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**A Place of Occurrence for Art and Art Education.  
A Conversation with Flavia Stara \*  
and Stephen Muoki Joshua \*\***

**Un luogo di accadimento per l'arte e l'educazione all'arte.  
Conversazione con Flavia Stara  
e Stephen Muoki Joshua**

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## A Place of Occurrence for Art and Art Education

A Conversation with Flavia Stara and Stephen Muoki Joshua

*In April 2022, Massimo Meccarelli met Stephen Muoki Joshua, Professor of Religious studies at the Pwani University (Kenya), and Flavia Stara, Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Macerata (Italy) in occasion of a meeting of the Project TPAAE – Transcultural Perspectives in Art and Art Education they are leading. This is a Marie Curie Project (<https://tpaae.eu/>), which aims to investigate contemporary art in Europe and East Africa, and forms of art education on both continents in transcultural perspective. Intrigued by the original object and their innovative approach, we took the opportunity to initiate a dialogue. This interview is a first outcome.*

*LawArt: We found your Project very original and interesting in several respects. Let us start with its main focus. The title actually suggests three angles: transcultural perspectives, art, and art education. In which relation are these three objects?*

*SMJ: The transcultural aspect suggests a comparative approach to understanding art. In this specific sense, we have Europe and East Africa in mind but it may include other intervening cultures such as Asian due to the intertwining history of the regions and Art itself. The co-relation between art and art education in East Africa is a new impetus partly due to the coinciding revision of basic education curriculum by the governments. There is a new emphasis on the need to re-introduce Art as a core subject in East African primary and secondary schools. Kenya has already revised the curriculum creating an immediate demand for art teachers across the country. The project's focus on art itself and how Art is educated within a local and international cultural relevance is therefore quite timely.*

*FS: The project aims to investigate contemporary art in Europe and East*

Africa, along with practices of art education on both continents in trans-cultural perspective. Contemporary art on the international scene is highly Western oriented, although interest in non-European art is present in Europe since more than a century along with its cultural recognition. The research in transcultural perspectives on art and art education will be realized within the TPAAE project by the Consortium including academic and non-academic institutions from Poland (Academy of Art in Szczecin – AASZ, National Museum in Szczecin – NMS), Italy University of Macerata – UNIMC), and Kenya (Pwani University – PUC, Kenyatta University – KU, Technical University of Mombasa – TUM). The participant institutions, exerting diverse competences, will also focus on processes of social empowerment toward tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

*LawArt: What is also remarkable about this project is the composition of the network: four Universities and a museum in very different cities in Europe and in Kenya. How much does the complementarity of skills and how much does the geographical factor matter in characterizing your network?*

FS: The international research team-consisting of researchers from AASZ, UNIMC, PUC, TUM, KU put in action a synergic and intercultural research on teaching art and enhancing art culture, taking in account the socio-educational contexts of Kenya as well as the actual needs and development potential of the Country. The team – through institutional meetings, lectures and informal workshops – engages in implementing a socio-cultural dialogue between Europe and East Africa, aimed at disseminating a larger awareness of mutual artistic influences, from the times of Great Avant-garde to contemporary globalization. In reference to this, the team also interacts with local stakeholders and artists – both in Kilifi and in Nairobi – interested in the development of the University curriculums at PUC, as well as in empowering local communities with cultural heritage awareness and contemporary art production fruition. Furthermore, the team is carrying on the exploration of urban contexts in Nairobi, marked by distressed social settings that could bene-

fit from art educational actions carried out in cooperation with local artists as well as students and colleagues of KU.

SMJ: The project envisions art from diverse angles such as training of artists, creation of art products, artpreneurship, heritage and most importantly, the celebration of intercultural significance. Each city and region brings on board a unique angle, perspective and approach to art creation, preservation and heritage. Contrary to colonial approach to art where the master simply collected art objects from colonies and preserved them in exile, TPAAE project celebrates Art in its organic form and in authentic communities by pairing artists from Europe and Africa in ‘duos’ in the development of art work. The community is invited to consume the final product in an annual art event. This is done yearly both in Europe and Africa enabling not only transfer of skills and knowledge between artists but also creation of an enabling environment for the local community to interact with artists from abroad. The universities and the museum facilitate this showcasing their cities heritage. A similar inter-regional cooperation is extended to curriculum development and scientific research works.

LawArt: *Which are the characteristics of the art that your project addresses? What are the goals of your project?*

FS: The project addresses art in its multiform universe (painting, sculpture, media, photography, and dance) as the most significant hybrid, contaminated, changeable, transcultural expression. An authentic approach to the world of art requires to go beyond the traditional space in which art has been understood and justified. The project also explores the ‘change of course’ imagined by Wolfgang Iser for a transhuman and transcultural aesthetic: to go beyond the thesis of ‘commensurability’ affirmed in the modern age (Kant, Hegel, Schelling); and beyond the thesis of ‘incommensurability’ between art and philosophy supported by Adorno and by Lyotard. Iser proposes the solution of a more flexible relationship between art and philosophy, a possible sharing not foreshad-

owed once and for all. Instead of absolutizing a certain concept of art, the project aims to investigate the changing character of reality and reflect on art, philosophy and education, as expressions of human world (Welsch). It is appropriate to adequately appreciate the importance of the 'mimesis' and the 'performative dimension' of art in the individual learning process (child, young, adult). Taking in account the suggestive indications of the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, we could use East African narrative production together with the fairy tale tradition, to 'decolonize the mind' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o).

SMJ: Visual art is primarily focused although the project also involves performing art forms such as music and dance. An overarching goal of the project is to develop art as a livelihood business activity, a heritage and an opportunity for national development and international cooperation. This simply means that the local artists will personally increase their influence and skills, the training institutions will address the current gaps and art scientists will contact research that mutually benefits their institutions, peoples and nations. Essentially the goal is to grow art industry within and between the partner regions and cities.

LawArt: *Do you think that reflecting on the socio-educational impact of art also includes reflecting on the different audiences or types of art spaces?*

FS: The theoretical framework of the project promotes the cross-cultural dialogue on the concept of art and art education, enhancing the local knowledge and traditions of the countries involved. This favours in-depth dialogue with the local communities involved in the enhancement of their own cultural heritage. The interdisciplinary and international composition of the working groups facilitates the enrichment of transcultural aesthetic experience, fostering recognition of cultural heritage not in the unchanged form but as a source for current and modern art production and art education. The research is conducted in several urban/rural areas within the geo-political space of project partners. The interaction between researchers, artists, activists has developed paying attention to the

hosting environment/habitat, to the use of sustainable techniques/materials, to the typology of utilizers.

SMJ: Very much so! Art in Africa never belongs to museums. On the contrary, Art is lived on as a day-to-day experience. The best way to experience it is for one to immerse oneself in the community. Since this is not always possible, art collections have become a source of tourism income, both in Europe and in Africa. The socio-educational impact of art must therefore take into account the diverse forms and spaces of art. This necessitates cultural excursions, exhibitions and art-work demonstrations. Religious art products such as *vigangos* are wooden artifacts which for the community are active representation of ancestors and are considered sacred all the time, regardless of where they are kept. Shrines are sacred and will require certain religious regulations for visitors to access them. Similarly, Cathedrals in Italy are sacred spaces and tourists are allowed to visit and study paintings therein. Therefore, researchers and consumers of Art, must be cognisant of the art forms and environment, especially with regard to community values and ownership, whether in Europe or in Africa.

LawArt: *Do you think that a project such as yours could constitute an observatory on art and its forms of expression, in addition to promoting the dissemination of an art culture?*

SMJ: Art is a mirror that enables reflection of one's own identity in dialogue with the art message. As most sectors are going interactively live with audience, Art ought to render itself engaging with views, comments and responses of the consumer. As a matter of fact, that engagement with art from observers complete the 'art communication cycle' which is in itself multi-cultural.

FS: Art is the language that allows human beings to represent in a symbolic form the experience of their own time. As Hegel observed in order to understand a culture it is necessary to appreciate its art. According to Dewey, at the educational level, the aesthetic experience represents the

fundamental interaction between individuals and environment because it stimulates creative thinking and therefore activates processes for human evolution. In the Western post-modern culture, art gives space to a fragmentation of cognitive and existential expressions exploring transcultural contexts through the hybridization of languages. Against the processes of globalization, leading to the assimilation of the concept of a 'single model', art is still the space to contrast mass-media homologation as well as to create new possibilities of communication and understanding among cultures. It is, therefore, paramount to investigate the 'nucleus of meaning' that artistic experience produces in different cultural contexts. In this respect, education plays a pivotal role, since the development of new curricula and training approaches can provide the skills and tools to master relational sharing in inclusive perspectives.

*LawArt: Is the legal issue part of your field of action? To what extent? Is it an aspect that contributes to defining the object and objectives of the project? And what relevance could your research have, in order to address legal issues?*

SMJ: Art sector is valued highly in terms of monetarily and otherwise. The protection of Art objections as well as the copyright issues therein are complex legal matters. The media has recently covered 'return of stolen' art properties from Africa by Belgium, United Kingdom, and United States of America, in certain instances with compensation. Hence the legal debate as well as historical injustices involving Art sector between the West and Africa is overwhelming. During TPAAE project undertakings, we realised that African collections in the Museum of Stettin (Poland) are the only known collection that was legally permitted for transfer with written consent by Africans. Nevertheless, legal aspects of the project are more complex. They involve also the issue of representation, especially of the minor and marginalised communities who own heritage and are easily deprived of their rights. This research project therefore highly involved in legal matters. Whereas it is multidisciplinary in nature, TPAAE promotes equity, awareness and social justice that empower the oppressed and marginalised members of the society.

FS: Within an intercultural setting, a possible cooperation among Humanities and Legal Sciences, should move from the level of *logos* toward the construction of *praxis*. It requires, indeed, an attitude of epistemological openness among theories and methods pointing out the importance of gaining insights and broadened perspectives on how problems, commonly concerning law, are conceptualized and solved by other disciplines ad vice versa, as well as by testing the dominant assumptions and resolutions of legal discipline with the consequences of other knowledge. The awareness to empower each individual with rights, implies searching, at all levels of competence, for an ethic of words, of rules, of social means so to unsettle a balance mainly forced by economic mechanisms. Thus, to contribute to a space in which each individual is represented, recognized and protected in his/her capacity to contribute his/her opinions and visions about common good. The large number of visual languages in action within the social space generates a load of visual information able to process all kind of needs, distress, urgency. Hence, a transdisciplinary competence to interpret and master visual communication may improve social awareness on relevant issues. The decisive step is to become responsible actors of one's own time and act accordingly: one is objectively placed in a reciprocity of care where the extent of one's action represents the difference for life and opportunities of others. It is desirable that the language of art will attract different intellectual resources and skills, channelling active attention to the needs and requests for both the protection of dignity and the empowerment of human beings. In light of these considerations, it appears realistic that the epistemological intercultural instance connects with national policies through social hermeneutics that challenges also art languages and art literacy. For this reason, a multidisciplinary approach is needed for a comparative investigation of the complex geo-political space of global citizenship in order to identify historical conditions, economic interests, legal resolutions and religious tensions. The awareness and knowledge acquired through this approach could facilitate to re-configure the reality of contemporary European scene and lead to its critical appreciation, resulting in an appropriate pragmatic and epistemic action.



LawArt: *A qualifying element of the project, as is typical of Marie Curie RISE programmes, is the transfer of knowledge; what kind of transfer does the project intend to achieve and what actions are being implemented?*

SMJ: I see three types of knowledge being transferred in TPAAE. These are scientific, cultural and art skills. The project involves exchange between researchers in person-month secondments across the two regions. These involve seminars, conferences, academic presentations and even teaching. The off-shoot scientific exchange in these engagements are phenomenal and mutually beneficial. The Duos Festival drives the art skill exchanges between African and European artists in joint projects. An underlying exchange between these is cultural content which develop around visits, food and excursions. The very act of exposure to a different space, people and lifestyle brings about newness perspective and self-awareness.

FS: Knowledge will be shared during various secondments among project participants being focused on combining three main paths: 1) Theoretical, 2) Academic and 3) Practical. Organization of festivals will contribute to settle the artistic basis in coastal region of Kenya and will produce recipients for the new art curricula to be created at PUC in compliance with international requirements and demand and supply of local contexts. The active interdisciplinary cooperation among TPAAE participants will secure high level of scientific research along with innovative educational experiences. Furthermore, the theoretical research will allow deepening the understanding of local art and culture and its contemporary transformations within the international scope in which contemporary Kenyan art is received.

LawArt: *If we understand correctly, a significant part of the outcomes of this European project is in Africa. Or are there also expected results for Europe?*

FS: TPAAE project will follow ‘European Innovation Union’ focused on achieving goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive economy, ensuring that innovative ideas will be turned into

products and services that will create growth and jobs in Kenya, Poland and Italy. We will work towards making Europe into a world-class science performer, remove obstacles to innovation like skills shortages and market fragmentation, and improve the way public and private sectors work together, between the European institutions, national and regional authorities and business. All the project's activities and effects will be communicated to defined target groups in each country participating in the project. In each country involved, there are diverse target groups to whom the project will be communicated, because of the different scope of research carried out in each of them and because of the different social and community fabric in different settings.

SMJ: The project has Africa as partner but it is first and foremost organised around Europe as a society. European Art is not homogeneous and as such opportunities and gaps for research are enormous. Besides, an understanding of European Art in relation to itself and Africa is key developmental outcome which the project is promoting. Polish and Italian art scene has as much to benefit from each other just like they both would in engaging colleagues in Africa. That possibility is realised through such initiatives as in TPAAE project.

*LawArt: As legal historians, we are also curious to understand to what extent the dimension of the past affects the way cultural politics are implemented in the present. How do you think this kind of cultural interaction you are implementing, differs from other forms of cultural interaction between European and African regions experienced in history?*

SMJ: The historical relation of Europe to Africa is clearly a key factor in the broader present relations, let alone in our TPAAE project. Effects of the 1879 Berlin meeting by European powers to divide and colonize Africa are even more felt and visible in both Africa and Europe today. Scars of slavery, colonialism and apartheid have made Africans very sensitive to unequal relations of any kind, especially with the West. Although Italy and Poland did not colonize Africa as such, the two countries related

to Africa in the context of colonialism with similar attitudes and interests. TPAAE is based on a relation of equal partners. The 1800 ideological context of civilizing, Christianizing and colonizing Africa is a reality of the past that can be overcome through celebration of civilizations, cultures and religions on equal platform. As TPAAE partners we are constantly aware of this dark past.

FS: The project opens up a wide space for reflection on how European culture visualized (and in a sense invented) African world in the artistic production between the 19th and the 20th century. By analysing the artistic phenomena of European Orientalism and Primitivism, it is possible to observe how European culture has been fascinated before by the atmosphere of the north African countries, and then by the African sculptures and masks, that were used to revolutionize contemporary artistic language. Therefore, these works of art are an extraordinary source to understand the history of the intercultural exchanges during the colonial period.

On the other hand, the project investigates how African culture visualized and is visualizing the western world during the postcolonial period, analysing the 'academic art', that is produced in Africa since the foundation of the first Academy of Art (on the model of European ones), and the so-called 'tourist art', produced by African artists for western public and commissioners. This last type of production (examined in particular through Kenyan painters and sculptors) is significant because reveals how the African artists answer to the direct or indirect requests of western customers, interpreting their needs and creating subjects that are perceived as exotic: an exoticism created by African artists for European customers. There is no doubt that this production can be considered an effect of globalization and exposure to western features and fashions, produced mainly by tourism transformations. Nevertheless, the new art system is always the effect of negotiations, not impositions, generating original and unexpected outcomes through which African artists appreciate and communicate with the western culture.

LawArt: *More generally, do you think that the colonial legacy still affects the possibility of a dialogue between these distant regions of the world? Is art, in this, part of the solution or part of the problem?*

FS: The problem lies in the fact that the formal recognition of diversity and otherness is often associated with the preconception of superiority of the developed cultures and with consequent dynamics of incommensurability. It is equally true that, in many cases, these processes of fragmentation and emphasis of the differences are caused not only by aggressive processes of assimilation or segregation but also by defensive encapsulations of resistance implemented by the same minorities to protect their traditions. The practice of thinking differences in a static way could be replaced with a research approach that through art considers differences in a continuous and sinuous movement that integrates them into the historical dynamics accrued in the social fabrics. An interaction that produces a fertile dilation of one's own vital horizon, proceeding in an unusual manner, shifting away from what is expected and conventional. The collapse of truths, which opened the twentieth century, has resulted in the dissolution of the standards also in the field of art and produced a breakthrough in its language. The work of art no longer exists as an object, but as an action; no more eternal, but precarious; no longer made of a single substance, but of different and varied materials; no longer achieved through traditional techniques, but in new or mixed modes. The language of art constitutes meanings within discourses and discourses orientate new actions.

SMJ: Art is itself a key area of contestation between Europe and Africa on account of activities of explorers, missionaries and colonial masters in the colonial legacy framework. In that sense, Art is part of the problem and an impediment to meaningful forward-looking dialogue. Part of the problem is the continuities and discontinuities in this process due to varying policies of government regimes. For instance, some of the heroes of Africa such as Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who championed forgiveness and reconciliation on

account of national cohesion and new opportunities, have recently been branded as passivists responsible for Africa's continued lack of economic independence and self-actualization.

In another sense, I see hope in Art itself as a language of Euro-African dialogue. That is why TPAAE is a very exciting adventure as it presents the two communities with an opportunity to dispel fears and mistrust while critiquing misplaced values of colonialism. That humanity can rise beyond divisive past ideals and embrace universal values that promote inter-dependence, equality, and social justice as basic human right is a dream of TPAAE. Africans were told that every 'white' is a colonizer and oppressor, whereas Europeans were told that all Africans are cultureless and uncivilised. These are impediments as well as opportunities in TPAAE project activities.