

S A V V Y
CONTEMPORARY
THE LABORATORY
OF FORM-IDEAS

A C O N C E P T
RELOADED

Eight years after the inception of S A V V Y Contemporary – The Laboratory of Form-Ideas in 2009, it is worth re-viewing at the agencies and ambitions, agitations and turbulences, missions and visions that led to its founding. It is worth deliberating on the beaten and unbeaten tracks S A V V Y Contemporary strode and stumbled upon, as well as stating the challenges of the past and the status quo, and redefining the causes and courses.

In order to do these, which is what we intend to do in the next years, one needs to re-pose the question: Why, how and what is S A V V Y Contemporary – The Laboratory of Form-Ideas?

As an art space, discursive platform, eating and drinking spot, njangi house, space for conviviality, S A V V Y Contemporary situates itself at the threshold of notions and constructs of the West and non-West, primarily to understand and negotiate between, and obviously to de-construct the ideologies and connotations eminent to such constructs. For this, it seems appropriate to invoke, convoke or deploy the cosmogenic powers of artists and artistic practice to guide us. On this journey, S A V V Y Contemporary engages in what Paget Henry would call the “poetic power of artistic practice” to “un-name and re-name, to de-institute old selves and establish new ones, and to silence imposed voices and reclaim lost ones” in an effort to resolve the “crisis of entrapment.”¹

Being conscious of its base’s geography and history of power, S A V V Y Contemporary has defined as one of its focal points the urge to deliberate, experiment and experience on issues of conviviality and hospitality. Taking into consideration the rise of xenophobic and racial violence, widening gaps in class and economic realities, revamped hegemonial structures over the last years and decades, the necessity to reflect about hospitality seems to be more important than ever. Derrida sees in the concept of hospitality an ambiguity that stems far back from its proto-Indo-European etymological derivation, which encompasses the words “stranger”, “guest,” but also “power”.² This power gradient inherent in the concept of hospitality is at the root of what Derrida called:

¹ Henry, Paget: Ramabai Espinet and Indo-Caribbean Poeticism, in Marina Banchetti & Clevis Headley (eds), *Shifting the Geography of Reason: Gender, Science and Religion*, Cambridge Scholars Press (2007).

² O’Gormann, Kevin: Modern Hospitality: Lessons from the Past. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 12 (2), 2005, pp 141–151.

*an essential “self limitation” built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one’s own and the “stranger,” between owning one’s own property and inviting the “other” into one’s home.*³

It is to this end that S A V V Y Contemporary actively and performatively tries out strategies of ignoring, abrogating, neutralizing those distances and impediments between the self and the ego, the self and the other, or basically negating the existence of self and other, as categories of differentiation. A possible method of realizing the aforementioned is through radical conviviality and sharing.

S A V V Y Contemporary is a space for epistemological diversity. A space that embodies and screams out Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ postulation that “Another Knowledge is Possible” and vying to his arguments that there is no social justice without global cognitive justice. As de Sousa Santos states, the exclusions, oppressions and discriminations produced by global capitalism have not only had economic, social and political effects upon the world, but have also had detrimental cultural and epistemological effects.⁴ Thus, the urge not only to acknowledge the diversity of epistemologies, but to resist the tendency to universalise Western epistemology as the alpha and omega.

It is here that Donna Haraway’s concept of “Situated Knowledge,” implanted within the context of Feminist Theory, also comes in very handy. By moving away from what she calls “god-trick,”⁵ i.e. the all-seeing eye of Western science that considers itself the omniscient observer, Haraway offers the image of the embodied, complicated, actively seeing eye, which is a split and contradictory observer. Haraway’s argumentations for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims resonate in our practice. So we appropriate proposals on viewing from a body – always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, against the view from above, from nowhere, or from simplicity – and we push this further to

3 Caputo, John D.: *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York, Fordham University Press 2002), p 110.

4 de Sousa Santos, Boaventura et al.: *Opening Up the Canon of Knowledge and Recognition of Difference*, in Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed) *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, London Verso (2008).

5 Haraway, Donna: *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives*, *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988) p 582.

what I will like to call “Associated Situated Knowledges” or just “Associated Knowledges.” While viewing from these bodies, one also puts them in relation, association and companion with each other and their sociopolitical ecology. In so doing, one not only puts the bodies, but also their embodied knowledges, histories, memories in association. In this respect, art and exhibition-making act as catalysts.

At S A V V Y Contemporary we celebrate this plurality of epistemologies as we articulate knowledges as a means of decolonising the singularity of “knowledge,” in line with Lewis Gordon’s reflections on the coloniality of knowledge, when he points out that the mere

*formulation of “knowledge” in the singular already situates the question in a framework that is alien to precolonial times, for the disparate modes of producing knowledge and notions of knowledge were so many that knowledges would be a more appropriate designation. Unification was a function of various stages of imperial realignment, where local reflections shifted their attention to centers elsewhere to the point of concentric collapse. On their way, those varieties of knowledge coalesced into knowledge of the center, and successive collapses of centers under the weight of other centers led, over time, to the global situation of the center and its concomitant organization of knowledges into knowledge.*⁶

S A V V Y Contemporary’s efforts are thus to produce antidotes to the epistemicidal activities that have been practiced all over the globe, by accommodating and celebrating knowledges and epistemic systems from Africa and the African diaspora, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, but also Europe and North America. In so doing we have chosen to explore other mediums that embody and disseminate knowledges like the body, music, storytelling, food/eating, performativity of different kinds e.g. dance, theatre, performing and performance art, etcetera in an effort to swim against the Enlightenment conception of reason. By so doing, we scout out possibilities of escaping

6 Gordon, Lewis: *Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence*, in *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(2), 2011, pp 95–103.

7 Hegel, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm: *The Philosophy of History*, (tr. J. Sibree), 1858, p 99: "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as is Naoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History." Re-echoed in a Speech by Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the French Republic, at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal, on July 26, 2007: "The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. The African peasant, who for thousands of years have lived according to the seasons, whose life ideal was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time, rhythmized by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this imaginary world where everything starts over and over again there is no place for human adventure or for the idea of progress. In this universe where nature commands all, man escapes from the anguish of history that torments modern man, but he rests immobile in the centre of a static order where everything seems to have been written beforehand."

8 Kant, Immanuel: *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* (1764), Trans. John T. Goldthwait, University of California Press, 1961, p 110–111: "Mr Hume challenges anyone to cite a simple example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality; even among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to capacities as in color."

the vicious and violent cycle of re-referencing historical and philosophical assumptions and postulations that found their way and were fundamental in the construction of the other that was needed to establish a European age of reason. Examples of these foundational perpetrators of epistemicide and othering would at best find a spot in footnotes of S A V V Y Contemporary practice.^{7,8}

As Banchetti-Robino and Headley point out, the idea of embodiment of thought – as it was outlined in feminist critiques – intimates the prospect of relocating reason in the corporeality of the thinking subject, rather than in some disembodied and immaterial realm.⁹ It is for this reason that S A V V Y Contemporary sees itself as a performative space. On one hand, because it is a space in a state of constant becoming and on the other hand because it is a space that explores philosophical concepts of the embodied mind – as understood, since time immemorial, in many non-Western philosophies. S A V V Y Contemporary thus acknowledges the fact that human cognition is not only shaped by the brain, but is indeed encompassed in the body, which performs cognitive tasks like conceptualisation, reasoning and judgement – and that it is formed through interactions with the environment or the world at large. This goes hand in hand with postulations by the like of Francesco Varela et al., when they talk about the embodied to imply first and foremost that cognition depends on the kind of experiences that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and secondly, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in more encompassing biological, psychological and cultural contexts.¹⁰ Or Esiaba Irobi, who notably described the body as a site of discourse and a platform on or through which histories can be transmitted or narrated.¹¹

Another issue at stake here is the culture of referencing or not referencing, the culture of canonising some, or leaving others out of the canon – the question of who has the right to legitimise whom. Thus, as much as S A V V Y Contemporary cites references from scholarship circles, it also cultivates what we call the "academia of the fireside." Which means, that all those stories, folktales, recitations

etcetera that are narrated around the fireside are practiced as legitimate sources of reference. The idea is not to create another/parallel canon hereby, but to decanonise the notion of the canon as a whole. So by choosing the body, music, food etcetera as mediums of discourse and knowledge, we delink from the conventional referencing phenomena and propose a more phenomenological approach of dealing with history, memory and knowledge at large. It is not unusual to discover – still – contemporary references to Hume, Kant and Hegel citing their thoughts on Africa. But what is often left out or disputed are the references of great civilisations, discoveries and innovations from the non-West that paved the way to what one now calls a Western civilisation. Eduardo Galeano aptly summarizes these phenomena when he writes on EURO EVERYTHING:

On his deathbed, Copernicus published the book that founded modern astronomy. Three centuries before, Arab scientists Mu'ayyad al-Din al-'Urdu and Nasir al-Din Tusi had come up with the theorems crucial to that development. Copernicus used their theorems but did not cite the source.

Europe looked in the mirror and saw the world. Beyond that lay nothing.

The three inventions that made the Renaissance possible, the compass, gunpowder, and the printing press, came from China. The Babylonians scooped Pythagoras by fifteen hundred years. Long before anyone else, the Indians knew the world was round and had calculated its age. And better than anyone else, the Mayans knew the stars, eyes of the night, and the mysteries of time.

*Such details were not worthy of Europe's attention.*¹²

An important part of our culture is working extradisciplinarily. With team members from eleven countries and five continents trained as biotechnologists, art historians, cultural theorists, anthropologists, designers and artists, we think interdisciplinary work is not enough. One must

9 Banchetti-Robino, Marina Paola and Headley, Clevis Ronald: *Charting the Shifting Geography of Reason, in Shifting the Geography of Reason Gender, Science and Religion*, Cambridge Scholars Press (2007).

10 Rosch, Eleanor; Thompson, Evan and Francisco J. Varela: *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, MIT Press (1991), pp 172–173.

11 Irobi, Esiaba: *The Problem with Post-Colonial Theory: Re-Theorizing African Performance, Orature and Literature in the Age of Globalization and Diaspora Studies*, in *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, Vol. 2 / No. 1, 2008.12 Galeano, Eduardo: *Euro Everything*, in *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, 2009.

12 Galeano, Eduardo: *Euro Everything*, in *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, 2009.

be able to liberate one's self from the tight corset of one's own discipline. Thus when Glissant talks about not leaving history in the hands of historians alone,¹³ he indeed calls for extradisciplinarity, as a plumber, physician or poet can appropriate the role of a historian without having been trained as one. Our effort is thus to go beyond the hierarchisation of disciplines, as well as the incestualisation of disciplines. By thinking extradisciplinary we acknowledge the limits and faults of our discipline and advocate for processes of unlearning to be able to learn something new. S A V V Y Contemporary embraces Lewis Gordon, when he so articulately talks about the teleological suspension of disciplines and the need to fight the forces of disciplinary decadence, which he describes as:

*disciplinary decadence takes the form of one discipline assessing all other disciplines from its supposedly complete standpoint. It is the literary scholar who criticizes work in other disciplines as not literary. It is the sociologist who rejects other disciplines as not sociological. It is the historian who asserts history as the foundation of everything. It is the natural scientist who criticizes the others for not being scientific. And it is also the philosopher who rejects all for not being properly philosophical. Discipline envy is also a form of disciplinary decadence. [...] And then there is decadence at methodological levels. Textualism, for example, infects historiography at the level of archival legitimacy.*¹⁴

At S A V V Y Contemporary we also concern ourselves with issues of language. Language – finding the right words to express what we want to talk about in the way we want to talk about them without the limitations of an inherited, universal language – is of course always an issue in an age of coloniality and hegemonies. “Shifting the boundaries of language” is thus a trial to find a way of expressing thoughts that cannot necessarily be put forward in colonial languages like English, French, Spanish or German. As colonial languages, they might not be able to articulate certain philosophies and world views, because their hegemonic structure and embedded hierarchical systems in relation to knowledge are intrinsic to them. At the same

¹³ Glissant, Édouard: *The Quarrel with History* (1976), in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia (1989), pp 61–67.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 5

time, we concern ourselves with languages and ways of life like Pidgin, Patois and Creole as possibilities of articulating knowledges – also or especially because of their ability to stand out as syncretic languages, their legacy as languages of resistance, their ability to embody, express and disseminate subversivity, and negotiate identities.

Pidginisation as a way of being also means commoning. A popular phrase upon farewell in Cameroonian Franglais pidgin is “on est ensemble” or “we are together” – an almost frantic invocation and incantation of an eminent (re-) assembly or togetherness at some point. This stresses the need to network, to relate – that is to say the need to get together, to take care of each other, be together – which is in itself a stance against the capitalist concept of the lonesome cowboy. From the S A V V Y Contemporary perspective, commoning also stands for “co-” as in collaboration, co-production, co-creation in collectivity. This should be understood as a concept of radical sharing. This sharing goes beyond the physical, as we look into the concept of the collective mind and the noosphere. But commoning should also stand for common sense as in being savvy, as in exercising the knowledge of the quotidian. This too is of course a political stance that reflects upon our view that certain natural and cultural resources such as air, water, habitat, land or basic human rights must be available to all members of societies, rather than at the disposal of sovereignty or private companies and their speculation economies.

We propose to move with Sylvia Wynter “towards the Human, after Man”¹⁵ with S A V V Y Contemporary giving space to reflect on colonialities of power (Anibal Quijano) and how these affect histories, geographies, gender and race. It is a space wherein epistemological disobedience and delinking (Walter Dignolo) are practiced, and it is a space for decolonial practices and aesthetics through exhibition making, discursive programmes, performances, archives, and residencies, as we are aware of the fact that:

...colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with

¹⁵ Wynter, Sylvia: *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument*, in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2003, pp 257–337.

holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it.¹⁶

¹⁶ Fanon, Franz: *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), New York: Grove Press (1963).

C O N T A C T

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