

Special section editorial

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It is our sincere pleasure and privilege to introduce the reader to this special edition of *Image & Text*—‘Art, Access and Agency - art sites of enabling’. The collection of articles and interviews contained herein serves as the outcome of the three-day conference-event, ‘Art, Access and Agency - art sites of enabling’, presented over two years ago on 7-9 October 2021 by the School of the Arts in collaboration with the Transformation Directorate, University of Pretoria. Since then, it has taken many patient hours to transcribe, edit, peer review and otherwise transform the many varied presentations that formed the basis of the conference-event into its present textual format. We are pleased to present the results to readers and introduce them to the thoughts and ideas that underpin the project as a whole. In what follows, we briefly describe the process of conceptualising the project, outline the overall research question and sub-questions and describe the processes of its implementation and methodologies at stake therein. We also briefly introduce the many varied scholarly responses to the research project and show how they align with the project’s particular vision.

‘Art, Access and Agency - art sites of enabling’ sought to investigate and highlight how contemporary art and its myriad associated forms of practice and research may act as a catalyst to enact meaningful societal change. During the initial planning stages, we deliberately adopted the compound term ‘conference-event’ to describe the planned proceedings to allow for the inclusion of a broad range of scholarly formats and research methodologies. Such an open, non-hierarchical approach to scholarship is the hallmark of contemporary artistic research globally, including in

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its purview a diverse range of research outputs such as conference papers, workshops, performances, community engagement projects, art exhibitions, and artworks, among others. This diverse approach to research also aligns with the guiding principle that underpins the research project, namely to raise in-depth, collective awareness about issues of difference, diversity and discrimination on and beyond campus.

In 2021, at the time of the conference-event, the entire world was still caught in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of us felt powerless against this new invisible threat, a feeling further exacerbated by extreme forms of enforced social isolation and the resultant experience of alienation and loss. The pandemic transformed everyone, including even people's own families, into a potential threat, and everyone duly retreated into their homes, forms of online communication and remote work. Moreover, large sections of our society simply did not—and still do not—have adequate access to data, computers or even 'homes' for that matter. In this way, the global pandemic further highlighted the incredible societal inequities that (still) exist at every level of our society. More to the point, the shortcomings of seemingly democratic economic, civic, and political institutions of governance aimed at empowering large sections of our population were forcefully laid bare by the very manner in which policies related to the pandemic further divided us through social distancing and unequal access to healthcare and education, among others. Even worse, we felt the full sting of instrumental approaches to human existence as many of us contracted the virus, and most especially as loved ones succumbed to it - only to find that these individuals were somehow transformed into abstract numbers and terms. Daily statistics told the story of the spread of the virus by referring to individuals as the 'infected' or as 'casualties', in the process erasing the very individuality that makes us human. Too many of us suddenly discovered what it is like to lose a loved one without ever being able to say goodbye, because you were not allowed to do so. That said, many more of us suddenly also knew what it means to die helpless and alone. Accordingly, at Visual Arts we felt an almost inexorable urge to turn to art and to ask, 'How might the practices and forms associated with contemporary art and its institutions enable and produce alternate, shared and even wholly new forms of agency, access and participation?'

'Art, Access and Agency - art sites of enabling' seeks to rethink questions of agency, access and enablement by way of the expanded parameters of contemporary artistic practice, the sites of its production, and its dissemination. As for the expanded definition of contemporary artistic practice, we take as a starting point recent (and some not-so-recent) developments in social and political praxis and

thought, including, but not limited to, debates surrounding the arts in relation to ongoing gender-based violence and racial discrimination, decolonisation, social and community engagement, differently abled-bodies and more discipline-specific issues surrounding the very notion of contemporary artistic practice as a form of (academic) research and its broader societal function. It should also be clear to the reader that our definition of contemporary artwork is thus also one that allows for the inclusion of a broad range of aesthetic forms and hybrids, including dance, easel painting, installation, theatre, written fiction, performance art, music, video, film and many others.

Given its radical permissiveness as a discipline, contemporary art provides fertile soil for the discussion of matters of agency, access, and participation. For example, one might, rightly in our humble estimation, argue that contemporary art is 'transdisciplinary' and 'collaborative' by way of its very workings as a discipline. To clarify briefly, researchers in the arts (whether via theory or practice) commonly engage with varied fields of scholarly study, including literary theory, gender and race studies, philosophy, the sciences and social sciences, and many others. Secondly, collaboration vis-a-vis community engagement (CE) has become a core ingredient in much contemporary artistic research and practice—for example, it now forms a core component in our undergraduate studies in Fine Art at the University of Pretoria, and every student at the university is required to complete a smaller CE module as part of their studies, regardless of their discipline.

Even where it concerns more institutionally bound work, such as framed oil paintings, the artwork remains a site of collaborative meaning-making by virtue of its dynamic status as a site for engagement. In keeping with these concerns, at least since the end of narrow attitudes implicit in western modernism in the twentieth century, what counts as an 'artist' or as 'contemporary art' today are open, ever-expanding definitions replete with a host of practices, forms and interests inherent to it. Most importantly for our purposes, this means that when we discuss matters of agency, access, and participation in relation to contemporary art, we gladly risk opening a Pandora's box of meanings, thoughts, practices, and ideas that actively seek to intervene in the status quo and its norms. We contend that such risk is endemic to change and to challenging problematic hierarchies, societal attitudes, and practices.

'Art, Access and Agency - art sites of enabling' seeks to provide an enriched, complex framework within which to address these issues by asking questions such as:

- What forms or definitions of agency are at stake in contemporary art and its myriad media, and how are they embodied by it?
- How might artworks and the spaces and practices associated with them materially and conceptually enact such forms of agency and moments/spaces of shared access and participation?
- If the work of art is relationally founded and only exists within a complex nexus of socio-cultural and economic relationships and boundaries, which boundaries are shared and which are not, and why?
- Within art, who gets to decide on the limits of speech, dialogue, and interpretation and why? When are agential boundaries and limits generative, and when not?
- How can art and the sites of art generate distinct forms of agency that productively highlight difference and the particular, often highly subjective, forms of knowledge embodied within such difference?
- How do various artistic contexts (such as those provided by museums, galleries, community engagement projects, large-scale exhibitions, institutions of learning, and arts publishing) allow for the emergence of dynamic forms of subjectivity by and through which different individuals or even whole groups of individuals are enabled to participate more (or less) meaningfully in society?
- How might different bodies (gendered, racial, differently enabled, human, and non-human) enter into collaboration by way of the artworks, its processes or sites of display and interpretation and to what extent may existing notions of agency, participation, dialogue, and contemporary art be challenged thereby?

Throughout this research project, we take the position that contemporary art, in all its multifaceted forms, can do more than simply illustrate or highlight discrimination and injustice or even further entrench the *status quo*. That is to say that even as forms of discrimination and injustice may be shown to exist at the very heart of culture, our institutions, and our forms of cultural expression, contemporary artistic practice remains hopeful and even audacious enough to insist upon its status as an agent of change for the better. Given this remit, we felt it vital to clearly position and identify our keynote address early on, both in relation to its form and its content.

The tenor of the research project was established by way of our keynote address, 'Flowers sex loss and labour', a moderated conversation between Willem Boshoff (South Africa) and Olu Oguibe (United States). It is no stretch of the imagination to say that both Willem Boshoff and Olu Oguibe are key figures in the field of contemporary (South) African Art and that a conversation between them about art and its capacity to inspire change is truly illuminating and perhaps even critically important to our endeavour. Boshoff and Oguibe are globally known for their socially engaged artworks that challenge accepted norms and biases, but perhaps even more importantly, they are both revered for their generosity as artists who regularly share their knowledge and experience with others through their practical work as well as various authored publications and interviews.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Olu Oguibe. Installation view, *Monument to Strangers and Refugees* (2017). Concrete obelisk installed at Königsplatz (Kassel Germany) as part of Documenta 14. Sizes: 15.8 metres. Courtesy of the artist.

On a related note, the conversation as format and methodology has a long, rich, and diverse scholarly history. In Greek philosophy and culture, many well-known oral antecedents exist, including the Socratic method and Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. However, given our context, we feel more drawn to forms of oral art as practised within Africa past and present, especially how it foregrounds the significance of the occasion and the relations and tensions between performance and audience. After all, knowledge must be shared and continually adjusted if it is to have lasting meaning, and it is by no means a certainty that the best way of doing so is only by publishing a book or writing an academic article, for example. Sometimes, it is best to begin next to the proverbial fire and in the company of one's 'elders' (regardless of how old they are). Beyond such historical and cultural concerns, a conversation embodies the very ethos of sharing, intimacy, openness, and even storytelling that exist at the heart of all artistic practice and, indeed, 'Art, Access and Agency - art sites of enabling' as a whole. In our view, art gives meaning to our lives by inscribing the purely factual with poetic form, in the process embellishing, transforming, and celebrating life and its diversity. As such, art is always in conversation with the world and always in the process of changing.

Having confirmed Boshoff and Oguibe as keynote speakers allowed us to further define the remit of our public call for participation and the outcomes that followed, including this current publication. Contributions to the research project were invited according to four interrelated themes. The first two themes were related to the artwork and the site of its encounter:

- The artwork as a site of enabling (materiality and form, performance, and the performative in relation to the display and interpretation of the work of art).
- Contemporary art institutions as sites of enabling (artist-run spaces, non-profits, galleries, museums, art collections and related art spaces, and practices).

The second two themes expanded to focus on the artwork and its relationship to various communities, sites of learning, and forms of engagement and production:

- Educational art spaces and practices of learning as sites of enabling (art schools, universities, educational programmes within museums, for example).
- Community engagement, publications, and other aesthetic forms of social creation (collaborative creation, open dialogue, socio-aesthetic interaction, and access).

We were, and still remain, overwhelmed with the eagerness and generosity of spirit with which our call for participation was met by scholars, artists, curators, and researchers from around the world (including as far afield as the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the United States, the University of Applied Arts Vienna, University College London and elsewhere). Final contributions to the conference-event took several exciting forms, including papers, workshops, screenings, discussions, and other spatio-conceptual interventions (both digital and analogue). We provide a brief overview of those included in this special issue of *Image & Text*.

We have already mentioned the keynote conversation with Willem Boshoff and Olu Oguibe. This issue of *Image & Text* also includes the transcription of a second conversation between Professor of Creative Writing Bronwyn Law-Viljoen and the South African poets Philippa Yaa De Villiers and Fiona Zerbst. Viljoen accompanied the poets on an exploration of the power of poetic language (their own and each other's) and how, in Law-Viljoen's words, it 'involves action in the world that affects one's position in the world and the position of others in the world'. Zerbst and De Villiers generously illustrated this by reflecting on their poetic techniques and by reading several poems, all of which are reproduced as part of the transcribed interview.

The four peer-reviewed articles in the issue individually and collectively engage with the four themes of the conference: artworks, art institutions, practices of learning, and community engagement as sites of collaborative creation, and enabling. In her article, Fatima Cassim engages most prominently with the latter two of our four themes as she explains the intent of social design and illustrates the use of play to realise this. Jacki McInnes stays with the theme of community engagement but also lingers with art itself (and how we define it) as the site of enabling. In his contribution, Rory du Plessis guides the reader through an exhibition in a gallery, thereby addressing our second theme, the art institution. He also interrogates the boundaries of what we consider as art by elevating photographs never intended to be beheld as such as exhibition objects, thus creating a transcendental site for the posthumous reverence of the intellectually disabled persons in the photographs, and all others who continue to be misunderstood and misjudged. In their article, Kristina Johnstone, Marth Munro, and Tarryn-Tanille Prinsloo work with performance as art, illustrating how embodied practice offers a site to exercise agency. For those who were able to attend the online conference-event in 2021, the published article will bring back vivid memories of the way the simultaneous engagement of online participants, each with their body and their cell phone screen in the space they had at their disposal, contributed to an embodied sense of shared experience.

The article included by Sean O’Toole delves into the history and legacy of Ernest Cole’s photobook *House of Bondage* (1967). O’Toole specifically charts the period between the photobook’s first publication and its banning by the Apartheid government in 1968. This essay forms part of a longer research project by O’Toole including a number of public talks and an exhibition through which a number of questions about photography, its public dissemination and its subsequent reception are all brought to bear upon one another by way of the notion of ‘risk’. Whereas the days of Apartheid censorship are long gone, Cole’s work remains risky to this day: As O’Toole shows, in many ways its deep influence on the work of contemporary black South African artists remains informed by the trenchant insights into our most unequal, racially divided society, first given palpable form by Cole now more than 50 years ago.

Given the variety of forms and formats at stake in the presentations during the 2021 conference-event, not all of them were suitable for textual replication in this edition of *Image & Text*. We think specifically of online film presentations by The Centre for the Less Good Idea (Johannesburg, South Africa) and Deborah Padfield (Institute of Medical and Biomedical Education, St George’s, University of London & Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London, UK). We must also mention the art exhibitions *You don’t say*, curated by Teboho Lebaneng (Lecturer, University of Pretoria) and *Light for Art’s Sake*, curated by Carla Crafford (artist, South Africa). Both exhibitions were held on-site at the University of Pretoria’s Javett-UP Student Gallery, and Crafford’s book (also entitled *Light for art’s sake*) was launched during the conference-event. Both exhibitions are included here in edited form featuring the original curatorial statements by Lebakeng and Crafford respectively, and accompanied by selected images.

Other exciting contributions that, for one reason or another, unfortunately could not be included in this publication are those by Margaret Coleman and Caroline Jean Martin (both PhD candidates from the Institute for Doctoral studies in the United States), a workshop in postgraduate fine arts research by Başak Şenova (Guest Professor University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria/ Turkey) and Johan Thom (Associate Professor in Fine Art, University of Pretoria), and a conversation between David Medalie (Coordinator of the Creative Writing Programme at the University of Pretoria) and students Barbara Adair and Jacki McInnes.

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