

## Editorial Locating ‘Localities’

**Mario Pissarra and Lize van Robbroeck**

It was in 2008 that Rasheed Araeen, founding editor of *Third Text*, proposed the establishment of *Third Text Africa (TTA)*, to be implemented and hosted by the Africa South Art Initiative (ASAI). As he recently reminded us, ‘The initial idea was due to the fact that what we were doing in London vis-a-vis *Third Text* was not reaching Africa; and therefore the main task of *Third Text Africa* was to establish the means or open the channels by which the intellectual pursuits of *Third Text* would reach African readership.’ This was consistent with Araeen’s internationalist vision, which was also instrumental in the establishment of *Third Text Asia* and *Tercer Texto*.

The original formulation of *Third Text Africa* was modest. ASAI was to republish material selected from the print journal, more especially that which dealt directly with African themes. The intention in working with ASAI as an African project was to attract a greater number of African readers for *Third Text*, and, more ambitiously, to encourage new African contributors to the print journal. In what now can be read as a sign of impending conflict for *Third Text*, the entire *Third Text Africa* project was almost aborted following the intervention of the academic publishers Routledge, who recently had entered into an agreement with *Third Text*. The publishers objected to the planned free distribution of articles, which are available on their website for a fee. As a result, a compromise was made. Material was limited to items published before the Routledge deal and access was restricted to readers on the African continent. Under these constraints, eight themed editions of *TTA* were published online in 2009 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> As an organisation committed to open-access publishing, the restricted access to *Third Text Africa* was out of step with the rest of our online projects. Consequently, we decided to reposition *Third Text Africa* as an online, peer-reviewed journal that would publish themed editions with original material.

A key issue in the development of *Third Text Africa* has been the concern that it should have its own character, identifiable and compatible with, but distinct from the mother journal. In keeping with this goal, we adopted the position of publishing material *on* and *from* Africa. The ‘from’ allowed for themes of a non-African nature, the ‘on’ enabled contributions from writers based in any part of the world, of any ancestry. Whether this framing will be adequate to define the ambit of *Third Text Africa* remains to be seen. Certainly, in the light of significant changes to the identity of *Third Text*, including the unprincipled ousting of Araeen as the pivotal editorial force, and the subsequent mass-resignation of most members of the journal’s editorial board and advisory council (see [Word View](#) on our website for further details), many observers are watching *Third Text* closely to see if it will retain its independent, activist character or become just another academic journal. Of course, we do not pretend to be able to step into that space, but this potential vacuum opens up questions

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://asai.co.za/third-text-africa>.

regarding the manner in which we defined our ambit in relation to the print journal. Related to this are concerns regarding the isolation of African discourse from internationalist forums. This tension is evident in a recent communication from Araeen's where he expressed the view that 'I do understand and appreciate the fact that the priority of *Third Text Africa* should be first to deal with what concerns Africa, but it is also important that *Third Text Africa* does not forget its trans-continental or international task and vision.' Certainly *Third Text Africa* does not want to separate Africa from internationalist discourse, however with African themes and African voices underrepresented in the discourses of contemporary art, we evidently need to work hard to level the intellectual and material terrain.

Against this background, it is appropriate that the first themed edition of the 'new' *Third Text Africa* should be 'Localities.' In issuing the call for papers we noted that: 'Whether explicitly or implicitly, art and its discourses mediate between the national and the international, the particular and the general, the local and the global.' We called for papers that 'engage critically with the interface of locality and practice.' We are pleased that we received a healthy number of submissions, from which the papers published here were selected.

Contributors have located their texts in various transnational, national, urban and rural contexts that are mostly, but not exclusively, on the African continent. Adopting tones that encompass self-reflexive, critical, provocative, and playful responses, they introduce and probe a wide-range of related themes. These include the translation of aesthetic objects through curatorial projects (Butcher), and the inscription of localised specificities in contemporary art practice in cosmopolitan African contexts (Garber). Hard questions are asked of cultural heritage in postcolonial African nation-states (Mhishi, Mzayiya), and of the place of Africa in the cultural identity of non-African countries (Frank). Readers are prompted to experience, mourn and (re)consider ideologically laden historical spaces as constituting forms of memorialisation and re-membering (Jaar, Maart, Sondiyazi, Zenzile). Cautionary observations are made on the risks of reductive readings of localised projects (Pissarra), while pragmatic limitations are acknowledged and problematised (Grunebaum). There are reflections on the dynamism of local practices in contexts where critical writing by 'indigenes' are recently beginning to emerge as an important agency (Labi), as well as on the legitimacy and challenges of writing national art histories in the aftermath of post-modernism and globalisation (van Robbroeck). Together, these texts highlight the richness of the theme, demonstrating its relevance for contemporary discourse.

We are grateful to the British Council and the University of Stellenbosch for the financial support that has made 'Localities' possible. We also are grateful to the Foundation for Arts Initiatives and the National Arts Council of South Africa, whose exceedingly generous grants have assured the publication of further editions. Special thanks are due to our editor Natasha Himmelman, whose energy, diligence and commitment has been largely responsible for the materialisation of 'Localities.' Tambu Ndlovu, who played a crucial role in the preparatory stages, also deserves recognition for her contribution. Thanks are also due to the many reviewers and to the writers whose patience, we hope, has been rewarded.

'Localities' is dedicated to the memory of the late Colin Richards. Professor Richards was a former member of *Third Text's* advisory council and an enthusiastic supporter of *Third Text Africa*. As a member of our founding editorial board, and as a reviewer for 'Localities,' Colin made it clear that we should set a high standard. Whether we have met his expectations we will never know, but certainly we are among the many who miss his wise and warm counsel.