interview by the twin headlights of Black Lives Matter and a viral pandemic attacking the lungs. Breathing room has come to signify more generally what independent art spaces are for.

One artist showing work in the 2018 Off Biennale, Karim El Hayawan, simply titled her contribution *What If Art is Elsewhere*. It is based upon instinctive and short-living chalk sketches created by construction workers on unfinished walls. In another opening night performance work,

68 For more information, see: https://web.facebook.com/somethingelseoff.
69 Simon Njami, interview with the author, Cairo, 31 October 2018.

Always start from where you are.

Manohar Chiluveru used the game format to create an opportunity for social interaction. In an inversion of the traditional egg-and-spoon race, a game that was exported to Egypt under British colonialism, he ran a 'race' without competition and celebrated sets of shared values instead. Some artworks and interventions took place at the event's headquarters in Darb 1718, a non-profit art space.[70] An artwork that caught my eye during the opening at Darb 1718 was *Geometry of the Passing* by Youssef Limoud. It was made out of found objects collected from Cairo streets following public protests, the objects all carefully assembled on a studio floor in an evocative demonstration of second chance. The composite form of *Geometry of the Passing* is ambiguous — perhaps a ship, or city plan, or construction site — but clearly engages ideas of repair and recovery. The Off Biennale itself manifested this principle; in addition to events at Darb 1718, it repurposed existing venues from private apartments to abandoned workshops in the city. The latter, next door to Townhouse, comprised one of the Off Biennale's most compelling public interventions, as the conviviality of the outdoor coffee shop alongside the former workshops attracted passers-by to pop in to experience the art.

Njami's insights about the social fabric in Africa and its relationship to art point to several important aspects of this principle of second chance. *Visionary Africa: Art at Work* is a publication created for a nomadic exhibition ("art caravan") and research project by the same name, manifested between 2010 and 2012 in five African cities before culminating in Brussels. It was curated by Njami with David Adjaye, who designed a travelling pavilion for the purpose. The project included a residency programme and a workshop on the topic of public space and art audiences in Africa. Reflecting upon curating *Art at Work*, Njami writes about the challenge of designing an accessible exhibition outside "traditional places of consecration, namely museums and biennales [...] in countries where the institutional and artistic infrastructure is lacking"; the challenge, he says, is to invent other models and other forms, "adapted to a specific territory, sociology and culture".[71] One aspect to consider is how "the manner in which the people use the instruments available", particularly in Africa, "is frequently characterised by transformation and reinterpretation"; followed by the observation that people "reorganise structures according to their basic needs. The more *structured* a society is,

70 Darb 1718, an independent collective with a compelling vision around social change, facilitates visual art, ceramics, music, film, workshops and talks, and is positioned in the midst of historic Old Cairo. It also hosts Cairographie, a recurring photography festival.

71 Simon Njami, "Of Curating and Audiences", in *Visionary Africa: Art at Work; Une platforme itinérante en Afrique*, Bozar Books, Brussels, 2012, p. 27. Available: www.bozar.be/file/1288/download.

the more totalitarian its public sphere will appear, because, in such cases the state is in charge both of the means of control *and* its implementation".[72] In societies with less technocratic control, he continues, long-term societal forecasts are impossible since "the people dispose of a larger space, which compensates for the failings of the state, in which to express themselves".[73] The status of the artist, meanwhile, does not hold a privileged position as it does in the West, and artistic production is necessarily receptive to people's concerns. Further, Njami says "there is no 'centred causal logic' in Africa, but rather a series of micro-logics, which, brought together, form the social fabric. Markets, neighbourhoods and courtyards therefore become the places where a specific aesthetic is created" — he calls this "an aesthetic of scraps, of bits and pieces, [...] in the primary immateriality that has always been Africa's secret".[74]

Reinterpreting and reorganising structures according to need characterises the way participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform assembled themselves in response to prevailing uncertainties. They were all engaged in building new infrastructures to create contexts of possibility, often literally, as in the unrelated case of Adjaye's roving pavilion, which is "a device capable of organising a context".[75] Most of the off-spaces had already led a few lives when I encountered them and would surely go on to reinvent themselves yet again. A constant metamorphosis was part of their survival strategy, which could include reincarnating by other means. A compelling example of this kind of redirection, through refusal and reimagination, was Netsa Art Village, a collective and independent art space in Ethiopia with a fascinating backstory. It offers an intriguing and instructive demonstration of second chance from its founding motivation to its location, its building materials and its ultimate fate.

Netsa Art Village (2008/9–14) was an artist-run space started by recent art graduates and located inside Ferensay Park, a large urban green space in Addis Ababa. An artist collective took over the location from Asni Gallery, which had closed down, and set about building its own physical structure from leftover material found in the park. It created a dome-shaped structure to house its various art events and establish a forum for networking, communication and exchange. This was self-described as "a living museum of contemporary art", where artistic practice and process could be made visible in situ to others. Netsa's stated objective was in part to anticipate new artistic tendencies and evolutions in the environment of

72, 73, 74 Njami, p. 27–28, original emphasis, 78.
75 David Adjaye, "The City Pavilions: Pop-ups for Art", in *Visionary Africa*, p. 19.

the contemporary arts in Ethiopia and Africa as a whole. For several years, Netsa operated its collective from this autoconstructed space in the public park. However, in 2014, it was forced by the government to close down; others suggested that its funders also got impatient. Either way, "it is a story that needs to be told", said Mihret Kebede, an artist and poet who helped found Netsa Art Village as part of a group of eleven former students from the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design. "Once we graduated, there was nowhere to go for us. There was no independent collective and contemporary art space at that time. That was the need driving us."[76] The collective organised exhibitions, poetry and music events, video art screenings, discussions and an annual art festival. The artists built the space themselves from metal they found abandoned on-site in a wonderful demonstration of recycling and second chance. An architect friend designed a geodesic dome and everyone built the gallery structure and office over a period of three to four months. The fabric covering the dome was sourced using a grant from the Goethe-Institut, a German cultural association operating worldwide.

Commission from sales on artworks was one source of potential revenue. However, as Kebede related the realities of running Netsa, it became evident that the biggest challenge was the broader incapacity of society to value the kind of work that it carried out. This difficulty was starkly reflected in bureaucratic hurdles. For one thing, Netsa did not fit into existing government categories for registration, which defaulted to classify art collectives as traders instead of non-profit entities. Government regulations also treated artworks as capital that must be valued in monetary terms. Such challenges ultimately eroded the sustainability of the initiative because it became impossible to effectively administer operations in such a pecuniary framework. This had its humorous side, albeit on the absurdist end of the spectrum. Once the government decided that Netsa collective had "capital" in the form of artworks, it also had to show that it had a cash register machine, in line with regulations. Netsa bought a cash register under threat of closure, but it was something the collective could ill afford. It was not only the cost of the machine; someone had to take a daily report at close of day from the cash register and the whole team had to be officially trained in how to use it. "That is the [level] of understanding that they have. You can just imagine how hard it was for us", she added, with an incredulous laugh. Kebede recalled how, after spending a full day's work in the studio, the completed daily report read "no duty" since

76 Mihret Kebede, interview with the author, Addis Ababa, 16 January 2019.

no sales had been transacted.[77] Any artist wondering how to measure a day's invisible labour, or any independent art space articulating what it does and why that matters, would find this kind of scenario completely relatable. I like to think of that cash register at Netsa issuing its daily report as a durational work of performance art that signals the perversity of measuring value through sales.[78] But before elaborating upon the next principle of performativity, a final note on Netsa's experience.

Around 2014, after several years of Netsa's existence, transformation plans for Ferensay Park and the city at large were made as part of larger development visions for Ethiopia and especially for Addis Ababa. Netsa was told it needed to move. Kebede explained the clash of logics resulting from the fact that the collective felt it was already carrying out a transformation agenda. An architect working on those redevelopment plans worked the art collective into their redesign and proposed this to the government, but it did not fly. Kebede said: "At some point, if you are independent, they do not want you in the place. At that time, [the government] did a lot of propaganda with artists and comedians. We refused to be associated with that."[79] Netsa was at that time the only collective art space in the city that was independently organising collaborative events centred around contemporary and experimental practice, she added. "We wanted to create a 'living art' space where you could also see an artwork in progress as well as finished. As soon as you come to the space, you want to be part of it."[80] In the end, the forces against Netsa were too strong and the space in the park had to close. The collective dismantled its physical structure, left the metal in the park (where they had found it) and took the artworks to dispersed studios. "What brought us together was an independent space. There were a lot of commercial spaces but you could not see and feel what was going on in the country apart from kitschy artworks that do not speak to the actual life."[81] Once shut down, it was hard to start something new. Its former public park location was closed off and became a site of active excavation and redevelopment.

However, Netsa could be understood to have found a second life. Its artistic energies have been transmuted into monthly poetry and jazz fusion events involving Kebede and her interdisciplinary collaborators, events which started along with Netsa in 2008. The same week of our interview, Kebede performed at one such evening, a hugely popular fixture that

77, 79, 80, 81 Kebede, interview with the author.

78 The artist Tehching Hsieh was known, among other things, for his one-year performances conducted in New York from the 1970s onwards. In *Time Clock Piece (One Year Performance 1980–81)*, he punched a time clock every hour for a year. Mentally and physically gruelling works were his signature, and his art can be understood as a form of refusal.

has instigated artistic crossovers and bred other jazz and poetry spinoffs elsewhere in the country. Kebede says of these interdisciplinary occasions: "Poetry is the culture of the people; they love poetry. For people to address things like authority and social issues, [...] we open the stage for everyone to perform and share what they have."[82] Members of the audience can participate and the collective also bring invited guests. The collective has collaborated for several years now with the same jazz band. "The need was there, we provided it and people started to come. We also started the culture of attending such events with payments. Now there are different kinds of jazz evenings here and there."[83] The programme, often political, had been banned three times and some content censorship was attempted, Kebede said. State officials were sometimes in the audience, observing and documenting. In such cases, the organisers might make a programming detour and the audience would notice that it is all suddenly about love, Kebede joked. It was always a challenge but the aim is to keep the space totally independent; "Now the ownership of the programme is the people. We are not the only ones safeguarding. We have over 1500 people coming to attend monthly."[84]

This kind of redirection is both a refusal and a reimagination. Independent spaces like Netsa vividly demonstrate the incremental, self-build process of autoconstruction, which uses the already existing logics and resources of the city fabric. Netsa used a pre-existing site and redirected it. This modus operandi is a vital thread throughout Platform/ Plotform. It is DIY-DIT institution building as artistic practice. Autoconstruction informs a broader mode of making cities that is prevalent in cities of the global South that Caldeira calls "peripheral urbanization", although not peripheral because of its physical location; it is peripheral because of the crucial role of residents in producing such space, which she says unsettles official logics; "they do not contest these logics directly as much as they operate with them in transversal ways".[85] Autoconstruction is about respecting residents as agents of urbanisation and not just consumers of spaces, Caldeira says; the state is present but frequently "acts *after the fact* to modify spaces that are already built and inhabited".[86] Or, as the story of Netsa made clear, state logics can misperceive the value of such spaces. Either way, self-assembled spaces testify to a city future that could be otherwise. Autoconstruction requires a rhizomatic organisational logic that is subversive and pragmatic at

82, 83, 84 Kebede, interview with the author.

85, 86 Teresa PR Caldeira, "Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 1, 2017, p. 7.

the same time, balancing official and unofficial hybrid relationalities. Such autoconstruction is evident in many structures passed by daily in the city, manifesting multiple stages of completion or serving numerous purposes. Like a kindergarten by day and church by night, collectively and incrementally built as urban bricolage. At the heart of this approach to making cities is an agential capacity, which the next principle elaborates upon.

Performativity

ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge in Accra is situated in Osu near the well-known bustling hub of Oxford Road. Its gallery is a former Alfa Romeo car workshop that closed down. On the other side of the road, ANO's offices and a new residency space had recently taken over some former lodgings. This physical expansion reflected an interesting cusp for ANO. After being created organically and run quite intuitively, it was shifting in August 2018 from institution making to institution building, according to its founder and director Nana Oforiatta Ayim. At a meeting with visiting curatorship students, she suggested this new trajectory would involve plugging into the state level to engage what was happening in the country. That prophecy came to fruition less than a year later with Oforiatta Ayim's curatorship of Ghana's first ever national pavilion at the 2019 Biennale di Venezia, supported by Ghana's Ministry of Tourism. The concept of the pavilion, rendered by architect David Adjaye, created elliptical chambers containing the work of six artists. The chambers derived from the country's regional architecture, "where cooking, sleeping and other activities take place in these individual, chamber-like spaces".[87] Oforiatta Ayim said this about her appointment, in a statement: "The conversation about nations is broadening in the face of issues of migrations; of us redefining our connections to our diasporas throughout our 'year of return'; of discussing what it might mean to have our cultural objects returned, and how we thus might redefine ourselves in the world; and of finally moving out of the 'postcolonial' moment into one we have yet to envision."[88]

This international limelight marked a poignant moment for ANO, which began life in purely conceptual form in 2002. Oforiatta Ayim was then a student and knew she wanted to grow something but was not sure exactly what it would be. "I knew that I wanted to shift the overriding narrative of the continent, in particular African culture, so in a way that has been quite consistent. But I started by myself and was super young. For a very long time it was just me, so as an institution, [ANO] is a relatively new thing."[89] It was launched as a physical space just after Oforiatta Ayim returned to Ghana in 2011 from Germany, starting in a public space (a park) around 2012. In 2016, ANO moved into the former car warehouse in Osu. Three years later, it expanded across the road. Most strikingly, positioned in between these two premises is the Mobile

87 David Adjaye quoted in Caroline Roux, "Ghana arrives at the Venice Biennale, bringing new narratives with it", *Financial Times*, 3 May 2019.

88 "Ghana Pavilion at the Venice Biennale", *e-flux*, 24 February 2019, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/246977/ghana-freedom.

89 Nana Oforiatta Ayim, interview with the author, Accra, 23 August 2018.

Museum designed by architect Latifah Idriss. It symbolically represents abiding concerns of ANO through an ongoing project on future museums and it also symbolises in this text the third working principle of performativity, which is closely linked to mobility, a secondary conceptual tier that informs and qualifies it. The Mobile Museum, in its fusion of art and urban everyday forms, derives its design from a kiosk — the small and ubiquitous trading hut, an everyday sight in Accra and other African cities — that could house a shop, a barber, a mechanic or artist studio. With the Mobile Museum, the multipurpose kiosk is blended with the idea of a museum, but unlike the traditional white cube of the Western art world, this museum is nomadic, accessible and porous. In the place of opaque walls are long strands of wire-like material that give it an intriguing transparency. Its collapsible structure means it can travel. In all these facets, the Mobile Museum represents an ongoing ANO project to reconsider what a contemporary museum is and could be.

Its predecessor was the Kiosk Museum, built by architect DK Osseo-Asare[90] and conceived by Oforiatta Ayim: "My questions were: Is a museum relevant to our particular context? What kind of space might a museum look like if it were right for our particular context?"[91]; "I was asking myself quite a few questions about the whole notion of the museum and its problematics. It is not a very democratic, accessible institution and can be quite intimidating. I was wondering what kind of structure would open and allow people in without pushing them away. And the kiosk is just everywhere, anyone can go in. It is everything. [...] It is just so versatile."[92] However, the Kiosk Museum was very heavy and needed ten people to carry it. Meanwhile, the idea of a project travelling around the country had started gestating. "We did the exhibition, *Kiosk Culture*. Latifah Idriss was part of that exhibition. She had travelled the country doing a typology of kiosks and she thought she could do one that comes apart and could go on the back of a van, so that is how the Mobile Museum came about."[93] It now stands alongside ANO, signalling the listening and learning tour it undertook during the summer of 2018. A team travelled the regions of Ghana to ask people it encountered along the way what culture meant to them, how they would like it expressed, in what forms or structures or institutions, and how it could help overcome some

90 Osseo-Area is co-leader on the AMP–Agbogbloshie Makerspace Platform, which promotes maker ecosystems in Africa and the idea that to build an innovative future for Africa we must start from the ground up, "mining what already works for models and methods, and deploying co-design within existing communities of makers, across class, religious and tribal strata". (AMP Spacecraft profile, 2019, https://theindexproject.org/award/nominees/3205); for more information, see: https://qamp.net.

91 Nana Oforiatta Ayim, meeting with students, Accra, 24 August 2018. Author's notes.

92, 93 Oforiatta Ayim, interview with the author.

challenges in the country. ANO asked these questions to *kente* (cloth) sellers, weavers, farmers, artists, creators, performers, workers, traditional priests, knowledge keepers, charcoal sellers, fishermen and healers. Their answers, captured in film among other media, ranged from ritual to indigenous knowledge to local customs and ideas around self-reliance. Michael Gyimah, an ANO staff member who went on the regional listening tour, explains that "it was very interesting. For people, culture was about life. For some it was food, for others the way they interact with their neighbours, or the interaction they have with nature. It is what they do every day".[94] Some of this information was shared on social media and informed ANO's Cultural Encyclopaedia archive project. The idea of the countrywide listening tour was to develop a mobile museum of objects, photographs, paintings, films and oral histories from each region that could later make a return trip. For example, in December 2019, it was the turn of Greater Accra and the Mobile Museum exhibited its findings and artefacts from the Ga culture.[95]

Natasha Tania Gordon, then head of strategy at ANO, said in a statement: "The aim of The Mobile Museum is just to take back the narrative of what the Ghanaian culture is and have the people who lived it and experienced it every single day be the dictators of that narrative instead of it being imposed."[96] There was also an evident awareness of the inherent plurality embedded into this project. The imbrication of art and life and the plurality of forms can be seen in this example of an ANO Instagram[97] post from these nationwide travels:

> We are not only interested in our stories but also those who are the caretakers of the past, the keepers of the present. In imagining structures outside of a conventional gallery space, we have come across many instances of people still living in historical buildings. This embodied form of cultural memory connects the past, present, and future in everyday life. We have stumbled across so many almost unbelievable stories in incredible structures, one of these is Obuasi House built in 1935 by Joseph Edward Biney, the man who discovered gold in Obuasi and built what is now the Obuasi Gold Mines, as well as the Ashanti Goldfields. He was also a President of the Aborigine Rights Protection Society, which laid the foundations for our nation. Rebecca Ackuah, in our last video, is his great granddaughter. Pictured is the building and an initialled pot he brought back from London almost a hundred years ago. (@ano_ghana)
> #Ghanauntold #CapeCoast #CentralRegion #Ghana #ObuasiHouse #Obuasi #GoldMines #Binney #tradition #oralhistory #heritage #storytelling #anoghana #collectiveconsciousness #livingarchives #mobilemuseum #ghana #modernity #imaginingfutures

94 Michael Gyimah, interview with the author, Accra, August 2018.
95 For more information, see: https://www.anoghana.org/mobile-museums.
96 Natasha Tania Gordon quoted in Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, "A mobile museum is traveling through Ghana exploring what it means to be Ghanaian", *Quartz Africa*, 23 May 2018, https://qz.com/africa/1285865.
97 Institute Of Arts & Knowledge (@ano_ghana), Instagram post, 11 June 2018.

Resonance between the Mobile Museum in Accra and *Nai Ni Who?* in Nairobi can be found in their shared deferral of authorship, horizontality and open-access structure. Both of these initiatives canvass neighbourhood residents about what meaning art and culture hold, and reflect these ideas back rather than imposing them, as Gordon described it. ANO elaborates: "The notion of the dynamic fluidity of time is often absent in museum spaces, fixed as they are on the singularity of one spatial story or telling. In the transmitters of culture within Ghana — the Afahye or festivals — time is a fluid mechanism. How, then, can we retain the dynamism, inclusivity and participatory nature of these open cultural phenomena, while encompassing more contained, immersive transmissions of culture? How do we create a space — one that offers growth, insight, learning and transcendence through culture — for all, not just one privileged social class? How do we write about, contextualise or house art that does not take on wholesale imported paradigms, such as Western theories and methodologies of description and interpretation, hermeneutics, phenomenology and so forth, without ignoring knowledge of them either? How do we begin to create cultural contexts, narratives and histories integral to the cultures they come from?"[98] Part of the answer concerns mobility, apparent everywhere on city streets. The stool a trader was carrying as she hawked her food became a table when she made a sale. The tailor expertly balancing his sewing machine on his head moved nimbly from client to client. Mobility, of course, has much deeper conceptual and historical heft. As Achille Mbembe points out, "African and diasporic struggles for freedom and self-determination have always been intertwined with the aspiration to move unchained. Whether under conditions of slavery or under colonial rule, the loss of our sovereignty automatically resulted in the loss of our right to free movement."[99] Further, in the constitution of Ghana, Mbembe came across a concept he had not found anywhere else: the right of abode, which is "a cornerstone for any re-imagination of Africa as a borderless space".[100]

Shoshana Zuboff, in her recent critique of big tech and surveillance capitalism, writes about these ideas from a different angle. She addresses "the right to sanctuary" and "the right to the future tense" as having a bearing on individual sovereignty, agency and autonomy: "Right now, however, the extreme asymmetries of knowledge and power that have accrued to surveillance capitalism abrogate these elemental rights as our

98 For more information, see: https://www.anoghana.org/futuremuseums.

99, 100 Achille Mbembe, "The idea of a borderless world", *Africa Is a Country*, 11 November 2018, https://africasacountry.com/2018/11/the-idea-of-a-borderless-world. "The idea of a borderless world".

lives are unilaterally rendered as data, expropriated, and repurposed in new forms of social control, all of it in the service of others' interests and in the absence of our awareness or means of combat."[101] Zuboff understands a right to the future tense as a claim through an act of free will; "there is no freedom without uncertainty; it is the medium in which human will is expressed in promises".[102] But this "elemental *right to the future tense* is endangered by a panvasive digital architecture of behaviour modification [...] necessitated by its economic imperatives, and driven by its laws of motion, all for the sake of its guaranteed outcomes".[103] That being said, it is not all about human will; structural conditions need to be taken into account when considering notions like a right to sanctuary or a right to the future tense. Take, for example, the issue of food. ANO ran a recent provocation that considered the Ghanaian kitchen in 2025 as a futuristic prototype. The analogy is pertinent because food systems are at the nexus between planning and urban poverty, according to Issahaka Fuseini. Urban poverty in turn is multidimensional and multiscalar, he said. "Someone may be poor [...] as defined by income poverty, that is one level of poverty. But another is by city design; there is also infrastructure deficit that consigns a segment of the population by virtue of their geographic location." Fuseini added: "If you look at means to lift themselves out of poverty, people can sometimes be innovative and able to do things for themselves. But then they still are confronted with unfavourable dynamics that make things difficult".[104] This very important counterweight to the notion of autoconstruction and DIY-DIT assemblages will be picked up again in the next chapter within the topic of future forms in order to acknowledge the systemic changes that also need to be made.

I visited ANO at the tail-end of one regional trip of the Mobile Museum, and the intended opening of the exhibition *Future Museums*, signalling ANO's broader intention to rethink the museum concept into something much more performative and polyvocal. That curatorial exploration formed a six-month programme from August 2018 until February 2019. ANO's effort coincides with museums globally rethinking their remit, purpose and methodology, and a broader institutional recalibration towards social justice imperatives. Oforiatta Ayim spoke in 2020 about this pivotal moment for museums: "I get invited to a lot of these talks about museums, and see that museums are going through this form of crisis. A lot of

101, 102, 103 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile Books, London, 2019, p. 54–55, 332, 331.

104 Issahaka Fuseini, interview with the author, Accra and Cape Town via Skype, 2018.

museums, especially encyclopaedic museums, are built on this imperialistic impulse of 'we are collecting other cultures for us to understand well'. But these museums are a lot about 'othering'. They are not really about self-reflection. [...] And obviously now, in terms of how the world is operating, it is not really valid anymore. You cannot have one culture that is looking at all of the other cultures in this form of othering. So there is this kind of crisis going on where museums are asking themselves: Who are we? How do we represent ourselves and other cultures in relation to each other? It is quite an interesting moment, even though museums like the British Museum are holding on for dear life to what they have created for so long."[105]

ANO's entire project seeks to help fathom a new logic for the museum space, one that respects public space and the aesthetic as it is constituted by people themselves and in everyday ways, noticing what is already there and taking this cue. As Oforiatta Ayim said, people are busy living culture and defining it for themselves irrespective of what is going on elsewhere; in these places and spaces, the real work is happening.[106] For this reason, the desire was not to produce a formulaic exhibition opening for *Future Museums*; she sought instead something that had resonance, "reimagining what we are as a nation, a collective identity, [...] seeing what is already there visually and aesthetically and rethinking Ghana as a metaphor. I do not want it to be an exhibition people look at in a disengaged way but to use it as a starting point".[107] She was grappling deeply with the challenge of how to adequately represent the content that ANO was collecting and synthesising on its nationwide research trips. This included the performativity of everyday life and how to break away from the stasis of the white cube. In light of these challenges, and still integrating the content from the latest regional trip, the *Future Museums* exhibition opening was slightly delayed but this deferral was in and of itself instructive and helped me reconsider what performativity meant.[108]

Performativity in the artworld is generally understood with relation to the contemporary genre of performance art. Performance art is ephemeral; it employs temporary combinations of the body, time and space; sometimes it extends over a longer period of time and becomes a durational performance. Artist Stacey Okparavero, speaking at the 2018 Chale Wote

105 Nana Oforiatta Ayim, "Museums in the 21st Century", panel discussion, Investec Cape Town Art Fair, 15 February 2020. Author's notes. Audio available: https://www.investeccapetownartfair.co.za/programme-2020.

106, 107 Oforiatta Ayim, interview with the author.

108 The exhibition opened in August 2018, shortly after my fieldwork ended. I observed the installation and some of its build-up.

Street Art Festival, had this to say: "Performance not only helps you see but it helps you feel. You are holding something intangible in your hands. Performance makes people aware of realities we are in."[109] The overriding sentiment during this Chale Wote discussion panel was how performance art offered the sense of being less alone and that whatever you were going through was not exceptional. Despite being an ephemeral medium, performance can also have real political effects. The performative occupations of public squares that was emblematic in Cairo's 2011 political transformations, for instance, created a "novel choreography" for the city, writes Mona Abaza.[110] Tahrir Square "triggered extended and replicated dramaturgical violent public confrontations, public performances and occupations in all the squares of Cairo as well as in other cities of Egypt."[111] Key to this transformation, Abaza says, was fascinating art and squatting of public spaces; occupation tactics included satire, humour, and perfecting performance while marching. This in turn stimulated debate about "inventing new and real public spaces that merge with a virtual imaginary, public spaces which occur through collective performances and actions".[112] The Platform/ Plotform case study of Townhouse Gallery in Cairo will elaborate in the next section on such imbrications between people, physical space and the public sphere.

In line with Abaza's notion of inventing new and real public spaces through collective performances and actions, I have come to appreciate a different understanding of performativity in the artworld as an agentic capacity to institute new contexts. I largely base this agential understanding of performativity upon the linguistic work of John Austin. His notion of performatives is short for performative sentence, or performative utterance, and "indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action — it is not normally thought of as just saying something".[113] Performatives are words with a constitutive power. The key point is that Austin's performatives do not describe; rather they are instances when "to *say* something is to do something; or in which *by* saying or *in* saying something we are doing something".[114] Contemporary art, conceived as a performative utterance, opens up the possibility for artistic practice to not only reimagine but also institute new contexts. Or, making a play on

109 Stacey Okparavero, "The LABs Panels: Panel on performance art and video art", Chale Wote Street Art Festival, 23 August 2018. Author's notes.

110, 111, 112 Mona Abaza, "Post January Revolution Cairo: Urban Wars and the Reshaping of Public Space", *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 7–8, 2014, p. 163, 166.

113, 114 John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962, p. 6–7, 12.

Austin's book title, "how to do things with art". This agentic capacity can be useful when material and immaterial infrastructures fall short. By way of example, the physical premises of the FCA–Foundation for Contemporary Art (b. 2004), an independent art space and network of artists in Ghana, collapsed when a tree fell on it during severe floods in 2015. Three years later during a site visit in 2018, it was still waiting for enough fundraising to rebuild, although its work has continued nonetheless. The library was stored in a crate inside the structure's remnants. The security guard looking after the larger precinct advised: "If you run these spaces, you are on your own." His comment was telling of the contexts in which such spaces often operate and the very particular hazards, from systemic precarity to speculative urbanism. Yet, in spite of such realities, artistic assemblages can create new infrastructures and in turn contexts that enable other possibilities. "African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used", writes AbdouMaliq Simone in a reflection upon people as infrastructures; "These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure — a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city."[115] This is very much the mode of institution building that is common to the participant spaces researched in Platform/ Plotform. These platforms engage complex combinations of urban space, artistic practice, social relations and everyday artefacts as conjunctions that become an infrastructure, for doing things with art.

115 AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg", *Public Culture* 16, no. 3, 2004, p. 407–8. Available: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/1946/1/Simone_2004a.pdf.

Elasticity

The Townhouse Gallery (1998–2019), based in downtown Cairo for twenty-one years, had no curatorial vision as such because it was "not a linear, singular or even definable thing", said Mariam Elnozahy, its programme manager. "It is really about who is present and what are we responding to, who is involved, and all of these factors. In that sense, it really is hyperlocalised. If we do not have an exhibition on, there is a reason why we do not have an exhibition on. And a lot of times that is corresponding to things happening inside the institution, or in the neighbourhood, or in the country."[116] Later, she added: "Everything is in flux all the time." This reality was already evident prior to the fieldwork in the impossibility of providing a forward programming schedule as the climate was just too unpredictable. Life being contingent on a plethora of factors also meant it was difficult to have a coherent, cognisant theme such as "sociopolitical" or "social" engagement. "And there really is a point at which those terms do not apply here," Elnozahy said, "because we are not doing anything other than being socially engaged. When people say that [about their own work], I am always so confused because what are you doing with your art if you are not engaging socially? That is just isolation. [Those terms] are not even categories for us; it just 'is', in a way. When you turn that [socially engagement] into a curatorial vision, it really elides the fact that there is no intentionality behind it. It is just the way we breathe, move, interact. And the way I have talked to everyone on the street before I come up the stairs." She said forward thinking was difficult because "we do not know what is going to happen in six months' time. [...] We are very embedded in the context and it really makes a difference in the output. We have a very volatile and fast-changing environment. Daily sociopolitical fluctuations, and as a space, we are very responsive to that."[117]

Her words were dramatically borne out the following year when Townhouse ended its institutional life. During the period of limbo that followed this decision, Elnozahy ran a curatorial project called Taking Stock in collaboration with artists Elke Uitentuis and Wouter Osterholt as a goodbye to the Townhouse building.[118] Running parallel to the gallery's closure and its transformation, they exhibited material remnants from various

116, 117 Mariam Elnozahy, interview with the author, Cairo, 4 November 2018.

118 This turn of events has intriguing parallels with the story of August House in Johannesburg; not only in the closure of the space and consequent period of limbo for artists but also in the staging of a parallel event as a goodbye to the building. A group of resident artists at August House, coordinated by Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, likewise created an event, *At the End of August*, after the building was put up for sale in 2013 and its former inhabitants had to relocate.

Townhouse activities in the past, and invited artists and neighbourhood participants to respond with drawings of the same. This fed into a dialogue about Townhouse, the downtown neighbourhood and the broader cultural scene in Egypt. According to Osterholt, Townhouse could no longer continue in its prior form due to economic, political and institutional shifts enveloping it.[119] Through these drawing sessions, participants took stock of "a multilayered situation", using Townhouse as a lens to examine a nexus of happenings within the cultural scene in Egypt. Each session was recorded and transcribed anonymously, intended for online publication along with the drawings. This curatorial goodbye effort was cut short by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Later in 2020, a new art space started life in its wake: Access Art Space. It is located in the same building and run by the former Townhouse team. An online statement said that this necessity to evolve and change was in response to the latest developments, which it called unique and urgent circumstances. "From here we were convinced of the inevitability of the existence of a modern entity to take on the challenges and vision of the past. With a creative team in charge that seeks new ideas, visions and aspirations, as well as working with strategies that suit the present day and near future, a new space and approach is born."[120] The exact reasons for the closure of Townhouse were unspecified.

What Townhouse reflects in its responsiveness to a highly mutable context is a working principle of elasticity. Its co-founder and executive director, William Wells, formerly had a space in London in the late 1970s and moved to Cairo in 1984. Townhouse began life in 1998, co-founded with Yasser Gerab. Over time, this non-profit art institution became a Middle East regional hub and connected with a lot of different places and platforms all over the world, which included Art Dubai, the New Museum in New York and the Mosaic Rooms in London. "People who exhibit here get seen, their work can travel and get picked up for biennales, for instance", Elnozahy explained. "Over time, what is remarkable about Townhouse is its alumni. People who have worked here have gone on to do incredible things. The editor-in-chief of *Bidoun* magazine, professors around the world, lots of people started their careers here. It is a very tight network. It has been an incubator for talent."[121] This includes being a springboard for other independent spaces like the CiC–Contemporary Image Collective. In 2004, ten artists and photographers held their first meeting to set up CiC in

119 Source: http://www.wouterosterholt.com/taking-stock/taking-stock.
120 Access Art Space, announcement published online, Facebook, 28 September 2020.
121 Elnozahy, interview with the author.

Always start from where you are.

Townhouse's Annex Space, in conjunction with a network of collaborative relations supporting CiC's incubation. CiC operated from the Annex Space for one year before it moved to its own premises in the district of Mounira; it shifted location again when the rent became too high. CiC spans contemporary art and media educational programming that responds to and develops visual culture and artistic practice, engagement and discourse.[122] It deliberately aims to work beyond the curatorial logic of a platform to help create a milieu of ideas between local and international contexts, with a special focus on photography.

The team managing the Townhouse Gallery in October 2018 had recently shrunk to three, from about a dozen at its largest, and Elnozahy picked up a lot of the curation. She founded the Townhouse Archives and ran the (Re)writing Criticism programme while also coordinating the Open Index Archive to document and digitise the country's contemporary art. Elnozahy joined the Townhouse team in 2015 during an important pivot in its trajectory; temporarily shut down and at a crossroads. "I was really inspired by the place", she said. "What Townhouse gives a lot of people is a sense of community. It is really hard now. People are really hungry for community in the post-2011 period. So that was exciting to me. There were a lot of things happening here that were intriguing." Those same attributes also made Townhouse a political target. "There is a constant determination to thwart what we have going here and the independent scene at large, but Townhouse in particular, because it is seen as the root, and very symbolic."[123]

In a resilient demonstration of the working principle of second chance, Townhouse literally rebuilt itself following a government raid in December 2015. Litigation following the raid kept its doors closed for a year. Its late nineteenth-century building partially collapsed a few months after the raid in April 2016. A military demolition order came within twenty-four-hours after that collapse. According to an article by Lina Attalah, this was both the perfect embodiment of, and metaphor for, its surrounding environment "at a time when many of us, who had lived through the revolution's heyday, followed by its brutal reversal into a space devoid of freedom, spoke of emotional collapse".[124] But the gallery clubbed together with its neighbouring tenants to fundraise, rebuild and reoccupy. Townhouse opened again operating from its factory wing in September 2016. It reclaimed

122 Source: www.ciccairo.com/about.html.
123 Elnozahy, interview with the author.
124 Lina Attalah, "Defying disappearance: The return of Townhouse", *MadaMasr*, 22 June 2018, https://madamasr.com/en/2018/06/22/feature/culture/defying-disappearance-the-return-of-townhouse.

the full expanse of its original premises in April 2018; I visited just a few months later in October 2018. It had also expanded into a satellite gallery, Townhouse West, in one of Cairo's new towns. The downtown complex remained the heart, cohabiting in a large building alongside other tenants. This hub included a gallery, artist studios, a library that doubled as a space for film screenings and conversations, an archive, and an independent performance space called Rawabet.

This constant dialogue with the immediate environment, between the art and the city, was reflected in the Townhouse visual art exhibition I encountered at the time: *Building Number Twelve Al Kamel Mohammed* by Imane Ibrahim. The exhibition was about two lovers and a building, an "encrypted meditation on love, freedom, and human nature", according to the artist's statement.[125] The work was also a return to painting for Ibrahim after abandoning the medium for a period of time. The solo show followed her degree in feminist art, where she was mostly concerned with the human figure, identity and the body in society. However, it was not only thematics that chimed with the neighbourhood dynamics. It was also her method, an iterative process of painting and erasure, which seemed to capture the palimpsest of the Townhouse environment as constantly being reshaped, ending and starting over. Ibrahim's paintings made a stark contrast to galleries in nearby Zamalek that housed more stylised works intended for the commercial market. She explained that independent spaces like Townhouse and CiC are regarded suspiciously by other players in the artworld who are not independently funded. Consequently, there is very little communication between the disparate artworld ecosystems. The hot topic of conversation among her generation was how to bridge this divide, and how to tap into more conceptual work and opportunities while keeping engaged with people of different viewpoints who comprise another everyday reality and explain to them how things are or could be. Seated in the Townhouse Library, she expanded on this dilemma: "We only find in these places the knowledge, the development of our practice, the books to read, people to meet interested in us and who can write about us in the world. Here is the only place we can find this, but we cannot stay abandoned from the other because they are our ways of living. I am here, in Egypt, in Cairo, so how can we..."; her voice trailed off and then came back in a rush, "I can assure you, as a young artist living here, this is the topic we are talking about day and night."[126] It is not an easy tightrope. Engaging with everyday reality carries risk, as writer Ismail Fayed points out.

125 Source: https://www.thetownhousegallery.com/p_447.
126 Imane Ibrahim, interview with the author, Cairo, 31 October 2018.

At a time of political crisis and crackdown on dissent, he asks: "What is possible in a context where the slightest misstep could lead to years in jail with no trial?"[127] Ibrahim studied painting in Alexandria, the city where she was born. She also participated in a ten-month programme in Lebanon in 2014, which helped shift her practice to become more experimental. Drawing, text and sculpture combined into a conceptual book project called *Book of Riddles I* about a narrative of imprisonment and an investigation of authority; "the reader is asked to solve three riddles, and the artist gives their answers at the booklet's end."[128] She met Elnozahy at a Townhouse workshop intensive on critical writing and this connection led to her solo show.

Reciprocal relations between people and the built environment constitutes the core of what Townhouse actively lived out: space and imagination were intimately bound. As Elnozahy phrased things: "It has definitely been a challenge, especially since [...] this kind of space is really scarce in Cairo, the sort of space you can go in and do whatever. [...] To envision it now would be very challenging."[129] Townhouse had always been attached to its spaces, even at times when it was economically irrational: "It has been very important to have the space as an institution, but maybe that is changing. I look around at very similar contexts and a lot of institutions that are coming up now are spaceless. A lot of local collectives. And maybe this is the model that people should be going towards, but because we started at a different time, space to us was very important."[130] Part of that importance is the close links with its neighbours. The working-class surroundings are constituted by a district of mechanics' workshops, as well as an open-air coffee shop, grocers, carpenters, traders, a school and a nineteenth-century Ottoman palace that is now abandoned with a lone guard sitting outside in a chair. At first it was not a friendly environment for Townhouse because of the insularity of this district, which had its own militarised security force. It even had its own currency of banged-out pieces of metal that neighbourhood coffeeshops and stores accepted as payment, and some still do. But that wariness changed over time, accelerated by a neighbourhood issue that brought residents together. It was not about consensus, Elnozahy pointed out, but "creating a space where these debates can happen. [...] When push comes to shove, we are all working to the same goal and we are all working against the same thing".[131]

127 Ismail Fayed, "Roznama 5: The return of politics, including some empty gestures", *Mada Masr*, 14 September 2016, https://madamasr.com/en/2016/09/14/feature/culture/roznama-5-the-return-of-politics-including-some-empty-gestures.

128 Source: https://imaneibrahim.blogspot.com/2015/06/the-initial-symmetric-isometric-and.html.

129, 130, 131 Elnozahy, interview with the author.

The neighbourhood was fast changing in 2018. The large factory space, formerly part of the Townhouse premises, had recently been sold to Al-Ismaelia, a real estate company, for development purposes. That company's expanding influence in downtown Cairo was visible. A nearby row of empty workshops that formed part of the Off Biennale cited earlier were also now part of the Al-Ismaelia footprint, which sponsored the Off Biennale. And the property company had lent support to Medrar for Contemporary Art, another significant independent art space nearby. Nonetheless, Elnozahy cautioned against reading what was going on through a Western lens of gentrification because of the radically different dynamic and relationship with the urban environment's development that is evident in Cairo.

Part of that dynamic is an elasticity, which is reflected physically by architecture: multipurpose nodes that can be reconfigured according to need. Elasticity is also about relations that involve wriggle room and a margin for negotiations. As a small independent space, elasticity is partly about being flexible and nimble, although in reality, this changeability can also create institutional skittishness, which leaves these spaces in a situation where traction can never be entirely assured. State support is negligible and sometimes state actors actively counter independent initiatives, while private sector help is thinly spread. Precarity can create an environment where it is impossible to think ahead clearly or make longer-term plans. In response to such a scenario of prevailing uncertainty, and being backed into impossible corners, independent spaces often implement a strategy of opacity or refusal. This can be a necessary method of resistance and recalibration, as Édouard Glissant's seminal essay "For Opacity" conveys.[132] He writes: "The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence."[133] Glissant further elaborates that "to feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him".[134]

On opacity and other kinds of refusals, take this for a set of directions received to find an independent space: "The entrance is through the courtyard. Stairs on the right. Second floor. We just moved here so there are paper signs for now and they are sometimes not in place but just call me if you are confused. Also the guys selling jeans etc. downstairs know where we are so you can ask them for CiC and they can tell you." I was confused

132, 133, 134 Édouard Glissant, "For Opacity", *Poetics of Relation* [1990], trans. Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997, p. 189–94.

because I had been misdirected to a pink building downtown, but CiC had recently moved out from there. I got dropped a pin but it was useless without internet connection. I soon learnt that a bit of obscurity was a downtown Cairo trademark.[135] Opacity, when it occurs, is often borne partly out of circumstances. Not enough resources, capital or hands on the wheel. Sometimes it is infrastructural. It could be a five-week power cut, which results in a long hiatus in communication. There is also structural opacity because visibility is something that is constructed by a global artworld ecosystem with its weightings anchored from Euro-American vantage points. There is opacity as a survival strategy because sociopolitical circumstances mean it could be dangerous, even impossible, to say or do anything more without putting others at risk. And there is the kind of opacity that comes from sheer exhaustion, from the never-ending job of having to keep explaining oneself and one's context over and over again through a multitude of lenses and misunderstandings that should in reality comprise (and be understood as) other people's labour. In that case opacity is a refusal to be diverted with producing justifications.

An example of why strategies of opacity may be required as a response was starkly highlighted by Nafasi Art Space in Dar es Salaam. My arrival at the Nafasi compound, in late March 2019, was delayed the same morning via a message from its managing director, Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey. She conveyed the news that resident artists had been rounded up by the police and detained. The artists were later released — having been falsely accused of colluding with another artist whom the police were seeking — and staged a one-day multidisciplinary art festival just a couple of days later. Corey sums this up as an incident that could happen to anyone rather than persecution of artists per se and commended the support they received. "The abuse of power and lack of due process is something that we as an art space and everyone in society has to deal with. That experience really showed me the power of the network and solidarity."[136] The festival *Asili ni Tamu* was hosted at Nafasi as planned and showcased a young dance troupe called Shine that had incubated at Nafasi, and marked the opening of the visual arts exhibition *How did we get here*? How did we get here, indeed. "After the week we had, it was amazing to see everyone pull together.

135 At one restaurant in Cairo, the entrance appeared to be an apartment, the signage outside the building was actually for an insurance company and the unmarked restaurant was up one flight of stairs, through heavy wooden doors that were left open only a fraction, leading to the restaurant located at the end of a long passage.

136 Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 1 April 2019.

This one will go down in history", Corey told her colleagues at the weekly staff meeting.

Such juxtaposition of refusal together with reimagination is typical in Platform/ Plotform case studies. This resilience involves the capacity to straddle paradoxical conditions and simultaneously recalibrate them in an expansive direction. Saidiya Hartman speaks about this tension between pessimism and vitalism, between refusal and utterance, as alternate ways to create a desirable set of social arrangements. She told an audience in Cape Town how this necessarily involved divestments along the way, of institutions, containers or forms that are not working, and how such divestment can be liberating and mobilising. Hartman also stressed the importance of "counterfactual imagination" and the necessity for speculative thinking to even imagine black life is possible, or "the miracle that we live at all".[137] She underlined the importance of imagining new projects and not giving in to despair, and that this was a particular requirement of those leading fungible lives; the imperative to imagine while enslaved, "as if it were possible to breathe while still an item in the ledger book". Hartman said such sensory capacity, conjectural anticipation and an imaginative case is unauthorised by the canon and is conducted in a minor key. "Traditional intellectuals have no monopoly on thought at all," she added, calling instead for thinking "that enables us to refuse and battle the structures that contain us, [...] that enables us to be outside of its defining apparatus."[138]

This conception of refusal as part of radical imagination is likewise expressed by Tina Campt, who belongs to the Practising Refusal Collective, a collaborative forum co-founded with Hartman. In an essay on black visuality, Campt defines refusal as "a rejection of the status quo as liveable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise".[139] Indeed, "the right no" can be psychologically and politically demanding while at the same time a necessary means of self-preservation when facing untenable conditions, writes Kari Cwynar, for a

137, 138 Saidiya Hartman, "Writing Black Social Life", seminar, University of the Western Cape, 9 May 2019. Author's notes.

139 Tina Campt, "Black visuality and the practice of refusal", accompanied by Arthur Jafa's playlist "Phonic Substance", *Women & Performance*, 25 February 2019, https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt.

themed magazine issue on refusal.[140] This particular issue of *C Magazine* considered refusal or non-participation as a political strategy in art and institutional practice. Cwynar describes such refusal as "a strategy of Indigenous self-governance amidst settler colonialism" following Audra Simpson, refusal as the possibility of finding an "otherwise" following Ashon Crawley, and decisions by Sara Ahmed, Rebecca Belmore, Lee Lozano, Tehching Hsieh and others "to leave flawed institutions or art systems", as well as many other examples on how to maintain "the terms of your own participation".[141]

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ania Szremski, former chief curator of Townhouse Gallery from 2011 to 2015, decided in 2016 to write serialised essays about positions of refusal and withdrawal inhabited by artists and other thinkers in post-revolution Egypt. As she described, this blog would situate certain modes of "not-working" in the historical context of Egypt's revolutionary moment, a moment "understood here not as a fixed, discrete period of time (the 18 days of 2011), but rather a series of fluctuating moods, actions and events that occurred before and after, with a focus on artists who combine alternative strategies of retreat [...] with a vociferous shunning of sociopolitical critique or commentary".[142] Her blog, now defunct, elaborated in its colophon upon themes like quitting, sleeping, angelic and ghostly forms of communication and the turn to the aesthetic. Likewise, the off-spaces in Platform/ Plotform combine strategies of refusal and utterance, resistance and reimagination, to recalibrate the public sphere. Artistic thinking is being able to navigate such apparent contradictions to build institutions that are intimately responsive to their particular context while also striving towards something "otherwise". This capacity cues the fifth and final principle of convergence.

140, 141 Kari Cwynar, "Editorial: Refusal", *cmagazine* 133, no. 6, 2017, p. 6. Available: https://cmagazine.com/issues/133/editorial-refusal.

Convergence

Longevity is a fairly unusual attainment for independent spaces. All five Platform/ Plotform participants have been in existence for at least a decade in some shape or form; in some cases, double that. This is quite a remarkable feat, given they are non-profit entities that advance their work in liminal zones, literally and conceptually. They generally do so with anaemic funds and negligible state support. Yet, bar the 2019 closure of Townhouse after twenty-one years of operating, they were all managing to sustain themselves. In fact, I learnt from these spaces something quite distinct about this rather tired and overloaded term: sustainability. Writing about Ethiopia, Helawi Sewnet and Zegeye Cherenet point out that for many in the global South, thinking about the future is still a luxury and sustainability is actually about the "NOW".[143] Statistics indeed demonstrate that southern cities are urbanising in ways and forms beyond wildest imaginings. However, I came to understand it was not so much that the future is a luxury; rather, the future *is* now. I call this fifth working principle convergence.

Convergence can be demonstrated most tellingly through the Zoma Museum case study, where the future is present in a way that is markedly evident. Over the past two decades, Addis Ababa, which is located in the continent's second-most populous country, "has experienced tremendous economic, social and spatial transformations never witnessed in a hundred years", according to a recent UN-Habitat report.[144] The city's makeover is very much linked to efforts to transform it by 2025 into a middle-income industrialising country, the report adds, benefiting from significant state investments in urban renewal projects. This transformation induces convergence of a different kind: a nested set of wicked problems faced by fast-urbanising cities. Temporally, Ethiopia also approaches time with a completely different calendar to the West. Its calendar starts the new year (Enkutatash) in September and has a gap of several years to the Gregorian calendar used in most of the world. The daily clock starts counting the minutes at sunrise rather than just after midnight. Together, these differences can generate all sorts of confusions but also offer alternative conceptions of time that are more fluid

142 Source: https://www.artswriters.org/grant/grantees/grantee/ania_szremski.

143 Helawi Sewnet (ed.) and Zegeye Cherenet, "Introduction: Building Ethiopia", in *Building Ethiopia: Innovations in the Built Environment Vol. II*, EiABC–Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development, Addis Ababa, 2015, p. 10, original emphasis.

144 Report, "The State of Addis Ababa 2017: The Addis Ababa we want", UN-Habitat, 2017, p. 97.

and ambiguous.[145] This temporal collapse is conveyed through the East African colloquialism of *chap chap*, which translates to "quick quick".[146] The ride-hailing app Uber offers a chap chap option in Ethiopia, which is a cheaper and nimbler vehicle that in theory is also faster.

Politically, convergence was evident (at time of fieldwork) in the significant changes being ushered in by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed — time was being telescoped and things that ordinarily take years were happening in months or even weeks. Since then, doubt has been cast over these reforms due to the escalating violent conflict in the northern Tigray region; nonetheless, these prior changes won Ahmed a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. One personal experience of telescoped time occurred during the religious festival Timkat, which celebrates the Epiphany through street processions and baptismal re-enactments with makeshift water stands set up along the sidewalks. Celebrants thronged the roads and public spaces in their finery, surging voices rang out in song, playful demonstrations by groups of youth began and ended spontaneously, and spectators clogged every available space. Elevated traffic intersections or flyovers were key viewing spots, as they offered vantage over the ritual procession of the Tabot passing by. This reverently wrapped model of the Ark of the Covenant slowly made its elevated way through the crowds, symbolically brought to the people in this annual parade. Colourful Christian Orthodox banners punctuated a river of elegant white robes. Every now and then, the procession would pause and religious iconography would appear awhile and then disappear.[147] Looking down in turn upon this performance of the past and present was a crowd-monitoring drone, an omen of possible futures.

Convergence in the urban fabric is very clear in the street leading up to Zoma Museum, an independent space and reportedly the first privately owned museum in Addis Ababa. One day a pop-up tent emerged at the end of the street, temporarily closing it off to traffic. Adjacent to the tent was an upmarket house, right next to that an informal shack, and next to that a trading stall. Such juxtapositions are everywhere in Addis Ababa; there is no spatial hangover from a colonial grid system.[148] Instead of a spatial grid, everything

145 An aside on the fluidity of time: The author Rémy Ngamije told an audience at the 2019 Cape Town Open Book Festival that in Rwanda, also in East Africa, the word for future and past is exactly the same, and that word is *ejo* in the language of Kinyarwanda.

146 South Africa has its own equivalent colloquialism "now now", a phrase that can indicate anything from "in the next few minutes" to an indefinable point on the horizon.

147 Each square was held up by one person, kneeling on the ground, to create a composite image for the spectators above; they would then stand up and disassemble the image before walking on and later repeating it.

148 Ethiopians are proud of having never been colonised, aside from a five-year occupation by Italy.

emerges around key nodal points like churches, mosques or markets, and the city is an ongoing construction site. There is a pressing sensation of hurtling headlong into the present at the risk of speed wobble. In contrast to the frenetic scale of some of the urban development around it, Meskerem Assegued, the co-founder of Zoma, thinks artists should build communities first and foremost.[149] Zoma Museum has been doing just that since 2002 in different forms, its origins elaborated upon below. In March 2020, Zoma officially opened its newly built premises. I arrived a couple of months prior as the team was putting finishing touches to the museum on the newly acquired site in Mekanisa, a residential area, in which its expansive plot slopes down towards a river. The site was previously polluted so the team initiated rehabilitation and landscaping through planting trees as well as medicinal herbs and vegetables in an edible garden. They also built an impressive suite of interlinked buildings using vernacular architectural techniques in a gesture that quite literally brings the past and present together. These futuristic-looking structures are created from mud, straw and local architectural knowledge. The design also references bird and insect homes. The museum is an artwork in and of itself.

In its relocation from another nearby site, Zoma inherited a kindergarten that already existed on the newly acquired land. In an act of radical responsibility and care to those around it, the Zoma School is now part and parcel of the Zoma Museum. I sat in on one lesson with a guest music teacher that involved children making music out of empty glass bottles differentially filled with water. They learnt about tonality and sang songs to the guitar accompaniment, including an enthusiastic and soaring rendition of a Disney hit, "The Lion Sleeps Tonight". The underlying philosophy of ecological thinking binds the space together, from the school curriculum to the architecture, the land, and Zoma's organisational principles. Ecological thinking is about far more than the environment; it is relational, considering each element as an integral part of a larger whole. Zoma is built upon ecological principles in physical form and also philosophically. Convergence is a philosophical principle, according to a book about African art as philosophy. Souleymane Bashir Diagne writes about Léopold Sédar Senghor's idea of convergence in a chapter dedicated to the concept, describing politics as positive action, "of convergence towards a panhumanism".[150] This would be "based on the art of accommodating differences through dialogue for the purpose of a meeting of cultures. The panhumanism which is to be founded on the dialogue of

149 Meskerem Assegued, interview with the author, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2019.
150 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude*, Seagull Books, Kolkata, 2011, p. 12.

civilizations is also the advent of a new man, who is, [...] an artist".[151] Zoma's panhumanism is the result of a very particular creative collaboration: The platform has been assembled over the past two decades by Assegued, a curator and cultural anthropologist, together with co-founder Elias Sime, who is an artist. This combination of skillsets affords a very particular ethos that informs the space as a whole. Sime's own art practice speaks strongly to the second chance principle. He generally uses discarded objects such as electronic computer boards and repurposes them into large-scale collages.[152]

In its former incarnation, Zoma Museum was known as ZCAC–Zoma Contemporary Art Center, with international exchange between artists and the conception and implementation of sustainable, innovative and environmentally conscious art projects. It was named after the Ethiopean artist Zoma Shiferraw (unknown–1979), a close friend of Assegued. ZCAC used to also extend to a rural space in Harla village, which included studios and close community engagements, but that offshoot is now closed. According to Assegued, despite its shapeshifting form , which culminated in the new build, the dream of Zoma and its goal has stayed consistent over time. What has changed is its size, the amount of money it can attract and the number of visitors it receives. The result is recognition and ears to meet its voices.[153] Zoma's progression over time animates its philosophy, as articulated by Assegued: start small, right where you are, and build your good idea incrementally. It also involves knowing how to walk away when refusal is required, Assegued said, and ultimately creating a sustainable self-built offering — meaning it can survive financially, beyond the lives of its original founders, and address everyday social issues. It is about art being integral to humanity; Zoma is about creating a humane and compassionate environment, she added.[154]

Getting to Zoma takes some initiative. The museum is located down a tiny unnamed lane, still unmarked on GPS maps when I visited. In January 2019, construction work outside obscured its entrance further, but just beyond the bricklayers and down a little path, a magical oasis emerged through the brush. The layout is a green maze of interlocking pathways and bridges interspersed with visually striking dark brown buildings. The main building has been built using wattle and daub, a traditional technique with

151 Diagne, p.12–13.

152 In early 2019, Elias Sime completed a large mural for Facebook's headquarters in the United States using recycled technology components. The artwork's conceptual origins refer to interlocking tree roots, inspired by an upturned tree in a redwood forest. Around that time, Assegued and Sime serendipitously heard an NPR–National Public Radio programme talking about roots as communication systems, and the artwork for the Facebook headquarters was born.

153, 154 Assegued, interview with the author.

Always start from where you are.

special thermic properties that keep the interiors naturally cool. Its walls comprise intricate nested shapes that ask to be touched. A sloped amphitheatre of grass leads to the kindergarten. There is also a library and an office. One small part of the landscaped premises remains wild and off-limits. The interlocking paths lead down past an edible garden and towards the Akaki River beyond. As I wandered the grounds, builders were putting finishing touches to the museum's architecture. I came across Sime seated on a raised plank working side-by-side with a young artisan, one of a team whose skills were newly appreciated by this vernacular architectural project. Sime was perfecting the shape of a sculpted cow's head emerging from the barn's wall. His collaborator prepared mud for a new sculptural form in another wall recess. The final addition to the wall and sculptures would be a coat of cactus juice to harden and preserve them, Sime explained. A logo of a caterpillar on the central building wall looking over the entire plot symbolises latency while a series of butterflies emerging from cocoons speaks to a second life. "We do not build walls, we build bridges", Assegued remarked, as we walked the grounds. This was also quite literal: Zoma is running a series of residencies for guest artists to help build bridges around the grounds. We passed the barn, being constructed in the cob technique with a system design that employs natural gas and gravity to push materials where they need to go. Its wall will be fifty-six centimetres thick and the building will need no air-conditioning, I am told. We conclude the walk in the gallery space, yet to see its first exhibition, and speak about where it all began.

Zoma started life in 2002, seeded by a three-day public event called Giziawi #1 (*giziawi* means "temporary" in Arabic), which first introduced ZCAC to the public. This art happening was organised by Assegued with local and international artists, including jazz legend Multaku Astatke and forty-five different organisations. The whole event was very collaborative and the first of many more between Assegued and Sime. Giziawi #1 comprised exhibitions and performances across the city. It was centred upon Meskel Square, one of the largest public spaces in Addis Ababa, with a rich history and where on any given day different activities converge.[155] Assegued called the Giziawi #1 moment "a pivot" and "a paradigm shift", not only for herself but also for other artists who were involved. "The whole idea was: how do you create something extremely beautiful and let it go?"[156] At the close of the event,

155 A futuristic-looking rail line cuts across the square before heading off into the distance, and athletes train on the square alongside the "Red Terror" Martyrs Memorial Museum, a memorial to those who were executed during the Derg regime (1974–87).

156 Assegued, interview with the author.

the Giziawi #1 tent was deliberately burnt down in response to the political circumstances in Ethiopia at the time, and to push back against imposed notions about what artists should or should not be doing. This performative act offers yet another poetic demonstration in the art of refusal co-existing with reimagination.

It was a countrywide trip in 1994–95 that was truly formative in the conception of the Zoma Museum. Assegued calls this trip "an awakening to how the past and present could be taken into the future". It inspired her to bring more ancient forms into the contemporary world. Looking at historical sites and more broadly in villages and towns like Gondar and Yeha, as well as the Wollo region, Assegued noticed how the buildings had withstood time; that there was something about their construction that should be understood and learnt. "Not the façade but understand it from its foundations. [...] The detail of it; and you need to be patient to understand everything. How the doorknobs work, where the connections are between the corners. The roofs. Why are there small windows and why oriented in that direction? All those things. You have to be curious."[157] People are abandoning these structures and forgetting how efficient and sustainable they are, but "how do you bring them into the new world? I immediately thought that building a museum was the right idea."[158] Vernacular architectural techniques with mud and straw, stonecutting and building without cement are now part of this "living museum" at Zoma, as it calls itself. It is living in the sense that the past is brought into the present, configured into futuristic forms.

Zoma's incarnation from concept to rebuild spans a twenty-five-year morphing trajectory. Assegued's ultimate goal, however, is something profound and longer-term still: to think about art that is devoid of nationalism. "My dream is that we all look at art as art. No borders. That is my dream and that is what I work for. I have built everything towards that goal. But I also understand that everything takes time. So it may not be something that I can live to see. But I should plant the seed so it can grow because there are many dreamers like me, and yet to be born too. [...] Because isn't that the world we want? Where we appreciate each other's differences?"[159] She also emphasised storytelling: "I do resist when art is put in a [national] context. It should be put in context not of nationality but of a story. [...] There is something that is created that is beyond [the artist]. Visual art is one of the languages that has no

157, 158, 159 Assegued, interview with the author.

borders."[160] Her dream finds a serendipitous echo in the words of Achille Mbembe, who advocated a project of "de-borderisation" at the recent Radical Solidarity Summit.[161] In response to a suggestion that the museum format needs to be hacked, Mbembe said a museum should also be an "anti-museum", which he described as a radical laboratory and space of openness. "Borders are our biggest obstacle to emancipation, [...] the project we need to have is de-borderisation. Physical borders but also extended to concept. So, a new understanding of the museum would be without borders and unlocking the border mentality we have inherited from centuries of slavery and colonialism."[162] On the same panel, former judge and political activist Albie Sachs suggested we think about the question posed by Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956): Who built the museum? In Brecht's poem, "Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters" ("Questions From a Worker Who Reads", 1935), the repeated refrain asks about those behind the scenes who did the heavy lifting, the cooking, the paying, the weeping. The opening stanza reads:

> Who built Thebes of the Seven Gates?
> In the books stand the names of Kings.
> Did they then haul up the rock-slabs?[163]

Proffering a possible solution, Sachs suggested the museum could see itself as "an installation in history" and bring to life the ghosts in our world that are unseen and unremarked upon.[164] It is indeed pertinent to draw attention to the invisible labour involved in museum building, or any institution building, and the deeper questions about why this matters. As Mpho Matsipa suggested, art and architecture need to be viewed "in relation to value chains and [alternative] economies", such as using endogenous materials. "Sustainability is not about parochial localism," she added, "but a question of the relationship of Africa to the rest of the world".[165]

160 Assegued, interview with the author.

161 Achille Mbembe, "Solidarity: Historic Contexts of Pan-Africanism and the Transnational Struggle", panel discussion, Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 14 September 2020. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/KzWiuVGfvHo.

162 The African Continental Free Trade Area came into effect as of 1 January 2020, and aims to connect 1.5 billion people across 55 countries. For more information, see: https://afcfta.au.int.

163 Raphael Samuel (ed.), "People's history", in *People's History and Socialist Theory* [1981], Routledge, Abingdon, 2016, p. xxxiii.

164 Albie Sachs, "Solidarity: Historic Contexts of Pan-Africanism and the Transnational Struggle", panel discussion, Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 14 September 2020. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/KzWiuVGfvHo.

165 Mpho Matsipa, "Urban Imaginaries, Mobilities and Why So Many Borders", panel discussion, Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 17 September 2020. Author's notes. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/6vPQsDQeon8.

The importance of acting locally and thinking globally has been a priority for the director of Nafasi Art Space in Dar es Salaam. Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey has focused on building partnerships and collaborations to address what she saw as a major gap in the lack of conversation, dialogue and mutual support. She joined Nafasi from the music sector and brought with her a multidisciplinary approach. This is another manifestation of convergence, which the programming at Nafasi embodies. Its events often have a live performance element to attract local audiences, which then cross-pollinate with the visual arts, workshops, screenings and more. This strategy is deliberate. It attracts broader audiences and it reflects the fluid nature of the arts, especially in the Tanzanian context where distinction between disciplines is perhaps artificial. Performativity is part of its character and Corey suggests it may be more helpful to keep sight of other types of distinctions instead, such as commercial and non-commercial or independent work. She cites a local proverb told to her by an artist friend: to really understand the beauty of the *ngoma* (traditional forms of dancing, drumming and performance), you have to enter it and dance. It comes down to celebrating the participative and immersive nature of cultural experience.[166] Corey was aware of the lack of live music platforms and contemporary expression in Tanzania before becoming director in 2016. "One thing that I saw was the need to connect artists and give them a safe space to develop and explore their own ideas. And [previously] working for an annual big international music festival, I started to feel more [that] my interest was also about audiences, [...] that focusing on artists alone at the expense of local audiences can cause a disconnect. Otherwise, artists are groomed to become export products."[167]

This multidisciplinary convergence emerged over time as Nafasi morphed from focusing upon visual arts to also embracing the performative. Kwame Mchauru, who had helped with the initial conversion of the former garage-type space into art studios using recycled shipping containers, later returned to take up his current position of performing arts manager at Nafasi. "In the beginning we struggled because artists thought it was too out of the way. But over the years, it is not the case anymore. You get off the bus and onto a *tuk tuk* [a three-wheeled taxi] and they know where to take you," he said.[168] Mchauru now looks after the interests of members, runs events and offers opportunities to musicians in need of a platform, or genres of dance performed by those who are stigmatised because they come from the village

166, 167 Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 1 April 2019.
168 Kwame Mchauru, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 3 April 2019.

or disadvantaged areas in the city. "Some of these groups are still out there but [struggling] because they are not being showcased; [...] some of these dances, they take place in poor areas. Then, when we bring it here, everybody is like: Okay, wow! We need to be associated with something modern, to believe in [it] ourselves. Nafasi is a very important spot to let people believe in what they do."[169] One example is Shine, a young dance troupe founded in 2015, performing traditional arts practices from around Tanzania. Incubated within the Nafasi hub, Shine performed at Asili ni Tamu and for this inaugural festival, they auditioned some ideas and combined different dance groups together with a performance that was preceded by workshops. Nafasi leads to more exposure, said Joseph Kumeza, the leader of Shine, speaking in his Nafasi studio. Traditional music suffers from lack of popularity and the value of art in Tanzania is very much linked to fame, while a colleague adds that, in fact, it is talent which is passed on like knowledge between people.[170] Recognition of artistic skill is one of the challenges for performing artists, concedes Mchauru, in addition to management know-how, securing venues and remuneration. Some genres are relatively invisible and unpaid, perpetuated by a status quo that Mchauru called "a robotic cycle". Nonetheless, there was an encouraging interest in live performance from the youth. "We should encourage them to think out the box because if [young women, for example,] play instruments that are not gender-typical, then the level of respect from other band members increases."[171]

In addition to multidisciplinary art forms, convergence is represented in Nafasi's multipurpose design: it combines a large central performance space with a gallery, offices, studios, a classroom, a restaurant and artisanal workshops including weavers. The hub hosts residencies for visiting practitioners, exhibitions, workshops, film screenings, performances and events, and has recently added an art academy to its offerings with a classroom collaboratively built out of upcycled shipping containers. Nafasi is located in an industrial area on the site of a former warehouse, and its organisational structure is an innovative collective membership scheme based on subsidised dues. This horizontal structure gives artist members particular rights, from subsidised studio rental to electing board members and an influence on programming. Nafasi is an accessible and inclusive space; it helps for "building counter narratives and imagining other possible worlds" that oppose authoritarian agendas and bolster freedom of speech and human rights through provocative work. Nonetheless, Corey

169, 171 Kwame Mchauru, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 3 April 2019.
170 Shine dance troupe, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 3 April 2019.

elaborated, neo-colonial agendas and capitalist economies, as evidenced by NGOs enrolling artists in agenda-driven work, is the daily frontline. "There are different ways that freedom of speech gets impacted. Trying to create a space of active political consciousness is important."[172]

How did we get here?, a group exhibition curated by Valerie Amani, the centre's visual arts manager, opened as part of Asili ni Tamu. Among other things, this exhibition looked beyond individual agency to interrogate the collective whole and the relationship between. Regarding the broader sociopolitical environment, Amani thought some visual artists, like cartoonists, had always been pushing boundaries, but people were still a lot more careful now. "I think there is no one artist who outright says something; they hint. Even young artists. There is a fear about how much can they really say and what will get them into trouble, which is unfortunate. There is a lot of talk but nobody creates work around it because of what might happen. But the people who have been targeted the most are musicians. With visual art, you can always be abstract and be misunderstood. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the government does not care."[173] In this broader sociopolitical context, Nafasi provides a safe space where artists can experiment, grow, network and meet like-minded people, Amani explained. "Artists need to make a living but focusing on commercial purposes can trap them into creating superficial or predictable art", she said. "I think art also has the power of making people feel proud and heal as well. [...] I do not think in our culture we grow up with [enough consciousness about] visual art. It's important for spaces like this to be able to be a doorway to understanding and appreciating and interacting with art."[174] Tanzania has more recently seen a change of political leadership when the serving president, John Magufuli, passed away in March 2021; an event that added another layer of uncertainty. Samia Suluhlu Hassan took over the presidential reins and, according to news reports, looks set to reverse creeping authoritarianism: "We cannot isolate ourselves as if we were an island", President Hassan remarked.[175]

The curatorial hinge between the individual and collective in *How did we get here*? echoes A4's exhibition *You and I*, cited in Chapter 1, which explored the conditions of coming together as a collective. Oscillation between "me" and "we" is the territory of the institution; independent spaces are experimenting with a new relational ethics that both resists and reimagines institution building with future museums at the front line. Oscillation

172 Corey, interview with the author.
173, 174 Valerie Amani, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 1 April 2019.
175 Samia Suluhlu Hassan quoted in Andres Schipani, "Tanzania's new President turns her back on Magufuli", *Financial Times*, 14 April 2021.

between the individual and the collective is also about holding the past and the present together with all their contradictions and messiness to fathom a common space for the future. Space that belongs to nobody and to everybody; a common space that is necessarily and routinely contested, negotiated and performed anew to turn a platform into a plotform.

The capacity to straddle paradoxical situations constantly thrown up by fast-changing cities is best represented by the Ghanaian emblem of the Sankofa ("go back and get it") bird with its head facing backwards and its feet facing forwards, carrying a precious egg in its mouth. As Michael Gyimah of ANO said quite poignantly while painting video plinths before the *Future Museums* exhibition opening: "It looks like a home calling when you see the future. You collect the aspects you lost. Like how we drank tea with pineapple and ginger. It used to be a part of us but got lost on the way." The future in this poetic sense is already here, and it is never too late to retrieve what was left behind.

From pℓatform to pℓotform

"One has to have courage", said artist Nico Wayo, while explaining a mural design sketched in his studio that depicts a small man seated on top of a large lion's head.[176] He described the design as having Surrealist influences that inform his "inspirational" work, by which he meant the content was imaginative. Later, while he is painting the street mural itself, I pass by and notice that he has changed the original design and inserted the man right inside the lion's mouth instead. The mural-in-progress was part of the unfolding of the Chale Wote Street Art Festival in Accra, whose first iteration in 2011 had followed a series of discussions about creating DIY-DIT community projects. The festival continues to hold as its objective the breaking of creative boundaries and the rejuvenation of public spaces through art.[177] In August 2018, Chale Wote worked with the theme of *Para-Other*. It came across as a potent combination of being both here and not-here, of acting locally but thinking globally. The festival abstract is instructive, aiming to transcend dualities of belonging and non-belonging, transcribed below in English and then in Pidgin (a means of communication between groups that do not have a language in common):

> *Para-Other* is a transatlantic shortwave that transcends language and geography, but is also represented in relationship to unique locals. It is a philosophy born out of historically determined necessity to flourish beyond a world of alienation and crisis we currently experience as reality. *Para-Other* requires new knowledge fractals, codes, symbols, and sounds that transmit our core creative intent where imperial languages fail us. This order is an embracing of a black labyrinth and establishment of an aesthetic that captures our cessation of flight and transit into a non-contested existence.
>
> *Para-Other* be phenomena, e be tin we go fi use take change how yaanom do tins wey we no dey fi move. E be mind tin. E dey like shortwave radio wey we go fi take travel anywhere. *Para-Other* check like some state wey we no sheda be human — we turn som oda tin. We dey use am link Black pipol for every corna for dis earth. E be some code, e san be sound we no hear before but

176 Nico Wayo, interview with the author, Accra, August 2018.
177 For more information, see: http://accradotaltradio.com/chale-wote-street-art-festival.

> e dey here already. *Para-Other* be new way to think den open space wey wana humanity evolve pass ein current state. *Para-Other* be deh place we wan link oda Black People for earth, so say we go fi create wanna own world. *Para-Other* be key, you for find your own.[178]

One participant artist described the event as Afrofuturism[179]; as in "thinking about ways of writing black people into the future". Another described *Para-Other* as "the history I know that exists in my heart but I do not know its details; I see its cues around me". Listening to other artists and audiences on various festival discussion panels, it became clear that the work being made at this festival was largely performative, mobile and digital. Its political concerns were about the queering of spaces, pushing back, interrogating notions of relevance and respectability politics, of "a fluid being and having fluid ways of making", as one artist put it.

In Wayo's view, Chale Wote does two things for the city: it gives people a chance to do their artwork and to engage with artists from other places for a conversation.[180] Wayo himself expanded his artistic practice after meeting other artists this way, and it is also how we met one another. Walking back to ANO, I spotted a kiosk with a portrait of Muammar Gaddafi on its door that attracted me inside. I found Wayo hard at work in his studio, drawing commissioned portraits alongside colleagues doing the same. After a conversation about his practice, he accompanied me on a walk down a nearby side street to see another wall mural he had created. This one celebrates a radical journalist known only by his single moniker Anas, who exposes corruption using new media techniques and masks his face with a beaded headdress to protect his true identity. The mural depicts this masked figure holding up a mobile phone that has captured cash bundles changing hands. "As an artist I can only fight corruption with my paint and my brush", Wayo told me. The next chapter takes a closer look at the potential capacity that contemporary art has as an instituting force and what future forms this might take.

178 Source: http://accradotaltradio.com/2018/04/para-other-in-pidgin.

179 A satirical take by Nairobi's Nest Collective on the increasing popularity of the term "Afrofuturism" and its multiplicity of meanings, features artist Patricia Kihoro in a video work called "Episode 5: This One Went to Market", *We Need Prayers*, http://www.thisisthenest.com/we-need-prayers.

180 Wayo, interview with the author.

FUTURE FORMS: DIY-DIT INSTITUTION BUILDING AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Off Biennale Cairo was established in 2015 as an independent platform when the Egyptian state shut down the official biennial in 2010. Titled *Something Else: What If*?, the 2018 edition was curated by Simon Njami and hosted by Darb 1718 (b. 2008), which is an independent art centre in a historical part of Cairo and the brainchild of Moataz Nasr.[1] It includes studios, exhibition spaces, performance venues, an outdoor cinema and rooftop spaces. The origin story of Darb 1718 reflects the conditions many independent spaces face in their battle for resources and an infrastructural foothold within a city of accelerated change and competing priorities. Njami relates how this collective hub came about, speaking at its premises: "A lot of spaces in Africa started with nothing. When Darb 1718 opened ten years ago, the guys told me: what do you have in your pocket? I called a couple of friends and we started with the buildings there. I curated the first show; and this is how it started and is still running. There is no money. We make whatever we can, and we have more than one hundred people, with sixty coming from abroad [this year]. You can do things when you tell people why you are doing them. There are some good people out there who want to fight the fight. When you start, you must know that nobody will help you, and any help that comes is just falling from the sky. You need to be organised in order to make sure whatever happens will still be there."[2]

The potential significance of biennials on the African continent, including the Off Biennale, is not about art, Njami said. It is about creating exchange and networks. Such events are also about critical thinking, which helps to counter a sense of exceptionalism. The latter arises in part from the logistical difficulties and expense that prohibits easy travel between African countries. This in turn encourages people to think they are operating as an island. Biennials can help people to realise what challenges are common, even if the contexts and solutions differ, he added. Later, speaking on a public panel at the Off Biennale launch, Njami emphasised the point by saying that most biennials are dysfunctional: "The [national] pavilions of Venice are the most stupid thing in the world."[3] Biennials should be creating new opportunities for young artists and creating a platform for exchange while offering a bit of fresh air, he told me as the Off Biennale kicked off. "No matter what [the state] is doing to them [artists], no matter what the police is doing to them, they have this parenthesis where they can breathe, where they can get a bit of strength to keep on going."[4] The findings of Platform/ Plotform echo Njami's

1 For more information, see: https://darb1718.com/darb1718/story.

2, 4 Simon Njami, interview with the author, Cairo, 31 October 2018.

3 Panel discussion with Simon Njami, Hazem El Mestekawy, Yasser Mongy and Haytham Nawar, Darb 1718, 2 November 2018. Author's notes.

sentiments. The parenthesis offered by the participant project spaces have significance beyond the artworld itself. This is because contemporary art has a chameleon-like capacity to speak about other things, fields and disciplines; a capacity reflected in the varied work of independent spaces that is engaged in policymaking, building city futures, making a city one's home, deliberating notions of value, relating the hyperlocal to the global, leveraging everyday innovations, infusing ecological principles and building counter narratives. They happen to do this through art, but as Njami has stated already, it is not all about art.

Artistic practice in Platform/ Plotform participant spaces is not just about saying things but also about doing; specifically, creating infrastructures and contexts that expand the public sphere. They do so by using some shared organisational logics. To briefly recap, the five working principles of independent spaces identified in this research project are: horizontality, as an organisational principle that takes collective and rotational form; second chance, as redirection using repair and recovery; performativity as mobile agency to not only represent but also institute new social realities; elasticity, comprising both refusals and reimaginations in response to flux; and convergence, which collapses temporalities into a present tense where the future has already arrived. Such DIY-DIT institution building as artistic practice takes determination and inventiveness, plus a good dose of courage.

The next section shares experience from the directors of Platform/ Plotform participant spaces regarding the often invisible backstage labour of institution building. Interviews are excerpted at length to offer more self-articulation and convey the distinct and compelling registers of the women who are leading them. These interviews are relayed in the order of the fieldwork conducted. The transcripts focus upon origin stories and operating models, which are usually interlinked in interesting ways. They also reveal the stresses and strains of working in shifting environments with little support or visibility, which in turn hampers traction and fluid forward projection. This constant paddling against the current necessitates a collective and collaborative working environment where the platform becomes an enabling plotform, and it involves significant risks and vulnerabilities.

But first, a brief summary of some shared aspects of their operating models. The five participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform respond to precarity with collective membership schemes of one kind or another, dispersing risk and benefits in a not-for-profit operating structure. This

scheme is generally formalised in some way, where it most closely resembles a co-operative (co-op), which is a form of solidarity economy. A co-operative is an autonomous and voluntary body, defined as "people-centred enterprises owned, controlled and run by and for their members to realise their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations".[5] Principles like fairness, equality and social justice are at the heart of such enterprises, and voting rights are shared. The key point is that the organisation has a horizontal structure, however this may be expressed in its specificity. Unlike other art collectives that may be looser in formation, there is a formal framework to manifest this horizontality.

The participants and other like-minded spaces also deliberately position themselves to take greater control of (counter) narratives. They conceive of their work as knowledge production through different modes of storytelling; crowdsourcing multicentred stories in horizontal curatorial strategies. To that end, and owing to larger structural shifts, the conventional funding model for independent spaces, which was largely supported by grants from foreign cultural organisations and other agencies, is already dead or dying. There has been significant recent defunding in the cultural space and many off-spaces have moved away from the single donor reliance model of the past. All of the participant platforms had either put in place or were moving towards a blended model. In most cases, this hybrid model still includes some grants but is less reliant upon single funders and seeks to grow local support and philanthropy instead. The latter also involves significantly increased use of crowdfunding and community-based initiatives while creating savvy new sources of income generation, including from previously undervalued intangible assets. In the case of CiC–Contemporary Image Collective, a close relative of Townhouse, its main revenue comes, for instance, from a photographic processing lab, along with project collaborations. In terms of its production facilities, CiC specialises in printing and the book form. Visitors can also purchase, develop and scan analogue film. Although the emphasis is on digital methods, CiC continues to work with analogue because of sustained interest and as a bridge for experimental work. This rejigged revenue model is better, although more precarious, said Andrea Thal, its artistic director. "It has gotten very tricky. We are operating on a fraction of the budget we had a couple of years ago. To be honest, the thing that stresses me out is the responsibility for the people who work here."[6]

5 This definition comes from the International Cooperative Alliance: www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/what-is-a-cooperative.

6 Andrea Thal, interview with the author, Cairo, 30 October 2018.

Another notable innovation is the grafting of legal and financial structures originating from the investment practices of trusts and other collective investment schemes and repurposing them into public interest vehicles.[7] As part of the seed capital for such arrangements, all the spaces prioritise owning or securing their physical premises and other such assets in order to claim a literal stake as proprietors in city futures. Although state funding in these contexts is either absent or anaemic, a growing trend is to engage with official logics in very selective and deliberate ways in order to transversally participate in systemic change. The multiplier effect this can have belies their small scale and hyperlocal focus. By not isolating their activities and creating regional alliances, they position themselves as nodal players in a much larger urban ecosystem with contemporary art as the vector. In this way, art platforms help reimagine social realities beyond the status quo and help to institute them. This transposition has a parallel in platform technology when an initially single-use application becomes an enabler for a multitude of other uses. These organisational forms and strategies also bear an increased relevance within the recent shift, triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, to prioritise being a place of refuge and respite; a much-needed social role that independent spaces increasingly seek to play. Other organisations and practitioners interested in futures thinking could find these alternative operating models helpful when considering their own institution-building imperatives.

7 The AVA–Association for Visual Arts is an independent non-profit artists' organisation and gallery in Cape Town, which participated in a Platform/ Plotform research roundtable, and has created a funding mechanism along these lines. Its Circle membership scheme, launched in 2019, raises money to capitalise an endowment fund that in turn helps AVA's sustainability by contributing specifically towards operational costs, and Circle members receive various benefits in return. For more information, see: https://www.ava.co.za/join.

Organisational models

GODOWN ARTS CENTRE
NAIROBI, KENYA

ANO INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND KNOWLEDGE
ACCRA, GHANA

TOWNHOUSE GALLERY
CAIRO, EGYPT

ZOMA MUSEUM
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

NAFASI ART SPACE
DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA


GoDown Arts Centre

GoDown Arts Centre, Nairobi

The shapeshifting trajectory of the GoDown Arts Centre is intertwined with its operating model. It took ownership of its own space in 2010 and henceforth saw itself as having a stake in the city. Its current rebuild, as well as its annual *Nai Ni Who?* public art festival, are both closely connected to its participation in urban processes. In this systemic engagement, GoDown focuses on legislative issues by acting as a catalyst. GoDown collaborates with other institutions in Nairobi to consider policy and capacity building within the arts and creative economy, and helps artists acquire entrepreneurial skills and knowledge on issues like intellectual property. Its work extends regionally: GoDown hosts regular gatherings on the creative economy, including a conference that connects arts practitioners to academics, and acts as a nodal hub in East Africa for artists in various genres (visual, performing arts and music). Importantly, it imbricates in its physical premises other start-up enterprises alongside artist studios, who all receive subsidised rental for their work space. The backstory of its current reimagining is also a powerful and instructive tale. The interview transcript, below, derives from a group interview conducted with four GoDown colleagues, reflecting the centre's collaborative emphasis. Core concepts of collectivity, rotation and the fractal are all part of the centre's ethos. Binaries are foregone in favour of holding paradoxical juxtapositions — the traditional and the modern, the rural and urban — as well as expressing mutability through multiscalar and multivalent forms.

Joy Mboya, Executive Director of GoDown Arts Centre:

The journey of the GoDown model is an interesting one. When the conversation started around an arts centre, around 2001, for the longest time the arts had no resourcing either locally or from international foundations except through development money, aid money. There was a lot of theatre for development, arts that relied on messaging. [...] Around 2001, the Ford Foundation, who had offices here [in Nairobi] and had been supporting other things, decided to focus on arts as basically a democratic pillar. While there were a number of artists and arts organisations excited that there

was a funder who was really looking at the sector, it was clear that they were also trying to strengthen the democratic space. The idea for the GoDown came about through conversations happening with several different artists, art organisations and this funder. [...] The notion of a collective was proposed because

it was going to be difficult, perhaps, to support many singular activities, and for trying to see how there could be shared synergies and resources. That happened in 2003. I was also running my own little thing, a programme for young artists in high school, a performing arts programme. I had been running that for about a year, and I was also looking to see whether I could be part of this collective that would form. [...] And then, during the conversations, we [realised that we] needed to look at models and references [that] were pertinent to our context. It was not easy to find things right away. We of course thought continentally: What was happening in other countries? We were aware there was a scene in South Africa but at that point in time we could not access South Africa. We were aware there were things happening in West Africa and in North Africa. So we formulated what looked like a model. It proposed that the leadership of this space be rotated around the different organisations that were part of the collective. And then, we were asked to contest those models a little bit before we settled on anything. [...] I had the chance to go to the United Kingdom to look at models while being aware that some things might not translate. There was one organisation in Wales that seemed to have started in a similar way to the conversations we were having: this was Chapter Arts Centre. In the 1960s, they also had been a collection of artists who said "why don't we start something", and they had then rotated [leadership]. So Chapter was one of the first spaces I went to, and found it was quite different to then [when it started]. That more idealistic

space shaped completely by artists had become a bit more systematised and formalised, but it was good to hear the journey and hear how it had transformed. It was good for us to think whether we wanted a journey as well or whether there were models that we wanted to adapt. I came back with that information and we began to find the vehicles for the shape that GoDown would take. [...] One was that it would be a not-for-profit company that would have directors. It would also have a trust because it was looking at

the future and thinking about holding assets. And also thinking about how to have an active conversation with the main constituents, who are the artists, and how should they be represented. It was decided to have regular compound meetings rather than directly sitting in legal entities; and that is how it happened. [...] It was clear the model should be dynamic rather than a club, so we had two-year agreements with organisations that could be renewed while also allowing for a circulation of energy and [for different] artists to benefit from the space. [...] This was dependent on seeking international funding all along. Local funding: we did look at some sponsorships but that was fickle. Corporate sponsorship was a lot of hard work and you could not rely on it. [...] I think what has shifted over time, as we have concretised our vision and begun to understand our context and audiences, is to also think about the model and begin to now shift it to local sustainability and look at local philanthropy; and what art means when you are looking at entrepreneurship and artists becoming economically independent. How does that work and what is our role in supporting those sorts of directions?

The model is shifting now from something that has grown through a lot of international support to something that is looking at localising that support. [...] The context is also different because fifteen years ago when we started [GoDown],

> conversations with government were zero-ish, but over time the sector has grown stronger and has had good representation around policy issues. And this has also begun to formalise the voice of the sector around some of these policy issues. The government has begun to think about policy development for the sector as well, so things have shifted. [...] Shukisha Nairobi is absolutely part of the transition of a space ready to move into its next iteration, as well as a context that is ready to begin embracing what it means, in terms of culture, in this space of post-independence: Who are we? What are the expressions representing that? How do you own and support those?[8]

By the time the viral pandemic struck Nairobi in early 2020, the residents of GoDown had already temporarily vacated and moved to smaller premises ahead of the centre's planned rebuild. The intention is to spend this transformation period, which is projected at thirty months, on reflecting, archiving and carrying out a range of preparations necessary to pivot to "GoDown 2.0", as Mboya put it. In particular, the focus is on raising the full capital required for the rebuild in ways that are innovative and community-building. Meanwhile, programming work has continued, including a virtual exchange programme with artists in Somalia's capital of Mogadishu. "We also prioritised safeguarding staff positions so we did not lay off any staff or cut wages", said Mboya.[9] A national lockdown period in April 2020 suspended the plans for breaking ground that month in a phased excavation process for the new build. Instead, the excavation will now be kept within the tender for the main works. This adaptation to initial plans is in response to the pandemic, which means the fundraising landscape has had to focus on newly arising necessities. Notwithstanding, construction is projected to commence in the second quarter of 2022. The pandemic has not diminished the rebuild plans. If anything, the impetus is even stronger than before because the lockdown heightened the importance of public space in Nairobi, said Mboya. "We all witnessed families trapped, anxious and even resorting to domestic violence. The value of spaces like the GoDown as psychological and physical getaways became evident. [...] Such spaces must be built, and how they might provide refuge in times like these is a point of reflection for us."[10]

8 Joy Mboya, edited and condensed excerpts from group interview with the author and Mutheu Mbondo, Catherine Mujomba and Garnette Oluoch-Olunya, Nairobi, 16 July 2018.

9, 10 Joy Mboya, personal communication with the author, April 2021.


ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge

ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge, Accra

In 2018, ANO Institute was posing similar questions to GoDown through its *Future Museums* exhibition project: questions addressed to the public around what art and culture meant and how it could be better represented through local metaphors and indigenous knowledge. This exploration is also reflected in the creation of the Cultural Encyclopaedia, which aims to build a different canon of multimedia storytelling.[11] Initially working in a small space that doubled as a shop, ANO had recently acquired additional space across the road and now operated from there instead. Alongside the shop space stood the Mobile Museum, marking the space out along Lokko Road and leading visitors to the rectangular ANO gallery space at the back of the property. The excerpted interview transcript, below, describes the origins of ANO and some of its challenges at the time, as it navigated its expanding trajectory, closing off with some additional information excerpted from a meeting.

Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Founder and Director of ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge:

It is something that has sprung up really organically. We are just starting to build a model now. It is a mixture, nothing was planned. Projects came up as and when. We found a way of paying it, whether by selling art or getting a grant. We got some private investment but that has not been a key [source]. I have also put a lot of my own money that I earned from other avenues, [...] doing jobs outside of ANO in order to sustain it. [...] People who are working on institution building or narrative building or their own practice are going to keep doing that whether there is a fad [about art from the African continent] or not, it does not make that much of a difference. The everyday work — the grind, the hustle — remains the same. [...] The biggest challenge is time. I am just doing a lot, [...] the hundreds of things [involved in] running one's own space. [...] At the British Museum, how dead it was! Like a graveyard. Here,

11 For more information, see: https://www.culturalencyclopaedia.org/about.

objects are so living. Space is living. Hopefully that will come out in the [*Future Museums*] exhibition. I am not sure what relevance something that is static or unmoving has, because it is trying to create a certain narrative model and I do not know whether I find what it represents to be super interesting. [...] I set this place up with the idea of giving context to expression — mine and other people like me — but I do not know if I am succeeding. [...] I wanted to set this place up so others like me who wanted to write and express something could come and have a home, a place to think collectively, create, push boundaries. But I am spending so much time trying to get money together, [...] carrying this whole thing. It *is* actually working but it is really hard.[12] ANO as a concept started fifteen years ago, I knew I wanted to grow something but was not sure what it would be. As a physical space, it started very small in 2012 or 2013. I helped set up a gallery space [called 1957] and then came here in 2016. We were working in the small [shop] space before. [...] As we become more of an institution, we find that we cannot be as intuitive. We have had meetings about revenue strategy these past few weeks with regular companies. I also spoke to Okwui Enwezor who said there is a difference between institution making and institution building. We have made one, organically. We have built in terms of human and financial capacity — we are in that phase now and it is doing my head in.[13]

12 Nana Oforiatta Ayim, edited and condensed excerpts from interview with the author, Accra, 23 August 2018.

13 Nana Oforiatta Ayim, meeting with students, Accra, 24 August 2018. Author's notes.

Looking ahead, she would like ANO to be less about her identity and to put certain structures in place, including investments and devolution. The three main focus areas for ANO going forward are cultural narrative and institution building, collaborations and training. Oforiatta Ayim was recently engaged in advising the Ghanaian government about the creation of new museums and art initiatives.[14]

14 Report, "A New Chapter, A New Museums Act", Presidential Committee on Ghana's Museums and Cultural Heritage, January 2021. Available: https://www.ghanaheritagefuture.com.


Townhouse Gallery

Townhouse Gallery, Cairo

Townhouse did not have curatorial principles as such but appeared to run along the interconnected ideas of hyperlocality, elasticity, refusal and repair. Its immediate environment and context necessitated a highly honed responsiveness and vigilance to shifting circumstances. Townhouse was structured as a non-profit foundation, registered in 2006 in Sweden, "as a practical way to safeguard Townhouse's future operations and activities".[15] Grants, donations and other kinds of contributions could be made to the Townhouse Fund, which enabled its core mission. However, foreign funding had recently been made illegal in Egypt and, at time of research, Townhouse was staring this dilemma in the eye, signalling the larger entangled crisis around institutionality, economics and politics. Totally enmeshed with its environs and day-to-day life in the immediate neighbourhood, social engagement was the everyday norm and this in turn informed the programming at Townhouse. Being tightly wound with these nested dynamics also informed its fate.

Mariam Elnozahy, Programme Manager of Townhouse Gallery:

It is obviously very, very difficult. There is panic every month: Will we make rent? Will we make salaries? Who knows?

Basically, this is what happened in the early 2000s through to 2012: The Ford Foundation was a very strong presence in Egypt, and then they were cut off and they were not allowed to get in anymore. A lot of institutions began on institutional grants from the Ford Foundation, and when Ford Foundation left, it created this crisis. And that is the moment we are living in now. [...] A lot of the independent institutions that do not want to work with the private sector and do not want to work with the public sector have to look at how to be sustainable in different ways; they cannot really rely on the grant model anymore. I think that, especially because non-profits and foreign funding were made illegal in late 2016 or early 2017, a lot of the NGO sector

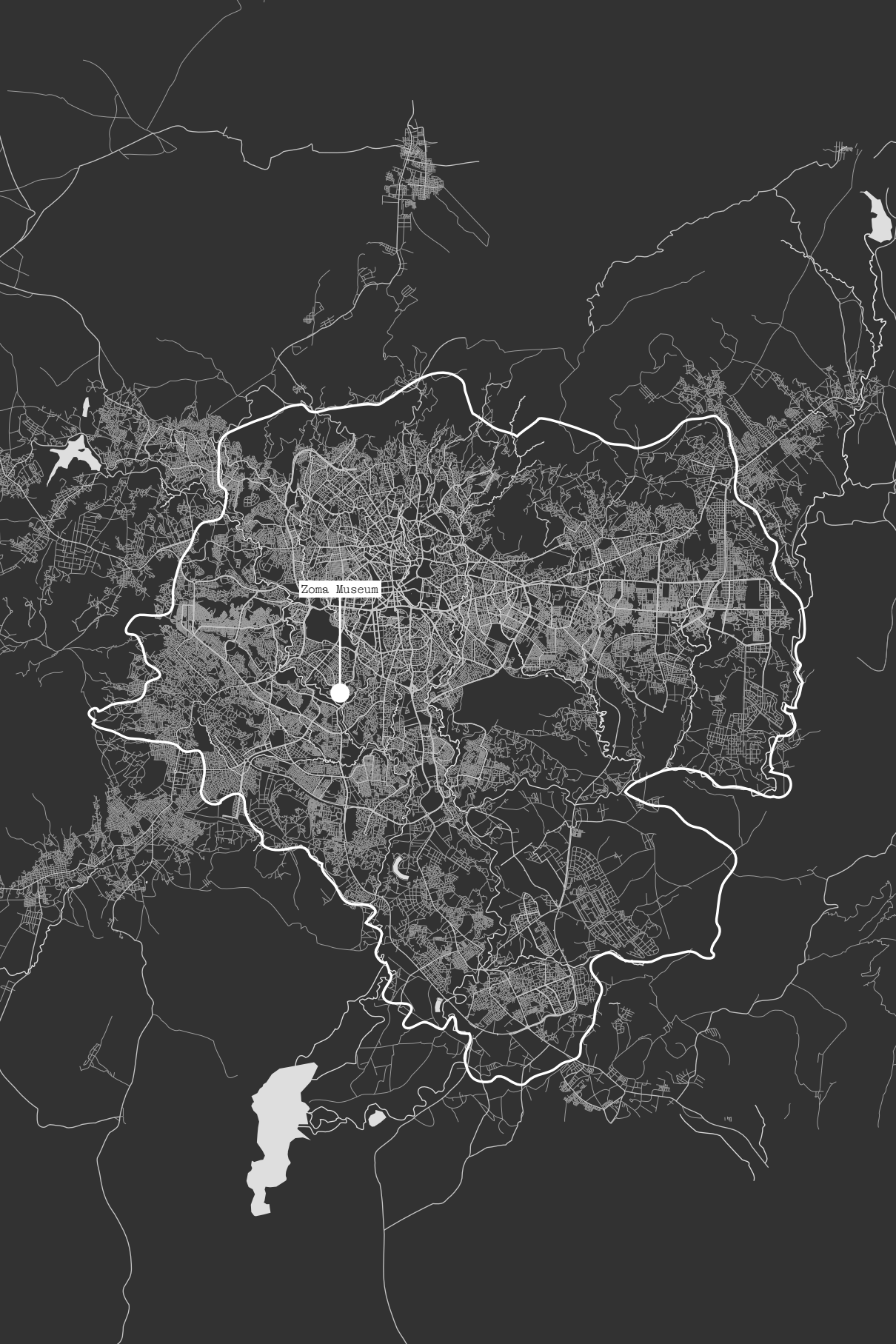
15 Source: http://www.thetownhousegallery.com/?page_id=25.

has dwindled. [...] The options that remain are: you either work with the private sector or the government. The latter is not really an option, and the former is not really a very viable option either. [...] I am starting to see this traction happening because there have been a couple of times that we have all sat in a room — the heads of institutions — to think: What do we do? We need to get consultants in or something, because the first thing that goes is labour and then it is space. And it really, really limits. Nobody can think properly. It is just not an environment where you can think clearly in any way. [...] A lot of people focus on the censorship. That has always been the case, but what is happening now is really a question of institutionality in this region. Everyone knows to a certain extent that all of these institutions that were created in the 1990s in the Middle East more often than not do not outlive their directors. So why is that? That is another issue of sustainability. All that institutional memory is held in the hands of one person. [...] [Townhouse is] about who is present, what are you responding to, who is involved, and all of these factors. In that sense, it really is hyperlocalised. If we do not have an exhibition on, there is a reason why we do not have an exhibition on. A lot of times it corresponds to things happening inside the institution or in the neighbourhood, or in the country. [...] Everything is in flux all the time.[16]

16 Mariam Elnozahy, edited and condensed excerpts from interview with the author, Cairo, 4 November 2018.

Her final words proved highly prescient. In mid-2019, Townhouse shut down its operations, and not long after Access Art Space emerged from its embers to continue the story along another trajectory in the former premises with the former staff. An online statement describing this death and reincarnation mentioned the need for change but gave no specificities. Elnozahy collaborated on curating an exhibition with the artists Wouter Osterholt and Elke Uitentuis during this transitional shutdown phase. From January 2020, they assembled various artefacts and remnants from the Townhouse space and its projects, and invited artists and the neighbouring community to respond. In this way, they were saying goodbye to a long-running institution with this curatorial project called Taking Stock.[17]

17 For the purpose of the exhibition, part of Townhouse's former premises (the Factory) was rented back after the latter had been bought by a property developer (Al-Ismaelia). The exhibition run from January until March 2020 was disrupted by lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic.


Zoma Museum

Zoma Museum, Addis Ababa

Zoma also takes its immediate context seriously, infusing ecological principles and notions of radical care into its operations. Zoma is conceived as a "living museum" that brings the past into the present in futuristic architectural forms. Rebuilding itself on a previously polluted two-acre plot in the neighbourhood of Mekanisa, Zoma deploys vernacular architectural techniques and time-honoured engineering feats. It is an institution that is both a work of art and operates like one. In fact, it began life as a temporary collaborative work of art in public space. A countrywide trip through rural towns and villages inspired the idea of building a space that would harness and showcase the architectural techniques observed. The distinctive ethos of Zoma includes ideas of convergence, sustainability and reinvention.

Meskerem Assegued, Co-founder and Director of Zoma Museum:

All independent art spaces should think about how to continue after you [the founder] are gone. You have to have a goal. What happens when you are not there? You have to start planting that quickly and that leads you to sustainability. You have to put a solid structure in place. Nothing in life is permanent, [...] in order for the institution to continue, you have to bring in different age groups on the board. As you go, it has to be a kind of board that allows the young voice to come in so it sustains itself, and it has to continually feed into that. We are not there yet but this is my dream. [...] I think independent spaces should start owning their spaces. Governments or the public should really see art as integral to the survival of humanity. Not for the country, but for the survival of humanity. Investment should come from anywhere in the world to make

sure that there is a solid space. Art is everyone, art is everything. It is the food you eat and the clothes you wear. [...] I think to

have a proper relationship with the state, you have to first build your own state yourself. You need to understand what you can afford to do. The initial thing should be: If you have a small house, a living room, how do you turn it into an art space? You need to really turn what you have into value. [...] You also have to always focus on quality. Always on quality. Whatever you have, turn it into *that* work of art. If that is what your goal is, [...] then you do not get overwhelmed. You do not need the big funding. What can I do with what I *have*, not with what I can *get*. [...] The first thing you need to build is people and relationships. You cannot be constantly beating their heads. You have to create a full-of-love relationship, and you also have to know how to walk away from people who are going to attack you, or who are actually underestimating what you are doing, or demonising you. You have got to stay away from that. It will destroy this little place that you are trying to build. They will come around later. [...] The one person you are responsible for is yourself; you are the one who should

stay positive, and you should not attack and pick up the gun. But when others pick up the gun, you should pick up the shield for protection. Once you have built something, then the others will come because you have a dream. Do not try to do something that you do not know how to do. [...] I would much rather have the space to show people what there is, not necessarily for selling. It is a museum where you come to see the art. We have entrance fees and other

> income-generating things. [...] This is a place where the artists can be themselves rather than worry about who buys their work. Each project has to find its own funding. It is project by project.[18]

Zoma Museum officially relaunched at its new premises in March 2019, shortly after my fieldwork visit. Several months later, co-founder Elias Sime was honoured alongside Njideka Akunyili Crosby at the fourth annual African Art Awards presented by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. Since the relaunch, Zoma has hosted all sorts of activities, ranging from markets and workshops to yoga classes. During the pandemic, it ran socially distanced tours of its museum site and convened a laboratory to raise awareness around related social issues.

18 Meskerem Assegued, edited and condensed excerpts from interview with the author, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2019.


Nafasi Art Space

Nafasi Art Space, Dar es Salaam

Nafasi is a non-profit that is formally structured as a collective with member artists as its key constituents. In common with all of the other participant spaces, it works very collaboratively and with the local context in mind. Nafasi, at time of writing, had about sixty members and a sprawling premises that includes thirty studios created from upcycling damaged shipping containers. It has a large central performance space and an expansive gallery; it strongly emphasises multidisciplinarity, incubation and polyvocality. Artist members get various benefits, help influence programming decisions, and participate in electing the board representatives. The board of Nafasi in turn hires the management team of technical and support staff.

What first attracted me to Nafasi as a potential case study was its forward planning and concrete thinking about the future. Quite unusually for such spaces, it had published a strategic plan that looked three years ahead. This included developing an arts incubator programme, improving opportunities for Tanzanian art students and audiences, building financial sustainability, and nurturing the Nafasi artist collective that lies at its core. Nafasi relies both on funding (covering about sixty percent of its operating cost) and generating its own income through various streams (covering about twenty percent of its operating cost). Income sources include rental fees, commissions, a small bar and an on-site restaurant. Crowdfunding the other twenty percent of operating cost is an ongoing effort. A recent social media post describes the challenge, which is common to all the participant spaces: "While we're often able to find grants for exciting once-off projects, the daily running costs are much harder to cover. There is little to no public funding nor private sponsorship for the arts in Tanzania. Can you help us?"[19] In 2018, its programme was supported by the Norwegian Embassy, Pro Helvetia Johannesburg, the African Arts Trust, and the Friends of Nafasi giving programme.

Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey, Director of Nafasi Art Space:

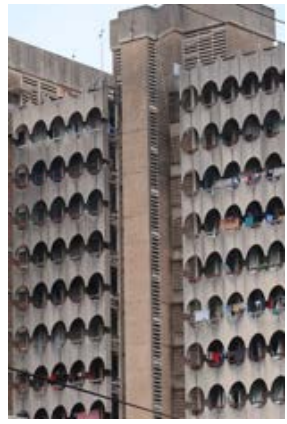
> Innovation comes out of survival. There is always this tension, but I think it is something that is really important to explore: institutionalising for the sake of sustainability because we can support the artists more when we have that stability and

19 Source: www.globalgiving.org/projects/support-nafasi-art-space-in-dar-es-salaam.

structure. Just the confidence of knowing that we have the funding for x amount of time, and [that we are able to] deliver these programmes because we have the budget for it. So, there is that. But on the other side, the tension of trying to have a space that is still very free and flexible and dynamic and responsive and critical. [...] At this point, year to year, fifteen to twenty percent of our funding sources are self-generated somehow through membership dues, commissions on artwork, venue rental and that kind of thing. The rest is supported by donors and grants. We do not receive any public support. State funding does not really exist. [...] Another big focus of mine has been in building partnerships, especially with local institutions. That is something I am really proud of because one thing I noticed coming in was the lack of partnership and collaboration. Even just between Nafasi and the University of Dar es Salaam and the National Arts Council, for example, there was such a major gap in dialogue and mutual support due to the lack of conversations. Although Nafasi was founded [in 2008] by six Tanzanian artists and the member artists are all Tanzanian, it was funny that the perception from outside was that Nafasi is a foreign institution. That very much had to do with where the funding was coming from and with the [previous] director, but also with the level of partnerships. It was important to reach out. [...] In terms of funding, we feel we have very little compared with what we want and compared with what most international arts organisations would have. But in relative terms compared to local public institutions or smaller

NGOs, we are actually doing quite well. [...] In terms of what we manage to do with the amount of money we have, we do a lot. We stretch it. The staff work very hard and do a lot, considering what they are paid. Most people who work here could probably get jobs elsewhere that pay much more. But there are no other arts organisations that give you the opportunity to learn as much, to grow as much, so there are other benefits. Also, I tend to favour hiring artists. [...]

Right now, the model works. The Danish Embassy [supported us before], then the EU and Hivos. The Danish came back, then closed their culture programmes and the Norwegians stepped in. For me, when I think of sustainability, I do not think about growing completely away from donors but about having multiple donors and not relying on one too much. Right now, the Norwegian funding covers about sixty percent, I would say, of core stuff but then we essentially have to fund all programmes. [...] I am really strict about only applying for or accepting funds that directly fund [our objectives] rather than those of [a funder with stipulations] to deliver programmes that do not align with our objectives and our strategy. [...] Our members apply and pay monthly dues for highly subsidised studios. The structure is quite unique. The members select the board and the artists have representation on the board. It is a big challenge as an artist-driven space. It works when people are committed and driven. Artists have a lot of power in the organisation. We have continual conversations around membership, which is the biggest challenge right now. [...] As the director of the space, I have grown a lot by being challenged, and I would not feel that in an organisation with a more conventional structure. The organisational structure can very much benefit [everyone], and it can also create issues that need to be addressed and looked at. There is the



balancing act of helping artists here in the city and the audiences. I may have ideas that I think are good for the space but cannot implement. And things take time.[20]

In late 2019, a majority of Nafasi's long-term members on five-year studio terms went on to successfully set up their own independent spaces as artists and cultural workers. In early 2020, the Nafasi Academy for Contemporary Art and Expression was launched in line with the strategic plan. This launch was the culmination of many months of building, planning and designing, and several more years of discussion and dreaming that preceded the process.[21] The Academy is designed as a culmination of what Nafasi has learned throughout its decade of engagement in the arts in Tanzania, as well as from the know-how at home and abroad of those who have passed through the space. The inaugural curriculum comprised five modules: community engagement, concept development, history, introduction to contemporary art, and professionalisation. It was aimed at young emerging artists to create a space for experimentation, conceptual engagement and collaboration, said Corey. "Most of that programme ended up having to be delivered online, but it worked out very well."[22] In spite of pandemic disruptions, the Academy's first cohort of thirteen artists graduated in December 2020. Many of them had no prior formal training and seven were women. A six-month curatorial practice and arts management programme formed the Academy's focus for its second year. The Academy's premises — a classroom, library, workshop, shop, gallery and cinema — was built, and is continuously refined, through a co-creative process between its members and the community.[23]

In addition to skills for dealing with the artworld, the curriculum is also designed to look beyond Tanzania, according to Valerie Amani. "The industry here is quite closed-minded so [the idea is also] to have more Tanzanian artists experience different biennales, exhibitions, residencies and contexts."[24] The format of the curriculum aims to provide "a transnational, long-form arts experience whilst retaining Nafasi's artist-led spirit and the flexibility to adjust in the process", according to Nafasi's

20 Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey, edited and condensed excerpts from interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 1 April 2019.

21 For more information, see: "Nasafi Academy | Introduction", 14 November 2019, https://youtu.be/G6Pthzq6dYo, and "Nafasi Academy | Groundwork (The Build)", 29 May 2020, https://youtu.be/5OzK_B6vG3s.

22 Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey, personal communication with the author, April 2021.

23 For more information, see: https://www.nafasiartspace.org/nafasi-academy.

24 Valerie Amani, interview with the author, Dar es Salaam, 1 April 2019.

statement.[25] In other words, striking a good balance between institutionalising on the one hand and keeping the space free and flexible on the other, as Corey has highlighted. The next section sets out what such institutional navigation might mean in practice.

25 Source: https://www.nafasiartspace.org/new-spaces-faces-introducing-nafasi-academy.

Thinking like an artwork

Museums could model themselves as installations in history, bringing unseen ghosts to life, as suggested by Albie Sachs.[26] This is already happening with independent art spaces on the African continent. Artists are creating such installations themselves, says Emeka Okereke.[27] He cites by way of example Ibrahim Mahama, an artist who recently established new independent spaces in Ghana.[28] In another example, Okereke draws a connecting line from the personal library of Koyo Kouoh to the independent space she founded in Dakar, RAW Material Company, and onwards to her current position as both the executive director and chief curator of Zeitz MOCAA–Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town. The larger point is that artists construct their spaces in a very specific way, he added, and it is important to articulate and value those processes. That effort is very much the terrain of this book. Independent art spaces are assembling their own infrastructures and hence new contexts, as Platform/Plotform research findings show. It comes down to an intriguing fusion of artistic and structural thinking; both these modalities privilege collectivity as a response to uncertainty but have different ways of getting there. The takeaway is how this approach to institution building involves resistance to the status quo and a simultaneous reimagination of counter narratives. In short, independent spaces are thinking like an artwork. This section sets out where this notion originates and what it might mean for other practitioners and organisations.

Félix Guattari (1930–1992) asks an intriguing question in *Chaosmosis*: "How do you make a class operate like a work of art?"[29] This provocation engenders a way of thinking about art that is removed from form and function, suggest Springgay and Rotas, to the realm of a relational field. They write: "Counter to the assumption that posits humans at

26 This idea was posited by Albie Sachs in conversation with Achille Mbembe, "Solidarity: Historic Contexts of Pan-Africanism and the Transnational Struggle", Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 14 September 2020. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/KzWiuVGfvHo.

27 Emeka Okereke, "Urban Imaginaries, Mobilities and Why So Many Borders", panel discussion, Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 17 September 2020. Documentation available: https://youtu.be/6vPQsDQeon8.

28 SCCA–Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art opened in Tamale, Ghana, in 2019. It was soon followed by related project spaces, Red Clay Studio (b. 2020), which connects histories and architecture through social infrastructure, and Nkrumah Voli-ni (b. 2021), self-described as an institution for archaelogical memories, ecological ideas and thinking future forms. Mahama is affiliated to another important initiative, BlaxTARLINES, hosted by KNUST–Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Department of Painting and Sculpture. BlaxTARLINES (b. 2012) sustains criticality in art practice in Ghana and beyond by building hard and soft infrastructure.

29 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm* [1992], trans. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, p. 133.

the center of creation, where matter is something to be formed and shaped by the artist, Guattari is calling for a destruction of human-centered ideology."[30] Further, Guattari says that "art does not have a monopoly on creation, but it takes its capacity to invent mutant coordinates to extremes: it engenders unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being".[31] Springgay and Rotas go on to conclude that a classroom as a work of art is about "the capacity, we will argue, to invent new ways of learning through movement that is non-localisable or territorially bound".[32] Building upon Guattari's provocation, David Andrew sets up some characteristics that comprise the artist's sensibility, citing related thinkers who helped shape them, before considering the classroom as a work of art. These characteristics that are present in the contemporary artist's practice and way of working with learners include the abridged attributes listed below:

- A less anxious creativity registered in an attitude that does not insist on knowing the path beforehand but acknowledges that the next step might be an unexpected one;
- Makeshifting, which appreciates what is afforded in the moment, is a process of to-ing and fro-ing from situatedness to transformative moments to critical contemplation and back again, without overt instruction but with learner archives and stories and histories driving the encounter;
- A "leaning towards" as relishing the encounter with the teaching and learning situation, asking questions, listening, problematising and also knowing when to back off;
- Ambulatory thinking and acting, or being able to think on your feet;
- Embodied reflection as tacit knowledge, and knowing beyond what one might be able to say or demonstrate;
- Playfulness, which includes game-like generative movements in learning, spontaneous or otherwise, and serious play where artists work with rule-like processes without being bound by them;
- Risk-taking that encompasses a readiness to entertain indeterminacy through disruptive and even transgressive moments — a trickster ethos;

30 Stephanie Springgay and Nikki Rotas, "How do you make a classroom operate like a work of art? Deleuzeguattarian methodologies of research-creation", *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28, no. 5, 2015, p. 553–4.

31 Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 106.

32 Springgay and Rotas, "How do you make a classroom operate like a work of art?", p. 554.

- Awareness of affordance comprising improvisation, inventiveness and fluidity across mediums;
- Acknowledging multimodal voices of teachers, learners and other participants as well as multimodal pedagogies (audio, spatial, visual, gestural and linguistic) while recognising the capacity for exercising voice is not equal;
- Making public — the artist often has an interest in making their work public or being a public intellectual.[33]

Andrew identifies these qualities to help answer the question: What does the artist's sensibility look like in the early twenty-first century? Concomitantly, he asks what this mix does in order to contribute to the repertoire of the arts and culture educator, and to the educator more broadly. He poses the artist's sensibility as central to education programmes, positing that the dispositions listed above are needed for artists to act in the classroom, along with an in-depth subject knowledge. For the class to be a work of art, or "an extended socially engaged, durational activity", those capacities also need to work in tandem with relational and dialogical aesthetics.[34] Achievement in the classroom, he adds, might then also consider aspects like "conviviality, hospitality, dissolving of authorship, sharing of competencies, hope, aspiration, navigational skills, rhetorical skills, playfulness, deliberation, intimacy... imagination — as dispositions that are cultivated and acted out in the class as artwork". Quite poignantly, he adds: "there is always the possibility that something is created that does not sit easily in the world — and this is what learners experience and, in time, perhaps understand".[35] Crucially, Andrew shares as a parting note how "order is tricked by art", following Michel de Certeau, and posits: "This is how classrooms (all institutions) become artworks and how the occupants of these spaces recover the artist."[36] His analogy of classrooms with institutions in general raises the tantalising possibility of other kinds of institutional forms also operating as artworks. By way of example, the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg began life this way: "We had the freedom to create an institution in the same way as an artwork", is how Bronwyn Lace described the process of helping to set up this artist-led space in 2016, which is both site and context specific.[37]

33, 34, 35, 36 Summarised from David Andrew, "The artist's sensibility and multimodality — Classrooms as works of art", PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2011, p. 120–34, 207, 209, 224.

37 Bronwyn Lace, "The Collapse: Creative Liberation of Collective Making", panel discussion, Worldings: A Virtual Conference, Griffin Art Projects and Urban Shaman, 10 July 2021. Author's notes.

It is already obvious how the artist's sensibility, as conceived above, chimes with the five working principles that lie at the heart of Platform/ Plotform. Order is indeed tricked by art. These platforms, through a relational aesthetics of resistances and reimaginations, help induce a differently configured public sphere. Social engagement, as Elnozahy described it, is "the way we live and breathe".[38] The repeated imbrication of the work of independent spaces with everyday life adheres to Andrew's conception of artworks as socially engaged durational activity, and with a bit of luck, they will host long-running conversations that form plots over time. Andrew also points to the importance of collective practices, particularly in regard to "the introduction of ambulatory pedagogies and the inviting of unpoliced zones".[39] Referencing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, he writes that this is "not without affinities to the collectivities that are present in countless social practices of the early twenty-first century.[40] Such collective practices might be drawn from African 'models', Andrew suggests, which offer potential "purchase for institutional practices", including Le Groupe Amos in Kinshasa, and Huit Facettes in Dakar.[41] Understood as dialectical situations, artworks can have a modelling function, as "a lived alternative to existing contexts, reception modes, and communications", according to Jamie Allen, Bernhard Garnicnig and Lucie Kolb.[42] Writing about Stephen Willats, who creates artist books as interactive tools, they add: "Art becomes its own instituting force, art becomes an alternative that manages to embrace the idea of cultures that are circumscribed by interaction and communication."[43] Willats offers "an interactive approach that avoids the demand to respond and redefines the artwork as a network of relationships between artists, artworks, audiences, and society, framed by participatory interaction. [...] [T]hese visual and mental models are invitations to alternate systematicities, they are exercises — technologies even — for diagrammatic world-making, not representations but tools for thinking new ways of life".[44]

In this world-making vein, Hito Steyerl goes so far as to say that the value of the artwork *is* the network. "Art is an 'alternative currency' of this historical moment", Steyerl writes, in an "imminently hackable"

38 Mariam Elnozahy, interview with the author, Cairo, 4 November 2018.

39, 40 Andrew, "The artist's sensibility and multimodality", p. 225.

41 Le Groupe Amos (b. 1989) was formed to bring about social change through non-violent means with particular emphasis on women's issues. Huit Facettes (b. 1996) organises workshops in rural areas of Senegal and an exchange series with international artists hosting exhibitions structured as dialectical situations.

42, 43, 44 Jamie Allen, Bernhard Garnicnig and Lucie Kolb, "'Counter-conscious' Ways of Life", in *Artwork as Institution: Stephen Willats*, exhibition catalogue, Brand-New-Life, Magazin für Kunstkritik, Zurich, 2019, p. 5, 6.

ecology, "a jumble of sponsors, censors, bloggers, developers, producers, hipsters, handlers, patrons, privateers, collectors, and way more confusing characters. Value arises from gossip-*cum*-spin and insider information."[45] In response, Steyerl calls for an "art-related undercommons by building partial networked autonomy via all means necessary".[46] Amid this jumble, collectivism has become a buzzword during the pandemic as mutual aid and solidarity networks once again make the spotlight, but it has long been a part of how independent art spaces operate. Collectivism is also reflected in current high-profile artworld events. A few key curatorial examples are instructive when considering future forms, despite potential problematics. The examples, below, all privilege thinking with others as part of artistic practice — or, thinking like an artwork.

An art collective based in Jakarta called ruangrupa (b. 2000) was chosen for the artistic direction of the next edition of Documenta, a quinquennial founded after the Second World War in Kassel, Germany. "In the artworld's search for new institutional models, ruangrupa exemplifies the creative possibilities of collaboration, social engagement and exchange", according to *Art Review*.[47] For ruangrupa, this includes working as an organism without fixed structure. Moreover, ruangrupa's concept for documenta fifteen (18 June–25 September 2022) is a collective social practice, a resource governance model called *lumbung* (rice barn), which is a collective pot or accumulation system where crops produced by a community are stored as a future shared common resource. Specifically, these principles include: providing space to gather and explore ideas; collective decision making; non-centralisation; playing between formalities and informalities; practising assembly and meeting points; architectural awareness; being spatially active to promote conversation; and a melting pot for everyone's thoughts and ideas.[48]

During 2020, as the pandemic took hold, ruangrupa turned its horizontal curatorial work into a form of commoning, helping to produce personal protective equipment and transforming workspaces into emergency kitchens. In effect, hacking the institutional resources of a mega-exhibition towards direct social ends. This response is another illustration of the mingling of art and everyday life as a defining characteristic of independent art platforms that in turn informs their institutional practice. During an

45, 46 Hito Steyerl, "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms", *e-flux journal* 76, October 2016, p. 1–3, 6, http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_69732.pdf.

47 "Power 100: The Year in Art (and in the Real World)", *Art Review* 71, no. 8, November 2019, p. 81.

48 For more information, see: https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/#2578_lumbung.

online panel discussion, ruangrupa described this entanglement as "practice that we are living".[49] One of the collective, Mirwan Andan, elaborated: "That is the reason why we propose lumbung as a theme. It is not because we have been contemplating for weeks and weeks in the studio or room as an individual. It is part of the way of life we have been practising. Even our parents and great-great-great-grandparents have been practising it."[50] He gave the example of a wooden house being moved from one lake to another lake: "People are invited to help and give a hand to move the house. People are just contributing to help a particular person or family who want to move their house from one ground to another ground. We learn a lot from this notion of the way people work together. And also, one other thing: What we learn from our life, from human[s], we [also] learn a lot from the habit[s] of animal[s]."[51] The ruangrupa collective is drawing upon an accumulation of its own experiences in directly practising institution building as an artistic form.[52] Specifically, ruangrupa says this employs "imagining, tinkering, experimenting and executing models of *koperasi* (closely but not exactly translatable to co-operative), a model of economy based on democratic principles of *rapat* (assembly), *mufakat* (agreement), *gotong royong* (commons), *hak mengadakan protes bersama* (right to stage collective protest), and *hak menyingkirkan diri dari kekuasaan absolut* (right to abolish absolute power)".[53] All of these characteristics, as well as those of the lumbung model described above, chime with the working principles of Platform/ Plotform.

Another artist collective currently in the curatorial hot seat is Raqs Media Collective (b. 1992) based in New Delhi. Raqs works across several forms and media — art, performance, writing, curatorship — on the intersection between contemporary art, philosophical speculation and historical inquiry. The collective was artistic director of the Yokohama Triennale 2020, titled *Afterglow*. In common with ruangrupa, Raqs privileges indigenous knowledges in its practice. Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta took up a curatorial mantle for Yokohama that celebrated itinerant autodidacts rather than hierarchical knowledge systems; what Raqs calls "an un-encyclopaedia".[54] The Raqs curatorial statement for Yokohama Triennale explains: "There are no predetermined

49, 50, 51 Mirwan Andan, "On Collectivity and Collaboration as Radical Practice", panel discussion, Radical Solidarity Summit, Zeitz MOCAA, 16 September 2020. Author's notes.

52 For more information, see: www.documenta.de/en/documenta-fifteen/#2858_lumbung_members.

53 Source: https://ruangrupa.id/en/documenta-fifteen.

54 Raqs Media Collective, "Sharing Our Sources", *Sourcebook*, Yokohama Triennale, 2020, p. 18, https://www.yokohamatriennale.jp/english/2020/wp-content/themes/yokotori/images/source/sourcebook_en.pdf.

hierarchies that dictate which mode of practice, which form of thinking, which cultural or historical provenance is of lesser or greater significance. Everyone who shares what she knows, or is curious about what he does not know, can be a friend, and can care for friends."[55] In the build-up to the triennial, the collective staged a series of events called Episōdos, or "exuberances of collective artistic production".[56] The Episōdos invited artists, curators, cineastes, dancers, musicians, performers and futurists to experiment in gatherings to "play out unrehearsed historical propositions, risk uncertain stories, elaborate on itineraries of ideas, and listen to, as well as amplify or echo ecological and historical soundings from other moments than the present", its statement reads.[57] This is a demonstration of the epistemic disobedience inherent in horizontal working principles.

A recent spotlight for collectivity in the artworld is the awarding of the 2019 Turner Prize for contemporary art in the United Kingdom. Its final four shortlisted artists clubbed together and implored the organisers to consider awarding the prize to them jointly as a collective, since all of their work was socially and politically engaged. In a letter to the jury, the four artists jointly stated: "At this time of political crisis in Britain and much of the world, when there is already so much that divides and isolates people and communities, we feel strongly motivated to use the occasion of the Prize to make a collective statement in the name of commonality, multiplicity and solidarity — in art as in society."[58] The Turner Prize, for the very first time, was thus awarded collectively to Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo and Tai Shani. The jury in a statement supported what it called a bold statement of solidarity and collaboration in these divided times: "Their symbolic act reflects the political and social poetics that we admire and value in their work."[59]

Another influential and recent curatorial collective is the joint artistic direction of the 10th Berlin Biennale held in 2018. This biennale was curated by Gabi Ngcobo with Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Serubiri Moses, Yvette Mutumba and Thiago de Paula Souza. They write in the biennial's catalogue about how their collective process influenced curatorship. This process was also about "thinking with others", including the musicians Nina Simone and Tina Turner. The latter's 1985 hit song "We Don't Need Another Hero" cued the title of the biennial itself. Masilela states in the catalogue transcript of their collective discussion: "The sentence 'the biennale

55 Raqs Media Collective, p. 20.
56, 57 Source: https://www.yokohamatriennale.jp/english/2020/whatisanepisodo.
58, 59 Turner Prize, press release, 3 December 2019, www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/turner-prize-2019-awarded-collective-years-nominees-abu.

does not provide a coherent reading of histories of any kind' is critical for us because it marks our refusal. But we don't want it to be read as purely a reaction. It's a refusal that is then followed by a kind of openness of possibility."[60] A discussion then ensues among the co-curators about the violence inherent in refusal, which they see as a defence mechanism against an existing violence. "Our thoughts around self-preservation of course reference Audre Lorde's well-known statement: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' [...] We are fighting for our lives."[61]

In closing this section, the cited examples of collective practice can all be said to deploy art as a way of institution building. Although countries such as Egypt and Algeria, for instance, "have a long history of cultural institutions, they are with some exceptions state-sponsored and state-censored and thus are met with much mistrust and critique", writes Kerstin Pinther.[62] The absence of a museum about the city of Cairo triggered the project *Myths and Legends Room — The Mural* (2010) by Hala Elkoussy.[63] Here, Elkoussy's artistic strategy of photomontage "challenges the possibility of a single historical narration and media format by using a multiplicity of images, voices and references without offering a clear 'reading' perspective [...] in a field of nonhierarchical heterogeneity and diversity of voices, otherwise sidelined".[64] Further, Pinther suggests the orientation of the archival art of artists like Elkoussy is also "institutive" in the sense of building infrastructures: Elkoussy co-founded CiC–Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo.[65] The next section considers how such institution building might sustain itself, and interrogates further the very notion of sustainability.

60 Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, "Curatorial Conversations", in *10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, eds. Gabi Ngcobo and Yvette Mutumba, exh. cat., Distanz Verlag, Berlin, 2018, p. 35.

61 Gabi Ngcobo, "Curatorial Conversations", p. 36.

62 Kerstin Pinther, "Artistic reflections on the archive and the need for new art spaces in Cairo and Algier", in *New Spaces for Negotiating Art and Histories in Africa*, eds. Berit Fischer, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi and Kerstin Pinther, Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2015, p. 194.

63 For more information, see: http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/myths-and-legends-room-the-mural.

64, 65 Pinther, "Artistic reflections on the archive and the need for new art spaces in Cairo and Algier", p. 188, 194.

Sustainabi€ity in merry-go-rounds

"Is this the end?" — a social media notification from Nafasi Art Space in December 2019 called for donations towards an exhibition by the same title and exhorted readers to "keep Nafasi alive in 2020".[66] Its crowdfunding appeal illustrates the horns of a shared and pressing dilemma for any not-for-profit independent space: how to survive and sustain its practice. That is the repeated question to which everybody wants to know the answer, but in one sense at least, the question is a red herring. During a discussion on museums, Koyo Kouoh addressed a problem she had with the public's request for sustainability, saying "non-commercial art institutions can never be sustainable" and further explaining that the numbers simply do not add up.[67] Her observation begs a much deeper double-barrelled question about appreciating the value of such spaces and what sustainability means beyond a purely financial reckoning. This section addresses these two closely interlocking aspects.

"Fuck sustainability, it's boring", declared nora chipaumire, a choreographer and performance artist, answering a question I put to her at a public talk reflecting upon "economies of imaginations".[68] "It is just a meaningless word that people put out there", she added. Instead, we should think about what is *un*sustainable, "to dream outside and in excess", as she eloquently put it. "You have to be uncompromising. How do you approach [making work] without apologising? All the good, bad and in-between, in the ecology of touring, work that circulates [elsewhere] or on the African continent, how can we dream together? [...] How can we create dreams that are excessive?"[69] That ecology of touring involves related questions on mobility, organisation, infrastructures and logistics, said chipaumire. It is really not easy to travel around the African continent; it took her three days to get from Zimbabwe to Mali. "What we have not done, past our claim to being independent, is figure out what culture means to us; and figure out what exchange means to us", chipaumire added. "We have very little of that right now."[70] For instance, she travels around the continent largely as a teacher, without the concomitant expenses that bringing her full team would incur. "I am ok with that, as pedagogy, but I think there is a need to share knowledge and information. So, if I go teach, it is less of a strain on the resources

66 NAFASI Art Space (@nafasiartspace), Twitter, 10 Dec 2019.

67 "Museums in the 21st Century", panel discussion, Investec Cape Town Art Fair, 15 February 2020. Author's notes. Audio available: www.investeccapetownartfair.co.za/programme-2020.

68, 69, 70 nora chipaumire, "dreaming — UNsustainability as a tool for the 'new African' thinker-maker-doer", European Dancehouse Network Cape Town Encounter, Institute for Creative Arts, University of Cape Town, 13 March 2020. Author's notes.

of whoever is hosting me. We need to rethink performances — sharing pedagogy of teaching and practice, which is performative, but I realise sometimes you move fast to go slow, and slow to go fast."[71] chipaumire's provocations resonate with Saidiya Hartman's literary efforts to reclaim from American archives the erased lives of ordinary black women, writing about spaces of enclosure and the will to live otherwise , to live beyond what is circumscribed. "This collective endeavour to *live free* unfolds in the confines of the carceral landscape", writes Hartman.[72]

chipaumire is likewise posing, with her outright rejection of the sustainability buzzword, a much more complex and interesting question: Just what is it that we are sustaining? Because, as she elaborated: "The black life is too precarious. The genocidal project we continue to live with makes me think I do not want to care about it [sustainability]. I want to push outside its presence. What is it to be *un*sustainable? I am interested in that — as a practice, a desire, a goal. Not what is sustainable. I am thinking about excess."[73] By way of example, she added: "If you grow enough maize, and you have tonnes of food, and you have excess, it is a time for other things. You are no longer going hand to mouth. You can make pots, dream up stories. This is how Europe got to make work. They had leisure time." chipaumire nails it with this resource analogy, with echoes of ruangrupa's curatorial concept of lumbung. Her words effectively reconfigure the whole sustainability question. It is about thinking beyond the status quo to sustain instead a differently configured, more equitable future that better serves majoritarian interests. Institutions are integral to such a project. To dream outside and in excess, as chipaumire laid down the challenge, requires a collaborative effort to shift structural conditions.

Independent spaces, to this end, employ mutual aid and collaborative economy models that borrow from existing social practices, structures and forms that are already circulating in public space. A collaborative economy is a rotational mechanism, using the principle of a merry-go-round. Members all contribute to the shared resource and in turn benefit from the communal pool. This is part of a broader global co-operative movement, where enterprises are controlled and run by members for

71, 73 chipaumire, "dreaming".

72 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, Profile Books, London, 2019, p. 24, original emphasis. In her preliminary note on method, Hartman explains how this book responds to a multitude of physical archival references including "the journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files" (p. xvi).

the common good. It addresses the financial sustainability issue while at the same time is a systemic intervention to create conditions in excess of the status quo. Vishwas Satgar, at a public discussion on his recent book about co-operatives in South Africa, pointed out the co-operative's global nineteenth-century beginnings, as well as its ameliorative and transformative tendencies. The latter were the roots of the solidarity economy. Satgar highlighted three imperatives of solidarity economies in the South African context: they offer resistance against past apartheid oppression; they comprise a critique of *Homo economicus*; and demonstrate a different way to build institutional relationships. "The solidarity economy is about a contingent political practice to build a different future [...] with ecology of things and institutions. We need to think about financing very differently; things like working capital, which banks will not provide, as well as education and training."[74] By way of example, Satgar mentioned the Fingerprint Co-operative, a printing company and one of a number of worker-owned enterprises in the Western Cape province. Fingerprint is over thirty years old and is based in Elsies River, where its egalitarian model allows all workers a stake and equal vote in the way things are done. Specifically regarding stokvels, the term for merry-go-round savings clubs in South Africa, Satgar said they involve bonds of trust. "They also confirm a practice of cooperation, hence challenging both *Homo economicus* and *Homo solidaritus*", he adds.[75] In stokvels, everyone contributes in turn and the financial benefits also rotate. These schemes are usually used to cover large expenses like funerals or weddings.

I first came across a striking local example of this merry-go-round phenomenon in the artworld during research on a former textiles factory that had been turned into a studio building in Johannesburg. I observed the making of new artworks during a time of prevailing uncertainty when this studio building, August House, was put up for sale and the resident artists had to relocate. One of the former resident artists, Gordon Froud, moved his studio to an industrial area nearby and launched the Stokvel Gallery among other collaborative initiatives. The Stokvel Gallery has artist members who all contribute monthly stipends and enjoy the benefit of hosting their work in the gallery on a rotating basis, as well as participating in group shows. It is a collective membership arrangement created with dispersed, fractal benefits for members. The underlying philosophy of stokvels is determined by the following salient attribute: they are autoconstructed solutions to

74, 75 Vishwas Satgar, "Soil, Soul and Society: A Talk with Dr Vishwas Satgar", Sustainability Institute, Stellenbosch, 22 August 2019. Author's notes.

systemic problems, solutions that involve coming together and chipping in, and rotating accrued benefits for the common good. Stokvels are social mechanisms also common in other cities of the South. These include the Sacco in Kenya, some of which leverage themselves into banks, the Upatu in Tanzania, and the Susu in Ghana. The Susu has also evolved into other leveraged networks and this is the secret to its success and power. Issahaka Fuseini pointed out in the previous chapter how issues like poverty were multidimensional and multiscalar, and that systemic interventions were needed in response. He confirmed how commonly the Susu structure is used in different contexts from traders to university lecturers, but all involving people with the shared interest of coming together to contribute money on a regular basis in support of each other. Fuseini explained how often the progress enabled by such schemes is incremental: An informal trader may start with a roadside table, then progress via savings to a metal container, or a home may be built over ten or fifteen years. Some Susu groups have even leveraged themselves into affiliations with larger international organisations, like Slum Dwellers International, a network of community-based affiliates. This leverage, he added, has helped mobilise collective resources against evictions, for instance, by hiring legal representation and organising resistance strategies. "That is how Susu helps empower people economically and also socially."[76] This strategic response is necessary in contexts where power structures are set up in a way that rigs the game; merry-go-round mechanisms are examples of autoconstruction for systemic change in situations where inequities are baked into the status quo. Merry-go-round mechanisms are one way to think beyond and in excess. They involve a combination of artistic and structural thinking; a saying and a doing.

Collaborative economies with their incrementalism at heart are innovations that already exist in the social fabric and successfully offer much needed strategies for dealing with prevailing uncertainty. As Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga writes, "It is in times of economic and political crisis that these technologies of the ordinary people manifest themselves ever more boldly".[77] Others have said much the same thing in different ways. As we already heard, Oforiatta Ayim is privileging local context and resonance with everyday life in ANO's projects, and ruangrupa described its curatorial concept of a shared resource as already part of their practised way of life. Indeed, there is merit in trying to understand public space as it is already

76 Issahaka Fuseini, interview with the author, Accra and Cape Town, via Skype, 2018.
77 Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 9.

constituted and extrapolating creative solutions from there, according to Molemo Moiloa, one half of a South African artistic duo MADEYOULOOK, created in collaboration with Nare Mokgotho. "There is a lot of street culture in Johannesburg that is primarily transient and very dynamic but there are also specific public practices [...] that already constitute a kind of public connectivity [in which] people connect to one another in often quite formal ways that might be better learned from when developing creative responses to the city."[78] Moiloa suggested these extant practices as constituting public relations and public space. One example she cited is another South African phenomenon and a close relative of the stokvel called *gazat* or *khoezat*. This verb, from township slang and favoured by a younger generation, refers to the act of pooling limited resources to fulfil something common to a collective. This may occur when everybody in a communal taxi decides to pool their money to pay for one seat that is either empty or unaccounted for; or to gather coins to collectively buy food to be shared. Everyone pitches in according to ability in order "to collectively contribute to a common goal".[79]

MADEYOULOOK partnered with other collaborators in 2010 for a Gazart initiative based on the gazat concept. Two events were held in different Johannesburg venues and followed a DIY-DIT exhibition making model. MADEYOULOOK and its artistic collaborators proposed to apply this to the artworld — "gazart" — as "a way for everyone to create anything for anyone, creating work, lessening divisions and establishing options" rather than being in competition for resources. Its defined principles are: collaborate, contribute, exchange, copyleft (share ideas) and experiment. The initiative's website states: "The term follows after other popular black South African philosophies and practices such as Ubuntu and stokvels. In an art context the term alludes to a DIY ethos which promotes independence and self-sufficiency on the part of artists. Too many a time, artists are held ransom to the demands of their art communities and those communities' museum practices which often suppress true artistic experimentation and expression in favour of work for commercial consumption."[80] Gazart shares the animating philosophy of independent art spaces; what they are effectively doing is DIY-DIT institution building as artistic practice. The working principles of horizontality, second chance, performativity, elasticity and convergence convey the same sensibility as those proffered by gazart, which is to create work, lessen divisions and establish options.

78 Molemo Moiloa, interview with the author, Johannesburg and Cape Town via Skype, 2015.
79 Source: https://gazart.wordpress.com.
80 Source: https://gazart.wordpress.com/about.

Independent art platforms draw inspiration from people-driven mechanisms already existing within the social fabric. Artists benefit directly from such initiatives but so does the expanded public sphere. The sustainability solutions of independent spaces take a cue from well-established collective economy models and co-operatives to secure their futures. These models are a different way to build institutional relationships and, as Satgar suggests, a simultaneous riposte to reinscription of economic logics.

DIY-DIT institution building is certainly not a panacea and does not obviate the need for formal support, whether private or public. Rather, it highlights the structural deficiencies of the artworld ecosystem. Independent spaces accomplish significant things, especially considering their limited resources. And, because of their autonomous nature and freedom to experiment beyond market logics, the work they facilitate is often driven by a public interest motive; and in an ideal world it would also be supported as such. Shoestring budgets mean necessary shortcuts can backfire while there is not much of a safety net available. Cross-subsidies from artists themselves, often working in mixed-income or flexi-work arrangements to enable their broader practice, help keep such spaces alive and in a real sense subsidise them. Many of these subtleties are not easily visible, measured or mitigated. At the same time, the rewards of facilitating new and more experimental modes of practice and thinking can be significant and profound on both a professional and personal level. That all said, care has to be taken to enable viable structures that transform rather than simply ameliorate the status quo. The extended interview transcripts at the start of this chapter made some of these realities explicit.

The takeaway for now is that merry-go-rounds are one potential way to attempt horizontal scalability while also rewriting the rules. Alternative DIY-DIT models may be of interest to (cultural) institutions in general as more organisations around the world reconsider their mandate and operating structures. Various inflection points around institution building are currently evident and inform this trend. One of these concerns is the increased blurring of private and public spheres, which manifests in the proliferation of new private art foundations operating in the public sphere. Internationally, a record number of private collectors have built their own museums to publicly display their holdings of art. There were 317 privately founded art museums in the world in 2015, with over seventy percent of them founded after the year 2000.[81] What is behind these institutional

81 Larry's List and Art Market Monitor of Artron (eds.), *Private Art Museum Report*, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Vienna, 2016.

reconsiderations of mandate and operating structure is debatable, but in part, there is a growing awareness that accruing substantial collections of art comes with certain societal responsibilities as custodian. A related pressure point for institutions is a growing critique on wealth inequality around the globe. This is coupled with more awareness about how accumulated capital can outpace potential return from market growth, as posed in Thomas Piketty's now famous formula in *The Economics of Inequality*.[82] This accretive dynamic entrenches generational divisions around inequitable resources and compounds disparities over time. Without structural intervention, it is hard for the majority to ever catch up, despite the touted claim for rising tides lifting all boats. Such dynamics cast a spotlight on the role institutions have to play and how they account for their own impact on the public sphere.

At a broader macroeconomic level, greater private investment in art can also be ascribed to policy factors such as quantitative easing, a term describing the strategies of central banks that followed in the wake of the 2007–8 global financial crisis. Quantitative easing involved a complex injection of new money into the broader financial system for almost a decade with the nett effect of subduing interest rates and therefore heightening the appeal of so-called alternative assets such as contemporary art. The record-breaking sale in 2021 of a digital artwork, *EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS*, created by Beeple is emblematic. This piece of crypto art, stored in a non-fungible token lodged using blockchain technology, sold at a Christie's auction for sixty-nine-million US dollars and set the third-highest price for a living artist. The buyer, Vignesh Sundaresan, is a crypto investor who says he appreciates how art can define societal norms. As he told a journalist, founders of companies are interested in what investors can offer beyond capital, and his "circus stunt" of buying the NFT was a way to buy a seat at the cap table (a spreadsheet of investors commonly used by start-ups). He is also buying hundreds of other NFT artworks by artists not represented by traditional galleries: "I want to build museums for people like me… someone from my town can now visit a URL and experience a narrative. [This is] the new distribution medium".[83]

With social justice movements growing in global vocality and as societal fault lines become more exposed during crises, there is renewed pressure for a more equitable world. Such a world comes amid a deeper

82 Thomas Piketty, *The Economics of Inequality* [1997], trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

83 Stefania Palma, "Crypto investor Vignesh Sundaresan: 'It's the NFT that changed the world'", *Financial Times*, 4 June 2021.

global call for decolonisation of museums and other institutions, whether they are independent, commercial or public. Diversity on boards, staff and programming is increasingly challenged and cultural appropriation roundly called out. The magazine *ArtReview* annually surveys the one hundred most powerful people in the artworld. Its 2019 editorial for the Power 100 announcement sums up the intersectional issues: "As an increasingly connected and internationalised art system comes to reflect on global inequalities of power (since globalisation hasn't necessarily brought equalisation), the issue of redressing those imbalances has become more critical. The short name for this is 'decolonisation'."[84] In 2019, Black Lives Matter appeared on the Power 100 list for the first time and at number one: "Both an explicit social movement and a diverse idea, BLM has come to symbolise a global reckoning on racial justice and a paradigm shift in contemporary culture. What started as a protest against police brutality in the United States has catalysed movements from Britain to South Africa, dramatically reshaping the cultural landscape within which the international artworld operates. And as it spreads around the world of art, it impacts on how everyone makes work, displays collections and exhibitions, and engages with the public. In the process it has triggered a self-reckoning, a consideration of our own biases, complicities and allyships."[85]

One manifestation for cultural institutions of this reckoning is the important debate triggered in late 2019 by the publication of a report commissioned by France's President Emmanuel Macron to investigate the repatriation of artefacts acquired from Sub-Saharan African countries during French colonial rule. The report, tellingly subtitled *Toward a New Relational Ethics*, takes cognizance of the generally accepted fact that "over 90% of the material cultural legacy of sub-Saharan Africa remains preserved and housed outside of the African continent".[86] It suggests African cultural objects acquired under particular conditions should be restituted; having incorporated several regimes of meaning, such objects are "sites of the creolization of cultures and as a result they are equipped to serve as mediators of a new relationality".[87] Other countries with colonial pasts have made their own gestures in recent years. Belgium has with mixed results refurbished its Royal Museum for Central Africa — the institution itself partially rebranded as AfricaMuseum — to create less ethnographic displays

84 "An introduction to the 2019 Power 100", *ArtReview*, 14 November 2019, https://artreview.com/ar-november-2019-power-100-intro.

85 Source: https://artreview.com/artist/black-lives-matter/?year=2020.

86, 87 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. Drew S. Burk, November 2018, p. 3, 87, http://restitutionreport2018.com.

of its three major collections. The scientific institute is now divided into the departments of Cultural Anthropology and History, Biology, and Earth Sciences. Most of its artefacts come from Democratic Republic of Congo and were acquired during the colonial occupation. Under review and targeted by activists, Belgium struggles with the legacy of its multiple statues of King Leopold II (1835–1909). The former king presided over a brutal period of colonial violence and exploitation, which many scholars now consider an example of genocide.

Museums as cultural repositories and agents have to some extent taken transformation on board. For instance, ICOM–International Council of Museums is engaging with a consultative process to change the formal definition of a museum. Proposed amendments in 2019 included two vital phrases. First, museums as "democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures".[88] Second, they exist to also pursue social justice imperatives, including human dignity, global equality and planetary wellbeing, among others. While the previous definition acknowledged only that museums conserve, research, communicate and exhibit heritage, this shift in sentiment reflects recent findings from Gensler Research on the future of the museum that it would become more interactive and self-directed, community-focused, public, welcoming and flexible.[89] All of this action around the role and meaning of museums cues a larger crisis around institutionality and an opportunity to reconsider its future forms. However, there is a much deeper systemic level that often prevents people from having the means to create and express themselves despite sustained efforts. In a recent online opinion piece, Georgina Jaffee points out that controversies and critiques about the choice of museum collections, curatorship policies, funding sources and internal management injustices leave structural inequalities in the local cultural sector of Cape Town unchanged. As a trustee for a local non-profit independent organisation, She argues for much more robust partnership in redressing inequalities to bring arts and new museums to benefit everyone and conversations that take resource imbalances seriously. "Never spoken about is how and where an object is conceptualised or made, as well as what the material conditions are within which it is reproduced. Where do the artists live

88 International Council of Museums, 25 July 2019, https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote.

89 Gensler Research, *Museum Futures: Exploring the current state of museums and what leaders see coming next*, 2016, p. 2–3, www.gensler.com/uploads/document/497/file/GenslerResearch_WhatIsTheFutureOfTheMuseum_print_2016.pdf.

and come from?", Jaffee asks in the social media post.[90] Her vital questions bring discussion back to the importance of independent art spaces whose practice and processes can help enable other ways of seeing and doing.

Taking a cue from chipaumire's provocation about "UNsustainability" as a tool, the commonly posed question on *how* independent spaces should be sustained could ask instead *what* material conditions should be sustained. The corollary would then be figuring out the kinds of institutions needed to get there and how to keep them going. Future institutions would have to disrupt the status quo and they would need to embrace Hartman's pessimism and vitalism at the same time, or what she calls "counterfactual imagination".[91] *Panya Routes* posits that this new kind of model involves DIY-DIT institution building as an art form. Collaborative economies and solidarity networks are at the heart. This way, a platform potentially becomes a plotform in the kind of durational conversation Kodwo Eshun proposed. A plotform not only says something but does something, instituting new contexts in which other things become possible. By dreaming outside and in excess of the status quo, independent art spaces offer new ways to collaboratively build institutional relationships to sustain a differently configured social imaginary.

90 Georgina Jaffee, "Mapping a fair cultural future for Cape Town: Who are the arts for?", Greatmore Studios Trust, Facebook post, 2 April 2019.

91 Saidiya Hartman, "Writing Black Social Life", seminar, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 9 May 2019. Author's notes.

Artistic thinking

Tethered to the rooftop of a Johannesburg inner-city atelier looms a virus of a different sort to the headline-grabbing pandemic that emerged in early 2020. The bright orange luminosity of *Cone Virus*, a sculpture made from oversize traffic safety cones, creates a striking star-like silhouette against the dense skyline of South Africa's economic metropolis. As the world grapples with disruption, this aerial assemblage has something significant to say about how artists navigate prevailing conditions of uncertainty — or, artistic thinking. *Cone Virus* is emblematic of prior research I conducted that helped to seed Platform/ Plotform.[1] That study found artistic responses to uncertainty were rooted in collectivities of different kinds. It also birthed the idea of moving beyond South Africa's borders to see what other independent spaces were thinking and doing, relative to their own contexts of flux. This section offers a short summary of the salient features of this prior study. The chapter then moves on to literatures that helped to inform *Panya Routes*, and concludes with notes on method in order to contextualise and modulate its findings. This chapter should appeal primarily to researchers and academics interested in the less visible mechanics of how the work for Platform/ Plotform was done, and what it contributes to the bigger picture of existing work in this domain. The ethos of this long-form research was very much in nora chipaumire's vein: moving slow to go fast, or taking a pragmatic approach towards a larger goal.

The bright orange *Cone Virus*, 4.6 metres from point to point, is part of an ongoing artwork series by former August House artist Gordon Froud. The series, in various iterations of size, shape and colour, began traversing public and private spaces in South Africa several years ago and continues its sculptural mutations today. Recent Gauteng province examples can be found on the University of Johannesburg campus, the mixed-use Maboneng arts precinct in Johannesburg central, the retail and office complex of Melrose Arch neighbourhood, and the inner-city park called the Wilds. The bright orange asterisk on the rooftop of August House, a former textiles factory that was converted in 2006 into an atelier, was commissioned by a property developer for permanent installation four years ago. This commission provides a poignant coda to an instructive backstory about disruption, uncertainty and how artists respond.

1 This research firstly informed a book of creative nonfiction, *August House is Dead, Long Live August House! The Story of a Johannesburg Atelier* (Fourthwall Books, 2017). The research also comprised a case study about art and notions of value, which proposed an ecological model underscoring public interest as central (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2019, http://hdl.handle.net/11427/30352).

In late 2013, August House was put up for sale much to the chagrin of its resident artists. While the building's owners (a group of shareholders) sought new buyers, its occupants had to relocate. I followed four residents as they created new bodies of work during this eighteen-month hiatus and the subsequent trajectories of their artworks. Mbongeni Buthelezi, Daniel Stompie Selibe, Jacki McInnes and Gordon Froud were the key participants, as well as other residents including the building's two caretakers, Power Mazibuko and Gibson Khumalo (1968–2016).[2] The main idea for this research was to fathom what was "august" about August House by paying close attention to studio practice and process. For almost a decade, August House had seen a remarkable constellation of artists inhabit its studios. Bié Venter, formerly part-owner, resident and prime instigator for converting August House from a former textiles factory into an atelier, described the special aura that such spaces generate: "There is a certain kind of discussion that takes place between artists that is different from a discussion that takes between stockbrokers or accountants. There is an incredibly energy, a creative energy, when you get a whole lot of artists together. There was always a very interesting mix of international and local artists coming together and sitting around this table, and that table — all over the place — a lot of interesting ideas got thrown around. It is a very special energy; you cannot deny it. When artists get together, they create crazy ideas and crazy projects and you need a good space and environment where people can sit and relax."[3] I refer to this capacity in the research findings as "artistic thinking" and track it by following artworks in the making and where they go.

Close attention is paid to the work itself but also the material conditions of its production, and ideas around intrinsic value before and after it enters the financial circuitry of the formal artworld. Others have written about artistic thinking using terms like visual knowing, visual thinking, artist sensibility or artist critique. Regarding the latter, Eve Chiapello writes: "It embodies a discussion as to the value of things and stands opposed to the commodification of other forms of value which money will never be able to take into account: artistic value, aesthetic value, intellectual value and what [Walter] Benjamin called 'cultural value'. It draws

2 Gibson Mabutho Khumalo passed away in 2016, a year after the building's sale concluded. Its new owners decided to keep its artistic identity going, and a second life for August House began as an atelier with new management and new tenants. Its second life is more formalised and collective than the prior laissez-faire approach of individual artist studios in a shared building.

3 Bié Venter, interview with the author, Johannesburg, 24 February 2014.

attentions to the unprofitable activities that cannot be sustained by market forces alone, but whose value must nonetheless be acknowledged."[4] I found that artistic thinking is partly an approach, a way of seeing the world, or a visual knowledge that the artworks made evident through their thematics and materiality. It is also about the strategies the artists came up with to transfigure the prevailing condition of uncertainty they were confronted with. This amounted to some key principles of collectivity to self-organise better structural conditions for sustainability; or "collaborative setups that differently leverage resources in a reimagination to benefit a broader set of people".[5] Khumalo, one of the former August House caretakers, voiced his own take on nested capacity and the liminal condition of uncertainty induced when the building was put up for sale. "It is like someone has just thrown a mess into the bird's nest so all these birds now have moved out of the nest. So, I am left alone in the building, and I do not know the other situation, what will come. It is a wait-and-see. We are just hanging there. It haunts me quite a lot."[6]

The *Cone Virus* series by Gordon Froud conveys this artistic thinking and in these characteristics the resonance with Platform/Plotform is clear. The artworks embody a fractal logic that is multiscalar and multivalent. The series morphed in varying iterations across different environments and gathered new layers of meaning as it migrated. It did so by using everyday materials that were found, repurposed and revalued in unexpected combinations using repetition and modular forms. Their unlikely juxtapositions within surprising contexts provoke surprise and humour, and their formal appeal makes them good smugglers of critique as they are granted a free pass to otherwise exclusive environs. These artworks had adventures and misadventures alike: creating a showstopper pyre at Afrikaburn in the Tankwa Karoo, blown off a gallery rooftop, stolen from a private collector's garden, vandalised on a public art exhibition, and sunburnt.[7] The detours or unexpected pathways mutate the artwork's meaning, and those pathways are not only literal journeys because the *Cone Virus* links space and imagination. "Artworks are about ideas more than any thing else and ask us to get out of our own selves", as Thembinkosi Goniwe

4 Eve Chiapello, "Evolution and Co-optation: The "Artist Critique" of Management and Capitalism", *Third Text* 18, no. 6, 2004, p. 593.

5 Kim Janette Gurney, "The mattering of African contemporary art: Value and valuation from the studio to the collection", PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2019, p. 219. Available: https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/30352.

6 Gibson Mabutho Khumalo, interview with the author, Johannesburg, 26 February 2014.

7 A digital story map tells this nomadic journey of *Cone Virus* online: https://tinyurl.com/se44a5i.

described it; "An artwork is to begin a journey that is unpredictable and to imply other spaces, multiple trajectories for people to travel," he told a public audience in 2016.[8] The *Cone Virus* offers viewers new ways of apprehending the world and their place in it. The coping strategies Froud deployed when he relocated from August House to nearby Nugget Square are also particularly instructive, and chime with the strategies of independent spaces in Platform/ Plotform. He made a number of changes in his new studio environment at Nugget Square that create an infrastructure. For one thing, he bought his own studio space this time around, which gives him a different stake and footing. He expanded these premises into the warehouse unit next door, using recycled materials and working with other artists in the build. And most importantly, he converted this expanded studio to collective ends. This includes adding a drawing and printmaking space, a residency room for visiting artists and a stokvel gallery.

The problems August House faced when its artists were forced to move were not singular; such circumstances are shared by comparable spaces in other global cities. Platform/ Plotform deliberately considers collective platforms beyond the parochialism of South Africa's borders, while deepening ideas of artistic thinking by identifying their working principles and how these logics reflect in artistic forms and modalities. The participant spaces all have strategies of collectivity modelled on everyday social practices drawn from the urban fabric, especially collaborative economies. Artists can innovate with other individuals and collectives for their own structural needs: "Creatively rethinking the city means apprehending forms that already exist in the social fabric and elsewhere and applying them in new ways, just as Stokvel Gallery and Gazart did. Learning from these ways of doing can potentially help address structural legacies and reconfigure them, amplifying the kind of logics already evident in self-fashioned solutions rather than imposing a disconnected model. Such innovations pay attention to existing logics, less visible infrastructures and embedded networks and leverage them into strategies for dealing with uncertainty that create emergent forms."[9] Such innovations are about creating a more resilient artworld ecosystem for art practitioners. That all said, a structural shift is needed for deeper systemic change in power relations. Independent art spaces in Platform/ Plotform exemplify self-constructed

8 Thembinkosi Goniwe, "Making Art Across Disciplines and Geographic Boundaries", panel discussion, Market Theatre Laboratory, Johannesburg, 23 February 2016. Author's notes.

9 Kim Janette Gurney, "The mattering of African contemporary art: Value and valuation from the studio to the collection", PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2019, p. 231. Available: https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/30352.

collective assemblages that draw upon formal collective vehicles to structure and sustain their work. With this hybrid approach — the fusion of artistic and structural thinking — these platforms offer an innovative model that is scalable, where art is deployed as an instituting force.

Literature review

Relevant literatures, in the broad sense of the word, helped to inform and modulate the research findings of Platform/ Plotform. Various books and other publications, discussions, symposia, exhibitions, performances, research and online interventions across the African continent over recent decades have helped to lay the solid foundations for a shared continental discussion among organisations and practitioners about building independent art institutions. This prior work, in the academic domain as well as other fields of inquiry, has composted the landscape in which today's independent spaces grow and upon which research such as Platform/ Plotform builds. To that end, I have compiled a partial compendium of these bodies of knowledge that summarises these various texts as an accessible resource list for others. The selection is focused upon research conducted in Africa, and within that ambit is limited to Anglophone contributions. In keeping with the idea of acting locally but thinking globally, some reference is also made to relevant work further afield. The literature review travels chronologically to help map the way in which the larger discussion has evolved over time, through various calls and responses, thickening noticeably in the past decade.

2006

Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945

This book about social imagination post-1945 posits that collectivism survives as an influential artistic practice despite the artworld's star system of individuality. Okwui Enwezor, by way of example, profiles in this publication two important collectives on the African continent operating since the 1990s: Le Groupe Amos from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Huit Facettes from Dakar in Senegal. He suggests that such collectives spring up during crisis, and they force "reappraisals of conditions of production, re-evaluation of the nature of artistic work, and reconfiguration of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social and political institutions".[10]

2009–10
2013

African Urbanism Colloquium
Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities

A colloquium on African urbanism, the contemporary condition and possible futures of African cities was conducted in 2009 and 2010 by ACC–African Centre for Cities in collaboration with SPARCK, Pan African Space Station, and Infecting the City, a public arts festival. It was held in Cape Town (April 2009) and in Cairo (May 2010), and included a series of exchanges between scholars and artists interested in elucidating the specificity of everyday life, or ordinary cities (following Jennifer Robinson), and their underlying currents. This colloquium in turn grew out of the inaugural publication of *African Cities Reader*, published in 2009 by ACC in collaboration with Chimurenga, a magazine and platform founded by Ntone Edjabe in 2002. The edited volume that emerged from this colloquium, published in 2013, is structured according to five thematics: urbanism, palimpsests, deals, governmentalities and interstices. In the words of its co-editor, it is an ensemble of diverse perspectives and modalities of thought on the various ways in which a thick analytical account

10 Okwui Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork: Protocols of Community in the Work of Le Groupe Amos and Huit Facettes", in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 225.

of African 'cityness' can be advanced.[11] In his own contribution, Pieterse speaks to "grasping the unknowable" in a broader urbanisation context for the continent while making a compelling argument for including an aesthetic register to offer "fuller, more textured accounts of ordinariness in African cities than we find in the vast literature on Western urbanism".[12] He highlights "vectors of the everyday" to foreground the specificity of spatial practices; these include senses of belonging, attachments that city dwellers display, multiple zones of contact across social and identity boundaries, dealmaking as a kind of futures trading, and "lines of movement and transection [...] people use to read, navigate and represent the city".[13] He also argues for other registers of scholarship besides the developmentalist narrative to describe the heterogeneity of cities in Africa whose spatial dynamism and generative capacity remain largely unwritten. Another pertinent contribution is from Elvira Dyangani Ose who engages in her essay with the reappropriation of urban space by artists and the resurgence of storytellers, from street poets to comic artists and spoken word performers.[14]

2010–12

Afropolis: City, Media, Art

Afropolis brought the cities of Cairo, Lagos, Nairobi, Kinshasa and Johannesburg to life, manifesting in a multi-city exploration through the eyes of scholars and artists between 2010 and 2012. This take on urbanisation was also documented in a publication by the same name. It explores social networks and cultural relations through issues like *matatu* mobility, Slum-TV, soundscapes, a library, futuristic urban views, a building's changing biography, and the struggle over public space. "It entails grasping the role of urbanites as the self-willed producers of urban life; developing a better understanding of the significance of social networks and informal processes in cities; gaining a vivid picture

11 Edgar Pieterse, "Introducing Rogue Urbanism", in *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities*, eds. Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone, Jacana Media, Auckland Park, 2013, p. 15.

12, 13 Edgar Pieterse, "Grasping the unknowable: Coming to grips with African urbanisms", in *Rogue Urbanism*, p. 27, 33.

14 Elvira Dyangani Ose, "What makes a place a city? Untimely contemporary artists and the African city", in *Rogue Urbanism*, p. 383–96.

of African cities based on both artistic as well as on scholarly views; and not least contrasting current urban development in Germany and Europe with the wealth of urban strategies in the growing African metropolises."[15] AbdouMaliq Simone's seminal article "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg", originally published by the journal *Public Culture* in 2004, was republished in *Afropolis*.

2010–13

Visionary Africa: Art at Work

Another exhibition project providing very helpful touchstones manifesting in different African cities is *Visionary Africa: Art at Work*, co-curated by David Adjaye and Simon Njami. It was conceived as an art caravan: Between 2010 and 2013, the project visited five African cities — Tripoli, Ouagadougou, Addis Ababa, Cairo and Kampala — before concluding in Brussels. The central structure of *Art at Work* was a pavilion, described by its architect as "a device capable of organising a context".[16] The pavilion was designed to adapt to whatever urban environment it encountered. It comprised three gallery spaces, three passages that interconnected, and a central tower that could be seen from the surrounding area. These key elements reconfigured in each city into different types of spaces for art and intervened in the public realm, working with institutions to create a context-specific structure. Alongside the exhibition, an artist from each city conducted a residency in dialogue with the host partner. The linked publication includes an atlas timeline of selected cultural policies in Africa from 1954 to the present. This timeline was also presented as part of the physical manifestations on an external section of the pavilions. "The idea is not to impose a system on Africa. That has been done before. [...] The Western model is not, not necessarily anyway, the best model to show or present the visual arts. With David Adjaye, the pavilion's architect,

15 Hortensia Völckers and Alexander Farenholtz, "Preface", in *Afropolis: City, Media, Art*, eds. Kirsten Pinther, Larissa Förster and Christian Hanussek, Jacana Media, Auckland Park, 2012, p. 8.

16 David Adjaye, "The City Pavilions: Pop-ups for Art", in *Visionary Africa: Art at Work; Une platforme itinérante en Afrique*, Bozar Books, Brussels, 2012, p. 19. Available: www.bozar.be/file/1288/download.

we explored what sorts of things were sufficiently fluid, sufficiently interactive, to fill out the structure."[17] Paul Dujardin and Simon Njami describe *Art at Work* as a space at once material and symbolic in which people would be invited to debate questions on creativity but also the organisation of the city, over the course of several installations in public spaces of African capitals. "More than an exhibition device, it was an urban exercise involving local artistic creation as a vector of transformation and social cohesion. And in this regard, it demonstrated concretely how culture contributes to sustainable development, by being closely associated with its three pillars — social, economic and environmental."[18]

2011

Nka Roundtable IV: Independent Art Centers in Africa

A discussion forum on independent art centres in Africa was organised in 2011 by *Nka: Journal of Contemporary Art*.[19] This event, documented online, included founders and directors of independent spaces to discuss the necessity of such platforms, the challenges in establishing and operating them, the difference they can make to their environments, the need for networking, sustainability and funding, the place of art in their respective locales, as well as the interplay between global initiatives and local contexts. The forum was moderated by Chika Okeke-Agulu, and included speakers like Marilyn Douala-Bell (doual'art), Bassam El Baroni (Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum), Mia Jankowicz (Contemporary Image Collective), Abdellah Karroum (L'appartement 22) and Bisi Silva (1962–2019) (Centre for Contemporary Art). Their conversation regarding the dynamics around starting these institutions and the challenges in keeping them going is particularly informative. As El Baroni says, in his preliminary remarks on starting up the Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum, it grew out of navigating his own

17 Simon Njami, "Of Curating and Audiences", in *Visionary Africa*, p. 32.
18 Paul Dujardin and Simon Njami, "Introduction: *Art at Work* and Social Design", in *Visionary Urban Africa: Built environment and cultural spaces for democracy*, BOZAR, Brussels, 2014, p. 12.
19 Source: https://nkajournal.wordpress.com/2011/08/30/nka-roundtable-iv-independent-art-centers-in-africa.

artist-intellectual schisms between artistic practice and art-world systems. "I think generally I look to find what dictates the larger picture and paints the circumstances and conditions for artists to think and work the way they do. Deciphering, unpacking, and re-imaging these conditions is generally what I think my curatorial work is about in a very abstract sense."[20]

2011

Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations

Common Practice, a visual arts advocacy group in the United Kingdom, investigated the value of small arts organisations and published its findings in a report, *Size Matters*.[21] This publication sets out the potential of small-scale arts organisations, the operational and financial aspects of running them, and how to reconsider these organisational practices for the future. The section on the financial dynamics of small arts organisations is particularly helpful, including a useful breakdown of key income types: space hire, commissions, sales and overheads, training, marketing, research and development and reserves. It distinguishes between tangible and intangible assets; the latter is particularly interesting because they are often overlooked. Examples of intangible assets covered by the report include individual and organisational expertise and experience, intellectual property, research skills, professional methods, and processes that can potentially be income generators along with tangibles such as archives. Turning selected intangibles into income generators is significant because small organisations need to reduce reliance on grant funding, which the report acknowledges is received wisdom. It also found small organisations spent most of their budget on production and salary costs, thus under-developing research and development because not much could be spent on overheads. Another fascinating aspect of the

20 Bassam El Baroni, "Roundtable IV — Before we begin", *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 29 September 2011, https://nkajournal.wordpress.com/2011/09/29/roundtable-iv-before-we-begin-bassam-el-baroni.

21 Sarah Thelwell, *Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations*, Common Practice, London, 2011, http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Common-Practice-London-Size-Matters.pdf.

report is how *Size Matters* approaches value metrics. Considering the experience of Common Practice members and following the trajectories of commissions through the art world, it becomes apparent that value accrues over the lifetime of an object or idea. Further, this phenomenon is often capitalised upon by larger institutions and the commercial sector, overlooking the vital incubator role played by small organisations such as independent art spaces. The report says value is multi-fold, spanning artistic, intrinsic, social, societal and fiscal modalities, and these different notions are intertwined. In particular, deferred value means smaller organisations will be deemed less successful because their contribution is not adequately accounted for, as they often originate or commission but do not participate in value accrual: "We conclude that we need to develop ways of measuring a variety of types of value being delivered by small visual arts organisations. In particular, we need approaches that take into consideration the structures in which a substantial portion of the value created is deferred until later in the life of the work."[22] Suggested changes for a new model include establishing norms focused on the creation of deferred value, amelioration of usability of data, configuration of a lifecycle investment approach that improves methods for tracking how value is accrued over time, and rebalancing value types (artistic, social and societal).

2012

Value, Measure, Sustainability: Ideas towards the future of the small-scale visual arts sector

Common Practice built upon its first publication with a symposium the following year that focused on two interlinked areas: the broader question of the value of small-scale arts organisations and the more practical question of their operational sustainability. Its follow-on report, *Value, Measure, Sustainability*, condenses the resulting dialogues.[23] Issues raised include funding metrics,

22 Thelwell, p. 7.

23 Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, *Value, Measure, Sustainability: Ideas towards the future of the small-scale visual arts sector*, Common Practice, London, 2012, www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Common-Practice_Value_Measure_Sustainability.pdf.

public subsidy decline, how to attract private funding, and how to define artistic value beyond economic metrices. Particularly useful are its reflections around the ecosystem metaphor that has pervaded the artworld. This metaphor can naturalise an existing order, the report finds, and its unreflexive usage infers that organisations must adapt to prevailing economic measures.[24] Diversity and risk-taking are acknowledged as strengths of small-scale visual arts organisations, which should be better appreciated by other beneficiaries and larger organisations. Narrative rather than technical techniques is advocated as a way forward: "Stories about the aesthetic encounters mediated by small arts organisations can offer nuanced, particular and memorable accounts of their work."[25]

2012–13

Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa

RAW Material Company in Dakar hosted the first of its biennial symposia in 2012. The inaugural État des lieux (Condition Report) event was on the topic of building art institutions. It found that the cultural and artistic context was characterised by a predominance of government-led art programmes and infrastructure while the previous two decades had seen an emergence of various independent art spaces using a wide range of formats to promote art and critical exchange. A book of essays that emerged from the symposium reflects upon context, the field of artistic action, programming models of artistic intervention, funding and issues of dependence, and narratives on the transformational power of art. The wording of the motivation of these burgeoning independent spaces may vary, writes Koyo Kouoh, but one of the common grounds in their establishment has been the need to address an artistic and critical void: "These spaces question hegemonic viewpoints, canons and narratives of art and development and manifest approaches of knowledge production outside state institutionalization."[26]

24, 25 Gordon-Nesbitt, p. 5, 9.
26 Koyo Kouoh (ed.), "Filling the Voids: The Emergence of Independent Contemporary Art Apaces in Africa", *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2013, p. 17.

2012–14

Across the board: Interdisciplinary Practices

A series of engagements called *Across the board* was held in four different cities that provided an organic and experimental platform for emerging artists and explored recent artistic practices in Africa and its diaspora. The series was curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose and hosted by Tate Modern in London. The first event took place in London on 24 November 2012, inviting two artists to respond to the question of the politics of representation. Otobong Nkanga and Nástio Mosquito presented a durational performance and multi-projection live performance piece, respectively.[27] The second event took place in Accra between 21–23 February 2013, where various participants came together from across the African continent and diaspora for talks and screenings reflecting upon the impact of different models of institution building, from artist-led initiatives to national museums. This programme was organised in collaboration with the Nubuke Foundation, Dei Centre: for the Study of Contemporary African Art, and AiSS–Art in Social Structures. The *Across the board* series continued its explorations in Douala in 2013, a collaboration with doual'art and its third edition of the SUD–Salon Urbain de Doula, along the theme of "Public Space/ Public Sphere". The fourth and final phase of the project was hosted on 18 April 2014 in Lagos. Chimurenga was invited to excavate interdisciplinary practices on the continent with a focus on FESTAC '77, also known as the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, which led to a symposium in Lagos, featuring key festival protagonists.[28]

2013–14

BLACK COLLECTIVITIES, Nka Journal of Contemporary Art

A special issue of *Nka* titled BLACK COLLECTIVITIES, edited by Huey Copeland and Naomi Beckwith, suggests that contemporary black collectivities often aim to resist commodification of art but are excluded in mainstream artistic discourse, which is

27 For more information, see: https://www.tate.org.uk/file/across-board-booklet.
28 Additional information available: https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/across-board/interdisciplinary-practices-festac-77.

symptomatic of white subjectivity.[29] Such exclusions also sidestep rich sets of black cultural traditions that could broaden the discourse. The special issue emerged from a conference held in Chicago in May 2013, which brought together artists, art historians, cultural critics and curators invested in the histories and futures of collaborative practice in Africa and its diasporas.

2014

Condition Report 2: Symposium on Artistic Education in Africa

RAW Material Company continued its biennial symposia with a focus on artistic education in Africa, which was held in Dakar. The main objective, as its online descriptor states, was "to provide a platform and opportunity for examining artistic pedagogies and practices, institutional policies and traditions, and how these contribute to the production, transmission and perpetuation of artistic and visual knowledge in African academies".[30] Participants were invited to provide analyses of the current situation regarding artistic education in African countries and articulate possible futures. Themes included: faculties and narratives; curriculum and syllabus; alternative education; art, education and social engagement; and comparative global contexts of art pedagogies.

2014

Toward a Principle of Practice: Mobilities and Response

This research project by VANSA–Visual Arts Network of South Africa looks at how infrastructure could be differently conceived in response to the precarity of the artworld and its current practices, and advocates for collectivity and common practice guidelines. The authors advocate finding alternatives beyond "an ossified infrastructure", one that "manifests relationally and engenders its own tacit codes of practice. This requires a shift

29 "Black Collectivities", eds. Huey Copeland and Naomi Beckwith, special issue, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 34, 2014, https://read.dukeupress.edu/nka/issue/2014/34.

30 Source: http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_955?lang=en.

towards other kinds of resources, with the industry supporting itself through relationship, network and connection rather than state-based or legislated (read here policy driven) structures".[31] The study, supported by the National Arts Council, was commissioned to work towards establishing a national code of practice for the visual arts.

2015 **Public Assets: small-scale arts organisations and the production of value**

2016 **Practicing Solidarity**

The most recent publication in the Common Practice trilogy is called *Practicing Solidarity*.[32] This report builds upon the 2015 Common Practice conference *Public Assets: small-scale arts organisations and the production of value*, plus a subsequent discussion meeting. The objective was to look at ways such organisations provide value beyond standard measures and market logics, and to help develop a language commensurate with aspects like solidarity and co-operation. The report, which emerged from these discussions, includes case studies of arts organisations conceived as public assets. The discussions were contextualised amid a shift away from public commitment to the arts towards general privatisation of culture and the erosion of collaboration.

2016 **A Best Practice Guide for the Visual Arts in South Africa**

This VANSA handbook was commissioned by the South African Department of Arts and Culture and sets out some sector norms, paying heed to ethical standards and what might comprise fair play between practitioners. Although this report is specific to South Africa, many of its principles are applicable more broadly and it sets these out in an introductory ethos of

31 Mika Conradie and Molemo Moiloa, "Toward a Principle of Practice: Mobilities and Responses", *Transnational Dialogues Journal*, 11 December 2014, https://transnationaldialogues.eu/toward-a-principle-of-practice-mobilities-and-responses.

32 Carla Cruz, *Practicing Solidarity*, Common Practice, London, 2016, www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CommonPractice_PracticingSolidary.pdf.

mutual aid. A section on non-profits articulates what to pay attention to, from governance checklists to the imbricated issues of running collectives, including decision-making structures, attribution of copyright and conflict resolution mechanisms. It also offers practical tips about finance, media and practitioner author rights.[33]

2016

The new institutions: artist-run participative pℓatforms and initiatives in South Africa

Recent research points out the rise of artist-run initiatives (ARIs), which has been global but particularly significant in a pan-African context.[34] Robin Cook's research on ARIs in South Africa appraises the recent do-it-yourself approach of artists filling the void of funding and infrastructure support for what she calls open-ended, idea-rich and socially focused praxis. They are creating experimental and laboratory space through autonomous and self-directed initiatives using non-traditional, context-specific and participative methodologies. She identifies three typologies of these new type of institutions: (i) an ARI following a commercial white-cube gallery model; (ii) "mockstitutions" that co-opt institutional codes to present as such but are in fact artistic projects that critique prevailing hegemonies; and (iii) artist-run participative initiatives that are non-commercial and open-ended experiments. Regarding artist-run spaces, Cook explores three case studies all based in Johannesburg. Cook suggests ARIs offer radical new possibilities, both in terms of institution building and a reimagining of authorship, collectivity, economic democracy and inclusivity within artistic production. She predicts heterogeneous, de-stratified and co-operative approaches to artistic production will result in a shift in art discourse and theorisation over the next decade, and beyond: "The question remains as to what form this will take, and whether

33 VANSA, *Best Practice Guide for the Visual Arts in South Africa*, 2016. Available: https://vansa.co.za/art-info/artright/best-practice-guide-for-the-visual-arts-in-south-africa.

34 Robyn Cook, "The new institutions: artist-run participative platforms and initiatives in South Africa", PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2016, p. 137. Available: https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/58466/Cook_New_2016.pdf.

the inevitable attempts at co-option, re-institutionalisation and commodification can be resisted."[35]

2017 **Public Art in Africa: Art and Urban Transformations in Douala**

This publication examines the role and impact of art on urban transformation through a range of artworks created since 1991 through doual'art, an independent art space in Cameroon, which offers an emblematic case study on the topic. doual'art conjoins art and the urban in various manifestations including Ars&Urbis, a symposium series as well as SUD–Salon Urban de Doula, a public art festival, "born to consolidate and strengthen the work begun by doual'art in 1991 and to bring together new ideas, new energies and new works in Douala".[36] Alongside the physical book, an enriched digital version of the volume contains an additional series of peer-reviewed articles that aim to lay the theoretical foundations of public art in Africa, including a glossary to expand understanding of contemporary artistic practices on the continent.

2016–17 **Organising: the rise of new voices and new narratives in Southern Africa**
2019 **Organising: collective, collaborative organising in Southern Africa**

In 2016, the Ford Foundation Southern Africa commissioned a report by VANSA titled *Organising: the rise of new voices and new narratives in Southern Africa*.[37] It involved an in-depth discussion on new forms of arts organising in southern Africa, the state of arts infrastructure in the region and a longer reflection upon

35 Robyn Cook, "The new institutions: artist-run participative platforms and initiatives in South Africa", PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2016, p. 137. Available: https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/58466/Cook_New_2016.pdf.

36 Iolanda Pensa (eds), "Introduction: The oeuvre in progress; the SUD", in *Public Art in Africa: Art and Urban Transformations in Douala*, Mētis Presses, Geneva, 2017, p. 18–19.

37 VANSA, *Organising: the rise of new voices and new narratives in Southern Africa*, 2016–17. Report excerpt available: https://vansa.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/An-Excerpt_Organising.pdf.

the impact of the history of the region. The report informed a subsequent meeting held in October 2018 of arts organisers, artists, writers and cultural creators working within an organising function from different parts of southern Africa, facilitated by Ferdiansyah Thajib. From that meeting, a handbook publication called *Organising: collective, collaborative organising in Southern Africa* was produced.[38] Much content is shared across the two; the summary that follows is based upon the original 2016–17 report.

Community, sharing ideas, multiplicities of skills and the energy of cross-disciplinarity is manifesting in collectives and increasing collaborations in the southern African landscape, the VANSA research finds, and this is linked to political shifts in relatively young independent nations. Neoliberal priorities, crumbling independence narratives and increasingly youthful populations emboldened by the connectivity of global technology are some factors the report highlights. It draws attention to the fact that contemporary arts infrastructure across the region remains significantly underfunded and understaffed with limited skills, capacity and funding. That said, lack of sufficient data also makes any definitive picture difficult to determine.

Development funders are regularly criticised in the report for instrumentalising creative expression for developmental objectives, while much government funding in southern Africa is limited to the support of "culture" muddled with tradition or heritage. Further, it finds that most funding is aimed at programming, events and festivals, which sidelines artwork production and practitioner fees. Consequently, there is insufficient structural support for practice that is non-commercial, new or experimental, or for emerging or younger practitioners. VANSA states: "Creative practitioners are banding together, usually to collectivise resources, in order to create for themselves — and importantly also for others — the space and structure for new, socially important and supportive creative expression. The collectivising of resources comes out of an environment of limited funding, particularly for innovative or risky work. Thus, for many of these organisers, alternative funding

38 VANSA, *Organising: collective, collaborative organising in Southern Africa*, 2019. Available: https://vansa.co.za/art-info/artright/vansa-organising-handbook.

models are the only way to work."[39] There is also a move away from donor funding or NGO models for new and younger organisers and organisations that take a hybrid form. Challenges highlighted include conflict resolution, gender roles, and life cycles (because many organisations are short-lived and dependent on individual founders). Networks, interconnectedness and collaboration through "a radical sharing and anti-competitive approach" are highlighted.[40] Lastly, although independent groups fill the gaps posed by lack of sufficient formal infrastructure, the VANSA report stresses that they are not a substitute; "there are strong possibilities in sharing best practice and finding future ways forward — together".[41]

2018 **Condition Report 3: Symposium on Art History in Africa**

2020 **Condition Report: On Art History in Africa**

The third Condition Report symposium was also convened in Dakar, produced by RAW Material Company in collaboration with Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi. The 1990s marked a moment at which numerous initiatives, including the journals *Revue Noire* and *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, as well as the Dak'art–African Contemporary Art Biennale, served "to restructure the axes of artistic perspectives and led to an increased interest in the African creative scene, notably in the domain of art history".[42] Thirty years later, the time had come to take stock of what today constitutes the discipline of art history in Africa with a focus on the contemporary.[43] The resulting book, *Condition Report: On Art History in Africa*, reflects upon Africa as the legitimising site of knowledge: "The urgency of approaching contemporary African art history from a spectrum of different practices that go beyond the academy emerges as a lynchpin of this Condition Report."[44] Most contemporary

39, 40, 41 VANSA, *Organising* (report), p. 5–6, 15, 16.
42 Source: https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/condition-report-3-on-art-history-in-africa.
43 For an article about the key discussions, see: https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/afar_a_00456.
44 Eva Barois de Caevel, Koyo Kouoh, Mika Hayashi Ebbesen and Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi (eds.), *Condition Report: On Art History in Africa*, RAW Material Company, Dakar, 2020.

Africans do not necessarily recognise themselves in what they are reading because much of African art history is dominated by Western scholars, the book's descriptor says. "Their cultural frames of reference, which they cast as universal, exert influence on the interpretation of African art, social conditions, and cultural milieu. The knowledge produced in most institutions and academic or independent publishers outside of Africa communicates the extant system in place within those localities."[45] The book explores to what extent Africans have a say in the way this knowledge is produced and consumed, and what strategies and methodologies exist that counter and rebel against the dominance of a Western academic status quo.

2019

Governance Handbook

With support from the National Arts Council in South Africa, VANSA published the *Governance Handbook* in 2019. It includes information on principles, accountability and legal structures of non-profit organisations. The guide includes useful information on governance boards, including their purpose and tasks, duties, legal status and potential liabilities, the business judgment rule, board composition and constitution, the relationship between the board and management, conflicts of interest, board committees, and more.[46]

2020

Condition Report 4: Stepping out of line; Art collectives and translocal parallelism

At the Dhaka Art Summit in 2020, RAW Material Company hosted a follow-up in their series of symposiums. The gathering took the co-operating non-hierarchical group as guiding principle. It opened up different lines of enquiry emerging from collective practice, focus on Africa and the web of solidarities within which it is entangled. Merging form and content, the symposium itself

45 Source: http://www.mottodistribution.com/shop/de-l-histoire-de-l-art-en-afrique-on-art-history-in-africa-raw-material-company-motto-books-9782940672097.html.

46 VANSA, *Governance Handbook*, 2019. Available: https://vansa.co.za/art-info/artright/vansa-governance-handbook.

was based on the *Penc* structure from Senegal, which is described as a designated zone in the public sphere where the community can come together to work through problems and organise, usually outdoors, in the shade of a large tree. The content of this gathering is available online.[47]

2020

How does collective practice function as an artistic strategy?

A recent body of academic research by Deborah Weber takes a particularly instructive look at how collective practice functions as an artistic strategy. Her reflections are focused upon South African examples that have been active over the past two decades while also including international referents. They all have in common member artists who choose to produce and author work collectively under a group or project name, and individual identity is designated less primacy than the collective identity.[48] The research deals with strategies of joint authorship and interrogates factors that motivate artists to work collectively under an umbrella name. It also looks at collective art practice as institutional critique using three international case studies that explore art collaboration in the context of broader sociopolitical conditions and periods of political or general crisis. The research explores the mechanics and methodologies of collectives and their impact upon sustainability, notably: structures, agreements, processes, decision-making, roles, finances and copyright issues. Her work finds that a financial model that is socialised and shared is the most common and effective structure to sustain the collective intent. Weber's thesis outlines how collaboration is often based on agreements that are not bound by formal processes and procedures, instead, they are supported by "the intent to commit to the principle of shared authorship and authorial renunciation as the collective aim, each artist acting as an agent for the collective, which then takes ownership as the artistic identity replacing the I

47 For more information, see: http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_3330?lang=en.

48 Deborah Weber, "How does collective practice function as an artistic strategy?", MA diss., University of Cape Town, 2020, p. 23. Available: https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/31776.

with WE."[49] Further, collaboration fosters a messy and organic approach to art-making because "[it] is mostly un-hierarchical and ephemeral. It is often about the not making of art and the un-becoming of the individual artist. [...] The collective becomes a part of something greater than the self, a greater body of knowledge production that invokes the articulation of unspoken truths and unwanted visibilities, forcing reappraisals of the condition of art making".[50]

49, 50 Weber, p. 72, 71.

Notes on method

Platform/ Plotform project is anchored at the African Centre for Cities, an interdisciplinary research hub at University of Cape Town that builds knowledge and networks on global South urbanism. The ambit of Platform/ Plotform originally proposed a study into independent spaces in African cities with three provisional aims: to apprehend working models of sustainability; to observe what kinds of artistic forms and genres such models help make manifest in the world; and to fathom how these artistic forms and curatorial strategies correspond to the urban fabric. What arose through grounded research and situational analysis across all five participant spaces as case studies was a reflection on the key working principles these platforms shared: horizontality, second chance, performativity, elasticity and convergence. Connections between space and imagination came from correlating the emergent curatorial and organisational forms such spaces facilitate with everyday urban practices. Specific questions the fieldwork set out to ask were framed in these six sets of inquiry:

- Who is creating and running these spaces?
- What sort of artistic programming are these spaces assembling and to what effect?
- Where are these spaces manifesting in relationship with the city?
- When did they originate and under what circumstances?
- Why do they exist?
- How do they sustain their practices?

The participant spaces are located in very different cities with distinct sociopolitical, cultural and other kinds of dynamics in the broader environment. The intention is not to flatten out these distinctions by making a straight comparison between spaces. To that end, respecting this condition of difference, I borrow from Teresa Caldeira's method of juxtaposing dissimilar cases from a few cities in the global south.[51] She says the logic of these cities is different to that of industrial cities of the North Atlantic and very different each to the other, while their singularities can be clearly contextualised. Specifically, "To work with the *juxtaposition of dissimilar cases* means to use difference and estrangement as modes of analysis and critique".[52] This

51, 52 Teresa PR Caldeira, "Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 1, 2017, p. 5.

perspective can be traced back to the practices of the European artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century (such as Surrealism) and to the critique of anthropology in the 1980s, she adds. "It does not look for the representative, typical, similar or repetitive", Caldeira writes, rather: "The juxtaposition of dissimilar, located, and historicized cases brought together to illuminate one another destabilizes unexamined views and generalizations and opens up new possibilities of understanding."[53] Caldeira also writes about "peripheral urbanization" as exploring processes of both socio-spatial formation and theory making.[54] Importantly, "[w]hat makes this process peripheral is not its physical location but rather the crucial role of residents in the production of space and how as a mode of urbanization it unfolds slowly, transversally in relation to official logics, and amidst political contestations".[55] The participant spaces in Platform/ Plotform were all engaging residents in the production of space.

My research method deliberately stitches contemporary art to everyday city life, joining socio-spatial phenomena with theory-making. "Grounded theory offers an empirical approach to the study of social life through qualitative research and distinctive approaches to data analysis."[56] Grounded theory, Adele Clarke adds, involves coding data, which gives temporary labels to particular phenomena, densifying the codes that endure across sources into categories, and then integrating these into a theoretical analysis of the substantive area.[57] The empirical studies of the independent spaces in Platform/ Plotform and their curatorial events or artworks induced particular insights for each case study ("coding", in Clarke's terminology); the observations from these case studies were collated into key concepts ("densifying"); and then points of correspondence were leveraged into findings to help build theory. Situational analysis is a particular development within grounded theory, as proposed by Clarke, who takes it into a deliberately spatial domain: "the researcher becomes not only analyst and bricoleur but also a cartographer of sorts", and this development suits an array of projects drawing upon "historical, visual, textual, ethnographic, and interview materials" including multi-site research.[58] The idea is not to centre on the framing of action but instead elucidate the situation of inquiry; and in a complex and heterogenous world, we need new methods aimed at capturing complexities to get there.[59] This underlying process has ready comparisons to cultural geography, generally informed

53–55, 57–59 Caldeira, p. 5, 4.
56 Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*, Sage Publications, London, 2005, p. xxi, xxxi, xxxvii, xxix.

by ethnography and textual analysis as well as understanding the particular to illuminate the general.[60]

The fieldwork for Platform/ Plotform coincided with heightened international interest in contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora, at auction houses and art fairs in particular but also museum shows and gallery exhibitions. The project's findings offer a grounded perspective with an alternative frame of reference: It assumes the African continent as a centre of conceptual gravity rather than orbiting the largely Euro-American coordinates of the contemporary artworld and its associated canons. The research methodology of Platform/ Plotform takes this cue. Its intellectual starting point is built upon a set of premises that allow for a different set of questions to be asked. Attention is focused upon what knowledges already circulate in everyday public space, with artistic practice as a vector. This process permits insights to emerge on their own home-grown terms. *Panya Routes* brings the work of independent art spaces alongside other bodies of knowledge where the spotlight is not necessarily lingering. This could be the design logic of market stalls, the know-how to achieve a lot with very little space, or the nomadic nature of a business venture like a tailor with a portable sewing machine who can pick up and move at short notice. It could also manifest at a makerspace where second-hand objects are turned into useful domestic goods, or during a tea ceremony where ritual is key to relating with others. Such customary ways of doing may not be considered part of the academic canon of formalised knowledge sources. Nonetheless, operating globally for the few does not necessarily mean that something is not (also) operating locally for the many, as Kabelo Malatsie pointed out.[61] She was speaking with reference to the South African musical subculture *gqom* on a discussion panel about sustainable art platforms.[62]

There are clear limitations to the Platform/ Plotform project. The research method and fieldwork period were not comprehensive enough to engage in a robust critique that a more sustained observation period or repeat series of visits would allow. On this note, it is important to also acknowledge that independent spaces are not beacons of harmony and seamless innovation. Their collective structure necessarily involves contestations, disputes, negotiations and conflict resolution. However, the

60 Pamela Shurmer-Smith (ed.), *Doing Cultural Geography*, Sage Publications, London, 2002.

61 Kabelo Malatsie is an independent curator and was appointed the director of Kunsthalle Bern in July 2021.

62 "The quest for sustainable art platforms", panel discussion, Investec Cape Town Art Fair, 15 February 2020. Author's notes. Audio available: https://www.investeccapetownartfair.co.za/programme-2020.

research is not designed to closely attend to these particular dynamics. It set out to observe general working principles and organisational ethos evident from emblematic programming. My short and immersive visits meant I could only gather a cursory impression while taking a reading on the urban context at the same time: a snapshot. Nonetheless, this was sufficient for making valid observations, collating these insights across the spaces, and supplementing them with secondary sources and ongoing research.

I found surprising subject matter, interviewees and insights by using panya routes as a methodological tool. They were often located by following unexpected detours in ambulatory pedagogies. At the neighbourhood games for *Nai Ni Who*?, for instance, I wandered off into the surrounding public park only to discover an intriguing mosaic labyrinth by Eric Manya, a former GoDown resident artist. The artwork design represents a plant with medicinal qualities and incorporates symbols for all the natural elements of earth, air, fire and water. It tells direction, he said, "a true compass".[63] Or in Accra, an unexpected back road diversion led me to Nico Wayo's mural, elaborated upon earlier. Panya routes notwithstanding, the method had a basic modus operandi in mind — to follow the thing (artwork) and let it lead the way; or "follow the things themselves", after Arjun Appadurai.[64] Biographies of things also intersect with social histories, Appadurai says, and these historical ebbs and flows bring temporality into view.[65] Following the thing is a bit trickier than it sounds because artworks can be wonderfully obscure and disruptive. They often do not play along with expectations and instead go down all sorts of left turns, detours, or even dead ends; but detours can be generative and often reveal something far more interesting in the process. Such platform cracks or glitches, invoked earlier by Nancy Odendaal, can productively redirect and allow for new ideas and possibilities to emerge. The technique is also great fun, and works very well for arts-based research. Arts-based research is, simply put, "thinking in, through and with art", according to Henk Borgdorff.[66] "The research derives its significance not only from the new insights it contributes to the discourse on art, but also from the outcomes in the form of new products and experiences which are meaningful in the world of art."[67] Consequently, a key challenge in the research outcomes is creating a reciprocal relationship between form and content, where the

63 Eric Manya, in conversation with the author, Nairobi, 14 July 2018.

64, 65 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value", in *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 5, 34.

66, 67 Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, Leiden University Press, Leiden, 2012, p. 143, 146.

form in some sense "performs" the subject matter. In this endeavour, I take the view of Annette Gilbert and approach publishing as artistic practice.[68]

One caveat on the method of "follow the thing": a necessary distinction should be drawn between objects and things. Things are understood here in Jane Bennett's sense of "thing-power", or vibrant matter, "a materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension".[69] Things have animation or agency, which reflects in their migratory nature and mutating meaning. Objects, on the other hand, are subject to Aimé Césaire's powerful critique about "thingification", which he calls an othering that relates back to rendering the colonised "non-human". Césaire writes that between coloniser and colonised:

> No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.
> My turn to state an equation: colonization = "thingification".[70]

Artworks as "things" are understood here in excess of objecthood. Like Dr Seuss's Thing One and Thing Two, writes Bill Brown, things "hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable".[71] This approaches the academic territory of New Materialism, a body of theory that abandons the idea of matter as inert and instead says that it is indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. Sometimes called neo-materialism, it "takes seriously the idea of things as agents along *with* humans", writes Andrew Poe.[72] It is focused upon an embodied, affective and relational understanding. This kind of understanding infuses the artist's sensibility and the artistic thinking of independent art spaces more generally, tracing the constant oscillation between art and its imbrication with everyday social realities.

As part of the research method, I convened a trilogy of events after the fieldwork was completed as a way to test out findings and create the

68 Annette Gilbert (ed.), *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2016.
69 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, p. 20.
70 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1955], trans. Joan Pinkham, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2001, p. 42.
71 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory", *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1, 2001, p. 5.
72 Andrew Poe, "Review Essay: Things-Beyond-Objects", *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 19, no. 1, 2011, p. 153.

opportunity for an expanded conversation on the topic. Central to this endeavour was a two-day roundtable of a dozen invited guests who comprised the key research participants in Platform/ Plotform, project partners and interested third parties including artists and academics. Held in September 2019, it brought together the directors of the participant spaces and some South African stakeholders in the broader topic to consider the project's preliminary findings and start to think about their articulation and future research pathways. This gathering in Cape Town included a public panel discussion called "Beyond Our Borders: Independent art spaces as a lens on city futures".[73] At this event, some workshop participants spoke about the independent spaces they run, their current challenges and future outlook. They helped to identify key crossover points in their work and how these relate to current affairs and contexts beyond the artworld. Further, just prior to this workshop, a public talk was held at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, to share preliminary findings of Platform/ Plotform and receive peer feedback on work in progress.

What became very apparent over the course of this research was how the work of off-spaces was not about art per se. Teju Cole, in his literary musings about his home city of Lagos, says the most convincing signs of life he sees are connected to the practice of the arts: "And it is like this. Each time I am sure that, in returning to Lagos, I have inadvertently wandered into a region of hell, something else emerges to give hope. A reader, an orchestra, the friendship of some powerful swimmers against the tide."[74] Likewise, the research fieldwork in Platform/ Plotform was full of contrapuntal experiences. In the immediate wake of something that knocked me entirely off kilter came a superlative experience — an event, an artwork, or a conversation that transported me to an otherwise world. This duality seems part of the paradoxical nature of such fast-changing cities and sets up the contradictory task for off-spaces of simultaneously resisting and reimagining their own conditions.

It also sets up a challenge for researchers navigating unfamiliar terrain, where mistakes inevitably happen. As research progressed, I kept a growing list of things to do in preparation for the next bout of fieldwork and pointers on how to better navigate unfamiliar cities in situ. It is a highly practical list of small and important things that I would have liked to have known before setting out, compiled as a letter to myself. I list them here as

73 Documentation available: https://www.africancentreforcities.net/video-beyond-our-borders-independent-art-spaces-as-a-lens-on-city-futures.

74 Teju Cole, *Every Day is for the Thief* [2007], Faber & Faber, London, 2015, p. 87.

a method footnote, an offering rather than a toolkit. As the Google Maps opening caution of this book relates, “walking directions may not always reflect real-world conditions”. Perhaps the list says something useful about the backstage realities of knowledge production in cities where travel not only involves substantial logistical complexities but also dimensions of culture, religion, health and safety, social codes, language and gender hierarchies that require extra attention.

How-to-guide: Notes from the field

BEFORE DEPARTURE

1. Visit travel clinic and get all required inoculations. Take a yellow fever certificate ("yellow card") with you even to countries that do not officially require it as sometimes it is nonetheless requested at border control. Visit with sufficient time to take malaria tablets beforehand, if required.
2. Check visa requirements and apply in time; or take correct currency if applying on arrival (often US dollars are needed) with an official invitation letter from local host.
3. Take probiotics just before heading to cities where food or water-carried disease is an issue (most cases) and pack diarrhoea tablets. Do not drink unbottled water or eat food that is likely to be cleaned with it, such as salad.
4. Pack basic medical kit including plasters and mosquito repellent. Include anti-inflammatories and antiseptic.
5. Get travel health insurance. Take along a printout of the confirmation certificate that shows proof of this cover.
6. Pack coffee pre-mix sachets and emergency snacks for missed meals.
7. Pack a multiplug adapter with the right combination for the destination country.
8. Take earplugs and a spare smartphone.
9. Pack spare batteries for electronic devices and a solar-powered recharger.
10. If collected by pre-arranged airport transfer, get the mobile number of the driver beforehand in case you need to make contact at the airport before you are internet-enabled.
11. Turn mobile phone service to SMS roaming on departure and activate bank cards for use abroad.
12. Download communication applications such as Signal or Telegram before visiting countries with restrictive communication or invasive monitoring laws in order to ensure secure messaging with local contacts.
13. Pack all medication in original packaging and carry authorising medical script alongside. Check for any restrictions on high-schedule medication before travelling.
14. Make arrangements for daily safety check-ins with a mutually agreed contact at your home base. Have a document lodged at this base with all personal particulars and emergency information including accommodation address and relevant health information.

UPON ARRIVAL

1. Upon arrival at destination airport, make it your first task to secure a local SIM card with 1GB of data per week. Passport and return ticket are generally required to purchase a SIM. Turn a spare smartphone into a hotspot and pair it with your regular smartphone as a travelling duo. This enables ride-hailing and Google Maps, which is essential in a foreign language city as street signs and numbers may not be familiar. It also enables general online searches and freeware calls or messages. This hotspot is your navigational lifeline and the single most important enabling mechanism. If you cannot find a telecoms booth at the arrivals hall to purchase a local SIM, make it your first assignment after settling in.

2. Find a cash dispenser at the airport and secure a decent amount of local currency. Some cities are cash-only (like Cairo) while others are "smart" (like Nairobi) and it makes a difference for small daily transactions to know what the custom is. Either way, a cash buffer is necessary. Ride-hailing services also accept cash instead of card, which is a useful option in case of tech failure.

3. If in a foreign language city, get the host hotel and any other key destinations written out in English and the local language as backup to carry with you.

4. Write out the numbers one to ten in local script (for example, in Arabic) to recognise number plates and addresses on the street. Carry this guide with you.

5. Download ahead of time Google Map areas you are travelling within and save them as offline maps so that you can access this navigational aid even when you have no internet connection. Even without internet access, this geolocation service tracks your movements and tells you where you are so that you can navigate your way around quite easily. For this functionality to work in Google Maps, you have to set it to "vehicle" option and not "pedestrian".

6. Familiarise yourself with local laws and customs. For instance, it is often illegal to photograph official buildings, transport stations or infrastructure nodes. There are also customary restrictions on behaviour, such as accepted dress codes in certain places. It is important to be aware of social norms governing more patriarchal societies that, for instance, expect solo women to have a male escort when walking at night. Gender relations play out very differently in such cities and social situations need to be navigated with due care.

DAILY HABITS

1. Keep daily fieldwork journal and field note writing, and transcribe these into digital form each night.
2. Write your field notes in a minority home language if you are in a politically oppressive or authoritarian country and communicate via encrypted text message. Keep notes in password-protected documents.
3. Upload images, sound recordings of urban environment and interviews daily into the cloud to clear from devices in order to protect your sources.
4. Send daily SMS to home safety contact to confirm all is well. By prior agreement, no contact beyond a 24-hour period means that something has gone wrong.
5. Carry passport or ID with you at all times. In some cities, officials do random spot checks.

UPON RETURN TO HOME BASE

1. Back up all fieldwork data.
2. Notify safety contact within 24 hours of safe return home.
3. Write up short reflections one or two days after returning, and follow up any loose research ends before too much time passes.

Southern urbanism

The African continent has twenty-one of the world's thirty fastest growing urban areas, according to the Toronto-based non-profit Global Cities Institute, and a rapidly expanding youth and middle class. Four of the five participant spaces in *Platform/ Plotform* are in the top twenty-five world's largest cities by 2100, according to its projections. Dar es Salaam, for example, would potentially become the world's third largest city according to the most extreme of the three socio-economic pathway scenarios whereby it could be home to over seventy-three million people.[1] Whatever actual growth figures transpire, cities will become the nexus of what is often called wicked problems that are a conflation of social, economic and political questions, which will need to be worked out at speed and scale.[2] This is a reality the Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated, exposing the intersectional dimensions of everyday urban life and how the most vulnerable are generally at the sharp end. Acceleration is, however, a particularly southern phenomenon because Asia and Africa are urbanising at speeds the West has never had to fathom, according to Aromar Revi.[3] Modern urbanisation is a global fact: United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN Habitat) predicts the world will further urbanise over the next decade, from 56.2 percent of the global population today to 60.4 percent by 2030,[4] while 96 percent of that urban growth is expected to occur in regions of East Asia, South Asia and Africa. There are risks to this accelerating trajectory. Unsustainable urban growth, increasing inequality, distortions in the function and form of cities, and problems affecting the environment are all major factors affecting prosperity, according to Eduardo Moreno at UN-Habitat. Speaking about the United Nation's urban data platform City Prosperity Initiative, which looks at development in a more integrated manner towards sustainability, Moreno said: "Cities are forgetting that they have intangible values — collectivity, identity, solidarity."[5] There are

1 Daniel Hoornweg and Kevin Pope, "Socioeconomic Pathways and Regional Distribution of the World's 101 Largest Cities", Global Cities Institute, Toronto, January 2014, p. 9. Available: http://media.wix.com/ugd/672989_62cfa13ec4ba47788f78ad660489a2fa.pdf.

2 The importance of cities is enshrined in global development policy, most notably the Sustainable Development Goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development where Goal 11 is sustainable cities and communities. For more information, see: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities.

3 Aromar Revi, Kapuscinski Development Lecture, University of Cape Town, 5 November 2014. Author's notes.

4 UN-Habitat, "Key Messages Summary", *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization*, 2020. Available: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/key_messages_summary_english.pdf.

5 Eduardo Lopez Moreno, "The City Prosperity Initiative", UN-Habitat worldwide, 29 August 2014, https://youtu.be/nQgnyDF2N-A.

also boons to this trajectory: by 2030, over fifty percent of urban populations will be under 35 years old, according to UN-Habitat's estimates.[6]

Either way, "The city becomes this laboratory of what freedom might be [...] the city is the space of encounter; it's the space where we have to deal with the other ethically — do we embrace that other or do we shun them?", asked Saidiya Hartman.[7] Independent art spaces, or off-spaces, offer an intriguing lens on such intangibles, while generating new ideas on organisational models. As *Panya Routes* has shown, such spaces respond to prevailing uncertainty by autoconstructing their own material and immaterial infrastructures. In this DIY-DIT mode of institution building as artistic practice, off-spaces turn themselves into transformative nodes to help recalibrate city futures.

Panya Routes has put forward five working principles of off-spaces, induced in the research project Platform/ Plotform by making correlations between their artistic strategies and everyday urban innovations or social forms already in public circulation. The five working principles make a potential contribution towards forging a new vocabulary for terrain that is unfolding but not yet named. This effort to expand the lexicon is becoming urgent as geopolitical changes put cities of the global South into the spotlight. The increasingly used term "global South" is disputed since it flattens a constellation of singularities into one grouping. That said, the designation is generally understood to be less geographical and more conceptual; the general idea being that many cities in the southern hemisphere have something structural in common. This is largely because they share certain dynamics linked to colonisation and its extractive forces, impacts which are ongoing in new and complex guises. Not only that, cities of the global South are also potential precursors for other cities of what is yet to come, owing to the accelerated urbanisation dynamics. They are often the first to feel the effects of world-historical forces, as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff point out; it is the South in which "new assemblages of capital and labor are taking shape, thus to prefigure the future of the global north".[8] They assert that: "Put another way, [...] Africa, South Asia, and Latin America seem, in many respects, to be running slightly ahead of the Euromodern world, harbingers of its history-in-the-making."[9]

6 Source: https://unhabitat.org/topic/youth-and-livelihoods.

7 Saidiya Hartman, "Writing the City", discussion panel, Open Book Festival, Cape Town, 7 September 2019. Author's notes.

8, 9 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South. Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2012, p. 12, 13.

Southern cities are sometimes grouped into the category of "southern urbanism" that broadly spans Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean. As Caldeira noted earlier, the logics driving modes of urbanisation in such cities are different to that of industrialised cities of the North Atlantic. Likewise, research participants in Platform/ Plotform caution against reading what is happening in the urban fabric of African cities through a Western lens. Quoting Saskia Sassen's research about class and spatial polarisation, Joy Mboya and Garnette Oluoch-Olunya write that urban renewal in Nairobi is about the broad "processes of spatial, economic and social restructuring" rather than "the [specific] rehabilitation of decaying [and] low-income housing [or industrial wastelands] by middle-class outsiders".[10] They add: "The spatial realignment occurring in the area is a consequence of emergent business seeking infrastructure for operations in a city that has increased over tenfold in population since independence, without commensurate city planning to cater for such growth and expansion."[11] Mariam Elnozahy at Townhouse made a comparable point about urban development in downtown Cairo. She said issues like gentrification are complex and do not easily transpose to the context of Cairo: "Our traditional way of thinking about gentrification is the suburbanisation-urbanisation compendium, but I think here it functions very differently and it is really about a centralisation of capital and what it means for one company to be renting out all of these spaces at very high costs, for example. [...] The way people think about urban life here is very different."[12] For instance, she reflected upon the way the relationship of Townhouse and its neighbours, primarily mechanics and shops, had metamorphosed from initial hostility to a symbiotic relationship. Townhouse got rebuilt because the neighbours all came together, sat around a table and agreed to pitch in. "It really was a full circle, a radical shift. I think [this demonstrates] how you cannot talk about gentrification in the same way when observing the history of Townhouse and how it has evolved over time and become so enmeshed with the environment around it."[13]

Indeed, while contemplating the nature of "theory from the south", Alan Mabin points out its four common lines of argument:

10, 11 Joy Mboya and Garnette Oluoch-Olunya, "*Nai Ni Who*?: Exploring Urban Identity, Place and Social (Re)construction in Nairobi", *Critical Interventions* 11, no. 1, 2017, p. 59; Saskia Sassen, *The global city: New York, London and Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, p. 255.

12, 13 Mariam Elnozahy, interview with the author, Cairo, 4 November 2018.

1 that northern theory fails or does not apply in the south;

2 the future is outlined in the south not the north;

3 the north-south axis of power can be inverted — northern hegemonies intellectually may be challenged, Europe may be provincialized (Chakrabarty), Africa may be worlded (Mbembe); and

4 events and ideas in the south are powerful for understanding the world as a whole, not only the south.[14]

After discussion, he concludes that "in the complex world of cities, everywhere, artists working right now may be onto more far reaching [sic] ways of communicating what contemporary city life and cities are about. [...] [A]rtists may be doing a better job than southern, or northern, theorists in 'painting', 'composing', 'dancing' and 'writing' cities into being. It remains to scholarship to go further."[15] In Platform/ Plotform, artists are both communicating city life and bringing it into being through building narratives and building institutions. This ranges from locally led neighbourhood walks and dialogue that inform broader urbanisation processes to capturing everyday stories about what art and culture mean to people and representing them in new ways; from collaborating with neighbours to create solidarity networks and reconstruct a collapsed building, to revaluing vernacular knowledges as borderless assemblages and fusing these into architectural forms and educational curricula; from building alliances to literally co-designing with the community a new pedagogical institution. Although they act local, these spaces think global. In this balancing act, the African continent is a powerful fulcrum.

It is interesting to consider, within this larger imperative of paying attention to cities of the global south and artists in particular, whether there is something distinctive in "thinking at lower altitude".[16] At a conference on arts research in Africa, Mareli Stolp suggested that some of the characteristics that aligned artistic research with "African" epistemology included the enmeshing of thinking and doing beyond Western binaries or

14, 15 Alan Mabin, "Grounding southern city theory in time and place", in *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, eds. Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield, London, Routledge, p. 24, 32.

16 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* [2014], Routledge, London 2016, p. 12.

Cartesian dualisms, and towards a more holistic idea of knowledge that privileges tacit, embodied and implicit forms.[17] Stolp's words reinforce the working principles of independent spaces conveyed in this book, but there is also something more fundamental at play in what constitutes knowledge at all. Hans Ramduth, contributing from the point of view of an island, in his case Mauritius, suggests that originality is not necessarily the pinnacle: "A focus on uniqueness and novelty would be detrimental to the island. We need to integrate craft and arts for a more multifaceted approach to creativity."[18] *Panya Routes* is part of an effort to recognise local knowledge and innovations that are already at play in the urban fabric. Deliberately imparting alternative forms of knowledge production is part of decolonising the canon and its hierarchies. Many of the cited projects in Platform/Plotform celebrate an epistemic disobedience, which is a characteristic of the third working principle of horizontality. Additionally, might there be something inherent to knowledge production from the global south that actively resists certain modes of co-option, such as an in-built refusal mechanism against particular types of capture?

In an increasingly algorithmic age of digital data and computational power, this would offer intriguing possibilities. The prospect was inferred at a public talk about music and sound by Martin Scherzinger at A4 Arts Foundation in Cape Town.[19] Scherzinger covered a broad array of topics from the interconnection of political economy with digital sound technologies, to copyright law and intellectual property regimes, mathematical geometries of musical time, and histories of sound in philosophy. He spoke about somatic software relating to the body as "a deeply advanced prosthetic" and the wave of the future — a dialectic where social and cultural value was sedimented into lines of code. Humanity is now subject to measurement by computation, Scherzinger added, but computers could not always "hear" the groove with beat trackers; some musical genres and rhythms, like the triple pulse of compound time, are resistant. Among these refuseniks is the African thumb piano, or mbira; as its colloquial name implies, it is "nothing but the thumb", said Scherzinger. The mbira inverts the gestural logic of the QWERTY design of a computer keyboard in which the thumb is regarded

17 Mareli Stolp, "Artistic Research as African Epistemology", Arts Research Africa Conference 2020, University of the Witwatersrand, 22–24 January 2020. Author's notes. Full proceedings available: http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/9276.

18 Hans Ramduth, "Addressing Artistic Research at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius: Challenges for a Small Island Developing State in Africa", Arts Research Africa Conference 2020. Author's notes.

19 Martin Scherzinger, public talk, "Algorithmic Temporalities of the Neocolony: the Case of African Mathematics", A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town, 23 May 2018. Author's notes.

as inessential. The point of mbira music is to rotate the beat, Scherzinger explained, and the mbira musician also plays in the spaces of the other performer, known as "folding" or "interlocking", which creates a fractal harmony common to African music. A clear inference from Scherzinger's talk was how such characteristics resist digital capture and coding, and offer a potential line of flight. The musical qualities of the African thumb piano described above — refusal, rotation, interlocking, fractal harmony and collectivity — are shared by independent art spaces in Platform/ Plotform. This left me thinking about the aesthetic potential embedded within art forms on the African continent to resist and reimagine prevailing logics. Such recalibration is even more pressing at a time of enhanced global surveillance, behavioural mining and data extraction for profiteering that rely upon algorithmic thinking. Shoshana Zuboff, in her critique of the world of big data, describes this phenomenon as surveillance capitalism, which begins with the discovery of behavioural surplus: "More behavioural data are rendered than required for service improvements. This surplus feeds machine intelligence — the new means of production — that fabricates predictions of user behaviour. These products are sold to business customers in new behavioural futures markets."[20]

How to recapture the horizon line from the futures market? Words on decolonisation from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o kicked off *Panya Routes* with an exhortation to always start from where you are. This final chapter now circles back to his thoughts on art. In *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, he explores the relationship between art and political power within society in Africa. Ngũgĩ revisits ancient Greek thought and its relationship to a universal modernity in order to outline four aspects of art in Africa: godlike, Socratic, Andersenian and Munchian. His first aspect puts art into potential confrontation with autocratic states, which see themselves as godlike, and he concludes that art and the state are generally antagonistic. The second Socratic aspect arises from the very nature of the artistic process as an exploration, "to contemplate the ordinarily uncontemplatable".[21] The Andersenian conveys the artistic process as "like a mirror lodged in the consciousness [...] and it has even that capacity to mirror what is below the surface of things".[22] Finally, the Munchian aspect is about how art "tries to gives voice back to the silenced", taking its cue from the famous artwork

20 Shosanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile Books, London, 2019, p. 97.

21 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* [1998], Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 17.

22 Ngũgĩ, p. 21.

Skrik (*The Scream*).[23] This analysis offers a productive foil for contemplating the working principles of independent art spaces in African cities. The participant spaces forge ahead with their panya routes. The state, if it comes at all, arrives after the fact. While Ngũgĩ's aspects of art are all recognisable, the practices of these off-spaces extend beyond making things contemplatable, reflecting back, or giving voice. Off-spaces may do all of those things but they also move understandings of art into an agential role. As the third working principle of performativity makes clear, art in these contexts is also an instituting force. Likewise, institution building can itself be an art form. In this way, institutions become durational artworks. Instead of looking to antiquity, Platform/ Plotform correlates artistic thinking in contemporary independent art spaces with everyday urban practices. Its findings reflect a living aesthetics, a geo-aesthetics, that is already part of the world. As Ngũgĩ wrote: art, with its embodiment of notions of creativity and freedom, needs to assert itself amid "the credit-card mentality — based on debt and mortgage of the future to satisfy the present — [...] It needs to be active, engaged, insistent on being what it always has been, the embodiment of dreams for a truly human world where the progress of any one person is not dependent on the downfall of another".[24]

23, 24 Ngũgĩ, p. 25, 6.

Geo-aesthetics

This section takes an independent art space in Cairo, the CiC–Contemporary Image Collective, as emblematic of the role that off-spaces can play as urban indicators. By linking space and imagination, this exemplar is a lens on the nested dynamics of southern urbanism sketched above. But first, a brief diversion on urban context. CiC is located in downtown Cairo, which has some interesting parallels to inner-city Johannesburg where the Platform/ Plotform project has its conceptual roots. Both city centres are mixed commercial and residential nodes previously favoured by a more privileged elite who migrated into suburbia and left downtown buildings to a wave of transformations. Cairo is striking for its burgeoning satellite cities. New suburbs, gated estates and an array of developments are being built apace for miles around. These include a wholesale migration of the administrative capital in Cairo to a new city created from scratch, which is located forty kilometres from the city centre. This re-envisioned capital will reportedly cover seven hundred square kilometres, making it as large as Singapore upon completion. The most striking experience of this new world-building was a drive to the outskirts of Cairo. For miles around, new builds dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see. Buildings in half-finished formations lined the horizon. The scale and sheer density were astounding. Looming billboard after billboard promoted these new estates by co-opting artworld lexicon with taglines like "Real Estate is Art" and "stART your business".

Downtown Cairo remains a busy hub that is transforming itself with a different energy. The Arab Spring partly played out in Tahrir Square, when it was occupied by protestors and variously reimagined. Tahrir Square in effect triggered a new visual culture, writes Mona Abaza, "formulating a novel understanding of public spaces as spaces of contestation, of communication, of artistic expression, or public interaction".[25] A building in the heart of Downtown Cairo called the Yacoubian is located amidst these urban dynamics and just down the road from CiC. The building has become quite famous after its inner life was turned into a novel by a former resident, and then a successful film was based on the book. The Yacoubian is an art deco construction (b. 1937) with a fascinating history. During its heyday, the building signalled a prestigious neighbourhood address until its privileged inhabitants vacated the city centre amid larger

25 Mona Abaza, "Post January Revolution Cairo: Urban Wars and the Reshaping of Public Space", *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 7/8, 2014, p. 171.

capital flight that also left such heritage buildings to a wave of transformations. Visiting the Yacoubian in October 2018, it appeared a bit neglected but nonetheless the stern security guards at the entrance refused access. Its immediate surrounds, just like Johannesburg's city centre, is an intense melting pot: former residents and newcomers, commercial developments alongside older establishments, light manufacturers, retail, cinemas, bookshops, cafés and bars. This environment is evocatively captured in '*Imārat Ya'qūbiyān* or *Omaret Yacoubian* (*The Yacoubian Building*, 2004), a novel by Alaa Al Aswany. It tells a fictional story of this real building's varied inhabitants and meditates on class divides. In the novel, the working-class residents live on the rooftop and the elite inhabitants in plush apartments inside. Their relations and intertwined fates are the topic of the book as a both tragic and uplifting literary social analysis about the trials and tribulations of people undergoing seismic shifts in the political landscape.

The CiC is tucked away behind a watchmaker, through a courtyard where traders sell clothes and up a flight of stairs. A balcony with an empty chair and a shisha pipe overlooks a narrow side street where mannequin dolls are lying in a discarded heap. The long passages lead to exhibition rooms and work spaces. I sat down with the artistic director, Andrea Thal, to talk about the origins of CiC, organisational principles and current concerns. What became quickly apparent was that CiC believes in the capacity of art as a way to connect to other fields (popular historians, researchers, activists, literary practitioners, film-makers). It sees itself primarily as a place for people to meet in a low-key way and have conversations about things that matter in everyday life. Thal, who joined the CiC in 2014, said these kinds of meetings and conversations are happening all around the city in other contexts, from shops to cafes to barbers. "In our case, it is a connection between different conversations that connects to other kinds of practices and kinds of cultures. That is my personal understanding of what such a space can do. It can bring together a lot of different things. [...] Experimentation is also a very important element here, otherwise it is pointless."[26]

That description epitomises the independent art spaces encountered in Platform/ Plotform and is key to understanding their productive contribution. As this text has already made very clear, it is about doing things with art and taking the immediate context seriously in that process. Thal eloquently describes how both form and content are informed by what

26 Andrea Thal, interview with the author, Cairo, 30 October 2018.

is possible, as well as by certain sets of obligations. "The obligation is working in mediation and extending the group of people that has access to the space, people who are already talking about the same things but just somewhere else: at home, in the cafe, whatever, and might not even know about CiC. You do not have to be an established artist to do something here."[27] This approach translates into programming, where the off-space becomes a node for exchange, communication, debate and alternative imaginaries. As Thal said: "It is very important that it is a space people come to and hang out in and discuss — larger [discussions] than just between people. It is between films, books, works of art. A dialogue between these things, which is partially why the library is open every day as a public space. It allows for an open space, especially now that this area gets more commercialised, it is a free space with coffee, tea, Wi-Fi and lots of books."[28]

"To be honest", Thal summed up, "I do not think contemporary art can get very far on its own. If there is anything I am interested in about contemporary art, it is precisely that it can talk about things that are relevant far beyond its scene in a way that might actually add something to those conversations. That is probably why a lot of our work has been on topics that are in very simplified terms. Our larger projects are always a combination of exhibitions, workshops, lots of screenings, talks, discussions, readings. The project we have now is about water politics."[29] This 2018 multimedia exhibition curated by Thal was titled *Submerged* and dealt with rivers and their interrupted flow. It was presented in connection with a workshop, screenings, a three-month programme of discussions and books available in the library that had been suggested by researchers. All in all, a series of articulations that surround a particular inquiry; in this case, on water politics connecting symbolic violence of cultural productions and the resistance of rural communities to systemic violence. This layered approach honours the complexity of lived realities and offers multiple access points to help unpack their interconnected nature.

Another recent CiC project on imprisonment and social exclusion resulted in a book titled *If Not For That Wall*. This project complicates the personal in relation to collective identities in times of sociopolitical turbulence and becomes an interesting way to consider the relationship between institutional forms and the urban fabric. Or, more pithily described in the book itself: "We believe that there is no clear dividing line that separates the political dimension of institutional and social exclusion, and

27, 28, 29 Thal, interview with the author.

artistic articulations that engage with those subjects."[30] A critique on institutional violence moves into a chapter on psychological states pointing towards structural problems, followed by text on migration politics, then nationalism and the ways in which it represents itself through culture. One of the profiled projects, *Imagined Life In A Museum Vitrine*, shows this merger between the political, the social and the artistic. It "traced notions of desire and defeat inherent to the histories of national liberation movements in Egypt and the region, and the recession of collective forms of organisation and ideas of the collective in the face of accelerated processes of segregation, individualisation, and consumption".[31] Like other CiC projects, it took a multicentred approach, comprising an exhibition, a programme of discussions, artist talks, screenings, a workshop and related books in the CiC library.

Artworks in *If Not For That Wall* engage the construction of national identity and manifestations of the state through historic sites, architectural monuments, international fairs and development schemes for residential compounds. For example, *Plan for Greater Baghdad* (2015) by Ala Younis is activated by a set of 35 mm slides and takes viewers through numerous iterations of development for a gymnasium over a time span of twenty-five years.[32] These plans passed through five military coups, six heads of state, four master plans each with its own town planner, a development board that became a ministry and then a state commission, a modern "starchitect", draftsmen, contractors, agents, lawyers, architects, government departments, and local artists "as well as other monuments that simultaneously appeared and disappeared as a result of these same conglomerations".[33] This multifaceted work moves very much beyond the insularity of the artworld. Off-spaces like CiC extend the logic of curatorial showcasing to actively build critical context; "a primary question for CiC as a whole is rooted in the creation of milieux in which ideas, practices and discussions related to the broadest remit of visual culture can be fostered".[34] CiC demonstrates how contemporary art is in fact a social praxis. Art in this conception has the power to critique systemic issues (including

30 Nawara Belal, Ahmed Refaat and Andrea Thal (eds.), "Introduction", in *If Not For That Wall*, Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo, 2018, p. 14.

31 Belal, Refaat and Thal (eds.), "Chapter 4: Imagined Life In A Museum Vitrine", p. 219.

32 This work was acquired by the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2015; for more information, see: https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/34608.

33 Ala Younis, "Plan for Greater Baghdad", in *If Not For That Wall*, ed. Nawara Belal, Ahmed Refaat and Andrea Thal, Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo, 2018, p. 220.

34 Mission statement available here: www.cuipcairo.org/en/directory/contemporary-image-collective-cic.

its own) and structural conditions in society, and deploys art as its own instituting force. Or, how to do things with art.

The mission statements of independent art spaces that have proliferated on the African continent may differ but all create platforms of criticality and production, according to Koyo Kouoh. She writes: "Some of these initiatives aim to establish self-organized, non-hegemonic and experimental fields and orders of knowledge. Others deliberately question institutions established by the post-colonial nation state, while still others attempt to step in where public institutions are undermined. [...] They are developing forms of south-south cooperation and transcontinental networking — including diaspora communities. It appears that, despite their inevitably varying cultural settings and socio-political parameters, the core urgencies and necessities are the same and are not bound by geographical definitions."[35] Back in the Townhouse library, I came across Jack Shenker's 2016 volume, *The Egyptians: A Radical Story*, and read his take on how the revolution was less about religious divides and more about everyday reclamations of "space to breathe" — reclamations by farmers, factory workers, vegetable traders. People who wanted more agency over spaces they felt were being overrun and put out of their reach by a conflation of political, corporate and state interests. The idea of breathing space is a consistent thread throughout *Panya Routes*. In the context of fast-changing cities of flux, off-spaces offer much needed room to breathe, to pause and to assemble alternative conceptions of city futures.

35 Koyo Kouoh, "Never Despair, Your Miracle is Around the Corner: The Multiple Forms of Designing the Social", in *Making Africa — A Continent of Contemporary Design*, eds. Mateo Kries, Amelie Klein, exh. cat., Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, 2015, p. 47.

Plotform urbanism

How does a platform becomes a plotform? The five key working principles conveyed in this book enable off-spaces to create infrastructures of different kinds and instantiate new contexts. In conclusion, I posit these principles as "plotform urbanism", following on from the growing urban studies literature around "platform urbanism".[36] As described earlier by Nancy Odendaal, platform urbanism acknowledges technological agency as relational, intertwined with human and social networks, and creating nodes around which relationships form. It has spatial effects, she added, and also creates glitches or platform cracks that can be generative to engage with.[37] *Plotform* urbanism acknowledges artistic agency as relational, imbricated with everyday life and creating transformative nodes. Its effects are also spatial: through refusals and reimaginations, it can help create new contexts, possibilities, and hence city futures. Glitches or necessary detours likewise afford opportunities to think in excess and beyond the status quo and create alternative panya routes to that end. Moreover, this institution building happens through co-operative structures that critique socioeconomic hegemonies.

Reflecting upon the Platform/ Plotform research project as a whole, a few distinguishing factors about independent spaces stand out. To begin with, they are all quite distinctive in their origin stories and motivations, which are intimately connected to sociopolitical context and everyday realities. This contextual specificity inevitably shapes both their physical form and content, which focuses upon art in public space. They often begin life in public settings in the form of temporary events or small-scale interventions, and grow from there. This same foundational context is highly mutable, thus off-spaces are always shapeshifting in response; they are flexible and nimble and constantly reinvent themselves. Reimagination also includes some necessary refusals and divestments; even dying, if and when the time is right. What is highly consistent among off-spaces are some common working principles, borne from prevailing uncertainties of different kinds. Off-spaces autoconstruct solutions using whatever resources, knowledges and innovations are already circulating. That is not to say such spaces are parochial; on the contrary, they act local but think global. Part of this effort is to build solidarity networks, particularly with other like-minded

36 Sarah Barns, *Platform Urbanism: Negotiating Platform Ecosystems in Connected Cities*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020.

37 Nancy Odendaal, "Platform Urbanism and Hybrid Places in African Cities", seminar, Cubes–Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, 18 August 2020. Author's notes.

spaces on the continent but also more broadly with actors who are working towards differently configured city futures. Their actions are focused upon assembling narratives, which may run counter to existing ones. This storytelling is a multimodal act of knowledge production, an assemblage from the ground up that involves devolution of curatorial authority. Such artistic practice is not only representational, making what is overlooked more visible; it is also a productive practice that has agential capacity. This kind of autoconstruction takes collective forms and pathways, usually formalised in order to hold assets and to think about the future.

Operating models are hybrid schemes that most closely resemble worker co-operatives. Formal structuring mechanisms increasingly borrow from collective investment vehicles in the private or institutional sector and reconfigure them for public interest and not-for-profit ends. These models deploy collaborative economies and mutual aid, which help to turn "me" into "we". They rely less upon foreign-funded grants and increasingly upon local support from the immediate community and philanthropists, as well as crowdsourcing, digital technologies and turning intangible assets into income. Sustainability for off-spaces is not about the ability to keep doing tomorrow what is done today; it is about disrupting the status quo to think and dream beyond it, and then assemble the kind of DIY-DIT institutions that is required: post-museum, post-white cube, post-plinth. Such an off-space can be any space of counterfactual imagination, even the void of a toppled statue that today is a public stage for contesting ideas about public space to move towards common space. Common space belongs to nobody and to everybody; hence it is contested, negotiated and daily performed anew. Such evolving terrain necessitates a constant search to better articulate beyond market logics the value of such spaces and why their work matters. Off-spaces are, in this institution building process, reinventing new organisational models that are not about art per se; they are about debate, exchange and reconfiguring a public sphere. This world-making is really about the agentic capacity of contemporary art. It involves action and refusal, utterance and silence, positivity and pessimism, and inveigling city futures from these paradoxical tensions.

In that spirit, below is a playful offering of pointers gleaned from Platform/ Plotform research about flat-pack institution building. It is not meant as a definitive list; rather a love note for all of the immanent self-assemblers who find themselves on an unmarked panya route.

- Start small, from wherever you are. Do what you know and use what you have. Take a cue from what already exists.
- Act local and think global.
- Build collectively using collaborative economies.
- Work as a co-operative using a collective membership structure with leadership roles that rotate, curatorial roles that devolve, authorial rights that disperse, and decision-making that is shared.
- Pursue a socially focused praxis that understands art as embedded with everyday life.
- Demonstrate radical sharing, mutual aid and hospitality to an expansive idea of community.
- Build relationships so the space becomes a transformative node, and choose allies in this network selectively.
- Build narratives that reflect home-grown knowledge systems and ways of doing.
- Function like a rhizome. This includes transversal relations with official logics.
- Build your own infrastructure.
- Think about the future by holding assets, including owning your own premises.
- Turn some intangible assets into income generating ones.
- Use the principles of horizontality, second chance, performativity, elasticity and convergence to build your offering.
- Embed both artists and practitioners from other fields and disciplines together in subsidised independent work spaces to encourage interdisciplinarity and cross-pollination of ideas.
- Stay autonomous in order to encourage experimentation, and counter instrumentalisations of art practice.
- Be context specific and use participatory methodologies already in circulation.
- Make your own panya routes.
- Do it yourself, do it together.
- Breathe.

CODA: BLUE ELEPHANTS AND OTHER USEFUL FICTIONS

Always start from where you are.

My own starting point informing Platform/ Plotform is a semi-industrial precinct in Salt River, Cape Town. This entrepreneurial hub is converted from former train yards with rail lines and ever deepening potholes crisscrossing the terrain. It is home to a number of artisanal workshops largely oriented towards South Africa's burgeoning post-apartheid film industry: set-builders, special effects gurus, prop warehouses, event lighting specialists, mutant vehicles for hire and a small film studio; also, furniture makers, Bedouin tent manufacturers, a pinball machine repair workshop, a long-haul trucking company; and, for the past few years, some artist studios in the back yard of the set-building company Sets & Devices. My studio was assembled from recycled film sets with a green screen for a ceiling and palettes for walls.

The final approach road to the cul-de-sac of Sets & Devices offers a constantly changing mélange of objects and scenarios that arrest attention. I fell in love with a giant, dazzling silver-and-black brain positioned in the front yard of a neighbouring props warehouse. Over time, that brain severed into two and its dislocated hemispheres kept shifting around the props yard, settling in positions that revealed their spongy innards. Two of them came to rest in a boat, like stranded lovers going nowhere; another in the long grass on the side of the road. Keeping company in the same props yard were some Moʻai, or Easter Island heads. These smaller doppelgängers of the monolithic human figures also met a disintegrating fate, breaking into sections over time and rearranging their poses in an inexplicable ongoing dance. One of them more recently acquired a coat of luminous pink paint. They are still shifting around the yard, along with various assemblages of goods-for-hire hoping for a second filmic life: wheelbarrows, ladders, trolleys, signage, even a defunct aeroplane — all spillover from Props to the Stars.

Such uncanny transformations are daily occurrences in this city hub, owned by the state rail operator and now leased to entrepreneurs. Working from this former railyard, these largely blue-collar artisans are all engaged in reimagining city futures with a different kind of sensibility. Props and sets are useful fictions and, in making them, the set builders deliberately deployed their own. Completely agnostic about the set's final destination, they focus intently on the task at hand, and when the set eventually returns to the workshop, it is simply recycled and repurposed towards redistributive ends. It is another kind of second chance. A six-metre-high metal armature welded together for a giant tiered cake under studio lights held singing and dancing characters from movies. Back in the

yard, it became roof trusses for a shed and security gate. A cherry tree rejected halfway through production was nonetheless completed *as if* it were a star of the show, with webbing on the bark and real-life branch-ends inserted as final gestures. The reject moved around the workshop for months, acting as an otherworldly inveigler who accrued all sorts of items hanging from its branches. Over time, it shed its skin and finally came to rest in skeletal form on the patio entrance to Sets & Devices.

This counterfactual imagination resonates keenly with Kwame Anthony Appiah's philosophy, sharing the name of his book: *As If*. He builds on theories by Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933) about idealisation, or necessarily leaving some things out, as being a useful fiction for "*finding our way about*".[1] This involves suspending some element of disbelief, using thoughts as tools. "In believing that it is *as if* something is so, I dispose myself to act in a certain way, but only in certain contexts and for certain purposes."[2] He suggests various tractable implications, from politics to justice, or making the world better, "if all or most of us act as if it is so".[3] This *as if* philosophy has important repercussions for reimagining city futures. It involves thinking beyond how things or people are, and imagining possible worlds instead. Appiah calls this our most astonishing human capacity, "the ability to access ways the world is not but might have been".[4] To think and dream in excess of the status quo necessarily involves some useful fictions and a lot of thinking *as if*. It is an unlikeness that is more than the thing itself; or as McKenzie Wark puts it, "unlike it by over-shooting it rather than falling short of it. [...] If the less-than truth procedure would do for the era that we called the spectacle, the more-than procedure is perhaps more fitting to our time of simulation".[5] These useful fictions can be likened to the experience of video gaming, when reality and game-world elements start to combine. This phenomenon is called "slipping" when we start to read the city in terms of a game world, or "segueing" where the effect is more sustained.[6]

On the corner of the final approach road to the studio behind Sets & Devices, a useful fiction appears on a workshop's double doors. The artwork depicts a blue elephant. The elephant is kneeling down and laying its trunk along an existing step. It could be doing some yoga, but since it is

1, 2, 3, 4 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *As If: Idealization and Ideals*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 5, original emphasis, 21–22, 133, 171.

5 McKenzie Wark, "Unlikeness", in *Speculation, Now: Essays and Artwork*, eds. Vyjayanthi Venuturupalli Rao, Prem Krishnamurthy and Carin Kuoni, Duke University Press, Durham, p. 79.

6 Rowland Atkinson and Paul Willis, "Charting the Ludodrome: The mediation of urban and simulated space and rise of the *flâneur electronique*", *Information, Communication & Society* 10, no. 6, 2007, p. 827.

facing the opposite direction to all the prevailing workshop signage alongside, it appears on second thoughts to be resisting the status quo and just being otherwise. The blue elephant is spray-painted onto a bright pink background and has a couple of patches stitched onto its body in a considered act of repair. Soon after, I pass by again to see a truck pulled up alongside the warehouse, and goods are being loaded through the elephant's midriff, now functioning as open double doors. After objects are hauled outside and loaded up, the elephant's body regains its shape as the doors are closed. This particular blue elephant belongs to a series of multicoloured pachyderm murals that have appeared in strange places all over Cape Town, and further afield, since around 2014. Their maker, a Cape Town artist called Falko One, chooses off-spaces as his canvas: a Vibracrete wall along a freeway, a stairway, a caravan, a defunct boat, the side of a home. Wherever the canvas emerges, the animal takes its environment into account and blends in with the existing structures. The elephant's trunk, for example, might lie along an existing duct or join with a protruding lamp post to make a periscope.[7] These animals, with their surprising imbrications, slip and segue everyday structures and imaginary worlds. They are a reminder to be open to the astonishment of the unforeseen, offering useful fictions to dream beyond and in excess, and to act as if that fantastical city future had already arrived.

7 Falko One also paints other animals and human figures in a similar style.


CAIRO
DAKAR
TAMALE
KUMASI
ACCRA
DOUALA
ADDIS ABABA
NAIROBI
DAR ES SALAAM
JOHANNESBURG
CAPE TOWN

Appendix

Resource list of independent art spaces that are mentioned in *Panya Routes*, including those that have recently closed down, which are indicated with a dot.

A4 Arts Foundation
23 Buitenkant Street, District Six
8001 Cape Town, South Africa
+27 010 880 2595
a4arts.org
info@a4arts.org

Access Art Space
10 Nabrawy Street
off Champollion Street
Cairo Governorate, Egypt
+20 1273714371
www.facebook.com/accessartspace
accessartspace@gmail.com

ACCRA [dot] ALT
Accra, Ghana
+233 57 717 2884
accradotaltradio.com
info@accradotaltradio.com

AISS–Art in Social Structures
No. 3, 2nd Ridge Link, North Ridge
P.O. Box 9398
Accra, Ghana
+233 21 257 636
artinsocialstructures.org
info@artinsocialstructures.org

August House
76–82 End Street, Doornfontein
Johannesburg, South Africa
augusthouse.co.za
76@augusthouse.co.za

ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge
Lokko Road
Accra, Ghana
+233 55 251 0479
www.anoghana.org
info@anoghana.org

blaxTARLINES
KNUST–Kwame Nkrumah University of
Science and Technology
Kumasi, Ghana
www.facebook.com/blaxtarlineskumasi
blaxtarlines@gmail.com

○ Center for Historical Reenactments
Johannesburg, South Africa
historicalreenactments.org

Chimurenga
157 Victoria Road, Woodstock
7925 Cape Town, South Africa
+27 21 447 1119
chimurengachronic.co.za
info@chimurenga.co.za

CiC–Contemporary Image Collective
22 Abdel Khalek Tharwat Street
4th floor
Downtown, 11638 Cairo, Egypt
+2 02 2396 4272
www.ciccairo.com
info@ciccairo.com

Dei Centre
Accra, Ghana
www.facebook.com/Dei-Centre-for-
the-study-of-contemporary-African-
Art-436479465531
dei.centre@gmail.com

doul'art
Place du Gouvernement
B.P. 650 Douala, Cameroon
+237 233 43 32 59
doualart.org
communication@doualart.org

Darb 1718 Contemporary Art
& Culture Center
Kasr El Sham' Street
Al Fakhareen, Old Cairo
Cairo, Egypt
+2 02 2361 0511
darb1718.com
info@darb1718.com

GoDown Art Centre
Dunga Road
P.O. Box 27772–00506
Nairobi, Kenya
+254 726 992 200
thegodown.org
info@thegodown.org

Kuona Trust
Likoni Lane, Dennis Pritt Road
Nairobi, Kenya
+254 721 262326
kuonatrust.org

Medrar for Contemporary Art
7 Gamal El Din Abou El Mahasen
Street, Garden City
11519 Cairo, Egypt
+2 02 2795 7714
www.medrar.org
info@medrar.org

Nafasi Art Space
P.O. Box 31715
Eyasi Road, Mikocheni B
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
+255 757 820 426
www.nafasiartspace.org
info@ nafasiartspace.org

○ Netsa Art Village
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
www.facebook.com/
Netsa-Art-Village-168126196555841

Nkruma Voli-ni
Tamale, Ghana
@nkrumahvolini
www.sccatamale.org

Nubuke Foundation
Lome Close, East Legon
Accra, Ghana
+233 289 102 163
nubukefoundation.viewingrooms.com

Pan African Space Station
Cape Town, South Africa
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info@chimurenga.co.za

RAW Material Company
Villa 2A Zone B
BP 22170 Dakar, Senegal
+221 33 864 0248
www.rawmaterialcompany.org
info@rawmaterialcompany.org

Red Clay
Tamale, Ghana
@redclay_studio
www.sccatamale.org

SCCA–Savannah Centre for
Contemporary Art
Tamale, Ghana
+233 37 209 6210
www.sccatamale.org
sccatamale@gmail.com

SPARCK – Space for Pan-African
Research, Creation and Knowledge
sparck.org

Stokvel Gallery
Nugget Square, 131 Albert Street
Johannesburg, South African
www.facebook.com/plasticsculptor

○ Townhouse Gallery
Cairo, Egypt
www.thetownhousegallery.com

Zoma Museum
Mekanisa
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
+251 118354262
www.zomamuseum.org
zomamuseum@zomamuseum.org

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Acknowledgements

Books come together, if at all, in gradual increments requiring crucial assists. Edgar Pieterse, Director of ACC–African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town, backed the Platform/ Plotform research project that informs this book when it was only a concept note and helped move it into reality, as an ACC project. Another early moral supporter was Josh Ginsburg, Director of A4 Arts Foundation. I am deeply grateful and indebted to the five participant art spaces who agreed to the research proposal. This book would not exist without their participation, letting me into their worlds and trusting me with the insights upon which my own depend. Meskerem Assegued, Mariam Elnozahy, Joy Mboya, Nana Oforiatta Ayim and Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey all breathed life into this project. I am grateful for their input, expertise and patience. Many other interviewees and encounters along the way were also instrumental.

There were other important moments in the evolution of this book. One of these comprised a roundtable of key Platform/ Plotform research participants and local stakeholders, which ACC hosted in Cape Town in September 2019. My thanks to all of the participants, as well as the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, which accommodated us, and ACC colleagues who helped make it happen. Adrian and Dominique Enthoven enabled a two-month writing residency at Wrensch House in Cape Town. This generosity provided an ideal environment in early 2020 in which to conceive the first full manuscript draft. I also acknowledge the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, where I held a research position from 2018 to 2020 and during this time encountered a new set of literatures that helped expand my own understanding of Platform/ Plotform and its implications. I also participated in a workshop hosted by the CHCI–Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes at Addis Ababa University in January 2019, which helped to inform this work.

The academic mothership for this book project, African Centre for Cities, works in an interdisciplinary manner to unpack the nested issues of urbanisation on the African continent from the perspective of southern urbanism. My special thanks to Marlene Joubert, Maryam Waglay, Ithra Najaar and Warren Smit who all helped me to navigate the significant logistical challenges of the fieldwork and, along with other ACC staff, the execution of the 2019 roundtable. For the latter, I also thank Bella Knemeyer and Alma Viviers. Useful information for my fieldwork in Addis Ababa and Dar es Salaam came from ACC colleagues Liza Cirolia and Anton Cartwright, who both participated in the roundtable.

I am grateful to various institutions for their financial support which made this book project possible. The research and writing of Platform/ Plotform were solely funded by the South African Research Chair in Urban Policy. The Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft and Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona contributed towards publishing costs in a partnership with ACC.

The publisher, Alexis Zavialoff, took this project to another level with the care and engagement of the team at Motto Books, in particular Mika Hayashi Ebbesen, the book's editor. I also thank Márcia Novais for her translation of the book into its physical design. I am very grateful to the internal and external reviewers for helpful suggestions and feedback, in particular kąrî'kachä seid'ou at the Faculty of Arts, KNUST–Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana.

Chapter 2 of this book draws upon a journal article previously published by Elsevier: "Zombie monument: Public art and performing the present", *Cities* 77, July 2018, p. 33–38. Chapter 3 draws upon a journal article to be published by MIT Press in a forthcoming issue of *African Arts* titled "Breathing room: Working principles of independent art spaces in African cities".

Colophon

Panya Routes: Independent art spaces in Africa
Kim Gurney

Publisher	Motto Books, Berlin/Lausanne
Editor	Mika Hayashi Ebbesen
Designer	Márcia Novais
Cartography	Bella Knemeyer
Photography	Kim Gurney, Ubulungiswa/Justice Collective (third image on page 29)
Indexing	Clifford Perusset
Proofreading	Phoebe Blatton
Typography	GT Alpina, GT Alpina Typewriter
Printer	Gráfica Maiadouro, Portugal
Distributor	Motto Distribution
Edition	800
ISBN	978-2-940672-39-4
Legal Deposit	496778/22

This book was made possible with generous support from the African Centre for Cities at University of Cape Town, Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and South African Research Chair in Urban Policy.

Alfred
Herrhausen
Gesellschaft

CCCB Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona

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Motto