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On SAR 10's Productive Gaps, Enhanced Dissemination Formats & Inspiring Failures

STEPHANIE MISA

As with all things interesting and engrossing, time is the enemy. It stutters and stops, withholds, races, stretches— until a three-day conference feels like a monumental hill traversed on a single-speed bike, as well as a mere blip in time. The 2019 10th SAR International Conference on Artistic Research, with its 252 attendees, 31 panels, and 3 keynote speakers, was held in Zurich, Switzerland, hosted by the Zurich University of the Arts, and aptly called “Productive Gaps, Enhanced Dissemination Formats, Inspiring Failures”.

From the get-go, SAR10 aimed to create a different kind of conference. The call asked for abstracts falling into any of the three topics found in its title, and the only other component asked from potential speakers was to tick off a time limit— a long format (90 minutes) or a short format (20 minutes). The panels were then arranged accordingly, grouped in a neatly colour-coded booklet (handed out at registration with your own SAR10 water bottle, a Ragusa chocolate bar, and a tote bag) that told you exactly who was speaking, where, with whom, and at what time. The only variable left undetermined was how panelists would fit, flow or meld together or if (even within the co-alliance of being tagged the same colour) they would even connect. Some panels I sat through were clearly disjointed— an **inspiring failure** reproducing itself, yet in the chaos of multiple simultaneous panels and engagements, there were quite a few presentations that managed to shine in the very limited space of 90 or 20 minutes, and panels that somehow managed to coalesce.

As an artistic researcher myself, I clearly had my own motivations for attending SAR10, the most pressing was to be able to enjoy the conference as an observer rather than a speaker. I had spent most of my time at SAR9 worried about my presentation and spent more than half of my time in Plymouth hunkered down, obsessively rewriting my spiel. The ability to just enjoy my peers and listen to them speak without the burden of nervous jitters was incredible, I had both the time and energy to engage, yet this is where I found myself running into walls as there was hardly enough time to ask questions. Giaco Schiesser, the chairperson of SAR10, had implicitly implored (in his welcome talk) for the panels to generate discussion— the push was not to impart knowledge but to initiate dialogue and debate, but within carefully planned out timeframes this stayed a pipe dream. Perhaps the

simplification of time limits (into long or short formats) also leaned towards more frontal forms of information delivery— there were less performative lectures, performances, or artistic interventions, in a sense less diverse offerings. Though notably the working group / artistic platform QuARTz (Queering Artistic Research) of Outi Condit, Simo Kellokumpu, Vincent Roumagnac who presented and were present as “avatars”, managed to make use of their enhanced dissemination topic by thoroughly twisting the medium of dissemination in their allotted time, and a nice long-format surprise came in the way of Shialoh Phillips’ “(Dis)connectology: can artefacts be critical?”, a workshop littered with different table spreads of materials, tools, instruments, apparatuses, and various unnameable gadgets that connected and disconnected in very physical and tangible ways. Phillips’ workshop aimed to “look specifically at the critical turning points where connections shift, by joining, separating or transforming” not on an abstracted level but by a very physical making.

SAR (the Society of Artistic Research), this year presided over by Henk Borgdorff, especially touted SARs’ growing number of member institutions and the representations from a more international body, a fact concretised by the list of conference attendees also found in the welcome tote. Institutionally, there were several attendees from North America, but in terms of where the attendees hailed from, there was far more diversity than was accounted for. The three keynote speakers of the conference were all women, Kristen Greider (with James O’Leary), Rebecca Hilton, and Cathy van Eck, who each spoke to the three key themes of the conference: failures, gaps, and dissemination, respectively. While definitely representing for a stronger female presence (in the much-lauded all-woman keynote-speakership) what was not in the mix, as Rebecca Hilton pointed out, was representation for practices outside of the Eurocentric norm. There is still much room for broadening the scope of practices, especially within the yearly conference. So, while body counts are important, it is not a stand-in for an active leaning towards diversity: pushing for stronger, more vitally divergent discussions, thematically. Diversity here can be read in many ways— whether it be inclusive of disability, queerness, neuroatypicality, or even food allergies, and the odd-houred coffee break (outside of designated coffee times)— there is a lot that speaks to allowing for different ways of being to co-exist, even in a heavily regimented event such as a conference.

In terms of content for SAR10, I, personally, gravitated towards themes (talks, panels, workshops) that were inclined politically and spoke of and about the margin, and the navigation of that space (that kind of glaring gap). I found these in the talks (unsurprisingly) fielded by the few speakers-of-colour within the program; and of which I was able to attend Maryam Tafakory’s and Flavia Meireles’ presentations.

Tafakory's talk was under the theme "Inspiring Failures" and was sandwiched between a stunted presentation on tiny-data and one on body-building. It was premised as "incorporating the fragmented 'I' through first-person narrative, a sense of self emphasising the uncertainty, plurality and precarious nature of this research and the researcher is unraveled." Tafakory led us through an auto-biographical journey of her attempt to film Darwish-men (Sufis) in a Pir-Shaliar ceremony in Kurdistan, a ceremony strictly for men, and how she in the process of being denied entry uncovers a lesser-known ceremony held in an enclosed basement room. It is a parallel ritual held by women to grieve for the loss of loved ones. Her inspired failure to which she was the lone audience, as she read: "Little did I know that I am about to witness a ritual I had never heard of. Nor anybody else had; for I am the only viewer in the room that women hold the same ritual every year behind closed doors with no audience whilst Darwish-men attracted many visitors and photographers. Had I known that my failure would result in unveiling a ritual concealed for decades, I would have planned to fail much earlier".

Flavia Meireles' presentation was on the third day of the conference, and was titled: "OCCUPY TREE - urban indigenous resistance in Brazil". The presentation was premised on the expulsion of different indigenous communities from the Maracanã Village (an abandoned, former Indigenous Museum, re-appropriated by indigenous groups to serve as a social centre for minorities in Rio). The expulsion was instigated by the need to reallocate the space of the center as a parking lot for the newly build Maracanã Stadium, a major site for World Cup 2014. What followed was a series of staged resistances, most notably by Urutau Guajajara, who climbed a tree and refused to come down. He provoked a 26-hour state of apprehension, suspension, and confusion on the part of state forces— as tree-climbing was not an envisaged mode of police conduct. Meireles presentation ended with a recognition of a productive gap between herself and her collaborator, Guajajara, the indigenous Brazilian activist.

The gap, in her words, was an erasure— a chasm between different Brazilian cultures, and between herself and Guajajara in terms of how to function as collaborators in an artistic context. Her presentation raised questions of visibility and representation, as she herself problematised the idea of "speaking for" (as in what can you attest to when the experience is not yours) versus the proposition of a "speaking with".

What drove the stakes home during the SAR10 Conference, was the closing round on Saturday (right before everyone was to disperse again). Questions fielded to the organisers were not shy about asking why the conference was so lacking in diversity— the diversity asked of here was meant in terms of body count. If murmurs of "it's too straight, too male, and too white" are ricocheting down the halls— that's probably because it is seen as such. But shouldn't diversity itself aspire for more than representational box ticks?

The Society of Artistic Research’s Conference is currently the largest yearly congregation of Artistic Research practitioners, it is at the forefront of dissemination within the field (if we want to borrow from SAR10’s given themes). It is crucial that a ‘society’ of this size and dedication be able to take stock of the types of practices it wants to encourage and highlight. If Artistic research situates itself as the alternative to stratifying disciplines within Academia, if it wants to be known as the polymorphous symphony of “outside” voices that is de-limited in its mediums of investigation and expressions. So, while there are many trans, queer, non able-bodied, neuroatypical, gluten-intolerant, nut-allergic, persons-of-colour practitioners within the field, what may not be present is support for the topics that they find relevant, or food they find edible. Perhaps what is needed is a more tangible attempt to reach out— even if it means stepping into the overtly political, impossibly messy, conflict-laden, and undeniably difficult topics — as such is always the case when one decides to be inclusive.

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Figure 1. Screenshot taken from “Pir Shaliar”, courtesy of Maryam Tafakory



Figure 2. Screenshot taken from “Pir Shaliar”, courtesy of Maryam Tafakory



Figure 3. Urutau Guajajara in stand-off with Brazilian Police, image courtesy of Flavia Meireles



Figure 2. Urutau Guajajara, image courtesy of Léo Bittencourt

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