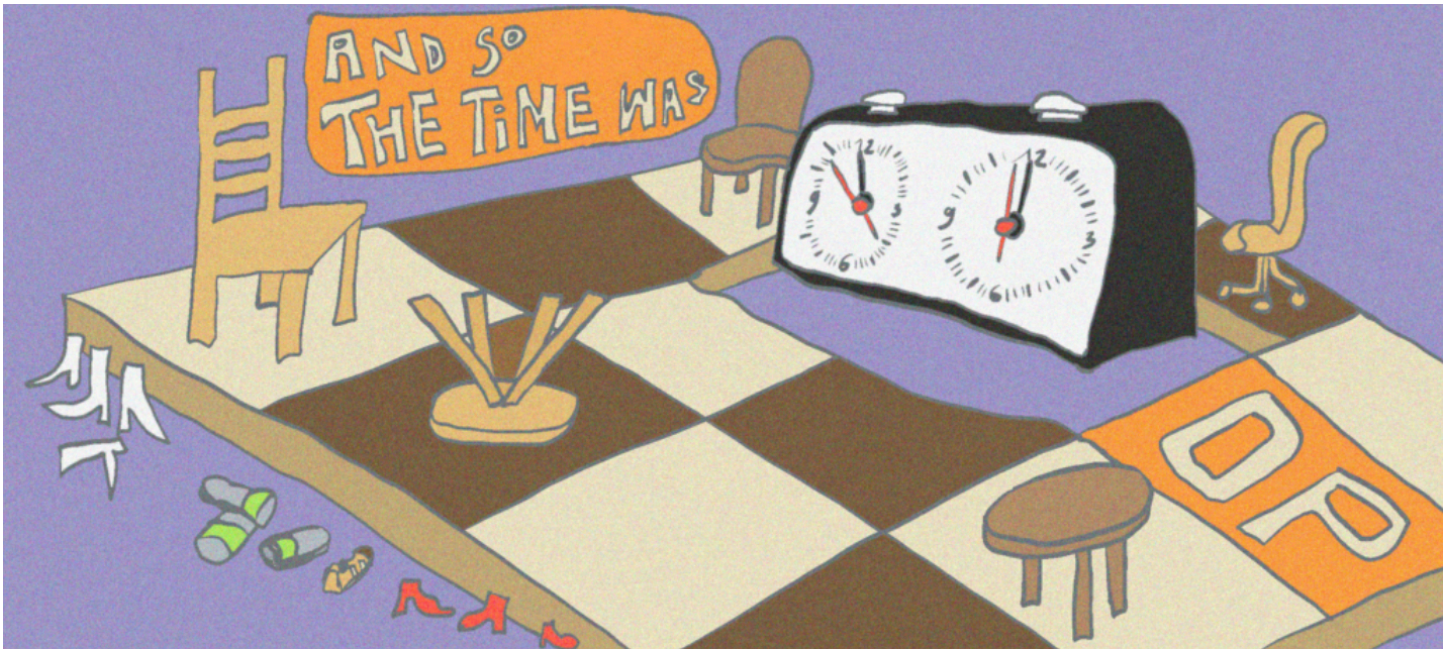
Visions for the Field: Shari Aku Djifa Legbedje



A Field That Dares to Be Slow

In *Visions for the Field*, Etcetera asks key figures about their perspective on the performing arts of tomorrow. What is going well, what needs urgent change? What would they change if they were tomorrow an almighty Minister of Culture, with unlimited resources and powers? This week: Shari Aku Djifa Legbedje, co-founder of the development, production, and management platform AnAku, and staff member at the Social Fund for Performing Arts. Shari works on structural change in the cultural sector, with a focus on intersectionality, justice, and the position of artists.

My dream for the performing arts of tomorrow is not a new form, but a new attitude. A field that is less afraid to slow down. That takes the body more seriously. That builds further on the care that already exists, and dares to stretch it into something radical, something that becomes the norm. That not only imagines change, but practices it in the way it collaborates. That no longer sees the drive for control and comfort as self-evident, but as something we can unlearn. Art can allow us to become human again, fully, in a world that prefers to cut us into pieces.

The question “what do performing arts mean?” can never be separated, for me, from the question “in what world do we move?”. A society that does not function (that gets stuck in its own logic) produces haste, distrust, loneliness, control, oppression, and exclusion. It diminishes people and calls that efficiency. In such a society, art can be a rare place where we relearn to feel what we have lost along the way. Not as a luxury, but as a survival force. Art can remind us of our full humanity: emotional, rational, physical, and spiritual. Only, the rational is often treated as superior, as if thinking only counts when it is linear and tight. I do not believe in that hierarchy. I believe in balance, in thinking that may tremble, in knowledge that also lives in muscles.

"Art can be a rare place in our society where we relearn to feel what we have lost along the way. Not as a luxury, but as a survival force. Art can remind us of our full humanity: emotional, rational, physical, and spiritual."

I write this with a double consciousness: that in this text something may be opened, and that it can also close doors. For me, as a woman and mother who is racialized, such a text has consequences. Not in an abstract sense, but in real relationships, real rooms, real glances. Becoming more visible is never 'just becoming visible.' It changes how you are looked at, how you are addressed, how mistakes are remembered. And yet I write, because silence also has consequences.

I am in a phase where I try to deconstruct and reconstruct myself. More back to emotion, to the body, to the spiritual, and not as an extra, but as a foundation. I try to apply that in the spaces I navigate and in the spaces I help build. The question that keeps returning is simple and difficult at the same time: what does deconstruction mean, if it is not just an idea, but a daily practice?

And one more thing: what I write here is not knowledge *of* me, but knowledge *through* me. Our voice has been inspired and lived through other voices over the years and will experience a similar process in the future. The words are formed through 'shared knowledge,' by which we want to make clear that any form of knowledge that can be taken from this contribution is not a contribution based on knowledge 'of' us, but 'through' us, not as owners, but as conduits.

In this search, I carry a name with me that remains a compass for me: Nadia Benabdessamad. She was a mentor, a pioneer in many areas, an elder, and for two years now an ancestor. She accomplished much and co-founded SPReeKuuR and AnAku. When I get stuck, I think of her ability to be both gentle and sharp, to build without romanticizing reality. Her absence is not emptiness; it is a task: to care for what she helped make possible and push it further, with equal courage.

Slowness as Infrastructure

The logic of haste is everywhere. Deadlines, efficiency, optimization, measuring results. In this system, people are treated as resources, time as a commodity, and rest as a luxury. I propose another logic: a field that dares to slow down. That does not reward speed alone, but also patience, reflection, and care. Where rest is not a luxury, but infrastructure. *Rest is infrastructure.* A moment to breathe, to feel, to understand. Without it, we cannot create anything that truly lasts.

This is not just about slowing down for artists. Institutions, networks, and platforms should also embrace this tempo. It is a question of how we structure collaborations, budgets, planning, and evaluation. It is a question of ethics and empathy. What if we measured success not by the number of projects delivered, but by the depth of relationships we nurture, by the resilience we build, by the space we create for learning, failing, and recovering?

Body, Emotion, and Knowledge

We often treat the body and emotion as secondary in art production. As if rationality alone carries value. I insist: the body is a site of knowledge. The muscles, the gestures, the breath, the sweat, the tears, the nervous system — all of this communicates truths that cannot be translated into reports or funding applications. Our emotion is not an obstacle to work; it is work. Our embodied experience is a foundation for thought, for understanding, for justice.

Practicing this in daily life means listening more, moving differently, and giving attention to how we inhabit our spaces. Institutions must reflect this not just in words, but in practice: meetings, hierarchy, schedules, communication, conflict resolution — all of it matters. If your structure speaks of freedom, creativity, or care, but practices rigidity, control, or exclusion, the contradiction erodes trust and possibility.

Intersectionality as Daily Practice

Structural inequality is not only external; it appears inside the field itself. Racism, sexism, ableism, classism, colonial legacies — all these shape who is seen, heard, funded, or valued. Tackling these dynamics is not optional, nor a matter of reputation. It is core practice. Intersectionality must be integrated into every process, from recruitment to programming to audience engagement. This is how we build resilience, trust, and ethical practice.

Rethinking Audiences and Technology

We must rethink our relationship with audiences. They are not consumers of art, but living presences with whom we share space and time. This implies a profound respect for engagement, attention, and consent. Technology, too, must be approached critically. Tools — digital platforms, AI, social media — are not neutral. Their use involves ethics, power, and control. What do we share, for whom, and who benefits? How do we prevent exploitation or surveillance under the guise of innovation?

Art at the Heart of Social Life

Ultimately, the field I imagine is not separate from society; it is embedded in it. Art does not only produce works, but relationships, attention, and transformation. It is work that nurtures empathy, understanding, and community. The value of art is not only in its form or spectacle, but in the spaces it creates for people to meet, feel, and think differently.

If the field dares to slow down, to prioritize rest, to honor the body and emotion, to confront inequality, to care for relationships and shared knowledge, it will become a place of survival, healing, and innovation. This is not utopia; it is practice. Every act of care, reflection, and embodied engagement is a step toward the field we want tomorrow.

Conclusion

The performing arts of tomorrow will not be defined by faster, bigger, more, but by depth, attention, and ethics. By slowing down, by valuing the body and emotion, by practicing intersectionality, and by putting care at the center of all we do. Art is not a side activity; it is

infrastructure. And it is through this infrastructure that we can imagine a world that is not only survivable, but livable, just, and human.

Source: https://e-tcetera.be/visies-voor-het-veld-shari-aku-djifa-legbedje/