The stronger we become

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PAVILION

The stronger we become

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PAVILION

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PAVILION

The stronger we become

Curators
Nkule Mabaso
Nomusa Makhubu

Artists
Dineo Seshee Bopape
Tracey Rose
Mawande Ka Zenzile

Contents

Nkule Mabaso (b. 1988) graduated with a Fine Arts degree from the University of Cape Town (2011) and received a Masters in Curating at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK, Zürich (2014). She has worked as contributing editor of the journal OnCurating.org and founded the Newcastle Creative Network in Kwazulu Natal (2011). Mabaso is the curator at the Michaelis Galleries at the university of Cape Town. In 2017 she collaborated with the art historian Manon Braat to towards the realization of the exhibition and publication Tell Freedom: 15 South African Artist in 2017 at Kunsthal KaDE in Amersfoort, The Netherlands. She has authored articles and reviews in Artthrob, Africanah and Field-Journal. In 2017 she convened the Third Space symposium in collaboration with the Institute for Creative Arts, Decolonizing Art Institutions, and is co-editing the conference proceedings with Jyoti Mistry. Mabaso works collaboratively and her research interests engage with South African and Afro-continental context.

Nomusa Makhubu (b. 1984) graduated with a PhD from Rhodes University. Makhubu is a senior lecturer of art history at the University of Cape Town and an artist. She is the recipient of the ABSA L'Atelier Gerard Sekoto Award (2006), the Prix du Studio National des Arts Contemporain, Le Fresnoy (2014) and the First Runner Up in the Department of Science and Technology Women in Science Awards (2017). Makhubu was a fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies and an African Studies Association Presidential Fellow in 2016. In 2017, she was a Mandela-Mellon fellow at the Hutchins Centre for African and African American Studies, Harvard University. Makhubu is a member of the South African Young Academy of Science and the deputy chairperson of Africa South Art Initiative. In 2015, she co-edited a Third Text Special Issue: 'The Art of Change' (2013) and co-curated with Nkule Mabaso the international exhibition, Fantastic. Her research interests include African popular culture and socially-engaged art.

Word from the curators

A playlist of survival

Something inside (so strong) – Labi Saffre
Everybody loves the sunshine – Roy Ayers
Anthem – Leonard Cohen
Love supreme – John Coltrane
Jikijela – Letta Mbulu
Ndodemnyama – Miriam Makeba
Stimela – Hugh Masekela
Wakrazulwa – Thandiswa Mazwai
A million times or more – Sonny Criss
Don't let me be misunderstood – Nina Simone
Ndiredi – Simphiwe Dana
Dlala mapantsula – TKZ
Free – Lebo Mathosa
Zombie – Fela Kuti
So what – Miles Davis
Strange fruit – Billie Holiday
Brrrrlak – Zap Mama
Soul makossa – Manu Dibango
Tekere – Salif Keita
Agolo – Angelique Kidjo
Dibi dibi rek – Ismael Lo
Ngiculela – Stevie Wonder
Ngegazi lemvana – Rebecca Malope
Mama's always on stage – Arrested Development
The mountain – Abdullah Ibrahim
Yakhal'inkomo – Winston Mankunku Ngozi
Bridge over troubled water – Aretha Franklin
Mo' better blues – Branford Marsalis
Let the music take you – Johnny Dyani
I wanna rock with you – Michael Jackson
You think you know me – Ezra Ngcukana
Zwakala – Stimela
Matswale – Moses Molelekwa
Take your love – Steve Kekana
Papa – Sankomota
Morwa – Jonas Gwangwa
Love is the key – Bheki Mseleku
Simmer down – Bob Marley and the Wailers

The stronger we become

We begin with song – a playlist of survival – to understand the feeling, the timbre, the texture of what it means to resist the injustices of resilient neoliberal institutions, what it means to live with a crisis. This sonic intervention recognises that music is 'fundamental for understanding the world [...], and [that] the ability to hear and or to listen is indispensable for analysing cultural formations – be they social, political, artistic, psychic or technological – as the ability to see.'[1] We turned to the lyrics of British songwriter, Labi Siffre, from the song *Something inside (so strong)*.[2] Since Siffre composed this song in response to the hideous violence of apartheid, we found ourselves traversing unwritten histories, written in song. South Africa's struggle against racism is captured in song. The playlist elucidates everyday encounters, hidden mysteries, experiences, and silenced and repressed plural knowledges that unfold in song.

In her essay, Gabi Ngcobo shows how song provided explicit and implicit political messages. Yvonne Chaka Chaka's *I'm winning (my dear love)* audibly resembles 'I'm Winnie Mandela' (one of the most significant political activists in South Africa, who posed a threat to the apartheid government). By doing this Ngcobo reveals the significance of music in what she aptly terms a 'sonic subversion.'

The artistic practices of Dineo Seshee Bopape, Tracey Rose, and Mawande ka Zenzile offer modes of encounter through which pluralities in knowledge systems and epistemic justice can unravel. In their work we find dissenting voices that astutely and sensitively engage with profound colonial and apartheid displacement. Their practices contest single-axis thinking and interrogate gaps and silences as socially located, political phenomena. Without giving answers, their works capture the zeitgeist of the socio-political moment in South Africa today by engaging with a multiplicity of conflicting views about justice and resilience within this country's extreme socio-economic imbalance.

To explore the circuit of discursive points, and of meanings, we approach this short text as a glossary of terms.

The glossary offers an opportunity to contemplate questions and terms that have become part of the conversation about *The stronger we become* exhibition. For us it has been important to delve deeper into the multiple meanings of some words and terms as a way to explicate precisely what we mean, and to zoom into what the same terms might mean in relation to the South African context, especially in relation to the critical themes arising from the work of Bopape, Rose, and Ka Zenzile.

A glossary of terms

As an entry point into our thinking for the compilation of this project we have selected to discuss some of the terms we used in our public statements in order to arrive at an understanding of the constraints we apply to the terminology.

1 Mieszkowski, 2007, 11.

2 Ibid.

Play

The games we played as children were pedagogic and sometimes explicitly didactic. Indigenous songs, poetry, philosophies were taught through play. Diketo, umgusha, dibeke and other games strengthened cognitive, physical and social acumen. Play therefore becomes central in changing the ways in which we counteract colonial education, which is bereft of whimsical but profound knowledge centred on life experience as the core of knowledge-making.

If one considers Bopape's installation, *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its Bones the Stars)*, the mud and soil labyrinth is like a mind game, requiring that clues be found, and answers be unearthed. Above the labyrinth is a constellation of stars illuminating specific aspects of the installation. It is as though one is faced with the double-coded nature of soil, mud and clay as a medium used in fortification and in building homes, but also as something that crumbles to reveal socio-cultural fault lines. Bopape regards land as a container of memories and histories. In her work in general, play is a way to engage with hidden histories and memory.

The tactility of the mud, clay and soil is reminiscent of childhood play. As one navigates the installation, one resists the urge to pick up and feel the mud cakes, the bronze chewed gum and twigs. Play is a pedagogy enabling an exploration of many epistemological frameworks. It is through play that we are able to learn and unlearn old and new habits to escape the vicious cycle of social injustice.

Laughter

'I don't trust anyone who doesn't laugh.'
Maya Angelou[3]

Laughter is where everything begins. We regard laughter as a form of freedom, a political weapon, a humanising moment. It is from laughter that the most intellectual concepts are born. We become stronger in the face of peril because of laughter.

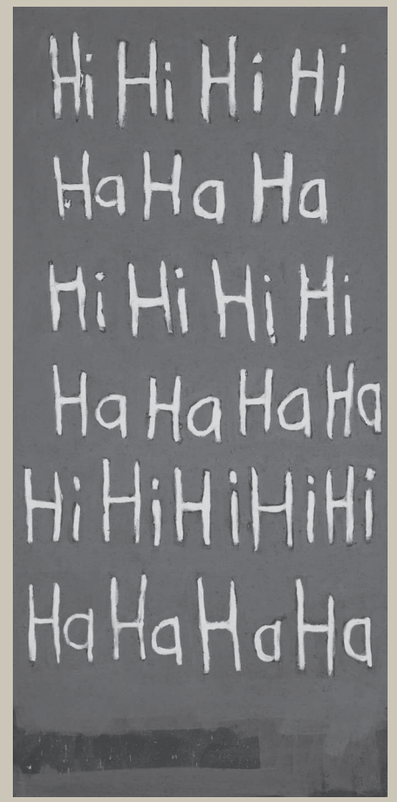
The psychologists John Nezlek and Peter Derks point out that 'in contemporary society the world over, humour and laughter are frequently presumed to be means people can use to cope with life's difficulties.'[4] Using examples of the proverbial slogan: 'Laughter is the best medicine,' they point out that it is through humour that people can 'cope with stress and adversity.'[5] As a coping mechanism, it is a temporary reprieve from otherwise oppressive conditions.

Sheer laughter can be subversive. It can be a potent ideological tool. Racial laughter, for example, reinforced stereotypes of blackness; that is black people as simpleminded. It spread the perception that the demise of

3 Angelou, 2016: 5.

4 Nezlek and Derks, 'Use of Humor as a Coping Mechanism, Psychological Adjustment, and Social Interaction', https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ca9f/5151a75909c7e72bf0110a56fcb012b94876.pdf

5 Ibid.



Mawande Ka Zenzile
Hahaha (Motivation & Reward), 2016-17
Oil on canvas
180 x 86 cm
Image Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson Gallery

black people was something to be laughed at. Laughter as mockery is demeaning but it is also a political device that on one hand can create social hierarchies, but, on the other, can subvert them.

Ka Zenzile's *Ha Ha Ha (Motivation and Reward)*, however, captures the cynicism of post-apartheid South Africa. The media's use of all sorts of racial stereotypes means that South Africans have learnt to laugh at themselves and, more pointedly, to laugh at their demise and at the sublimely tragic South Africa. This ironic painting also alludes to the powerful laughter of the disempowered or what Lawrence Levine sees as 'the innate power to rise above the ironies of life.'[6] Laughter, he argues, 'was a compensating mechanism which enabled blacks to confront oppression and hardship: [it was an] emotional salvation.' It is 'what has enabled blacks to come into prolonged and intimate contact with white civilisation without being annihilated and to emerge from slavery in a comparatively strong state.'[7]

In our approach, laughter, like play, is political – it lies at the core of resilience.

Resilience

The stronger we become presents the ways in which the artists show resilience and resistance as correlative. To be strong could also mean to be able to resist, to be able to speak freely as a dissenting voice, to be able to intervene where necessary. Resilience requires a certain measure of resistance.

6 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 289.

7 Ibid., 299.

This is reflected in what Aicha Diallo says in her essay in this catalogue: 'In physics, resilience is the ability of an elastic material to absorb energy and release that energy as it springs back to its original shape.' She also aptly draws our attention to trauma and what a natural, if not cyclical, response would be to it.

What is unsettling about the notion of resistance is the expectation for people to remain intact and sustain a sense of being strong even as they continue to face the systemic violence of hostile 'resilient' institutions.

In neoliberal terms, resilience is defined as 'a condition where institutional strength, capacity, and social cohesion are sufficiently strong for the state to promote security and development and to respond effectively to shocks.'[8]

If 'shocks' refers to crisis and protest, then the concept of resilience has an internal dichotomy or contradiction. The neoliberal definition does not take into account the situation in which these 'resilient' institutions and their anti-black mechanisms were predicated on the monopolisation of violence by the state. This negative manifestation of resilience is evidenced in the shooting of striking mine workers at Marikana in South Africa in 2013; in the show of force against protesting students who demanded a change in curricula during the 'Fallist' uprisings at South African higher education institutions; and in the approach to gangsterism in Western Cape marginalised communities through bringing in the South African National Defence Force – all demonstrating the monopolisation of the means of violence by the state. The state continues to operate as though nothing happened.

The state's institutions are constructed in such a way that they can 'respond appropriately to shocks,' but what about those citizens who were crushed by apartheid and are now forsaken by neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa? If to live in a black township means breathing polluted air, drinking polluted water, travelling on unsafe unserviced roads, being denied good health services and good schools and having one's quality of life severely diminished, then what possibilities are there to 'appropriately respond to shocks'?

To be resilient is to be able to recover, to 'bounce back.' It is the capacity of something that has been stretched or distorted to return to its original form. Proverbially, it is the expectation to 'bounce back' and 'get over' something – to get over racism, to get over violence, to get over a brutal history. How possible is it to 'bounce back' if, structurally, the factors enabling one to do so do not exist or have been taken away? How do we retrieve or recuperate our sense of being human once it has been stretched beyond recognition, beyond its ability to find its former shape and form? We are unable to remember who we were.

8 https://www.aies.at/download/2017/AIES-Fokus_2017-08.pdf

Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile. [...] The antifragile loves randomness and uncertainty, which also means – crucially – a love of errors, a certain class of error. Antifragility has a singular property allowing us to deal with the unknown, to do things without understanding them – and do them well.[9]

'Antifragility', says Nassim Taleb, 'is beyond resilience or robustness' where the 'resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better.'[10] Our application of this term to our statement and essay was a way of implicating South Africa's institutions in the destructiveness where they, in fact, remain *too* resilient, in that they absorb all the shock and the demands for them to transform. In doing so they subsume the transformation agenda through institutionalised racism and assimilation and are thus rendered unable to respond to calls for change because they are maintaining the status quo.

As South African political, educational and economic institutions subsume and digest shock, they steal the full lives of young people, thriving from their demise. Is South Africa eating its young, chewing on black children as it deceives them with the promise of prosperity through 'netherpreneurship'? Through the content and title of one of his paintings Mawande ka Zenzile reminds us to *Call a Spade a Spade*, since, in the context of volatility, disorder, randomness, things are not what they seem. Ka Zenzile's tautological work is a parody reflecting the deceit of power.

Antifragility is on one hand the crime of South African institutions against the country's own citizens, whom it has denied for a long time. On the other hand, it is the eerie uncertainty we face as we watch our human-ness collapse in the face the monstrous capitalist machine.

So when we pick up the spades to break the ground, to excavate the bones of those who have been devoured by a greedy, unjust, racist, sexist system, to exhume our histories, we risk shattering the very ground we stand upon. Antifragility, in *The stronger we become*, captures the very risk that is continuously being taken in order to break things so as to build them up again. Surviving the creative destruction of our cannibalistic institutions requires us to be disobedient, to confront epistemic violence; it requires the antifragile.

9 Taleb, *Antifragile*, 3.

10 Ibid.

Epistemic violence

Political scientist, Tendayi Sithole, characterises epistemic violence as that which 'excludes, marginalizes, demonizes and even eliminates forms of episteme that differ from modernity."[11] Epistemic violence is experienced as an affront, an assault on the minds of those who are oppressed. Take for instance the prophet in Tracey Rose's *Hard Black on Cotton*, who agonises as he struggles to read and enunciate a text in Latin. He weeps, he exerts himself and words lose their meaning. We are reminded of the erasure of our languages through the dominance of colonial languages derived from Latin. Furthermore, our attention is drawn to what Nontobeko Ntombela in this catalogue terms 'untranslatability,' alluding to that which gets left out, cut off and erased.

To deny, negate, refute and demonise the knowledges and experiences of the marginalised is to annihilate them as people. Colonial education, as Chika Okeke Agulu points out, was designed to suppress the intellect of the colonised and turn them into exploitable labour.[12] Literate Africans were regarded as a threat to colonial administration. The violent overhaul and erasure of the deep understanding of our environment and its people is a form of domination, of the mind and of the body.

In her essay analysing Ka Zenzile's paintings as a visual language, Same Mdluli notes the annihilation of creative knowledge through thinking critically about the types of education given to black people, specifically black artists, in South Africa. She probes the lack of art education in black schools and notes how 'indigenous languages have acted as a form of resistance against the indoctrination of colonialism and apartheid,' locating Ka Zenzile's work as a visual language of resistance against [...] entrenched ideas about "truth" which poses 'more intricate and intimate questions around knowledge and knowledge production in the South African visual arts landscape.' Ka Zenzile's paintings reflect the assault on the mind that was waged through colonial power.

As we experience the continuation of epistemic violence in our current institutions of higher education – the resilient colonial institutions – we search for multiple ways of generating knowledge, through disrupting and intervening.

Disruptive aesthetics

We refer to disruptive aesthetics as creative forms of uprising. It is through changing conventions that one can intervene. Ka Zenzile, Rose and Bopape's artworks can be seen through the lens of disruptive aesthetics. All three artists go against the grain in their mediums and methodological approaches. Ka Zenzile's use of academic text in cow dung paintings, Bopape's packed or compressed earth, mud and soil, and Rose's confrontational videos do not pander to the limits of placatory, palatable aesthetics, but instead disrupt the conventions of artistic practice.

It is through the revelation of raw materials that one can begin to engage with unfettered truths. Disruptive aesthetics, as we see it, is another form of disobedience, but one that seeks to interrupt, to change or shift paradigmatically from conventional ways of doing things. Disruptive aesthetics are meant to evoke 'volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors, risk, and uncertainty."[13]

Self-determination

Self-determination is employed here as the notion of free-will (the ability of individuals or a collective to determine their own course), as opposed to the proposition that people are unable to steer events in the face of higher forces such as religion and politics. This self-direction is necessary in realising individual capacity to shape events in the world.

As a political phenomenon the discourse on self-determination 'is tied to the 1960's establishment of the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People and a country's right to choose their sovereignty or political orientation, free from external influence' linking self-determination specifically to the process of decolonization.[14] In both these understandings, self-determination articulates a desire for self-definition and representation freed from historical imposition, in order to propose and form 'new social or political formations founded on emergent collective subjectivities, as yet unrealized or unforeseen."[15] Self-determination 'asks that we think again about the political formations of which we are a part and how we might re-imagine our role within them. In this sense, self-determination (as a process of subjectivisation) stands vehemently opposed to reactionary nationalism. Instead, it demands that we speak beyond established boundaries, whether they be physical borders of nation-states or ideological framings of left and right."[16]

The contradiction in South Africa is that self-determination was used to separate black people into different racial bantustans or subject 'nations.' Prior to 1994, South Africa could be regarded as a multi-national state. While the right to self-determination is foremost for the oppressed, it continues to be elusive. Drawing from Lenin, we see the principle of self-determination as an important step towards emancipation.

11 Sithole, 'Decolonising Humanities', 122.

12 Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism*.

13 Taleb, *Antifragile*, 3

14 https://www.un.org/en/decolonization/declaration.shtml

15 Ibid.

16 Aitkens, http://glossary.mg-lj.si/referential-fields/subjectivization/self-determination

Situated-ness

> situatedness means involvement of social beings with symbolic and material dimensions of sites and with the various social processes occurring in those domains. In sum, situatedness refers to the quality of contingency of all social interaction. As such, it stands in sharp opposition to the universal, determinist, atomistic, and absolute pretensions of classical positivism.[17]

Situated knowledge is knowledge that is reflective of its context. Situatedness is to understand that involvement in something changes the way it is understood. Dineo Seshee Bopape's work is exemplary in this respect. In her installations the sense of place becomes immediate and palpable. Bopape draws our attention to embedded knowledge. As one navigates the soil, the mud, the clay, the grass, one is reminded that all knowledge is subjective and constructed on the basis of locatedness and relationality.

Colonialism, whether it is admitted as such or not, was a great theft. It took. It swallowed up. It devoured. It was a destructive force. What do we see when we look at what it has destroyed? Portia Malatjie refers to this as a constellation of voids, demonstrated in Bopape's work. She conceptualises these as spaces of 'black fugitive movement and fugitive being.'

To take the notion of situated-ness, therefore, is to examine the politics of space through understanding displacement and dispossession in South Africa.

17 Vannini, 'Situatedness', 815 (see also https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/sage-encyc-qualitative-research-methods/n424.xml)

Post-humbleness

Humility makes us human. The difficulty is that there is sometimes a perception that to be humble is a form of inferiority or subservience. In this conundrum we sacrifice being human in search of vanity and the spectacular or superficial. The prefix 'post' not only defines what happens after, but it also connotes a paradigmatic shift. In this new perspective the idea of being humble as inferiority or as the opposite of excessive and aggressive falls away; instead we create space to work creatively and encounter all people justly, whether they appear powerless or powerful. To challenge the perception of inferiority, we believe that humility must be retained. We cannot play along with the capitalist spectacle. Post-humbleness offers a philosophical space that is outside of external validation.

Decadence

What would pleasure and indulgence be for us? It is not in the accumulation of things. Nor is it in the hyper-securitisation of our lives. It does not lie in creating little utopias from creature comforts. It is not the luxuries of bourgeois life. Decadence makes the mind complacent. It explains why racism comes across for the bourgeoisie as just another illusion. It is through decadence that a servant society of gardeners, domestic workers, waiters, cleaners, runners, prostitutes, petrol attendants, parking guards and general casual labour on the side of the street seems 'normal'. Decadence and excess can be isolating and confining, and it necessitates dialogue about people-centred emancipatory politics.

Emancipatory spaces

Freedom and emancipation are elusive. They cannot be given, and are intangible. Therefore, emancipatory spaces can only be carved and created through relations with people: the fleeting moments that enable that which is taboo, unconventional, and disobedient, to exist. Spaces must be created, as David Harvey argues, relationally. It is because of the relational nature of spaces that, even within spaces of confinement, the oasis of freedom can exist. In *The stronger we become*, we hope that these transient moments can be brought to existence through how people interact with the works and with each other as they experience them. We hope that these moments will produce the freedom to push the boundaries, to be playful, to not only see the work but also to feel it.

Future-oriented disobedience

Disobedience is in relation to the future, it counteracts real and symbolic violence. When the struggle for justice is always branded as disobedience and when impatience with an inequitable present no longer accepts gestures and half steps, a future-orientation of radical thought becomes necessary. Future-oriented disobedience and agonism should be understood here as a critical methodology for social justice.

Agonism and conflict are essential components of a healthy democratic society; and in order for critical reflection to occur, the space for differing and antagonism must be present so as to initiate difficult dialogue that will eventually recreate new relations between people. As such, Bopape's, Rose's and Ka Zenzile's work is infused with the spirit of future-orientated disobedience, disruptive aesthetics and agonistic ideas that disturb accepted globalist epistemic arrogance and its expectations. The artists question given definitions and parameters, which develops healthy scepticism towards the agendas inherent in formulations of national and global discourses.

Rules are meant to be broken, especially if they were made to repress specific groups of people. Civil disobedience for those who have not been recognised as part of civil society is justified. Modern 'governmentalities' depend not only on the exclusion of black people but also the exploitation and cheapening of their labour. The inclination to innocence of settler-colonialism is an attempt to relieve settler feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land, power or privilege. When rules prevent one from fully participating in public life, then civil disobedience is the only way to enter the politics of the public sphere.

Take, for example, the recent debates surrounding Section 25 of the South African Constitution: historically, rules were created to displace people from their land. Those unjust rules have now created the socio-economic imbalances we face today. In lieu of property rights there is a hindrance to the radical rectification of that injustice. This aspect of the constitution set against a prejudiced property market sustains the injustice. How does one obey the object of one's own oppression? Claims to land, ill-named as land invasions, are an example of future-oriented civil disobedience.

The disruption of the indigenous relationship to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological and cosmological violence. Bopape's installation, in its material use of earth, becomes a meditation on an indigenous futurity.

Opacity

Providing the contextualising note for this exhibition, Gabi Ngcobo draws our attention to how murky and impenetrable our socio-economic politics are. She draws attention to subterfuge. As she expertly states, 'to apply opacity as a strategy for making things differently clear is a way of owning the right to non-imperative clarities. It is a commitment towards the rearrangement of systems for the creation of new knowledge, a way of distributing responsibility for the historical process of unravelling "the problems we didn't create."'

This essay, much like the exhibition itself, is not trying to deliver a text that will be easy to consume, nor is it trying to give specific answers to questions or pin down one definition for the exhibition. While our title might appear to be a definitive statement, it is in fact an open-ended, incomplete phrase. It opens up to multiple intersecting meanings of love, anger, endurance, resistance and everyday struggles in the face of unrelenting injustice. In *The stronger we become*, we wanted to unravel the many layers of resilience, firstly in people and, secondly in institutions as they resist change while they repress or co-opt our struggles. The latter underlines the obstinacy of mutating racism and classism across different historical eras.

In a way this essay is a self-serving way to decode what we have said and done. The generous aspect of this gesture is that it takes you along with us in working out the explication. We have raised more questions than we can hope to answer. We may well have asked further questions: How are social disparities mediated? How are oppressive regimes overcome? How do we deal with South Africa's shortcomings in the face of the state's monopolization of the means of violence and increasingly anti-black responses to calls for equitable distribution of resources and change? Opacity becomes, for us, a way to navigate the 'smoke and mirrors' of post-1994 South Africa.

References

Angelou, Maya. ctd. in Hollis, Heather. *Teaching with Humor, Compassion, and Conviction: Helping our Students become Literate, Considerate, Passionate Human Beings.* Ontario, CA: Pembroke Publishers, 2016.

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Mieszkowski, Sylvia. Smith, Joy. De Valck, Marijke. *Sonic Interventions: An Introduction*, Haarlem: Colophon, 2007.

Nezlek, John. and Derks, Peter. 'Use of Humor as a Coping Mechanism, Psychological Adjustment, and Social Interaction', https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ca9f/5151a75909c7e72bf0110a56fcb012b94876.pdf

Okeke-Agulu, Chika. *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Sithole, Tendayi. 'Decolonising Humanities: The Presence of Humanitas and the Absence of Anthropos', in *Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of Education from Within and Without*, Grosfoguel, Ramón., Hernández, Roberto., Velásquez, Ernesto Rosen. (eds), Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016.

Taleb, Nassim. *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder,* London: Penguin Books, 2012.

Vannini, Phillip. 'Situatedness', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods: A-L ; Vol. 2, M-Z Index*, Given, Lisa. (ed), Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage.


DINEO SESHEE BOPAPE


Love inside and remember to leave your shoes and your mind outside

Gabi Ngcobo was the lead curator for the 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. Since the early 2000s, Ngcobo has been engaged in collaborative artistic, curatorial, and educational projects in South Africa and on an international scope. She is a founding member of the Johannesburg based collaborative platforms NGO – Nothing Gets Organised and Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR, 2010–14). NGO focusses on processes of self-organization that take place outside of predetermined structures, definitions, contexts, or forms. The CHR responded to the demands of the moment through an exploration of how historical legacies impact and resonate within contemporary art. Recently Ngcobo co-curated the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, 2016, which took place at the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion in São Paulo, BR, and A Labour of Love, 2015, at Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, DE. She has worked at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, SA, and at the Cape Africa Platform where she co-curated the Cape07 Biennale, 2007, Cape Town, SA. In the past she has collaborated with various institutions including Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno (CAAM), Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, ES; Durban Art Gallery, SA; Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg, SA; Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC), Johannesburg, SA; LUMA/Westbau, Pool, Zurich, CH; New Museum, Museum as Hub, New York, US; and Raw Material Company, Dakar, SN, among others. She has been teaching at the Wits School of Arts, University of Witswatersrand, SA since 2011. Her writings have been published in various catalogues, books, and journals.

I'm winning (my dear love)

Gabi Ngcobo

In 1987 South African musician Yvonne Chaka Chaka released a song titled *I'm winning (my dear love)*, a song that became very popular amongst black South Africans and one which has come to symbolise a moment of sonic subversiveness. Chaka Chaka's song was recently re-edited in a mix by Mo Laudi, a Paris-based South African DJ and musician who, whilst going through his archives of records during Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's funeral in April 2018, re-encountered the track and noted: 'the song goes; "I'm winning, winning my dear love" – *but if you listen carefully* [emphasis mine] you will hear that she is actually singing "I'm Winnie, Winnie Mandela".'[1]

On April 2, 2018, the day Madikizela-Mandela reached the end of her life, something beautiful also happened. In the aftermath of her death, as we were witnessing the dark cloud forcefully concealing the untold but unofficially implied meaning of her political struggles – how she had stood in the forefront with grounded intelligence, mighty in her vulnerability – the final nail was about to be hammered into her tainted legacy, monumentalizing her as one of history's biggest losers. However, what the local and international media had failed to grasp was the defiant spirit of an uncompromising generation of South Africans who, through the unfolding political realities of the country, had come to understand the complexities surrounding her legacy.

These tenacious voices did not arise out of nowhere. We have witnessed how, over the past five years or so, young South Africans have fought for and carved out a political space for themselves, disturbing, calling-out and thus refreshing the political vocabulary that has been stagnant for more than two decades. Consequently, they have inspired self-organised movements in the creative sphere and beyond. The louder they spoke, the more our outdated political grammar was exposed – how voiceless we have been, yet, hopefully, how strong and articulate we are set to become.

From my curatorial post in Berlin, I watched obsessively as the active disruption of a narrative that was set to damage her legacy became a story of resilience. It was a chronicle of self-preservation as method and also *the* symbol of resistance. I longed to be home in South Africa, to be part of this long overdue moment of truth, to be embraced by the positive light that seemed to shine onto our uncertainties. But alas it seemed impractical to attempt the journey, let alone to articulate to those around me the true meaning of what was unfolding.

We were two months away from the opening of the 10th Berlin Biennale (BB10) titled after Tina Turner's 1984 song *We don't need another hero*. This title signalled an important curatorial position; one that was inspired by recent student movements in South Africa. The exhibition title, to quote from the BB10 curatorial statement: '… rejects the desire for a savior but instead, explores the political potential of the act of

1 Cited from Mo Laudi's Instagram page, April 4, 2019.

self-preservation, refusing to be seduced by unyielding knowledge systems and historical narratives that contribute to the creation of toxic subjectivities.' All the same, we did find ourselves dedicating our biennale catalogue to Mam' Winnie, with a very simple tribute: 'For Nomzamo.' We had, as it appeared, reached a moment of deep recognition; a different meaning of Tina Turner's song had come to instigate the kind of complexities we were in search of without even knowing it.

The previous year, coincidentally on Madikizela-Mandela's 81st birthday, I had travelled by train from Berlin to Köln to present the 2017 film *Winnie*, produced and directed by Pascale Lamche, at the Museum Ludwig Afrika Film Festival. In a modestly full auditorium her story unfolded, albeit amongst a majority of people who, at the time, did not realise the magnitude of what was being revealed to their consciousness, or lack thereof. Here was a woman whom the apartheid regime had come to recognise as a backbone of the struggle and whom the regime had therefore done everything to destroy. The more they tried, the stronger she became. To use the words of one of her daughters in the film, 'some people come in and out of history but [Nomzamo] is a constant'.

We screened the film again on July 19, 2018, this time in one of Europe's oldest institution, Akademie der Künste in Berlin, as part of BB10's public programme titled 'I'm not who you think I'm not'. Having established itself, in 1696, as a centre for national cultural renewal and enlightenment, the Akademie has gradually assumed its present-day form as a platform for discussions on art and politics. We felt it was critical for this film to be seen within this historical setting. We wanted to unsettle an existing narrative as well as to signal a proposed desire to embody Nomzamo's life and philosophy as a theoretical principle towards an enabling, even if complex, future.

As I see it, the future is looking towards the horizon with skewed eyes, it is a reality that is always unfolding, always a challenge – it is an ever-open question. It compels us to apply as reference points the kind of coded vocabulary employed by Winnie during her banishment to the township of Brandfort in South Africa. It is the kind of vocabulary used by artists to signal and encourage strategies for winning a seemingly losing battle. Looking towards the horizon with skewed eyes is to perform a vigilant but somewhat obscure kind of observation. The kind of looking that inspires steps towards imaginative and liberative actions. Nomzamo's life as a theoretical principle need not disavow the fact that we don't need yet another hero. It is simply a proposal for careful listening in order to decode the countless messages still hidden in our collective unconsciousness. Listening carefully can help us avoid problems inherent in the kind of grand commemorative initiatives that have come to define us as a nation. '[...] to celebrate is to solemnify, in practice', as Fred Moten warns.[2] This proposed theoretical principle need *not* be a forced balance between a thing that has passed and its future as a narrative, but rather a continuous writing and re-writing of an ever-emerging story.

2 Moten, 2007.

Dineo Seshee Bopape's installation, an immersive theatre of ruin and mourning, titled *Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings]* 2016-18, does exactly that. The work departs from three distinct points: Bessie Head's 1974 autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power;* Nina Simone's live performance of the song 'Feelings' at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival; and Madikizela-Mandela's television interview from the 1970's in which, when asked by a journalist if she would be prepared to take up arms and kill in order to achieve freedom, she, with a clear resolve replied '*now* I know I can'.[3] Bopape re-enacts Madikizela-Mandela's chilling answer by standing in for her and using her own image and voice to utter the exact words: '[...] when I saw my children mowed down in Soweto in 1976, then I realized that in order to defend that I would have to do exactly the same.' To embody such a forceful resolution is to embody the historical motive and theoretical principle I am trying to propose with this text. It is to conceive of a complex way of working against the grain of the terror that produced a condition that demanded a statement like that.[4] Bopape's re-enactment sends a decoded message to a yet unknown destination.

Creative actions such as Bopape's – the ones that excavate from the numerous historical subversive strategies employed by artists from the sonic, literal and visual political fields – are critical in forging a refreshed grammar in which to speak of what Mawande Zenzile demarcates as 'the problem we didn't create'. In order to do so we will have to transform ourselves into tricksters and in that way be able to traverse different spaces of meaning-making that speak to our present. Of his artistic practice Zenzile writes: 'Sometimes in my work I like to confuse people; I intentionally conceal the meaning of the work. I do this by giving the works ambiguous titles that have no obvious links to my "true" intentions. But sometimes I use titles as clues for the audience to access the work through.'

To apply opacity as a strategy for making things clear in a different manner is a way of owning the right to our own particular, non-imperative perspective and form of clarification. The use of opacity can thus be seen as an artist's commitment to the rearrangement of systems for the creation of new knowledge. So too it can be seen as a way of distributing responsibility for the historical process of unravelling 'the problems we didn't create'.

Tracey Rose's method in *A Dream Deferred (Mandela Balls)* (2013–ongoing) is slow and calculative and evolves over time. Using the iconic legacy of Nelson Mandela she constructs a narrative that is part fact, part speculative in the unpacking of grand political legacies. Inspired by the poem 'A Dream Deferred' by Langston Hughes,

3 Emphasis based on the fact that she had been asked this question before but in terms of ANC non-violent policy of the time she had rejected the idea of inflicting violence.

4 Bopape's installation features a video from Nina Simone's 1976 live performance in Montreux, in which she stops the performance to ask, 'What are the conditions that demanded a song like that?'

who was writing at the time of the North-American Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1920s, Rose's series of sculptures interprets the question posed by Hughes: 'What happens to a dream deferred, does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?' The sculptural balls in the work seem to carry with them what has been accumulated over a lifetime. They appear overburdened by uncertainties lugged by a nation still under construction. Though the work makes reference to Mandela's testicles: his real and mythologized legacy, it also alludes to the act of castration or crushing of African males' testicles during the colonial period. The work consists of large disintegrating balls created from unconventional materials, such as butcher's paper, chocolate, newspapers and cling wrap – to comment on the slow disintegration of ideas upheld in the construction of a post-apartheid South Africa. *A Dream Deferred* will result in a series of 95 objects (balls), a reference to Nelson Mandela's age at the time of his death.

Rose seems to signal that we will have to split ourselves into many pieces if we desire to relearn how to reassemble only that which we deem critical for winning this war: a war against dying. We start winning when we commit ourselves to creatively working towards rearranging the systems for the creation of new knowledge and understanding that winning is *us* ending up on the same side of the future.

References

Mo Laudi, Instagram page, posted April 4, 2019.

Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Dineo Seshee Bopape

Dineo Seshee Bopape was born in 1981, on a Sunday. If she were Ghanain, her name would be akosua/akos for short. During the same year of her birth, the Brixton riots took place; two people were injured when a bomb exploded in a Durban shopping centre, Bobby Sands dies; Umkonto We Sizwe performs numerous underground assaults against the apartheid state. There was an earthquake in China that killed maybe 50 people; an International NGO Conference on Indigenous Populations and the Land is held in Geneva; Hosni Mubarack was elected president of Egypt; there is a coup d'etat in Ghana; princess Diana of Britain marries Charles; Bob Marley dies; apartheid SA invades Angola; Salman Rushdie releases his book *Midnight's Children*; the remains of the Titanic are found; Muhamed Ali retires; Winnie Mandela's banishment orders are renewed for another 5 years; the first test tube baby is born; Thomas Sanakara rides a bike to his first cabinet meeting; Machu Pichu is declared a heritage site; the song "endless love" is popular on the airwaves; Bopape's paternal grandmother dies affected by dementia; that very year millions of people cried tears (of all sorts), spoke words in many languages and billions of people dreamt.... The world's human population was around 4.529 billion... today Bopape is one amongst 7 billion - occupying multiple adjectives. Her intuitive installations transform spaces into meditative arenas in which historical narrative, fiction, and personal narrative are wittingly interwoven in order to reveal the subjective conditions of being alive.

Bopape is known for her experimental video montages, sculptural installations, paintings and found objects. She graduated at De Ateliers in Amsterdam (2007) and completed an MFA at Columbia University, New York (2010). She is the winner of the Future Generation Prize (2016), and the recipient of Columbia University's Toby Fund Award (2010). Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh (2018); Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg (2018); Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev (2018); Art in General, New York (2016); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2016); Hayward Gallery, London (2015); Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen (2015); August House, Johannesburg (2014); Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (2013, 2011); and Mart House Gallery, Amsterdam (2010). Her work has also been included in group exhibitions at the Marrakech Biennale 6, Marrakech (2016); La Biennale de Montréal (2015); Bienial de São Paulo (2016); Tate Modern, London (2015); Center for Visual Art, Denver (2015); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2015); The Jewish Museum, New York (2015); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2014); Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (2014); and Biennale de Lyon (2013).

A: araba.....
.....
....
.....
.....
.....
and.....

...kobamelo.
.....
.....
.....le yona...
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....pitsi.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
..... (And its bones, the stars);
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....byale
ke lerole.

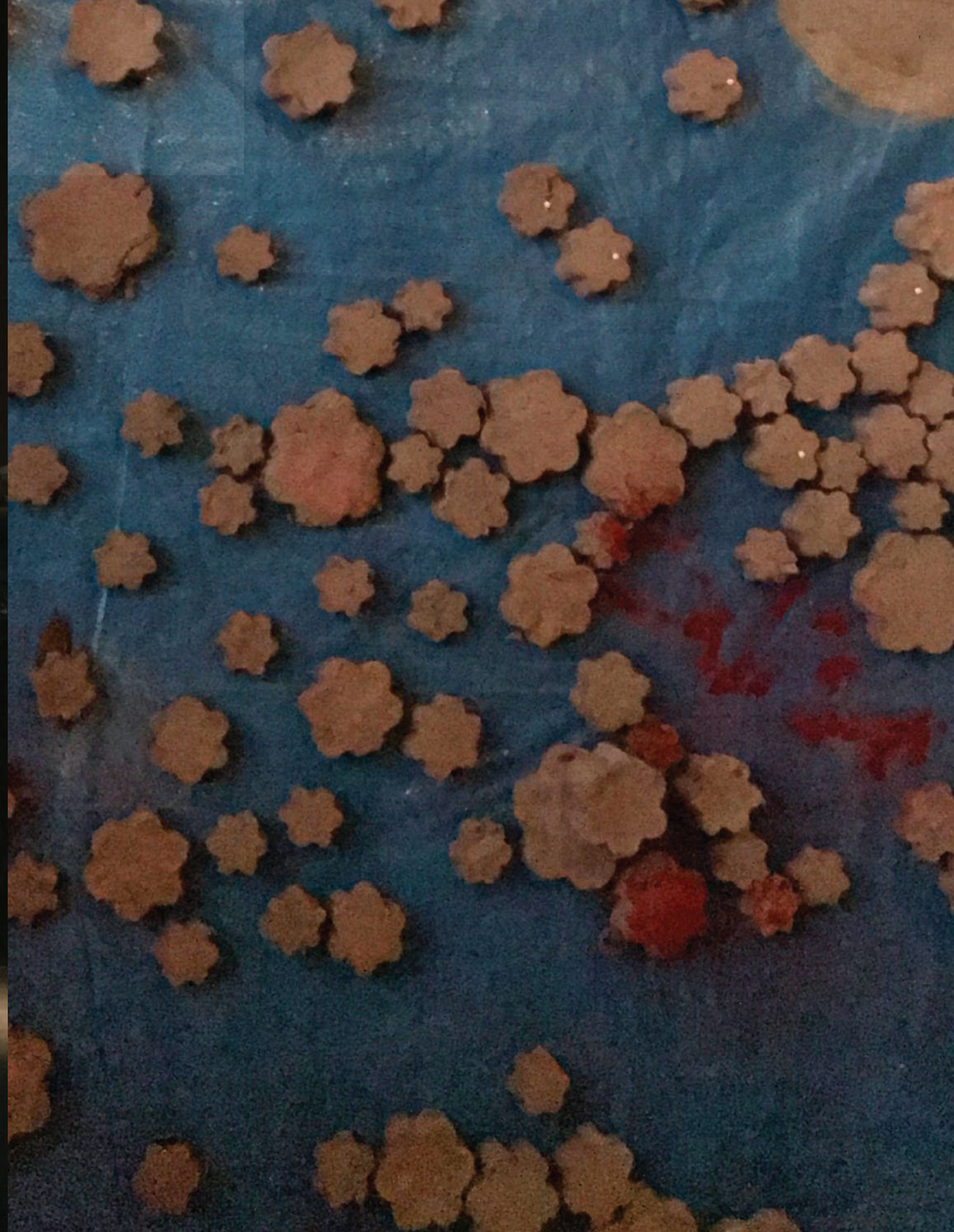
Marapo.
Morithi/Moritshana.
O tseba bjang? E tseba byang.
Moso o mo botse.
e tseba byang?
toro ya gona.
maraga.letsopa. maswika. molora. molori. pitsi.
a cosmic horse. boloko.bolopo.
mmele wa mmu.
Raisibe.
Aramela.
Bebenya byale ka legadima la kgole.
Gogolwana.

.....
.....

.....
.....tša swa moyeng .....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....tša kgakgatha, tša wela ... mafahleng: ....;
.....
.....
.....
.....
..... Mmupi a re .....
MARAPO A YONA:DINALEDI.
.....
.....golola. phurulloga.

Dineo Sesee Bopape

Marapo *a yona Dinaledi (Its bones the stars)*, Sketch no 22, 2019



Portia Malatjie is currently completing a PhD in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. She holds an MA in History of Art and a BA in Fine Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa). Malatjie is Associate Lecturer of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, was lecturer in History of Art and Visual Cultures at Rhodes University (2012 – 2013) and has guest lectured at the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University. She has published in local and international peer-reviewed journals and exhibition catalogues, and has presented conference papers at the National Women's Scholar Association conference in Atlanta (2018, USA), University of Glasgow (2017, UK), Bayreuth University (2016, Germany) and College Art Association (2014 and 2017, New York and Chicago). Malatjie was Head Curator of Brundyn+ Gallery, Cape Town (2013 – 2015); Director of the AVA Gallery, Cape Town (2015); Public Programme Coordinator at Goldsmiths, London (2016 – 2017), and curator at Tiwani Contemporary, London (2017 – 2018). She is currently Adjunct Curator at Norval Foundation and has served as a board member of the Visual Arts Task Team (Department of Visual Cultures), VANSA and IZIKO National Art Gallery. Her current research looks at the intersections between black spiritualities, continental black ontologies, and the African moving image aesthetic.

A Constellation of Voids: Dineo Seshee Bopape's Shrines to Nothingness

Portia Malatjie

Dineo Seshee Bopape's interdisciplinary practice oscillates between concerns with spirituality, advocacy for a multiplicity of temporalities, and issues pertaining to land and landlessness. She accomplishes this by marrying a vast array of symbolic materials, which she arranges into immersive intuitive constellations. This process later manifests through various channels, most commonly large-scale installations and moving images, and often an amalgamation of the two.

At the centre of Bopape's practice is a continual recourse to history and memory as it pertains to Afro-diasporic events and experiences. At the forefront of this is seeking similarities in ritual and spiritual practices and how they are channelled in the lived experiences of black people in different parts of the world. Her recourse to Afro-diasporic spiritualities has been seen to feature in works such as Mabu, Mubu, Mmu (2018) and alluded to in : indeed it may very well be the _____itself (2016), specifically with the recurring inclusion of Santera voodoo symbolisms. In these works, Bopape uses chalk to draw Santera-like symbols – including circles separated into four and sometimes bearing crosses and smaller circles – onto compressed heaps of soil. In other moments, she carves these shapes into the earth structure and inserts healing crystals, such as amethyst and jade, as well as healing herbs, such as sage and hibiscus, which are often sourced from the area where the work is being installed. The remnants of the speculative rituals – although still rooted in reality because the act of assembling these installations can be read as rituals in themselves – resemble shrines for appeasing ancestors as found across most African communities. Through the centrality of Afro-diasporic and worldly healing practices, Bopape compels us to imagine what it would mean to refuse the sustained antagonism towards blackness and the perpetual rejuvenation of anti-black worlds.

In Bopape's practice, there is an incessant gravitational pull towards the geological. This has been summoned in different ways, including the cascading of water in Untitled (Of Occult Instability) Feelings (2018), the inclusion of soil from different parts of the world in Azania (2016), the motioning towards rain in Sedibeng (it comes with the rain) (2017), and the representation of the sky and the cosmos in is i am sky (2013). In kgoro ya go tŠwa: even if you fall from a circle (2013), Bopape gestures towards geological exits and entrances – such as the Gate of the Sun in Bolivia – presumably as gateways between multiple worlds and multiple modes of being.

What has become central to Bopape's current practice is the arrangement of different materials into shrines that commemorate different Afro-diasporic events and experiences. It is this embarkation into the language and aesthetics of shrines that is the concern of this essay. As such, I look at the mechanisms of enshrinement in Bopape's work through the idea of occupation. I pay close attention to the different materials

that compose the whole constellation. More interestingly, I want to concentrate on the moments and spaces in between the installation that are conceptualised as voids and nothingness. The voids and nothingness in (between) Bopape's installations are therefore the 'objects' of study. Through them, I contemplate the intersections between blackness, nothingness and the idea of representing absences. I am thus intrigued by the idea of creating a shrine to nothingness, and the shape and form that that shrine might take.

Enshrined

The installation and shrine *+/- 1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)* (2017) signals Dineo Seshee Bopape's interest in monumentalisation and traversing space and time through commemoration. Conceptualised in her use of the shrine is a connection to Afro-diasporic spiritual practices and their relationship with spiritual events that have motivated revolutions. *+/- 1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)*, as the title suggests, is a contemplation on the spiritually-based performances about the Haitian revolution. Bopape is drawn to the narrative of Cécile Fatiman, a voodoo priestess who presided over a ceremony where the Haitian revolution was prophesied.

She is fascinated by the idea of a spiritual gathering conjuring up a political occurrence and the sizeable effects that spirituality could have on the structure of society. This ceremony resulted in what would be the first successful anti-slavery revolution. In the installation, constellations of carefully assembled objects are subliminally placed in, on and around clay and concrete brick formations. The clay bricks are themselves well conceptualised objects that sometimes include soil from different regions, cow dung, and ash. These materials are later compressed and pounded together into different-sized rectangular shapes. There are remnants of healing herbs that are indigenous to the United Arab Emirates, the site where the work was installed in 2017.

Other objects and materials include cowry shells, soil from Palestine, South Africa (Marikana) and the Congo, which are all sites of conflict marked with the residue of violence. Scattered around the work are plastic bottles of varying sizes, some filled with rose water and sea water, the majority filled with fuel and covered in red and white cloth. These bottles, on initial inspection, resemble petrol bombs that could be used in acts of conflict or of resistance.

+/- 1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791) comprises four architectural structures, and the seemingly unoccupied spaces in between them. It is these 'unoccupied' spaces, this void, this nothingness, that is of particular interest to me, something which is self-proclaimed by Bopape. Her 2013 video, *is i am sky*, is a contemplation – with and through Sun Ra's *An Endless Realm* – into the idea of being nothing, or having nothing, and being in nothing. As such, my contemplation into the idea of (re)presenting nothingness is rooted in long-standing queries that Bopape has herself returned to.

I want to speculatively contemplate what it would mean to represent nothingness, and what shape nothingness, a void, an absence, would or could take. I am intrigued by the idea of enshrinement as it relates to presence and non-presence, being and nothingness. As such, I want to begin with a set of assumptions about shrines, specifically the idea of commemorating something that used to exist, but is no longer here or there. While enshrinement is not only for things that have passed, perished or died – such as a shrine to an ancestor – this essay presupposes an enshrinement of things that were there, and are no longer there, things that existed and now cease to exist. With that in mind, an enshrinement of or to nothingness assists us in putting pressure on preconceived conceptions that are rooted in chronological temporality. In other words, what happens when we consider enshrinement outside of the capture of chronology in the sense of something existing, undergoing a death, not existing, and then being commemorated in its absence. What happens when we conceive of enshrinement as existing outside of time, and outside of place and materiality? What also happens when we consider an enshrinement to nothingness that is represented by, through and as nothingness?

I am enchanted by the performance of reading the voids in Bopape's installations through Tina Campt's notion of the low frequencies emitted in the everyday lived experiences of black people, and the idea that there is merit in paying attention to the inaudible, seemingly absent, frequencies that are at the centre of black life. The frequencies that Campt speaks of are the sonic frequencies of black quotidian life. These are apparently inaudible moments that are not heard through listening, but instead activate other sensorial responses. It is the 'infra-sonic frequencies' that are not audible to the human ear, but are felt, often as vibrations. Departing from Campt, we are compelled to imagine what happens when we listen closely to the emptiness or empty spaces in and around Bopape's shrines, and, more specifically, what happens when we look carefully at nothing. Bopape makes us contemplate what becomes revealed to us when we stare into nothingness. More significantly, what happens when we consider the ways in which Bopape has represented that nothingness and how we engage with that representation?

The Shape of Nothingness

Nothingness as it relates to blackness is central to my reading of Bopape's work. I want to consider Bopape's meditation on nothingness through the highly charged concepts of occupied, unoccupied and forced occupation as they relate to space and place. In the context of South Africa, this often means centralising land (and landlessness) and the dispossession of black people from it. In certain areas, land is the nucleus around which blackness comes into being. What I mean by this is, if we are to follow on from the Afro-pessimist belief that blackness is preceded by ontology, and that blackness is that which is borne out of violent encounters such as slavery or colonialism, then land becomes the central point on which the becoming non-human (or becoming nothing) of black people reveals itself. This is through the forced removal of slaves from their world, across the Atlantic, to an alternate world or through settler colonialism and the violent extraction of black people from lands they have called home. In the context of settler colonialism, this manifests through the dispossession of black people from their land to small townships, which can be read as graveyards

where they are meant to live as black spectres having suffered both a social and a political death.

The 'location' or township as a graveyard for black people who have suffered both a social and a political death insinuates the non-being of black people – thus locating them outside the parameters of being human – who have presumably taken up the role of the living dead. They are relegated a state of black spectrality as they aimlessly wander the land as beings that are not really there, and as beings that do not belong. This foregrounds the question of how to articulate and represent that which is not there: a question that is integral to the voids and absences in Bopape's practice.

Bopape does this through working against the very idea of nothingness, continually pushing against its very (non-)being. She insists on the something-ness that always already exists in, through and in between the perceived nothingness. As such, the moments in between the different parts of her installations are just as important as those filled by the bricks, the tiles, the soil, the hand casts and sticks that form the whole. Continuing her interest in presence and non-presence, where things seemingly do not exist, Bopape continually leaves traces of a part of herself in the work. There is an insistent need to make 'self-presence in the work'. This is achieved in numerous ways, including through her recurring motif of casting the void inside her fist into clay or bronze, and placing these [voids/fists in large quantities – almost obsessively, insistently and as a kind of haunting – in and around the shrines. Through this performative strategy, Bopape explores how to replicate one's presence in one's work, thus ensuring that there is something there where there might have been nothing. In the shrine/installation *+/- 1791*, the artist's making of self-presence in the work materialises through her breathing air into spherical glass objects, quickly closing them with a tailored cork to trap the air inside. Some of the glass objects are cracked, others imperfect with holes, thus allowing the ghost-like air to escape. But it is not only the existence of the artist's breath in the glass object that is important, it is also the minute particles and traces that are orchestrated, facilitated and enabled by the process of blowing into the glass. The residue of the presence of the artist also lies in the memory of the process and performance of the blowing.

There is thus a kind of generative anti-occupation of the voids in Bopape's installation. What I mean by anti-occupation is that the voids are neither occupied by physical elements as tangible as the bricks they surround, nor are they unoccupied, if we consider the thesis that something always already exists in nothingness. As such, an anti-occupation of and in the void becomes an articulation of fugitive existences, that is, where fugitives are those who 'cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned'. Accordingly, I contemplate Bopape's voids as fugitive spaces or spaces that potentiate fugitive existence for blackness. Fugitivity is here understood as what James Ford calls 'the artful escape from objectification'. The fugitive spaces of Bopape's voids are therefore spaces that are not proper, where nothing is assigned and nothing is confined, and yet something always already exists. If blackness in the Afro-pessimist sense is a form of social and political death, then I see fugitivity in the voids presented by Bopape. I am thinking of this resurrection from political death through Richard Iton's notion of the black fantastic. Iton argues that, if citizenship (and perhaps humanism) is that ability to engage in formal politics, then this poses a problem for blackness, which is always excluded from formal or mainstream politics. As an act of refusal and resistance, blackness has carved a space for itself outside the mainstream where it practices its own informal politics and way of being. Iton calls this place the black fantastic. Bopape's voids are thus spaces of, for and from the black fantastic, spaces where things happen outside mainstream conceptions, in low inaudible frequencies, in invisibility, but where they happen nonetheless. Bopape's voids are spaces where black fugitivity is potentiated, where it is instantiated and where it has given itself permission to thrive and exist as something.

I argue that Bopape's voids, which are in and of the black fantastic, are where alternative temporalities, spatiality, politics, and ontologies exist. It is a space that functions according to its own time, and exists outside of normative Western temporalities. It is a space governed by the rules and regulations of pro-blackness. It is a space of hesitation, of (dis)expectation, of possibility and probability; it is a space of informality where black fugitive existences are potentiated.

Escape through and towards Nothingness

The voids in between Bopape's constructed shrines and installations, I surmise, are spaces of black fugitive movement and fugitive being. By virtue of the fact that Bopape deliberately draws attention to the voids means that there is something intriguing that can be conjured up in those spaces. I believe that what is conjured up, through a constellation of light and movement of people through the space, is a kind of move towards a fugitive ontology (of blackness) that is located in absence and in nothingness. As such, in as much as material such as clay bricks, ceramic tiles, herbs, crystals, candles, white handkerchiefs, red cloth and plastic buckets are integral to the experience of Bopape's shrines, the same level of attention should be placed on the seemingly absent moments and spaces in between. It is in these mystical spaces and places of nothingness where black fugitivity can be felt, heard and (un)seen.

References

Calvin, Warren. 'Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit.' ZAA 2, no. 65 (2017): 219–29.

Campt, Tina M. *Listening to Images*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Ford, James. 'Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination.' Black Camera 5, no. 2 (2014): 3–4.

Iton, Richard. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Rabkin, Eric. *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Tracy Rose belongs to a generation of artists charged with reinventing the artistic gesture in post-apartheid South Africa. Within this fold, she has defined a provocative visual world whose complexities reflect those of the task at hand. Refusing to simplify reality for the sake of clarity, the artist creates rich characters that inhabit worlds as interrelated as the many facets of a human personality. Her reference to theatre and the carnival tradition also places her work in the realm of satire. As such, it has consistently questioned and challenged the prevalent aesthetics of international contemporary art, the emergence of a dominant cultural narrative of struggle and reconciliation in South Africa and also post-colonial, racial and feminist issues in the wider world. Working with performance, often for the camera, Tracey Rose places her body at the centre of her practice. She inhabits the roles given to Africans, to African women, and to women in a male dominated world, swallowing stereotypes whole. In her quest to understand the source of these cultural meanings that define the human condition, Rose is inevitably led to religious myths of creation. The scope of Rose's work is not limited to the boundaries of South Africa, and it has indeed quickly found a global, humanist resonance

Rose holds a Master of Fine Art from Goldsmiths College, University of London (UK) and received her B.A. in Fine Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in 1996. She was trained in editing and cinematography at The South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance in Johannesburg. When Rose graduated in Fine Arts in 1996, her career almost immediately took off with high profile exhibitions that included Hitchhiker at the Generator Art Space, Johannesburg (1996); the Johannesburg Biennial (1997); Cross/ingsat the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum (1997) and Harald Szeemann's Plateau de l'Humanitéat 49th Venice Biennial (2001). More recently Rose has had solo exhibitions at The Project, New York; Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Doualart, Douala; The Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg; Bildmuseet, University of Umea, Umea; Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen; Dan Gunn, Berlin and Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid.

The work is a story, narrated by two voices, of the continent of Africa and her diasporas. Rose seeks to tell the history of the region through the prism of her own heritage as an African woman, creating a subverting critique of Western theories around history and historiography.

Two locations have been used, each hosting a male character, one in Johannesburg, one in Paris. A single channel projection shows the South African actor Denzel Edgar narrating in Latin a translation of the text which Rose has written. This is an homage to Africa's past, narrated in one of the original languages of European intellectual self-identity and presumed exceptionalism. Edgar plays The Profiteering Prophet, a comment on the masculine usurpation of spiritual work and practices on the continent, which hints at the exclusion of women for profit and gain.

Edgar's portrayal of the prophet is of one who, while he has the desire for it, does not quite have the calling: he wants it, he could have had it, but the knowledge has been lost somehow. He tries and fails to call upon a past before distorted, doctored historical propaganda. His character attempts, through an alchemy of words, objects and symbols, to reactivate a truthful historical past referencing Mansa Musa, a great African icon of the past whose presence, if called up now, would bring forth a great recollection of the lost past of Africa's greatness: An Illusion or a myth worth calling upon.

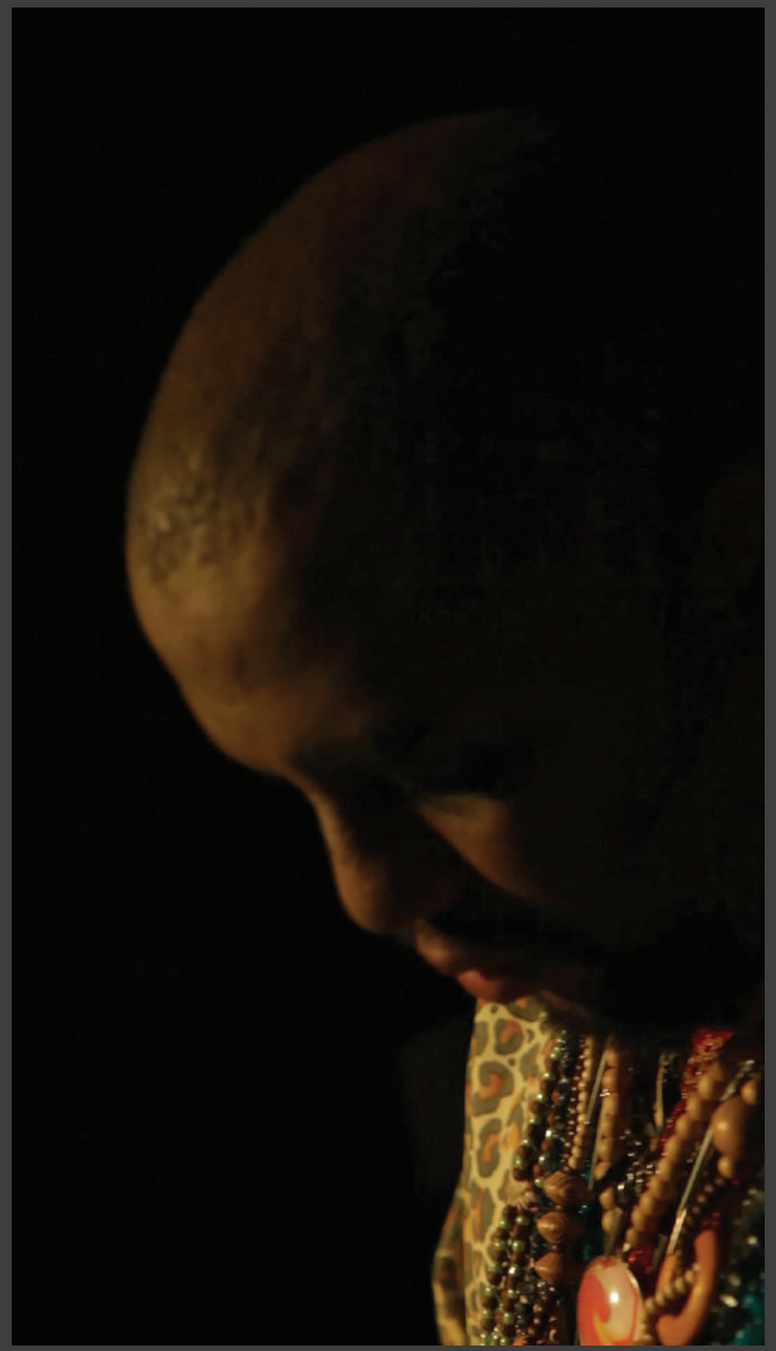
The eminent Cameroonian-Swiss curator and writer Simon Njami is The Prophessor, reading from Paris the voiceover of Medieval Latin which forms the broken telephonic cosmic communication with Edgar's clairaudient profiteering pseudo-prophet, who tries unsuccessfully to understand it in Classical Latin, a disjuncture in the communication and the information meant to be shared or disseminated.

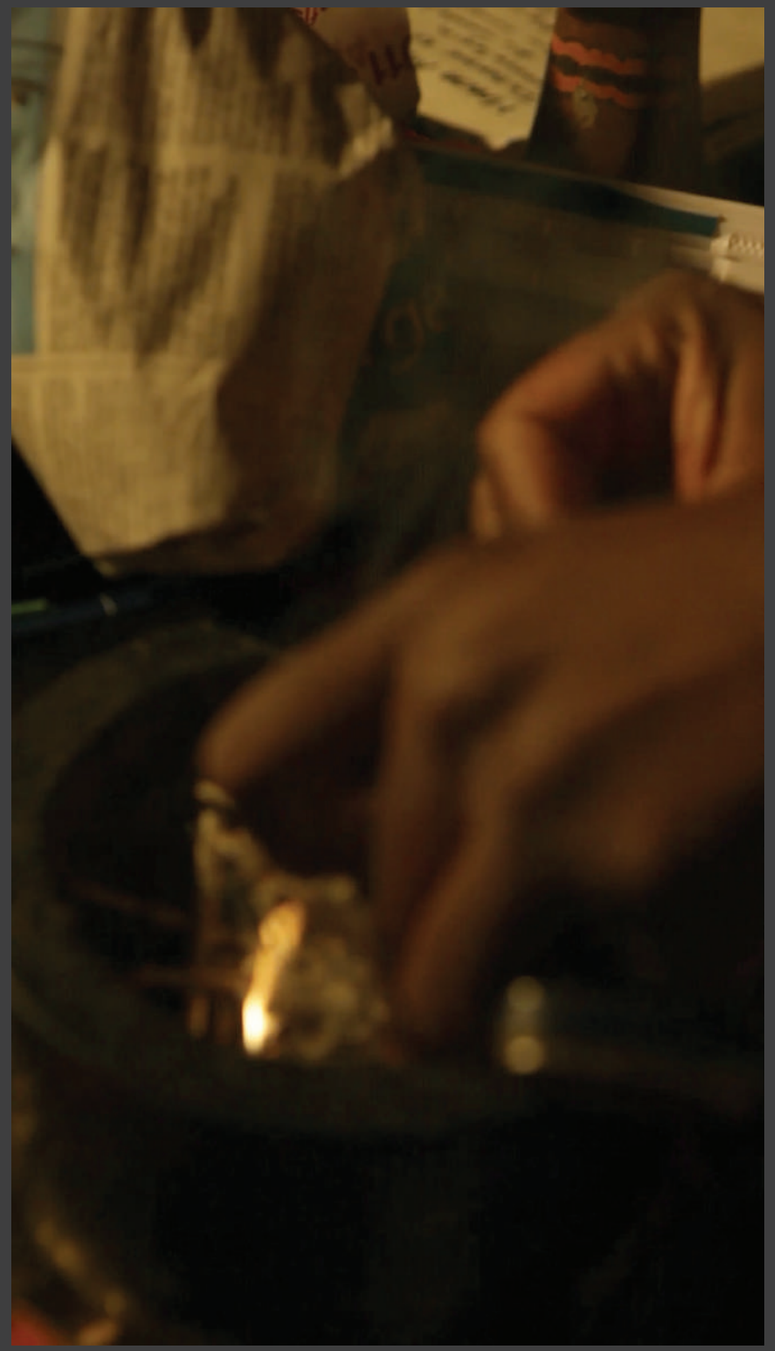
Having formed a practice over the last twenty years in which her own body is central to the form and narrative of her video works, Rose is taking a critical distance, becoming the portrait maker, pursuing an active, subjective stance and removing herself as object from the canvas. This work is an investment in a different human body from her own, within the framework of a video, which is a series of entirely aesthetic decisions. In this work, Rose's bodily agency will be realized through her holding of the camera, her hand directing the dance of the building of the layers of imagery; a long, slow, passionate tribute to a man and a people and peoples.

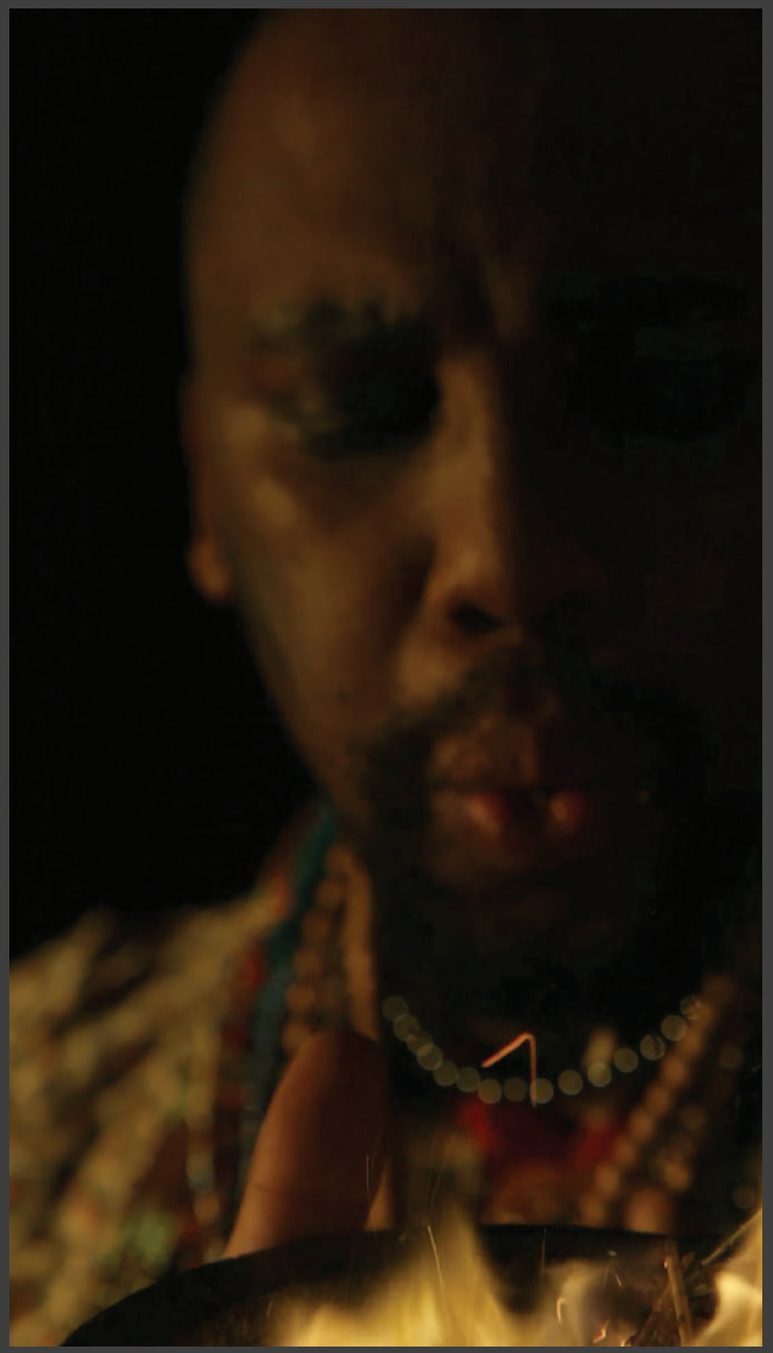
Rose is grasping the obsessive dedication which the painter has for the canvas as a route to unfurling her story through the moving image. As paint dries on a canvas it dries before one's eyes, changing colour and light. Rose's camera follows Edgar closely through his narration, filmed on a set created in Johannesburg to form a still-life painting as background to his person. The camera follows him lovingly, gazing off into the background to record various symbolic objects and strange compositions, unexpected characters and precarious spaces. Deeply saturated, beautifully coloured light and shadows will form a Caravaggian Chiaroscuro, emulating that fine line between insanity and genius.

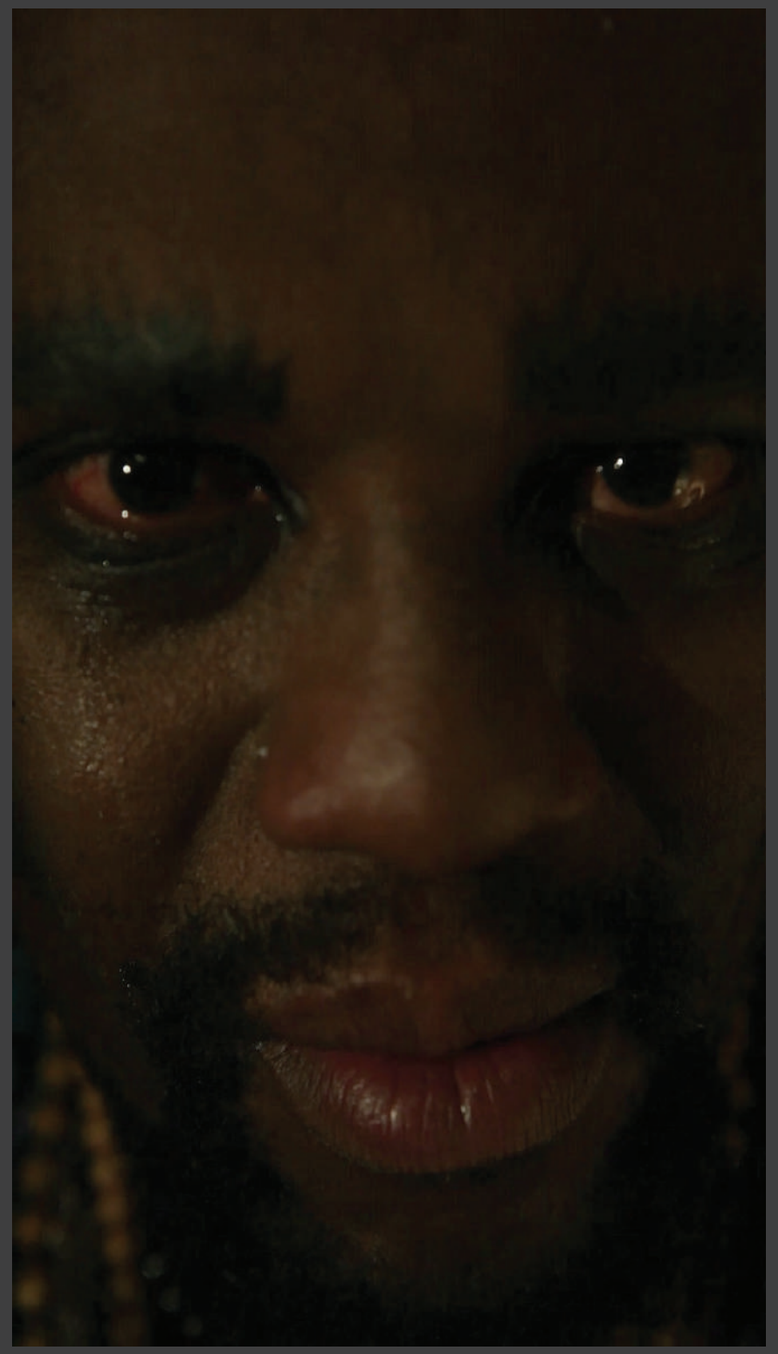
Tracey Rose

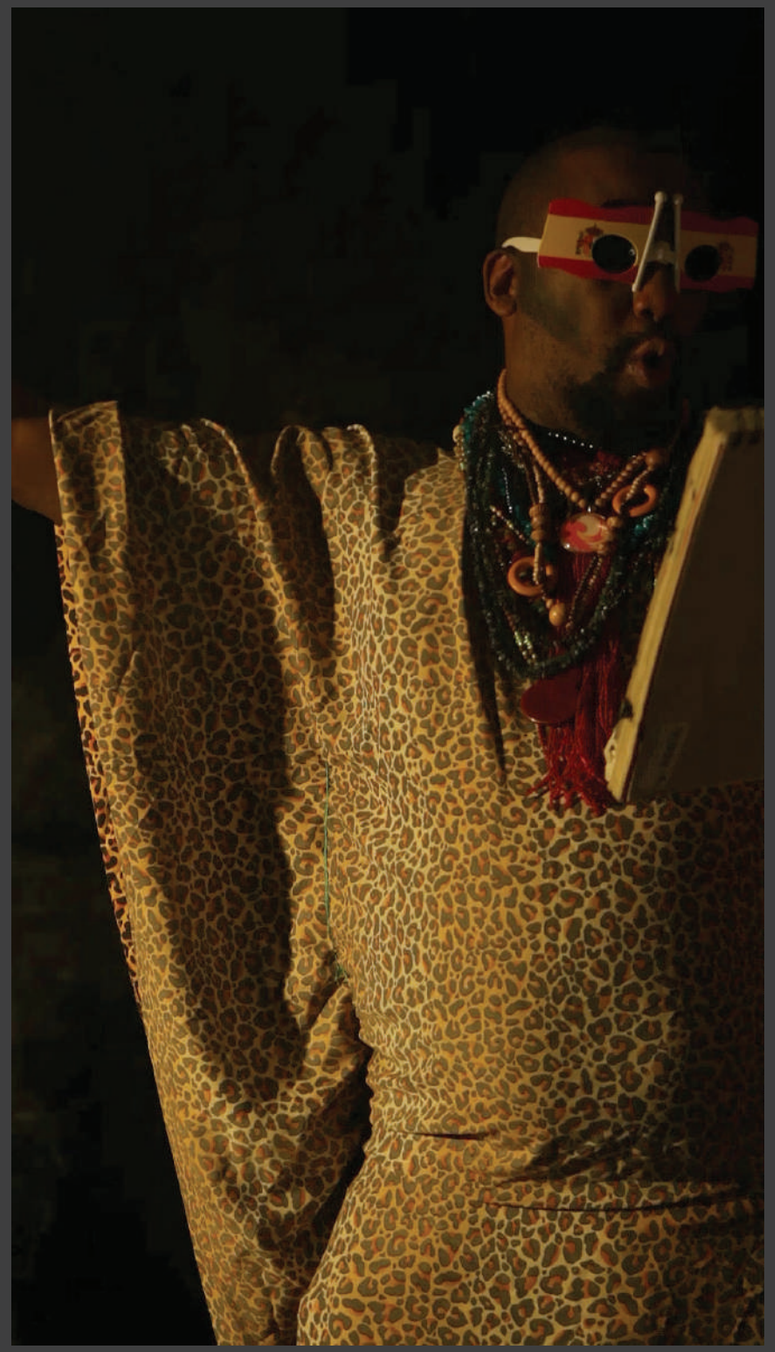
Hard Black on Cotton, 2019
Single channel colour HD, sound, 36'56"
Simon Njami and Denzel Edgar, Filming and editing by Zen Marie, Latin translations by Astrid Khoo
Realised with the support of the South African Department of Arts and Culture

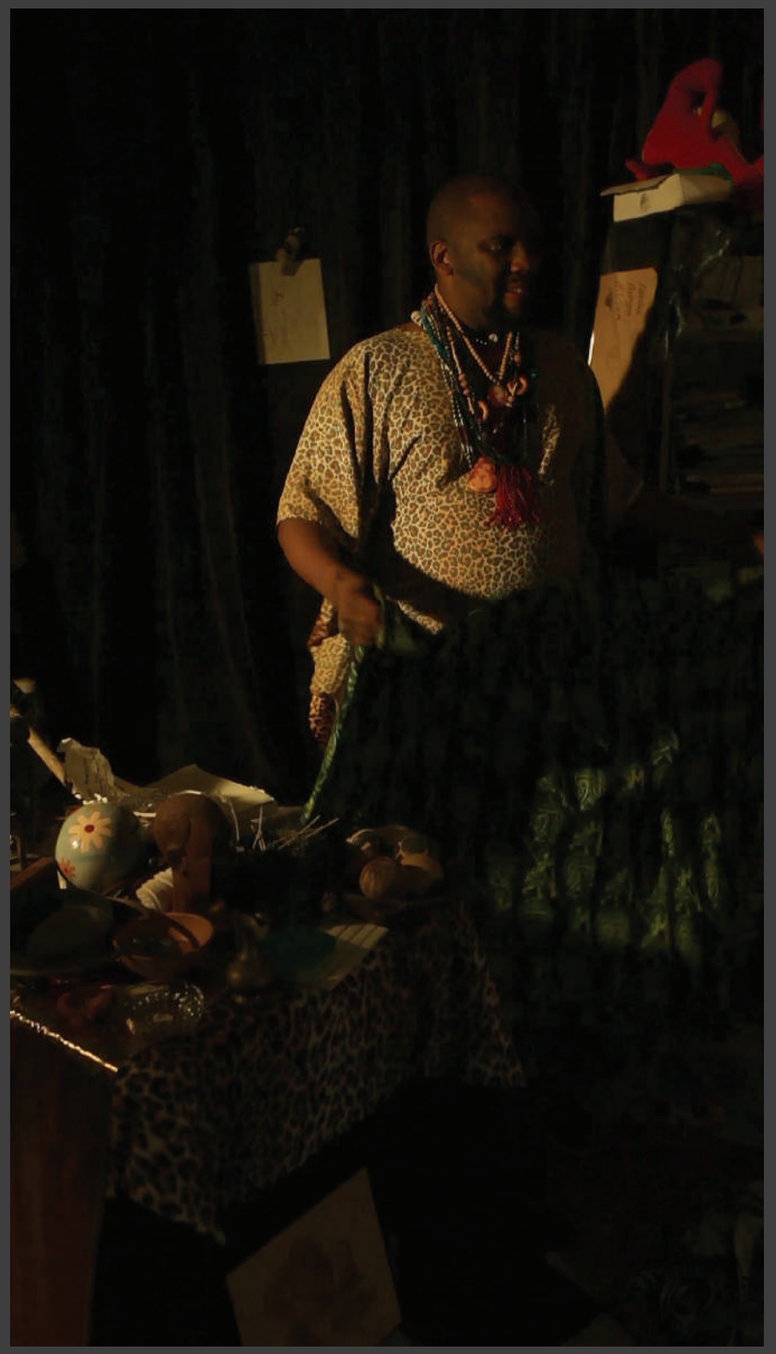








Hard Black on Cotton DRAFT
Mansa Musa
Crazy Black People Slavery
Cosmology

I have been thinking - this feeling, not yet a thought Occupying my being:

The management of lies...
Here we stand on Roman land their tales engraved, the place they called Alexandria burned, Timbuktu erased [erasing].

———— ————————————————
————————————————
There's a reason they've kept this from you
for if you knew what it was / how it was to stand on a mountain and command

you would not be here sitting

Concussed Tied

Contemplative Silent

you'd be warring in the guise of mmmmmmmm Every womb-man sharpening womb-man

like steel sharpening steel.

Instead you sit here
broken in your amnesia

your lost his STORIES Our STORIES

HER STORIES.

Hard Black on Cotton DRAFT

I lied when I came here, I said I would tell you of the series [stories] of the Moors - your people in this land... but I came here to claim back
you can find these stories with ease now: l o o k i t u p

l oo k i t u p

My mouth may say burn the Vatican
the arsenal of Empire

holding constraining our arms with their combative cross . . .

But my mind says temperance is needed, Because this is the dutiful slave.

NGATI MPHEPHO YOFIKA KONSE
God is as the wind,
which touches everything.

If you're asleep spirituality and if you're asleep spiritually
You can be oppressed and manipulated
It's a tool, given to yo by the universe:
Use it for good, use it for bad
It's your choice…
I was always taught to use it for good.
That first Christian who
worshipped Jesus at the end
of a whip.
How would
you take the religion
of your oppressor?

The tradition the culture is to do with the universe
And our place in it. Religion doesn't deal with
that, religion deals with one person…they have
personalised God.

The Profiteering Prophet and the Useless Sinner.

If you disassociate yourself from your
ancestral heritage, you are lost
And if you have a lack of understanding
Of your ancestry.
You don't know where you've been\
you don't know who you are
and you don't know
where you're going.
Because if you are asleep to that
you are asleep
spirituality.
And if you are asleep spiritually
you can be oppressed
and manipulated.

So it is absolutely vital for your own survival to have this cultural identity
and cultural awareness.

Who knows how the sphinx lost her nose?

Rock
Water

Trees

Saints are Ancestors are Saints are Ancestors.

An experiment in shading & shadows using Hard and Black for Chiaroscuro.

The story of secrets lost

searched for formed
adopted
The Sphinx from Napoleon: Caucazoid feature to the noseless one we know today:
the firing of the canon.

Hypoxis hemerocallidea
Hypoxis species are tuberous perennials with lone, strap-shaped leaves and yellow, star-shaped flowers. The species can be distinguished by the size shape and orientation of the leaves and the size and shape of the flowers.
H. Hemerocallidea (previously also known by the name H. Rooperi) has broad
SLIGHTLY HAIRY
LEAVES
which are arranged one above the
other
to
form
three
distinct groups
s
p
r
e
a
d
i
n
g

t o
u w r r m the centre of the plant
o a d f
BRIGHT YELLOW
STAR
borne
on
long
slender
stalks

Mutant Beats
Blazing Arrows
Rebel Women
Mine Boy
Gran Espectaculo

"Many-Sided Wisdom: A new politics of the Spirit"

Nothing to be gained here:
Come to my room let me tell you a story.

The Crescent Moon in Lwandle's curls along with the Ocean, a Double Rainbow.

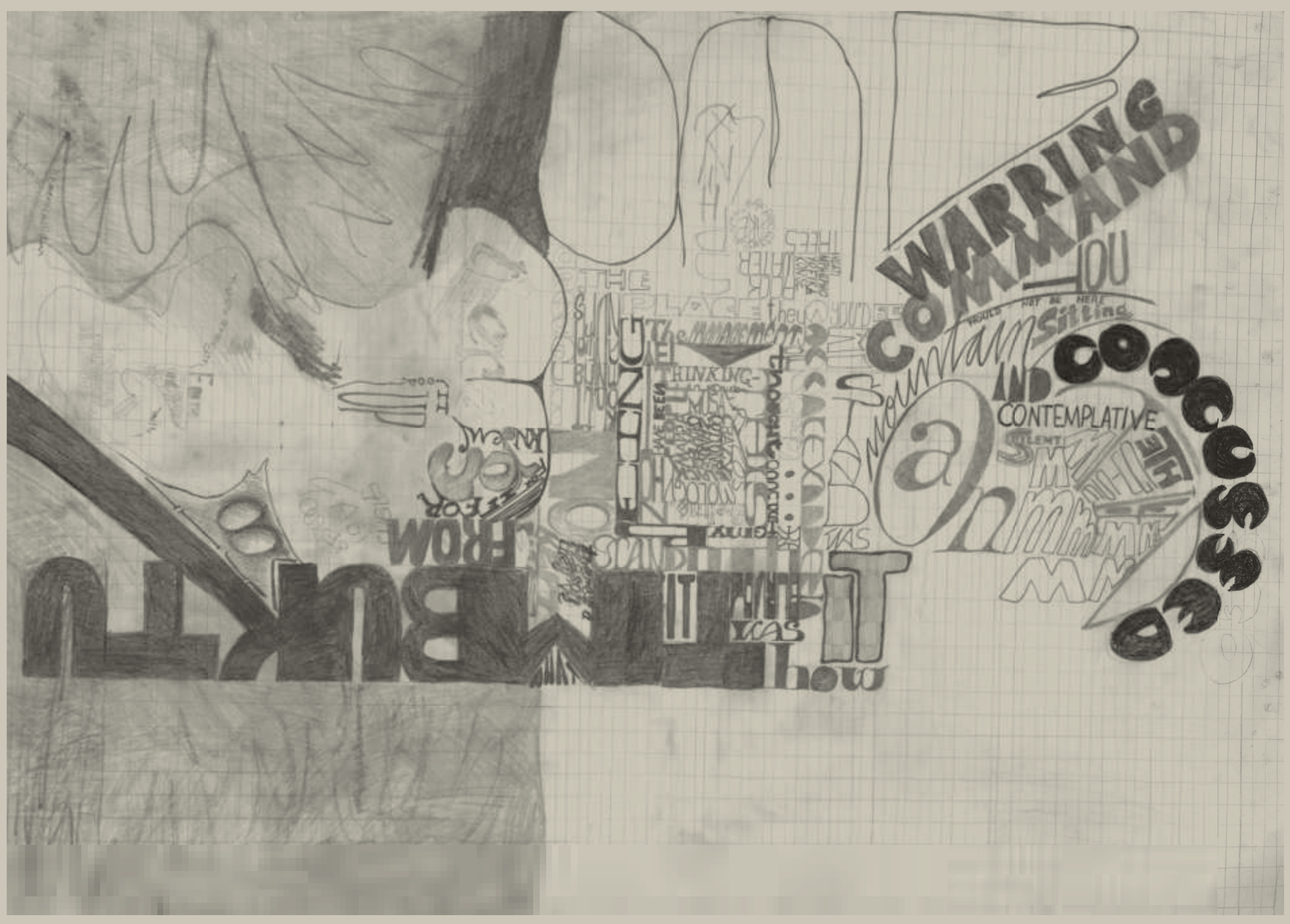
A hand, a ghostly hand.
A WAVING MAN drowning
A Whale
A Shark:

A tribute
Kori Newkirk
get your grid on.
The Napoleon Sphinx
The Existing Sphinx
The Canon Phallus
and the ball who blows:
an eye
a nose
Conquering the demons of the past.
A Black Aesthetic.
Dumile Feni
a leaf to balm the wound
for a cure.
Phala Mautloa Sihlali Sekoto Baloyi*

Jean Michel
God Fried
My Creators
SUPER HEROS.

*Black South African Artists: Madi Phala; Pat Kagiso Mautloa; Durant Sihlali; Gerard Sekoto; Vincent Baloyi; Koloane.


FRAGILE
ORIGIN OF CREATION!


WARRING
COMMAND
CONTEMPLATIVE
FROM
IT
how

Nontobeko Ntombela is a South African curator based in Johannesburg.

Some of the exhibitions she has curated include Disolo, Musée National de Lubumbashi (2018), From No Fixed Place (SOLO Projects) Cape Town Art Fair (2018), Spectaculaire, Frac Des Pays La Loire, Carquefuo, France (2013-2014), The Two Talking Yonis, Constitution Hill, Kalashnikov and Room Gallery (2012), Trade Rerouted, Johannesburg Art Fair and Fringe (2012), A Fragile Archive, Johannesburg Art Gallery (2012), Made in Africa: Towards Cultural Liberation, Sandton Art Gallery (2011) among many others.

She is a member of staff at the Wits School of Arts in the Department of History of Art and Heritage.

Untranslatable Histories in Tracey Rose's *Hard Black on Cotton*

Nontobeko Ntombela

Tracey Rose, who is known for her defiance of taxonomical logic and convention, created the video piece titled *Hard Black on Cotton* (2019) for the South African Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale. In this single-channel projection, Denzel Edgar, a South African actor, plays the role of a traditional healer (or prophet), while the voice-over is done by the curator Simon Njami as the 'professor who narrates in Latin a translation of text written by the artist.'[1] The video is said to pay 'homage to Africa's past, narrated in one of the original languages of European intellectual self-identity and presumed exceptionalism.'

At the beginning of this video, the prophet (Edgar) appears standing in profile looking down at something that seems to occupy his hands. A moment later, there is a sound of a matchstick being struck. The camera moves down towards his hands to show that he has lit what looks like impepho (incense) in a small, thick, black, seemingly wooden bowl placed on the table. And, as the impepho catches alight, the prophet lifts the bowl with both hands towards his face while turning to face the camera. With immense force and sound, he blows and then inhales deeply. He does this to encourage the smoke coiling from the burning incense to thicken, while trying to extinguish the flame of this little fire, and thereafter to inhale the smoke. As he continues to blow, he lifts up his right hand, while his left hand continues to hold the bowl. With the right hand, he slowly swirls the impepho smoke in the direction of his face, inhaling. He repeats this gesture a few times in-between closing and opening his eyes, murmuring, sighing, and making semi-smiley-grin-like faces as if satisfied by the effect of the smoke, or engrossed in a semi-trance-like state. Eventually his eyes become red and watery.

After a few minutes, the male narrator, voiced by Simon Njami, begins to talk in the background. Speaking in Latin, his narration is meant to form 'the broken telephonic cosmic communication with Edgar's clairaudient profiteering pseudo-prophet ...' As Njami narrates, Edgar slowly moves around the room murmuring something we can hardly hear (as if to say 'vukani bawo' – wake up father(s)), sighing loudly, inhaling and exhaling the smoke from the little bowl that he now holds just below his face, the smoke continuing to rise like a veil. He continues walking around the room. His face moves in and out the video frame. Sometimes he stops and holds a long pose in front of the camera as if in a trance or listening attentively to Njami's voice, though he '... tries unsuccessfully to understand it in Classical Latin, a disjuncture in the communication and the information meant to be shared or disseminated.' While in this position, tears fall from his face because

1 All quotes where a specific reference is not indicated are taken from the Statement of the Work supplied by Tracey Rose and her gallery Dan Gunn Gallery London, 2019.

of the smoke that is affecting his eyes. He blinks. His left eye twitches uncontrollably, while tears run intermittently down his face.

He continues to move in and out the frame, and in and out of focus. Sometimes he looks shocked, as if in disbelief of what he is hearing; sometimes disappointed and confused. At some point he tries to mimic what is said by the voice-over. All these gestures – even writing down and reading out loud what is being said by Njami – are meant to let us know that there is an exchange between the prophet and the professor, with the prophet trying very hard to listen and understand, yet failing dismally to grasp what is being said. For a while the camera focuses on Edgar's face, but eventually the camera zooms out to show the rest of the space where Edgar is standing. It is either in the front or backstage of a theatre because – we are given small clues – of a black curtain 'backdrop' with many props on the small table, on shelves, in a place that looks like a room.

A portrait

Shot in the orientation of a portrait (handheld camera turned on its side, vertically, which is unusual for video), the focus on the face signals the convention of portraiture. According to the statement for the artwork, this video work is meant to be read as a painting. It states:

> Rose is grasping the obsessive dedication which the painter has for the canvas as a route to unfurling her story through the moving image. As paint dries on a canvas it dries before one's eyes, changing colour and light. Rose's camera follows Edgar closely through his narration, filmed on a set created in Johannesburg to form a still-life painting as background to his person. The camera follows him lovingly, gazing off into the background to record various symbolic objects and strange compositions, unexpected characters and precarious spaces. Deeply saturated, beautifully coloured light and shadows will form a Caravaggian Chiaroscuro, emulating that fine line between insanity and genius.

Stressed in this description is the reference to Rose as a painter, and the video as a painting. Light, colour and objects are also described in terms highlighting its painterly qualities. The strange angle at which the video is shot follows a portrait format, and not the usual landscape angle for video. The choice of angle reinforces the artist's desire to illustrate this video as a portrait painting. In his article 'Post-Apartheid Identity in Visual Art,' Zen Marie explains that a portrait 'is a convention of picture making that has a rooted tradition. Oil painting and street photography are traditions of portraiture that have vastly different, if not conflicting histories. To have a portrait done in oil painting was historically a sign of wealth and standing. You had to have been someone, either important or rich in order to have your portrait painted.'[2] To bring this understanding back to the work of Rose, it is worth considering how she collapses the conventional portrait in her chosen medium, but does not do so in the traditional sense of photography nor of oil paintings, rather through video.

Her choice of an unconventional person (sitter) for a 'portrait', a prophet, iSangoma, shaman, rainmaker or traditional healer (sometimes inaccurately referred to as 'witchdoctor'), is curious. According to Robert Thornton, 'Sangomas are chronically outsiders of their own contexts … they are acutely aware of their difference from others. Others around them are acutely aware of the difference they perceive between them – the 'normal' or ordinary people – and the iSangoma who live among them and to whom they sometimes turn.'[3] This outsider position to which Thornton refers is a result of a long history of African traditional practices disappearing overtime, making the practice of ubungoma taboo, although some may argue that today this position has changed and is fast gaining popularity and wider acceptance. So, what does it mean for Rose to choose to do a 'portrait' of an iSangoma whose societal position today is so complex? Why is the artist drawing our attention to something beyond the accepted tradition of portraiture/the norm?

Does the statement: 'Rose seeks to tell the history of the region through the prism of her own heritage as an African woman, creating a subverting critique of Western theories around history and historiography,' allude to the artist's attempt to shed light onto the historical 'status' of a people who once held high positions as advisers to chiefs, but whose historical role is 'suppressed' today? In other words, what does this imaging of iSangoma and the drawing of attention to an exceptional group, or to a history, that is not exceptional in the same sense of the rich and wealthy that Marie describes, meant to do? What is the purpose of imaging a group that would have historically been considered high standing, but whose position today sits contentiously between rejection and special appraisal? Interestingly, here the choice of iSangoma, as an important historical link to the past, raises questions around relevance. Why is this history/person relevant? To whom is it/he important? The fact that historically iSangoma would not be imaged in the same way as other races or elite groups interestingly disrupts the value of portraiture in the traditional Western sense. As such, it is an important assertion to address 'unrecorded' African history, or rather histories that are not recorded in a particular way. This contrast is interesting from a perspective of thinking about historical silences.

Silenced pasts

In his book, *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot is concerned with principles of cultural power that work to shape and silence narratives, highlighting the politics, limitations and possibilities of how history plays out in contemporary society. Unpacking key ideas of how silences happen – in the making of sources, archives, narratives and history – Trouillot discusses how history-making can be distinguished between what happened and what is said to have happened, based on our own values. To him, these things are not separate or mutually exclusive. He argues that history is a socio-

2 Marie, 'Post-Apartheid Identity in Visual Art,' 22.

3 Thornton , 2017: 17

historical process that happens in the real world, and then it happens in our mind – what we understand to be happening.

Trouillot states:

> Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). These moments are conceptual tools, second-level abstractions of processes that feed on each other.[4]

These four key elements create a tension between things that are held together by the structures of domination and subordination. In other words, these elements are held together both by those who control the narrative and those who don't. To him, this power struggle shows inequality between those who tell the story and those who hear the story, even of themselves from second-hand sources. As a result, the meaning is always wound up with questions of inequality and how we can make sense of these silences is premised on the understanding that the position of power and powerlessness is always intertwined. The result of this is that we can never really know what happened, but rather rely on the interpreted traces of written histories that can always be critically contrasted with the ephemeral material in the archive and oral history.

Rose, in her work, plays with these ideas of manipulated histories, using irony and symbolism through the imaging of iSangoma, which becomes more than a 'native' nostalgic representation or eternalisation of a bygone history, but rather begins to question the telling of Africa's history. The tension she creates through this video demonstrates how miscommunication, misunderstanding, and the resistance of language between the professor and the prophet reflects the hierarchies of knowledge, of Africa's history, which is often told through foreign languages, to the extent that the African no longer understands or recognises this history, even a history about him/herself. It points to the impossible task for Africa to ever regain the telling of its own history, and the failure for a real exchange to happen between iSangoma/prophet and the professor, which in turn divulges the failure of history. In other words, Rose challenges the silenced past and proposes a different knowing of history, which Trouillot prompts us to consider. As the author of this story, Rose uses her privilege as an artist to creatively hint at the obscureness of the past. This is further illustrated in the artwork's statement:

> Edgar … does not quite have the calling: he wants it, he could have had it, but the knowledge has been lost somehow. He tries and fails to call upon a past before distorted, doctored historical propaganda. His character attempts, through an alchemy of words, objects and symbols, to reactivate a truthful historical past referencing Mansa Musa, a great African icon of the past whose presence, if called up now, would bring forth a great recollection of the lost past of Africa's greatness: An Illusion or a Myth worth calling upon.

Incomprehensibility, untranslatability, and accentedness

This failure to recall history can be understood in light of what Carli Coetzee in her book *Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid* has described as 'incomprehensibility', 'untranslatability', and 'accentedeness.' For Coetzee history must be told from different positions to avoid reproducing inequalities of a history that is only told from the victors' position. She argues that such multiple forms of retelling history propose an accentedness that is not about the way we speak with an 'accent', but rather accents that speak to the multiple forms/positions that history can be told from, even if these accounts are conflicting. To her, given that South Africa is largely a monolingual country, it is therefore important to avoid the translation of these histories only from one language to another – meaning other languages are always being translated into English. As such she promotes the notion of 'incomprehensibility', and 'untranslatability' and 'cultural untransferables', arguing that sometimes it is important to leave certain things untranslated because some stories are embedded in the culture of the language, that is cultural codes and references that are sometimes not interpretable and it being important to leave those nuances untampered with. This relates to how languages grow and develop, in accent, geography and history, often resulting in differing uses and meanings of common words. This is an important link to Rose's work when thinking about what is happening between the professor and the prophet, and the perpetual miscommunication they seem to be wrapped in.

Coetzee insists that history could be told from a place of misunderstanding. She asserts: 'My argument seeks out moments where non-understanding and misunderstanding are presented as the very aim of the text …'[5] In other words, it is not about the story being misunderstood, but rather the story is about pointing out the misunderstanding, which in turn begins to pinpoint issues of privilege, and of who benefits from understanding. This offers a useful paradigm from which to think about a telling and knowing about history that does not always mean it must end in total understanding and agreement; that a story told from multiple angles is still a story that can be linked to a common history, further complicating the idea of privilege and inequalities. This insistence is evidenced in Rose's film, where the Latin narrative pre-empts the failure of the prophet to understand. Over and over, we are shown how this story is unreachable, frustrating and downright pointless for the prophet, and in the end, he gives up, and decides instead to indulge in something totally outside of what this professor (voice-over) is trying to say. In the end, we are shown that this story is about failure, history's failure.

Coetzee's literary reading of 'incomprehensibility,' 'untranslatability,' and 'accentedness' can be said to also relate to this artwork, in the sense that what is being looked at could invoke multiple

4 Trouillot, 2015: 26.

5 Coetzee, 2013: 21.

readings, some that may be accessible to some and inaccessible to others, depending on who is looking and their proximity to the subject matter at hand. In other words, leaving certain things untranslated unburdens art and allows for productive (mis)representation.

Another important paradigm in Coetzee's book is her interest in upsetting the idea of who tells history, calling for a dismantling of the position of the teller (addresser) as the teacher, and the listener (the addressed) as the student, because this reinforces the power structures or hierarchies of teacher and learner. For Coetzee these positions are interchangeable, in order to nuance accentedness. In the case of the professor and prophet, it seems likely that the teacher is the professor who reads out something the prophet needs to understand. The professor's reading is passive: he is not interested in what the prophet says back. The conversation is thus one-sided: the dominant story being told by the professor, with the prophet unable to say anything back. While this narrative might suggest that this renders the prophet inferior and without agency, the fact that the prophet engages on his own terms in his own space, and in the condition that he sets out (hence the fact that he begins by lighting incense), allows him the freedom both to select what he engages with and to come in and out of the story. He is not in the confines of the space defined by the professor, nor under his control. And as demonstrated in the end, he leaves to do something else. He leaves because he realises the futility of the exercise.

Autobiography

> Through the form and narrative of her video works, Rose is taking a critical distance, becoming the portrait maker, pursuing an active, subjective stance and removing herself as the object from the canvas. This work is an investment in a different human body from her own, within the framework of a video, which is a series of entirely aesthetic decisions. In this work, Rose's bodily agency will be realized through her holding of the camera, her hand directing the dance of the building of the layers of imagery; a long, slow, passionate tribute to a man and a people and peoples.

Rose's work has most commonly been read through the prism of autobiography – autobiography from a feminist perspective – because of the continued use of her body as the centrepiece. Often responding to the history of the Western gaze – disrupting it through the use of her own body – the fact that she chooses to not use her body here is interesting. Suddenly the work moves beyond autobiography in the obvious sense, though it remains within its framework, given the fact that the work is directed by her, and is also essentially her story.

What happens when the work is not about Rose's body? I am tempted not to analyse this strategy from an overtly feminist perspective, as so much of her work has often been read through this lens. Here I want to consider Njabulo Ndebele's 'tactical absence.' In *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Ndebele proposes a shift from 'protest literature', a defining genre of writing of the apartheid era. He proposes 'post-protest literature,' which would enable writers to move away from focusing on oppression and shift towards exploration – what he later describes as writing about the future.

Congruent to this concept of post-protest literature is the approach called 'tactical absence', which is premised on the understanding that whilst the writer acknowledges oppression happening around him, he/she will use this experience to imagine a different future. As a strategy 'tactical absence' can be a way for a writer to speak from within an institutional framework while simultaneously positioning their work outside of that framework. He argues:

> This attitude can only work, though, if the writer genuinely believes in the oppressed in that first instance, as the makers of the future … it is now the oppressed confidently introducing the new definitions of the future to which the oppressor will have of necessity to respond.[6]

Ndebele's concept of tactical absence is useful in relation to Rose's replacement of her body with that of Edgar. I consider this replacement less of 'a comment on the masculine usurpation of spiritual work and practices on the continent, which hints at the exclusion of women for profit and gain,' as declared in the statement, but rather as a possible extension of Rose's body. In most of her work Rose acts out different characters. Meaning it would have been possible to act out a character of a male umNgoma. And yet she chose not to. My reading of this is that there is a desire to represent as closely as possible the authentic body of a man – a 'passionate tribute to a man'. Yet it is also very possible to still see the artist in this body of a man whose movement is orchestrated by Rose herself. The fact that she is not in front of the camera brings us to the question of the 'exclusion of women'. To me, such a strategy accurately points to tactical absence. It illuminates the possibility to imagine a different critique of history in Rose's work without always relying on her body, given that as a woman, her body gets absorbed quickly into gender discourses and loses the focus of the central narrative. That being said, it is also impossible to read the work of Rose outside of her positionality of being a Black woman telling this story; however, as a tactical absence, this body is not the first thing you see, thereby keeping the narrative focused on the male-genderedness of history. Such use of tactical absence makes possible a rewriting of history and reflects the conflicting history far more effectively. The agency to use male 'bodies' also reveals Rose's power to command a particular authority over them.

6 Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 70.

Conclusion

If Susan Sontag's proposition to look beyond interpretation is anything to go by, then contemplating 'incomprehensibility,' 'untranslatability,' and 'accentedness' allows us to read this work in multiple ways. Sontag argues against the need to rush towards fixed readings of work, instead she recommends that we 'recover our senses' in order to 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more.'[7] She argues that 'Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work that is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.'[8] Although Sontag speaks of photographic work, my engagement with Rose's work is based on the sense I got from the work, which may be different to how someone else sees the work. Sontag compels us to read art not as reality but rather as a provocation (a thing standing in) of realities of the world, that may very well evoke a reality to those viewing it. The layeredness of Rose's work – through the use of irony and iconography – offers the possibilities to read many things, whilst refusing to be fixed into a single reading.

7 Sontag, 1964:10

8 Ibid.

References

Coetzee, Carli. *Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013.

Marie, Zen. 'Post-Apartheid Identity in Visual Art.' *Jagged: JAG education booklet*. Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2011.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. London: Picador, 1964.

Thornton, Robert. *Healing the Exposed Being: A South African Ngoma Tradition*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017.

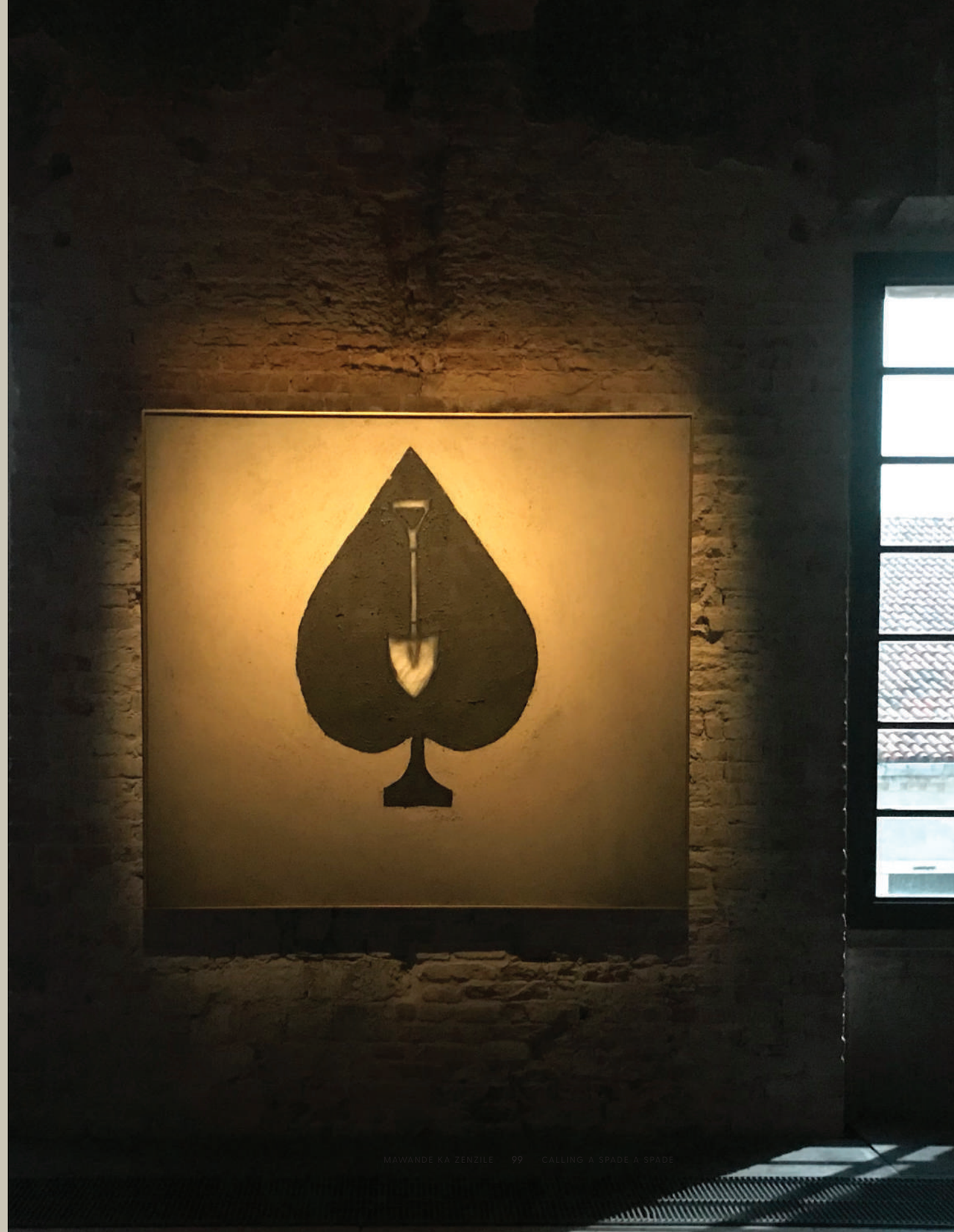
Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2015.

Artwork Statement found on the exhibition website:
https://www.thestrongerwebecome.co.za/downloads

Mawande Ka Zenzile
In my life time, I have seen the Twin Towers fall, the lynching of Saddam Hussein, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, and the execution of Muammar Gaddafi. These terrible events were globally broadcast. The so-called 911 terrorist attacks were the beginning of a radical paradigm shift, after which we witnessed the rise and fall of nations, new forms of invasions, cultural subversion, new geopolitics, an advancement in military and other technologies, new forms of commerce, colonialisms and universalisms. I have seen the wars that destroyed Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and other Arab nations, leading to displacement and migration from war ridden countries into Europe and North America.

Radical legislative shifts in international laws, policies and securities can also be counted as a direct result of 9/11. Nations and their governments, in turn, increased surveillance and this gave rise to a new generation of whistle-blowers, hackers, cyberworld-attackers and social media activists. All this has affected the way we see the world. We are drowning in information or misinformation in the information-era. New world orders have emerged; old politics, ideological paradigms, religious fanaticism and spiritualism have been reinvented. I dedicate my artwork to denouncing and debunking hegemonic ideologies, and explore how these global events contribute to a jaundiced view of the world.

Ka Zenzile gained a BA Fine Art from Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, in 2014, where he has recently completed his MA Fine Art. He won the Tollman Award for Visual Art in 2014 and the Michaelis Prize in 2013. Solo exhibitions have included *Autobiography of Mawande Ka Zenzile: lingcuka ezombethe iimfele zeegusha* at VANSA, Cape Town (2011); *Crawling Nation* at the AVA Gallery (2009); as well as five solo exhibitions at Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg (2013-18). Group exhibitions include *Tell Freedom*, *15 South African Artists* at Kunsthal KAdE, Amsterdam (2018) *Looking After Freedom* at Michaelis Galleries (2017); *I Love You Sugar Kane* (2016) and *Material Matters: New Art from Africa* (2015) at the Institute of Contemporary Art Indian Ocean, Port Louis, Mauritius; *Between the Lines* at the Michaelis Galleries (2013); *Umahluko* at Lookout Hill (as part of Cape 09) *and X Marks the Spot* at the AVA (2008). In 2014 he completed a residency at Nafasi Art Space, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; he was awarded a residency in Norway in 2008 as part of the *Abazobi* project, organised by the Arkivet Foundation and the Robben Island Museum. Ka Zenzile has been a regular participant in academic conferences including *Between the Lines*, Michaelis School of Fine Art and Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig (2013) to name a few. Many of these projects have been accompanied by his performances.

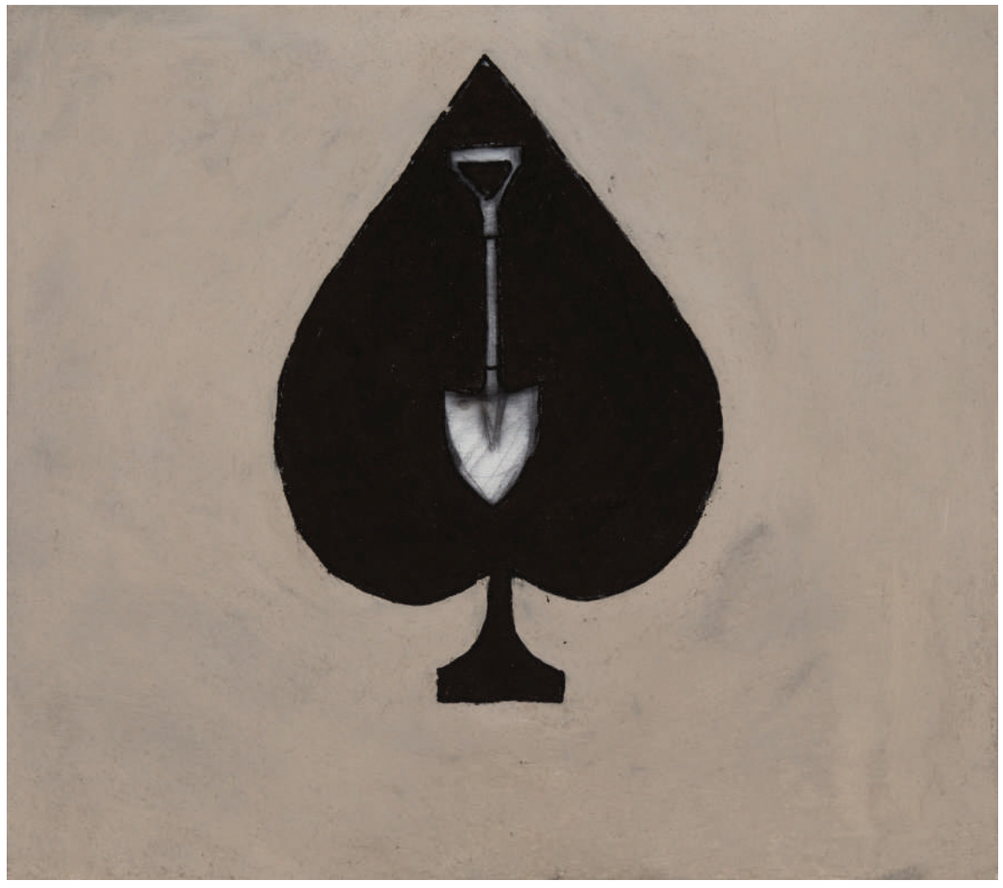


DINEO SESHEE BOPAPE

TRACEY ROSE

When I look at you my spirit leave
my body.

Calling a spade, a spade, 2016
cow dung and oil on canvas
154 x 172.5 cm



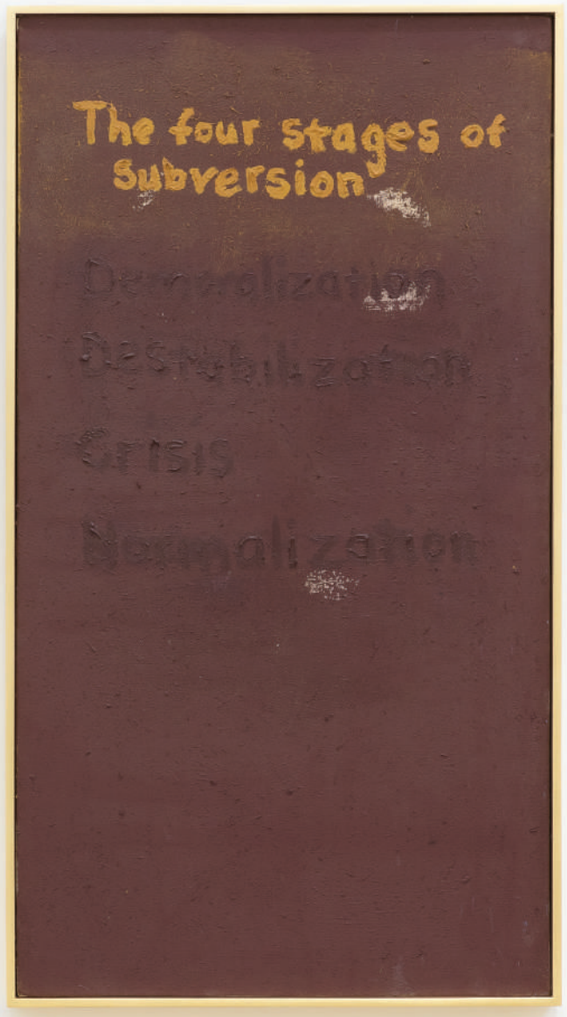
Ubuz'ibasi ibhaliwe, 2019
cow dung, gesso and oil on canvas
203 x 102 cm (each)


Come inside and remember to leave your shoes and your mind outside

When You Look At Me My Spirit Leave My Body, 2019
cow dung, gesso and oil on canvas
202.6 x 102.5 cm

Leave your mind outside, 2018
cow dung, gesso and oil on canvas
162 x 202 cm


Come inside and remember to leave your shoes and your mind outside



Behaviorism 101, 2018
cow dung, gesso and oil on canvas
90.5 x 49 cm

Same Mdluli is the Standard Bank Gallery Manager and chief curator. She is a Botswana-born, South African-based artist, curator, arts administrator and writer. She holds a PhD in Art History; an MA in Arts and Culture Management from the University of the Witwatersrand and a B-Tech in Fine Arts from the University of Johannesburg. She has worked as an administrator at Goodman Gallery. In 2012 she was a recipient of the Mentorship Award from the South African Arts Writers & Critics Association. In 2012 and 2013 she was selected as a Junior Research Scholar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles and as a participant at the Diversitas Summer School in Oldenburg, Germany. She was invited as guest researcher at the Institut National d'histoire de l'art (INHA) in Paris for the 'Culture Profession' programme. In 2015 she was selected as one of the Mail and Guardian's top 200 young influential people and sits as an advisory panel member for the National Arts Council.

A case of an Art Language through the work of South African artist Mawande ka Zenzile

Same Mdluli

In this paper I discuss the work of South African artist Mawande ka Zenzile, who uses a visual language of resistance against what he sees as entrenched ideas of 'truth'. His visual language offers several approaches to posing intricate and intimate questions about knowledge and knowledge production in the South African visual arts landscape.

I begin with a visual analysis of Ka Zenzile's work, as it provides a working methodology for grappling with the discrepancies that the work seeks to challenge – discrepancies particular to pedagogies, hegemonies and epistemologies of art. For this analysis, I refer to two African scholars whom I believe best articulate these challenges. The first is David Koloane, who views art criticism and Black identity in South Africa as part of the 'art discourse that is and has always been the prerogative of the privileged white community whose education system has been designed according to western standards'.[1] Koloane's contention is primarily drawn from his assertion that 'artistic discourse on the whole is based on abstract thought process rather than visual symbols'.[2] The second scholar is Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo, whose notion of 'decolonising the mind' is articulated through what he refers to as 'the language of African literature'.[3] In both instances I discuss a selection of Ka Zenzile's painterly works and installations, which deal with similar issues or concerns. I use these two perspectives to locate Ka Zenzile's oeuvre within a larger framework of a visual art language that draws from different sources to formulate one that refers to art as a spiritual practice.

In *Art Criticism for Whom?* Koloane presents two main ideas to consider when discussing and writing about art in South Africa. The first relates to the effects of the apartheid state in so far as it denied black people the basic right of choosing the type of education they preferred.[4] Koloane's views are informed by his experience of being subjected to a system where the government not only enforced a substandard education for black people but also made this part of a concerted effort to turn black people into cheap labour to serve the white minority.

Education was not just used as a tool to control a particular group of people but was also dangerously associated with institutional indoctrination regarding what constitutes art and defines an artist. The distinction between a self-taught artist and a formally trained one is contentious in the South African and African context, given the limited opportunities black people

1 Koloane, 1998: 69.

2 Ibid, 71.

3 Wa Thiongo, 1986:4.

4 Koloane, 1998: 69

have been presented with and the level of accreditation afforded to formal education. Koloane, like many of his predecessors, such as John Koenakeefe Mohl (1988), Sydney Kumalo (1988) and Durant Sihlali (1988), has consistently upheld strong views about the methods of teaching art and as such the epistemologies of learning in art centres throughout South Africa. These matters are yet to be explored by arts scholars and researchers in the visual arts.[5] At the core of these artists' insistence was a challenge to the notion that black artists were to be taught in a 'non-invasive' manner that enabled their sense of 'African-ness' to resonate in their creative practice. This meant certain mediums, such as sculpture in the form of bronze casting, as opposed to 'wood-carving', were less encouraged as modes of expression deemed appropriate and accessible for black artists. The individual quest by these artists to articulate artistic language in their own way, despite the prescriptive modes available to them, is testament to the way many others have also grappled with the question of finding their own artistic language.

Wa Thiongo's discussion in *Decolonising the Mind* is perhaps an extension of this, as it relates to the tensions of being caught between the interstices of two cultures. In an attempt to articulate the dilemma that Ka Zenzile's art presents, I argue that part of this is embedded within the struggles of self-determination and choice of language that Wa Thiongo locates in colonialism and its formation in building European powers. He points out that not only was Africa divided according to the different languages of the European powers, but that these languages have left behind an indomitable neo-colonial condition where the former colonies now define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe.[6] Language is thus a critical component of how as Africans our understanding of the world has to a large extent been shaped by narrations of self or 'others'. This is the case not just for African artists but also for the ordinary citizen in understanding the language(s) used in their surroundings which communicate the dominant narratives determining their relationship to the state as citizens. Ka Zenzile boldly confronts colonial history, political ideologies and economic systems through the lens of language – an art language that challenges our perception about ways of seeing and looking.

In discussing the role of language in Ka Zenzile's work I am conscious of the debates and discrepancies that exist regarding language and language policies in South Africa. Language is itself layered, and when embedded into artworks it has a level of dependency on visual literacy.

Ka Zenzile's work deals with a broad spectrum of ideas related to knowledge as

5 Areas such as theatre and literature for example have developed a substantial amount of scholarly engagement with the kinds of expressive modes that emerged and informed the art 'centres' most of which were located in the townships.

6 Wa Thiongo, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 4-5.

an investigation of methods of knowing and knowledge production as a process that takes different forms depending on who is producing it. I highlight the idea of knowledge and knowledge production in his work as a means of sensitising the reader to the ways in which pedagogies become a critical component in defining an 'art language'. In the case of South African art language, I argue that this has been determined by a host of factors which, as pointed out by Koloane, Mohl and Kumalo, is less about the art itself and more about the power relations that determine the dominant narrative around what constitutes art.[7]

Art education is a critical component of visual literacy, which is in turn about developing an ability to create a visual language that not only reads images but also deciphers the meaning of visual imagery. If we apply John Berger's way of reading images, in which he encourages the viewer to see the world with a new lens, it suggests that art language is largely informed by social constructs that shape our particular understanding of the world.

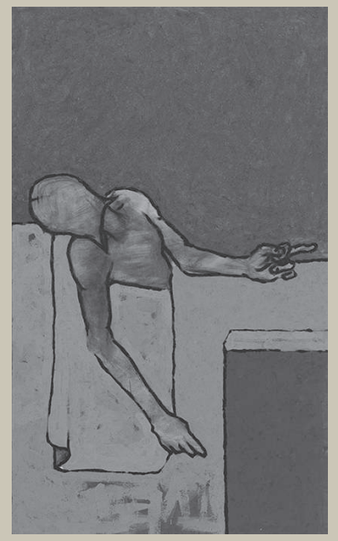
In this sense visual reading refers to the way we typically read road signs or information on a noticeboard, whereas we use a different kind of critical lens to decipher, for example, a billboard of women in sexually provocative poses. In relation to the acquisition of these kinds of perceptual distinctions, Koloane notes how 'within black communities in South Africa art education, with a few exceptions is not catered for in the educational system'.[8] He made this observation in 1998 and now, just over twenty years later, not much has changed in many schools, especially those located in the townships and on the periphery of the urban centres. The lack of infrastructure and effective policies for building good facilities such as community art centres and well-resourced libraries has deprived such spaces of any creative impulse. This has perpetuated a preconceived notion, as noted by Koloane, that 'the visual arts in the South African context are often perceived as elitist and a specialist undertaking because that are associated with power and affluence'.[9] Ka Zenzile's work becomes part of a long lineage of important black creative practice that seeks to challenge this notion of elitism and exclusivity to a selected few.

Ka Zenzile's early painting, *I demand that you assassinate me* (2015), explores his sometimes subtle preoccupation with the intersection of politics and violence, and is a reference to Jacques-Louis David's *La Mort de Marat* (1793). While the political nuances of *I demand that you assassinate me* rely on the viewer having some knowledge of art history, the painting's title reads as a political statement that alludes to the current political condition. *La Mort de Marat* is an iconic image of the French Revolution depicting

7 Mohl and Kumalo both were teachers like Koloane and challenged the kind of teaching that was being applied for black African students in learning advanced art techniques like their white counterparts.

8 Koloane, 1998: 70.

9 Ibid.



Mawande Ka Zenzile
I demand that you assassinate me, 2015
Cow dung, earth and oil on canvas
150 x 90.5 cm

Jacques-Louis David
La Mort de Marat, 1793
Oil on canvas
165 x 128 cm
Royal Museums of Fine Arts
of Belgium Collection

the murder of the French revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat. In Marat's hand as he lies dead in his bath tub is a letter that reads *Il suffit que je sois bien malheureuse pour avoir droit a votre bienveillance* ['Given that I am unhappy, I have a right to your help']. Ka Zenzile's title is thus an extension of this statement, granting the viewer permission to continue the violent act of murder. By so doing Ka Zenzile is not only positioning himself as a product of history but more importantly as a part of what art writer and critic, Themba Tsotsi, says is 'his contemporary modality'.[10] Tsotsi notes that for Ka Zenzile art 'becomes a facility to awaken consciousness of contemporary and postcolonial cultural production'.[11]

In his review Tsotsi describes Ka Zenzile's painting as having 'a corporeal appeal yet there is nothing literal about his choice of representation'.[12] This explains an enigma often ascribed to the paintings in respect of their materiality, and their relationship to the physical body.

The use of cow dung is not only a tool for challenging the conventions of traditional oil painting but an important statement which Ka Zenzile elaborates on in an interview with arts writer and critic Sean O'Toole:

> If I say art is shit I would be emulating Piero Manzoni or Chris Ofili, whose context or conceptual framework might differ to mine. My main intention with using cow dung, which is similar to the use of earth in my work, is to revive Xhosa art and traditional decorative materials, particularly in relation to myself, and to examine this aspect of the culture in contemporary ways of art production inside Africa. At the same time I use these materials to challenge ideologies and stereotypes associated with my identity, as well as representation and perceptions of African art and Africans by the west.[13]

The statement is Ka Zenzile's response to O'Toole's question about why he uses the medium of cow dung, in which O'Toole is not only questioning the technique of using cow dung 'to achieve a thick of impasto finish' but also whether Ka Zenzile's use of dung as a medium is 'just a desire to evoke texture through a use of cow shit'. Both the question and the artist's response are symptomatic of the type of criticism and categorisation applied to black (African) artists in South Africa. Taking this further, Koloane has referred to the fact that Moshekwa Langa's work is an enigma to art critics and art historians.[14] He notes that not only did Langa defy categorisation, but that the sentiment expressed towards his work is indicative of the often presumptuous, racialised and stereotypical expectations attached to black (African) artists' work. One could argue that Ka Zenzile's use of cow dung is thus not only about the desire to evoke texture, as observed by O'Toole, but also an intentional expressive language.

Like Langa, Ka Zenzile's art often uses a combination of mediums – painting, sculpture, video and installation. Themba Tsotsi describes the broad themes typical of Ka Zenzile's work – the state, morality, death, power, violence and politics – as 'concepts that operate as both a mechanism for comparing contemporary and precolonial contexts'.[15] Ka Zenzile's questioning of cultural mediums, such as literature, music and theatre, is largely rooted in his interrogation of how these mediums have served to entrench our belief in particular ideas as 'truth'. The source of much of his visual reference material is familiar imagery from the internet, art history and popular culture. He uses this material as a means to construct and/or deconstruct how images are used as a form of propaganda. By taking these images out of context Ka Zenzile not only allows the viewer to see them from a different perspective, but in re-assembling them formulates a different kind of conversation: one that Tsotsi points out 'emphasises the didactic potential of images and the power with which they can inform both the personal and collective experience'.[16]

It is unsurprising that Ka Zenzile draws from Wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind*, given how it 'alludes to the experience of relinquishing African tradition and appropriating Western traditions that informs him as an artist... .'[17] The reference

10 Tsotsi, 2018: 298.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, 298.

13 O'Toole, 'Maybe if you made this video it would be more technically resolved!'

14 Koloane, 1998: 71.

15 Tsotsi, 2018: 298.

16 Ibid.

to Wa Thiongo in Ka Zenzile's work can also be seen in his use of text as imagery. The textual paintings often seem obscure mainly because they are read out of context. However, this is also part of how Ka Zenzile draws the viewer's attention to the manner in which they are meant to process the jarring message of the text. The textual work is minimal and leaves 'empty' canvas space, which Tsotsi notes 'references the psychological implication of existential, cultural, and historic erasure'.[18] The paintings echo Wa Thiongo's literary anxieties about the dilemma of dealing with what it means to write and think from a colonial legacy of language. Wa Thiongo probes the central question of whether African literature does in fact qualify as African, given that most of what is considered as African literature is not necessarily written in the indigenous languages of Africa. Nonetheless it seems he addresses this predicament by referring to Chinua Achebe's 1964 speech entitled 'The African Writer and the English Language' in which Achebe says:

> Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.[19]

In his reference to this declaration, Wa Thiongo also points out that ten years after making the statement Achebe described the attachment of African literature to English as 'a fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'.[20] Ka Zenzile's paintings share a similarly contradictory logic in relation to art making. On his part this is perhaps a deliberate attempt to create tension, and a contradiction, in how the work is read and positioned within a broader dialogue of what constitutes art or an artistic language within a particular African context. In this sense, it (particularly the textual work) evokes Wa Thiongo's pertinent question: 'But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?'[21] While this may seem rhetorical, it points to the very nexus of the inescapable predicament within Ka Zenzile's practice; that it finds itself within a discourse it seeks to critique. Nonetheless there is a strong sense that within his artwork Ka Zenzile comes to terms with this, in much the same way that Wa Thiongo – echoing what Obi Wali articulated decades before – describes the predicament as an 'inescapable conclusion'.[22]

17 Ibid, 299.

18 Ibid, 300.

19 Achebe cited in Wa Thiongo, 1986:7.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, 26.

The other way Ka Zenzile deals with the dilemma of language is through performance, which offers a form of language that has more to do with an extension of self than a strategy. The idea of performance as extension of self is significant given that in South Africa the importance of performance art in artistic practice and scholarship has only recently been acknowledged within formal institutions such as art schools, galleries and museums.[23] It is also as significant to articulate why performance features prominently at a particular moment within South Africa's artistic landscape and how this has shaped a misplaced understanding of what performance art is and why it differs from *performing*. Performance art tends to be preoccupied with aesthetics and the visuality of creating a physical intervention and is often seen as spectacle, whereas *performing through art* is a process-lead articulation of self that is integrally linked to spirituality, meditation and self-reflection. While some performances may be spontaneous and guided by a sense of performativity, there is also an element of authenticating oneself in the act of performing, which Ka Zenzile alludes to in relation to performing as part of his artistic practice. It also comes from what appears to be a deliberate attempt to tie this act performativity to ritual and ceremony rather than spectacle and event.

In *Rope trick* (2015), an installation, consisting of bound sticks, that appears to be crawling up the gallery wall, there is a sense that the artist is not only formulating a linguistic signature informed by place and space but that the installation becomes an embodiment of his inscription into the space at both a physical and philosophical level. The images come across as a remnant: a reminder or remainder of something that once was or once occurred. The nonsensical appearance of the pile of wood, discreetly tucked away against the corner of the wall, is in a way a metaphor for what Wa Thiongo sees as the depth of the distortion that has been wrought: '[T]he very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities.'[24]

22 Wa Thiongo was here referring to Obi Wali's argument that 'African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism'. He explains how African literature as we think of it can be referred to as Afro-European literature, which he says can be defined as literature written by Africans in European languages in the era of imperialism (1986: 27)

23 Artists such as Samson Mudzunga, Steven Cohen, Tracey Rose, Berni Searle and Moshekwa Langa have been working with performance as part of their practice, along with other modes of artistic expression and exploration, as a process that expresses an extension of self.

Mawande Ka Zenzile
Rope trick, 2015
installation view
[part of the STATECRAFT exhibition held 16 April – 30 May 2015
Cape Town, Stevenson Gallery]

Nicholas Hlobo
Umthubi, 2006
exotic and indigenous wood, steel, wire,
ribbon, rubber inner tube
200 x 400 x 730cm (variable)

Rope Trick (2015) is also reminiscent of Nicholas Hlobo's *Umthubi* (2006), which explores Xhosa traditions or African traditions, and gender issues, with an emphasis on masculinity and rituals. Both artists have works that use an artistic language that mediates between a spiritual consciousness and the modernist practice of challenging conventional practices of display and what constitutes contemporary African art from a Euro-centric perceptive.

In *The Identity Question* Koloane aptly points out: 'it is evident that there is no common denominator as to what really constitutes an "authentic" African expression'.[25] Koloane was in this instance not only writing during an era imbued with the sentiment of the dawn of democracy but also at a watershed moment where black (so-called rural) artists were appearing in the mainstream art market. Notably, he distinguishes between 'the romantic notion which combined traces of the old and the new' and 'being untutored in the Western mould'.[26] The latter he suggests is formulated through the 'other-ing' of black African artistic expressions, which, he adds, was also influenced by the manner in which certain artworks by black artists were written about. Koloane further notes how, as a result, 'a parallel can be drawn between the somewhat hollow ring round the legitimation of the bantustan policy and the false echo of an "African" mythology of "ethnic" expression conjured by the local art fundi'.[27] It is a blanket statement that seeks to frame a larger concern that Koloane denotes as follows:

> It is only Black artists, who constitute the indigenous population, who are insistently reminded at every possible occasion about their own identity, and how they should be conscious of it, by the specialists who are descendants of settlers. One is reminded here of Chinua Achebe's comment about the stranger who sheds more tears than the bereaved.[28]

Ka Zenzile's art is recuperative in how it evokes Wa Thiongo's notion of pursuing 'a quest for relevance', which Wa Thiongo looks at 'in as far as it relates, to not just the writing of literature, but to the teaching of that literature in schools and universities and to the critical approaches'.[29] The same can be argued in relation to the teaching of visual literacy and language within the institutional frameworks of South Africa. This, as articulated by Ka Zenzile in his layered practice, has to take place through a process of reclaiming a sense of identity through employing language, in particular artistic language, to formulate this identity. Identity politics are not new to South African artistic expression, with the period following democracy standing as a clear marker of how many creative spaces (both tangible and metaphorical) finally experienced a sense of liberation. However, this liberation also came with a set of prescribed rules on what constitutes artistic expression and most importantly what purpose it is meant to serve. The displaced and fragmented narrative of artistic expression in South Africa is indicative of a condition that Ka Zenzile's work draws attention to, in that it not only renders the art object itself as obsolete – artistic expression for Ka Zenzile also means a lot while at the same time it means nothing.

Ka Zenzile's work is therefore not necessarily about 'visual art' per se, but rather the language of art, where visual references and artistic language are placed within a particular context. This context, he seems to suggest, is stuck somewhere between challenging pedagogies and epistemologies and using the very same methodologies to subvert a way of seeing and thinking. As noted by Wa Thiongo, 'how we see a thing – even with our eyes – is very much dependent on where we stand in relationship to it'.[30] Ka Zenzile's oeuvre thus becomes visual anecdotes that draw attention to how he is not only working with aesthetics, which he poignantly points out are part of how he grew up in formulating his own genealogy, background and memory. Ka Zenzile is not only creating an identity for himself through an artistic expression that points to how one views oneself in one's environment, and also, much as wa Thiongo describes it, to a way of questioning one's perspective. His practice thus becomes an artistic language that not only roots itself in creating what Wa Thiongo

24 Wa Thiongo, 1986:28.

25 Koloane, 1993: 99.

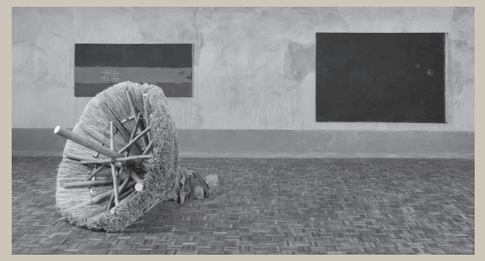
26 Ibid, 100.

27 Ibid, 102.

28 Ibid.

29 Wa Thiongo, 1986: 87.

30 Ibid, 88.



Mawande Ka Zenzile
Uhambo luyazilawula , 2018
installation view
[part of the Uhambo Luyazilawula, 12 May – 29 June 2018, Johannesburg, Stevenson Gallery]

Mawande Ka Zenzile
Leave your mind outside, 2018
Cow dung, gesso and oil on canvas
[part of the Uhambo Luyazilawula, 12 May – 29 June 2018, Johannesburg, Stevenson Gallery]

Mawande ka Zenzile
Anglophone/Francophone, 2015
two channel video installation
2:00; 2:15

describes as 'the quest for relevance', but also intuitively draws from imagery that is itself relevant in the public domain. Relevance is an important currency in the linking of visual art to how socio-political conditions govern perspectives and how these perspectives are often at variance with one's sense of selfhood. Wa Thiongo notes that 'certainly the quest for relevance and for a correct perspective can only be understood and be meaningfully resolved within the context of the general struggle against imperialism', which he further points out is not always easy to see in literature.[31] What Wa Thiongo seems to be highlighting is a consciousness around pedagogies, those that determine the way in which we access the world and understand our place in it.

A way of seeing is even harder to see or suggest in terms of visual art, and especially within a gallery or museum space where art and viewing art is often presented through a Euro-centric lens. Ka Zenzile is certainly aware of the tension between his self-articulation and assertion and his deep awareness of how the self is pronounced through a relationship to the institutional structures that govern citizenship and nationhood in present society. As noted by Nkule Mabaso 'to understand the psychological motivation of this present society one must unpack, as ka Zenzile does, the historical legacy that the current democratic politic denies, hides, and at will, forcefully represses'.[32] While his work

31 Ibid.

may be read as confrontational, this is to be understood as intentional and deliberate precisely because it 'draws from poignant historical and contemporary political moments occurring in world history'.[33] The process of engaging with his work is therefore not determined by its placement within a particular space, that is a gallery, but rather by the work's bold relationship to its context. Mabaso further explains how 'by sweeping across history ka Zenzile tries to use his materials not just to define himself, but to challenge ideologies, stereotypes associated with being black by appealing to the viewer's imagination and experience of the social'.[34]

Ka Zenzile, like many other young artists living and working in an era where political ideology is not only competing with the affluence and influence of popular culture, is in a process of articulating a particular voice of relevance that forms part of a lineage of artists that have carved out an artistic language uniquely informed by a sense of conscious selfhood.

32 Mabaso, 2015.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

References

Koloane, David. 'The Identity Question: Focus on Black South African Expression,' *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, vol 23 (1993): 99 – 102.

Koloane, David. 'Art Criticism for whom?' In Deepwell, K. *Art Criticism and Africa*, Saffron Books: London, 1998.

Mabaso, Nkule. 'The Art of the Possible: Mawande ka Zenzile,' *Artthrob* . Available Online: https://artthrob.co.za/2015/05/16/the-art-of-the-possible/ [Accessed 31 March 2019]. 2015.

Tsotsi, Themba. 'Archetypocalypse,' *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 42 – 43 (2018): 298 -300.

O'Toole, Sean. 'Maybe if you made this video it would be more technically resolved!', *Artthrob: Contemporary Art in South Africa*, published 5/2/2014, Available Online: https://stevenson.info/sites/default/files/2013_sean_o%27toole_artthrob_2013.pdf, [Assessed 1 April 2019], 2013.

Wa Thiongo, Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann: Portsmouth. 1986.

Aïcha Diallo is a cultural producer, educationist, researcher, editor and writer. Diallo is co-Program Director of the master class program KontextSchule (Context School) at the Institute for Art in Context, Berlin University of the Arts. Furthermore, she is Associate Editor of the art magazine *Contemporary And (C&)* – platform for contemporary art from Africa and its Global Diaspora. She is currently a guest lecturer in the M.A. Program Practice Research in Social Work and Pedagogy at ASH Berlin. She completed her B.A. in European Studies at Queen Mary University of London and her M.A. in Intercultural Education at Freie Universität, Berlin. She has worked for the pan-African cultural platform Chimurenga in Cape Town, the exhibition project prêt-à-partager with ifa (German Institute for International Cultural Relations) and was Guest Contributing Editor of Aperture magazine #227 - *Platform Africa*, New York.

aichadiallo.com

Organic Loops

Aïcha Diallo

In physics, resilience is the ability of an elastic material to absorb energy and release that energy as it springs back to its original shape. Drawing a parallel with human behaviour, resilience refers to a person's ability to bounce back from a major, debilitating setback. Resilience represents a complex web of aspects and mechanisms to recover from or adjust to traumatic experiences on an individual level or a collective basis. Looking further, while resilience is the ability to absorb impact sufficiently to allow a person to bounce back, it is also the ability to *oppose* impact. Not only are the two interdependent, but also they operate on a continuum.

An explosive reaction. Débris. Elastic. A mantle of dust. Jumping, keeping up, standing up.

Multimedia artist Abdessamad El Montassir describes his project *Résistance Naturelle* (French for 'organic resistance') by referring to the Arabic term (Muqawama tabieia) which has the dual meaning of *natural resource* and *organic resistance*.[1] This idiomatic term, as El Montassir explains further, considers the act of resisting to be a natural resource as well as a normal, logical response when faced with threat and adversity.

1 Interview with artist Abdessamad El Montassir during his research residency at IMéRA – Institute for Advanced Study, Aix Marseille Université, available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKIpjtp9kqk

Sequence 1

'Trauma' is of Greek origin and means injury. In medical terms, trauma implies physical damage – a physical wound that is very deep and which upsets, if not damages, wholly or partly, the bodily system. In psychological terms, trauma is an emotional wound of great dimension that cannot be integrated into the human psyche. This means that when emotional trauma occurs, a process of disintegration comes into play. In other words, within the extent of the available coping mechanism, there are no words or symbols available to absorb and oppose the impact of the traumatic experience. The emotional wound then becomes a static memory, unable to be processed. It is often a hidden one. Intangible.

No escape. Trapped in a never ending loop.

Although the notion of trauma emerged a long time ago, it is only since the public testimonies of Holocaust atrocities at the Nuremberg Trials in 1945-1946 that the idea of collective trauma has become a subject of ongoing interest. The two-year period of those trials was pivotal in drawing attention to the importance of

giving testimony and of transitional justice – and also in introducing the concept of collective trauma.[2] Despite the emergence of psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century, any theory of trauma remained in the margins until after Nuremberg.[3] Before that, the responses of patients to traumatic experiences were generally defined as a product of their fantasies.[4]

It is now better understood that trauma involves a process that finds its own mechanisms of expression. Moreover, as Bouson says, 'trauma can result not only from a "single assault", but also from a "constellation of life's experiences", a "prolonged exposure to danger", or a "continuing pattern of abuse".'[5] The environment in which any individual lives and grows has both positive and negative influences upon the self. In fact, the social context, and in a wider sense the political context, plays important role to either lessen or increase the repercussions of any traumatic experience. By identifying the links between individual and social processes, Hans Keilson argues that trauma is sequential: not only does it involve a deep emotional breach or break, but it also operates not in a vacuum, but on a continuum.[6]

Timeless. Retraumatization. Fantômes. Reenactments. Reliving of emotions, of physical sensations. Breaks, triggers. The unforeseeable.

How to think and feel trauma, resilience and resistance simultaneously?

Collective re/traumatization, resilience and resistance are responses that go hand in hand. Who has the upper hand? Often there is a chasm in between. Yet, interdependent, they re-emerge in loops. Almost feeding each other, almost symbiotic.

Sequence 2

I am watching Abdessamad El Montassir's film *Résistance Naturelle* as I have been invited to be his interpreter on the occasion of his artist talk hosted by the ifa Gallery Berlin. It is winter, and I am sitting at my desk taking notes. At some point in the process, I stop the film and rewind, and then keep rewinding the same sequence, the same scene. I am struck by this image.

In this scene, the plant *Euphorbia Echinus* appears in an infinite sea of sand. The earth is flat. They say there is a finishing line... Perhaps an end... The soil... The land...

The film shows El Montassir's interdisciplinary approach through a lens of social science, psychology, biology and neuroscience. In his research project, he aims to trace the traumatic experiences that have been lived through in the ongoing conflict in the Sahara region of south-western Morocco.

2 Roth berg, 2009.

3 Becker, 2002.

4 Becker, 2002.
5 Bouson, 2000: 3.

6 In Becker, *Migration, Flucht und Trauma: Der Trauma-Diskurs und seine politischen und gesellschaftlichen Bedeutungen.*

He depicts the responses to the conflict and the mechanisms that people have adopted in their attempts to cope with the trauma – expressed by amnesia, shame and guilt.

The film translates the visceral transmissions between two generations and two bodies, creating a story in three layers, in three temporalities. To define one of these temporalities he uses *Euphorbia Echinus* or *daghmous* as it is known in the local languages of Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and Hasania (Arabic in Southern Morocco). Originally this plant had a different structure to the one that it has today: it consisted of leaves. However, in order to survive the external factors that threatened it, the *daghmous* developed its very own system of resistance: as of today, it is entirely covered in thorns. The *daghmous*, which is now ubiquitous in the Sahara of south-western Morocco, occupies a unique place: it epitomizes its very own continuum of trauma, resilience and resistance.

Like a weaver, Abdessamad El Montassir puts together the links that may exist between the resistance that the *daghmous* developed to survive and oppose external factors and the resilience that the Sahrawi communities have developed as part of their strategy to resist oppression and liberate themselves from their extremely violent political, social and cultural context.

'Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. At the beginning of his life man is always clotted, he is drowned in contingency. The tragedy of the man is that he was once a child.'[7]

These words of Frantz Fanon's describe quite well why the process of 'disalienation' and therefore of personal 'freedom' is a road of struggle and self-affirmation. Furthermore, this process needs to be cultivated in a garden of possibilities in which driving forces for identification, acknowledgement and reconstruction can continuously be fuelled and sustained.

How is trauma connected to the physical space around us, to the 'invisible lives', to land?[8] How can we imagine and map a world that bears witness to the sources and survivors of deep breaks and wounds and at the same time accommodates profound, transformative, lasting possibilities of healing and structural change? What do our plants of resistance look like?

7 Fanon, 1986: 180.

8 Verges, 2012.

References

Becker, David. *Migration, Flucht und Trauma. Der Trauma-Diskurs und seine politischen und gesellschaftlichen Bedeutungen*, Vortrag in Salzburg, 24 May2002.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet as it's Kept. Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: SUNY Press, 2000.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986.

Fick, Carolyn E. *The Making of Haiti – The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory – Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Vergès, Françoise. In 'Where We Meet: Cultural Translation and Art in Social Transformation', symposium, ifa, Berlin, 5-6 June 2012.

Videos:
Interview with artist Abdessamad El Montassir during his research residency at IMéRA – Institute for Advanced Study, Aix Marseille Université available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKIpjtp9kqk

El Montassir, Abdessamad: Achayef (17 min), 2018.

Acknowledgements

www. thestrongerwebecome.co.za
curators@thestrongerwebecome.co.za

Acknowledgements
The curators wish to thank
Dineo Seshee Bopape, Tracey Rose
and Mawande Ka Zenzile for taking
this journey and realizing this project
with us. Our grateful appreciation to the
contributors to this catalogue,
Gabi Ngcobo, Nontobeko Ntombela,
Same Mdluli, Portia Malatjie, and
Aicha Diallo for the words and ideas
shared in their texts.

Mawande Ka Zenzile
wishes to acknowledge:
Ndibulela ooDlomo, ooMadiba, ooSopitsho,
ooVelebembhentsele, icamagu livumile
budedile ubumnyama kwavela ukukhanya!
Thank you to the curators of the South
African Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale,
Nkule Mabaso and Dr. Nomusa Makhubu
for having the conviction to have faith in
my work, and for sharing it with the world.
I would also like to thank the South African
Department of Arts and Culture for their
support and believing in the vision of the
curators, my fellow artists works and my
works. I am honoured to be part of their
team to go and represent South Africa in
Venice Italy. I am deeply thankful to my
family, my wife especially, for allowing me
to take action when the urge to play and
make art arrives. I would also like to thank
God, my goat for being part of the family.

I would also like to thank my gallery
Stevenson Gallery for the support. I am
honoured to be part of their establishment.
I am most thankful to my gallerist
Michael Steveson, Nkule Mabaso,
Mamu Tofu (OoDlaminikazi,
ooZizi, ooJama kaSjadu, my spiritual
mentor), Sinazo Chiya, Mayibuye Ntsatha
aka Dj Mighty, Zakara Raitt, Zona Magadla,
Shona Alexander, Sophie Perryer,
Kabelo Malatsie, Andrew da Conceicao,
Joost Bosland, David Brodie,
Federica Angelucci, Sue Devine,
Liesl Hartman, Colin Steven,
Jane Alexander, Sabata, Sesiu,
Zwelakhe Khuse, Nolvuyo Mjoli,
Peter E Clarke (rest in peace to his soul),
Sarah Grace Potter, Larissa Johnson,
Thesis ZA (Ayanda Charlie and Ondela
Simakuhle) and everybody I forgot to
include. Bangaqumbi baqalekise. Camagu!

Tracey Rose wishes to acknowledge
Denzel Edgar as The Profiteering Prophet
Simon Njami as The Prophessor
Zen Marie, Mandlakazi Zilwa & Crystal
Wilton (Fierce Not Shady Productions,
Johannesburg)
Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Paris shoot)
Adelson De Oliveira (Production Assistant)
Audrey-Desmond-Lwandle Rose and Koyo
Kouoh (Production support & all round
awesomeness)
Wits School of Arts (WSOA), Department in
Visual Arts (DIVA)
The work is courtesy of Tracey Rose and
Dan Gunn, London.

Dineo Seshee Bopape wishes to
acknowledge

acknowledgement 1
ba ba golo. le ba banyane.
ba banyane. le ba bagolo.
ditebogo.
ke leboga bohle ba ba leng (fa).
ba ke ba bonang, le lena ke sa le boneng
empa le nthekgileng.
ka seetša. ka lerato. ka mmino. ka
monyama. ka ngwedi. ka dikeledi.
in the words of C.M. “bless every face I
have ever seen…”
bohle.
bless the thorns, the cries and the crows.
malebo Mama le Papa
and all hands that have helped to make
this work. (yes you too).
le mahlo.

Acknowledgement 2
everybody,
and yes, you too

Special Thanks
Our special thanks for the all the supporting
roles large and small offered to the artists
and the curators: Lindiwe Ndebele-Koka,
Andries Oberholzer, Amogelang Maledu,
Brendan Copestake, Liesl Potgieter,
Carlos Marzia, Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose,
Mmabatho Thobejane, Bulumko Mbete,
Dan Gunn, Bettina Klein, Justin Davy,
Sinazo Chiya, Greg Ruiters,
Josue Nsabwa Kabeya, Andre Buester,
Mateo Ortigas, Claudia Ortigas

Imprint

ISBN 978-0-620-85187-9(print)

ISBN 978-0-620-85188-6(e-book)

Title
The stronger we become

Editors
Nkule Mabaso, Nomusa Makhubu

Artists
Dineo Seshee Bopape, Tracey Rose,
Mawande Ka Zenzile

Contributors
Nkule Mabaso, Nomusa Makhubu,
Gabi Ngcobo, Nontobeko Ntombela,
Same Mdluli, Portia Malatjie, Aicha Diallo

Content management assistant
Amogelang Maledu

Copy editing
Mindy Stanford

Graphic Design
Carlos Marzia Studio

Photography
Luvuyo Nyawose
Jueun Kim

This project is realized with funds from the South African Department of Arts and Culture on the occasion of the 58th International Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 11 May – 24 November 2019

Publisher
Natal Collective Pty Ltd, 35 Umdloti Ave,
Newcastle, 2940

Contact and Address
Nkule Mabaso
Director, Natal Collective Pty Ltd
nkule@nkulemabaso.com
www.nkulemabaso.com
Cell +27 (0) 76371890