

## **“Epistemic disobedience: Institution-building as artistic practice”**

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Independent art spaces (for purpose, not profit) have flourished in Africa over the past two decades despite operating in fast-changing cities of flux and with negligible state support. They devise innovative operating models, incubate artists, cross-pollinate other enterprises, engage deeply with local knowledges, and pursue a radical futures thinking. They build new contexts and enabling infrastructures infused by DIY-DIT (do-it-yourself, do-it-together) working principles. Examples range from ‘design-with-people’ plans for an iconic rebuild to exploring everyday ideas around future museums and their more-than-human definitions of care, an ecological mode of thinking that extends into instituting a new art academy. A collective ethos, collaborative economies and solidarity networks are at the heart of these world-making models. Sustainability is not about perpetuating tomorrow what is happening today but rather instituting today what is desired tomorrow. In short, it is institution-building as artistic practice – or, doing things with art.

That is the gist of findings from my arts-based research project *Platform/ Plotform* – conducted in Nairobi (GoDown Arts Centre), Accra (ANO Institute), Cairo (Townhouse Gallery), Addis Ababa (Zoma Museum) and Dar es Salaam (Nafasi Art Space). The study surfaced five shared working principles of these platforms by making correlations between art and city life. In many cities of the South, accelerated rates of modern urbanisation offer useful indicators of what is yet to come, and the findings may appeal to any institution navigating the increasingly shared global condition of uncertainty.

This paper will focus upon the translation of the core research findings from a book – *Panya Routes* (Motto, 2022) – into a teaching module for Nafasi’s new Academy for Contemporary Art, Expression and Inclusion. The academy is built collaboratively from damaged shipping containers and has embraced ecological modes of thinking in its curriculum. Nafasi academy is a lively demonstration of all the working principles of art spaces identified by the research: *horizontality* (community building), *second chance* (upcycling), *performativity* (doing things with art) *elasticity* (responding to context), and *convergence* (creating a desired tomorrow,

today). The paper will share work in progress for designing this 10-module masterclass in collaboration with Nafasi, and how the academy, institution-building and arts-based research have epistemic disobedience in common.

**Keywords:** independent art spaces; institution-building; future museums; Nafasi art space; epistemic disobedience

**Bio:** Dr Kim Gurney is a writer, artist and researcher. She is a Research Fellow at Centre for Humanities Research (UWC) and a Research Associate at African Centre for Cities (UCT). Kim is the author of *Panya Routes: Independent art spaces in Africa* (Motto Books), *August House is Dead, Long Live August House! The Story of a Johannesburg Atelier* (Fourthwall Books), and *The Art of Public Space: Curating and Re-imagining the Ephemeral City* (Palgrave Macmillan). She is busy with a fourth creative non-fiction book, *Flipside*, that brings to literary life the archival stacks of the Association for Visual Arts.