

# Video Installation Art as a Platform for Promoting Mental Health Awareness

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## ABSTRACT

The author has been exploring the efficacy of video installation art as a meritorious health promotion medium. The researcher first created an original award-winning video installation art project, “The Besiegement: Advocating Mental Health,” which was exhibited for different age groups in various venues around Zimbabwe from 2019 until April 2020. The project did not continue exhibiting until the end of 2020 as planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The author has been critically analysing recorded interviews, discussions, audience reception, and views on the installation art experience regarding its possibilities and challenges. The project outcome suggests its potential as an effective medium for empowerment and enlightenment on mental health issues. Thus, video installation art has potential as a commendable developmental communication tool.

## KEYWORDS

Installation Art, Mental Health Advocacy, Video Installation, Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

Installation art is a design that includes an arrangement of objects in a space to create an artwork. This conformation of substances might include different visual arts such as paintings, sculptures, crafts and other artefacts (Hall et al., 1990; Rush, 1999; Zheng & Zhang, 2021). Whilst there are different types of installation art, this research specifically focused on Video Installation Art. Video installation art is a contemporary media art form that combines video technology with installation art, making use of all aspects of the surrounding environment to affect the audience (Bishop, 2005; Hall et al., 1990; London, 1995; Saaze, 2013).

The name ‘Installation art’ became popular from 1960s to 1970s. Meanwhile, video art either abstract or narrative was also gaining the momentum due to the development of the new video technology. This led artists to explore the combination of installation art and video art; hence the ‘video installation’ was born (Bishop, 2005).

In this case, the researcher having realized a gap in video installation art in Zimbabwe, he created an original video installation art project, ‘*The Besiegement – Advocating Mental Health*’. It is a fusion of metaphoric artefacts and two 10-minute short films depicting some details of existing mental illnesses, possible causes and symptoms.

The main objective of the project is to probe the efficiency of installation art as a worthy medium to raise an effective mental health awareness in Zimbabwe. The designer analyzed the audiences’ reception and views on the installation art experience in locating its probabilities and complications.

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Figure 1. The Besiegement video installation art work in progress



*The Besiegement* was exhibited for different age groups in some venues in Zimbabwe so to analyse its effectiveness as a media for empowerment. Most importantly as potential platform to raise awareness on mental health issues in the nation.

The project was launched at the *First Floor Art gallery*, Karigamombe centre in Harare on 8 March 2019. From mid to end of March, additional exhibitions were held for students at the University of Zimbabwe Beithall where about 1000 students visited.

Then from 22 – 25 May 2019, the exhibition was staged at the prestigious Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (ZITF) in Bulawayo. At ZITF, 937 audience members visited the stand including dignitaries such as cabinet ministers. More exhibitions were held during the University of Zimbabwe *research week* from 3 to 9 August 2019. Therefore, the project designer/researcher was bestowed with the ‘creative excellence award’ for the design work of this unique multimedia art production.

## BACKGROUND

It is in response to the need to investigate on mental health facts that the researcher designed the video installation to add on already exploited developmental communication implements. There are a plentiful academics who have already contributed in social development in Zimbabwe using arts. For example, Chivandikwa & Muwonwa, (2013) have written extensively about Participatory Theatre for Development. Chikonzo, (2018) has also written about the role of performance arts in a society and Ravengai, (2011) also analysed how *Studio263* was used as a pro-development television soap opera on ZBCTV (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporations Television) from 2002 and got pulled off air in 2007.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, video has become easily accessible through various mechanisms. It is now part and parcel of our daily lives in this day and age of social media. It is also easier to use video clips as an educational aid (Omiles et al., 2020) According to Gregory, (2005) from around 1990s, video technology has become easily accessible; video cameras are cheaper nowadays and they are also incorporated within mobile phones. Hence, the “...availability and affordability of technology”

Figure 2. The Besiegement video installation art project exhibition at the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair



in modern times has progressively driven video activism and advocacy. For example, Participatory Video (PV) has all the time gained popularity as a very powerful tool to empower the marginalized communities to raise their concerns. Moreover, PV has become an interesting avenue to outreach other grassroots communities who might be in similar situations (Lunch & Lunch, 2006).

Installation art is a later name to what used to be called 'environment', 'project art' and 'temporary art'. Apparently, these names defined the humongous nature of these multimedia art; eventually installation began to be interchangeably used with exhibition and installation was a preferred name till to date (Reiss, 2001). The development of installation art has been multidimensional, for example it involved landscaping, scenery design, architecture, video technology, painting, performance art and other numerous artistic elements (Bishop, 2005).

By 1958, Allan Kaprow produced a room-size multimedia art project which he called 'environment'. Hence, Reiss (2001), elaborates that installation art grants the viewers with a participation experience either just to walk about within the art or directly get involved in an interaction. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, visual artists such as Monika Sosnowska have continued to create large installation art works in open spaces and indoor museums (Sosnowska, 2007). Nonetheless, the evolution and development of the installation art hasn't come to a complete halt yet; a new terminology is being coined, 'the new media installation art'.

Zheng, Y., & Zhang, P. 2021, p.91) define 'New media installation art' as

*"...the product of the cooperation between new media art and installation art. It is a special multi-dimensional artwork based on new media technology".*

On top of materials or objects used in daily lives, the new media installation art can include digital audiovisual elements, internet, and virtual reality spaces (Zheng & Zhang, 2021). For example, an interactive theatre play 'Nufonia must fall'; it was a fusion of modern technology in terms of pocket cameras that were used to create live cinema and robots (Fuchs, 2019)

## MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Challenges of Mental Health in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, mental disorders are rising from early age, and it is mostly associated with the adversities that the country is going through. The country's economy has collapsed, and this has had a massive impact on many people's mental health. It's been reported that out of the population of 1.4 million people which is 10 percent of the population are suffering from one or more of mental disorders (Kajawu et al., 2019).

Most people in Zimbabwe rely heavily on mythical assumptions mainly based on cultural or religious beliefs in explaining mental illness. This is due to insufficient knowledge about mental health and eventually that lack of facts can inadvertently make the society to stigmatize those suffering from mental illnesses (RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE, 2009). In response to that challenge, 'The Besiegement' was designed and exhibited, presenting factual realities about mental health with the aim of empowering and raising awareness about mental health in Zimbabwe.

### Creative Processes

The designer/researcher of this installation art project decided to have at the centre a big human head representing a 'character' of someone confused or 'lost' in the midst of a forest with leafless trees. The leaves of the trees in this forest have all fallen down seemingly awaiting rejuvenation. The head is dressed in a black hooded top covering the head and big glasses as if trying to hide away emotions. On top of tree leaves scattered all over on the ground, there was a suitcase belonging to the confused character with some of his possessions dropping out of the suitcase. There is also an abandoned dilapidated computer hard drive symbolic to the deterioration of the character's mental faculty. On one of the trees there was a hung-up telephone handset hanging from that tree which is portraying the lack of communication or cut off from the society. On one of the trees there was an owl placed in the basket and a traditional broom hanging aside. This scenario was created to trigger the perception of the African psychology as far as witchcraft is concerned.

On top of all these artifacts, are two 10-minute short films depicting some details of existing mental illnesses that were being screened from the 'lost' character's glasses. These films were as if presenting his point of view or experienced incidents being replayed by his brain. The text about the possible causes and symptoms were screened from the projector screen positioned on the edge of the installation art so that audiences can be informed. Then, supplementary to the set was an audible harrowing soundtrack and sound effects intermingled. *The Besiegement* was a fusion of metaphoric artefacts and video technology fused together to affect the viewers.

The communities accessed and experienced the phenomena of this new media art exhibition while getting equipped with vital knowledge. That way, it enabled them to understand the crisis facing them before engaging in the mental health discourse. On top of all this, an opportunity to explore the video installation as a non-judgmental platform for a meaningful dialogue was inevitable. On the other hand, the communities' exposure to the video installation was a sharp reminder of this mental health calamity that seems to have been forgotten in Zimbabwe.

The enlightening of communities about mental illnesses, the subject often considered distasteful by the society was significant, consequently so that they may participate in well informed and healthy discourse on such a complex issue. Moreover, it aided in reducing stigma, rumours and myths on this mysterious topic to many due to lack of knowledge (Liang, 2016). However, the other purpose of the exhibition was to generate data through in-depth interviews, questionnaires, observation of audience reaction and recorded video footages. Then the researcher analytically scrutinized the project's efficiency from the collected data in pursuit of seeking the efficacy of video installation as another cost-effective avenue to promote accuracy on mental health issues in Zimbabwe.

### III. Methods

Dr Phandey & Dr Phandey, (2015) define research as searching again for new knowledge with already existing facts or searching for already existing knowledge for further refinement or development. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to collect sufficient data for this inquiry so to have a reliable and well-versed outcome. "...numerous data collection techniques..." and the 'triangulation' of the research methodologies lessened the research bias tendencies (Ozerdem & Bowd, 2010).

In this circumstance the investigator used an exploratory design as the subject being explored lacked essential documentation, there were high levels of uncertainty due to that lack of pre-recorded knowledge. On top of that, the design method offered flexibility with no formal structure (Dr Wyk, 2012).

Since the exploration was based on a video installation '*The Besiegement*' therefore Practice based Research (PbR) was also preferred. Candy & Edmonds, (2018) both agree, if artefacts are the foundation and main contribution to new knowledge being tracked then the research is practice-based. In modern times, PbR is increasingly becoming popular research technique so through this way, the installation art presentation was already an advantageous research methodology (Al-YahYai, 2014).

The quantitative and qualitative methods were as well used to collect data through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, post exhibition group and individual discussions, audience reaction observations, photographs, recorded video footages and audio contents critical analysis (Brent & Leedy, 2015). During the exhibitions, we did unstructured interviews, then after exhibitions we arranged structured interviews with selected interviewees.

These methodologies and procedures were carefully considered as the most suitable ways to collect sufficient relevant data. Furthermore, as the research design offered much-needed flexibility as there were limited existing literature about the subject matter. Hence, the study strategy bargained the researcher with an opportunity to collect diverse information for critical data analysis without any boundaries so to minimize the practitioner's biased tendencies (Swanepoel, 2005).

On top of all that, the research study had an abundance of visual interpretations represented in the form of juxtaposition, metaphors and other elements for the benefit of viewers' experiences. That way, the art was deliberately set up to interact with the audiences' psychology and evoke emotions of which emotionalism or expressivism theory was automatically part of the framework (Kuuva, 2007). The expressions of emotions are found not only in the designer but most importantly in the audiences and the art itself. In this context it aided the researching designer to evaluate the impact of the art on the audiences so to have an authentic and conclusive research outcome (Graham & NetLibrary, 2005).

Although with such a privilege of multiple-choice research techniques, the researcher remained grounded, focused and did not get carried away. He persisted being attentive and vigilant in pursuit of quality relevant information for a sound and solid research foundation (Macdonald et al., 2008).

### RESULTS: RESPONSES FROM AUDIENCES

There were numerous research procedures which were used; formal interviews and discussions were recorded, audiovisuals and still images were captured leading to copious data being collected.

On top of that, a questionnaire was also availed to the audience members, it carried questions such as:

1. Have you ever seen a video installation or an installation art in general?
2. After watching '*The Besiegement Video Installation*', what do you think about it?
3. Do you think the message we are portraying through this art is intelligible?
4. Did the installation manage to evoke any emotions out of you?
5. All in all, is the exhibition fit for the purpose of advocating for mental health
6. Taking everything into account, do you think your visit here was worthwhile and would be able to refer someone?
7. If you can, please take us through your analysis of the project, feel free to suggest where you think we might improve it.

Thus, over 2000 audience members who visited the exhibition acknowledged in the questionnaire that they had never seen such an art. The number of appreciative viewers was overwhelming. Approximately, over 99.9% of the viewers felt the artwork was unique but very interesting to watch and were positive about its potential as an enlightenment mechanism.

The exhibition attendees were almost equally both male and female, from adolescent to middle aged. It was, however, the literate or academics who willingly volunteered to share their views and they were confidently articulate.

An art and design expert passed his sentiments about how the mental health message had been amplified and magnified by the usage of such multimedial art project. Although some metaphorical aspects and juxtapositions needed someone with a critical mind to understand the message. However, with the aid of video technology, the message was simplified so that every ordinary person can easily understand it.

Very few people, roughly less than 0.1% of the viewers felt the installation art project made them uncomfortable as it was too frightening for them to continue watching and engaging in the discourse. A psychiatrist insinuated that those who were afraid might have underlying unresolved emotions that needed to be dealt with. However, he did clarify that his assumptions did not mean the project is necessarily a diagnostic tool.

There were a few dignitaries who visited the exhibition stand during the opening of the exhibition at the first-floor gallery in Harare applauded the art as an interesting paradigm shift of modern art. The impact of the project was beginning to be felt, hence with the University of Zimbabwe agreed to fund the project to be staged at the ZITF in Bulawayo. Due to the effectiveness of the exhibition, it was suggested that perhaps the project should also be taken on tour, especially in places like Chimanimani where a lot of people had been psychologically affected after cyclone Idai.

## DISCUSSION AND REMARKS

All the exhibitions were well attended; positive reviews and views about its prospective were expressed. It was apparent that *The Besiegement* was increasingly getting interesting exposure and attention perhaps due to its distinctiveness. We aimed at taking advantage of that public interest and it was crucial in the success of the study to have more exhibitions. Our last exhibition was at the University of Zimbabwe in April 2020, again we had a lot more audiences getting attracted by our unique and humongous stature of the art which most of them had never seen before. Nevertheless, it was this enormous size that an engineering senior lecturer proposed that it should be reduced for the easier mobility of the installation project. However, it was this humongous feature that made the project to be an excellent experience for the audiences to even walk about within the set. On the other hand, most critics applauded the project for being a great concept, putting art into physical 3D format using installation art when tackling a subject that's usually avoided due to its sensitiveness.

So, it was fit for its purpose in opening up and triggering communities to participate in the discourse that's normally seen as a taboo in our culture.

During the closing of the UZ research week, the designer and researcher of the study was awarded with the creative excellence award. Therefore potentially, the project could influence the policy making in Zimbabwe.

It appears as if up until now, the area of installation art including video installation art as a possible health promotion transport has not been well probed globally. Charleson, (2011) elaborates the role of video installation as an unclosed participatory experience for the viewers not to be passive but be able to recollect their individual childhood or previous experiences and reflect on those reminiscences. Then Professor Gibson (2002) reiterates this notion of recollection and reflection of reminiscences as "imagistic cognition". This is where sequential images run through the head trying to stitch together some memories of experiences. He pronounces that the power of film is linked to



Figure 3. The VC of University of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe Minister of Higher Education visiting the Besiegement exhibition



the primitive stages of remembering “...that elicits the intense pleasures of childhood and access to a means of navigating the self” (Charleson, 2011, p. 17).

Another research was conducted between 2004 and 2005 with ‘Art Angel’, Dundee and Project Ability’s ‘Trongate Studios’, Glasgow and it was concluded that the participants’ self-esteem, determination, confidence, self-belief and understanding has increased (Parr, 2005). The arts therapy and participatory arts interventions’ positive impact was also reported, for example, positivity and ability to cope with situations increased. Agitation and other depression symptoms had decreased (Jensen & Bonde, 2018).

The project also raised more questions in terms of being a lot more as a development communication tool. For example, the installation art also positively exhibited that it can be a potential non-judgmental platform for dialogue on issues that matter within the community. Furthermore, it signified signs of being a possible participatory arts intervention means. The students that participated were from different backgrounds, some of them faced challenges but they testified very positive moods all the time they participated on the project despite difficult encounters they were going through. All these questions raised shall be probed so to discover further possibilities of the project and document the discoveries.

All in all, the critical analysis made from the video footage, recorded audio, still images and questionnaires suggest that the video installation has potential to be a meritorious development communication tool in raising mental health awareness.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

It was essential for the researcher to conscientiously interrogate this contemporary multimedia visual art. The study focused on examining the efficacy of video installation as an informative instrument to raise awareness in mental health issues in Zimbabwe. This way it has enabled the contribution of new tasted and tried ways and knowledge so to tackle stigma and myths in mental health in Zimbabwe. Mental health is a challenge to the nation; contemporary Zimbabwean society is characterized by a crisis that is complex and multi-faceted being reinforced by socioeconomic and political quagmire.

*“The number of people suffering from mental illness in Zimbabwe has been increasing due to the tough economic and social environment. Experts say one in every four people in Zimbabwe suffers from a mental disorder” (RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE, 2009, p.03).*

The investigator critically examined how a society can take advantage of the accessibility of this powerful open medium used to share essential messages to reach many people in modern times. By so doing he shall be equipping wider communities with vital knowledge to understand multidimensional mental health disorders. On the other hand, this will encourage and influence them to practice healthier ways of living and learn to be tolerant to those living with mental health.

As the subject has not been tapped across the globe, it was the goal of this research to fill this gap by looking at the role of video installation in health promotion. Therefore, the research has confirmed the possibilities of video installation being an effective developmental communication tool in health promotion.

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