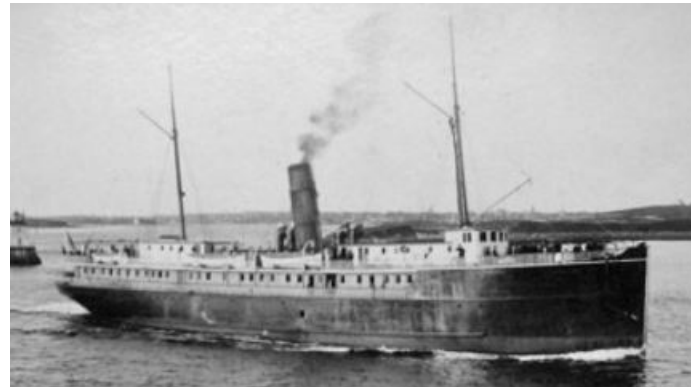




Dubship I - Black Starliner (2019) is a large-scale electro-mechanical, music-making sound-system sculpture launched at the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town in 2019. It plays a version of the dub track 'Black Star Liner' (1976). The work refers to the history of the political activist Marcus Garvey's *Black Star Line* shipping company, launched a century earlier in New York City. For more info see <http://dubships.spacecraft.africa>

Starting as a cargo line, the BSL was intended to repatriate the descendants of African slaves in the US and Caribbean back to Africa. It lasted only a few years before collapsing under mismanagement, misfortune and interference from the establishment. While Garvey's project was short-lived, his work influenced later movements for black power in the US and Africa. He was a media-savvy, innovative activist and controversial public figure.



One of the areas in which Garvey's work is memorialised is in Jamaican reggae, dub and dancehall music. In these genres, the Black Star Line became a mythical ark still coming to liberate Africans in the diaspora. Dub music, with its use of advanced electronic technologies for manipulating sound, also uses space travel as a metaphor for transcendence. The Dubship merges the form of Garvey's first steamship, with a future dub spaceship.

The Dubship is made with African wire art techniques, executed by street wire artists such as Farai Kanyemba and Lewis Kaluzi pictured here with their work, under the projects African Robots & SPACECRAFT. Mainly from Zimbabwe, many street wire artists identify with dub, reggae and dancehall culture. As kids in Africa grow up making wire cars and other vehicles they see, so here a spaceship is depicted in wire as if from observation.



African Robots lead artist Ralph Borland, who grew up in South Africa and Zimbabwe and made his first wire car as a kid, has been DJing dub, reggae and dancehall for the last twenty-five years. As well as being a visual artist, he has worked as a promoter of underground dance events across three continents. He delivers a dub lecture about the Dubship project, which was selected as a performance for the National Arts Festival in 2019.



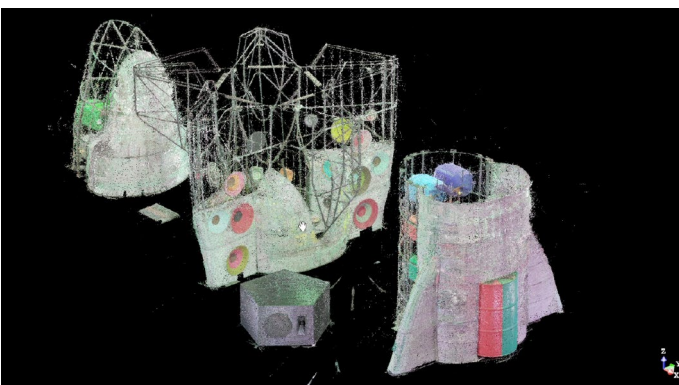
African Robots and SPACECRAFT worked with 3D and Virtual Reality expert Jason Stapleton, and with Rick Treweek and Gary Steele of Eden Labs, to produce the Dubship. Ralph learnt to use VR sculpting tools to sketch and model the work, and we constructed a VR version of the Zeitz atrium to model in, using a range of high tech processes such as LiDAR scanning and photogrammetry.

One of the aesthetic hooks for African Robots and SPACECRAFT is the similarity of old school 3D wireframe with hand made wire craft. A mode for the projects is the combining of low and high technologies, hand with digital, as well as popular culture with fine art, and art with technology. Our projects often use processes such as 3D modelling and CNCing of templates with with hand work.



We've hosted VR salons in Cape Town where we've introduced artists to VR sculpting tools, and Eden Labs in Jozi run similar programmes with artists. In the image at left, Marc Nicolson and Ofentse Letebele try out VR sculpting tools. We're proposing as part of this application to introduce wire artists to this technique, in order to produce VR sculptures that will exist in the virtual social space we're proposing, Digi-Dub Club.

One of the research ideas that has come from working with wire artists is the observation that they practice a form of topological ethnomathematics. Some theorists propose that dub foreshadows Virtual Reality, in conjuring imaginary spaces through sound. We propose that the project returns VR to African diasporic culture. We've experimented with the idea of a 3D artwork with the Dubship in a virtual environment on a small scale.

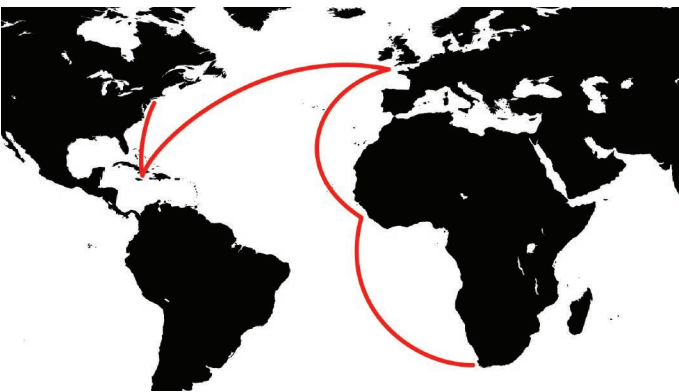
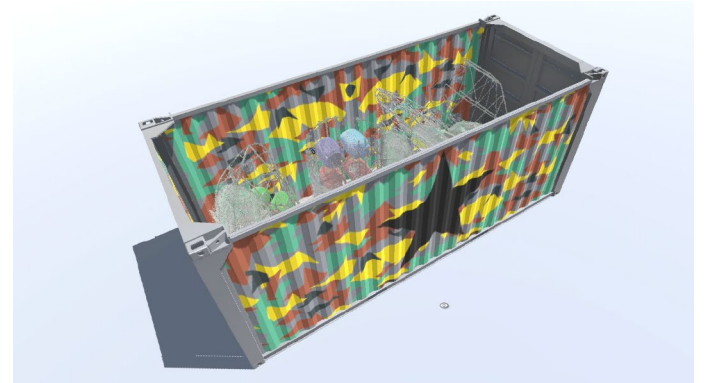


These experiments, as above, involved in-browser desktop viewing rather than full VR. In pursuit of taking the dubship into VR, we've made rough Lidar scans of the three main sections of the sculpture (the sculpture comes apart into sections for transport). This work requires augmentation and clean up, to be used as a template for 3D modelling and animation, of the moving parts of the sculpture's sound system, for example.



The Dubship sculpture makes use of found objects to make sound: ubiquitous global objects such as oil drums and plastic jerry cans with particular resonance in the South, where they are modified and repurposed. Wire art itself is an art of repurposing (as dub music also repurposed Western technology). We bought used sound equipment, as Garvey bought used ships. He repurposed the ship from a tool of Empire, to a means of repatriation and rebellion.

We're proposing to introduce a new repurposed, global ubiquitous object to the assemblage of the project: the shipping container. The dismantled sculpture fit into a standard shipping container. Buying and modifying a used shipping container is one of the aims in this proposal. As a key component of globalisation, the container, like the ship in Garvey's time, intersects with economics and flows of capital and power.



In the mode of the artistic reenactment, the project looks to travel the sculpture when this is possible, from Cape Town to West Africa (the work was selected for Dak'Art 2020) and to Europe (Garvey and his organisation addressed the League of Nations in Geneva in the 1920s). Then Jamaica, where Rasta culture still awaits the Black Star Line, and to Harlem Pier in New York City, where the first ship in the Black Star Line departed in 1919.

In this journey, the sculpture would trace part of the intended route of the Black Star Line, in reverse. Wherever the sculpture is exhibited, it serves as a locus for performance, accompanied by music, performance and discussion of the contemporary relevance of Garvey's political activism around race and power, dub music's contribution to culture and technology, and our contemporary work with vernacular African wire art techniques.

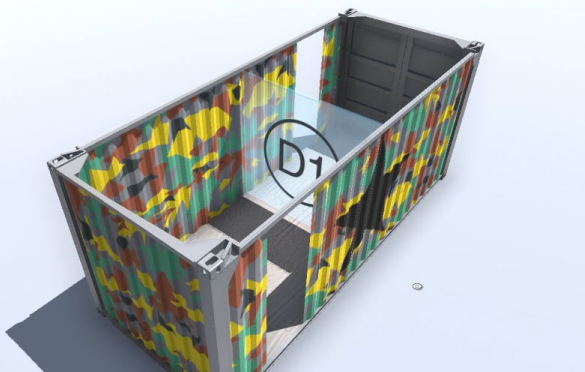


Our modified container, exhibited with the sculpture it transports, would build on the practice of repurposing containers in the South to make shops and salons. Ralph customised a shipping container for the Next Wave art festival in Melbourne in 2006, exhibiting a range of work from South Africa, screening movies, hosting workshops and events. We have similar intentions for this project in creating a shared space, including a twin VR portal.



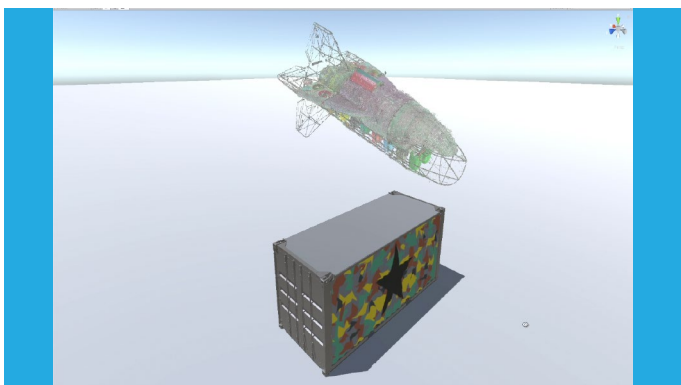
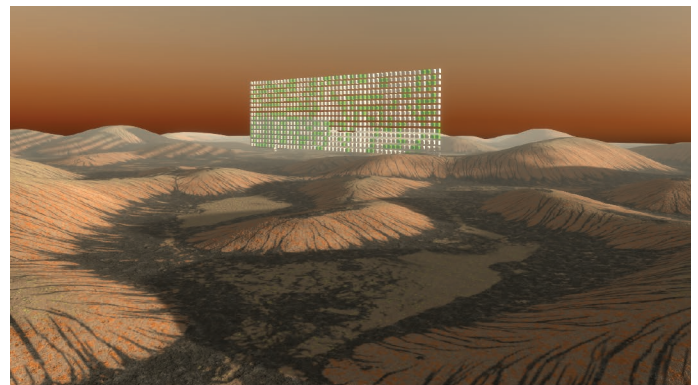
One of the things that we've been missing during global restrictions around Covid-19 has been social events, such as those the Dubship facilitated. We'd like to get back to this, when we can! But before geographical travel is possible (and even once it is) we can use some of the latest technology available for creating social spaces which can be accessed remotely from any area. We are proposing a blended reality experience using VR social space.

The platform VRChat is a social VR space, where users can login from their computers and headsets, and meet other people from around the world. Users freely select avatars, and talk using mics and headphones, navigating virtual spaces, from nightclubs to fantastical landscapes. An increasing number of events are offered here. Jason, and Rick from Eden Labs have been building VRChat worlds and spending hours a day meeting other people in them.



We are proposing to divide the container into two cubicles, each with a VR station. Two people can enter the same VRChat world we will design as the Digi-Dub Club, accompanying each other into a space where they can meet new people from other places. The Digi-Dub Club contains a virtual container bar, like the physical installation, blending the physical and virtual experiences. The container functions as a portal into the VR club.

With the headset on, putting out your hand to touch the wall of the virtual container, you will encounter the wall of the physical container. 'Walking' out the container (with your hand controllers) you will be in a virtual world in which you'll find the Dubship sculpture, remodelled in 3D. We will be designing the landscape and interactive features, and placing the VR sculptures produced by wire artists using the VR stations as production tools.



We enjoy the inversion of the shipping container's function here: staying still, while people travel inside it to meet people from other places. It resonates with the rethinking and repurposing of other objects in the project. And the avatars which users will inhabit also reverse their usual function: instead of one user assuming many avatar form, these avatars for the Digi-Dub Club will be constant, and inhabited by many users.

In summary, our proposal is to produce a blended-reality artwork which incorporates both physical and virtual reality components.

We propose to buy a used shipping container, and modify it for use to transport the existing sculpture *Dubship I - Black Starliner* (2019), when global travel becomes possible again, along a route which echoes the original intentions of the Black Star Line shipping company. Where the sculpture is exhibited, the modified shipping container will function as an associated exhibition and social space, in which one of its modes is as a Virtual Reality station with two access points.

We propose to design and build a Virtual Reality version of the shipping container, as a social space called Digi-Dub Club, at which people from all over the world can meet and learn more about the artwork and the histories it plays on: of Marcus Garvey's work and its relationship to contemporary activism around racial justice; of dub music; and of African wire art practices. The work also invites exploration of the significance of new technologies for remote socialising and organisation, and activism, via VR.

Garvey's work has much bearing on today's political, economic and social landscape. A century ago, he was identifying and combating racial injustice through acts such as the establishment of the Black Star Line, which functioned as much symbolically - named to rival the dominant White Star Line shipping company for example - as practically.

The artwork *Dubship I - Black Starliner* has received good recognition to date: funded by the National Arts Council of South Africa; selected for exhibition by Azu Nwagbogu, director of the African Artists Foundation, while director of the Zeitz MOCAA; launched at the Zeitz MOCAA; selected as a performance lecture by the National Arts Festival of South Africa; a performance lecture broadcast live on Chimurenga magazine's Pan African Space Station; selected for the Dakar Biennale 2020; awarded funding by the African Culture Fund; and an article forthcoming in *Revue Espace(s) n°20, 2020*, Éditions de l'Observatoire de l'Espace du CNES.

What the project needs now is a boost to travel across borders.

Supporting our proposal will enable the work to reach new audiences all over the world - first via virtual reality on new social platforms, and then in real space when we are permitted to travel.

A hallmark of our project is to connect widely across society, from DJs and artists to activists and diplomats. This is what we would intend to do at our proposed destinations for exhibition, from Accra to Dakar, Geneva to Bristol, and Kingston to New York. Ralph has worked in Geneva, and knows it to be a vibrant multicultural space, and has good contacts in New York from time spent living there. We would welcome introductions to creative connections in our other destinations in West Africa and the Caribbean!

2022 is the year of the next Documenta in Kassel, a day's drive from Geneva, and an ambition of the project is to be exhibited there on a show that should emphasise the South's contribution to global art.

We have the skills and experience as a team to accomplish this work well. Jason Stapleton and Rick Treweek have extensive experience in designing and building VRChat worlds, and working in 3D and VR.

Ralph Borland is an internationally exhibited artist with a degree in Sculpture, a Masters in Interactive Telecommunications, a PhD in Engineering, and post-docs looking at North-South knowledge inequalities and Southern agency.

Jason Stapleton uses digital capture, 3D animation, game engines and procedural generation tools to create abstracted digital worlds in which he seeks to question the boundaries between the virtual and the real.

Sean Devonport is a multi-skilled musician and computer scientist who specialises in advanced spatial sound techniques.

Rick Treweek is a director of Eden Labs, who enjoys constantly pushing the boundaries of digital formats and disruptive hardware

Lewis Kaluzi, Farai Kanyemba and Franco Shidume are master wire artists who are highly skilled at their work shaping wire into new forms.

For enquiries: ralph.borland@gmail.com