

# Decentralising the Studio

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“If you want to evolve something, first you need a space so people can get together and exchange whatsoever they’re going to exchange.” [1]

Experimental, creative, and critical work relies on exchanges - material, intellectual, or otherwise. Fundamental to these exchanges amongst creative practitioners are the spaces in which they take place. In Johannesburg and South Africa, these spaces have been dominated by private galleries and museums as the public arts sector settles into a mire of mismanagement and funding crises. The lackluster efforts for support by public funding bodies, councils, and departments also contribute to the erosion of confidence in public institutions.

The asymmetrical economic tilt in the contemporary art sector has contributed to unbalanced support for creative practices. Private galleries (despite supporting the production, dissemination, and articulation of art practices within and beyond our national borders) guide and govern aesthetic registers, and shape discourse as they navigate international art markets. Such a concentration of resources give rise to the narrow breadth of artistic practices to which economic and intellectual value is attributed.

Is there room for research-based practices, performativity, public art initiatives, digital art, or messy work that may not fit into trending aesthetic schemas and the concerns nurtured by galleries or those supported by national heritage initiatives?

Economic precarity and instability, both pre and post-Covid, leave South Africa’s creative practitioners vulnerable as artists struggle to find not only financial support but creative and intellectual support too. Despite these circumstances, artists have come together to create more sustainable environments for their practices, taking the form of art collectives, collaborative studios, publishing initiatives, online residencies, and platforms. Collaborative artistic practices and networks bring artists into proximity with each other. This opens up methods of working and thinking differently, together and apart. Independent initiatives such as *Sober & Lonely Institute for Contemporary Art*, *Floating Reverie*, *Assemblage Studios*, *DGI Studio*, *Keleketla! Library*, *The Flat Gallery*, *Center for Historical Enactments*, *Nothing Gets Organised*, and *Black Mark Collective* are some of the creative artist lead spaces that have, in their



various artistic and political aspirations, contributed to the city's artistic landscape. Other studios such as *the Bag Factory* (initiated by David Koloane and Robert Loder of the Triangle Arts Network [2]) have played a significant nodal point for local and international artists in Johannesburg.

What kind of opportunities are there for artists who cannot rely on support from institutions, or artists whose practices orbit outside of the stipulations and desires of the local and international art market? What kinds of spaces can facilitate exchange and collaboration for more experimental, obscure practices? And how can we think of participation and commitment to equitable artistic practices under collapsing economic infrastructures, especially when considering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on transnational exchanges and collaborations? Covalence Studios developed as a project with these questions in mind. Disaffected with the ecology of arts, Covalence Studios is a provocation and proposition to create a decentralised space for artists to expand their networks and encounters with other artists and organisations in Johannesburg, a "space for artists to test their toolkit out in a different terrain" [3].

Covalence Studios was developed to facilitate decentralization in art communities, networks, and artworks with blockchain architectures in mind. [4] Built on the Ethereum network, decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOS) support decentralised governance (member-owned communities without centralised governance), allowing organisations to make decisions on a peer-to-peer level. This organisational structure is dependent on its members' participation through a shared social contract while relying on blockchain technologies to support verification and trust on the Ethereum network. [5] While DAOS are still experimental and emergent, critical attention is currently being paid to its carbon footprint regarding mining and the steep, fluctuating gas prices for transactions within the Ethereum network. [6]

As a project still under development, Covalence Studios is an attempt to bridge the ideology of the shared artist studio (as a space for individual and collective thought and expression, exchange, collaboration, and innovation) with the fundamentals of decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs). DAOs are automated organisations that could potentially offer new ways of working to pool and distribute resources collectively. These systems are blockchain-based, meaning that trust, verification, and transparent governance could possibly be used to create a different mode of working for artists. [7] DAOs can also afford fractal ownership, meaning that members could have shared ownership of collaborative works, through the use of smart contracts and tokens.

Covalence Studios is envisaged as a digital space that could cultivate and incentivise sharing and exchanging skills and resources amongst its members. From transferable skills to material resources, time, and immaterial labour, studio members will be encouraged to share or exchange skills for individual or collaborative projects. The project is a proposition to work across our existing networks to support more lateral ways of sustaining our creative practices, mainly focusing on supporting interdisciplinary, experimental works and projects. This cross-pollination of skills and networks is intended to make available missed connections



across the networks we currently occupy. The studio aims to forge new relationships amongst practitioners, with the intention of catalysing different constellations of practices.

Central to Covalence Studios is that it is member-based and member-driven. There is no hierarchical structure, no director, and no board members. Unlike traditional institutions that rely on a director or manager with a mandate, the studio is its members.

[1] The quote is taken from Ahmet Sisman in conversation with Tony Cokes, from 'Mixing Plant,' *Urbane Künste Ruhr*, Essen, 2019 and was featured in a poster and T-Shirt project by Karmaklubb\* in collaboration with Tony Cokes, made for 'Today Is Our Tomorrow,' Helsinki, September 2019.

[2] The Triangle Arts Network is a global network of artists and art organisations that supports artistic and cultural exchange. The network was founded in 1982 by Sir Anthony Caro and collector and philanthropist Robert Loder through an artists' workshop in upstate New York.

[3] Conversation with Josh Ginsburg

[4] The prototyping of Covalence Studios formed part of [The DAOWO Global Initiative](#), a transnational network of arts and blockchain cooperation with leading international arts and technology institutions and communities in cities worldwide. The program was curated by Penny Rafferty, Ruth Catlow, and Ben Vickers with the Goethe-Institut London

[5] See Morrison, R, Mazey, N., Wingreen, S.C. 2020. 'The DAO Controversy: The Case for a New Species of Corporate Governance?', *Frontiers in Blockchain*, Vol.3. URL=<https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fbloc.2020.00025>

[6] <https://carbon.fyi/learn>

[7] Covalence Studios was developed in conversation with Carly Whitaker and Chad Cordeiro through a series of workshops with Nathan Gates, Naadira Patel, Brooklyn