Organising: collectives as a social infrastructure response to historical physical arts infrastructure
In Southern Africa
Molemo Moiloa, with the Visual Arts Network of South Africa

There is a shift, it would seem, towards a rhizomatic and lateral approach to creative practice. Leaving behind it the idea of the singular genius artist, this new practice recognises community, ideas sharing, multiplicities of skills and the energy of cross-disciplinarity. Collective, collaborative work seems to be carving out space in the Southern African creative landscape. This drive is still young but speaks to a region and socio-political status that provides very particular limitations and specifications for practicing and growing creative practice. The Southern African region presents some of the youngest independent nations on the continent – with stark and challenging issues unfolding over the past 20-30 years around economy, power and the faces we attempt to show to the world. From Luanda to Harare to Johannesburg to Maputo, the Southern African creative space is deeply entangled in the political shifts that present an entirely different social, political and economic space to the creatives of the 1970s, 80s and even 90s. Neoliberal priorities, crumbling independence narratives and increasingly youthful populations emboldened by the connectivity afforded by global technologies, means a region in flux, and a shift in creative practice in response.

WHERE WE MOVE AWAY

Contemporary arts organising practices across Southern Africa emerge out of a particular historical and infrastructural context. The following section gives a very brief – and sweeping – introduction to this context. Of course, due to its brevity it sweeps over key nuances, and importantly in many of the statements below South Africa has some quite significant exceptions. With this said it’s important to recognise that arts organising in the sector emerges very much out of the basis of historical forms.

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1 This article is taken from a meeting of arts organisers, artists, writers and other cultural creators working within organising in different ways, from different parts of Southern Africa. The meeting was held by the Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA) from 2 – 5 October 2018. The meeting itself emerged out of a report by VANSA, commissioned by the Ford Foundation Southern Africa in 2016/17. The original report was an in-depth discussion on new forms of arts organising in Southern Africa, the state of arts infrastructure in the region, and a longer discussion of the impact of the history of the region. This article is primarily taken from some excerpts from that report and is included in the VANSA publication on organising that brings these together with thoughts and learnings that emerged out of the organising workshop. The intention of the VANSA publication is to have a practitioner-oriented text that can be shared and discussed. The learnings, thoughts and research is intended to impel platforms for deeper discussion and exploration and encourage collectives and collaboratives themselves to drive rigorous engagement with the potential of their own practice.
Across Southern Africa formal arts infrastructure was developed in the colonial period, with colonial powers installing theatres and/or museums and/or arts councils at varying levels in different countries, determined largely by the colonial powers policies and priorities in each territory. Across colonial powers, at the minimum, there was basic provision of at least one theatre/concert hall and potentially one museum/gallery in the main city of each country (with distinct lack in the French islands of the Southern African region, and some other countries). Importantly this infrastructure was developed for colonial ‘expats’ who enjoyed largely colonial artistic forms. This means infrastructure was city-based, and extremely limited as it was for a very small population. Only in a few exceptions – Zimbabwe being most notable – was arts infrastructure developed for Africans themselves. In such cases, the focus was on ‘traditional African’ arts practice and a reinforcing of African creative art practice as separate to global flows.

There were thus significant lacks that needed to be addressed after colonisation. In line with independence era ideology across the continent, a lot of Southern Africa considered creative expression key to the creation of new nations, post-independence. This approach to culture’s role in post-independence nation building can be seen in the significant infrastructure developed in the region post-independence. Much of it addressed racialised and geographically limited colonial infrastructures, sought to integrate and adapt existing infrastructure, and also aimed at reclaiming and restoring African cultural narratives.

This upsurge in development has been short lived due to some combination of structural adjustment policies, long-standing political turmoil and economic stagnation across much of the region. Unfortunately, this led to cuts in funding for creative expression infrastructure and a general slump of political will – in some cases exacerbated by the independence and criticality of artists expressing themselves outside of nationalist metanarratives, and in some cases resulting in censorship and even banning of various creative expressions.

Existing arts infrastructure remains significantly underfunded and understaffed. Theatres may retain the funding to keep the lights on but rarely have funds to host their own companies or develop new productions. Museums likewise don’t have budgets for exhibitions or audience development programmes. There remain key challenges in enabling the full potential of infrastructure for creative expression – as it is increasingly considered an unfunded...
mandate at local, provincial and national levels across the region. Limited skills, capacity and funding towards the development of arts infrastructure across the region remain.

It is very difficult to determine any definitive picture of arts funding across the region. Most states do not release any statistical data at all, while companies and international bodies vary in their transparency about funding. All interviews in this research with country specific experts referred to diminishing funds at national levels. In most of the region, the bulk of funding for creative expression is available through international channels. These include multinational organisations such as the United Nations, cultural attaches of the various embassies, as well as international development organisations dealing with issues such as human rights, that might work through and with culture or creative expression.

Most state and foreign funding that exists for creative expression is aimed at programming, events and festivals. This means that limited to no funding is available for artwork production or practitioners’ fees. Furthermore, minimal funds are available for ongoing costs and overheads that keep creative expression alive between major festivals and events. This results in an overall ad-hoc events-based sector, without strong development, growth and sustainability of everyday practice and institution building, and the kinds of professionalism this enables.

Professionalisation of the sector remains a significant lack due to these infrastructural deficiencies. For example, arts education across the region is wide and varied, with differing levels of impact and professionalisation. Arts education at school level is minimal in most of the region, and a large portion of formal training in the arts is at university level, leaving many practitioners unable to access formal education. Even where it exists, it is largely focused on training of artistic skill and not on the other skills required to be a functional artist (business skills etc.), or to support a functional sector. There is a disproportionate and critical lack of infrastructure for the support of young practitioners into the professional arena for creative expression – whether as arts managers, part of the skilled support workforce (technical support, etc.) or seed capital for start-ups, equipment etc.

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Throughout the region a relatively strong commercial gallery market exists, to lesser and greater degrees. This commercial sector significantly drives forms of production towards saleable work determined by the interests of buyers. In many contexts this is skewed toward an ‘expat’ and tourist market and decorative, ‘afro-stereotyped’ creative practice.

The limitations to infrastructure described above leave a significant gap within the creative expression landscape. This gap is one of an eco-system of structural support for practice that is non-commercial, new or experimental, developmental in its form or intentions and/or for emerging and younger practitioners. Outside of the market, formal infrastructures that are stable, large scale and consistent should provide support for practice that is either not yet ready for the market or not possible within the market. In developed countries this is provided by state structures such as universities, galleries and museums, theatres and other institutions that provide educational, developmental and emergent processes. Often, where state infrastructures might be too bureaucratic, large and/or unwieldy to meet all needs, they would work with sustained and well financed non-governmental structures, serving as another part of the ecosystem for stronger arts infrastructure.

Not an NGO

Even in the case of non-governmental structures, Southern Africa is challenged by less than adequate historical trends. There is a strong civil society history of non-governmental organisation (NGO) or non-profit organisation (NPO) bodies across Southern Africa, that largely hold connotations of precarity, being overburdened, problematic relationships to international development agencies and potential neo-colonialism. Largely NGOs are seen by a younger generation as old fashioned and not able to keep up with the changes of their contexts. Their limited and clunky governance models, precarity and dependence on international donor funding is often seen to deaden impacts in favour of bureaucracy, therefore limiting independence in order to meet paternalistic regulations. Through this research we observed how the image of the NGO has become significantly less attractive to new and younger organisers. In the field of creative expression in a time of limited funding, a flexibility and potential for creative response is vital. In a world of globalised creative practice there is a sense that the reliance of ‘development for Africa’ donor funding is an incredibly limited way of working and it is understood to be unsustainable, with livelihoods of NGOs being subject to the whims of how long an international donor remains interested.
Many groups and organisers we interviewed indicated that they did have some formal registration. Groups registered as non-profits indicated they have done so primarily ‘for the certificate’ to be recognised where necessary and to access formal grant funding. However, the status of non-profit did not mean much for the organisations’ vision, way of functioning or governance with formal procedures seldomly followed post registration. A number have registered as for-profit entities as a way to formalise for recognition’s sake but without the additional burdens of non-profit governance, which are seen as a significant waste of time and resources. A third of the groups interviewed were not registered at all. This didn’t necessarily correlate with the most flexible structure, with organisations such as Kino Kadre, a film collective based in Cape Town, choosing not to register to remain independent and free of enforced bureaucratic processes but holding one of the most considered and intricate organisational structures of all the groups. Other unregistered groups saw themselves as interim, project-based or autonomous enough not to require formalisation. For many of the groupings the idea of registration often connotes being overtaken by administrative responsibilities at the expense of creativity.

WHERE WE STAND

Emerging out of this context, young arts practitioners are needing to find other ways of operating that do not rely on deficient systems and infrastructure. They are carving out space to enable new forms of practice, and in some cases to ameliorate some of those very same deficiencies. The negotiation of the NGO format is just one example of many ways
that practitioners are hacking the systems to create formats and structures better suited to the realities of their contexts, and the making of work that is urgent, challenging and deeply creative. Practitioners are bringing together resources and networks, to create work otherwise not possible within the formal nationalising narratives and structures, and also not possible to do alone. They are largely self and mixed funding models with self-driven and loosely structured entities, focused on the production of new forms and/or content in creative expression.

These spaces and practitioners are also, in various ways, enabling the professionalisation, development and internationalisation of creative expression in Southern Africa, filling some of the infrastructural gaps discussed above. Much of this is self-developed, ad-hoc and learned on the fly. And for many practitioners who have now been doing this for some time, significant lessons have been learned, key challenges have been identified and some of the impacts are now evident. This next part explores some of those lessons, challenges and outcomes.

WHERE WE FALL

We start first with the continued challenges. Of course, financing and resourcing is often the ongoing concern. However, for many of the practitioners we spoke to, it was the practicalities of organising that dogged their work as much, if not more, than the funding limitations. Below is a discussion of some of these.

Conflict management

For many groups, the approach towards non-hierarchical and informal structures means that no conflict management mechanisms exist, and conflict management has been identified as a key challenge. The commitment many of these organisers have to the intention of the work, and the personal contribution (financial, time, creative) creates a higher personal investment, resulting in highly emotive conflict processes.

Importantly, the initial purpose for which these groups were created often serves as the primary pivot point for conflict, and ‘careerism’ of individuals over the greater good of the group or the ‘work’, is often seen as significantly destructive. Whether providing space for long-form writing, enabling support for LGBTIAQ practitioners, or creating alternative dance forms, ‘the work’ is really what brings people together. Within the limited funding and infrastructural support framework of the Southern African region, this often relies on
self-funding, sweat equity and affective labour – effectively organisers put in their heart and soul for the love of the work. Under such circumstances, conflicts become a personal affront when not everyone pulls their weight or is equally committed.

The nature of affective labour – work done more out of relationship and care than for remuneration – is partly what makes it possible for these groups to fill the infrastructure gap. However, affective labour can result in organising burnout and major conflict within the groups. When asked about conflict mechanisms, many organisers interviewed referred to ‘being like a family’ and therefore determined that the affective nature of their work equated to affective strategies for conflict management. But at a deeper level, for many that would otherwise work alone with limited access to networks and resources, being together is much more than a job – it is a form of social relation. A strong example of this is Inkanyiso, who referred in their interview to the personal and emotional support they give one another particularly in the face of ongoing discrimination and violence to their community.

The affective nature of this work can seem at odds with career development. And yet, support and skills sharing are consciously part of the work. For Ferdiansyah Thajib, writing about affective labour in collective practice in Indonesia, this effectively places ‘collaboration into a longitudinal project of the becoming of an artist.’ In the place of limited infrastructure to develop careers, collectives and collaborative work can be the primary way for careers to advance, and a significant marker of their impact. However, it’s often unusual for groups to have come to terms with this ‘careerist’ potential, and to have determined a collective position on individual progression from within the group, therefore resulting in conflicts.

3 Ferdiansyah Thajib, (ed.) Holopis Kuntul Baris: the work of art in the age of manifestly mechanical collaboration. (Published to accompany Discipline, no.4, 2016), 5.
We identified a few cases in which conflict management strategies are integrated into the groups’ operations. Poetavango, a spoken word poetry platform in Maun, Botswana, has a counsellor as one of their organisers. KinoKadre has a complex framework for conflict management called Fresh Air Circles that are entirely about creating the space and mechanism for people to raise emotional and personality issues that would otherwise never make it onto the everyday working agenda.

Gender

Sub-Saharan Africa has one of the worst rates of gender parity in the world. Southern Africa’s rates vary by country but do not fare well by international standards. Issues such as women in the labour force, women in leadership in government and health standards for women are measured by the United Nations to calculate gender parity. Southern Africa is in the bottom third of the world. It is no surprise then that gender would be a key challenge in organising in the region. It seems very little amelioration is happening within the creative expression space. While the organisers interviewed for this research were almost equal numbers in terms of genders interviewed, there was clear indication that organising roles played particularly by women, are not equal.

Only two of the groups interviewed were all female, while four were all male, with a distinct emphasis for male dominated fields such as street art. Within groups that were mixed gender, there were more males in each group. This speaks to international trends in creative expression where men are more successful within the arts. Southern Africa presents similar patterns; male practitioners account for 72% of professional practitioners in Zimbabwe and this is confirmed through anecdotal evidence throughout the region. Importantly, education and training environments often have closer gender parity. However, once within the professional arena a combination of social expectations for women and family, gender pay gaps and preferential employment of males result in women spending less time within the professional creative environment. Research in the region similarly identifies that women exist in quite high numbers in support roles within the workplace but at low numbers in senior management roles (importantly this differentiates significantly between white and black women in South Africa). Even as

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5 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). *An Assessment of the Visual Arts Sector in South Africa and Assistance to the Department of Arts and Culture in Developing a National Policy for the Visual Arts* DAC/0006/07/T. (Commissioned by the Department of Arts and Culture, 2010).
project managers or middle management, within the case studies of this research, women tended to take on gender specific roles such as cooking or childcare responsibilities amongst the groups, over and above their organising roles.

Women Creative Wednesdays, an informal session arranged by the female managers of Shoko Festival – an event that forms part of the broader Magamba Network in Harare – is an interesting response to these challenges. Its two leading staff are women and expressed frustration at ongoing discrimination, particularly from funders and authorities they work with to arrange the festival. In response they created Women Creative Wednesdays, a space for mentoring, advice, skills-sharing and confidence building between women, aiming to boost and foster a sense of camaraderie to combat intimidation.

It is noteworthy that while gender parity remains a significant challenge among organisers, experiences of trans and gender non-binary organisers was not raised through the research. Apart from Inkanyiso’s work, none of the other respondents referred to issues of homophobia and transphobia. Homosexuality remains illegal or discriminated against – mostly in the form of colonial era ‘sodomy laws’ – in all countries in the region except South Africa and this is of course a key issue.

Lifetimes

The life cycles of these groups was another issue identified. The dissolution or closure of groups is often seen as a failing of the group and/or its organisers. They are not often established as formal NGOs with succession strategies or intentions. However, the nature of their formation usually dictates how long they deem themselves valuable and viable – which is usually not very long in the financial and infrastructural environment of Southern Africa.

While affective – and often unpaid – labour is in many ways the lifeblood of these groups, it is significantly unsustainable long term. Where practitioners have ‘day jobs’ to finance programming it is impossible to maintain energy and time to continue working at a high-quality level. External funds obtained are too often project-based or short term, and dry periods are inevitable within the funding landscape of the region. As with much of the rest of the grant dependent sector, available funding is often entirely for project production and not for its organisers, resulting in significant overworking, challenges of maintaining life balance and – in alarmingly high numbers – total burnout.
Under such circumstances, organisers often seek out different modes of working – as a response to limitations or difficulties of collective organising. An example of this is a number of street artists who still collaborate on works and particular programmes after being part of the now defunct TK Street Art Collective in South Africa. This is indicative that while some of these groups may never become long-standing institutions, their impacts, connections and intangible resources remain even after they close down. For many groups, this is understood as enough of a reason to not need to be sustainable and to consider life-cycles in much shorter terms, and potentially even to plan for the end.

WHERE WE FIND A DIFFERENT WAY

This final section looks to describe just some of the contributions this form of organising is starting to make. We consider here, the nature of the ways practitioners and organisers are working, the creative work immerging out of these spaces, and the impacts that are starting to happen. In effect, under very challenging financial, infrastructural and historical circumstances, and with significant challenges in the practicalities of organising, a space is being slowly and methodically cleaved out of the arts landscape for an exciting, necessary and forward-thinking form of creative practice.

Infrastructural space

A number of research processes have been undertaken to ascertain the value of – and therefore the need for – small arts organisations in the ‘global north’. Size Matters, by the small arts organisations network Common Practice in the United Kingdom, is an example of one.7 The research found that small organisations play a vital role in experimental and developmental licence for practitioners, enabling growth and critical exploration that feeds into larger formats and more formal institutions, both locally and internationally. Without them, there is very little space for testing work, a luxury not possible on larger stages. US academic Abdoumaliq Simone has written at length in a broader, more social science context, about the nature of human infrastructure as a stand in for limited physical infrastructure across the African continent and other ‘global south’ areas.8 Where formal infrastructure with curricula, standardised testing and quantitative results (physical building, formal funding, education, throughput rates and contributions to GDP by the creative economy for example) might be easily evaluated

7 Sarah Thelwell, for Common Practice. Size Matters: notes towards a better understanding of the value, operation and potential of small visual arts organisations (London: Common Practice, 2011).

and its value calculated, the informal human infrastructure that Simone describes, and that we discuss in this publication, provides a range of intangible and informal contributions to the sector that happen in almost invisible ways.

One example of this is Village Unhu in Harare. This collective serves as an informal training, studio and creative community space for many young practitioners. While studio space is rented, Village Unhu organisers regularly arrange alternative payment strategies or negotiate for collectors to sponsor studio space. As successful artists themselves they leverage their own networks to expand access for many of the new voices in the broader Village. The space is also an experimental gallery, giving young studio practitioners their first group exhibitions within a supportive environment and again, leveraging their own professional reputation as individual artists to garner associative value for their community.

The intangible assets and services the groups referred to in this study provide – often as an additional aspect to their core work – offer significant value to the sector. However, because these are often not formalised it can be difficult to determine the value they bring. Informal apprenticeship and mentorship, skills sharing and support to young practitioners are all areas of infrastructure that are primarily an infrastructure of people.
As part of the shift in the ways that groupings understand what it means to organise, there is the inherent interlinking and entanglement of the infrastructural, the aesthetic and the social.

A publication by collective KUNCI Cultural Studies Center, based in Indonesia, refers to the need to tease out and consider what it means for collaboration to exist within a discursive stream that defines art as indispensably social. Editor of the publication, Ferdiansyah Thajib, states,

*Doing so does not imply that we desire to prolong the confusion between art’s autonomy (its position dissolved of social role and function) and heteronomy (the collapse of art and the social) here. Nor that the aesthetic dimension of a collaborative artwork needs once again to be downplayed for its social efficacy. (In fact, the deployment of notions of efficacy, ways of working and intentionality as criteria of judgement on what ‘good’ collaborative art should look like, may fall short against multiple modes of working together that have historically and effectively developed in the different locals delineating Southeast Asia as well as Indonesian collective art production.) We are more interested instead in engaging with a holistic approach that will allow us to consider the different junctures where the multiple aspects of a collaborative artwork meet: the aesthetic and the social folding into and out of each other as the work continues to unfold across time and space.*

This is pivotal because it speaks to how the very nature of organising brings the creative expression process into the social, and therefore also into the political. As stated by Thajib, this is not about creating a differentiation between autonomous and heteronomous practice but as an important point in which intersections exist. In addition, the research done on organising in Southern Africa points to a further intersection with infrastructure – the creation of infrastructure in place of what is currently lacking. For the groups and organisers surveyed in this research, the ways they function, the work they do and their purpose, are all integral to one another.

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Inkanyiso is a South African cultural expression activist organisation that deals with LGBTIAQ issues. The form of the collective, which is non-hierarchical, fluid and very tight-knit, is integral to the work it does to support LGBTIAQ people, particularly young people, regarding issues including self-expression, collective action and bullying. The nature of the close-knit and socially supportive group upholds the collective’s values and ethics, creating necessary infrastructures for their community: safe spaces and social support. Importantly, the need for creative expression – primarily through photography – particularly for young black queer and trans womxn, becomes a radical act in the increased silencing of expression of gender and sexuality through violence and intimidation in many of the places these practitioners come from. Likewise, Toyitoyi Artz Kollective, a street art collective based in Harare, operates in an entirely non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian and autonomous model in correlation with their activist programme towards social justice. Furthermore, their street art and creative collaborations across the African continent link into their political agenda, focusing on public, accessible and anti-authoritarian creative expression.
The combination of the social, the aesthetic or creative and the infrastructural become one and the same. As stated by Thajib above, these forms of organising do not necessarily attempt to create particular arguments for creative expression’s role in the world but see their own role and that of creative expression as interconnected. The limitations of funding, the need for collectivising resources and skills, together with the limitations of formal structures such as the NGO, means that these organisers must seek alternatives that respond to their immediate needs as well as their obvious limitations. What we see is the inherent collapsing of forms that luxury might afford one to separate out. Where ‘art for arts’ sake’ becomes an improbability in relation to their locus of practice and livelihood.

Learning space

The groups surveyed also play a key role in supporting young practitioners, young practice and new voices. As noted previously, there is extremely limited formal infrastructure for young practitioners to enter a professional arena or the workplace. While some educational support exists in most countries in the region, it is not necessarily for all disciplines and seldom educates students to function as practitioners in the ‘real world’ after graduating. For many young practitioners, entering an existing group, collective or collaborative practice, or even creating a new one, is the only way to navigate the professional environment, create networks and develop a career.

This is visible at the Henry Tayali Art Centre in Lusaka. The artists that use the space have become its organisers, creating non-hierarchical and lateralised organising structure, including the informal mentorship and apprenticeship of younger artists. Enabling support
for young practitioners is key for these groups – even where practitioners can’t access formal training, very few can be said to be ‘self-trained’. As Andrew Mulenga, writer and chronicler of the Zambian visual arts scene explains:

*There is a crop of young artists who are, for lack of a better term, trending right now. You can’t really say they are self-taught. There is an informal system of apprenticeship, which is very encouraging. Especially if you pass through the Art Academy Without Walls [based at the Henry Tayali Art Centre] you will find an artist who is more established who will have three or even four younger artists there, training under him informally. Not doing exactly what he or she is doing, each has their own style.*

By comparison Johannesburg-based Counterspace is a collective of young practitioners who developed a practice together after finishing university. They have created a space of relative experimentation around subjects of keen interest that are not currently financially viable. Each has a ‘day job’ and they collectively fund their work, accessing further funds and in-kind support through broader networks and collaborations. Counterspace serves as an open space for their own professional research and investigation to develop their particular professional voices and areas of expertise. These groups create a sense of professional experimentation, support and collective learning – for organisers and their broader collectives. Within these groups, organisers learn, partly from each other and simply ‘on the job’ as practitioners trying to make things happen for themselves and others. This correlates with the inherently social nature of how these groups choose to work, understanding a multifaceted approach to the advancement of their fields.

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*CounterSpace, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy Vansa.*

10 Andrew Mulenga, personal interview, 7 March 2017.
Every group surveyed for this research is enabling a different kind of creative practice otherwise not possible outside of the collective pooling of minds, resources and knowledges. A notable example of this would be Mushroom Hour Half Hour.

Mushroom Hour Half Hour is a Johannesburg-based music collective that brings together unusual collaborations mostly around music production intertwined with visual imagery. The group functions primarily online, with live events when possible. Though it is made up of two organisers, they work with an array of musicians in producing mixtapes of new music. Mushroom Hour Half Hour’s role is significant as they specifically commission and produce new music – outside of what might be marketable. Mushroom Hour Half Hour is financed mostly by the two organisers who both work full-time, one of which works as a lawyer. This funding model, they explain, enables flexibility, playfulness and the ability to take their time and focus on the creative process.

What is significant in such examples is the space – intellectual, creative, online, physical and international – that these organisers make for new, experimental and important narratives to emerge. Space in its various forms, and as a stand in for infrastructure, is a key part of the overall ecosystem for creative expression that these organisers negotiate for and hold.
Collaboration and multiplying impacts

A natural inclination in these groups that mostly already work collectively and collaboratively is to further connect, network and collaborate in the process of production. These groups are able to connect to a radical sharing and anti-competitive approach precisely because of the limited infrastructure and resources available to them, working against the idea of competition often engendered in limited funding environments. This networked approach can be referred to as rhizomatic, resulting in independent capacity and programming through lateral creative connections. This rhizomatic approach is the only way of working with limited capacity and limited resources but with the intention to expand the impact and reach of the work.

These groups extend further into networks, collaborations and interconnectivity in order to multiply their impacts. This means stretching existing limited budgets to reach a wider range of practitioners, a networked and therefore more effective labour pool, and the ability to share their work’s outcomes and impacts more widely. Increasingly this means an internationalised perspective and often, global exposure – despite the highly localised realities of how they work. For organisers, the ability to link into other groups, practitioners and fields is a key motivator for the purpose of their work.

This multiplication of impacts through collaboration has another, vital point – that of the support, engagement and creative challenge to the limited existing formal infrastructure. It is important to state that, where some level of functionality exists within formal infrastructure, as mentioned previously, the groups all work with it as part of their collaborative strategies. Precarious and informal groups therefore invest in and are dedicated to the ongoing development of formal infrastructure – partly out of necessity (particularly regarding space) but also through instinctive practice of support, sharing and development.

Although these groups might fill the gaps of formal infrastructure, it is incredibly important not to view them as alternatives or to imply that formal infrastructure isn’t necessary. The functionality and role of formal infrastructure remains an imperative part of creative expression’s ecosystem and should be supported and encouraged as much as possible.

The National Galleries in Harare and Bulawayo, examples of formal state infrastructures, serve as key points of collaboration for some of these groups. Village Unhu, Magamba
Network’s MotoRepublik and the National Gallery in Harare and others recently worked to support Chinhoyi University graduates’ final year exhibitions11 – an extraordinary example of forms of infrastructure and creative expression support and crossover collaboration. Johannesburg-based poetry group WordnSound referred to the long-term relationships they build and maintain to enable the use of state infrastructure for performance space. Many of these spaces were built at very high quality and can, if maintained, support better quality practice and performance – something that WordnSound expresses as part of their developmental role, to raise the standards of poetry practice and appreciation in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

In response to the current state of creative practice, the kinds of practitioners that have come before, and the flows of popular and state feeling on the arts, artists are having to read their situation, weigh up their options and in many cases makes new decisions about how they will function. Importantly this research looks to identify the ways the state of infrastructure and support for artists has impacted creative practice and, in such cases, where it has meant innovative strategies for alternatives beyond the status quo – in terms of sustainability, pushing creative boundaries and determinations of success.

While there is the need to not glamorise the challenges and limitations of the sector, there is also the requirement that we recognise what works, how innovative and important work is happening, and that we are responsive to support creative practice in Southern Africa on its own terms.

Importantly it is primarily these organisers themselves who will need to drive better working conditions, stronger organising methodologies and the discourse around this practice. What this excerpt seeks to do is enable talking points for key issues that organisers need to address. From issues of registrations and policy, to plugging the gaps for young practitioners, to internal labour concerns and potential for burnout, there are strong possibilities in sharing best practice and finding future ways forward – together. Organising is, inevitably, a complex, taxing and highly skilled capacity, and more needs to be done to enable these organisers.

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