Art museums, galleries and curators dominate material culture, legitimising cultural forms and expressions. They exert and reflect specific contradictions in society. The museum’s position as the most authoritative art institution enables it to govern the construction of our present and also our future. In Harare, artists’ collectives have emerged as a counternarrative, a form of counterculture that is comparatively egalitarian in outlook, and whose emergence coincided with the political protest movements in the country, presenting alternative ways of practicing art. In reflecting on three sites where artists work together, namely Village Unhu, Chitungwiza Art Centre, and Chinembiri Studios, I ask how we understand notions of resistance, risk, success, process and transience as inherent constituents of those spaces. I use the term collective here not in the sense where artists collaborate in the production of particular works, but rather as descriptive of artists sharing physical spaces and developing common modes of practice. These three collectives are not the only ones in Harare, where different formats can be found. For instance, Revolutions Per Minute do performances for no monetary gain but work on individual projects throughout the year. Comprising writer Percy Zvomuywa and street artist and poet Tinofireyi ‘Aero5ol’ Zhou, RPM centres its practice on music and research. Also experimental, Njelele Art Station describes itself as an urban laboratory. Located in downtown Harare, Njelele focuses on contemporary, experimental and public art practice. Founded by Dana Whabira, Njelele has played host to several national and international artists including Nolan Dennis and Thembinkosi Goniwe. Wada is a community of digital illustrators and comic book artists that seeks to promote new media. Harare i Harare is a community of artists who work with found objects. After reclaiming a defunct beerhall, they are working together to create a cultural precinct in Mbare. There is also Post Studio Arts, a collective made up of Merilyn Mushakwe and Wallen Mapondera, which produces socially engaged projects. These collectives grapple to find geopolitical and cultural relevance, and with the tensions that arise when efforts of self-assertion collide with claims of inclusivity.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop at Rhodes University in 2016.
In *The invention of Africa*, Valentin Mudimbe examines how in the most recent past, western explorers and historians shaped meaning and identity in Africa, and stresses the importance of anthropology in representing Africa and Africans in the nineteenth century. This is further iterated in what Oyekan Owomoyela calls the ‘business of going back home’ arguing for Africans to shape their own meaning and identity. Collectives then can be seen as an alternative site to explore this transition. Dissent is often important, as is process. Priority is given to reclaiming and reasserting one’s independence and reevaluating the terms of engagement. Increasingly, the artist collective is gaining credibility as a site for experimentation and release from the economic machinery of the dominant art world and conventions of exhibition making. The collective becomes relevant because it reengages the artist directly in the process of framing the aesthetic experience.
and underlines the potential set up by a temporary site, a circulation of experiences beyond the clean white walls of the gallery.

The contribution of art collectives in Zimbabwe’s to the power dynamic in the art world is seen in the engagement of the artist beyond the production of artworks. Through them it is possible to see that a workable solution can be found to repurpose spaces; to rejuvenate and reimagine new audiences and ways of engaging with art. Here it is possible to see that spaces with an overtly colonial history, including those in historically marginalised spaces, can be more than alienating spaces. They can become the very spaces to shift focus and reveal a future, alternative discourse.

Significantly, some of the collectives in Harare occupy spaces that were built during the colonial era and which exemplify how the politics of space affect an area. Chitungwiza Art Centre is located in the dormitory town of Chitungwiza, an area designed to house workers for the city of Harare. Village Unhu is situated in Milton Park having moved from Chisipite; both areas historically being elite suburbs. Chinembiri studios is located in the oldest black suburb of Mbare. The location of these centres introduces questions of appropriation and reclassification and highlight the political and economic basis of place. They also provide examples of how disruptions are needed for transgressive learning and how this can lead to empowerment and new ways of doing.

The idea of the artist as a solitary and misunderstood rebel is a fairly new one. Practitioners of creative skills have more often than not worked in groups, with or without a hierarchy. The Chitungwiza Art Centre was established in 1997 as a poverty alleviation programme for the youths in the Chitungwiza area, with funding from the United Nations Development Program through the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture. Here the term collective can be seen as tenuous because it is principally an arts centre that is used by more than 200 sculptors. However, there is a certain sense of community connected to this art, with each artist developing their own means of expression in the company of fellow artists. Fashioned loosely after earlier initiatives such as Friends Forever, Tengenenge Art Centre, Vukutu and Surprise Art Centre, the centre is run by artists. There is an elected management team who ensure that the centre runs smoothly and organises workshops and training for those that require it. They deal directly with collectors and agents. Historically, their target audience has largely comprised European and Korean buyers. They decided to take the position of dealing directly with the buyer of their work as opposed to the past where stone sculptors were represented by white culture brokers such as Frank McEwen, Tom Blomefield and Roy Guthrie. Not many of the Chitungwiza sculptors are trained in arts administration and they have been swindled by agents and collectors on numerous occasions.

There are also places however, where doing it collectively becomes desirable — where collaborative forms of work and play hover in between exercises of freedom and imperatives of survival. Places where artistic expression merges with social activism. The establishment of Harare Conversations by the National Gallery of Zimbabwe followed the creation of monthly Artist Talks organised by Misheck Masamvu, Gina Maxim and others at temporary places. This was a platform for artists to commune and amplify their voice. Realising that talking was not getting them anywhere, Maxim, Masamvu and fellow artist Gareth Nyandoro set up Village Unhu. Village Unhu collectivises the do-it-yourself culture to transform from a grouping of individuals into a community of shared interests built on relations of trust, affection, familiarity or solidarity. Living and working together as an extended family, Village Unhu provides a platform to create new networks and for the artists to critique their own works. Operating under their own management, Village Unhu is predominantly self-funded. This limits the influence of grant institutions, and reduces reliance on others, enabling the artists to reclaim agency.
The Chinembiri Studios were established after Wycliff Mundopa received permission from the City of Harare to convert a unused training centre into a studio. This centre had been established by the Harare City Council’s Education and Social services division as a vocational training centre but had lain unused for years. Mundopa invited Moffat Takadiwa and a few other artists to join him. Initially, they wanted to mass produce ceramics because there were potters’ wheels and a kiln at the centre. However, that idea was abandoned in favour of working on their art production. Mundopa and Takadiwa have since moved to new spaces and the studios are now occupied by Troy Makaza, Julio Rizhi and Takunda Billiat. Makaza and Rizhi work in the same medium – silicone infused paint sculptural paintings and Takunda Billiat works with found objects to make surreal sculptural forms. They all work with First Floor Gallery but there the similarities end. The themes explored vary greatly as do the production techniques. The studios are a good example of a grouping of artists with divergent approaches and interests who occupy the same space.

What makes the artworks from these three spaces unique is experimentation. Artists are constantly pushing each other to innovate. While work from Chitungwiza Art centre has remained mainly sculptural, artists there have been experimenting with form and a
different aesthetic. Similarly, work from Chinembiri focuses on creating a new language of expression. In contrast, the artists at Village Unhu reflect realities of present Zimbabwe, with much of their work having a distinct social message.

AGENCY AND FUNDING

With increasingly conservative national discourse and fragmentation and polarisation of society, artists are working increasingly in groups. This applies especially to younger artists whose ‘interventions are no longer dependent for their activation on the gallery site alone.' Independent artist spaces and collectives have increasingly become sites for critical engagement and research which could transform the Zimbabwean art scene. Their position as experimental sites allows for fluidity and intersectionality, and for artists to find ways to articulate their subjectivity. This introduces new possibilities for art, where artists can be part of collectives, take risks, and make decisions themselves. It is a way to

---

6 A point I have made earlier, see Ruth Simbao in dialogue with William B. Miko, Eyitayo Tolulope Ijisakin, Romuald Tchibozo, Masimba Hwati, Kristin NG-Yang, Patrick Mudekereza, Aidah Nalubowa, Genevieve Hyacinthe, Lee-Roy Jason, Eman Abdou, Rehema Chachage, Amanda Tumusiime, Suzana Sousa, and Fadzai Muchemwa, "Reaching Sideways, Writing Our Ways: the orientation of the arts of Africa discourse", African Arts 50, no. 2 (Summer 2017), 58
free art from grant making, biennial agendas and simultaneously remind the world that the artist is not a social worker or social activist.

Formal art institutions often embody the segregationist legacies of the colonial era. Artists collectives create new frameworks for reclaiming history by subverting and often undermining the pervasive legacies of colonial rule that are manifest in the gatekeeping attitudes of art museums, conservative galleries and curators. The emergence of new art forms has been created in part by artists who travel and inject new life into the local scene. The diversity that is the city of Harare beg for a free, unstructured non-traditional art space. The constant quests for identity, geopolitics, immigration have led to the search for new spaces for dialogue. The itinerant movement has found a new home in the collectives.

Collectives provide a framework from which one can articulate the complexities which have plagued Zimbabwean art history. Collectives are however a mass of contradictions. Even utopias have their own septic tanks. Curator Simon Njami comments,

Like Janus, they cannot be satisfied with a single unequivocal representation. The self-evident facts they attempt to highlight are necessarily twofold, even contradictory, since they are permanently open to the movements of the world and the changes in their own environment.

This duality can represent an impediment to the survival of these initiatives. These spaces claim intellectual and moral independence from outside influences because the creator and the critic are one and the same. They are however far from commanding the financial self-sufficiency that would enable them to realise programming over a long term.

Whether these collectives can sustain their momentum in activating art outside of the gallery site and in breaking the mould by working outside of the mainstream is yet to be seen. These initiatives may well need to learn strategies of survival, which they will need to adapt to develop new ways of doing things in order to avoid devolving or morphing into the very places whose rigidity they are trying to escape. By bringing into focus the inequality of systems and platforms in an artworld and society that still reflects colonial legacies, collectives have the potential to critically transform the Harare art scene.

---

7 Nancy Adajania, comments during the ICI Curatorial Intensive, Raw Material Company, Dakar, Senegal, 4 June 2016.