

THE SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCH CHAIRS INITIATIVE

RESEARCH CHAIR: *Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa: Agency, Diversity and Democratisation* - Professor Ruth Simbao.



Professor Ruth Simbao
Photo: Paul Greenway/3pphotography

radical expressions of contemporary geopolitics. I'm probably most comfortable at those intersections, and in my view it is in these interdisciplinary interstices that the most cutting-edge work is being done."

In her capacity as the National Research Foundation SARCHI Chair in 'Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa', Simbao argues that artists and scholars in Africa need to find a way of challenging - and subverting - dominant perspectives from the 'north', an intellectual strategy she refers to as 'strategic southernness'. Simbao has a strong awareness of the complexities of what the 'south' might mean, and her notion of 'strategic southernness' focuses on strategic acts of re-writing that are based on self-identification and the production of knowledge that is contextually embedded. "'Strategic southernness' and 'sideways' engagement with the rest of Africa and other parts of the 'global south' are critical at this socio-political and socio-economic juncture", says Simbao, "but it is important to view such strategies as temporary and conceptually fluid. We shouldn't need the same strategies in the future if the disruptions to dominant discourses have significant impact."

Simbao has been instrumental in attracting Postgraduate students to the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University, and there are currently 19 Postgraduates in the SARCHI Arts of Africa Research Team (AART). "We are at a critical point in the shaping of the international discourse of the contemporary visual and performing arts of Africa, and there is a need for more scholarly writers on the African continent to play leading roles in shifting the centre of gravity of the global academy so that the artwork on the continent is not predominantly theorised by the 'north' as if it is merely raw material for the consumption of scholars elsewhere". Much of the research of the SARCHI Arts of Africa Research Team is about re-positioning Africa and situating the production of knowledge on the continent without being territorial or theoretically regressive.

"There is a tendency in the discourse of contemporary art", she suggests, "to falsely assume that an emphasis on the African continent is driven by a conservative, continentalist perspective, as if Africa is not characterised by transcontinental and contra-flow movement". Her interest in spatiality is driven by the art world's simplistic fetishisation of mobility, and the

BY HER OWN admission, Professor Ruth Simbao is difficult to pin down as a scholar. While she trained as an art historian, she finds certain aspects of the discipline constricting. "Art history in the traditional sense can be quite boring and certain traits of its Eurocentric roots stubbornly and problematically persist," she says. "I prefer to talk about visual studies and to engage in an interdisciplinary way, bringing in, for example, issues of spatiality and mobility in human and cultural geography, as well as

false assumption that small, local places are not profoundly touched by movement too. "I have developed the term 'cosmolocalism'" she says, "as a way of moving beyond elitist notions of cosmopolitanism that too facilely imply that smaller spaces or specific local places are inevitably parochial".

The discourse is changing, however, and inroads are being made in terms of moving the dominant discourse of 'African art' away from the privileged institutions of Western Europe and North America. "It's an exciting time for our team to be engaging with these discussions, and in light of South African exceptionalism, it's important for the team to be made up of students, visiting writers and artists from other parts of Africa". In 2016 students, scholars and artists from Zambia, Zimbabwe and Uganda engaged with the SARCHI programme, and the Chair is planning collaborations with scholars and artists in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia, as well other parts of the 'global south' such as Brazil, Cuba and Jamaica.

As part of the SARCHI research programme, Simbao will launch a pan-African database and website in 2017 that connects and raises the profile of scholars in the visual and performing arts who are based on the African continent. The database and website aim to share knowledge in the discipline and increase the visibility of scholarly writers through monthly profiles, featured writers and links to scholarly articles. This year she also launched a publishing workshop that focuses on the production of articles in the discipline and which in the future will take place annually in different African cities. These activities, she argues gently, are a way of 'writing back' against the structures that have, since the early 1990s, dominated this relatively new international discourse. She views these activities as a means of hollowing out space for scholarly interventions by Africans in a discourse that is largely defined elsewhere and that tends to have a self-congratulatory tone.

"The rhetoric typical of exhibitions of contemporary African art on international platforms is riddled with language of the 'first', the 'biggest' and the 'best'", she says. "This perpetuates the dominance of privileged arts institutions and ignores a lot of really good work that might take place in smaller spaces or alternative venues and that are not documented by exhibition catalogues and books that receive hefty funding".

In response to such grandstanding, Simbao finds herself increasingly open to theoretical concepts of smallness, modesty and so-called failure, all of which cannily subvert the deforming gaze of the 'north'. "I've started to write about issues of scale and the positive embrace of failure in a non-linear and non-

hierarchical way", she says. Her goal is to prise open a strategic discursive space for her and others to explore "the small, everyday episodes and modest gestures in art and culture that subvert representations of spectacle that continue to plague perceptions of 'Africa' and 'African art'".

Simbao first engaged with alternative views of failure when she curated a performance by Athi Patra-Ruga, which according to the paying art audience did not pan out as expected, but which, to Simbao, was "a beautiful 'flop' that subverted the gaze of a privileged audience and instead communicated more meaningfully with passersby on the street."

In 2016, the SARCHI Chair will revive the Residencies for Artists and Writers (RAW) programme that Simbao founded in 2014, which links scholarly writers from the African continent to artists. She is eager to invite the Ghanaian artist, Ibrahim Mahama, who drapes jute sacks once used to carry cocoa over large buildings as temporary installations. "Mahama's intervention could be a very power statement if he draped just sacks over a colonial building on campus or an apartheid-era building elsewhere in Grahamstown" she says with the merest hint of a smile.