

# **THE PROMISE OF CRISIS: CREATIVELY TRANSFORMING DANGEROUS LEARNING INTO INNOVATIVE OUTCOMES IN EDGY CONTEXTS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents the perspective of a range of practising South African artists on the contextual factors influencing the recent surge in artistic creativity and innovation in their country. In particular, the ‘edginess’ of the everyday contexts of artistic endeavour is seen as a source of transformative learning for those having the courage to engage with it. Through such ‘dangerous’ learning, it is claimed, the creative ideas fuelling artistic renewal and development in the country are being generated. Furthermore, the conversion of these novel ideas into innovative forms of artistic production is viewed as an outcome of two unusual contextual factors: a covenantal culture characterized by an ‘in it together’ ethic; and committed, broadly distributed, leadership.

## **Key Words**

creativity; innovation; learning; crisis; leadership

# **The Promise of Crisis: Creatively Transforming Dangerous Learning into Innovative Outcomes in Edgy Contexts**

## **Introduction**

Over multiple decades South Africa has been pounded by waves of transformation; waves carrying in their wake profound political, social and economic change. This paper explores one particular recent surge - that of artistic creativity and innovation within the South African arts community – that appears to have its origins in the seismic socio-political shifts occurring in the country. Drawing on unstructured interviews with a range of South African artists, the paper presents a perspective on this phenomenon; one that argues that a range of practices - each facilitative of novel thought and its conversion into innovative outcomes - has blossomed within the turbulent and challenging contexts of everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, these ‘edgy’ social contexts – as they are referred to by those interviewed – appear to have exposed artists to new forms of transformative learning; learning that when fully embraced is ‘dangerous’ in that it challenges core mental models (assumptions of ‘self’, ‘others’ and the ‘way the world works’) while facilitating the generation of the creative ideas and collaborative practices necessary for artistic innovation.

In spite of the fact that creative enterprises represent an important and growing sector of many national economies (Andari et al, 2007; Cooke and Schwartz, 2007; OECD, 2006), and given the widespread acknowledgement of the critical role played by innovation within rapidly changing economies (Byrne et al, 2009; Barsh, 2008; Barsh et al, 2008), surprisingly little research has been conducted into the nature of creativity and innovation in the creative industries (Moultrie and Young, 2009; Banks et al, 2002), or into the forms of learning required to sustain innovative outcomes from creative practices. In an attempt to contribute to such research, this paper follows up on a perception gained from numerous visits to South Africa that the country is experiencing not only a surge in artistic creativity but also is developing new capabilities with respect to the conversion of this creativity into innovative forms of artistic expression. The first phase of the research was established with the view to gaining access to the informed perspective of well-known contemporary South African artists – people who have experienced these contexts day-in and day-out over many years. This paper presents their perspective, without critique thereof, with the intention of using it as a basis for broader and deeper scrutiny in subsequent phases of the research planned for 2011.

After discussing the concepts of creativity and innovation, the choice of a phenomenological methodology for the research is explained. Thereafter the perspective of those interviewed is presented and discussed in relation to the research literature on creativity and innovation. In the concluding comments, the most important insights delivered by this pilot project are highlighted and the implications for subsequent phases of this research are outlined.

## **The Concepts of Creativity and Innovation and the Contexts of Their Realization**

There is little clarity in the research literature on the concept of creativity. Much of its meaning seems to depend upon the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the philosophical paradigm within which it is viewed (Magyari-Beck, 1994). While positivist

research into creativity has been concerned primarily with the identification and objective measurement of the traits of creative individuals (Eysenck, 1994), more recently research emanating from alternative philosophical paradigms has challenged the notion of 'the creative individual' and argued for creativity to be seen as a socially constructed phenomenon that is contingent for its meaning on contextual and situational factors (Rickards & Moger, 2006; De Cock, 1996).

In this paper creativity is viewed in terms of its outcomes, namely the generation of ideas that have the potential to extend or transform current practices in ways that are viewed by a particular industry or community as being beneficial to its interests. As Moultrie & Young (2009: 300) put it:

Creativity is often defined as the production of ideas which are both novel and applicable to an identified opportunity.

In this respect, ideas can be viewed as a source of *conceptual capital* – a vital set of intangible resources that has strong contextual (especially relational) dependencies (Dovey & Mooney 2010; Amabile, 1996). This has significant implications for leadership in that in order to ensure the continuous generation of pertinent ideas, the task of leadership becomes one of the creation of an environment in which ideas that serve the interests of the stakeholder collective can flourish (Dovey, 2009; Mumford *et al*, 2002). The literature is clear that broadly collaborative practices are essential to the generation of relevant and rich ideas and that, in general, two conditions greatly enhance the effectiveness of such practices. The first condition is that of *requisite variety* in the social composition of the group, with participants drawn from diverse backgrounds that provide them with perspectives that disrupt the dominant cultural conventions and taken-for-granted assumptions of other participants (Sonnenburg, 2004; Gyskiewicz, 1999). The second condition is the enactment of the practice of *creative abrasion* whereby participants are able to confront each other over the value of ideas without the process degenerating into ego battles and sectarian conflict (Leonard-Barton, 1995). To manage these two conditions, the deep commitment of all participants to the broad mission of the collective is crucial; equally important is the establishment of a 'negotiated order' among stakeholders with respect to consensus on a set of principles upon which collaboration is to be based (Dougherty, 1999; Strauss, 1978).

While defining innovation as the *realization* of relevant and promising ideas, the research literature warns that, because of its highly political nature, such realization is very difficult to achieve in practice (Barsh, 2008; Barsh *et al*, 2008). Human endeavour is characterized by competing interests, and ideas that support prevailing power interests are more likely to be realized than those which threaten such interests (Simonton, 1984). The *status quo* is thus far more likely to prevail even when change is in the interests of the stakeholder collective (Dovey & Fenech, 2007). In this respect, it takes courageous and enlightened leadership to enable a collective to realize ideas that are perceived by powerful sectarian interests within that collective to threaten their power bases (Dovey, 2009). Thus, this important leadership role is often performed 'below the radar' of senior management by self-appointed champions of ideas - individuals known as intrepeneurs (Pinchott, 1985) – who work covertly (at considerable personal risk) in order to ensure the realization of ideas that they view as critical to the future of the organization (Abetti, 1997; Augsdorfer, 1994).

In this pilot project I was primarily concerned with gaining an informed perspective on the sources of the creative ideas being generated in the South African arts community; the factors enabling their *realization* in new artistic practices, art forms and other innovative manifestations of creative endeavour; and the forms of leadership that may be facilitating these processes.

### **Methodology of the Study**

This research is underpinned by the ontological assumption that the reality of the South African creative industries is a nominal one that has been socially constructed over various historical and political eras by stakeholders who often had competing interests and agendas; and by the epistemological assumption that the knowledge sought is subjective in nature and resides in the 'minds' of those who have deep experience of the phenomena of artistic creativity and innovation in South Africa. Thus, by recognizing the socially constructed and contested nature of the reality of the South African creative industries, and the dependence of knowledge accessed about them upon the interpretative and sense-making capabilities of those who 'live' within this reality, this study is located within an interpretative research paradigm. Furthermore, as the intention is merely to understand the phenomena of creativity and innovation within this socially constructed reality from the perspective of those who have deep experience of it, and not to intervene in any way, the selection of a phenomenological methodology was deemed most appropriate. The method of data collection was, thus, unstructured, probing individual interviews with a range of artists who have significant experience of the South African creative arts domains. My primary question sought validation of the assumption that there has been a surge in artistic creativity and innovation in South Africa in recent years and, depending on the answer, I subsequently probed the reasons for the interviewee's response to that question.

Eleven people were interviewed in the two major South African cities (six in Cape Town and five in Johannesburg). Those interviewed were well represented by gender (five women and six men) and generation (four in their thirties; one in her forties; five in their fifties; and one in his seventies) but not well represented by race (nine white, one black and one 'Indian' artist). The limitations imposed on this exploratory research by the small number, and select nature, of people interviewed (both factors of limited time and access, for this pilot study) are significant and need to be considered when reflecting on the results. The interviews were conducted at whatever location was most convenient for the interviewee, and all were tape-recorded. The verbatim transcript of each interview was shared with the relevant interviewee and confirmation gained that it was an accurate record of what was said during the interview.

Hermeneutic principles were applied in the analysis of the interviews. This involved sensitive 'listening' to the sound data in order to comprehend the personal and socio-historical context of the interviewee's perspective. Thereafter 'key meanings' were documented from each transcript and, through comparison with the other transcripts, dominant 'themes of meaning' were identified.

### **Perspective of the Artists Interviewed**

All those interviewed, except for one person who felt unable to judge, agreed that there has been a surge in creativity and innovation in South African creative arts in recent years. While seven people believed that this was a general phenomenon, three people limited their validation to a

specific art form; with two feeling that it was particularly the case with dance and another arguing that there had been ‘something of a renaissance in the visual arts’. In the presentation of the perspective of those interviewed, I have separated the dynamics of *creativity* from those of *innovation*.

### *The Surge in Creativity:*

Several dominant themes emerged with respect to the enablers of this acknowledged surge in creativity:

- *The ‘Edginess’ of Life in South Africa:* Most of those interviewed referred to the significant challenges of everyday life in South Africa. Not only are issues of personal safety ‘in the back of their minds’ continuously but so too are the significant implications for personal and group identity, and affiliations, of the various forms of social contestation and competition that characterize life in that context. They describe how the politics of every aspect of everyday life in the country, are ‘in the face’ of all who live there. However, given the history of the country; the deep roots that most have in that place; and, in particular, the recent peaceful transformation to what became known globally as the ‘miracle country’, there is an unusually strong commitment of many who live there to embrace the challenges they face. As one person expressed it:

(In my art) I am just trying to make sense of the world around me, you know. Trying to understand what I see and what I live. That’s on a personal level. And on a more social level, I believe in engagement. I believe that if you engage with something then you have the right to the light as well as to the dark. If you don’t engage, you sit in that fear zone and you don’t have access to the light.

Another comments that:

the issues are so stark that you need to find a way to say something about them, or to engage symbolically. I certainly feel that, and I think that’s true of most people who are creative in this country.

One, who recently co-curated the *Dada South* exhibition in Cape Town, refers to the link between the absurdity of much of everyday life in South Africa with that of the period in Europe in which the Dadaist movement arose:

Constitutionally we’re allowed to be these ‘free people’ who have all these rights, etc., but in practice much of this is absurd. ... I mean, *Dada* and that entire movement developed out of a sense of absurdity that emerged from the horrors of World War I - the horrors of the trenches - and they all started to talk a nonsense language as a way of philosophically, linguistically, and in every other possible way of separating themselves from the order - the Western order. ... We believe we have a contribution to make to the country, however small, but it won’t be around whatever the official national agenda is. We ask ourselves the whole time ‘what kind of criticism will count?’

As a result of such engagement, these people have ‘something to say’ – their creativity appears to be fuelled by their attempts to address, and make sense of, the profoundly challenging social issues that constitute everyday reality in the country they call home.

- *Cherishing the New Constitutional Right to Freedom of Expression:* Many of those interviewed made explicit reference to their recently gained constitutional right to self expression as an important factor in their creative endeavour. The long history of government control over artistic expression in the country, and the engagement of many South African artists in ‘resistance art’ during the apartheid era, has made the relationship between politics and art very explicit. Those interviewed claim that, while a period of politically correct ‘respect’ was accorded the new South Africa – the international ‘poster child’ of peaceful change and reconciliation, as one person put it – in recent years the constitutional right to critique has encouraged new forms of critical dialogue and artistic engagement with the realities of life in post-apartheid South Africa.
- *The Nature of the New Generation of South African Artists:* According to these artists, South African artistic enterprises have been boosted by the influx of the so-called ‘born frees’ – talented black youngsters who experienced the schooling system post-1994 and who are now entering the employment market. They claim that several art forms are particularly well placed to maximize the positive contribution that these young people can make to them. Dance, in particular, is flourishing as many black youngsters who have grown up in the townships enter this art form being fully literate in the language of dance and having embodied performance skills. They are, thus, not disadvantaged in such art forms by the on-going inadequacies of the township education system. As one artist who was raised in a township expressed it:

In the townships people are geared to performance. I grew up in Alexandra township and it was like a performance stage, you know. People from the rural areas, over the weekends, dressed in their tribal attire and singing those songs; and religious groups from different denominations; and you had urbanized musicians – jazz musicians – playing penny whistles and all that in the 60s and 70s. So it was like a performance stage and I think that still holds today. Most black communities produce natural performers.

Furthermore, those interviewed claim that the South African design industry, increasingly recognized internationally for its innovative products, is also accessible to this generation of creative black youngsters and offers them excellent employment opportunities. Facilitating this access, according to them, is a broad collaborative effort between commercial businesses, women (described by one person as ‘white women with missionary zeal’) running non-government organizations (NGOs) that operate many grassroots development projects in the townships, and the new universities of technology.

- *New Forms of Engagement with Africa:* The majority of those interviewed commented that many South African artists still have ambivalent attitudes towards the rest of Africa. As one person expressed it, they are ‘still standing with their backs to Africa’ and, as a result, are cut-off from potentially valuable artistic collaboration with their Northern neighbours. This, however, is changing rapidly as hundreds of thousands of African

immigrants (legal and illegal) flood into South Africa, bringing with them new artistic ideas and practices. One artist summed up succinctly the ambivalence felt by many of the others towards this phenomenon:

Suddenly there's been this influx of people from the African continent – people with whom we've never had any kind of discourse or interaction before. They bring a new flavour into the city and a new energy as well. This is what Johannesburg is grappling with now – this new energy. Should we be accepting of it? Should we be resistant to it?

Linked to this ambivalence is South Africa's problematic 'African' identity: while, as one person argued, there are definite international commercial benefits for South African art to be classified as 'African', the notion that South Africa is 'different' to other African countries and that it needs to protect the artistic heritage that is a product of this sense of unique identity, seems still to prevail - at least sub-consciously - among South African artists. However, the influx of African immigrants is unlikely to abate and, as the recent outbreak of xenophobic attacks on them seems to indicate, this phenomenon is likely to add one more dimension to the 'edginess' of life within the country and, thus, another source of creative energy.

- *The Strongly Internal Locus of Control of South African Artists:* Most of those interviewed argued that because of the years of isolation during the apartheid era, and the international cultural boycott that was in operation during that period, artists in South Africa had to develop what they refer to as a *Do It Yourself* (DIY) attitude that has made them fiercely independent and resilient.

There isn't the same money, access, or technology here but there is this DIY attitude of 'how do I do it myself and how do I make it mine?'

This attitude has made South African artists wary of slavishly following international trends at the cost of authentic South African artistic styles. As one person put it, there is 'an anxiety of influence' among South African artists in this respect. Just as occurred across many local industries (the arms industry, in particular) international boycotts during the apartheid era seems to have led to the development of a DIY attitude within the South African arts community. As a consequence, South African artists have taken control over their own artistic production, and are suspicious of government and corporate funding and the potentially debilitating consequences thereof. One artist expressed it thus:

People are starting to realize that relying too much on the government is not conducive to the interests of the art scene. The innovation must come from the makers of art themselves rather than from government because anything that comes from government comes with strings attached.

Another put it more forcefully:

But I like that (the lack of government funding) because that's what has given South African art an edge. You are being screwed at every corner and you just have to figure it out for yourself and operate outside of any agenda other than your own. That's a very powerful position to be in.

One, engaged in the design industry, concurred more demurely:

The receipt of government funding support, however, has had mixed outcomes: while enabling some endeavours to establish themselves it has introduced bureaucracy, poor work practices and complacency that has undermined the creative impetus of the industry.

According to most, corporate sources of funding are fickle and often threaten artists' ownership of the creative process. One person expresses this point thus:

On the side of corporate sponsorship, these things are always very shaky. For twenty-five years Standard Bank was the major funder of the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, which has been such an important crucible of performance arts in South Africa. Four or five years ago they pulled out and seem to have put their funding into cricket. Corporate sources of sponsorships are fickle and are very much linked to the personal tastes and interests of the marketing directors<sup>1</sup>.

These artists are politically astute and, while conceding that government and/or corporate sponsorship may be welcome early in one's career, they stress the need for artists to guard their ownership of their art by managing their financial independence intelligently.

One explains this position thus:

I have been a corporate art consultant and I've curated corporate exhibitions – I mean I've worked for Brett Kebble<sup>2</sup>! – so I've had my share of experiences of negotiating with corporate interests ... but I try, as far as possible, to be independent of anyone else's agenda. On an ethical and philosophical level, I needed to work independently. With my teaching in the background, I decided that I would stick to my own values-set and put all of the money I'm paid back into my project space.

In the same way, a musician outlines how he and his wife have managed their financial situation, over his thirty-year career, in order to ensure his freedom of operation:

I wasn't interested to begin with; I wasn't interested in doing any kind of commercial endorsement. But we did come to an agreement whereby I would have artistic control over what I did. Right the way through, the financial independence that my wife and I developed was extremely important.

Although all would accept (and have accepted in the past) government, corporate and/or international funding if offered, they insist that they would ensure their artistic independence by accepting it only on their own terms (with several of those interviewed providing evidence of having done so in the past).

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<sup>1</sup> This person subsequently sent me the following message: 'You might recall that I praised the *Dance Umbrella* - which has been, in my view, one of the initiatives which have contributed to the flowering of contemporary dance in recent years. They announced this month that FNB - their main sponsor - has withdrawn all sponsorship after 2010'.

<sup>2</sup> Brett Kebble, a controversial South African mining magnate with strong political connections within the ruling ANC government, was forced to resign his executive roles in several mining companies after suspicion of corruption. He was murdered in 2005. His killer is yet to be identified and charged.



### *The Surge in Innovation:*

As pointed out earlier, while it is one thing to generate ideas it is another to convert these ideas into forms of innovation. The realization of creative ideas in innovative outcomes is a highly political process that depends on particular socio-cultural contexts, and power-relations, for its achievement. In this respect, several dominant themes emerged from the interview data.

- *The ‘Covenantal’ Culture of the South African Art Community:* One of the most interesting themes – raised by seven of the eleven people interviewed – is that of the existence of a kind of unconscious covenant – an intuitive sense of ‘all being in it together’ - that characterizes the ‘culture’ of the South African art community. Many people commented on the exceptional openness and generosity of spirit among members of this community that has enabled constructive cross-disciplinary collaboration and tolerance of individual style and, thereby, innovative artistic products and practices. One artist, who, as he put it, lived in the United States until his early 20s but ‘grew up’ in South Africa, commented thus:

There is huge generosity among people here. ... What is especially true in South Africa is not that you have to pay your dues but, rather, that you have to do something; it’s not like you have to prove anything – just start something and people will show up. And people will then want to work with you. Anything will do – it’s not that you have to conform – just do something!

The state of siege that South African artists experienced during the decades of apartheid and now, in a different form, as the challenges of everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa confront them, seems to have contributed to this covenantal culture wherein each accepts responsibility for the whole and acts generously in the collective interests. Significantly, these artists claim that there are people within this community who are playing important leadership roles in the manner in which they frame their art as a social and national responsibility. In particular, William Kentridge, whose art is recognized internationally, is said to exemplify this form of leadership, as one person explains:

I consider art to be a dialogue; an engagement with public discourse - and I know it’s a bit cheesy as a South African to say this – but my favourite artist is William Kentridge. And it’s not just because of the work he makes – I mean the work he makes is brilliant – but it’s because of how he embodies the artist as public figure. Wherever he is and whatever he does, he *talks* to people; he shares with people; he’s excited by ideas and is interested in what other people are doing and is interesting in what he is doing.

On this spirit of public service as artistic duty, another comments thus:

When I travel to Europe or to the East or wherever, I always feel that I am not going there for myself but as an ambassador for South African artists and to bring back whatever we can use here.

Another sees such service as an obligation to assist in the recovery of lost histories and cultural practices, especially of disempowered rural people:

There's a treasure house of stuff that's still there. When you go out into the rural areas, you see incredible poverty – a poverty of every sort. I want to bring those people onto the stage and, possibly, through these processes of collaboration, create new ideas and new work and champion them.

As would be expected within a covenantal culture, this community is said to be capable of hosting increasingly vigorous forms of critique. Such critical debate is not constrained by narrow perspectives encouraged by parochial attitudes but is enriched by the outward-looking orientation of South African artists and their ambition to prove their artistic worth on global terms.

Another feature of this culture, raised in most of the interviews, is the high level of integration of the various art forms. This seems to be the consequence of a move to shared workspaces partly due to economic necessity but also with the view to focusing on the intrinsic value of artistic production rather than its commercial possibilities. As one person explains:

When I came out of art school the different artistic communities were still quite separate. Recently, the introduction of new spaces – such as *The Bag Factory* in Joburg – has encouraged much greater cross pollination of artistic ideas and practices. And there are other experimental places that are trying to foster such mixing. ... What's driving these modes of practice is, at one level, the drive to create communities. If you've got a particular set of ideals or values and you don't see that reflected in the government policies or mainstream society, you've got to make your own community. It is also being driven by the idea that there is strength in numbers. When we started *The Trinity Session* three of us could afford the rent for the space together whereas one of us couldn't have afforded it. So there's something quite practical about that. On the other hand, people are becoming suspicious of the ego issues in individual authorship so collaboration is seen as a more social, or ethical, way of working.

- *The Existence of Intrepreneurs:*

The creation of art works that have value – commercial and/or historical – involves a political process wherein competent individuals or groups actively sponsor the production of artistic work and mediate the power relations inherent in the social construction of its value. Referred to earlier as *intrepreneurs*, such people exhibit deep commitment to the long-term interests of a collective and are dedicated to ensuring the realization of creative ideas in valuable innovative outcomes. Those interviewed mentioned several groups of people playing such a role within the South African creative industries; Firstly, in the visual arts, the curators of commercial galleries in South Africa, including the major ones such as the Goodman and the Michael Stevenson, are reported to be facilitating recognition of the work of emerging artists and, in the process, encouraging experimentation by them. According to those interviewed, this generosity of spirit differentiates South African curators of commercial galleries in global terms.

Secondly, some business corporations are singled out as having had a very positive influence on South African art by sponsoring festivals, events, and prizes that have helped to unearth new talent. Certain corporate collections are also mentioned as having focused upon emerging artists with the view to creating greater visibility for their work:

There are corporate collections - like the Billiton collection - which I think has one of the best collections of contemporary South African art. Their curators are young and they are looking much more closely at emerging talent.

Thirdly, during the immediate post-apartheid period, the politics of South Africa's peaceful transition to majority rule created significant international interest in South African art, with many artists being sponsored to attend international exhibitions, fairs and festivals. The international promotion of South African art continues but is now, according to one person interviewed, more focused upon the promotion of young black talent:

There are real opportunities for talented black youngsters. I've had one or two students who have had to leave our Masters programmes because they're getting so many invitations to exhibit internationally - and these are people who really have not got much of a portfolio yet! But being young, black and South African and having some work to show, they're getting a lot of invitations to exhibit internationally.

Fourthly, the interviews identify individuals who play a strong entrepreneurial role in South African artistic production. These include artists themselves, like David Koloane, who for no personal gain initiated *The Bag Factory* where sixteen artists have been provided a space in which to work:

Well the idea of having this kind of project, I got when I was in London. I was invited by some artists to work with them. The local municipality had given them an old bus depot to use in any way they wanted, and they started transforming the bus depot into studio spaces. And that idea appealed to me so when I got back this was a project that I initiated.

William Kentridge is regularly mentioned as someone who promotes South African artists whenever possible; sometimes unwittingly perhaps, as one young artist points out:

Maybe a kind of analogy would be that I am a *Goodman Gallery* artist but I sell very few things. But I am able to show at the *Goodman Gallery*, with all of their international connections and production budgets, because William Kentridge sells work for millions of rand and thus their turnover is such that they can support an artist like me.

Practising artists Kathryn Smith and Roger Van Wyk are lauded for their recent voluntary curation of the *Dada South* exhibition at the South African National Gallery. As a showcase of South African art, it represents a generous gesture on their part to the South African art community.

Various forms of public philanthropy are raised as playing a role in the realization of artistic ideas in innovative arts forms in South Africa. These include people who are prepared to labour unrelentingly in the production and promotion of artistic work:

(We've) also had people – Sylvia Glazer comes to mind – who believe in modern dance in Africa and have convinced corporate funders that this is something that they should be putting their money into rather than soccer or cricket.

and others who have put their own money into art projects:

We have some South African philanthropists, like Vivi Cohen, who when she heard about the project said, 'This is my project' and has cottoned on to this as her reason for living and she has been fantastic.

Those interviewed claim that it is through the work of many such committed *intrepreneurs* that innovative art is being realized on a significant scale in South Africa. Furthermore, they argue that the strongly internal locus of control over their artistic production seems to have developed in South African artists a sophisticated understanding of the debilitating consequences of dependence upon external sources for the wherewithal required to realize their creativity in innovative outcomes.

### **Comparison of the Artists' Perspective with the Literature on Creativity and Innovation in Organizations**

Firstly, the perspective of these artists concurs significantly with aspects of organizational theory concerning stakeholder creativity. For example, the major enablers of creativity identified in this perspective are not dissimilar to those reported in the research literature on the generation of ideas within organizations (Mooney & Dovey, 2008; Collins & Amabile, 1999). These include:

1. *Personal Vision Aligned to Strong Intrinsic Motivation.* The strongly internal locus of control that is expressed in ways that manifest a personal vision through which these artists construct meaning in their lives is very evident. Furthermore, the merging of personal and collective vision within the covenantal culture of the community of South African artists, results in a sense of collective responsibility for facilitating the realization of that vision. This creates a context in which vigorous encouragement, constructive debate and generous affirmation leads to a steady flow of ideas and a readiness to experiment with new concepts.
2. *Engagement with the Contexts of Practice.* Ideas are generated most prolifically 'in community' and *in situ*. The deep commitment of these artists to engagement with the subject matter of their art in ways that provide them access to 'the light' as well as the more disturbing 'dark' dimensions of this subject matter facilitates profound learning about, and insights into, these phenomena. Through such committed collective engagement with the contexts of their practice, new ways of viewing issues, and new understandings of their nature, are generated.
3. *Accessing Alternative Perspectives and Divergent Thought Processes.* The highly integrated nature of South African creative enterprise, plus the rich social capital that exists courtesy of the covenantal culture of this community, provides a basis for the generation of a broad variety of ideas and vigorous but constructive debate around their value. Furthermore, the challenges of the 'edginess' of everyday life in South African society generate the artistic energy with which South African artists are attempting to

make sense of their lives in that context. The influx of a new generation of (mostly black) artists who have had a very different life experience to that of older South African artists, plus thousands of African immigrant artists, further ensures a rich new mix of perspectives, orientations, and practices.

Secondly, the artists' perspective supports the research literature on the dynamics of innovation within organizations. In particular, the prevalence of multiple agents of *intreprenurship* who voluntarily promote the realization of creative ideas in innovative new practices, forms and products, seems to be a major factor in the capacity of the South African arts community to innovate continuously. It is particularly interesting that the raising of funds is shown to be not at the centre of this intreprenurial behaviour; rather it is the provision of opportunity for artists (especially emerging artists) to show their work and gain recognition. Thus a broad range of people are generously investing a significant amount of time and energy facilitating the realization of work by new interesting artists, many of whom would never have been able otherwise to take their artistic ideas to fruition.

Another major factor, identified by these artists, in the realization of creative ideas is the covenantal culture of the South African artistic community. The interviews show that members of this community can tap into very rich reserves of relationship-based intangible capital resources – resources such as trust, morale, commitment, resilience, and self-sacrifice - in the service of cherished values. Such resources are, generally, far more useful to innovation processes than funds *per se* (Dovey & Mooney, 2010). What is particularly interesting within this community is its leadership. These interviews reflect leadership practices that conform to the calls for distributed and values-based leadership in organizations (Gronn, 2002; Gee *et al*, 1996; Frost, 1994). Within the South African creative arts community leadership seems to be enacted through embodied values of practice that include service to the collective. Such notions of service are underpinned by the obligation to promote the best interests of the collective and to ensure that its artistic practices are renewed and reinvigorated through intense engagement with a broad variety of stakeholder groups. In this cultural model, every individual artist represents the community and holds its future in his/her hands; leadership is thus the responsibility of everyone, with situational factors determining the nature of individual obligation. Furthermore, embedded in this culture is the obligation to use personal success to promote the interests of the entire South African arts community: a responsibility that is admirably enacted by globally acclaimed artists like William Kentridge. While this is a form of leadership that is sorely needed in the global knowledge economy (Carroll *et al*, 2008), the perspective of these artists indicates that it can only succeed within organizations and/or communities that view their future as a shared one. As Leonard-Barton (1995: xv), quoting a Bell Laboratories researcher, concludes, innovation is 'a connected process in which many and sufficient creative acts, from research through service, couple together in an integrated way for a common goal'.

### **Implications for Situated Forms of Learning**

In line with Charles Handy's (BBC, 1998) comment that 'creativity comes out of chaos, not order', the interview data show that the learning that leads to the creation of conceptual capital is influenced by the degree of challenge offered by a context in conjunction with the level of courage characterising the human response to that challenge. The contexts explicated in this study are claimed to offer opportunities for profound personal learning; learning of the sort

identified by Kofman and Senge (1993: 19) as dangerous given that it is ‘not about tools and techniques’ but ‘about who we are’. They (1993:20) go on to say that such learning is achieved ‘only with the support, insight and fellowship of a community’ that encourages us to ‘face the dangers of learning meaningful things’. By embracing the dimensions of the South African context that contribute to its ‘edginess’, most of the artists interviewed are transforming their practices, their products and themselves. This achievement, however, is a collective one as the covenantal culture of, and forms of servant leadership practiced within, this arts community creates the ‘sources of courage’ necessary for creative risk-taking.

The most important implications for learning from this preliminary research are those for leadership development. This study shows that the generation of creative ideas and, especially, their conversion into valuable innovative practices and products is significantly easier in communities led by people who view their role as one of service. Through the creation and sustenance of social environments in which stakeholders are challenged to perform at their optimal level, such leadership facilitates continuous learning (of the dangerous kind) and, thereby, appropriate stakeholder and communal transformation. Furthermore, this study shows that this is best achieved through a form of ‘distributed leadership’ whereby each member of the stakeholder community takes personal responsibility for the well-being of the collective. Interestingly, such leadership, and the values that create and sustain it, is a product of the covenantal culture it nurtures. A positive dialectic is thus created whereby enlightened leadership and a social environment in which pertinent learning is a feature are mutually constitutive.

## **Conclusions**

This limited exploratory study offers a particular perspective on the dynamics of creativity and innovation within the South African creative industries. According to those interviewed, these dynamics have been influenced by several concurrent new events which, combined with historical factors, are facilitating the generation of unusually creative ideas and their conversion into innovative outcomes. The most important contemporary contextual events include access to new talent; the new constitutional right to freedom of expression; and the unusually high levels of creative energy as a consequence of the challenging and contested nature of everyday life in South Africa. These events are combining with historical features of that context to produce highly innovative outcomes. These features include the fierce independence of spirit of the South African creative community; a covenantal culture which endorses the value of shared responsibility for the survival of this community; and leadership that is broadly distributed and enacted through practices in which are embedded norms of mutual obligation to serve the collective interests.

As an exploratory phenomenological study, this research has significant limitations. In particular, the potential for bias resulting from the small number, and limited range, of people interviewed needs to be heeded. Nonetheless, the perspective produced raises issues that deserve further and more comprehensive research – the most intriguing of which is the covenantal culture, and the nature of the leadership enacted therein, within the South African arts community. It seems that these two contextual factors are at the heart of the current capacity of this community to generate creative ideas and to transform these ideas into innovative products and practices. In particular, the understanding of such cultural and leadership facilitators of learning and knowledge creation in ‘edgy’ contexts is important. Given the instability of many regions of the world, learning how

to harness the dynamics of contextual turmoil in the interests of greater human creativity and social innovation could offer significant benefits to all of humankind.

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