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Artists improvising

distance and closeness during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has, unlike any other global crisis, driven the performance of everyday life almost wholly to a digital landscape of interactions – from Zoom meetings and WhatsApp video calls with friends and family, right through to Instagram "lockdown" parties. This flurry of digital activity seeks to circumvent the void that the pandemic has brought to our human existence – a void of silence and social distance that artists, particularly poets and writers, are finding ways to navigate.

By "performance of everyday life", I use the term both in its most simplistic and broadest sense to refer to aesthetic production as in concerts and theatrical events, and also to sporting events and social, political and religious events such as rituals and ceremonies.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, improvisation has become a way of life. For artists, it has meant navigating the circumstances surrounding the pandemic, while for governments, improvisation has entailed taking measures to ensure social distancing, quarantines and "lockdown," among others, a different kind of improvisation. All these provisional measures have resulted in extreme restrictions of movement for performing artists and their audiences, a social distance they are trying to improvise their way across.

In this context, I use the term "improvisation" to reflect upon how we as artists are inventing as we go along; composing and recording simultaneously, using our tools to play with distance and proximity. Through improvisation, artists are once again demonstrating their power as creators, producers of reality and of memory, especially because the current crisis was in one sense not planned for nor rehearsed and yet it is a crisis that has always been dancing on the horizon.

In the current state of emergency-improvised performance by artists everywhere, we see how improvisation demarcates the resilience of artists, and our refusal to be silent as we seek to produce and imagine new spaces for social connection and creative expression in the time of social distance.

During the so-called "lockdown," – a term that misappropriates the carceral experience to describe social distancing at a time when the incarcerated are in fact unable to socially distance and therefore lethally caged in conditions of social proximity – artists have been coming up with ways to create and disseminate their work. They meet with one another online to stage music performances, share insights on their writing processes, and feature in media interviews on the current state of the arts, as well as collectively navigating the consequences of the collapse of the gig economy, an important tool of survival for artists whose work is often precarious and underfunded.

Seeking connection on a scale not seen before

On a global scale, DJs such as DNice and Black Coffee are among many others who have staged "lockdown" music parties that went viral, and icons such as Erykah Badu and Youssou N'Dour have also recently staged quarantine music concerts. There is literally a performance happening at every moment of the day, on every scale, everywhere in the world with arguably a newly enlarged global public – a "captive" audience on a scale not seen before is seeking connection.

Poets across the world are tirelessly creating and presenting writing workshops and poetry sessions on a plethora of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. As a poet, my attention was drawn to what poets and other literary and cultural workers were doing during this moment. Poets such as Vangile Gantsho and Lebogang Mashile were already at work producing poetry events and engaging with their audiences. In the words of literary blogger James Murua, "Impepho Press (cofounded by Gantsho) ran what could be considered a revolutionary event when they hosted *#InPoetryWeHope: A Virtual World Poetry Day Showcase* on March 21, 2020."

The event, hosted on Zoom, presented a programme in which many poets from across the planet performed for hours. The following week, Mashile had a solo live poetry session on her Facebook page with a few hundred audience members as she recited poems from her living room into the world. Another week later, I also hosted the first of my own weekly poetry sessions *called Virtually (A) live* on my Facebook page. Through his blog www.jamesmurua.com Murua is creating a virtual archive, tracking virtual literary activities across Africa.

The new 'real time': on closeness, distance and performance

In a recent email I received from Performance Studies Professor Ramón Rivera-Servera, he mentioned feeling "both the distance and the closeness with greater intensity" towards his students, colleagues and artistic community. This statement drew me into a deeper contemplation of being away from the stage, and engaging with colleagues and audiences in *real time and in the same space*.

In the same vein however, I was feeling as close and as immersed in art, culture and entertainment like never before in these digital modalities. Being in lockdown

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Artists improvising distance and closeness during COVID-19 continued

provided me (as it did many book lovers globally) the time to start and finish reading literary treasures that have been decorating my bookshelves or languishing in my car because of time eaten by countless meetings between different cities, or countries, some of the said time easily spent in daily traffic to and from buildings that most of us call *work*. We were now (re)creating the notions of *work* and *real time* through our smart phones and computers, discovering opportunities and acknowledging the disadvantages of (imposed) digital performance of everyday life and art. When all cultural, academic and corporate events and activities were cancelled or postponed indefinitely, my thoughts were on the gigs that most artists depend on for their own, their families' and sometimes their communities' survival.

Some artists had spent years negotiating deals for world tours for their work, only for them to be cancelled almost overnight – as expressed by Gregory Maqoma, internationally acclaimed dancer, choreographer and founder of the Vuyani Dance Company in a Facebook post (followed by similar comments from colleagues and friends). The despair lies in the individual and collective livelihoods that were at stake (already because even before COVID-19, the arts and culture sector in South Africa is one without stable nor guaranteed salaries (and mostly no medical insurance). Little or no intervention about the livelihoods of artists was found in government officials' speeches, thus little about artists' relief plans. Once again, artists' resilience was put to a grave test.

The fear of loss

Beyond the "morning hellos in the office, the shared intimacy of the classroom, the rigor and risk of the rehearsal room, the flirtatiousness of the bar, and adventure of the random daily encounters on… the sidewalks, and the parks of the city" that Rivera-Servera (and most of us) misses, it is the fear of loss of income first, and secondly, the impact on creativity and inspiration that I feared many artists would experience because of the uncertainties presented by COVID-19. It is this fear that forces (without any preparation) improvisation upon artists. For artists, improvisation no longer becomes a theoretical flirtation but an (urgent) practical mode of being and of producing work.

In his article, *Improvising Tomorrow's Bodies: the Politics of Transduction*, George E. Lewis highlights that "The computer has become an indispensable part of the cultural and social histories of the arts, in which improvisation has long served as a site for interdisciplinary exploration, exchanges of personal and cultural narratives, and the blurring of boundaries between art forms..."

This statement speaks to how artists have always been at the forefront of improvised realities, now like never before, forced into the urgency of adapting to the "culture of spontaneity" and to creating social meaning in a time of social distancing.

One of the things I will certainly remember about this period is that artists bring people together in meaningful ways that reach into that often tucked-away space called the spirit. I will also remember that artists did not hesitate and were not confused about how to respond to this death-dealing crisis. Not only did they pour narrative and performance into the silence, the distance and the fear, but they are also providing examples of both in-depth leadership and collaborative models. It is important that artists are seen beyond just *a single moment* because they are contributors to modelling more ethical and effective ways of being together – ways of governing our bodies and communities in the face of a dangerous, shared common threat.

In *On Making Sense: Queer, Race Narratives of Intelligibility*, Ernesto Martinez describes the sheer joy of making art in the face of homophobia and the HIV/AIDS crisis, which was a way to survive the bitterness of loss. The way in which Miriam Makeba smiled through song was to survive the rage of apartheid.

Performance as digitized memory/ audiences as digital co-performers

More than any sector in our country's (and our world's) economies, it is the arts and culture sector that is both undervalued and significant – in how artists straddle and wrestle with producing content relevant to socio-political memory, *and* history, *and* transformation *and* meaning, *and* feeling – during a time of despair and uncertainty. It is artists who are devising ways to keep people entertained by being on stage, albeit virtually, and keeping the show going.

Most households have some form of communication device (television, transistor radio or cellphone with FM stereo) through which music and other forms of performance/culture are consumed. Social media and other digital platforms are being galvanized by artists and producers alike to fill the distances created by the current lockdown with the purpose and inspiration of art. With free and paid digital performances, artists have created performance spaces that transcend (and even transgress) geographies and time zones almost overnight. Poetry, dance and drum sessions are online at all times of the day where people can access them in the quarantine of their own homes.

The current crisis has also created a closeness globally, whereby audiences, or to use Rivera Servera's words, co-performers, are interested in time zones, because 7pm in Chicago is a different time in Johannesburg. Although there is an archive that is almost automatically created on most digital and social media platforms in case one misses the actual performance, audiences like to be *in the moment*. In these spaces there may be, as Rivera-Servera explains, "an emergence of community, the world of possibilities and strategies, the promise of pleasure". Furthermore, one day when the COVID-19 pandemic is referred to as *history*, perhaps long after we have all died, future people will wonder how we spent our days during

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the lockdown. They will wonder what we lost? Or perhaps what we learnt?

Such questions point me to what Bibi Bakare-Yusuf so eloquently refers to as the archive of the future. "The archive as a reservoir of and for memory is the place where ideas and material culture of historic interest or social relevance are stored and ordered. It is where society warehouses *what it wants to remember* and *what it sees as worthy of remembrance*, especially for the future – literature, music, visual art, film."

This statement highlights that the current moment is worth remembering, retelling and documenting. Some of the telling will happen almost simultaneously (like all the current digitally centered cultural production and dissemination), while some will be told over time. It is important to have the podcasts, broadcasts and books, among others, as documented evidence about the *performance of now*. What Bakare-Yusuf is interested in is "what future people will find that gives them a record, a sense of this present moment."

Audience members can also extend their role of co-performer(s) by digitally sharing events with friends on their social media platforms, creating "watch parties", or buying e-books (especially those that document the now like Melinda Ferguson's *Lockdown: The Corona Chronicles*, described as "the first Corona book to be released in South Africa, capturing the mood of our times through a tapestry of South African voices …"

Although the merging of performing arts and new media technologies is not a new phenomenon, they have always been complements and not substitutes to gathering crowds in a theatre, poetry venue or dance floor, as Paula Varanda reminds us that the "here and now relationship between performers and spectators, which is traditionally found in concert dance, no longer necessarily represents an ontological condition".

As soon as it was evident that social interaction in the world as we knew it had changed, artists got to work devising the *new normal* as poets such as Gantsho, Mashile, and the Hear My Voice team continue to do. Online event posters, links to broadcasts and reviews found on Pan-African digital art spaces such as Murua's blog and *Brittle Paper* (a digital literary platform promoting African literature for over 10 years) are possible enactments of Bakare-Yusuf's ideal. Thus, the performer, writer, audience, blogger, are all co-performers in this creation of the artistic/literary improvisation and archive that are so necessary to serve as the memory of the current period.

Digital substitutes for warm bodies?

By this point in South Africa's lockdown, it is common to have a number of poets and writers on various social media platforms hosting sessions – from readings and book launches to workshops and master classes. It is important however, to remember that some (potential) audiences will be excluded and left out in the analogue world because they might not be tech savvy or may not have the privilege of access to WIFI to be part of this *new normal*.

Without any doubt, COVID-19 is brewing devastating consequences on the gig economy. It is also true that for most stage artists there can never be a substitute to performing in front of live bodies, and in many cases feeding off the energy in the room. It is however, during this lockdown that the concept of artistic improvisation is demonstrated to its full capacity. Without any prior warning, COVID-19 came in and changed the manner and shape of live performance as we know it. It will take months, and perhaps years until both artists and audiences can feel confident and safe enough to perform in crowded spaces that provided them their inspiration and livelihood in the first place.

Perhaps now is the moment to consider (urgently) the suggestion made by Varanda, that the medium of dance [as another example/signifier for performance] needs to extend, in order to accommodate principles that operate in new media; only so that the full potential of digitized production, distribution and exhibition of performing arts may be realized and valued.

It is a difficult challenge (much more difficult for some than others in the arts sector) considering the fact that most artists have performed for and earned a livelihood from engaging with live audiences until now. What artists are creating, recording and sharing now, and how they are navigating this extraordinarily difficult moment, will be used as lessons by future artists, and will stimulate the arts sector going forth.

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