



“Living Art” and aesthetic learning - An interview with filmmaker Tina Krüger

written by Sarita Fae Jarmack
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[Living Art](#) is a sensory oriented film that uses audiovisual methodologies to study the aesthetics and embodiment of contemporary art. I became interested, as a researcher on the South African art world, in how filmmaker [Tina Krüger](#) featured art practice and art works in her film to further her research questions about the aesthetic tendencies of contemporary Mozambican art. Released to the public in



June 2017, her film has gained international recognition and won several awards, such as Best Feature Film at Women's Only Entertainment Film Festival 2017, Award of Merit at IndieFEST Film Awards 2017, Best Feature Documentary (Bronze) & Audience Award (Silver) at 12 Months Film Festival 2017. So far the film counts 19 official selections, the most recent being at The Fine Arts Film Festival in Venice California.

Having met up with Tina during her visit to Johannesburg we continued our conversation on collaboration with artists and research on art worlds thinking more on ways to explore and share our lived experiences. Now back to our 'chat box' where so many of our exchanges take place as mobile researchers, I have invited Tina to share with Allegra Allies about the process of creating her film Living Art as it works to extend her ethnography and offer possibilities of working interdisciplinary.

FEB 6TH, 6:04PM

Sarita: Since your film follows young contemporary artists in Maputo, Mozambique, I was excited to see how it explores the art scene there. I watched it for a second or maybe third time when I returned from fieldwork in late 2017 and I was wondering if you could tell me more about how this project came into being and how you aim to use film in relation to your ethnographic work. I know it is late now, so I look forward to hearing from you whenever you have a moment to reflect.

FEB 8TH, 1:42PM

Tina: Thanks again for reaching out and for the opportunity to talk about my work and my film Living Art.

The short version of how the project came into being is basically that I wanted to make a film for my MA graduation project at the University Leiden in The Netherlands. I had a bunch of different ideas of course and it took a lot of



reflection, conversations with my peers and supervisor to come to terms with it. What I struggled most with in the beginning was that for some reason I thought making a research and film about art wasn't anthropological or ethnographic enough. I am very glad that I met the right people in Leiden to open up my mind about this and push me to go through with combining my passion for art and visual anthropology.

With Living Art I wanted to approach it a bit differently from my earlier film projects. The sensory ethnography genre inspired me a lot and I decided to try something in this direction. The process of making a film in this manner was eye opening and made me realize the real impact of how my relationship with the camera actually helps learn about the art I was filming in a more embodied and sensory way.

Since starting on the film I've been doing a lot of research and readings about more creative anthropology projects and approaches. For example I just began reading [‘A different kind of ethnography’](#) I heard about through you (Thanks for that!). It's been great to see how others explore similar questions to what I am interested in, and the insights they give in how to take creative ethnography to another level.

As for your question how I want to use film in relation to my ethnographic work, I am actually working on an exciting new project right now. I want to take it a step further away from classic visual anthropology, and this time actually make an art project based on my research. I've been planning and researching for roughly 18 months already and I hope I'll be able to bring it to life this year.

FEB 13TH, 4:07PM

Sarita: Oh, new projects! But before I get ahead of myself, I am wondering if you could share any key moments from your time at Leiden that provided insights or convinced you that your work on art through visual anthropology was ‘ethnographic enough’. And of course I am also thinking, why art and Mozambique for this project?



FEB 16TH, 2:55PM

Tina: Well... it's hard for me to think about any particular key moment. It's more like the ongoing conversations with my peers and encouragement from my tutor made me gradually feel like I can actually go ahead with what I wanted to do.

The choice of this topic is very much personally motivated by my long relationship with Mozambique and with the Mozambican art scene. I have been in Maputo for 10 years now and always had a strong connection with many artists and arts & culture institutions. In part because of my work as a filmmaker, which had me work with and for many of them, but also because I am an artist myself. I often feel like my time here in Maputo strongly influenced and shaped the way I grew into being an artist in the first place and into how I experience art and also strive to express myself through art.

Seeing that very little has been published about the fast growing and evolving contemporary art scene in Maputo it just made sense to do my research and the film about this topic.

FEB 26TH, 8:30PM

Sarita: Oooo... I have been away for a few days, but it was nice to get back and read a bit about your experience with Mozambique. I didn't know you had such a long relationship with the area.

You must have been able to see the space and art scene evolve over time while learning extensively about it. I was wondering what you learned through the process of your research? But also, you mentioned that the use of the camera helped you learn about the art, but I wonder if it is possible to explain a bit more about the 'embodied experience' in your process?

Hope all is well!

MAR 5TH, 3:34PM



Tina: I have been away on a documentary shoot in northern Mozambique.

The funny thing with this embodied approach I used to do my research, is that I learned a lot, but also very little at the same time. Let me explain.

Given my past history with Maputo and its art world I already had a sense of the artistic tendencies happening here, right now. Based on that, I approached the artists that we can now see in the final film because I felt that they represented a variety of aspects that I see in the contemporary art scene. My close work with them, combined with a lot of background research, led me to the conclusion that it really isn't possible to make any defining statement about Maputo's contemporary art scene. All we can really talk about are tendencies, and by their nature those are extremely dynamic and changing rapidly.



Photo by Tina Krüger

The approach I used, tries to understand the artistic production from an angle that doesn't seek to define or categorize. I call it 'aesthetic learning'. Throughout my research I sought to get up close to the artists with my camera and really be present in the moment. We often didn't talk much and I hardly asked questions during these sessions. They were focused on their work, and I on trying to feel in



on their work. I would pay close attention to colours, movement patterns, surrounding sounds and atmospheres, really everything that speaks to the senses. It is a bit abstract to explain, but these filming moments had an almost meditative character to them. Later I would write down what I thought and felt during these sessions, and also reflect on them again during the editing-analysis phase.

Let me give one example. When we think about art in most contexts, what comes to mind is the artist in a studio (or other detached space) working in a calm, silent environment. What I found characteristic for Maputo's contemporary artists is quite the opposite. Many of them work in public or semi-public spaces. There is a lot of noise and disturbance around them. Sometimes they are even subject to extreme weather conditions. I believe that these circumstances shape their practice and the art they produce. These qualities and influences cannot be derived from simply analyzing, or cataloguing the final products. That's what makes the embodied approach so interesting.

I will be working in my studio Wednesday – Sunday this week and it would be great to have a chat with shorter questions (and hopefully shorter answers too)

MAR 14TH, 10:07AM

Sarita: You know, I thought that using Facebook chat would break down some sort of formality in interviewing and allow for a different type of conversational flow. But I find myself still thinking a long time about what I type out here and revising all of my answers, so thanks for your patience.

Maybe I can offer a few reflections based on experiencing the piece:

The piece seems to work as a creative endeavour that, for me, is left more open in ways of affecting rather than the control of argument that an academic piece usually tries to evoke. However, as I am introduced to the medium I experience a few strategies that direct my experience, such as using sound prior to the clip change, which creates anticipation and curiosity for what is to come, and also the frame spilt guides my attention.



Nevertheless, I look forward to continuing to experience pieces that make me think about different ways to engage argument, if that is the goal, my goal in academia. The up-close view on materials and bodies reminds me of when I shove my face into flowers to see what I can experience up close or run my fingers along places in my own ethnography, such as the gallery walls in Jozi. As I engage with it imaginatively (I am not sure if I really know what that means yet), the experience of this genre of film sort of works to wake up my other senses. Of course, I think about how the imagery for me is attractive and beautiful and I am thinking about how this relates to my own ideas of beauty and in comparison the unpleasant or unattractive or 'the ugly'. I wonder about what other work can be done (in our ethnography and creative endeavours) through playing with or evoking and exploring e.g. the unpleasant aesthetics (...probably will go back and read Sarah Nuttall's [Beautiful/Ugly](#) more). And I wonder, more generally, what work the film is doing for others and for whom and in what way. How did the art community that it was created with receive the film and what is one of the most interesting interactions with the content that you encountered?

MAR 15TH, 11:29PM

Tina: I know it is not as immediate as we thought it would be, but I still think this interview format has an advantage to it. There is more connection between what each of us is saying/asking than if you had sent me a list of questions. And I too am thinking quite a lot about how to answer, which is a good thing. I'm glad we tried this!

Thank you for your take and interpretation on the film. It was really rewarding reading how it spoke to you on an experiential level, and that in some ways it was also able to evoke your other senses. This is exactly what I was going for with this piece. And just as you said, my intention was to give up control to a point and leave the final argument of the film rather open so that each person who watched it could see, hear and feel it in their own unique way.



So far, the film had its premiere here in Maputo last year and I am happy to say that it was extremely well received. We even had a full house on premiere night.

Overall I got a lot of positive feedback from the artists I worked with, and also from many other artists and creative industry professionals in Maputo.

I would have to say the most interesting interaction with the content of my research and the film was my collaboration with the 7 protagonists for an interdisciplinary performance we presented prior to the screening at the premiere event. The idea for this came from one of my research findings, that there are underlying aesthetics that cross the boundaries of the different art practices. If this is the case, shouldn't it be possible to actually combine them? Instead of just using one as a supporting element for the other (like for example often music during dance performances). Our joint creative process had me reflect further on my findings and how we could conceive a performance that was in tone with my film, but still true to each artist's own creative language. The end result was something entirely new. For example we used the sound of cutting metal as music for the dancer. We combined dance and painting, blurring the lines between dancer, painter and canvas.

To give you an idea here is a short video of the live performance by the protagonists of Living Art during the Mozambique premiere of the film:

Sarita: It can be rewarding to watch how others interact with a piece as a sort of shared negotiation of ideas, and I appreciated the inclusion of these interactions in the 3rd act of the film. With the performance you describe above, I am reminded of the possibility to push questions into new areas through collaboration is an important practice in ethnography and look forward to our future conversations about what this might mean or look like in sensory ethnography.