UNIVERSITY
of York

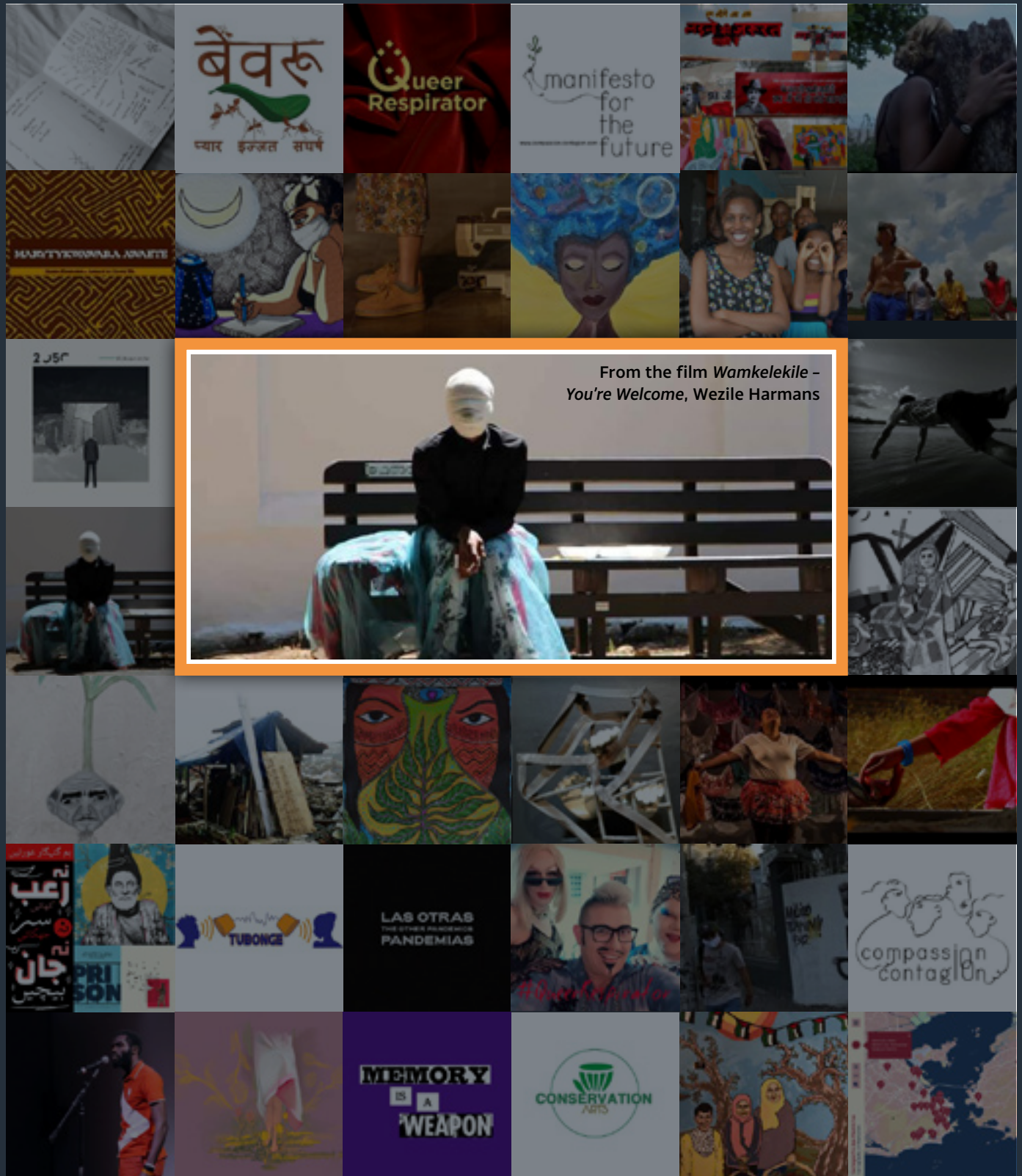# The role of art in keeping civic space open

Pippa Cooper, Pamela Enyonu, Emilie Flower, Wezile Harmans and Rochelle Porras

From the film *Wamkelekile – You're Welcome*, Wezile Harmans

The Arctivism Project

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic oppressive governments have exploited the crisis to restrict civic and public space, to limit rights and freedoms, to silence journalists, and to stifle dissent. The rights to peaceful assembly and to free expression in particular have been suppressed. Recognising the role art can play in promoting human rights and social justice, soon after the pandemic began the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York launched its first call for Arctivists, seeking collaborations of artists and activists to respond to the crisis in reactive, therapeutic or imaginative form.

As the crisis continued, the impact on human rights became increasingly apparent with a deepening of existing divides and inequalities. A second call in partnership with ActionAid International responded to the increased burden of care and the violence experienced by women, the danger of misinformation, and the increasing restrictions on civil and political rights.

To date, forty projects from twenty-three countries have been funded. Through theatre, sculpture, music, zines, painting, poetry, murals and drag performance these collaborations have addressed socio-economic inequalities, the challenges for women and for Indigenous peoples, and the threats posed by authoritarianism and popularism, and have considered imaginative futures. Furthermore the projects have highlighted our global connectedness and shown new possibilities for creative innovation, resistance and solidarity.

https://www.hrdhub.org/arctivism

To date, **40** projects from **23** countries have been funded.

About the authors

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Pamela Enyonu is a multi-disciplinary artist and was a collaborating artist on CAHR's AHRC-funded project Development Alternatives, exploring how the arts can expand civic space and the political imagination.

Emilie Flower is an associate researcher and resident artist at CAHR. Emilie coordinated the Development Alternatives project and recently published her research on Supporting Human Rights Defenders and Social Movements in Contexts of Shrinking Civic and Democratic Space.

Wezile Harmans is an art practitioner whose interdisciplinary practice encompasses performance, film and installation as a tool for social change; his Arctivism project is The Politics of Displacement.
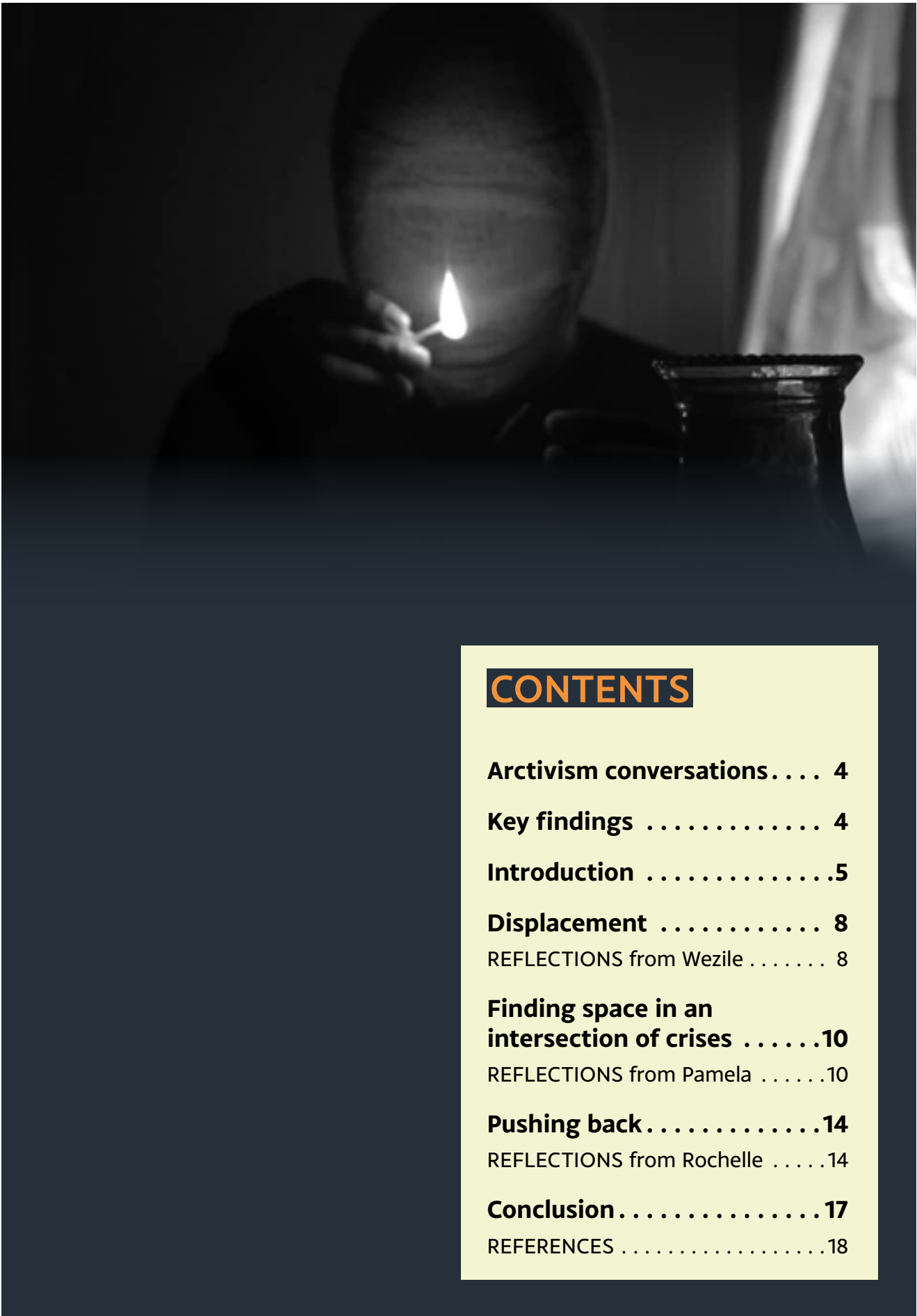
Rochelle Porras is from the Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research (EILER) in the Philippines and led the Arctivism project ReImagining Resistance.

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CONTENTS

ARCTIVISM CONVERSATIONS

This series of working papers is based on conversations that took place between artists, activists and academics as part of the Arctivism project at the Human Rights Defender Hub, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York. These Arctivism Conversations aimed to explore in more detail the creative practices of collaborations between artists and activists, to capture the innovative models of working and the key themes that evolved in the Arctivism project, and to better understand the role of art in activism. With these Arctivism Conversations as a starting point, the papers in this series take the form of a learning conversation.

This paper is based on the first conversation in the series – The Role of Art in Keeping Civic Space Open. In a webinar in July 2021, Emilie Flower moderated a discussion in which panellists explored the role art can play in keeping civic and political spaces open in times of emergency, how artists and activists have responded to the pandemic, and the ways in which artists and activists can push back to promote and protect human rights. The conversation was transcribed, re-ordered according to the key themes that emerged during the discussion, and edited, before being returned to the panellists for their comment. This co-written piece of work forms the main body of this paper, which is introduced by a brief review of relevant literature to situate the discussion and introduce the conversation.

KEY FINDINGS

- During the pandemic art was used to highlight the intersections between private and public spaces, between the home (as a repressive, restrictive or insular space) and external events and spaces.

- Artists also reflected on intersecting crises, with the pandemic layered on top of existing and new challenges, such as electoral violence and attacks on workers and journalists.

- Art is depicted as at once available to all – 'we are all artists' – and as exclusive and restrictive, notably as not everyone has access to the internet.

- Artists could use forms of communication – metaphor, symbolism, satire, discursive or conversational methods – to convey messages that more confrontational formats were unable to communicate.

- Artists found collaborations with activists restrictive in certain ways (with donors setting predetermined outputs and outcomes) and enabling in others (with activists providing access to information, communities, policy processes). Artistic activism can be most effective when it enables artists and activists to find 'common ground' on an issue of shared concern.

INTRODUCTION

The international monitoring body CIVICUS describes civic space as 'the place, physical, virtual and legal, where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly' (Civicus, 2019). These three fundamental freedoms guarantee all people the rights to protest peacefully, to express their views and opinions, and to form associations, and are a key part of democratic societies. For decades these rights have increasingly been under threat. In 2015 the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai, referred to shrinking civic space as a defining human rights issue and suggested in many places civic space was not shrinking, but gone (United Nations, 2016). States have abused their powers, often through counter terrorism and national security laws, to limit freedom of expression, to stifle dissent and to prevent protest. Governments have attacked the legitimacy of civil society organisations (CSOs), often suggesting they are controlled by foreign powers, and have restricted their activities and passed laws to prevent them receiving funding (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2019). In a 2019 report into the global crackdown on civil society organisations Amnesty International found at least 50 countries had introduced legislation to curtail the work of CSOs (Amnesty International, 2019). Even more worrying are the repressive practices states carry out against civil society actors, journalists and human rights defenders particularly, that are not legal: harassment, threats, violence, arbitrary detention, and even death (Kreienkamp, 2017).

Already under threat, civic space has been further adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic with attacks on human rights and civic space reaching unprecedented levels (Bethke and Wolff, 2020). Countless emergency laws and other extraordinary measures that limit fundamental rights and freedoms have been adopted in the name of preventing the spread of the virus in what has been termed a parallel crisis for civic space (ICNL, 2020).

In a study of the impact of the pandemic by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, CSOs reported worse conditions, an intensification of threats and attacks, and an increase in limits on their freedom (FRA, 2021). Restrictions on freedom of assembly have been introduced in 122 countries and whilst controlling movement may have at times been necessary due to public health concerns, there is evidence governments have taken advantage of the pandemic to target civic space (Joshi, 2020). Research by the Institute of Development Studies found examples of a wide range of measures ostensibly introduced to control the spread of the virus that threatened fundamental freedoms: curbs on media freedoms, increased regulation of online spaces and limits to freedom of expression, the harsh imposition of quarantine and lockdown rules, often disproportionately targeting marginalised groups, the use of excessive force to target dissent and attack on political opponents, restricted access to information and the spread of disinformation, greater restrictions on CSOs, and strict controls on the right to protest (Anderson et al, 2021). The study showed that Covid-19 gave states 'the opportunity and the impetus' for 'attacks on civic freedoms and space' and provided 'cover for further repression and attacks'(ibid;24).

There are examples of attacks on civic space and the misuse of Covid-related measures in the countries that concern this paper. In Uganda in the lead up to elections the incumbent government took advantage of restrictions imposed for public health reasons to prevent campaigning and protests, and to detain opposition supporters (Cheeseman, 2021). In the Philippines, the government of President Duarte passed an emergency law to introduce public health measures which at the same time

Already under threat, civic space has been further adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic with attacks on human rights and civic space reaching unprecedented levels

significantly increased the President's emergency powers (Freedom House, 2021). In South Africa a national lockdown was enforced by thousands of police and soldiers and public movement became subject to some of the strictest controls anywhere in the world (Ainembabazi et al, 2021).

These limits on democratic freedoms have impacted all areas of civil society and the artistic community has been no exception. Whilst lockdown restrictions had an obvious economic impact on artists, many also experienced constraints on their artistic freedom. A report by Freemuse showed Covid-related measures were frequently exploited and used as pretexts to silence the dissident voices of artists and artworks; the report found that governments have 'weaponised' the Covid health crisis to attack freedom of expression, with 17 artists killed, 82 imprisoned and 133 detained in the first year of the pandemic (Freemuse, 2021).

Whilst civil society has been disrupted by these widespread violations of the right to freedom of expression, and of the rights to association and assembly, there has also been considerable civic activism and the 'emergence of new actors, issues, coalitions, and repertoires' during the Covid-19 pandemic (Nampoothiri and Artuso, 2021). Civil society actors in countries around the world have responded to attempts to close civic space by forging new coalitions and undertaking new forms of advocacy and of civic mobilisation (Brechenmacher et al, 2020). There has been a pushback; communities and citizens 'have provided meaningful solutions and glimpses of hope' (Lacelle-Webster et al, 2021: 166).

During the pandemic such glimpses of hope have often come from artists who have found creative ways to reach audiences, to keep people connected, and to enhance the wellbeing of others (Stcherbatcheff, 2020; Lovett, 2020). They have undertaken projects to deliver public health messages and to counter misinformation.[1] Furthermore, as civic space has been increasingly threatened, arts activism has sustained movements and increased political participation (Aryani Suwito, 2020).

The powerful role that art can play in activism has long been recognised and there is extensive scholarship on the influence of art on social change and social justice, including the role of art for expanding public and civic space (Mouffe, 2007; Mbembe, 2009; Bishop, 2012; Barber, 2018). Art can express dissent and inspire change; it can help spark and sustain political engagement and collective action (Stern and Seifert, 2009; Kester, 2017); it can be a medium of resistance in the form of hidden transcripts where civic space has shrunk (Scott, 1990); and it can provide a way to articulate resistance (Lorde, 1984). Through participatory arts there is the potential to disrupt dominant imaginations (Bishop, 2012), to create new ways of knowing through collective conversations (Kester, 2010), and to expand the political imagination. As political theorist Achille Mbembe (2009) writes, art can pave a way for a 'practice of the imagination' and the struggle to 'write our name in history'.

This paper considers the role art has played in responses to closing civic space in three contexts. The first discussion is based on Wezile Harmans' contributions to the Arctivism Conversation in which he reflects on how art can be both a coping mechanism and a tool for social change. His account is based on his Arctivism project *The Politics of Displacement,* an interdisciplinary project in which performance, visual, sound and speech were combined to explore the dynamics of displacement and reintegration during Covid-19 in South Africa and to ensure there was a space for freedom of expression.

The next analysis centres on Pamela Enyonu's narrative of her experience of the pandemic in Uganda. It continues the theme of the healing power of art, describing how important this was to artists isolated during lockdown and how Pamela herself turned to painting when the loss

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1   Examples include creative artists involved in public health campaigns in Latin America, see for example 'Artistas Visuales Latinos Ayudan a la OPS a Combatir la Pandemia de Coronavirus' from Noticias ONU available at: *https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/08/1479692*; delivering public health messages in the US 'Artists Against an Infodemic: The Public Art Campaign Fighting Covid-19' by Marigold Warner, editor of the British Journal of Photography available at *https://www.1854.photography/2020/05/artists-against-an-infodemic/*; and countering misinformation such as 'Gilberto lopez: Combatting Vaccine Misinformation through Art' in Salud America available at *https://salud-america.org/gilberto-lopez-combatting-vaccine-misinformation-through-art/ (all accessed 14 December 2021)*

of work left her wondering how, as an artist, she could survive. She explains how civic space in Uganda was impacted by both the restrictive measures that were introduced, purportedly to protect public health, and the worst election-related violence in decades. Pamela considers the role art played in responding to these intersectional crises, including how activists claimed new digital spaces despite government attempts to shut down the internet.

Our final examination of the role of art in keeping civic space open is based on the words of Rochelle Porras from the Philippines who coordinated the project *ReImagining Resistance in Times of Oppression* and the exhibition *Art and Activism in Defense of Labor Rights.* The project responded to increased restrictions on the freedoms of association and expression, and the repression of workers' rights. In her discussion of the project Rochelle illustrates how artists and activists collaborated to make use of both physical and online spaces to push back against closing spaces for workers and unions.

The project responded to increased **restrictions** on the freedoms of association and expression, and the **repression** of workers' rights.

DISPLACEMENT

In the first section of this paper, Wezile Harmans discusses a project he undertook in the first months of the pandemic that interrogated the dynamics of space and of displacement, both between nations and within households. Wezile considers the role art can play as a coping mechanism, as well as its power to disrupt and to resist, but also highlights the tension between a desire to ensure art be available to all and the constraints that render art exclusive.

REFLECTIONS from Wezile

Wezile Harmans' Arctivism project *The Politics of Displacement* studied the process of negotiating space. In his words,

From the film *Wamkelekile – You're Welcome*, **Wezile Harmans**

'... this was a time when as well as fighting the outbreak we were also negotiating space within ourselves. The lockdown resulted in not just displacement between nations but there was also displacement within our households such as those who were forced to be in a space that maybe he or she was running away from. In this new reality there was no retreat, no time to get away; you had to make a home in the space you were familiar with, but not really familiar with, and were therefore displaced in this place. This is what this project focussed on – the spaces we stay in, how we negotiate this space, and how this affects us, especially mentally and emotionally. The project acknowledged that displacement is undeniably destructive and traumatic in multiple ways but suggested that it can also create new practices of power.'

The artwork for the project was a documentary and some formative stills, however, Wezile felt that the most important and the most interesting part of the project was the process. Materials were used to create conversations with artists, activists, and members of the local community, and thus to understand how people experienced the pandemic in different places, what could have been done to make things seem or look better, and how to find a way to survive. In this way, the project took a discursive rather than didactic approach, a less direct way of challenging shrinking civic space. Whilst the project was

collaborative, it was local people who directed the work, chose what was presented and how, and voiced their opinions. Wezile explains,

'... a core principal of the project was that we are all artists, expressing ourselves in different ways and constantly performing our lives. For this reason, it was important that others were given a platform to say anything, were given the chance to value their lives. Providing a space for people to truly be themselves and to speak about what really mattered to them was genuinely empowering; it enabled them to voice their concerns and to create a conversation they might not have had otherwise.'

The project reinforced the importance of art and art spaces and also made people realise how art can be used as a tool, in this case as a coping mechanism. As art is one of the few mediums people are able to enjoy at home, in lockdown,

From the film *Wamkelekile – You're Welcome*, Wezile Harmans

the impact of art on people, its possibilities to help us socially and economically, became clearer.

In South Africa, rather than the pandemic causing civic space to shrink, it revealed that civic space in the country was already more closed than people had realised. For example, civic space is impacted by the lack of internet which is unavailable to many people. Thus, as the pandemic necessitated more aspects of people's lives to move online artwork too had to appear in digital format making it appear to be an exclusive medium. Wezile emphasises how

'it became even more of a challenge to make artwork accessible to the public, to produce work for everyone to see so that they have a sense that it belongs to them, is part of them, and is part of who they are. It has also been extremely frustrating that performances have not been able to go ahead during lockdown.' Wezile highlights here the tension between the claim that art is available to all and at the same time access is restricted to an elite group with the infrastructural or financial means to access the internet.

A key role of Wezile's practice is to make space, to create a platform for further conversations, to put the subject out there to inspire thinking in a different way. People have conversations as a result of his work and this is really important to him. For Wezile, this is the whole meaning of art – it is another way of expressing views, different views. As he says,

'Artwork can reveal a lot of things, there is a lot of learning and unlearning through art, indeed the contribution of art is unlimited. As well as creating spaces to challenge and disrupt, and to resist, art can create space for expression, a freedom that has seen serious restrictions during the pandemic.

Art should not be something that we look at and then the next morning we move on; art is something we should reflect on, apply or use.'

FINDING SPACE IN AN INTERSECTION OF CRISES

In this next section we hear from an artist in Uganda. Pamela Enyonu describes the impact of lockdowns on artists and artistic space before reflecting on how artists in Uganda responded when two crises intersected – the pandemic and electoral violence. Avoiding more confrontational formats of communication, artists responded with metaphor, satire and symbolism. Like Wezile, Pamela finds that art is not accessible to all; in this case it is the prohibitive cost of internet access and the imposition of a tax on the use of social media that exclude many from accessing digital spaces. Pamela concludes with a reflection on the ways in which collaborations between activists and artists can be both restrictive and enabling.

REFLECTIONS from Pamela

During the pandemic Ugandan artist Pamela Enyonu began to paint. Having not painted in ten years, her return to painting, re-learning the skill, was in part a way to keep her mind busy, a response to the loneliness that the pandemic seemed to intensify. She describes her feelings after the lockdown began and she lost her source of income, and the impact of the lack of contact with others:

Nambi Myth Book – Pamela Enyonu

'I remember I had some projects that were supposed to happen in the Netherlands and in Senegal, so I was in a slight state of panic for a bit. For me as an artist mobility facilitates my work, it makes sure that I get paid so if I'm not moving or I'm doing a different project then I'm not getting paid. So that meant being grounded and having to think of alternative ways in which to survive. And I chose to focus on just keeping my mind busy, so I started painting again. I hadn't painted in 10 years. I started re-learning the particular skill of painting and I did that throughout the whole pandemic.

So the very first painting I did was responding to all the loneliness that the pandemic seemed to amplify for me. I was lucky that I was sheltering at home with family but I knew people who were sheltering at home by themselves, abroad or in another part of the district.

I used to take the things we do socially for granted. The human touch of going to the club and dancing and drinking with friends. And all of that seemed to be restricted or taken away. Because while introverts seemed to be having a good time, extroverts were suffering because they needed the energy of other people around them.'

Nambi Myth Book – **Pamela Enyonu**

The first artwork Pamela completed during lockdown was representative of the presence that extroverts missed, the energy of other people around them, the human touch, the things we do socially that we had taken for granted. However, artists were not only impacted by lockdowns that restricted their access to the spaces they were used to inhabiting. Around this time artists in Uganda were also affected by and responding to first, the closing down of the internet and social media, and subsequently, the rising violence that occurred in the lead up to presidential and parliamentary elections. Pamela explains,

'Last year we were preparing for an election and when the election campaign started people were actively using social media but our government, which is full of old men, was not as savvy as their opponent, Bobby Wine. So those avenues were locked down.'

The Ugandan government was able to use the recently introduced computer act, legislation that was vague, open to interpretation, and likely to be used to control dissent, to ensure Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram were all temporarily locked down. As the election campaigning progressed, artists and activists were arbitrarily arrested, taken from their homes and driven to unknown locations where many of them remain today. This intersection of two crises, the pandemic and the election violence, left artists with a choice: either to direct their attention to the pandemic and the impact it was having on them, or to respond to an extremely violent political situation, to write about their own economic precarity or about the human rights violations being perpetrated by state security forces. For many people the elections, and the violence that resulted, became a much bigger story than the pandemic. Pamela describes how she felt,

'So as an artist I think I was depressed. I didn't know what I wanted to talk about because I thought, I have no food but people are dying, they were being beaten on the street. It was a very difficult thing for me so I started to write poems, which I'm still working on, and to develop a project which will hopefully see the light of day. Because at that time I was not even thinking about the logistics or trying to have a proper project, I was basically responding to what was going on around me, and writing was the only way that I could, so I started to write.'

Other Ugandan artists responded to the pandemic through comedy, using humour to survive the trauma, so there were a lot of funny skits on the internet critiquing how the government handled the pandemic. The work the artists produced documented the times, allowed Ugandans to laugh about the terrible situation, and also provoked the government into responding to some of the critiques. Artists

were able to say the things they did, because of the format they used to convey their messages, something that other people were not able to do. Pamela explains how this was done by using metaphor to avoid confrontation,

'... we are a very polite society, as Ugandans, we don't confront things directly so things are layered in metaphor and art is an excellent tool for you to layer a huge amount of information in a metaphor or in an image. We will get it. The government will get it. But there is no direct way to arrest anybody for saying it.'

Just as Pamela reflected on the situation in Uganda in her poetry, other Ugandan artists, unsure if the atrocities occurring as a result of the violence would be recorded, found a way to document the human rights violations being committed and share their work for free on the internet. This was despite online spaces not having been fully utilised prior to Covid-19 and the Ugandan elections, principally because internet in Uganda is one of the most expensive in East Africa, making online space still an exclusionary space. A tax for using social media platforms further discourages the use of virtual spaces so that in a country of 45 million people there are only around 10 million mobile users. Thus, digital spaces remain the domain of a certain class or a certain social category. Artists also had to contend with lockdowns to the internet and social media imposed by the state. Nevertheless, because television and radio were heavily censored during the pandemic people were determined to find a way to access the internet and to remove some of the barriers put up by the government. As a result, citizen journalism was used to deliver news and information directly to WhatsApp.

Throughout the intersecting crises of election violence and the ongoing pandemic, artists and activists worked together to draw attention to the government's failings in handling the Covid-19 pandemic and the State's role in the widespread

A tax for using social media platforms further discourages the use of virtual spaces so that in a country of 45 million people there are only around 10 million mobile users.

election violence by finding new spaces to get their message across. Such collaborations between artists and activists in times of crisis have many advantages but Pamela recognises that there may also be the risk of compromising the work of artists. Many activists and activist organisations are responsible to donors and there can be an undercurrent of what a project's end result should look like; there may also be a requirement to be sure not to offend. Pamela summarises these difficulties:

'[Activists] may not want to confront, or rather they don't want to confront the idea that some of these funders are the perpetrators of the violence we see around us, they are the instruments of capitalism and oppression. … As an artist your work is at the intersection of all these issues and you may find yourself either having to edit and find another way, and even sometimes not do the work at all, because if you don't feel it will be true and authentic you may just abandon the whole project.'

Nevertheless, activists have access to information, statistics, numbers and policies and combining an artist's imagination with an activist or organisation's research can strengthen their work. Such collaborations also have the benefit of access; activists can have access to certain spaces that may not necessarily be open to artists. Pamela concludes that in her experience there are many reasons why collaborations between artists and activists are of value:

'What I like or rather enjoy about working with activists is because they also have access to certain spaces I'm interested in but are not necessarily open to me as an artist from a different region who speaks a different language. But when you work with these activists and activist-organisations they really earn the trust of the people in the community in which they work so you can have a first-hand, first-person experience when working with them. You get to listen to stories that have happened to real people and then it's like a wealth of information for you as an artist and also to check your own biases and things like that so I absolutely like that about working with activists.'

…activists have access to information, statistics, numbers and policies and combining an artist's **imagination** with an activist or organisation's **research** can strengthen their work

PUSHING BACK

The theme of the intersection of crises during the pandemic continues in this final section of the paper, this time in the Philippines. Once again Covid-19 is both a pretext for stringent emergency measures and an opportunity for increasing state brutality, such as attacks on journalists and workers.

The role of art as a medium of communication and the way it can be a means of pushing back are again discussed before the section concludes with a reflection on the way the crises drew artists and activists together and on the effectiveness of this collective action.

REFLECTIONS from Rochelle

The Philippines continues to be one of the worst countries in the world for workers as they and their representatives face intimidation, arbitrary arrest, violent attacks and even state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings; in 2021 twenty-eight union representatives were illegally arrested and seven union leaders were killed (ITUC, 2021). It is also in the ranks of countries with the most retaliatory killings of journalists, with perpetrators of these murders largely going unpunished; twenty-one journalists have been killed since President Duterte took power in 2016 (Agence France-Presse, 2021). Community leaders, Indigenous peoples and human rights defenders also face great risk. This already precarious situation for journalists, workers and human rights defenders was further exacerbated in 2020 by the passing of a new terror law (Amnesty International, 2020). The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 gave the government even greater powers and resulted in the 'red-tagging' or branding of many human rights defenders, Indigenous community leaders, and organisations, including trade unions, as communists and terrorists, as if the two are equivalent.

This type of vilification, of labelling, poses incalculable dangers to people, especially activists and progressive organisations, and has led to numerous unlawful detentions and killings (Voice of America, 2021). Forty human rights defenders were killed in the Philippines between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2021 with environmental defenders and defenders of
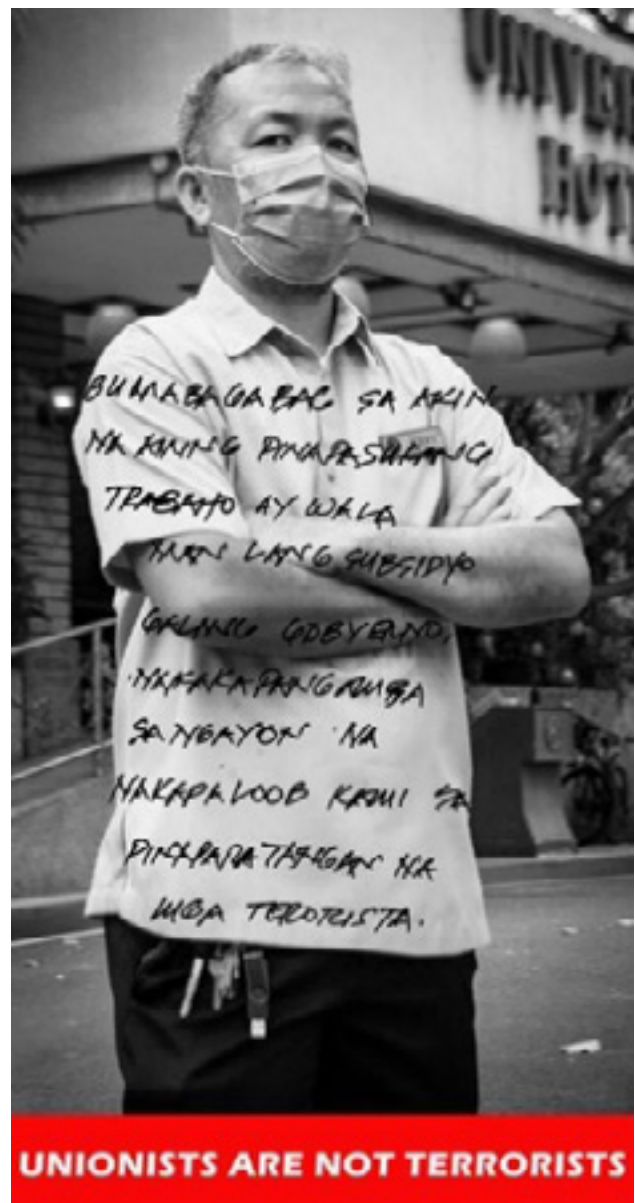
Jerry, unionist from the University Hotel Workers Union.
Photo by Neil Ambion

EILER staff prepare the ISTRAYK! exhibit before the mobilisation begins for the Global Day of Action Against Trade Union Repression, November 2020. Photo by Mayday Multimedia

Indigenous communities at particular risk of violence and death at the hand of the police and the military (FIDH, 2021).

The project *ReImagining Resistance in Times of Repression* recognised a desire among the general public in the Philippines to push back against the repressive laws, guidelines and policies that were being implemented in their country. The project responded to the demands of the people and contributed to their resistance by amplifying their voices, and did so by featuring the artwork of trade union activists and cultural workers.

This artwork showed the struggles and repression that workers and trade union organisers were facing on the ground in the Philippines. Sixteen small artworks of varying sizes were collected as well as the main centre piece which featured 12 large scale monochromatic photographs with handwritten statements by workers superimposed on the photographs. The handwritten notes expressed

calls to action to workers, highlighted working conditions and called on the government to meet their legitimate demands.

The resulting output was an online and physical exhibition entitled *The Strike – Art Against Repression*. The physical exhibition was held outside during lockdown and intentionally coincided with a demonstration on one of the most important days for workers in the Philippines – the Global Day of Action Against Trade Union Repression. Due both to the Philippines having one of the longest running lockdowns in the world and to the current government's inaction, people were very committed to joining protests and demonstrations in the streets, and specifically to responding to the call against trade union repression. People from many different organisations took part and lots of pictures were taken and posted on social media, so the exhibition became accessible to many who would not normally have the opportunity to visit a museum or art gallery. In Rochelle's words,

'[the workers who wrote the handwritten notes] were delighted as they got to see curated artworks in a space that is a ground for protesting. It was held in the University of the Philippines, one of the places of protest during the pandemic. [The exhibition brought] a kind of hope, amid the pandemic, because everyone was in a lockdown. At that time of the year it was one of the biggest mobilisations and people were gathered to collectively call for a better response from the government. And what better way to amplify that call than to express it in a form of art, something that anyone, ordinary people, can relate to.'

The artists approached to work on this exhibition were very receptive to the idea and worked jointly with the workers to develop the artwork. The central theme of the exhibition resonated with the common experiences everyone was facing at the time – heightened restrictions, and the lack of mobility and access to certain services. There was a lot of frustration with the inaction and the failed responses of the government and the theme of the exhibition united the artists, activists, civil society organisations, and the workers who were able to take collective action and work towards a common goal of using art to express the legitimate demands of the workers for better responses during the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic artists and activists in the Philippines have responded to closing civic space by doing collaborative work that gives voice to the marginalised. Art has also played a critical role in drawing attention to the political killing of trade unionists, which often go unreported by regular newsfeeds and undiscussed in the context of closing civic spaces.

Art has been used more widely to open avenues for further discussions on issues of social justice, to express the demands of the people and to convey their suffering. The work that artists produce can promote people's collective rights and help amplify the rights of the people in times of extreme suppression of their rights. In the case of this exhibition, for example, it was the fundamental rights of workers, the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, that were conveyed through art.

Reflecting on the collaboration with artists Rochelle did not believe that they had to compromise on their work or on their message,

'I think it was not really a challenge but finding the middle ground, or the common ground, the common goal, the collective action that you can take that both use the art and express the message you wanted. We were able to invite artists from different backgrounds and the way we see it is that they're united against … trade union repression. So, if we're able to find the issue that both artists and activists and civil society can work on I think it becomes less of a challenge and more of an exercise of finding the unity that you can work upon.'

Throughout the pandemic artists and activists in the Philippines have responded to closing civic space by doing collaborative work that gives voice to the marginalised.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic enabled governments to restrict the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, often necessarily, but frequently as a means of controlling dissent. Authoritarian leaders such as Museveni in Uganda and Duarte in the Philippines were able to tighten their grip on power and exploit curfews, lockdowns and other emergency measures to contain the pandemic to curtail political freedom, to restrict civil liberties, to criminalise dissent, and to clamp down on civil society (Abrahamsen and Bareebe, 2021).

Artists and activists have responded to this repression and pushed back against closing civic space. In South Africa, artist Wezile Harmans recognised the restrictions to freedom of expression and so created a space to disrupt and resist, a platform for expression. Ugandan artist Pamela Enyonu used different art forms for different kinds of comments – painting to represent absence, the more slow-moving process of poetry to reflect on the election violence. Other artists and activists in Uganda used sarcasm and satire both to entertain and also to draw attention to the failings of the government, recognising that comedy can be a form of 'expressing opposition, establishing political subjectivity, and bolstering civic support' (Davis et al, 2018: 3906). In the Philippines a labour organisation made use of art to communicate the demands and appeals of workers to the wider public and draw attention to their fight against oppression by staging an exhibition during a traditional demonstration.

Through the accounts of the recent work of Wezile, Pamela and Rochelle we have seen how art can draw society's attention to issues and struggles and complement traditional forms of activism, corroborating the findings of Goodman and Moynihan that '[a]rt is powerful. It moves people. It inspires. It unites. It provokes the power elite' (Goodman and Moynihan, 2009: ix). By articulating their concerns, responses of artists during the pandemic have demonstrated how art has 'the power to provoke, inspire, inform … particularly in times of crisis' (Harvard University Events, 2020). Claiming public space to protect freedom of expression, using comedy and artistic dexterity to highlight the intersectional crises of the pandemic and election violence, and incorporating artwork into a workers' protest are three ways in which artists and activists have contributed to the promotion and protection of human rights and have pushed back against closing civic space.

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