

# Economy, Society and Governance

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### ‘Locating South Africa’s Visual Artists’

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## 1. Introduction

Whether in the Global North or South creative industries, such as art, music, film and fashion, have traditionally clustered in a handful of global cities and aspiring creative talent has typically migrated from peripheries and regional centres (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A; Florida, 2002). But, recent developments are reshaping these spatial dynamics. Large cities are becoming more expensive and competitive, and new technologies, ways of working and mobilities are allowing more individuals to live and work from anywhere. In other contexts, however, individuals face barriers stemming from a lack of economic resources, family commitments and lockdowns, during COVID-19, which constrain or shape mobilities resulting in diverse outcomes.

These constraints connect to a long-standing and fundamental question in regional studies about the extent to which creatives need, can or even want to locate in the established centres to realise their ambitions (Hautala & Nordström, 2019; Sternberg, 2017; Turok et al., 2017). Yet, recent studies, critiques and global events, including pandemics, wars and economic crises, encourage a more nuanced investigation that considers the role of context and specificity. There is a need to go beyond studies of ‘one-off’ (one-time, permanent) moves to consider a broader range of mobilities and immobilities in poorly understood industries and regions including Asia and Africa (Bailey et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022; Hautala & Nordström, 2019).

While COVID-19 hampered the global circulation of people, the nature and intensity of the impact was felt unevenly across regions due to local and national policies including lockdowns (Bailey et al., 2020; Joffe, 2021; SLAPE et al., 2023; Snowball & Gouws, 2023). Greater attention should also be paid to the relationship between urban areas and peripheries (Chen et al., 2022; Pugh & Dubois, 2021), the influence of digital technologies on work (Repenning, 2022) and how intersectionality shapes the preferences, experiences, spatial strategies of creative entrepreneurs (Brydges & Hracs, 2019B; Sternberg, 2017).

To address these gaps, this paper provides a case study of the mobilities and immobilities of visual artists in South Africa. Drawing on 30 interviews conducted before and after COVID-19 it contextualises the country’s diverse regions and explores the locational choices of these creative entrepreneurs who are differentiated by race, gender, class and family dynamics. Building on the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006), which encompasses the physical and virtual movement of humans, ideas, knowledge and objects across space and at different scales, the paper also demonstrates how artists practice three forms of mobility: 1) temporary mobility, which entails physically attending exhibitions and residencies, 2) mediated mobility, which involves working with intermediaries to create a presence in key markets remotely, and 3) virtual mobility, which harnesses the internet and social media to promote and sell products in local, national and global markets. The paper argues that

although surviving in the marketplace is difficult, being permanently located in big cities, like Cape Town or Johannesburg is not essential, let alone possible or desirable.

The paper contributes to existing theory and debates in several ways. It nuances our understanding of the locational choices of creative workers and mobile ‘talent’ by moving beyond traditional considerations of ‘one-off’ moves and the ‘jobs vs. amenities’ debate (Florida, 2002; Storper & Scott, 2009). It also demonstrates how mobilities are practised and negotiated ‘on the ground,’ and against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, by individuals with unique characteristics operating within the specific context of South Africa. By revealing the multi-directional flows of creative talent, the paper also contributes to existing research that looks at creative practice outside core areas including suburbs, small towns and rural or remote areas (Hautala & Nordström, 2019; Leick et al., 2023). Finally, the paper advances our understanding of digital technologies, creative labour, and the spatial, temporal and commercial strategies independent producers are using to overcome the challenges associated with intensifying global competition and the do-it-yourself (D.I.Y) model (Bain & McLean, 2013; Brydges & Hracs 2019A; Hracs 2015; Repenning, 2022).

## **2. Locational choices and mobilities in the digital age**

Creatives are said to be mobile and skilled drivers of contemporary economies and understanding their locational choices is an important research agenda within regional studies (Florida, 2002; Fratesi, 2014; Sternberg, 2017; Turok et al., 2017). While Storper and Scott (2009) argue that talent follows jobs, others assert the attractiveness of amenities, including tolerance (Florida, 2002), consumption opportunities (Glaeser et al., 2001), and entertainment activities (Clark et al., 2002). However, this binary fails to reflect the evolving nature of creative work where most freelancers and entrepreneurs do not migrate for specific firm-based jobs but rather markets that offer opportunities for paid work (Hracs & Stolarick, 2014).

We should also question the assumptions underpinning these theories, including whether creatives are, in fact, free to live and work anywhere and the extent to which they value certain amenities or can access them in the first place (Hautala & Nordström, 2019; Sternberg, 2017). The tendency to generalise the preferences of creative workers fails to provide sufficient nuance by acknowledging the intersectionality of research subjects and the extent to which the locational preferences of talent are differentiated by factors including age, class, occupation, gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers (Hautala & Nordström, 2019). Indeed, levels of mobility may change at key life-cycle events, including entering the labour market or family formation (Sternberg, 2017). Thus, place-based amenities such as culture, climate, low crime levels, good schools, and tolerance may matter to varying degrees depending on local context, and individual tastes and subjectivities (Hracs & Stolarick, 2014).

The assumed supremacy of urban regions is also problematic (Pugh & Dubois, 2021). While the attractiveness of large cities is often emphasised, recent research has also highlighted appealing features of smaller cities, suburbs, and rural or remote areas including affordable space, supportive communities and natural environments (Chen et al., 2022; Hautala & Nordström, 2019; Leick et al., 2023). Therefore, not all creative workers can or want to live and work in cities. Moreover, permanent co-location in large urban centres or specific neighbourhoods is not necessary if access to key resources, people, networks, markets and activities can be gained through forms of mobility underpinned by technology or temporary visits (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A; Hautala and Nordström, 2019). This reinforces the ongoing need to study the locational choices and patterns of mobility and immobility of creative talent (Bailey et al., 2020)

Because the mobility of labour constitutes a direct transfer of embodied knowledge in space and may induce localised learning processes and innovation, the movement and pooling of labour – especially skilled workers and entrepreneurs – is regarded as a key driver of regional development and a crucial topic within regional studies (Fratesi, 2014; Grabher et al., 2018). Existing literature suggests that physically locating within specific clusters allows individuals and firms to access local ‘buzz’ or spontaneous, fluid and tacit forms of information (Bathelt et al., 2004). Many accounts associate frequent face-to-face interactions with the benefits of ‘being there’ including cultivating trust and networks (Grabher et al., 2018).

Yet, scholars have also argued that permanent co-presence is not essential as local buzz can be accessed from distant or multiple locations (Bathelt & Turi, 2011). For example, Grabher et al. (2018), highlight a shift from ‘being there’ to ‘being aware’. While some firms established costly satellite offices, global knowledge pipelines were also created by leveraging the physical mobility of individuals who participated in temporary clusters such as trade fairs and conferences (Maskell et al., 2006). More recently, the rapid development and proliferation of digital communication technologies, including video conferencing, blogs and social media allow firms and individuals to produce and access ‘virtual buzz’ (Rutten, 2017; Wood et al., 2020). With more forms of mobility available, however, effective strategies require identifying and analysing trade-offs and understanding what tasks are best suited to different channels and modes of interaction (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A; Repenning, 2022; Wood et al., 2020). Thus, there is an ongoing need for research on how firms, but also workers and entrepreneurs, optimise and practice the right mix of mobilities, proximities and virtuality to achieve their specific objectives which are shaped by a range of professional, personal and contextual factors. In so doing, attention should be paid to how these specific practices help to mediate constraints and forms of immobility (Bailey et al., 2020; SLAPE et al., 2023).

### **3. Methodology and research design**

This research draws on interviews with visual artists in South Africa using the following media: painting, drawing (ink, illustration), printmaking, ceramics, sculpture, mosaics, weaving, and beading. Professional artists (earning the majority of their income from the production and sale of artworks) were invited to participate. Semi-structured interview

schedules were used to inquire about artists' physical and virtual mobility, and immobilities (challenges and barriers), concerning their careers locally, nationally, and internationally.

A total of 30 interviews with 27 unique participants were completed. 22 interviews were conducted in the first round (November 2018 to February 2019). A second round of data collection (October 2022 to March 2023) was required to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mobility of visual artists. Of the 8 interviews in the second round, 3 were follow-up conversations with participants from round one, and 5 were additional interviews. Participants were recruited via the social network of one of the authors based in Cape Town. In addition to known contacts snowball sampling was used to expand the diversity of the sample in terms of race, gender identity and sexual preference, age, career stage and location. The interviews were completed by a team of UK-based and South African researchers, either face-to-face or online. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. A few interviews were translated from local languages, Afrikaans and Xhosa specifically. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, linking research themes to a theoretical framework (see Lawless & Chen, 2019). The authors co-coded the transcripts using keywords developed in line with the research themes of location choice and temporary, virtual and mediated mobility.

#### **4. Making a living in contemporary visual arts: the South Africa context**

South Africa has a vibrant contemporary visual art scene. In 2020, the visual art and craft sector contributed 15% of the creative economy's Gross Value Add of ZAR 161 billion – approximately 3% of the country's economy (SACO, 2023). There was an estimated 5,500 practising visual artists in 2010 (HSRC et al., 2010). Most of these artists were city-based, educated (over 70% had a degree or diploma), and relatively young (median age 38). Artists mostly worked from home, were self-employed and needed to supplement their art income to make ends meet.

In post-apartheid South Africa, there has been a gradual shift from 'Eurocentric' notions of 'high art' to a more inclusive 'canon' of visual arts (Marschall, 2001). As a result, there is greater recognition of 'folk' artmaking in Black communities (beadwork, weaving, quilting, sculpture, and ceramics) as contemporary African art. While the visual arts sector remains dominated by Whites, the representation and participation of Black African artists and artists of colour have increased significantly (HSRC et al., 2010; Marchall, 2001; Snowball et al., 2017). According to Snowball et al. (2017), the visual art and craft sector is the most racially transformed sector in the creative economy in terms of firm ownership and employment.

Johannesburg and Cape Town are the main centres not only for visual arts (Lynch, 2020), but indeed for creative industries (Booyens, 2012; Gregory, 2016). Compared to other countries in the Southern African region, South Africa's visual art sector is the most formalised and sophisticated in terms of institutions, public and private support, education and training, public and private art museums, and art associations or foundations (HSRC et al., 2010; ILO, 2003). Most institutions and opportunities are city-based, predominantly in the main centres.

The visual art sector is largely commercial and receives very limited public funding (ILO, 2003; Marschall, 2001). Large corporates, typically in the financial services sector, sponsor art fairs and contemporary art prizes. Commercial galleries present artists at international art fairs and biennales. There is also a proliferation of smaller, well-established independent galleries and art dealers of repute in all major cities and a few small towns. Galleries have an important role: artists primarily sell their work through galleries, directly from their studios or online platforms (HSRC et al., 2010). Most art is sold on the local market and the country has a small art-buying public, much smaller than in the developed world (HSRC et al., 2010). While commercial galleries sell internationally, international trade in South African art is driven by foreign tourists (Baur, 2018).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a prolonged and stringent national ‘lockdown’ was implemented in South Africa, accompanied by curfews and a non-essential item sale ban (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Snowball & Gouws, 2023). Visual arts, performing arts, galleries and museums were the most vulnerable creative sectors during this time (Snowball & Gouws, 2023). In accordance, art exhibitions and fairs were either cancelled, postponed, or ‘moved online’ as reported by respondents in this study. This not only resulted in the immobilities of artists, but also a loss of income in a country where there were limited, if any, relief or furlough funds available for artists and creatives in general (Joffe, 2021). Tourism also declined sharply because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). International and domestic tourists are important customers for some artists as discussed in this paper, especially for those living in small towns or exhibiting their art in urban galleries.

## **5. Mobilities and their dimensions: space, time and modes**

### **5.1 ‘Here’: Establishing a ‘home base’**

The locational choice of visual artists is highly individualised, albeit impacted by life stage as discussed below. Literature on creative work highlights the precarious, freelance and self-employed nature of artist livelihoods, balancing portfolio and project-based work, intense work periods with periods of unemployment or unpaid work, and finding new strategies to source work (Bain & McLean, 2013; Serafini & Banks, 2020). The nature of artists’ work allows for greater choice in terms of where they live and work (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A) and permanent location in the creative urban centres is not essential for the success of visual artists.

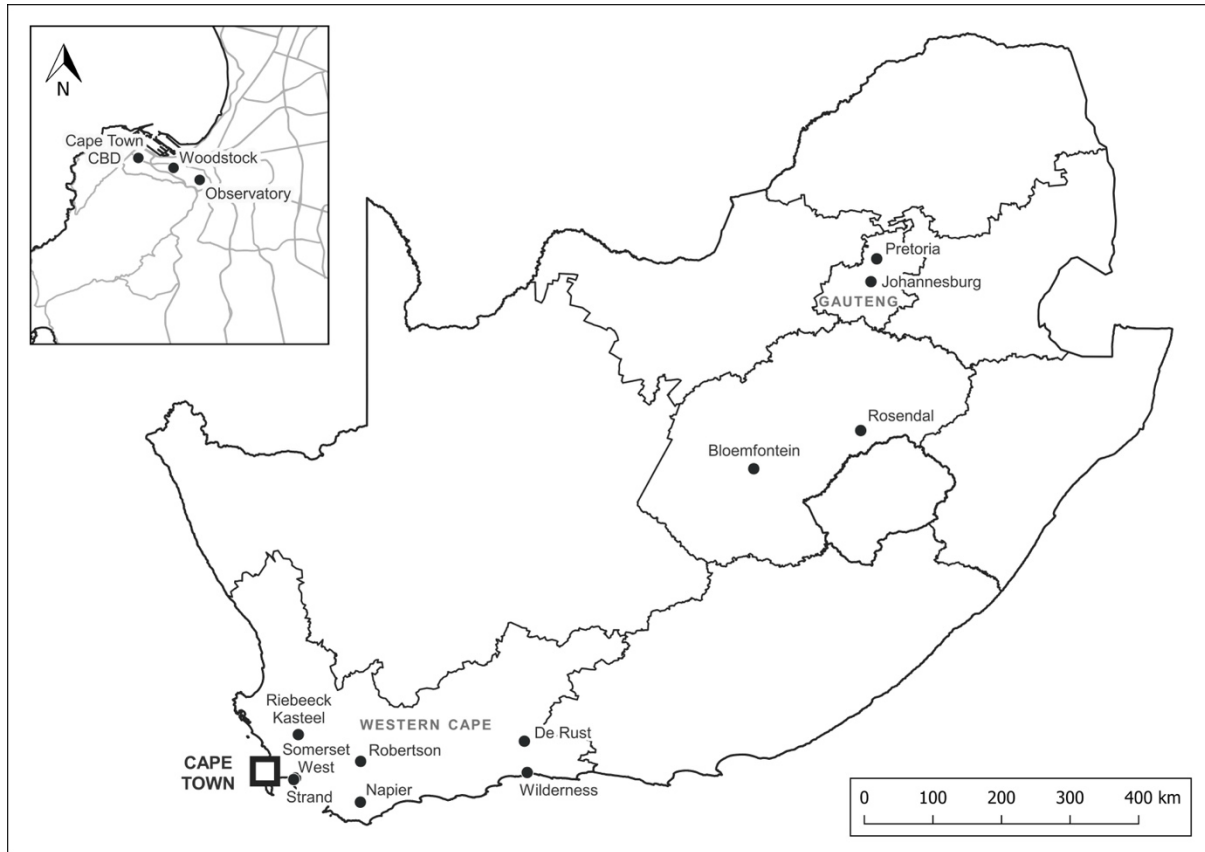


Figure 1: Locations of participants

Three-quarters of the research participants were based either in the greater Cape Town area or in small towns throughout the Western Cape region (see Figure 1;  $N=6$  were located outwith the region, including in Pretoria and Rosendal, Free State), and their median age was 44 (at the time of interviewing). While a substantial number of artists were based in Cape Town, we interviewed several artists based in small ‘art’ towns like Riebeeck Kasteel, Napier, De Rust and Rosendal (Donaldson, 2018; Ingle, 2010; Kimbu et al., 2022). As demonstrated by this research, artists increasingly choose to live and work in small towns where they sell their art to domestic and foreign visitors alike, either directly or via local galleries. While the ‘buzz’ in city-based creative clusters is a big draw for artists, it can also be achieved in art towns as explained by a young Cape Town-based artist:

“It depends on what you want for yourself. I know a lot of artists who work in small towns, and they create a big hype around them. I think wherever you are, you have to create this excitement and culture and appreciation and vibe around you. In smaller towns, you have to work harder to get that engagement” (I11 R1).

Most, if not all, of our interviewees received arts-based education and/or training from city-based institutions. Artists often move out of cities after a career in another (frequently a

related creative) field and/or upon retirement to pursue art on a more full-time basis, often those with a second home, or savings, to buy a property with a home-based studio, in a small town or coastal village (Chen et al. 2022). Lifestyle motivations, intertwined with a need to be closer to nature, prompt artists to ‘get out of the city’ and move to the countryside (I24 R2; I25 R2). A printmaker who draws inspiration from nature, explained why she relocated from Johannesburg:

“The coastal village where we ended up seemed a much better place to be and I just couldn't face the noise of Joburg anymore... This location influences my work. You can literally walk out of our door and there's openness. You can see the mountains. It's 500 meters and we're on the beach. You can drive somewhere and you are in the mountains. Being able to immerse oneself more in the surrounds was really important to me” (I25 R2).

While her mobility was restricted, she said that the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions did not have a great impact on her work since the natural environment that inspires her art is on her ‘doorstep’.

Another landscape artist living in a small art town says they decided to move from Pretoria as a young family because they were captivated by the beautiful surroundings and because living in the countryside was more affordable. This enabled him to pursue becoming a full-time artist after working in another creative sector. But he also gave other reasons:

“We also didn't want to bring up our children in the city. We moved for space and safety, and the freedom and things that come with living in the countryside. The house that we could get was nice and big [with space for a home-based studio]” (I10 R2).

Over the years, they have seen the town develop as a creative and tourist town with more galleries, shops, restaurants, and accommodation establishments popping up. Several respondents said they have seen more artists and creatives move to small towns with COVID-19.

Class and inequalities also impact the locational choices of creatives. Artists who live and work in small towns have the resources to do so linked to their life and career stage and their overall socio-economic status. Conversely, the locational choices of underprivileged artists we interviewed had less to do with lifestyle and inspiration, and more with accessing opportunities in cities. A few had moved from rural areas to be city-based, initially to access education and training opportunities. For these artists, cities are regarded as places of opportunity: where one goes to make a success; where there is more money, connections, and (international) tourists buying African-inspired art as emphasised in several interviews. One painter observed:



“It is easier if you come into the city and establish yourself first and you feel like you’re at the point where you know where to go and who the influential people in the city [in terms of arts] are; then you can go back to the small town and work from there” (I19 R1).

However, the affordability of residential and commercial / studio space is a big challenge for artists from disadvantaged backgrounds, living in townships or other low-income areas on the urban fringe. These artists see both a competitive and comparative advantage to being ‘in town’. A few artists have been able to access co-working spaces in the Cape Town city centre via creative intermediaries (i.e. not-for-profit arts and crafts organisations, see Communian & England, 2022). However, several respondents expressed the aspiration to upgrade to better workspaces by being able to afford (renting or owning) a studio of their ‘own’ in creative neighbourhoods like Observatory (Obs) or Woodstock where it is less expensive than in the more central creative clusters. A young mosaic artist, who was in the process of looking for a shared space for their small cooperative said: “Our first option was to get a space here in town, but unfortunately, we could not get one. Obs will be fine for us because there are a lot of art studios in Obs”.

While neighbourhoods like Woodstock and Obs have experienced creative redevelopment in recent decades with industrial buildings converted into multi-use creative spaces (Booyens, 2012; Gregory, 2016), one respondent who works in Woodstock remarked that there is a lot of competition for art studios. Because of cashflow constraints and general precarity, it is difficult for artists to provide upfront deposits and monthly payments to secure studio spaces. This challenge is particularly acute for artists from low-income areas where their living conditions might not be conducive to working from home.

## 5.2 ‘There’: Temporary mobility

Temporary mobility was an essential component of artists’ strategies to maximise opportunities and access a range of markets without relocating permanently. Temporary mobility is enabled by artists living a relatively short distance from big large cities. In South African terms this means within a few hours’ drive. Artists travel to big cities (mainly Johannesburg and Cape Town) on a fairly regular basis to stay connected with production hubs and markets. Keeping in contact with main hubs through short visits seems to be common practice to maintain the necessary connections, networks, work commissions; attend specific art events; and not to be cut off from opportunities or new people/ideas emerging more frequently in urban settings.

A more structured and long-distance form of mobility is offered by residencies (in South Africa or internationally). Art Residencies – as highlighted by Bevilacqua (2020) – are an umbrella term used to identify a range of places, models and practices that facilitate exchange, mobility and networking usually at the international level. However, beyond their

thematic, geographical, financial or institutional diversity, art residencies have emerged to create an interconnected global art world. Residencies are used strategically but are competitive and can vary across different mediums. As one respondent explained:

“I’ve applied for a lot of residencies, but the broader arts spectrum [...] It is very difficult to get selected to go to a residency. [...] I’ve managed to get invited to residencies for printmaking. I haven’t managed to get a residency yet in my [main] medium: [...] I’m going next year again to Paris for a printmaking session and then I will meet up at a studio [elsewhere in] France. I will do 2 residencies in the one trip.” (I13)

While temporary mobility is valued and considered critical to career progression, it is also very costly and there are barriers to accessing these competitive opportunities. Residencies often require big financial commitments which are beyond the reach of individual artists, i.e.:

“I would love to travel more. After you send the work away, there is little money left. You need the shows that I’ve had overseas; I can’t go because I can’t afford it. I can just afford to get my work there... What is so amazing about the Spier Arts Trust and Nando’s is that with the 154 Art Show, it cost me nothing. They took me across; paid for the hotel; made sure I had food; all of that.” (I7)

Intermediaries and brokers (Comunian and England, 2022) play a key role in facilitating some of these long-distance forms of mobility or exposure as discussed next in connection to ‘mediated mobilities’. However, such comprehensive funding is very limited in South Africa due to the lack of public arts funding (ILO, 2003; Marschall, 2001).

### 5.3 ‘There’: Mediated mobility

Despite the benefits of temporary mobility, not all artists can or want to continually travel within regional, national and international ‘art worlds’ (Breines et al., 2019; Hautala & Nordström, 2019). While government-imposed lockdowns severely constrained physical mobility during COVID-19, artists in South Africa have long struggled with other forms of immobility caused by the expense of air travel, access to appropriate workspaces, material and equipment costs, poor road and rail infrastructure, poor connectivity, especially to remote parts of the country, as well as household commitments including child and senior care (Berman, 2009; ILO, 2003; Xaba et al., 2021). Moreover, the need to physically be at the right location at the right time exacerbates the challenges associated with the D.I.Y. model of independent production and the need to complete a growing range of creative and non-creative tasks (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A; Hracs, 2015). To mitigate the ‘corrosion of creativity’ caused by the twin processes of de-specialisation and multi-skilling (McRobbie, 2002), many artists in our sample are ‘getting help.’ As one respondent explained: “It’s okay

to ask someone to write something on your behalf or to hire a photographer instead of taking your own photos. It's okay to delegate things (I11 R2)".

Although help can come from other creatives, family members and friends, much like independent musicians, fashion designers and designer-makers, artists tend to get help from cultural intermediaries who may function as brokers, gatekeepers, co-producers, co-promoters, managers and curators (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A; Comunian & England, 2022; Comunian et al., 2022; Hracs, 2015). This section nuances our understanding of specialised divisions of labour and collaborations within creative scenes by moving beyond typical questions about 'what' tasks are being performed by 'whom,' to consider 'where' these activities are distributed.

Our findings suggest that artists are mobilising mediated mobility, which entails not only outsourcing specific tasks to intermediaries but creating a multi-locational presence by working with actors such as social media experts, curators and gallerists located within key networks, markets and spaces. By enabling artists to be simultaneously 'absent and present,' mediated mobility challenges linear assumptions of temporality and traditional understandings that actors can only do one thing at a time (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Although artists may practise mediated mobility in individualised ways, the findings suggest common motivations related to penetrating distant networks and markets, including the U.S. and Europe, enhancing status and legitimacy and promoting and selling from a distance.

During the interviews, the overwhelming focus of discussions revolved around 'signing' and working with art galleries. Becoming part of their 'stable' of artists was said to bring a range of benefits. For example, galleries broker, curate, plan, finance, promote and run events and exhibitions, allowing artists to focus on creating art. As one respondent put it: "We just produce the work. They take care of everything else (I2 R1)". Galleries also develop client relations for commissions and handle all matters related to selling and shipping artworks. This alleviates the non-creative burden for artists and allows them to sell and promote at a distance. Depending on the gallery their reach can be local, regional, national or international. As another respondent explained: "You don't have to be there [physically]. You just have to have a team of people you can trust business-wise who can show your work on your behalf (I19 R1)".

Based on their reputations and positions within 'art worlds', galleries also offer opportunities to enhance the status and legitimacy of artists and their work. While some galleries are online-only, there is still value associated with displaying and viewing art in physical spaces. As one respondent asserted:

"Art is relative. The reason why people buy from galleries is their reputation... That is also why you need to keep exhibiting at galleries... in a physical space. You have to be able to stand between the paintings to get a feeling about the work. Nothing can replace that... but I do feel that the power that galleries have had has lessened since Covid and I

don't think that it will ever recover...You don't need galleries for contact with buyers anymore, but you do need them for space and for their reputation. If there are galleries that have existed for a long time and they have confidence in you, to show your work, then the person who buys feels better about it. They feel it is legit" (I10 R2).

Working with galleries provides multiple spatial channels to promote and sell and opportunities to develop and display multiple identities to engage different consumer groups or markets. As one respondent explained:

"I do exhibitions at the Breytenbach Centre [based in the small town of Wellington] which are specifically focussed on my own Afrikaans identity...But I also place work in galleries like 99 Loop Street which is more hipster Cape Town, and Everard Read which is incredibly English. I feel I navigate between different audiences"(I15 R1).

Yet, practising mediated mobility and working with galleries can create other challenges. One respondent discussed the downside of signing with a gallery and joining their 'stable': "They can have up to 50 artists that work for them...So they take 50% of everything that everybody makes so they get the same amount of money that I do for my work, but they have zero risk (I7 R1)." Others talked about inequalities related to power and agency. As one respondent argued:

"Some artists do not want to deal with the public or handle money...These artists prefer that galleries negotiate everything on their behalf...The danger is that they become dependent on galleries doing everything for them and they don't have their own clients because these relationships are brokered by the galleries. Because they have given the power and agency to galleries, they become completely dependent." (I14 R2).

Some artists also talked about the inability of galleries to deliver stable flows of income and the importance of developing their own sales and marketing strategies. Therefore, mediated mobility is not a panacea; negative elements must be identified and negotiated. Still, it does reduce the need for artists to locate in an established centre and helps them overcome the challenges associated with the D.I.Y. model. Moreover, for individuals who may be excluded from markets or undervalued because of their age, gender, race, language or cultural identity, experience or location, getting 'help' can generate legitimacy and trust without having to cultivate it on their own, which saves time and removes barriers (Hracs, 2015; Hracs & Brydges, 2019A).

#### 5.4 'Everywhere': Virtual mobility

Even before the pandemic, which has accelerated and intensified the so-called 'digital turn' (Ash et al., 2018), Grabher et al. (2018) argued that the simple juxtaposition of physical and virtual interaction is no longer adequate. Others have raised questions about how digitally mediated practices are embedded into work's spatialities (Bailey et al., 2020; Repenning, 2022; Wood et al., 2020). For artists in South Africa, physical spaces, including studios and galleries, remain vital to producing and promoting their work, but online platforms have become crucial channels of interaction and commerce. Websites provide the space to display, explain and sell art pieces to consumers from across South Africa and abroad. Blogs and social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter (X) and TikTok, allow artists to engage with consumers, creative collaborators and intermediaries on increasingly personal levels in local and global markets (Cheng et al., 2023; Scolere, 2019; Xaba et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021).

As one respondent explained: "I use Instagram...I definitely look for galleries. I look for similar artists. I see what is happening in other countries...It's looking at who I can link up with and whose work can inform my work and vice-versa. I definitely use it as a scouting exercise (I6 R1)." They went on to explain that an artist in Oregon found their work online and recommended that their local gallery host them: "I am now in communication with that gallery and hoping to have an exhibition in the States...interacting through social media...at a personal level...is very powerful (I6 R1)."

In this way, artists are harnessing digital technologies to practice virtual mobility. Building on conceptualisations of virtual co-presence, virtual mobility repositions actors in space and allows artists to act in real-time in different places, which may be local, regional and/or global (Bathelt & Turi, 2011; Cheng et al., 2023; Repenning, 2022). As one respondent explained:

"I [recently] exhibited with 2 very famous and established artists [from South Africa]...The one guy is internationally acclaimed. He didn't post or do anything on his social media. The other woman...she posted and did paid ads on Facebook and Instagram – a very aggressive effort, and she sold all her work...The other guy didn't sell a damn thing." (I6 R1)

Importantly, while some artists use virtual mobility to engage with galleries, others use it to bypass galleries and gatekeepers in the market and to successfully promote and sell directly to consumers:

“My friend is a potter...He started his Instagram account posting little videos about his pots [and his studio] and he’s got 120,000 views...He can’t believe it because he’s more of a recluse than I am. [Now] he’s selling on Instagram and...people travelling to South Africa are visiting his flat/studio. [But] what I have noticed is he is constant. He always posts...and makes sure the videos have the right hashtags.” (I7 R1).

Interactions can be local or global - “I sell internationally, to Europe or Netherlands, to England, and then a bit to Australia and New Zealand but it’s mostly in South Africa” (I10 R1) - and engagement in virtual channels can lead to physical visits and interaction. As one respondent explained: “Increasingly people want to come to the studio and see the production of the art...I’ve got people coming today...because they want to come pick up the work, they want to see where it is produced. They want to see the process, or at least, the studio” (I6 R1).

Although some consumers choose to physically pick up their art to enhance the value of the ‘experience,’ we were told that the rise of affordable and effective international shipping services, especially through the pandemic, has unlocked global markets: “There aren’t boundaries. If somebody in New York likes your work and you’ve posted a pretty good picture...there’s no reason why you can’t pack it up and send it off” (I25 R1).

While virtual mobility allows some artists to develop their careers without leaving large centres, like Cape Town, it enables others to move to and operate successfully from remote locations: “Because I’m far away from the market, and far away from the things that happen, for me [social media] is an indispensable tool to send work all over the place from here in Rosendal” (I10 R1). Similarly, accessing small peer networks to share ideas and works in progress via social media platforms helped to sustain artists in remote locations (Hautala & Nordström, 2019; Leick et al., 2023; Repenning, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic these networks of mentorship and emotional support, and the ability to market and sell became even more crucial: “During actual lockdown...I definitely saw that people were wanting to buy paintings, obviously because they weren’t spending money on holidays and eating out, and all that, and spending a lot of time in their homes” (I16 R2).

Yet, building brands, selling products and cultivating relationships in virtual spaces requires intense and constant performances of aesthetic labour which may limit the time and resources these entrepreneurs can allocate to developing new creative content and undermine their businesses (Brydges & Hracs 2019A; Scolere, 2019). Indeed, some artists in the sample really struggled to set up and maintain a range of overlapping online channels. Others lamented the investment of time and energy required to leverage virtual mobility (Scolere, 2019).

Issues related to aesthetic labour and the ‘corrosion of creativity’ (McRobbie, 2002) have been documented across a range of creative industries and locations, but in the South African context, local factors, including unreliable (and intermittent) electricity supply and internet connectivity, also constrain the practice and benefits of virtual mobility. This reminds us that digital technologies can produce, reinforce and exacerbate divides, disparities and uneven geographies and that immobilities can extend beyond physical movements (Ash et al., 2018; Breines et al., 2019; SLAPE et al., 2023).

As a result, virtual mobility is a complement, rather than a substitute, for face-to-face interactions and forms of temporary and mediated mobility. Indeed, artists are experimenting with multiple approaches and developing strategies to optimise the relative strengths and weaknesses of each tool, channel and practice. As one respondent summarised: “I’ve got 3 different channels to disseminate the work: the first is using social media platforms (virtual mobility)...The second is approaching specific galleries (mediated mobility)...Thirdly, I go to and hire a gallery to have a solo exhibition [in person] (temporary mobility)” (I6 R1). Ultimately, this evidence demonstrates how proximities are becoming more virtual, temporary and network-based (Bailey et al., 2020).

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper considered the extent to which South African artists need, can, or even want to be located in large established centres to realise their ambitions. Building on the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006) and recent work about the spatial strategies of creative entrepreneurs (Brydges & Hracs, 2019A), the paper explored how artists practice and combine three forms of mobility: 1) temporary mobility, which entails physically attending exhibitions and residencies, 2) mediated mobility, which involves working with intermediaries to create a presence in key markets remotely, and 3) virtual mobility, which harnesses digital platforms to promote and sell products in local, national and global markets. Ultimately, it demonstrated that locational choices and mobility practices are influenced by a range of factors and that being permanently located in big cities is not always essential, possible or desirable for visual artists.

Beyond reinforcing studies on the spatial dynamics and working practices of other creatives, including fashion designers and musicians, the findings nuanced our limited understanding of visual artists and how they value and strategically adopt a range of mobility practices to support and enable sustainable livelihoods. For example, by focusing on the role of arts residencies or production spaces, the paper explored the connections between local (markets and audiences) and global art worlds. Moreover, the focus on South African artists extends existing understandings beyond the Global North by identifying and reflecting on specific barriers and challenges artists face in specific contexts within the Global South.

By conducting interviews before and after COVID-19 and acknowledging the importance of locational context and intersectionality, the paper also provided a new perspective on

mobilities. Rather than identifying binaries between local and global, short or long-term mobilities and migration versus retention, it considered how these binaries are experienced by visual artists not as one-off options but rather as opportunities that can be used to suit the evolving and unique characteristics and circumstances of individuals operating in different socio-economic contexts and life stages. In this respect, it is clear that visual artists are constantly negotiating their mobility options and there is no single strategy that can accommodate the idiosyncratic needs, preferences and motivations of these entrepreneurs and the barriers and challenges they face.

To acknowledge and articulate the range of mobility strategies practised by visual artists Figure 2 visualises three key dimensions: time (short, medium and long term), space (local, national, global) and interactive mode (physical, mediated, virtual). These dimensions are ranges rather than fixed categories that can be practised and experienced differently by individuals in relation to their own experiences and circumstances. For example, a 'short-term' move may be a month for some and a few years for others. Moreover, 'local' may mean a small village or a global city.

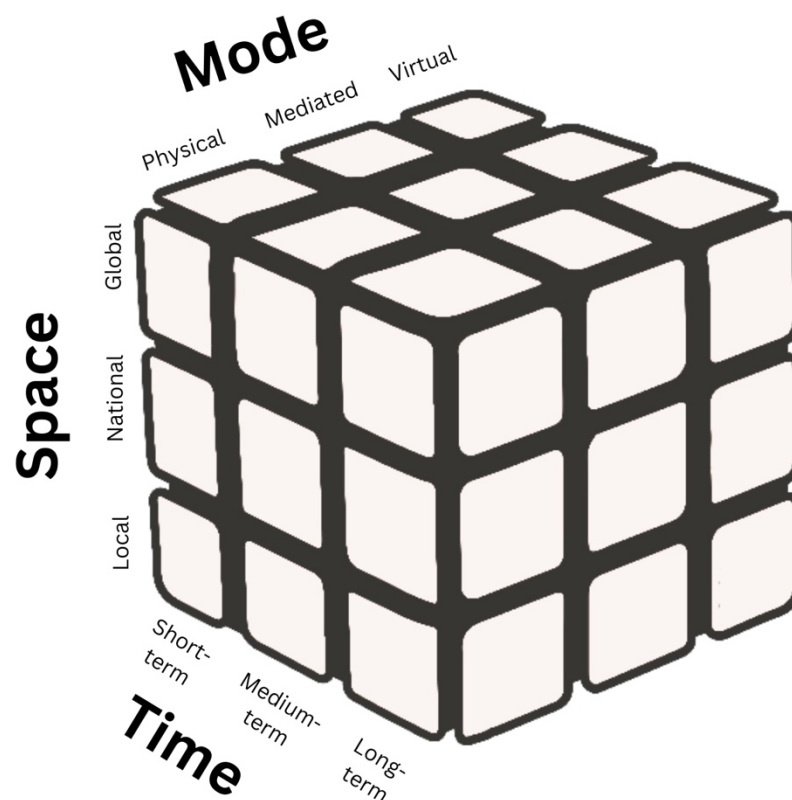


Figure 2: The dimensions of mobilities



Importantly, while some strategies are familiar within the art world, such as international physical moves for residencies (medium-term, global, physical), others are new or seem contradictory, such as interacting with and selling to local consumers through social media during COVID-19 (short-term, local, virtual). Thus, the framework provides enough structure to help understand the strategies and flexibility to accommodate the evolving real-world practices of individual artists.

Overall, the paper contributes to existing theories and debates in several ways. It nuances our understanding of the locational choices of creative workers, and visual artists who remain understudied, by moving beyond traditional considerations of ‘one-off’ moves and the ‘jobs vs. amenities’ debate (Florida, 2002; Storper & Scott, 2009). The paper also demonstrates how mobilities are practised and negotiated ‘on the ground,’ and in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, by individuals with unique characteristics operating within specific contexts that feature challenges. Finally, the paper advances our understanding of digital technologies, creative labour, and the spatial, temporal and commercial strategies independent producers are using to overcome the challenges associated with intensifying global competition and the do-it-yourself (D.I.Y) model (Bain & McLean, 2013; Brydges & Hracs, 2019A; Hracs, 2015; Repenning, 2022).

While the paper aims to move the debate forward beyond binaries and enable a more grounded understanding of mobility strategies of creative workers, it also calls for more research to expand further and nuance our understanding of how specific strategies respond and connect both to local conditions or temporary challenges (like COVID-19) as well as the life stages and intersectional characteristics of the workers at specific moments in time. For example, in the context of South Africa, it would be valuable to consider in greater depth how racial differences might influence these strategies or the influence of gender, age, religion or class.

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