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Notes from Johannesburg - Dialogues and Itineraries of the South from Kinshasa: Art, History, and Education

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Notes from Johannesburg - Dialogues and Itineraries of the South from Kinshasa: Art, History, and Education

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Abstract

This text was originally a brief speech in a debate – *Dialogues and Itineraries of the South from Kinshasa: Art, History and Education* that took place at Mário de Andrade Library’s Auditorium in São Paulo (Brazil) on October 26th 2016. It draws from questions and discussions in Kinshasa, concerning arts education, the challenges in decolonizing curriculum and methods, connecting them to South African experiences, particularly at the Wits School of Arts (Johannesburg) and also from the *Another Road Map School* research group workshops.

Résumé

Ce texte était à l’origine une brève présentation dans le cadre du débat - *Dialogues et itinéraires du Sud à partir de Kinshasa: Art, Histoire et Éducation* qui a eu lieu à la Bibliothèque Mário de Andrade à São Paulo (Brésil) le 26 octobre 2016. Il reprend des questions et discussions de Kinshasa, en ce qui concerne l’enseignement de l’art, les défis pour décoloniser curriculum et méthodes, en les mettant en relation avec des expériences sud-africaines, particulièrement à la Wits School of Arts (Johannesbourg) et aux ateliers du groupe de recherche *Another Road Map School*.

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In January 2016 a group of artists, curators, educators and historians met in Kinshasa at the *Académie des Beaux Arts*, to present work and debate ideas under the symposium title of *Mediating Past, Present and Future: Historical narratives and 20th/21st century art; Dialogues with Global South experiences*.

So my contribution today is an attempt to link the January moment with this moment today—and moments before and between. I position myself as an educator and artist in what follows—and this contribution is inflected by five days of working with the *Another Road Map School* research groups and Brazilian arts educators at the Biennale Pavilion. The *Another Road Map Story HISTories* research group programme in Sao Paulo brings together researchers from South Africa, Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Uganda, Egypt, Switzerland and Austria and aims to rethink how arts education might be understood in the current historical and political moment. Central to this research is the interrogation of imported models of arts education and foregrounding the presence of more local models that might serve as a basis for reimagining institutions, the curriculum and pedagogies. And furthermore, this requires not just gestures towards processes of decolonisation, but actively seizing moments in order to realise the kinds of social change demanded by a planet that is riven by inequality and poverty in the face of the violence of a hegemonic, patriarchal, neo-liberal order. In South Africa, this urgency is in part manifest in the student protests that have continued for many years but have become more pronounced in 2015 and 2016. And as I have discovered from listening to Brazilian colleagues, the parallels with the occupation of schools in Brazilian cities are ones that cannot be ignored. Yes, I know we are sitting in an important panel discussion, but as Marlon James, the Jamaican writer, challenges us, the time for panel discussions is over—we need to act. He

writes in relation to panel discussions on “diversity,” saying: “Maybe we will stop failing so badly at true diversity when we stop thinking that all we need to do is talk about it.”¹ I find myself in this position often—how do we realise the often rich and important discussions taking place in the dialogue that is so necessary, as actions?

With this as a broad introduction, what are the challenges and projects for arts education? Here I try to locate my response in the time span between the symposium in Kinshasa and the present in order to respond to this question and the necessity to think through relationships across art, history and education.

In an article written after the *Académie des Beaux Arts* symposium in January, the Congolese poet and critic Jean Kamba wrote:

What a blessing to be present at the discussion in the Academy of Fine Arts (ABA) in Kinshasa! – To discuss a number of topics during the symposium, especially how to effectively integrate contemporary practices of art into the curriculum. As Patrick Missassi, the [former] Director General of the Academy, said in his opening speech, “A curriculum should not always stay the same” It was astonishing to hear that the Academy intends to integrate the new artistic media that have been seen for so long as outlaws, phobias and ‘non-art’ in the heart of this temple of classicism. Good to hear the talk, but it would even be better to see the walk.²

And he continued:

The present Director General of the ABA is the painter Dr Henri Kalama, who succeeded Patrick Missassi. The new director general may personally represent an open approach. Remember, he is a rebel against the status quo, an old Librist, a supporter of freeism. But... but how is he going to deal with the heavy academic spirit so deeply entrenched at the top of this institution? That’s the question. It won’t be easy for him to uproot old habits and plant new seeds and implement all the other recommendations of the symposium. And they are not meant to stay in his pocket like a string of

¹ Marlon James, “Why I am done talking about diversity” In *Literary Hub* (October 20th 2016), <http://lithub.com/marlon-james-why-im-done-talking-about-diversity/>

² Jean Kamba, “Towards an Open Approach or a Dead Letter?” – Kinshasa: Decolonizing Arts Education I (July 28th 2016) In *Contemporary And*,

<http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/towards-an-open-approach-or-a-dead-letter/>

good luck beads! A tough battle lies ahead for this artist, the new director general, who is the embodiment of change.

I introduce this quote to ensure that the connection with the *Académie des Beaux Arts* symposium is present today. But I also do so because there is a similar challenge to that present in Marlon James' reminder about panel discussions. And just as much as Kamba scrutinises the Academy of Fine Arts in Kinshasa, I take on a similar scrutiny with regard to the art school in Johannesburg, the Wits School of Arts where I work. And again, just as much as the two might be understood as different contexts with different needs, conditions and urgencies, can we ensure that the "talking", that we know is necessary, has the potency to enable us to "walk the walk" in Kamba's words?

This is what I want to concentrate on in what follows—a focus on some of my thinking around the notion of the arts school in order to engage the questions directing this panel, even if this engagement seems oblique.

On the 19th of September 2016 I was leading a discussion session on the notion of the Arts School at the Wits School of Arts in Johannesburg. I initiated these sessions with colleagues in order to draw us back to questions around our vision, our purpose, our reasons for being—particularly at a time when the existing pressures that come with the commodification and hypermonetisation of higher education had been intensified to the extent that the majority of meetings in the school had been framed in terms of cut backs, deficits, and income generation. On the same day the Minister of Education was scheduled to make an announcement on student fees for 2017. Although making seemingly significant concessions, the announcement did not address the student #FeesMustFall demands from 2015, that demand being: free, quality, decolonised education. Word of the minister's speech and immediate student responses began to filter through by way of social

media during the Arts School session and we interrupted our deliberations in order to ensure that those who wanted to join the spontaneous protests could do so. The protests continue as I speak. I don't have time to go into the detail of what has taken place over the last five weeks at the university, and on other university campuses across the country, and the extraordinary trauma that has been suffered by many students and colleagues. There is one thing that is clear for me—many of the students, and staff members, have got to a point where they are no longer prepared to wait for their futures to be designed for them in the manner of the present status quo. Just as much as they are demanding free, quality, decolonised education, they do so within a demand for fundamental societal change at a structural level. How do arts educators respond to this in the present? How in the words of the title of the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennale do we "live" this "live uncertainty"?³

What follows are a number of notes to myself, that emerge from my work with the *Another Road Map School HISTories* research group and the thinking taking place with colleagues and students at the Wits School of Arts. These notes are posed as short statements and/or questions for discussions of potency towards action:

Note 1: How does an engagement with counter hegemonic practices become integral to the work we do at the Wits School of Arts? —this work being related to the decolonising of the institution, the curriculum, pedagogies—but also the work we take into the world. Perhaps this is where the *Another Road Map School HISTories* research project becomes one of many spaces for the borrowing and gathering together of liberatory practices towards finding ways of living together.⁴ Here the work of Paulo Freire has been concertedly present in the work we have done over the last five days.⁵

Note 2: Work intersectionally across gender, race and class in order to translate the contemporary

³ For further information see: <http://www.bienal.org.br/evento.php?i=2367>

⁴ Shire in conversation with the author, 2016.

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, London: The Continuum International, 2005). Also Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of Oppressed* (New York, London: The Continuum International, 1994).

moment in an intersectional way. Identify the silences and those moments of appearance and disappearance. Work with the notion of bringing knowledges to the surface as part of the conversations across the Global South, and South-North conversations. But at the same time be aware of who is left out of these conversations—and address this.

Note 3: Continue to accelerate the centrality of students in the notion of what constitutes an arts school, a university, a society. They have, in many ways pointed the way at a time when academic staff have been all too comfortable, too complacent. It is striking for me how many students who have been closely involved in the student protests have described them as spaces of learning and teaching—a space of learning and teaching that has led to extraordinary depths of understanding and realisation—to the extent that they rightly question the arts schools, universities and society that we have been complicit in creating. Furthermore, work with students in what I have often referred to as unpoliced zones or less-regulated spaces where practices located in student resources can be used in tandem with those of a more academic nature in teaching and learning.⁶ These zones would seem to be dependent on more ambulatory, even volatile understanding of pedagogy⁷ that acknowledges dialogue between the more regulated space of the curriculum and the unregulated spaces and texts that are the students resources—their experiences, histories, archives and desires.

Note 4: Why is arts education significant in this historical and political moment? Perhaps this significance lies in “art” being a site that allows us to imagine the unimaginable and to think through the difficulties of our time⁸—the “living” of the “live uncertainty” of the Biennale title, towards action.

There are many other notes for action that I might add—but perhaps the four that I have introduced will stimulate further deepening of discussion today and action thereafter.

⁶ Arlene Archer, “Academic Literacy Practices in Engineering: Opening Up Spaces,” *English Studies in Africa* 49(1) 2006, 189-206.

⁷ Denise Newfield, David Andrew, Pippa Stein, & Robert Maungedzo, “No Number Can Describe How Good It Was’: Assessment issues in the multimodal classroom”,

Assessment in Education (special issue: Assessment, Literacies and Society: redesigning Pedagogy and Assessment) 10(1) 2003, 61-81.

⁸ Shire in personal conversation with the author, 2016.