Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies

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Edited by

Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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—Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek

INTRODUCTION

MARINA GRŽINIĆ AND JOVITA PRISTOVŠEK

This book opens a discussion on bodies, gender, and decolonial horizons, issues that are increasingly becoming a political front in the search for justice. It offers an in-depth look at positions and current developments in decolonial theory, Black Marxism, trans* studies, and contemporary performance research and practice. Focusing on decolonial theory and trans* bodies, it brings forth a discussion of otherness shaped by race, class, and trans*. The questions move along the colonial/racial divide that continues to hold up the various movements in this space. Some bodies will move. Others will be stopped, immobilized, and silenced. What kind of body, movement, and politics can be conceived to contest the neoliberal tide with its accelerated digital transformations and seemingly dispersed but in reality hyper-flexible bureaucratic controls?

The book consists of 7 parts and each part is a conversation about a topical issue. The conversations held were recorded via a zoom platform, only the last conversation with ruangrupa took place in public to question the dialectic of opening and closing, of immobility and the desire for separation (Europe's mass incarceration of refugees; Europe's quarantine against refugees and Covid-19; and the restriction of basic human rights under the banner of pandemic measures, etc.) and the global exhibition of contemporary art, Documenta, in Kassel, Germany.

Each conversation was then reviewed with the authors. A strong subtext was added to each conversation, built up through a citation system, references, and additional clarifying information. The conversations explore possible forms of body(s), movement(s), and politics/political action in today's neoliberal (technocratic) global world.

Each conversation is like a lighthouse, a system of relationships, and histories supported by a sophisticated citation and reference apparatus.

Looking back

In 2020, Marina Gržinić participated in a productive online exchange with Anita Gonzalez, Katerina Paramana, and Victoria Thoms, who were trying to establish a dialog book series. Unfortunately, the series did not materialize for us, but it was a motivating impetus to think about the body, movement, and extended choreography, and a platform to work on dialogs or even trialogs. In February 2020, Gržinić met with a group of fascinating scholars assembled by Gonzalez, Paramana, and Thoms to listen to a brief but compelling exchange of a noisy reflection on what the body can do. The reflection took place in the context of a meeting with an inspiring group of influential positions (not all of whom were present at the meeting, but who must be enumerated as pure potentials): Maaike Bleeker, Felipe Cervera, Thomas F. DeFrantz, João Florêncio, Judith Hamera, Susan Jones, Alexandra Kolb, Panos Kompatsiaris, Erin Manning, Susan Manning, Tavia Nyong'o, Usva Seregina, Hypatia Vourloumis, Umut Yıldırım, Mi You, etc. The result was that Gržinić had the idea to work on a book that we could call a new philosophy and political activity of dance; an urge to shake up the meaning, significance and political implications of contemporary dance.

To advance the radicality of the flesh and the body of politics is to interrogate dance, voice, music, visual art, and performance practices, not to mention the body, on the one hand, and history, politics, protest, and pain on the other.

The question of positions from the other side of an imperialist Occident, and definitely from the other side of art shaped by race, class and trans*, develops radical elements in contemporary society, politics, art and community.

Looking forward

When conceiving the book, we started from radical positions in contemporary dance, even from some historical works that caused a revolution because they touched the political frontier of transdisciplinarity of art and society with such density that dance changed radically afterwards. The first idea was to end the book with a conversation with Macarena Gómez-Barris, but the unplanned but historically very important possibility of a conversation with ruangrupa changed this line.

Therefore, the book is also intended to connect theory and practice and serve as a primary source for area studies with references to trans* bodies, including decolonial theory and Black studies, which have sparked a revolution in the fields of area studies. In such a relationship, art cannot complain about being subordinate to life, while life is not only an existence but also a mode of survival and disobedience.

These references have a powerful effect on art in general and, not to be forgotten, on the body of the individual, the body of the community, and the body of society.

So the book has two possible endings, but both are definitely alive and tell of the past while being anchored in the pure future.

PART 1

GLOSSARY: POLITICAL CHOREOGRAPHIES, DECOLONIAL THEORIES, TRANS BODIES

This chapter contains an alphabetical list of terms and ideas that emerged from conversations with radical decolonial, Black Marxist, and contemporary dance positions. We have envisioned this glossary as a carefully choreographed collection of definitions and/or quotations that emerge in conversations with the positions presented in this book. We imagined it as a kind of extended index, guiding the reader through the topics discussed.

Marina Gržinić works as Principal Research Associate at the Institute of Philosophy of the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. She has been a Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna since 2003, and is in charge of the Studio for Post-Conceptual Art Practices at the Institute of Fine Arts.

Jovita Pristovšek is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. She is a participant in the FWF-PEEK project "Conviviality as Potentiality: From Amnesia and Pandemic towards a Convivial Epistemology" (AR 679, 2021–2025) and the Citizen Science research project "Citizens' Memories and Imaginaries: Democratic Citizenship" (FWF TCS 119, 2022–2023).

Gržinić and Pristovšek have co-edited *Re-Activating Critical Thinking in the Midst of Necropolitical Realities: For Radical Change* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022) and *Theoretical-Critical Horizons: Shifting Baselines* (Goethe-Institut Ljubljana, Association Nagib and Austrian Cultural Forum, 2021).

GLOSSARY: POLITICAL CHOREOGRAPHIES, DECOLONIAL THEORIES, TRANS BODIES

MARINA GRŽINIĆ AND JOVITA PRISTOVŠEK

A

To **advance** the radicality of the flesh and the body of politics is to interrogate dance, voice, music, visual art, and performance practices, not to mention the body, on the one hand, and history, politics, protest, and pain on the other. (Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek)

B

But **Black-only spaces** were aimed at creating safe spaces. Even in Black-led spaces, White allies had to be cautious about how they exercise their privileges and how or when they speak. (Nomusa Makhubu)

C

There are **conflicts** in performance languages that become institutionalized while others are forgotten in the subsequent commodification by the modernized society and different cultural traditions in theater practice and the entertainment industry. (Mika Maruyama)

D

I have moved between the Philippines; I go where there is money or where the work is to be created and developed. There is a concrete physical movement that is **driven by the capital of the economy**. (Eisa Jocson)

E

Since I could not find a place in Japan where people with different approaches to body practice, including dance, theater, acting, performance art, as well as curators, filmmakers, and photographers, can come together, this platform aims to interrogate the body as a medium and approach the social issues and politics **embedded** in their practices by experiencing performances collectively. (Yuki Kobayashi)

F

I became very interested in this image because it led me to the ideas of queer affection, histories and archives, and truth and failure. Everything comes up in this image. Interestingly, many people **felt queer affection** in this theater, and it was the only allowed space for homosexual desire between women in Korea. (siren eun young jung)

G

I similarly see **gender performativity** as a transformation process where you mediate power and desire. When I organized or curated projects, the invited artists and performers always talked about how there is no fixed "final" alter ego, but a process or even a fluidity or spectrum of genders. (Yu Cheng-Ta)

H

In **Huangmei opera** and Cantonese opera, for example, there are these kinds of gestures [she imitates the gesture with her fingers]. But if you change the angles of a wrist or fingers a little bit, you can not call it "traditional" anymore, which means I am already against the whole system of tradition. (Xiao Ke)

I

I could not **imagine** that in a German school, not even in a university, and probably not even in the study of international politics, you study the politics of Malaysia in the 1980s in such depth that you know anything about an opposition that was in power at a particular time. Then, less personally and more structurally, there are the very obvious sources,

references, texts, ways of thinking, and dispositifs that we are dealing with that are Asian in origin. (Karla Max Aschenbrenner)

J

Indeed, on **June 7, 2020**, these protests took place simultaneously in different cities of the Kingdom of Spain, permeated by the worldwide enthusiasm that prevailed at that time (which had a very positive impact on the multitude of people who participated in these protests and on the scale of the demonstrations). I dare say that these were the largest mass gatherings in recent times in terms of self-organization of the Black, African and Afro-descendant community in Spain, and therefore they are of crucial importance for the movement, for the radical Black movement in this region. We have come to this concentration both through the mainstream and through the struggle of Black civil society in recent years. (Basha Changuerra)

K

That's also my fear when I think about this crossroads, because I **know** that for example in LORI in 2014, when the anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ movement started, we did not know what was going on, because we had some legislative successes, we were close to having a law on civil partnership and the like. We felt like we were on top of the world, and then all of a sudden, little by little, we saw all the discrimination and violence that I listed. (Danijela Almesberger)

L

I would say that if we are really talking about reification, we need to think about this dialectic: on the one hand, reification talks about these sorts of passive conditions under which we act, and at the same time, we are still sort of agents within those conditions. We are still agents of **labor**, we are still agents of sexuality, even though we are responding to these conditions that just encourage us to do a thing or be in a certain way. That's the idea of the reification of desire as laid out by Floyd and as I might interpret it. (Nat Raha)

M

The new vampire has a particular **mode of operation** that is paraphrased by the term "sunken place" [i.e., a trope used to talk about the psychological consequences of living as a Black person in the United States]. Unlike psychological representations that highlight racial and political dynamics, the "sunken place" is not simply a metaphor for psychological forms of anxiety, such as depression. Rather, it is a means of highlighting the production of racism as a function of ordinary and normalized racial capitalism in the United States. (Bogdan Popa)

N

The European Union is trying to build an efficient infrastructure in countries that are not member states to house refugees in large camps. From there, people who are fleeing are processed. From there, people are then taken in or sent back to their home countries, deported, and so on. That's why these routes have become so important for people fleeing, because these routes, which are very dangerous, are the only way to get to the big European cities. And **not to be detained** in prisons and for months like on the Greek islands. (Aigul Hakimova)

O

Islam plays a special role because it becomes almost the opposite of Europe during the colonial encounter. In order for the Occident to define itself, it must constantly measure itself against the **Orient**. This can be seen in the writings of the Enlightenment, where Europeans or the Occident are portrayed as masculine, rational and reasonable, and the Orient as feminine, emotional, irrational, fanatical, etc. (Piro Rexhepi)

P

Part of the problem is that there's something I call epistemic extractivism, that all these Black Marxists have been subjected to a **process of extractivism** by Western thinkers or Westernized thinkers who basically take their ideas and spread them without recognition. […] I think that given the history of invisibilization and the history of inferiorization, of so-called epistemic racism that invisibilizes and inferiorizes the knowledge of subjects who are dehumanized in the modern colonial world, we need to do epistemic justice in the face of that history by acknowledging where

some of the critical tools that are used today by many on the left and even the decolonial network and the social sciences in general come from. (Ramón Grosfoguel)

Q

How does organized violence lead to and perpetuate disorganized violence? For example, how does waging war convince ordinary people that the solution to a problem is to hurt someone through organized violence or unorganized violence. And then, how can we abolish the regimes of separation that are essential to the institutions of carceral geographies, in order to make abolition geography. We have answers to these **questions**; they're not rhetorical. (Ruth Wilson Gilmore)

R

I think what interests me about US Native feminist epistemes, critical Indigenous theory, as well as US and global Indigenous theory and praxis, is the way that there is a very supple understanding of ecology and **relationality** that is historical and lives in connection with territory and all beings, but that also offers a way to break away from our settler condition and move forward to a post-extractivist imaginary. (Macarena Gómez-Barris)

S

When Documenta was launched by Germany in 1955, a movement of non-alignment emerged in Indonesia in the same years. At the end or after the era of colonialism and imperialism, Indonesia, together with many other African and Asian countries, South Asia, and of course Yugoslavia, built this movement of non-alignment. It began with the Bandung Conference, the Asian-African Conference in 1955. That's how we **started**, and that's how we thought when we thought about **documenta fifteen**. That's how we came up with the idea of the lumbung and then the East. (Iswanto Hartono)

T

On the other hand, we were just building this Gudskul ecosystem with the others. We discussed about it, started to talk again with each other and agreed that everything we propose is something we are working on, **that it**

is our concern and also that of our locals or our place, that it will always be a kind of line if we accept this offer. That's why we came up with the idea of expanding our practice also with these lumbung approaches, because from the beginning we saw Documenta not only as a 100-day event, but also as what happens after or what is after documenta fifteen. That was the most important thing from the beginning. (Ajeng Nurul Aini)

U

But what I missed during documenta fifteen was actually the public voice of artists and the scene, of collectives involved in politically engaged art, of academics and intellectuals who opposed these false accusations and spoke out loud about it in their own context, of course there were few exceptions. This silence is very **uncomfortable** because you are on your own to publicly fight back. (Jelena Petrović)

V

The concept of the nation-state stems from the same political ideas: you will always be excluded, because that is how the nation-state is defined. For me, the question we are asking is another point, because I always think that the way we think about problems also gives us the opportunity to think about how we can end this discrimination, this system, and actually build something else, which is social relations that are not based on this **violence** and discrimination. (Tjaša Kancler)

W

I think that we have a big problem with antisemitism in Europe, we have a big problem with racism. We need to rethink how we deal with these issues and how we address them seriously. I say "we" because I'm also a part of it. Because I was born in Europe. Even though I speak from a marginalized perspective that is shaped by racism on a daily basis, I am ultimately part of this system. **We** need to rethink how we can create a discrimination-free society from a pluralistic perspective. (Asma Aiad)

X

Scholars like Stuart Hall have brilliantly pointed out how race and difference is mechanized. Racism, as it is known, is structural. Some of the difficulties I **eXperience** as someone who has to work with employment

equity, we use racial categories in very deterministic ways and in the way that the apartheid system created them. In other words, to undo the work of apartheid, we have to use its logic (but to the advantage of those who were disadvantaged). (Nomusa Makhubu)

Y

Saidiya Hartman also does this beautifully in her work and especially in *Lose **Your** Mother* (2006), her second book, in which she points to the loss of maternal lineage as part of the institution of slavery, as there is no way to understand maternal histories that have been eradicated. Similarly, the mother is also lost, especially in Latin America, where the paternal name is passed down, the patrilineal line, where the maternal name is erased as part of the *patria potestad*, the Spanish legal possession by the father. (Macarena Gómez-Barris)

Z

Zoom in: The institutions of carceral geographies are diverse, including, analytically, normative regimes of sexuality to seemingly natural but actually social relations we call "race," to the obvious social and political categories of citizens and migrants, and in all of this, the problems that more and more people on the planet face in making a living, in living a life in an era of unfettered capitalism. Capitalism requires inequality, and many of those distinctions that you listed in your opening remarks anchor inequality. We are fighting to undo capitalism in all its forms, which I call racial capitalism in short, to remind people that there can be no inherent human well-being under this mode of production. (Ruth Wilson Gilmore)

PART 2

OTHER KNOWLEDGE, FIRST MOVE

The conversation with Nomusa Makhubu stems from the creative book *There are Mechanisms in Place* (2019) by Makhubu and Nkule Mabaso. In our conversation, we explored the book's connection to mechanisms in the contemporary South African post-apartheid context; the racial, class, trans*, and queer figurations at play in this context, and how these figurations confront the racial/colonial matrix, colonial legacy, and coloniality in the present. The conversation also touches on issues of performative photography, or the performativity that can be realized in photography, and in particular recent developments in socially engaged art on the African continent and developments related to creative insurgencies to reshape artificially imposed cartographies.

Nomusa Makhubu is an Associate Professor of art history and visual culture at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art and an artist. Her research includes African popular culture, performance art, photography, and political engagement in art. She has written essays on topics ranging from representations of sexuality in the art of Nicholas Hlobo and Zanele Muholi to the reception of the film *Black Panther* in South Africa. Exhibitions she has co-curated include the group show "Fantastic" (Michaelis Gallery, 2015), "The stronger we become" (South African pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, 2019). Recognizing the need for broader creative mentorship, collaborative practice and socially responsive arts, she started the Creative Knowledge Resources project.

OTHER KNOWLEDGE, FIRST MOVE: A CONVERSATION WITH NOMUSA MAKHUBU

MARINA GRŽINIĆ AND JOVITA PRISTOVŠEK

February 3, 2022, Zoom

Marina Gržinić: Nomusa, thank you very much for being with us. We will start with something that has caught our attention very much. First of all, this is the recognition that you have received with Nkule Mabaso. This is a prestigious award from the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), and it is for the best creative collections. But what was interesting to us is that the handcrafted creative book *There are Mechanisms in Place* has a fantastic title.[1] This title, which sounds almost like an engine, prompted us to ask you the first question. What does such a title mean? Why do you use such a title, one that inspires many layers of the imagination to think? And whether these mechanisms in place can be related to post-apartheid South Africa today?

Nomusa Makhubu: Let me begin by first explaining how the book came about. In 2016, students from the Fine Art school and the Drama Department on FKA (formerly known as) Hiddingh Campus formed *Umhlangano*—a movement and collective seeking to address, specifically, epistemic violence in the creative fields within the broader context of the decolonial movement at the University of Cape Town. During that time, the gallery became an emancipatory space—providing the creative outlet in the process of protest. It became a meeting space, where students got together to care for each other, to sleep and rest in that period of protesting. Students used the Upper Gallery to curate a processed-based exhibition, titled *Uyaphi* (Where are you going?) facilitated with Valeria Geselev, which was related to the pressing concerns around racism, sexism, queer-phobia and the alienating histories of the campus. This was the context in which the exhibition would take place. It was designed in such a way that it would deconstruct the conventional ways in which we

[1] See Makhubu and Mabaso (2019).

think about and use the gallery space. To do this, we envisioned continued engagements with students through collaborative experimentation. Soon after the occupation, Nkule Mabaso and I thought that we should invite the artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum[2] to work on an exhibition. We weren't only interested in just bringing her work and having a typical exhibition. We wanted to recreate the gallery space to continue in the creation of various interventions that counteracted the traditional curriculum, informed by the oppositional and intersectional politics that characterized the early years of Fallism.[3] So, we thought, well, you know what? We'd like someone, an artist, who can work with that space in the context of protest and its older, more problematic history to disrupt the hubris of colonial architecture and epistemes. We envisioned an exhibition where students can collaboratively work with an artist, where they can intervene.

There are Mechanisms in Place then is Pamela's own title for that exhibition. As she explained, the title refers to a speech by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, in his response to the nationwide student-led protests in 2015. Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum responds to this in her title to ask: well, what does that actually mean? Is it referring to the policing of students to just get on with the program, so what are those mechanisms? Her ideas or at least that concept probed the kinds of state mechanisms for suppressing protest, especially the demonstrations that were happening at the time. Sunstrum's title aptly opened up many themes pertaining to post-apartheid South Africa. Eventually, *There are Mechanisms in Place*, culminated into a fantastic exhibition where Pamela explored questions around belonging, land and the right to knowledge and flight as a metaphor for emancipation, which was beautiful. There's also this motif of feminine bodies that are part of the landscape, and can "take flight" or be freed from the violence that is conventionally concealed in classic landscape representation. Since Sunstrum's work explores the "parallels between ancient cosmology and

[2] For her works, see Sunstrum's website at https://www.pamelaphatsimosunstrum.com/.

[3] "*Fallism* is an attempt to make sense of the experiences of Black people in a white, liberal university, through decolonial theories centered on Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, and Black radical feminism. The idea of Fallism first emerged as a collective noun to describe student movements at universities in South Africa that use the 'Must Fall' hashtag, including #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FeesMustFall. These Fallist movements argue that the university's epistemic architecture is deeply rooted in coloniality, and that consequently, the university as we know it, must fall." (Gordon 2019)

advanced theories in science," this intervention would deepen and enrich our conversations about science and decoloniality.[4]

It made sense then that we don't just create a catalog that would accompany the exhibition, but rather work with the very ethos of the exhibition as something exploratory, collective, and works towards a counter-curriculum. Therefore, instead of a catalogue, we decided to make a creative book through which to experiment. We wanted the book to be multilingual, to include more than text and to have sound, and to have multiple forms of writing and imagery. We included poetry and posters. There is a sound element where one of the contributors, a poet, recites her poem. At the time, the only way we could have figured that out was to use a QR code, so that it leads the reader to the recording. We really enjoyed working with the possibility of a creative book. For us it was the first time we tried something like that. I think when we look at it today together, in hindsight, we're thinking, well, maybe we could have done this, maybe we could have done that, but I think it was worth allowing ourselves to work with that open sense of experimentation, working outside of the margins, going beyond the boundaries of academic practice, writing and publishing. Yeah, so *There are Mechanisms in Place* has a very long story.

Jovita Pristovšek: I continue with the second question. It's about the use of performative photography or performativity that can be enacted in photography. You are working as an artist. You use this performative photography, and also as an art historian you have written a lot about performative art in South Africa. Since you have talked about these mechanisms, how do you see these racial, class, trans*, and queer figurations in this context? How are these figurations, for example in the field of art, confronted with the racial colonial matrix and how do they interrupt this colonial legacy and coloniality in the present?

Makhubu: That's an important question, but one that hasn't always been easy to answer. Regarding performance and performativity, I think there was a time when I was reflecting on the ways in which particularly Black artists during the years of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy were using performance or performative photography and video (or new media) to question identity. What can we make of those strategies and that visual language that was established in the early post-apartheid years? In a country like South Africa, where power was

[4] See Sunstrum (2018).

exercised through the construction of oppressive, spatially segregated racial identities, it is curious that the creative work of Black artists, celebrated in White establishments, was seen primarily as challenging ethnic identity. For example, in those early post-apartheid years it became commonplace to see artists addressing customary practices and stereotypes of the sociolinguistic and racial groups with which they identify. So how do we make sense of performing identities, or re-enacting stereotypes, while these representations are consumed in the art market, which was White-controlled then and even now?

For me, this is a predicament in my artwork too. In a recent chapter, I reflected on the ways in which performance became a significant mode of articulation balanced between the emancipatory aesthetics of defying static identities being bound by the ethno-racial representational visual language of the 19th and 20th century. In the chapter, I also ask whether performance, or more specifically performative photography (for lack of a better term), may be useful in understanding South Africa's transitional politics from apartheid to being a democratic country, and in reckoning with the haunt of apartheid—or it's continued presence. I mean, yes, all photography can be seen as performative, and all photography is documentary, but it may tell us something about the theatricality in those transitional years that masked the compounded racial tensions now cemented by economic apartheid. The question is: why did most of us work in this way?

One speculation is that in the early post-apartheid years, Black students were encouraged by White lecturers to make work about their ethnic identities. Recently, I was listening to a film that was done in 2003, *The Luggage is Still Labeled*.[5] It was recorded nine years after apartheid. In it, the few Black students and alumni who could then enroll in historical White university (HWUs) art schools were complaining about the Eurocentric curriculum and the ways in which there was some expectation in how they produce their work and how they create a particular kind of vocabulary that homes in on their identities. In other words, they were encouraged to focus on their ethnicity, their race and their struggles but discouraged from exploring other themes through genres like abstract art. In the South African context, at least, one also has to think about the way in which art schools in HWUs, and I am saying this very loosely, approached the idea of art by Black artists as taxonomically different. This

[5] *The Luggage is Still Labeled: Blackness in South African Art* is a film by Julie L. McGee and Vuyile C. Voyiya (United States; South Africa: Vuyile C. Voyiya and Julie L. McGee, 2003).

might explain expectations for Black students to focus on their identities—a burden White students did not have to carry unless they chose to. Black students often became the subject and object of their or art, something that can be said to be consonant with the shaping of disciplines where People of Color are the object of study. Most of us, who graduated from such institutions, ended up working with our bodies, being in the artwork ourselves. If one considers artists like Berni Searle[6] or Tracey Rose,[7] self-imaging, turning the camera on oneself, points to this predicament. We were simultaneously the creators, but also the subject matter. Whereas our White counterparts could have the freedom to make work in any way about anything. And it was OK, it was acceptable.

A key factor was the increasing interest in the art market in contemporary African art, bent on contested linkages between identity and authenticity. There was, arguably, more focus in those years to works that engage particularly with questions around identity, class, race, gender and sexuality. So, this notion of performativity was also to question how we think about that kind of predicament: were we performing important political gestures or were we contributing to the insatiable thirst of the art market for consuming Black bodies on display? So how does one work oneself out of that quagmire? There are no correct answers to it, but a critical reflection on the predicaments of that particular mode of practice in that particular time is necessary. I think it's a great question to pose. As you can imagine, in South Africa, the transition to democracy leading to more Black students being admitted to HWUs intersects with the rise in African contemporary art in the global art market, in the context of large-scale exhibitions, at a time when introspective, identity-questioning seemed to characterize contemporary African art in general. So, on one hand, that was particularly important at that historical moment in time, yes, perhaps such an introspective approach was necessary in the context of visibility politics for Black artists globally. Whereas, on the other hand, it seemed to have ghettoized particularly Black artists who were hyper-visible in so far as they were performing their own identities. I mean, even today, one wonders about the reduction of the Black body as image. For example, when one thinks of Zanele Muholi's the most recent work, the

[6] See Searle's website at https://bernisearle.com/.

[7] From February to August 2022, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, South Africa) hosted *Shooting Down Babylon*, the largest comprehensive retrospective of the work of South African artist Tracey Rose (b. 1974).

series that is called *Somnyama Ngonyama* [Hail the Dark Lioness].[8] There's discomfort in the representation. And I mean Zanele is someone I truly respect and whose activism is particularly remarkable. Someone whose creative practice was central in my own master's dissertation. It was really something, for me, inspirational. The most recent work, however, the *Somnyama Ngonyama*: the issue around that is this disquieting sense that yet again the Black body is figured as an object for consumption and also the use of Black face as Black aesthetic.[9] I think there are about three articles now where Black writers point out that there's something particularly unsettling about the images and the silences where this performance of Blackness goes unquestioned, especially how and where it is performed. When you look at some of the interviews that Zanele did, you begin to see that we are all so deeply implicated in something that we can barely control and where our own politics can so easily be co-opted into something else that we just don't recognize. So, I mean, it is an important question to ask, but a particularly difficult one because how does one even articulate it in a way that doesn't sound as though one doesn't see the impact, importance or the value of making work in that way.

Gržinić: That is a very good answer. First of all, what you say is very interesting, very important. I think also of other cases, for example of the former Eastern Europe, where historically we are treated very similarly, and it is an expectation, for example, in terms of conceptual art. Conceptual art in the former Eastern Europe can only be existential, but not political, just to explain. Many of our analyzes went in this direction. It's very important what you are saying now, and my question is—before we move on to a similar question, similar in terms of the questions that are central for us to understand, and you have certainly given us an important introduction here—is that a difference? So whether it's possible to think about the difference between worlds, based on this history and the way we think about contemporary art in different parts of the world. Going back to your answer, which is really revealing, are there new groups of artists or perhaps activists in South Africa who, like you, are thinking very politically and who are also using their work to access other forms of representation, or forms of representations that are unknown to us, that

[8] Muholi's ongoing self-portrait series is currently touring the world's art galleries as a traveling exhibition of the same name, organized by Autograph, London, and curated by Renée Mussai.
[9] See Makhubu (2021).

challenge exactly what the market demands, and not even the market, but the hegemonic framework of art history?

Makhubu: Yes, I think that certainly there are. Over the years, we've seen artists coming together, working collectively, working against the grain, beyond institutions making work that is not commodifiable. South African examples include collectives like Gugulective. Today, Gugulective artists operate individually, each with their individual lucrative career, but I think they were particularly important because they challenged institutional mechanisms that reproduce difference. And the key mechanism through which power was fortified in South Africa particularly is spatial segregation. So, the exercise of power during apartheid was the usurpation of space (of land) as a means of controlling and exploiting people as labor and limiting their movements. The Gugulective focus on spatial designs that sustain a political economy of racial inequality was crucial. It shed light on the impact of apartheid legislation in the post-Apartheid era. Take the Group Areas Act of 1950, for example. Today it seems impossible to break out of the polarity of racialized spaces: Black townships—White suburbs. Now the minute artists start to undermine those polarities, I think they make a huge impact. Gugulective did not stick to the script in which art was to be enjoyed by the bourgeoisie, by predominantly White audiences in predominantly White spaces. Their practice represented a deliberate choice to practice, legitimize and engage audiences in Black townships. It disrupted an art economy in which legitimacy was a White prerogative and where progress was assumed to be represented by unidirectional movement from Black spaces to White spaces. It was as if to say: "No, actually, we don't want to be in those spaces. We don't want to participate in the structures that have negated us for so long. So, we will be creating work that is significant but will be creating it in Black townships." Contradicting the notions of unidirectional movement, White audiences must engage in Black townships, not just as voyeurs but as participants. So, I think those kinds of strategies have been particularly pivotal in shifting and questioning the way in which power is exercised through the control of space, time, movement. Then, other strategies include rejecting individualism and elitism in the arts. A lot of young artists have been going back to the vocabulary of the 1980s, where artists were calling themselves cultural workers instead of "artists" as a means of identifying with the working class, and experiencing and participating in the struggles of everyday life, rather than sitting somewhere in a studio and reflecting on life and representing it. They saw themselves as laborers, who could organize like all other laborers. This was particularly the case

with the Medu art ensemble and how it positioned cultural work. Then there are contemporary groups, like iQhiya, which is a collective of women that was also established following the protests of 2015 and 2016 at UCT. They also rejected the term "artist," and worked collectively, centering collective collaborative spaces.

Gržinić: I am going to continue with the questions that are in some way connected, and that's what you and Carlos Garrido Castellano are talking about under the title "Creative Uprisings: Art, Social Movements and Mobilisation in Africa."[10] That is exactly what we are focusing on and what you are expressing, which is to question the idea of socially engaged art as a contemporary Western phenomenon. I have two questions. One relates to the main difference. When it comes to questioning what is happening in the West, the question is what form does socially engaged art take in an African or South African context. Where is the difference? Is there a difference in terms of vocabulary, and what are we talking about? The second question is: what are the issues of this socially engaged art in an African context? Is it about power or about labor, or do the artists want to question the colonial past?

Makhubu: We were reflecting on a point made by Elvira Dyangani Ose in *Nka* [*Journal of Contemporary African Art*],[11] where she says that out of all the books that have been published in even the most recent collections on social engagement art, very few actually include anything on an African art. In some ways, it is odd because one would assume that the very reason African art was not seen as art in the first place is because it's so socially integrated (in other words, the classical African sculptures were socially integrated objects often aimed at addressing social issues). We often think of social engagement and social practice art in limited ways and often based on the tenets of 20th century, post-Cold War European practices rising within and against European institutions. Social engagement art is documented as a product of a particular age, a shift from modernism, in the rise of globalization. Given this temporal circumscription, it becomes hard to see how then to thematize or understand social engagement art within the African context, unsettling the tyranny of chronology to revive radical historiographies of art at the center of social life in Africa. This is very necessary because African art has been subjected to spatio-temporal distanciation, as though it operates outside of

[10] See Makhubu and Garrido Castellano (2021).
[11] See Ose (2014).

history. Rather than seeking to be included in biased histories, such an approach to social engagement art would necessitate disrupting (art) history and the teleology of colonialism and persisting coloniality. From this perspective, social engagement and social practice art must take into consideration the question of labor and its exploitation in the shaping of current social arrangements (parameters of "home," "community," "nation" etc.). What are the limitations of social relations (in terms of race, gender, class, religious and political belief and sexuality) that have been forged in the *longue durée* of colonialism? What kinds of public spaces have emerged? In the African context, who do they include and who do they exclude? What is produced through the cosmopolitan African art in the quest for social justice? Furthermore, does social engagement art rely on the legitimation of European institutions? So, it would seem that when it comes to social engagement art in Africa much is left unspoken and unwritten as such.

To unearth these practices, a focus on mobilities as a way of addressing the geopolitical enframing of Africa and its socio-cultural potentialities is necessary. For example, the works of collectives like PACA, the Pan-African Circle of Artists founded by C. Krydz Ikwuemesi in Nigeria. Drawing from the ethos of pan-Africanism, they travelled from one African country to another, placing emphasis on process within itinerant and nomadic communities of practice, moving between borders, coming to terms with the divisions created through colonialism within the African continent, choosing to travel within the African continent by not just flying but going by road. So, in a sense, slowing down movement but ensuring that is collective. There is also Emeka Okereke's trans-African project, Invisible Borders.[12] That project has a similar kind of model where artists traveled together. So, what starts happening there is a geopolitical reckoning of social borders as points of departures for re-thinking social engagement art in African contexts. Then there is also the need to be cautious of universalizing African social engagement art practices. While some experiences are shared, the conditions under which they are experienced differ. In South Africa, for example, there is more emphasis on race because of the experience of apartheid and its aftermath, economic apartheid, whereas race might not be so topical in other African countries. Issues may vary in terms of ethno-religious beliefs or conflicts. The significance of itinerancy as a social engagement method can be seen in the legacies of curators like Bisi Silva, for example. The late Bisi Silva ran

[12] See Invisible Borders project website at https://invisible-borders.com/.

Asiko Art School every year in a different African city each time. Other approaches emphasize solidarity. For example, Koyo Kouoh of Raw Material has emphasized solidarity and communality as a mode of working, of practicing in the arts, across borders. In most contexts, ecopolitics and eco justice are at the center, texturing the complex ethos of social engagement art in Africa. A comprehensive study might also consider the intersections in art and civil society.

Pristovšek: You also made a clear distinction between the socially engaged art in South Africa and that in Europe, because when you talked about this socio-political movement, this spatial dynamic came to the fore, all this new vocabulary, this creative work, and again, this living together, which is actually completely contrary to the European way of thinking and acting, to the way we deal with refugees here, incarcerating them, putting them in camps and so on. That's a very different perspective on how to deal with the movement, also in artistic practice. For example, what can you tell us about possible strategies for collective journeys and beyond for the continued creation of these communal spaces in the present?

Makhubu: Yeah, that's a really important question because, although there may be multiple strategies such as developing networks, collaboration, skills sharing and resource sharing, it may not always be easy to sustain. In other words, being itinerant is an ideal and crucial political principle but it requires resources to be sustainable. There is a need for political will amongst artists, institutions, and other agents to establish an art ecosystem that is fueled by an ethos of resource sharing as opposed to one based on competition. There are also concepts that could be developed in terms of itinerant strategies and for being specific about what kinds of movement are necessary, where and why. That is, it's not just movement anywhere but a purposeful movement within the continent or to other regions of the "Global South" based on progressive politics. These strategies may open the paths for organizing on a mass scale against injustice or refusing to co-operate with unjust systems and drawing from ideas inspired by scholars like Sarah Ahmed, for example. Then there are also concepts drawn from the Practicing Refusal collective, through which refusal is becoming a strategy, right? We refuse to participate in our own destruction. We refuse to be overly productive. We refuse to be cogs in the machine. That becomes a way to say: I'm not going to be putting so much of my own energies and resources into something that is actually reproducing the problem. So, collaboration, collectivism, refusal, mobility can be seen as key elements in formulating social engagement strategies. I am just

thinking on my feet, but also worth noting the revival of the ethic of care in current discourse. I mean, it's an older concept stemming from decolonial feminism, and feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde and Angela Davis among others, who have been talking about the socio-political dimensions of care for a very, very long time. The complexity of a notion like "care" shifts how social engagement art is positioned as philanthropy and the dialectic of giver and taker in light of the inevitable vulnerabilities, intimacies, and volatilities involved. It is in this precarious context that care work unfolds and where gathering, assembly and dissidence become part of creating common ground for nourishing and strengthening each other, to build the capacity and to effect change in a cut-throat world. As an individual these strategies are hard to realize but as a collective, much is possible. For example, if one decides to refuse, there are deeper implications, material implications for one's own livelihood, i.e. people worry about where the next meal or rent would be coming from. So how do we then create those spaces of solidarity to make those strategies realizable, possible, and sustainable? I think those are, in very loose terms, some of the concepts that are underpinning the kinds of strategies, that in very general terms characterize what is happening.

Gržinić: This is really fantastic. And why? Because I want to ask you a question, although we had prepared these questions in advance, and the next one would be about the epistemology that comes through the community. But I want to refer to your answer now. I was also thinking about all these terms that you brought into play. I felt that the notion of refusal, the notion of caring, of caring for each other, is something that makes us Whites, as a regime of Whiteness, absolutely incapable of participating in this discourse. That's really a very clear difference that I have been able to see and test and feel in other conversations, like with Rizvana Bradley,[13] who comes from an Afropessimist context. There, it's practically a knowing and an experience and a feeling that as Whites, as a system of Whiteness, that has destroyed everything, we are no longer able to respond. On your side, a new epistemology is emerging that we can not even respond to. We can only repeat or else, that's the idea of the system of Whiteness, it's always parasitic; we can only be parasites, which you have shown us in a practical way.

I think that's fascinating. I could see this in the last decade, but it's been longer, and we do not know what to do. Quite simply. We need a new

[13] See e.g., Bradley (2019).