

39th Annual SAVAH Conference & Festival

Reaching Sideways, Creating *Our Ways*

Hosted by the
Fine Art Department, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa
and the
National Research Foundation (NRF) *Arts of Africa* Research Programme

23 – 26 September 2026

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Professor Nomusa Makhubu

Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Professor Adepeju Layiwola

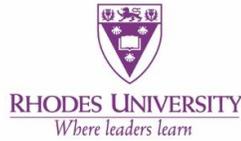
Stanley Museum of Art, University of Iowa, USA

Professor Sonjah Stanley Niaah

Centre for Reparation Research, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

CALL FOR PAPERS

The idiomatic phrase, “to go sideways” suggests that something is going wrong – it fails, veers out of control, deviates from the original plan, takes a turn for the worst, or ends up a disaster. Similarly, if a situation “goes south” it is said to be declining, decreasing in value, weakening or decaying. Such idioms are predicated on Western ideas of linearity, hierarchy, privilege and value that favour the global north. But what if we consciously *reach* sideways? What if we actively embrace a sideways slip and, with lateral thinking, we contest value-driven assumptions about up/down or success/failure?



A collaborative, multivocal dialogue, “[Reaching Sideways, Writing Our Ways: The Orientation of the Arts of Africa Discourse](#)” (Simbao et al 2017) was published in *African Arts* in 2017. Fifteen co-authors explored what it means to reach sideways and, in doing so, to write art histories in our own ways. While the “our” in this dialogue was not homogenous, it situated authors based predominantly on the African continent as a group of thinkers and creators who reach sideways across the continent and within the global south without gazing uncritically “upwards” or “northwards” for theories, ideas, methodologies and trends (Ngũgĩ 1986).

Challenging the competitive individualism of many academic and visual art spaces, reaching sideways emphasizes collaboration – a bringing together of hearts and minds in an “encounter [where] there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (Freire in Simbao et al 2017:10). It is about collaboratively engaging with communities in respectful, non-extractive ways as we strive to “know with” (de Sousa Santos in Baasch et al 2020) rather than “know about”.

Reaching sideways is about lateral vision that situates the visual and sonic cultures all around us within the social, political, economic and spiritual realities we live by, and grapples with them in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary ways. It is about a community of practice that “fuses artistic processes with social activism to respond to the conditions that plague our everyday modern existence” (Nalubowa in Simbao et al 2017: 18). Such approaches challenge hierarchies of knowledge and open creative practices and scholarship to forms of co-creation that are embodied, spiritual, creative and intuitive.

In contexts of education, reaching sideways is also about horizontal and reciprocal ways of teaching and learning that are transgressive and pedagogically engaged (hooks 1994). How do we, as scholars and practitioners in the visual, performing and sonic arts challenge Western legacies of dichotomising scholarship and practice? How do scholars in other Humanities disciplines engage with the arts to generate more creative, communal and holistic research?

We invite scholars and practitioners from the arts and other Humanities disciplines to grapple with broadly defined ideas of reaching sideways in relation to the ways that we create. We strongly encourage lateral thinking/creating that expands this concept through personal interpretation, and that crosses the boundaries of disciplines and modes of practice.

Positioning this event as a conference and festival, we support presentations that creatively engage with and expand upon academic presentation styles, including collaborative presentations and performance lectures. We welcome student participation, student and staff collaboration, as well as cross-institutional partnership. Proposals for short forms of live art, sound art and video screening will also be considered.

Presentations can relate to, but need not be limited by, the following sub-themes:

- Reaching sideways as collaborative ways of engaging
- Reaching sideways to develop transgressive learning and emancipatory pedagogies
- Intra-Africa and/or south-south research and collaborations that are relevant to our own contexts in South Africa and beyond
- Fostering nimble, lateral thinking that contests colonial legacies in academia as we embrace embodied, spiritual, creative and intuitive ways of knowing and creating
- Working across art history and fine art practice as we activate collaboration and interaction
- Working across disciplinary boundaries as we connect with other Humanities scholars and practitioners
- Reaching sideways through philosophies and practices of ubuntu and indigeneity in the arts
- ‘Sideways’ forms of self-identification that resist hierarchies, linearities and stereotypes
- Working collaboratively within communities and public spaces in respectful, non-extractive ways
- Upending ideas of success and failure as we counter hierarchical, colonial thinking
- Confronting conventional ways of being in academia as we embrace activism and practices of social justice
- Challenging epistemic traditions and knowledge creation as we question what knowledge looks like and how it behaves
- Challenging facile, romanticised notions of reaching sideways that might flatten the complexities and struggles of building solidarity and collaborating in meaningful ways.

SUBMISSION

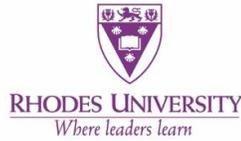
Please submit an abstract of 300 to 400 words via the [SAVAH website](#) by **15 April 2026**. Include a short bio with your affiliation (if applicable) and clearly indicate the format of your proposed presentation.

Successful applicants will be notified by the end of April 2026.

For any queries, please contact conference@savah.org.za.

FUNDING

Limited funding will be available for postgraduate students. Please indicate if you are a student who would like to apply for funding assistance. Include your degree, institution and year of registration.



RHODES UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE CONVENERS

Prof Ruth Simbao (SARChI Chair in *Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa*)

Dr Lois Anguria (Head of Fine Art Department)

Prof Stephen Fóláránmí (Head of Art History & Visual Culture)

Jarret Erasums (Fine Art Practice Lecturer & PhD candidate)

Dr Mbali Khoza (Art History & Visual Culture Lecturer)

REFERENCES

Baasch, Rachel, Stephen Fóláránmí, Emi Koide, Angelo Kakande, Ruth Simbao. 2020. “Knowing With’: New Rhodes Board Navigates Collaboration, Intimacy, and Solidarity”, *African Arts* 53(2): 1-5.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge: London and New York.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey: Oxford.

Simbao, Ruth in dialogue with William B. Miko, Eyitayo Tolulope Ijisakin, Romuald Tchibozo, Masimba Hwati, Kristin NG-Yang, Patrick Mudekereza, Aidah Nalubowa, Genevieve Hyacinthe, Lee-Roy Jason, Eman Abdou, Rehema Chachage, Amanda Tumusiime, Suzana Sousa, and Fadzai Muchemwa. 2017. “Reaching Sideways, Writing Our Ways: The Orientation of the Arts of Africa Discourse”, *African Arts* 50(2): 10-29.