



African Arts Revolution

Project Title: Publishing and Research of the South: Positioning Africa

Grantee Institutions: Rhodes University

Principal Investigator: Professor Ruth Simbao

Duration of Grant: 5 years (2017–2021)

In an atmospheric old house on the hill above Rhodes University's main campus in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape, an African arts revolution is taking place, encouraged by Professor Ruth Simbao, who heads the Arts of Africa and Global Souths research programme within Rhodes University's fine art department.

The programme has 19 postgraduate students, mostly from Africa, and includes – Publishing and Research of the South: Positioning Africa (PROSPA), the Art POWA Network (Producing *Our Words* in Africa) and the South African Research Chairs Initiative programme in Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa.

“While significant work is being produced by artists and scholars on the African continent, much of it tends not to be recognised by the global art market and dominant art discourse unless it is shaped and ‘consumed’ by

scholars, curators, and collectors based in the ‘North,’” Simbao explains.

“There is an urgent need for a radical shift away from the dominant Western European and North American discourse on the arts of Africa. For this to happen, we need the discourse on the relationship of Africa to its arts to be constructed by ourselves; the voices of African writers, scholars, and artists must be at the forefront of the study of the arts of Africa.”

“In addition,” Simbao explains, “we need to significantly change our perceptions in terms of how we value art and culture, and what we view as success or failure. Often there is a disjuncture between the arts of Africa and the type of exhibitions and galleries in Europe and America that achieve relatively high visibility, and we need to interrogate ways in which privilege creates ideas of aesthetic value.”

Simbao offers the following example: “I co-curated, with the director of the Lagos Photo Festival, Azu Nwagbogu, an exhibition of eight up-and-coming African artists titled *Consuming Us* at the Cape Town Art Fair in 2016. The art fair was framed as the first in Africa to focus on African art but if you looked at the galleries represented, the



Left-right: Eria Nsubuga SANE, *What Can Europe Do about the Migrants?* (2015). Mixed media, approx. 140 cm x 90 cm. Photo credit: Eria Nsubuga.

Doung Anwar Jahangeer, *The Other Side with the Matebese Family* (2012). Performance intervention at the Settler Family Monument in Grahamstown, *Making Way* exhibition curated by Ruth Simbao. Photo credit: Professor Ruth Simbao.

Front cover of the *African Arts* journal edited by Ruth Simbao in 2017 as part of the new editorial consortium. This issue is the first to feature scholars based on the African continent. Photo courtesy of *African Arts*.

majority were from overseas or from South Africa, hence there was a Northern and South African dominance.”

Simbao and her team argue that there is huge potential for new generations of scholars and artists in Africa and the Global South to change old problematic geopolitical frameworks of the art world, so that the exciting developments in the arts throughout the continent no longer fall between the cracks. The programme therefore emphasises “sideways learning”, where the African continent learns and engages first and foremost with the Global South as a way of repositioning the writing, publishing, teaching, and curating of Africa.

“Sideways learning stresses the necessity for staff and students to learn from each other as they unlearn certain assumptions traditionally taught in Western knowledge structures about the visual and performing arts. This is opening up new areas of decolonised learning, and new and more critical ways of thinking and writing about Africa,” says Simbao, who has given this an international platform in her role as a consortium editor of *African Arts*, a quarterly journal produced by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and published by MIT Press.

Simbao edited the May 2017 issue of UCLA’s *African Arts*, which was produced entirely by scholars based on the continent. “While this journal does publish some high quality work on the arts of Africa, it is problematic that overall, only about four per cent of the authors are based in institutions on the African continent, and only one per cent are in African countries excluding South Africa,” says Prof Simbao. “I’m working on redressing this, and, as an editor of *African Arts* I aim to include a balance of authors from throughout Africa.”

The programme questions who we are as humans, as Africans, and as global citizens in relation to place and geopolitics. Simbao has worked with Durban-based artist Doung Anwar Jahangeer, who engages with public monuments and walks with audiences through public spaces, challenging the way space in South Africa is still very much segregated economically and racially.

“We’re interested in art and interdisciplinary research that extends beyond elitist notions of fine art,” she says. “We embrace visual culture that engages with and challenges who we are, and where we are, as individuals and communities in our personal and political spaces.”