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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

'Entrance Fees': Black Youth and Access to Artistic Production in Gqeberha, South Africa

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Abstract

The arts sector in South Africa is portrayed as a multiracial, emancipatory and inclusive sector that promises to reduce youth unemployment and to mitigate inequality. In post-apartheid art institutions, artistic merit and perseverance are deemed to be sufficient in order to access the art sector and its market. The paths of individual black artists from poor areas who have succeeded in accessing the institutional art circuit are praised by the media, policymakers and curators. A romanticisation of their efforts is coupled with identifying them as role models for younger generations.

Despite emphasis on the inclusivity of the art sector and the hailing of successful paths, black artists report a long-standing difficulty in gaining access to, and being fully accredited in, the institutional art circuit. The ambiguity of the art sector, which claims to be inclusive in word but is de facto exclusionary, deeply affects young black artists whose first steps into the art sector are often accompanied by a feeling of uneasiness and bewilderment.

Drawing on the multivocal accounts of the everyday life of young black artists who work in the field of performance art in Gqeberha, this article unveils the 'entrance fees' that black artists have to negotiate in order to access the institutional art circuit, i.e. the obstacles they have to overcome, but also the deals and concessions they have to make in order to build their career and be fully recognised as artists.

Moreover, the article sheds light on a double invisibility in the performing arts sector: on one side the economic, spatial and reputational obstacles that artists deal with are

dismissed as part of the everyday life of individuals coming from marginal areas; on the other side, the performing arts and spaces that young black artists create within alternative or complementary circuits are not considered part of the city's artistic production.

Keywords

Black Youth; Performing Arts; South Africa; Access; Community; Inequalities

Introduction

The reflections presented in this article are a continuation of a dialogue that began in 2015, more than seven years ago, in Port Elizabeth (which is called Gqeberha today), Eastern Cape, South Africa. As part of her thesis, Marta Montanini was analysing the construction of informal performance spaces that serve as alternatives to institutional circuits in marginal areas of the city. Xolisa Ngubelanga was, and still is, a resident of Kwazakele, a peripheral neighbourhood and an area formerly designated as a black township under apartheid rule, and also a black theatre director and cultural activist. He was in his early thirties. At the time, our dialogue was mostly about the agency of young black artists, namely their ability to create alternative underground art spaces and projects despite the challenges that they faced daily.

Over the years, we noticed that these alternative spaces, although highly interesting and active, remained fragile and disconnected from the institutional circuits of the city centre. Moreover, we remarked that, despite being proud of their artistic achievements and successes, many young black artists in Gqeberha were experiencing a feeling of continuous fatigue and a sense that they would never be fully included in the art system of the city.

Exacerbated by the hinderances to the everyday work of young black artists due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we felt impelled to urgently change our focus. Thus we decided to expand our attention on the tactics and practices through which young black artists produce alternative culture spaces in marginal places in the city, to the difficulties these artists face on a daily basis. These difficulties include an uneven landscape of hidden obstacles, both monetary and spatial, but also various kinds of concessions and deals that artists must make in order to build a career and gain legitimacy in the art sector. We define the combination of these obstacles, concessions and deals as 'entrance fees' as they constitute an unavoidable burden for black artists, which is difficult to negotiate and overcome as access to the institutional art circuit is prohibitive to them.

In this article we discuss the presence of 'entrance fees' for young black artists as a political stand, since in South Africa the art sector is portrayed as multiracial, emancipatory and inclusive. According to this narrative, artistic merit, passion and perseverance are deemed to be sufficient in order to access the art sector and its market. Furthermore, a romanticisation of the efforts and paths of individual black artists from marginal areas or poor urban contexts prevails, and the presence of black artists within the institutional art circuits is saluted as a success, while a discussion on the sector-wide obstacles black artists face, and thus the inequality of opportunities that continues to exist, is neglected.

This article draws on five interviews with young black performers from Gqeberha. By analysing the ordinary and shared experiences of young black artists in light of the context in which they take place, a post-apartheid city, where various forms of socio-spatial segregation persist, we aim to recentre the discourse not only on young black artists' access to the arts sector, but also on the way black youth respond, as they inhabit the city and navigate its inequalities. As such, this article makes an important contribution to the literature on black youth and ordinary citizenship ([Neveu 2015](#)) in contemporary South Africa.

Romanticisation and uneasiness in the South African art sector

In South Africa, art is perceived as a powerful tool for fostering inclusion, promoting social cohesion and enhancing social mobility (see, for instance, the [NAC](#) website, 29 October 2021). The idea that art can contribute to levelling inequalities is rooted in South African history, and is shared by artists and activists who work in rural areas and in disadvantaged neighbourhoods ([Hagg 2010](#); [Van Robbroeck 2004](#)). The arts sector is therefore presented both as a market-oriented industry that should be productive, and as a source of educational values and transformative practices that should serve as a tool of social policy, especially in the context of youth inclusion.

In post-apartheid times, the individual paths of black artists from poor areas who have succeeded in accessing the institutional art circuit are praised by the media, policymakers and curators. Thus, artistic merit, passion and perseverance are deemed to be sufficient in order to access the art sector and its market. However, what is celebrated, above all, are careers that can be treated as exemplary in democratic South Africa ([Perryer 2005](#)). The artists who are praised have progressed through the public education system or completed community-based courses and projects. They claim roles as activists or as volunteers, and popularise South Africa by exporting ‘township art’ to renowned foreign galleries and theatres (see [SABC News 2022](#) on the visual artist Sakhumzi Nyedwana, [SABC News 2019](#) on the visual artist Giggs Kgole, and [De Beer 2013](#), who discusses a Zwakala Festival-winning production called *The Journey*. In the interview, the director, Simphiwe Kaya, who is from Gqeberha, explains that the play was rehearsed in the bush due to a lack of rehearsing spaces.

Despite the emphasis on inclusivity in the art sector and the hailing of successful stories, black artists report an ongoing difficulty in gaining access to, and being fully accredited in, the institutional art circuit. [Makhubu \(2013, p. 418\)](#), an artist and scholar who has written widely on this issue, points out that ‘many [art] institutions are seen as spaces of white proprietorship even though they are civic establishments’. Moreover, ‘the “apartheid burden on the artist” can be a setback when the caged life of the majority in black township spaces continues and remains a trope for inferiority. The abiding sentiment is that significant transformation cannot take place if the command of resources remains in the hands of a few’ ([Makhubu & Simbao 2013, p. 300](#)).

Makhubu identifies two main problems: the persistence of art institutions whose structure and organisation are perceived by outsiders as still reminiscent of apartheid segregation, and the persistence of the ‘apartheid burden’ on black artists, namely the condition of training oneself and creating from unequipped, isolated spaces with few economic resources. In addition, curatorial practices and market trends end up favouring individual rather than collective pathways: ‘the rampant pressures to commercialize increased the emphasis on idolized individual artists and curators. This phase can be characterized as one in which the political concerns of artists are not shared or common but personalized into individual identity issues that form a currency in commercial and mostly white-owned galleries’ ([Makhubu 2013, p. 300](#)).

The focus on individual pathways, the silencing of common obstacles and the ambiguity of the art sector, shaped by market logics, post-apartheid democratisation processes and persistence of segregation dynamics lead to a sense of profound uneasiness. Black artists are told they are fully entitled to inhabit institutional artistic spaces, yet at the same time they struggle to take ownership of art spaces and production processes. [Gamedze \(2016\)](#) highlights that she does not feel comfortable visiting museums and art galleries because their interior and curated content often reinforce her feeling of otherness. [Musila \(2016\)](#) reflects on the duality of the South African audience: while black artists should ideally also address black audiences, their audiences remain mostly white, both at national and international levels. [Makhubu \(2019\)](#) talks about ‘anotopism’, that is, the perception of feeling out of place that accompanies South African citizens in the post-apartheid era. According to [Makhubu \(2019\)](#), this perception is linked to the difficulty in interpreting the contradictory messages of the post-apartheid city, in which all are officially equal, but still segregated.

The socio-spatial complexities of the post-apartheid city are the great absentees when talking about the path of successful black artists. On the one hand, artists are acclaimed for the kinds of strategies that they adopt, which eventually influence their artistic productions and, in some cases, their styles and aesthetics, which are highly context dependent. On the other hand, the contexts in which they lived and worked before becoming famous are not problematised. Attention is focused on the presence of black artists, especially those from disadvantaged areas, while the daily struggle of artists in their journey from their homes to galleries, museums and performing spaces in the city centre is completely neglected.

Ultimately, the romanticisation of the life trajectories of black artists minimises the responsibility of city administrators and institutions. Narratives of individual success emphasise merit and perseverance, while responsibility for an inclusive urban art sector is allocated exclusively to artists.

Art, inequality, and black youth in Gqeberha

The Eastern Cape, where Gqeberha is located, is not a key province for artistic production. In 2017, the Eastern Cape accounted for 8 percent of South African cultural employment (30,500 jobs), while Gauteng accounted for 29.4 percent, the Western Cape for 18 percent and KwaZulu-Natal accounted for 17 percent ([SACO 2022](#), p. 10). This means that there are fewer opportunities to work in the arts sector in the Eastern Cape than in other regions. Data also shows that the percentage of young individuals who are employed in the cultural sector (29%) is lower than the national average (32.9%) and that few employees in the arts sector have completed their tertiary education (9%, compared to a national average of 25.5%). In addition, 'cultural workers in the Eastern Cape are less likely to be permanently employed (48.8%) than both non-cultural workers in the province (50.4% permanent) and cultural workers nationally (66.9%)' ([SACO 2022](#), p. 12). This tendency is also associated with the proportion of informal workers in cultural occupations in the Eastern Cape (64.8%), which is higher than the South African average (46.3%; [SACO 2022](#), p. 12).

Gqeberha, which is a part of Nelson Mandela Bay, is the most important cultural hub of the region. The city has four main cultural venues: the Mandela Bay Theatre Complex (MBTC), The Little Theatre, the Savoy, and the Mendi Arts Centre. While the first three venues have been located in the CBD since the colonial period, the fourth is located in a peripheral area. For a long time, the MBTC has been the most important performing arts hub in the city.

The city is still highly fragmented spatially, and several programs and projects are devoted to reconnecting urban areas physically and symbolically. The perceptions of proximity and distance are still strongly influenced by apartheid-era urban maps. Physical proximity does not always translate to mobility. For example, outsiders still find it difficult to access New Brighton, a historically black township that is next to the CBD. Perceptions of ease and discomfort and of security and insecurity also shape audiences at cultural venues. The more central the venue, the more diverse and wealthier the audience. Conversely, cultural venues in peripheral areas are often perceived as unsafe or as not being welcoming to 'outsiders' ([Montanini 2020](#)).

Although numerous projects that are intended to reorganise transport and its main hubs in the city are underway, mobility across different neighbourhoods remains limited. Connections are particularly difficult to access in the evening and at night, when many shows are held, both in the centre of the city and in its peripheral areas. The public transport system is modelled around the hours of work of factories, restaurants and offices, not around leisure activities. In order to attend a show, residents from peripheral areas must often make sleeping arrangements and return home on public taxis the morning after the show. Urban fragmentation therefore still has a significant influence on the sociality of the inhabitants and on the places and times of cultural and artistic gatherings. According to a 2016 STATSA work, which drew on 2011 census data, Gqeberha is the most segregated city in South Africa ([STATSA 2016](#)).

Research methodology and process

This article is based on five interviews that touch upon the experiences and trajectories of young black artists who live and work in Gqeberha (see box, below). The interviews were conducted by Xolisa in early 2022 and unfolded as dialogues between friends or colleagues rather than as interviews between researcher and their informants.

Five artists were interviewed. Tom Mzimkhulu (MZIDASLAMPOET) was born in Veeplaas and grew up in Zwide (Gqeberha). He is a 25-year-old poet who started writing poetry after participating in a project at Zwide library when he was a teenager, and continued through his university years. He has organised several performances and poetry productions. In 2020, he became the chairperson of the South African Arts and Culture Youth Forum (SAACYF). He is also the founder of the SAACYF schools festival and a radio co-host at IFM 88.3.

Charney Piet was born and raised in the northern areas of Gqeberha. She is 21 years old and is currently enrolled as a Live Performance student at AFDA Gqeberha. She expects to major in both screen and stage acting.

Anovuyo Nqeto was born in Tsolo, a small town in the Eastern Cape. He is 23 years old, and is enrolled in the Live Performance course at AFDA Gqeberha, from which he is expected to major in screen and stage acting.

Shafiq Kalumo was born in Malawi, Nkhota-Kota District, Traditional Authority Malenga Chanzi. He is a South African-based performing artist in his thirties. In 2015, he joined the Stageworld Theatre School, and in 2018 obtained a diploma in the performing arts (speech and drama). He is a founder of Linga Creatives, where he educates high-school students on theatre, radio and acting. He is also a presenter, producer and on-air technician at IFM 88.3.

Nobesuthu Nlovu was born and raised in Walmer, Gqeberha. She is in her thirties. As an artist, she uses different media, such as poetry, writing, singing, dancing and public speaking. From 2004 to 2008, she participated in theatrical productions and musical performances at Makhanda Festival.

The whole research process was based on ‘friendship as method’, as defined by [Tillmann-Healy \(2003\)](#). ‘Friendship as a method’ means that ‘the lines between researcher and researched blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity of both self and other [...] researchers *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways’ ([Tillmann-Healy 2003](#), p. 733). This approach is based on establishing a dialogue ‘where the subject to object relationship of positivism becomes a subject-subject one, in which academic knowledge combines with everyday experience to reach new and profound understandings’ ([Tillmann-Healy 2003](#), p. 733). ‘Friendship as a method’ requires also sufficient time, care and sharing in order to get to know the others.

This research is based on two ongoing dialogues: firstly, an ongoing dialogue between us, the authors, and secondly, an ongoing dialogue between Xolisa and the interviewees. The long-lasting collaboration and friendship between us, the authors, entails an ongoing dialogue, in presence and at distance, on our lives and working conditions. Progressively, we felt that the discussions we were already having on obstacles and the ordinary struggles of black artists in Gqeberha, such as Xolisa, had to be enriched by the ideas, thoughts and experiences of other young black artists.

Later, when lecturing in a drama course in an art college, Xolisa noticed that his young black students were experiencing a strong sense of uneasiness, which led us to think that it was important to give voice to younger and less experienced artists. We thus decided to select interviewees from among Xolisa's acquaintances, colleagues and students. Despite the interviews having been completed over a short period, they refer to previous dialogues and events that Xolisa and his interviewees had experienced together, which were based on pre-existing trust. In our case, therefore, adopting a stand of friendship meant above all starting from a consolidated close relationship, which allowed us, the authors, to be empathetic among ourselves and with the interviewees.

We, as authors, agreed on a set of topics that would be discussed. At the same time, Xolisa allowed themes to emerge spontaneously and in line with the interests of each interviewee. Sometimes, references were made to previous events or conversations. The first question that was posed to all interviewees concerned the main stages of their career ('When did you decide to become a performing artist? Where did you learn how to act?'). This question was sufficient to initiate conversations about obstacles.

We strove to choose interviewees with different backgrounds and life paths. The interviews were held in cafes or at cultural centres. They were recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees, and each lasted approximately an hour. The interviews were then analysed jointly by Marta and Xolisa. The interviewees were informed that their interviews would be heard and interpreted by Marta. They agreed to the publication of their names in this journal. This agreement was an important sign of trust in us as authors and especially in Xolisa, who is known for being a critical voice in the artistic circles of the city, as well as of the perceived importance of the purpose of this article.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we collaborated remotely by phone and email. Discussing findings long distance certainly made our dialogue less spontaneous and more mediated by technology. At the same time, technology and distance enabled us to describe our reflections more precisely. Moreover, working asynchronously allowed us to let our thoughts settle, to reflect on our interpretations and to revise them.

This article benefits from both the reflections of the interviewees and from Xolisa's mediation and interpretations. Given his proximity to the interviewees, he was able to position individual experiences within the larger framework of the arts sector of the city. The interviewees did not have the opportunity to discuss the reflections that are contained in this article; however, it is intended as a starting point for future dialogue between artists and between artists and institutions.

In this article, we use the term 'black youth' in the broadest possible sense. The term 'black' includes individuals who define themselves as black, such as, Black Africans, coloured people, people of Indian or Asian origin, and people who are not South African nationals but reside in South Africa. In South African discourse, this expanded definition is often referred to as 'Biko black', in the tradition of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko's black consciousness movement.

We did not establish *a priori* criteria for defining 'blackness' because we agreed to respect the self-identification of each interviewee. We use the term 'youth' to refer to individuals between the ages of 18 and 34, the criterion that [SACO \(2022\)](#) adopted. The term 'performing artists' refers to individuals who define themselves as artists and who work in the performing arts as directors, actors, performers, poets and dancers, but also to individuals in training who hope to find work in the field in the near future. The performing arts include numerous and varied artistic forms that focus on the body. In South Africa, artists often tend to specialise in several such forms (for an account of the variety and intensity of the modes of performing arts in South Africa, see [Pather and Boule 2019](#)).

In the following sections, we present the main findings from the interviews. First we focus on the obstacles the artists identified, then on the tactics the artists used to overcome the difficulties they faced, and finally we analyse the obstacles and tactics by situating them within the context of the post-apartheid city.

Accessing the Gqeberha performance art sector: Obstacles

In this section, we present the main obstacles in the forms in which they emerged during the interviews that we conducted. Extracts from the interviews are transcribed from the recordings and reported as they were formulated orally.

DETACHMENT OF BLACK ARTISTS FROM ART INSTITUTIONS

The responses of the interviewees to questions on aspirations and the challenges of being an artist in Gqeberha revealed a multi-faceted picture of institutional art networks in the city. The interviewees described a small artistic community in which everyone knew each other. At the same time, they portrayed the most influential personalities in the arts and culture as members of a closed and impenetrable elite circle. The most powerful artists were said to have strong political links and to often benefit from institutional assignments. It is interesting to note that the interviewees did not refer to colour (black or white). Instead, the divide appeared to be between those who did not want the art system to be reformed ('conservatives' and 'conservative institutions') and those who wished for change. One respondent spoke about the presence of a problematic 'narrative of excellence': 'You cannot say there is excellence if you are always elected and nobody challenges you' (Interview with Tom 2022). In order to explain why the status quo was seldom questioned, he added, 'if I keep bringing this menu and I do not bring another one, how do you know it tastes good?' (Tom 2022). Another respondent said that it was exceedingly difficult to access public cultural spaces if one was not a member of 'the inner circle' of influential artists and if one was unknown to institutions: 'you have to fight: you have to sit down, talking to people, force what you want to do' (Interview with Shafiq 2022).

In general, there was a perception of separation between the 'inner circle' and the rest of the artists in the city: 'you do not see people of institutions on the ground at events ... people who got the skills have built high wall' (Interview with Tom 2022). In addition, public cultural venues (theatres in city centres and cultural centres in peripheral areas) were perceived as difficult to access. One of the respondents spoke about the bureaucratic labour that was necessary to petition for a rehearsal or performing space. For this reason, being successful was not so much a matter of 'having a network' but of 'having a good network', one that was in contact with 'the inner circle', and being seen and considered by its members.

LIMITED MOBILITY OF BLACK ARTISTS AND AUDIENCES

The arts sector is situated in the city centre, where the most important performing venues are. Building a career as an artist implies progress towards the city centre and requires a strong willingness to be mobile and follow opportunities. Speaking about the difficulties of being an artist from the peripheral areas, Nobesuthu gave the following explanation: 'you can't afford to travel and go support other events because they are far, and that's where you build relationships [...] because you have to attend, to meet new people, that's how you grow. All this [the distance] is limiting, Walmer is isolated, it's alone' (Interview with Nobesuthu 2022). Her point of view is important because Walmer is not far from the CBD, but transport connections between the two are poor.

Obstacles to mobility affect not only the artists as performers, but also the audiences of other shows. Anovuyo, a performing arts student, explained that going to shows required money and time, which was why he did not go to the theatre often (Interview with Anovuyo 2022). The difficulties of accessing shows during one's studies also had clear repercussions for training and network creation.

The interviewees also highlighted that reaching the city centre was not a guarantee of success. Gqeberha offers few opportunities, which is why it is necessary to move to Cape Town or Johannesburg, both of which are rightly perceived as the real centres of art development in South Africa. Anovuyo explained, '(In Gqeberha,) there is the potential, but you do not earn money and you haven't got the same audience [...]

I might go to Cape Town, get a name, work on my brand, and one day I will come back here [...] or, if I haven't got a job, I might move to Cape Town or Johannesburg and learn more about theatre industry and then go back to my hometown' (Interview with Anovuyo 2022).

The inaccessibility of the CBD institutional art venues to performing artists, together with the lack of affordable rehearsal rooms and venues, also have consequences for the confidence of young artists. When Xolisa asked Anovuyo and Charney what was preventing them from trying to organise and perform their own shows, they both answered that they did not feel confident doing so. When encouraged by Xolisa to elaborate on this view, both students focused on the fact that they had had few occasions to perform, which was why they did not feel ready to meet the public (Interview with Anovuyo and Charney 2022).

FRAGMENTED AND CLUSTERED AUDIENCES

Mobility issues and lack of affordable rehearsal and performing spaces also affect audiences, which are highly fragmented. Tom explained that, if an event is to succeed, one needs a base of supporters, but also 'a variety of people, not just friends'. Diversified audiences shape the creation of networks and increase the likelihood of the artist gaining recognition in different parts of the city. At the same time, it is difficult to create spaces that are accessible to different kinds of audiences. While venues in the city centre are both more difficult to access for artists and more expensive for audiences, venues in former black areas are few in number and are sometimes perceived as dangerous. Nobesuthu explained, 'as people from Walmer, we live under a stigma that our township is rough, so we took the initiative of going to the police and asked them if they could increase visibility around the venue ... because we had to be proactive, since this was around a time when there was a lot of shooting in the township' (Interview with Nobesuthu 2022).

The audiences mostly comprise affluent adults who live in the city centre rather than young individuals from peripheral areas. Tom said that 'art must be brought to people', and he advocates for audience development in the most disadvantaged areas. English is often the preferred language in the performing arts and is spoken widely, but at the same time, the use of English can hinder comprehension of black artists' performances in black areas of the city. Tom said that, after shows, he would sometimes explain the meanings of his poems.

Students and young artists, such as Anovuyo and Charney, also highlighted the importance of seeing their own acquaintances as members of the audience. Charney also said that she 'would like to help young artists and elders [from her hometown] to understand that art can bring an income and tell our stories' (Interview with Charney 2022). The interviewees shared their idea that it was important to create audiences in peripheral places, which, in turn, could create different ways of narrating the experiences of black youth.

RECOGNITION AND REPUTATION

Accessing the art sector was also described as a shift from an informal to a formal job and from invisibility to recognition. The urgency with which formal work is sought became clear when the interviewees highlighted the importance of (1) ongoing training and the quest for professionalisation; (2) applying for grants and public funding; and (3) working on social projects in addition to one's work as a performing artist. Interestingly, discourse on labour and intellectual property rights was absent from the interviews, while access to formal jobs was seen as being tied to visibility and recognition. Tom thought that it was important for him to develop leadership skills in order to learn how to coordinate a team and write successful grant applications, while Shafiq tried to link his job as an educator to public funding as he was trying to establish a theatre festival for the young. In this sense, recognition was intimately linked to public rewards.

Recognition was also strongly linked to reputation. The reputation of young artists from areas that were perceived as difficult was connected to the reputation of the latter. Nobesuthu explained, 'obviously, our

main challenge has been the issue of crime, you see, all that has been happening in Walmer [she is talking about recent gang shootings] that has been our challenge ... even when we introduce ourselves to people – ‘I am from Walmer’ – you can see in their eyes that they become suspicious of your character, but we got to let them know, ‘listen there are people staying in there and not all of us come from the same home’ ... we can only make the best of what we have, and these conditions are what we have. I come from Walmer, and in Gqeberha, there is a certain respect for artists from each community. For example, if an artist comes from New Brighton, then that person already demands a certain respect because they come from a popular township, whereas some communities have to work double as hard. You see?!’ (Interview with Nobesuthu 2022).

Artists from urban areas who are portrayed as dangerous or unsafe and those from rural areas who are portrayed as remote are compelled to serve as ambassadors for the art sector, that is, as translators or guides for wealthy audiences. They are also regularly cast in specific roles (for example, as township youth). At the beginning of her interview, Charney, who comes from the Northern Areas, which often make headlines following gang shootings, explained that her childhood and early youth did not correspond to the stereotypes of the Northern Areas, and thus she likes to represent non-stereotypical stories in her artwork. Likewise, Anovuyo explained that it was important for him to change the narrative on black communities in small towns. He wanted to make this change by talking about his experience of being black and queer. He also said that he was aware that producers often tend to minimise such stories by reducing their complexity in order to make them appealing to a wider range of audiences.

Accessing and re-imagining the Gqeberha performance arts sector: Tactics

Referring to the difficulties of access to funding and art venues, Tom explained that one must ‘break the window because the doors are closed’ (Interview with Tom 2022). His statement does not refer to the idea of dismantling the system, but focuses on finding alternative means of entering the profession. Those means can be formal or informal and recognised or unrecognised.

In the city of Gqeberha, several strategies and practices are adopted in order to overcome the obstacles and difficulties related to artistic careers. The most common strategy is to build networks and links, although networks are not organised formally. Artistic collectives are also formed. They mainly consist of series of contacts and exchanges between art practitioners and their peers. Practitioners exchange information on upcoming grants and opportunities, as well as favours. For example, an artist may perform several hours of unpaid labour for another artist, who subsequently returns the favour by other means. Alternatively, artists may lend equipment to each other or grant free access to rehearsal spaces to their peers.

Networks are built not only between artists who live and work in the city, but also with artists from other cities, especially Cape Town. This, in turn, opens possibilities for mobility (artists in Cape Town may host artists from Gqeberha and vice versa), even when they are not financed by a production or a grant. In some cases, networks are highly aleatory – they are left dormant until an appropriate opportunity arises or until finance becomes available. For example, Shafiq explained that he had been organising a festival for three years and that he had already contacted performers from Cape Town and even from other countries in Africa. He was waiting for funding, but he had already invited artists. These kinds of networks can connect multiple cities, expand funding opportunities and improve the distribution of resources – when some member of the network accesses public funding, they try to distribute some of it to other members.

Most of the artists who live and work in peripheral areas have two working lives and two circuits. They try to be present in the CBD to gain recognition from the ‘inner circle’ of influential artists and local representatives, but they also maintain their roots in their neighbourhoods. This duality sometimes means

that artists promote two different projects, one for the CBD and the institutional circuit and one for their neighbourhood. The latter project is often executed in a community hall or a cafe.

Ticket prices are characterised by the same duality and can vary widely between venues. Working around venue policies, artists try to grant discounts for shows in their neighbourhoods in order to encourage the young to attend, thus attempting to establish future audiences. Individual purchasing power can fluctuate considerably over a month. Nobesuthu explained that she was used to advertising her shows towards the end of the month: 'You need to be strategic and know that on the 30th even people who depend on social grants will have money ... we sold our tickets at R100 for one and R160 for two people ...' (Interview with Nobesuthu 2022). Importantly, her audience includes individuals who are entitled to social grants, while, usually, performing arts audiences comprise more affluent individuals.

As noted by Shafiq, artists who work as educators try to establish links between the institutional art venues of the CBD and the schools where they work. The aim is to indicate to the young that those venues are, or at least should be, open to all citizens.

Since rehearsal spaces and institutional art venues are not easily accessible, artists create parallel art circuits in peripheral areas. These circuits are not created to compete with institutional circuits, but to create opportunities, spaces and venues where artists can perform. The venues are usually small or medium in size and may include cafes, private spaces, such as the backyards of family homes, and vacant plots of land that are particularly suitable for events. Usually, artists act as organisers, producers and performers. Shows such as poetry slams are advertised on social media. The audiences of these shows comprise young individuals from neighbouring areas. Sometimes, transport to the venue is provided.

These shows and circuits enable young artists to gain visibility, to perform in front of live audiences and to establish professional connections. Moreover, they contribute to the creation of new art venues and gathering places, which are often free to access, in areas where such spaces are scarce due to the long-lasting effects of apartheid planning. These places offer opportunities for socialisation that revolves around cultural events and are intended to be as comfortable and as inclusive as possible. The art venues are built as safe places, and the young are encouraged to attend and to feel at ease.

Negotiating the entrance fees in the post-apartheid city

The interviews strongly indicate that the social and spatial context in which young black artists operate is decisive for access and in shaping artists' approaches to their future professions. The recurring themes include not only the lack of economic means, opportunities and training, but also the persistent unjust and inequitable spatial and social effects of segregation on the everyday life of artists.

As far as spatial aspects are concerned, the issue of mobility across parts of the city and cultural spaces was prominent in many of the interviews. The difficulty of finding well-equipped and affordable spaces for rehearsals in former townships was a key determinant of movements from the periphery of the city to its centre. Turning to the socio-spatial, the interviewees pointed to the separation between the city centre and marginal areas. Art institutions, which are mostly located in the city centre and in buildings with strong colonial appeal, are still attended by a predominantly white or affluent public and continue to seem almost impenetrable. Moreover, the interviewees were frustrated by the necessity to rely on more powerful or whiter individuals in order to be included in the circles that matter. This problem shows how social mobility, which also implies a capacity to build social capital outside of one's neighbourhood, continues to be a source of difficulty for young black individuals.

Another important point that emerged from the interviews had to do with representation. In public discourse, black artists are referred to as 'community' artists. The word 'community' is mainly used to refer to black townships. However, in order to pursue their careers, black artists often have to leave the communities

in question, as Anovuyo and Charney noted. Not only do they need to be closer to their places of work, which are often in the city centre, but they must also become familiar with the culture and the praxis of the ‘inner circle’.

Finally, it is important to note that black artists receive ambiguous messages from institutions. They are encouraged to create artistic productions that contribute to development, social cohesion and the inclusion of the young. At the same time, the institutions in question are reluctant to equip them with the necessary resources.

Conclusions

In this article, we identify and describe the ‘entrance fees’ that young black individuals must negotiate when they try to make a living from their artistic pursuits. The voices and the opinions of some young black artists who live and work in Gqeberha revealed that the obstacles which they face (e.g. the means to access training) are not entirely or mainly economic. Above all, they must overcome the socio-spatial inequalities that post-apartheid cities perpetuate. These obstacles include fragmented (and expensive) urban mobility, lack of public safety, and the limited availability of free and conveniently located places where artists can gather and create.

Furthermore, the reputation of the neighbourhoods where young black artists live and perform can determine the recognition that they receive as artists and the legitimacy of their participation in cultural policy-making at the city level. These difficulties, in turn, affect the artists’ perception of themselves and their self-confidence.

As highlighted by the interviewees, given the difficulties of access to the institutional art circuit, young black artists from former townships are responding by experimenting with alternative ways of creating and performing. In particular, they are building small and resilient artistic circuits by focusing on proximity, accessibility, collaboration and mobility. In addition, they are finding means, often cheap and effective, of bringing art closer to the young in marginalised and peripheral neighbourhoods and of facilitating access to performing spaces for young artists.

While both obstacles and alternative artistic circuits are a reality, they are rarely acknowledged by those in power, with both realities rendered invisible. On the one hand, the economic, spatial and reputational obstacles that artists have to deal with are usually dismissed as being part of the everyday life of individuals coming from marginal areas. Such topics are held to be too obvious to be discussed; that is why they are not taken into account when talking about art production or careers in the artistic sector. On the other hand, the artworks, performances and performing spaces that young black artists create within alternative or complementary circuits are not considered as part of the artistic production of the city. When it is time to redistribute public resources and support the art sector, these circuits, artworks and spaces are not taken into account as they are not institutionalised or formalised.

Cultural and social policies for the inclusion of young artists focus on the provision of grants and are therefore based on rewarding artistic merit. However, the difficulties that the young artists reported are mainly associated with structural problems. Individualised support for artists will not suffice; it is also important to demolish the barriers that make the arts sector unequal. As [Ndzuta \(2021\)](#) argues, ‘the growth problems of the creative and cultural sector are firmly rooted in South Africa’s development agenda. The sector cannot solve its own problems in isolation from other public policies. Just as personal self-development happens in an enabling environment, sector development is possible in a supportive public policy space’.

Instead of promoting a romanticised narrative of the journeys of young black artists, institutions should not only recognise and try to eliminate the ‘entrance fees’ that artists must shoulder when they attempt

to enter the arts sector, but also make an inventory of the tactics that young artists employ to overcome obstacles in their day-to-day work.

Makhubu (2013, p. 418) advocates for ‘the engagement with and contestation of intimidation in [art] institutions [and] for the restoration of these spaces as common’. Recognising that multifarious ‘entrance fees’ are part of the collective experience of young black artists, and that the art sector is not sheltered from the socio-spatial dynamics of segregation, are the first steps in building genuinely innovative and shared art spaces and a truly emancipatory art sector in this post-apartheid city.

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