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South African independent self-organised art institutions, funding models and its effect on institutional programming

Malatsie, Kabelo

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Kabelo Malatsie

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Sam Ndaba
Artists Need a Union
1983
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ARTISTS NEED A UNION

– SAM NDABA

Apartheid has reduced a black musician to a beggar whereby the road to a job is obstacled with competition among musicians. One sees at recording companies queues of men pleading to be recorded, if not, looking for a job as a studio artist. Poverty keeps musicians worried about the next meal, rent, clothes for himself and his family and money to pay off the hire purchase musical instruments. There is s e l d o m time to reflect upon the past and the future and whenever musicians meet in large numbers, it is normally at concerts or massive festivals where the mood is not conducive to any serious discussion. The talk is often about the whereabouts of the next gig, who to contact for which job, when is the SABC offering jobs for commercials, etc. There is no time to get together to discuss problems that have to be tackled by a union, let alone the problem of realising the Freedom Charter. In most cases bands split within two years of their formation. Musicians often end up frustrated and standing at factory gates for jobs. A few band 'make it'. These are those bands that master the trick of keeping the master content by churning out the 'right sound and beat'

Efforts have been made in the past to bring Black South African artists together into a united National Force but were not successful. In the late 50's and early 60's we had a cultural centre in Johannesburg, the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC), the offices of Union Artists, the only coherent body which represented artists then but which for one reason or the other died in the early 60's.

Since then nothing concrete has come up which stands for the unity of artists and articulates their aspirations, frustrations and objectives. The coloniser has taken the land, exploits our wealth and labour, calls the political tune (to some extent) but has failed to colonise our cultural heritage. Having realised that, his next move was to arrest the culture so that it advances no further and in its place popularise western (mainly American) culture among the oppressed. This has to some extent succeeded as witnessed in the entry into our society of American style clothes that went with gangsterism, popularised by Mafia, El Capon movies in the 50's and 60's. This went together with Jazz, and different periods in the US reflected themselves in South Africa in clothes, music, theatre, , etc. For four decades we have witnessed a proliferation of western cultural styles and values in all forms.

The Nationalist government through the myriad of laws has closed all avenues of free musical expression. This they have done by excluding any type of music that went against their interest of perpetuating white supremacy from the radio and now TV through the Broederbond-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Faced with this state of affairs recording companies, capitalist owned and quick-profit oriented, became willing partners in the campaign to throttle the black song. Only music that set the nation dancing and the most banal songs were recorded and popularised. Choral music that had anything but the reality of our situation was

not accepted. Simultaneously with the above-mentioned events by the end of the 50's, the boers realised the foolishness of their policy of prohibiting Africans from drinking western liquor, although there was also the frustrating question of their inability to tax illicit brews that serves as an alternative, opened the door widely to the African. This was an act which served the system in two ways:

1. The capitalist made huge profits as well as the government which gave itself the sole right of operating bars and bottle stores in townships.
2. The black masses happily drank, openly danced to the state-controlled music, went to church on Sunday and reported to the boss on Monday with a legal hangover.

STRUGGLING MAN

To drink, host and attend parties over the weekends the worker had to stay employed. To relieve himself from frustrations stemming from exploitation and the futility of the vicious circle he found himself in, the bottle and the noises from gramaphones and radios was his only solace, and finally the priest told him to pay his tithe to the church, serve his boss well and look for a better life after he dies. That was and still is the vicious circle, complete and serving to dull the consciousness of the masses regarding their surroundings, future and plight.

Let us, then, look at the position of the musicans. Throughout the past four decades, bands have sprung up and disappeared. A few made their mark on the scene and are remembered mainly through their records. The most famous of the early period were the Dark City Sisters and individuals like Lemmy "Special" Mabaso and several others. A few "flew out of the cuckoo's nest" like the Masekelas, Brands, Gwangwas, Semenyas, Mbulis, Makebas and countless others. Some like Kippie Moeketsi, Zakes Nkosi, Ben "Satch" Masinga remained behind to face a slow death in the bantustans and ghettoes of apartheid South Africa. Others emerged in the 60's and 70's while some are emerging presently. All these groups and personalities have more than once been exploited by recording companies, agents, managers, producers and promoters. The practice still continues and it is still difficult for musicians to unite.

Harari, which adopted the name after playing at Harari township during racist Smith's rule, comes from the stock of bands of the 60s which fused American soul with township beats. Most of them like the Teenage Lovers, Flaming Souls, Inne Laws, Movers, Young Ones, of the 'monkey' jive era died in the seventies with the change of American sound. Harari, formerly known as The Beaters, moved from soul to Britain-American rock (woodstock era), Afro-rock (Osibisa influence) and presently a mixture of Afro-rock and disco.

Galla, a top recording company in South Africa, went on a massive recording-publicity campaign for Harari. The band got white management and is solidly on top, resting assured of airplay, stable income... reason? They keep the nation dancing and also advertise capitalist products. When asked about the band's future, the leader of the band, Sipho Mabuse, answered that Harari's dream was a trip to the US. They did get their trip to Uncle Sam's country but the plight of their own country and people remained the same — colonised and oppressed. The only competition Harari faces is from groups that play 'crossover' like Juluka, Steve Kekane and others.

THEATRE SUPPRESSED

'Quality' theatre left our shores for Britain and USA in the early 60's (King Kong, Sponono) and the vacuum was filled by boring, drab third rate productions. The advent of the Black Consciousness Movement brought a sudden upsurge of radical theatre with students mainly taking part. One should not get the illusion that there were no obstacles in the way of this new development, harassment, detentions, censorship were rife. The demise of this era saw the advent of two-man plays popularised by Winston Ntshona and John Kani *(Sizwe Banzi is dead)*. The themes were mainly the satirical portrayal of the black reality. In a bid to counter this development the government through its administration boards demanded to see and approve scripts before they are put up in government halls in the townships which serve as the only venues for theatre, concerts, bioscopes, boxing and some entertainment activites. This is how radical theatre was pushed off the township stages after which plays like *School girl and the Taxi Driver* served as the only source of entertainment. Radical theatre found home in liberal centres in the cities like the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, Baxter and People's Space theatres in Cape Town, etc., and also at liberal universities. But here the theatre is far from the working masses, due to cost, and is patronised by white and black intellectuals and students.

More than once, newspapers have carried stories of actors taken for a ride, left stranded on tours by producers. Worse still are stories of actresses having to use their bodies to get part in plays. On the whole one gets a picture of general disorganisation, depravity, insecurity among workers connected with theatre. Phoenix Players, a centre of actors, is and has been a place of exploitation. It has been run by one Ian Benhardt, a white businessman who has made so much that he is planning to emigrate to the USA. Efforts have been made to bring actors together to form a union. Some have had a temporary success, like the South African Black Theatre Union of the Black Consciousness era before the government clampdown. On the other hand white artists are protected by the law. There are organisations like the South African Music Association Pact, etc., securing their interests.



Painters, sculptors and others are wholly dependent on the galleries which practice daylight robbery. The gallery owners pays the artist whatever fee he seems fit for the individual art item and in turn makes high profits on the sale of the items either in his gallery or in overseas exhibitions. Not united and unprotected, they get ripped-off everyday.

Nevertheless, there do exist bands that pose a threat to the system. There are also hosts of individuals and musicians who are part of this movement. In nearly every township there is a cultural group connected to a church, a youth club or autonomous. These are centres of experimentation where alternative theatre abounds, different art forms are learnt and more often than not you will be met by the sound of accoustic guitars, tamborines, congas, etc., accompanying voices singing an original song. You might find a well-equipped amateur band, a solo guitarist, a poetry group. The inclination is towards Bob Marley, original catchy tunes, freedom songs, traditional songs and poetry. It is some of these groups that appear at commemoration services, celebrations and political meetings to render a song, a poem, or a drama. Also there are the other professional groups which are patronised by intellectuals, students, the white left, etc. The number of these bands is not so big but they manage to survive as professional bands by playing at small clubs, universities, colleges, liberal theatres and centres (Diakonia, Open schools). Some of these bands which emerged after 1976 are the AK-47s, Afrozania, Malopoets, Tou, Malimu, Badiri, Sakhile, Splash (a reggae group whose two musicians were recently sentenced to an effective four year term under the so-called Internal Security Act) and others. Also there is the third category which is comprised of recordable groups like Juluka, Joy, Steve Kekana and other Mbaqanga groups which have from time to time performed at concerts organised to raise funds for the cause of the oppressed.

Groups have been brought together during the Fattis and Monis and Wilson Rowntree strikes to raise funds for striking workers, and indeed it was gratifying to see these groups coming forward knowing fully well the likely reaction of the security police. Joy, the female vocal trio refused to perform for the "*boys on the border*" when asked



to do so by the notorious South African Defence Force during their tour of Namibia. Shortly thereafter the SABC stopped playing *Paradise Road* over the air and a feeble explanation was given, implying the existence of subversive undertones in the song. The song had long reached the number one spot on the ratings charts and was well within the second gold disc mark. All these groups, including those that have long been used by the recording companies need to come together into a strong anti-colonial and anti-imperialist union of South African musicians and artists.



Kippie Moeketsi.

CULTURE NEEDS UNITY

The Federal Union of Black Artists (FUBA), which was built with Angolo-American Corporation and other allied capitalist organisations' funds has always been and still is that glamorous institution that produces different calibres of artists, as a recruiting centre for the Americans and acts as a gallery for its rich patrons. Early this year FUBA hosted an exhibition of paintings of some of American and European artists at the posh home of Harry Oppenheimer's daughter, Mary, in Lower Houghton. South African artists did not take part and then the director was asked for an explanation by the press. He replied that black artists are difficult to reach (meaning that they are not at the phone, live far from towns, etc.) What a feeble excuse for class discrimination!

The Music, Drama, Art and Literature Institute (MDALI), which fancies itself as the messiah of South African cultural workers has so far managed to antagonise a lot of artists with its race exclusiveness and philosophy of narrow black consciousness. Of the two organisations, MDALI is the oldest, coming from the early black consciousness days and could easily have gained respectability and support from the community at large and membership from the artists in particular. But MDALI, like an old spider, sits in its web in the dark corner refusing to move out into the light. The organisation is led by Vusi Nkumane, as its chairman, a former PAC Robben Island prisoner and Zakes Mofokeng as general-secretary.

Progressive cultural groups like Mpumalanga Arts in Pietermaritzburg are found in various parts of our country. Yet, the establishment of a single union of artists, uniting all the artists throughout the length and breadth of our country, still remains a pressing need if our artists are to offer any meaningful opposition to apartheid and imperialist exploitation.

Introduction

This book project is born out of an all-consuming idealism and naive hopefulness for formations that can exist and be sustained locally. It is a quest for models that can enable and foster artistic experimentation. Of course, this senseless idealism was doomed to fail as a Masters project. Now that I am out of time, I am realising that my project is, in fact, only starting, because I have found the language to investigate my naive idealism. The project started as a result of seeing similar types of artworks that were termed 'experimental' in high rotation at local commercial galleries and independent spaces. *The Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art institutions in Africa* (2012) book, edited by Raw Material Company founder Koyo Kouoh, was another factor in starting this project. The book includes differing perspectives on independent spaces on the continent. What jolted me was reading Director of Goethe Institut Sao Paulo, Katharina von Ruckteschell's text, which is also included in the book, where she writes that

> An essential reason for *Action Africa* was certainly the attempt to position Germany on a continent that was about to be usurped by the Chinese-Africa, a continent whose resources, which are continually being discovered anew, appear to be inexhaustible. Added to this, many countries, the political situation still required the implementation of sustainable, peace-securing measures. Culture seemed to be tried-and-tested means of achieving the goals that had been set with "soft power" (2012:96).

This text made me aware of the power dynamics that seemingly weighed heavily on the Goethe Institut; they are an external funder of the *Condition Report* symposium and publication. I had to reread the book again wondering why some of the critical curators sounded maimed, like they were treading carefully, whereas von Ruckteschell was unapologetic. Surely von Ruckeshell's text should have allowed a similar candidness from some of the curators? This book sparked my research on local independent spaces and the resulting loss of autonomy through external funders. The interest was in finding alternative funding models that were viable within the local context in order to gain some degree of autonomy that could lead to experimental practices, both on the institutional and artistic level. Herein

lies my senseless naivety. I soon found that the notion of "autonomy" was in itself utopian, especially within the South African context, because it is entangled with systemic privilege brought on by apartheid. The power dynamics favour the external funder and consequently what is visible is based on what is funded, therefore experimentation on artistic level is influenced.

Autonomy is an idea that has been employed as an anchor throughout this book. It is simply defined as self-creation, self-determination and self-authorship that is free from external influence[1]. But what does that mean in the South African art context? Which conditions need to be in place to enable autonomy? In the book, *Reproducing Autonomy,* Marina Vishmidt writes that, "Autonomy is the point at which the subject thinks herself 'complete', before she encounters objectivity and realises that she is not" (2016:44). Within the local art context, autonomy is seen through a desire to produce without external influence, but "encountering objectivity" is discovering that the conditions are not favourable to experimentation through a lack of funding, space and the realisation that gatekeeping still follows racial divides. This "encountering objectivity" leads most artists to seek commercial gallery representation in order to access resources for their practice. This has lead to commercial galleries being super villains because of their influence on artistic production, encouraging commodifiable objects, and profiting from projects that were initially supported by independent spaces. On the other hand, self-organised[2] institutions (independent spaces/ artist-run/ alternatives spaces) are also influenced by a need to access external funding through foreign missions' (Goethe Institut/ Prohelvetia/ British Council) agenda of "soft power", as confirmed by von Ruckteschell in the text already mentioned. There are other external funders, such as local government agencies and private patronage. All of these forms of funding have influence on programming, whether in a subtle or overt manner, and whether the institution exercises self-censorship through tailoring their programming to be favourable to potential funders. Chimurenga's quartely gazette The Chronic issue *The Philanthropic Complex*, published in August 2013, deals with this complicated topic of 'soft power' and its entanglements in detail. My interest, however, is not to villainise external funders, but to encourage institutional autonomy as a moment where temporary autonomy can enable experimentation on the artistic level as well on the institutional models rooted in the local context. So the experimentation is both on the institutional model as well as the artistic level.

However, when you talk about power dynamics, you quickly bump into the art world's indeterminacy – not only in practice, but in who gets exploited and when. The current contemporary art world benefits those that have already emerged, namely the older artist, the older curator, etc. without considering meritocracy. Autonomy cannot be considered without the notion of meritocracy, of which art historian Suhail Malik writes that it 'disregards the social conditions by which individuals come to be who they are, which hinder or bolster them, assuming social equality where there is none' (2012:11). In the *Common Practice* conference report (2016:6) Carla Cruz clarifies that meritocracy

> makes us believe that one's progression comes from merit alone and not through systemic biases of inclusion/exclusion, racial or sexual favouritism, privileged backgrounds or economic independence. Those who succeed will feel a sense of entitlement whilst underachievers will feel that they *obviously* have less merit – this undermines any form of solidarity.

If the industry is favourable to those who have already emerged, how do young artists emerge? Which institutions support young practitioners and mitigate meritocracy? Are these institutions autonomous? And why are artist fees not a standard, even though they are a crucial component of how young artists can continue their practice? To set the pace and take stock, this publication includes a matter of fact text written by Sam Ndaba in 1983. It is unnerving that what Ndaba laments then is still happening today. Though unions and similar organisations are heavily administrative they are nevertheless crucial in fighting for basic rights, which every industry already has. Sexism, racism and every other grossly criminal behaviour is normalised in the arts because those with power can continue their abuse without being checked, and the individual artist needs organisations that enforce some form of accountability for everyone. Hashtags are only good for naming and shaming, but they do not offer real accountability on those that abuse their power.

This book includes five interviews – with David Koloane, Ntone Edjabe, Rangoato Hlasane and Malose Malahlela, Gabi Ngcobo and Sinethemba Twalo, each of whom are founders of local institutions that have already initiated experimental institutions. An interview with Gabi Ngcobo highlights

the Center for Historical Reenactments' model, where there was a built-in exit strategy to counter the moment of institutional stagnation. This moment of stagnation is well articulated by Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) philosopher Hakim Bey in a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist (2012), where he uses Ivan Illach's paradoxical counter-productivity concept to describe that moment where an institution becomes institutionalised to a point where it is counter productive, and where it starts monopolising the industry or sector, being more concerned with its survival and less on its initial intentions. In other words, when 'the institution approaches rigidity and monopoly it begins to have the opposite effect from its original purpose, where societies founded for "freedom" become authoritarian, etc' (Bey n.d.). Keleketla! Library talks about their practice, which is rooted on local formations through their projects such as Stokvel, Skaftien and Madibuseng. David Koloane talks about historical and collective organisations that were responding to the atrocities of the apartheid system. Fela Kuti remains an inspiration for Chimurenga when Ntone Edjabe recounts how Kuti implicated the audience at *Shrine* in Lagos when Kuti was making his music. Sinethemba Twalo candidly admits that autonomy is idealistic and that everything is entangled. He says that Nothing Gets Organised is concerned with being a space that keeps shifting its goal posts and learning through practice. These institutions differ in programming and structure, but they offer a glimpse of different ways of negotiating the local context. This book is idealist in that although there are no answers with regard to attaining autonomy, it is imperative that the experimentation on an institutional level continues, because only as a collective can we be able to mitigate some of the issues brought by the socio-economic in South Africa and the continent. We need to fiercely encourage formations that work towards enabling uninhabited experimentation.

Lastly, the book includes transcripts from two round-table discussions. The first round-table was held at Keleketla! Library and it included young artists in order to introduce the notion of autonomy and the urgent need for formations such as the ones included in this book, and to talk about how these can be sustained. There are no answers to these questions, but they are questions that need to be asked over and over again until we can speak of experimentation as an accessible norm. The second round-table took place online with Khwezi Gule, Molemo Moiloa and Rangoato Hlasane as panelists, and it also speaks to the notion of institutional autonomy and its contradictions and tensions that are being negotiated.

This is the beginning of the project on chasing autonomy as a way of encouraging experimentation, especially on an institutional level where we can push how we think of artistic practice and its presentation, and what type of institutions might be initiated.

Kabelo Malatsie

Notes:

1. Autonomy should not be confused with agency. The difference between agency and autonomy is that agency entails only a capacity to act. Autonomy on the other hand is an act based on one's own fashioning without external influence.
2. The definition of the term "self-organisation" 'is borrowed from systems Theory and the natural sciences, where it describes systems whose internal organisation tends to increase in complexity without being guided by an outside source. In recent years it has been used in relation to certain kinds of social groups or networks; in this context, the term does not have a strict definition, but broadly speaking it refers to groups that are independent of institutional or corporate structures, are non-hierarchical, open, and operate participatory decision-making processes' (Superflex, 2006:5).
3. Leanne Hoogwaerts's paper, 'What role do museums and art institutions play in international relations today and specifically in the development of what Joseph Nye called "soft power"?' (2012) defined "soft power" as 'the ability to persuade rather than coerce through elements of "hard" power such as the threat of a strong military. It is made up of many different elements that, when combined efficiently, can be wielded to produce great positive effects for the governments that use them' (Hoogwaerts 2012:1).

Center for Historical Reenactments

The Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) is a collaborative platform based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Since its founding in 2010 CHR has responded to the demands of the current moment through an exploration into the historical legacies and their resonance and impact on contemporary art. By addressing current urgencies, which have grown over the debris of the issues of the past, CHR has embarked on activities (events, seminars, exhibitions, residencies, interventions, etc), engaged local (South African) and international practitioners and raised questions about the political potentials of artistic interpretations of histories.

CHR was conceptualised in April 2010 by Gabi Ngcobo and Sohrab Mohebbi after the duo co-curated a performance event titled 'Rope-a-dope: To Win a Losing War' at Cabinet space in Brooklyn, New York. cabinetmagazine.org Rope-a-dope, a fighting strategy employed by Muhammad Ali to defeat George Foreman in the infamous "Rumble in the Jungle" boxing match (Zaire, 1974), is based on the idea of enduring your adversary's repeated blows until they exhaust themselves, before you finally rise up to triumph over them. Following this historical encounter and the events surrounding it, the term and strategy have been deployed in the public sphere to reference similar strategies in politics, business negotiations, artistic strategies and personal relationships. CHR was co-founded with artist Kemang Wa Lehulere in July 2010 and launched in a project space located in the east part of Johannesburg and in November 2010, CHR launched its lengthy research project 'Xenoglossia, a research project' with artist Donna Kukama who became an active member of CHR. Its staged 'death' in December 2012 foregrounded the project's intention to not simply conclude a single phase but, rather to re-evaluate larger institutional functions and time frames that could enable a different existence.

Kabelo Malatsie: Tell me about the Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR).

Gabi Ngcobo: In both CHR and NGO [Nothing Gets Organised] there's a resistance of sorts, of being an institution, but of course we do have to define what an institution is and what do we mean by 'institution'. CHR for example was an experiment on institutionality, so the whole project can be thought of as an artwork, a pseudo institution rather than an 'actual' institution. One has to think about this in an experimental way. With CHR we activated a space from which we can pose questions. Whether there was a write up on the founding statement of CHR or not, CHR was, till the end, activated through doing something, such as an event and then observing what happens around it, and then responding to what was observed. As an example, one response was to a question in a conference where I was speaking about CHR, that caused a shift on how we think about it or how we reject certain ways of thinking about it. So, the founding statement was never binding. Particularly, as I had been part of collectives and observed different collectives that I was close to so I knew that really after two years of operations things start to go in different directions. This could be called a death. I am more interested in collectivity than in institutions because when you work together with people, you all stand on top of each other and you become more visible than if you work individually, but also, you can see further. In two years things start to change, it's almost like a relationship you know, when the honeymoon phase begins to fade, then you really have to find other ways to sustain the relationship, creative ways perhaps.

CHR was located in August House, it was great because it was available, affordable and it wasn't going to remain like that for a long time. When one enters a space like that actually creates excitement even for the property speculators who often are also the owners of the place. When we were there we developed an address; 27 End Street or August House. Our withdrawal was partly based on these observations coupled with the fact that we also didn't want to become service providers. We didn't want to have to speak a certain language of funding or audience development or sustenance - and we were always critical of the idea of audiences. If you have been to CHR at August House where we had our events or operated from, you'll remember that we've always had a statement posted on our door, the 17th point from Nastio Mosquito's manifesto "Hypocritical, ironic and do not give a fuck": it read 'Don't be cool' be relevant and if you can be relevantly cool, good for you.

Indeed, there is trendiness around audiences in Johannesburg at exhibition openings. I call it "the coolification of audiences" and it happened in Johannesburg through initiatives like Maboneng, which are fast spreading to other pockets in the city. As CHR we located one of our enquiries to the premature closing of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale the media asked "who was it for?'. This was the grounding question for us, 'who was it for?'. You can ask this question generation after generation. Post '94 this question's answer has changed and we cannot say 'white educated' because when you go to Stevenson or JAG [Johannesburg Art Gallery], you see young black cool people. Recognising each other as part of a community that consumes these things. We didn't want the kind of people who would come to consume something, without questioning it? So the staggering of events was based on a set of questions. We would then observe in order to get the next question. We also stopped this idea of being ready at 6pm, of performing to some expectation. In order to implicate people, to create a questioning audience, not this audience that always says 'yes, yes, yes'. Can we ever think of a so-called audience that says 'No, fuck, no. I don't like this, this is shit!'?

KM: Was there ever a situation where an audience member said 'No, fuck this, this is shit'?

GN: No, it's not about there should be such a situation. But things could be touched or suggested. We never had artworks but we used artworks as reference material to pose these questions. As references these art works were never about whether we liked an artist or not but about making juxtapositions that were not made before, in order to expose existing tensions that perhaps were not considered before. For example placing a reference of [Anton] Kannemeyer's artwork, who has this work with a white child saying to a black woman, his nanny 'Say! If you speak English, we must be getting near civilization! next to Ernestine White's work 'I don't speak Xhosa'. Curatorial practice for me it is not about organising works or artists but rather creating a conversation; another example is when we placed Brett Murray's 'work' in which a white man is seen praying to be able to speak Xhosa next to a poem by Nkosazana Xaba "You Said" which is about language and the refusal for white people in South Africa to learn other languages outside of European languages. Then there's a different form of organising. It is organising for a different end, that was very much

part of it. There are certain things that are changing in the landscape and the city, in our careers individually, in the space where we are at and it's time to move. It is about being able to read the signs, it's time to look at things differently, or to look the other way. Also, I've always believed that good ideas can sustain a space. We didn't want to create a situation where we go and look for funding but to create a situation where people who have access to funding, who are funders, would come to us. I think that this is healthy for people who make work that is saleable in commercial spaces as much as so-called independent spaces. We shouldn't be listening to money we should be listening to ourselves.

The problem is that commodities are created because money wants this, money dictates, but can you imagine a situation where it's the other way around, where it's the ideas that dictate. Then people and funders start to recognise that they need these ideas next to them. When this happens, invitations start to come, this is what happened with CHR. But you can also see the danger of this, where you stop being a project that asks the questions that you want to ask and you start to fit in an event that is made in Berlin. It was going to be too easy for us to continue because we would be answering invitation after invitation rather than always bringing the questions back here, and there would be an outward movement. So halting that movement also became an interesting way of working. Where even more invitations come, just because you've stopped, like 'oh my god, you've stopped.' But at the same time we had to stop stopping...

KM: So have you finished stopping?
GN: It's interesting to think of CHR as a pseudo-institution and for us the idea was that if we die it need not lead to a crisis. But of course a death of a young person, if we are speaking in human terms, is a crisis. Situating this death among other deaths, especially black deaths that were happening senselessly, especially around HIV/AIDS and how people were relating to death. Where, death became a frequent occurrence. People were being buried Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday whereas, before we used to go to funerals on Saturdays. People died so much that we didn't have a space to party therefore the After Tears party was invented and for us it was interesting that in Pretoria this party is referred to as "Wie sien ons"?

KM: What does that mean?
GN: We thought that it might come from Tswana, because when pronounced it sounds like it might be a Tswana. But it's in Afrikaans, "Wie sien ons"? meaning "Who sees us"? We took this question towards our haunting phase. This question was interesting to us as undead institution "Who sees us"? There were these invitations that we still had to honor even though we had stopped. We then had to think about how we honor the invitation from the New Museum as a dead pseudo-institution. The 'After-after Tears' project that we proposed was foregrounding this question; "Who sees us"? It's true of artists working here, they want to be seen elsewhere but how do you want to be seen? These are the questions that were being asked in the mid and late '80's by different people such as Njabulo Ndebele, Lewis Nkosi and Albie Sachs. Because then, the perversity of our birth, which is apartheid, had to be shown to the world, the question was how do we come to be seen? How do we make work that is really critical and that is not just selling the gore-fest, works that question the language that we use to speak of this perversity? If you look at catalogues of exhibitions that happened, especially in 2004, when it was the decade of democracy and the world wanted to see how South Africa was doing, a lot of artists were performing to it, for me it was really boring. CHR was also an intervention into spaces like that.

When you look at the history of CHR you can see that we are looking at the environment where we were but also responding to things like funding. We really had to stop and say 'no, thank you, we're not...' but sometimes if the invitation was interesting enough to say 'ok, this is where the haunting could be possible, we took it up such as at the 8th Berlin Biennale where we presented a project titled 'Digging Our Own Graves 101'. This was one of those interesting invitations where one could sustain the haunting period. But the haunting period had to die because you can't, it becomes strange if we haunted more than the time that we lived.

KM: You can't?
GN: It was two years of being active and two years of this haunting phase and then it was becoming too much.

KM: Can't you become an ancestor, an Idlozi of sorts?
GN: Yes, you start to face another direction. But there were things and

symbols, things that we had adopted in the city that helped us to face those other directions. They are funny, because it is not official to adopt a pink elephant that stands on top of a squatted building. Nobody cares about the corner of Nugget and Kerk streets.

Our turning away from the idea that CHR is a physical space, also came from a question posed to me at a conference. Whilst talking about CHR I showed pictures of the space and someone from the audience asked if the walls of the space were painted black because we are against the white cube?' I thought to myself, why must I come to New York from Joburg to talk about the white cube? We can talk about the white cube until we go to bed because I am familiar with the dialogue and the discourse but what if we don't talk about the white cube? And this is when we decided, that the window of the space was a more interesting space because it allows us more contact with what was happening right there. Through the window we were part of an unfolding life in the city, the pink elephant, for example became a point from which we can locate ourselves and a process of going outside. When we ended the project it was a way to go out, to go and intervene at Alf Khumalo Museum, to do the 'Na Ku Randza' project in the streets and to go and do something in Lyon and New York because it was always about coming out. The question "Who sees us"? is interesting because it intervenes in the ancestral space.

KM: Prior to starting CHR, had you been influenced by any spaces or events in Johannesburg or elsewhere within South Africa that inspired these questions?
GN: I mean the questions come because you do something. They are not predetermined, it's about staying in tune, it is about staring outside that window and looking and listening to the signs. The signs were right there and we chose them as signs and we declared them as monuments. We declared them as memory. Of course it is an important symbolism that there was an elephant and the elephant remembers and that it was always standing where Gito Baloi died and his song 'Na Ku Randza' is beautiful. If you want to go back to that sight of trauma, how do you do it? Do you do it to replicate the trauma? Some artists do take the trauma and say, 'here is the trauma'. What we were saying was here is the site where Gito Baloi died. Someone we don't know had inscribed 'Gito Baloi Na Ku Randza' which is where the title of our project came from. We reversed how we visit a sight of trauma, through love or acts of generosity. It is not about that it was successful but we permitted ourselves to be there. To see that if you give somebody a flower with an elephant standing right above in the corner and the wall painted pink, what are the symbolisms?

At NGO it's difficult and interesting, first of all we own the space, which changes the dynamics altogether. When you are on Albert Street, you can see Mai-Mai, which means Maboneng is right there. We are the only creative space on street level. There are so many things happening on that street, there's a sex industry that can get intense at times, it is an intense space. It is important that we do something and then withdraw. I can tell that this idea of gentrification is going to come up because more and more people are having studios at Nugget Square and because we attend monthly meetings of owners...

KM: Monthly?
GN: Yes, monthly meetings. A lot of people who own units there they really want the place to be like the hub which means the neighborhood will change and we'll be part of that change and we are not going into that blindly. What's interesting is that things go on, there's a kind of unspoken understanding, with the women who work in that area. They don't say, 'oh, let's go to another corner' they stand where they are and we have security which is a bit of a fuck up because the security people they know the area and they start to typecast, how do you know that one belongs or doesn't? It is a difficult place; I would not want to go in everyday. It is there to tease certain questions out, how to do things because we do not have the full answers and we are not asking for money from funders. Sometimes you can piggyback when you see an opportunity, you have to be always sharp. You know the last event, I don't know if you were there...

KM: No, I wasn't there, I went home to a funeral.
GN: It happened that I was part of a meeting with "Museum Episodes" and when it came to Johannesburg, I didn't want them to come to NGO just for a party. I wanted it to be the space where these ideas we've been talking about in Bolivia and Salvador and now in Johannesburg, can be tested and to actually provide a different model of thinking about them. So having Masello Motana's vocal museum and the CHR museum, was also suggesting that this thing is dead and things go to museums and they die...

KM: Even further ...
GN: Yes, they sit in storage but if an artist works in the street and that thing goes into a museum, it becomes a representation of that thing. The CHR museum was a different kind of telling the story in a very fragmented manner and it came to be hosted by NGO. I don't think other people saw it. To a certain level, especially for me, NGO would not have been possible without CHR. NGO is a physical building, it is real estate and we will always do things there. But we don't want to be a venue like 'hey, can we hold a concert?'. We want to be determined by things that relate to that negation or refusal or embracing something else or a space of doubt, a space of mixed feelings, a space of uncertainty, but as soon as it becomes a venue, I'm not interested.

KM: Is there a visible connection between your work within collectives or collaborative work that forms a trajectory to how you work at NGO or CHR? Is it all related?
GN: Of course it's related but I don't know how it's related and I am not going to leave my ghost behind, I have to travel with my obsessions and the things that have shaped my questions as I go along. A lot of that is from my time in Durban and Cape Town, when I was very close to the Gugulective. When I was observing and working with them. Thinking about what it means to undo certain ways of doing because most of the time we don't question. You paint it white, hang it, write a statement, invite people, and say, 'thanks for coming.' I want to know what it means for me to go to a place or for a person to come to an event in which I've been a part of staging. In my opinion, this is what decolonisation is about. Artistic spaces are models when we think about how they function but maybe Joburg cannot function like that because most of the time it's things that are easy and stupid and populist that get all the attention, Brett Murray, Dean Hutton. Every time there's a controversy it's something easy, it's a formula, how to piss off certain people and the population, you take out Zuma's penis or the symbol of it and you say 'fuck white people' even if it's not your statement, you know people go like 'eehhh,' but I go, why, why? The more complex questions don't get any attention because they unfold over a period of time and we'd have to go back to them again and again until the answer changes. Maybe until they are not necessary anymore but the question, 'who was it for?' is always going to be a relevant question. If we take mental pictures of 'who things are for', things change but what does it mean to want to force this change, to go a different direction and be about something else rather than going there to look fashionable and be seen to speak to someone and then you go home to do nothing?

KM: Ja, but ...
GN: But how do you change that condition? How do you intervene in that condition so that you know it can really speak to a wider range of people, especially the people we leave at home?

KM: Ideally, it's possible to speak to a wider range of people, but I doubt it can happen.
GN: But of course I believe that it can, because I've seen it happening.

KM: With the contemporary art language?
GN: No, of course not with that language, as soon as you start to break away from that language, as soon as you don't say art is this, and it ends here, as soon as you come out of that frame and say 'hey, but what about this?'. There's so many forms that we don't recognise because we want to recognise that form that makes that artist a successful one, a selling artist, it's that form.

It's also that measure of success, what is the measure of success? Because there are a lot of people who are successful and they can't even sleep at night, you know? I want to be able to sleep at night and I think I sleep well at night because I just extract myself from those things and I know they are there. It's important for me to teach at the university because those students need to know that there are other possible worlds. Not that, when you get your degree you will be picked up by Goodman, Stevenson, Smac or blank. There are other possibilities, you can form collectives, create a space, declare things things. There's an interesting power in that, not a negative power but more and more you can see students coming together and naming these things in order to form a particular thing on this journey. Before Rangoato, Donna and myself, got to Wits this was not happening. People would come out of art school and they would be hesitant to call themselves artists because they were not with the Stevenson and they are not with Goodman but there are other things that people can do and still be creative and especially where it sustains their thought processes and

ideas because people run out of ideas when they have to make objects that need to go somewhere...

Gabi Ngcobo is the curator of the upcoming 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. 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-organisation 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 Sao Paulo, 2016, which took place at the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and *A Labour of Love*, 2015, at Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. She has worked at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town and at the Cape Africa Platform where she co-curated the Cape07 Biennale, 2007, Cape Town, South Africa. She has been teaching at the Wits School of Arts, University of Witswatersrand since 2011. Her writings have been published in various catalogues, books, and journals.

Bag Factory Artists' Studios

The Bag Factory Artists' Studios has been a space for visual artistic creativity since its inception in 1991. The old bag manufacturing warehouse was initially converted to provide studio space to artists from the diverse communities of South Africa. The concept was to bring together artists from different racial, cultural and educational backgrounds. Over the last two decades the organisation has grown to be synonomous with inclusion and diversity. Its groundbreaking and internationally renowned visiting artists' programme as well as its numerous professional practice workshops and exhibitions have extended the scope of the organisation towards one that supports, promotes and develops the visual arts and artists in South Africa. The Bag Factory has partnered with many other organisations around the world and is a member of the international Triangle Network.

Kabelo Malatsie: Lets start with your participation at FUBA Gallery in Johannesburg, as well as movements you were involved in, such as MDALI and Medu Art Ensemble – could you talk about that time, and how artists were coming together and organising?
David Koloane: The first thing to say is that during those times, in the late 1970s and '80s, there were no facilities in the township infrastructure, particularly for the arts. So what happened was that there were artists, especially performing artists, who complained about the lack of creative spaces available in the townships, especially halls and theatres. At the first meeting where these complaints were tabled, some people suggested forming a union, but then other people argued against it. They said, how would a union help, because it would only antagonise the apartheid government? Some raised the issue of lack of institutions where young people could learn about the arts and be trained as artists. Many people agreed, pointing out that it you can't have a union without practicing or trained artists to do that union work. Also, the union would always be in confrontation with the then apartheid system.

The first meeting that dealt with these issues was held in Soweto, and later meetings were held at the Market Theatre in Newtown, Johannesburg. The Market Theatre had just opened, and there were black and white artists at those meetings. They tried to identify a space that could accommodate such a project. It was impossible at that time to get a building in the city, but fortunately the Market Theatre complex had some space. It was hard at that time because all the areas around Johannesburg were divided according to apartheid racial design – there were black areas, white areas, and grey areas. The area around Newtown up to Fordsburg was a grey area, because MuseumAfrica used to be a produce market before it moved to where it is presently. So, the whole area there was mixed racially, and people of different races lived in the area, and so it was difficult for the government to be strict with the area's racial undertones.

We couldn't buy a building in the city. You had to have a white signatory to represent you. So the building opposite the Market Theatre was, at that time, empty. It used to be a warehouse or something of the sort, and the people who were doing fundraising for the FUBA project approached the government, who then became signatories for that building, which was then in the hands of the organisation that started FUBA [Federated Union of Black Artists] in 1979. MDALI [Music Drama Arts and Literature Institute], that you mentioned, was at Dorkay house. It was primarily a music project, but then they had a few art lessons once or twice a week. It wasn't only for the visual arts, but was also for performance, theatre, music, and dance. FUBA also operated along those lines, and I was in the Fine Art department there. Funda also came after FUBA. Funda was fortunately around Baragwanath hospital, in Soweto, which was almost like a neutral area. And then there was Mofolo Art Centre, which was at the Mofolo Park in Soweto. Mofolo Art Centre was preceded by Polly Street Art Centre, which later moved near Dorkay House and became AMDA [African Musical and Dramatic Association] – a centre similar to other performance arts centres. It was also an artists organisation. But the government started moving all these projects to Soweto in order to retain the apartheid system, making Mofolo Art Centre the main centre. Music and visual art were taught at the centre, and that was where those musicians who played classical music used to play. They used to practice there, and so it became the cultural centre of Soweto and nearby townships. As far as FUBA was concerned, it was fortunate that it was in the city, and it had a mixture of both black and white tutors, and so it was a notch higher than ordinary centres where there were only black tutors. Whilst I was at FUBA, we started a project called 'Thupelo', which means 'learning by example' in Sotho, and we held annual workshops from 1985 up to 1991 because we felt that we still needed space for visual artists.

KM: So Thupelo was initiated whilst you were still at FUBA?
DK: Yes. We invited artists from different parts of the country to join, and we chose a place outside of the city where there were fewer disturbances and where we would work for two weeks. We got funding for the artists' materials, board and lodging, and also, we had guest artists who would talk to the artists while they were working. Thupelo became popular in the sense that younger artists felt it was the right kind of programme for them because they could experiment and do whatever medium of art they chose. Although we didn't have things like printmaking available at Thupelo, there were other places where you could go and do printmaking, which is easier to do because you don't need a lot of space. And so most of the artists would do linocuts. That is why lino at some stage became so popular.

And then there was a centre in Natal called Rorke's Drift, which provided board and lodging. But the capacity was limited, and they couldn't

take a lot of artists. Rorke's's Drift was funded by a Swedish mission and they were primarily known for their linocuts and printmaking techniques, although there were artists who also did sculpture and painting. I think it stopped operating in 1982. Each year they used to hold an exhibition and call different people to go and select a winner for that award. I went once or twice as part of the selection committee.

It was difficult for most black artists in this country to be admitted to universities. You had to first apply to the government before you could be admitted, and so a lot of black artists couldn't think of tertiary education. You are much more fortunate that it's easier today. Back then there was an artist, Dan Rakgoathe, who was both academically inclined and talented as an artist, and he wanted to enrol at a university, but he was refused entry and so had to go to Rorke's Drift because he was doing his tertiary level studies and he thought that Rorke's Drift would work. Fortunately, because he was a printmaker, he could produce work necessary for his degree work. And eventually he did his Masters in the United States of America after many years of trying to get there, and when he came back he became a qualified teacher. But unfortunately he had diabetes, and at that time the technology wasn't yet as advanced as it is now and he became blind. He passed away three years ago. He was one of the best printmakers.

Fort Hare was the first black institution that had a visual art component, but most of the students who went there were from the Cape area and Natal. Most of those that qualified didn't become artists; instead they became administrators, and a few became or got involved in the teaching profession. The majority just became satisfied with administration jobs, because it was difficult at the time to operate as an artist – you really had to battle a lot of challenges before you could be recognised.

Polly Street produced the first group of artists, like Ezra Khumalo, and after that, there was a younger generation of artists like Leonard Matsoso, Nathaniel Mokgosi, Cyril Khumalo. Funda also became a very important institution because a lot of the students were allowed to correspond with UNISA for their degree work, and so they studied part-time getting their degrees through UNISA.

KM: What work were you doing with Medu Art Ensemble?
DK: Medu was organised by artists like Wally Serote and Thami Myele who were in exile in Botswana. We knew them before they went into exile and so when the Cultural Resistance conference was organised in 1982, I was teaching at FUBA, and we needed a space where we could store the work that we'd collected inside the country. Medu had asked us to collect work that we would send to be shown at the National Gallery in Botswana. I was one of the organisers who collected the work to be shown in Botswana, and I also worked with Medu. There were also representatives in theatre, visual arts and dance, and we organised a conference and we went there. I escorted the work to Botswana and back. From then on Medu became very important, because that conference declared that people should work as collectives and should do away with individual egos claiming to be the only one who was an artist in an area. The most positive thing to come out of that was that artists' cooperatives were developed all over the country – on the East Rand, the West Rand – there were all kinds of collectives. The work these collectives produced also became what was known as 'resistance art'. People felt that they had to do something that was meaningful rather than decorative. So the environment slowly changed, and a lot of young artists emerged. And most of the artists that came out of there became internationally recognised.

KM: Do you remember some of those collectives and cooperatives?
DK: Yes, for instance, when we got back we started Thupelo that was for the visual arts. And then the dance groups also came together to form Dance Umbrella. In music there were lots of groups in different areas, for instance, in FUBA, most of the professional musicians used to teach there and it was near Kippies [famous jazz venue in the Market precinct], which ultimately became internationally recognised. And in Katlehong they had the Katlehong Arts Centre. Although it was funded by the then government, it produced a lot of artists because it was the only place in the East Rand offering an arts course, even though they mostly taught embroidery there. And Funda was operating at a much higher level than the other centres because they got funding to pay teachers well, and also their programmes became meaningful to the public.

KM: Who were some of the artists that you were organising with at Funda?
DK: You mean, when I was head of the department for some years, especially before we started the workshops? We used to work with artists from Funda and Mofolo Art Centre because we didn't want to be the only

people in the field. We also wanted to work with other sectors, especially those who were not in the city itself, who were operating from outside. Like Pretoria, for example, which has always been problematic in terms of its infrastructure – even now the artists are still struggling there. Of course there are some exceptions, and one or two artists from there have become successful. So the art centres played a crucial role, and they still do, even today. Although times have changed, technology has also brought about new means of expression for younger artists, like video, photography, performance, which are new developments in the field. There's no longer that traditional link that used to exist within the arts from one generation to another. The younger artists no longer feel that they have to go through that traditional mode of working with much effort and detail when there is something that they can put under a machine and get in five minutes. So it's a challenge to combine the two. Although we always try to encourage artists to start by drawing, because drawing is the basis of everything. You can use it whether you are in architecture or design; you need drawing in order to accomplish those skills.

KM: The 1970s and '80's produced a lot of collectives. I understand how their need evolved at that time, but do you think that collectives are still important today?
DK: I think it's even more important today than it was before, and it is one reason why we opened the Bag Factory Artists Studios. We felt we needed a space where artists could share and engage with their fellow artists, especially because those who come from poor families, whose parents can't afford a tertiary level education, they have to struggle to buy materials and to find a space to work. And that is why a lot of young people are discouraged by their families to do art, because you know it's a struggle. Only the few that have managed to gain success can reap the benefits. But in opening this space the Bag Factory we don't discriminate against an artist who works with new media, although we do encourage them to do traditional work as well. So when we have new artists coming in, we usually have slide presentations of their work so that we can understand what type of work they are producing and what the ideology is behind their work. In that way when we help them we know from what point we can help them, and to what point.

KM: When did the Bag Factory start operating? And who were you sharing this idea with?
DK: The Bag Factory started after I came back – I went overseas in 1983 to a workshop in New York and after that I went to study a Museum Studies course at the University of London. I had met some artists in America and, when I told them I was going to study in London, they invited me to their studios in South London. They offered me a studio and said that, 'On weekends when you are lonely, you can go into that space and make your own work'. You know I was surprised that people who I hardly knew, and who were white, could offer me such an opportunity, and I grabbed it because fortunately I was getting a monthly stipend from the university so I could buy materials. Just being there and working with those artists made me realise that we had not been doing anything in South Africa, that we had just been scratching the surface. That got me worried, and I thought how can we call ourselves artists when we don't even have a space to work in, when you have to wait for people to go to bed at home to start working or you have to go and find a space with any relative who's got a backyard back room or a garage to use. So, when I came back from being abroad we talked about the idea of space. There was a space called the Art Foundation in Saxonwold, which I forgot to mention, and which was run by a white artist Bill Ainslie who did not discriminate between white and black and who took in everybody. Most of the black artists who were doing tertiary studies would go to the Foundation to do their tutorials. Bill would teach them drawing and painting, [or guide them] wherever they had problems. We talked to Bill about the space problem and since he was working from a large area in Saxonwold that could accommodate about six yards, he gave us space and we started working there. But we had a problem with the weather, because when it rained we didn't know how to store our paintings. So we said, why don't we look around the area where the Bag Factory is, in Fordsburg because it's a grey area and we won't have racial problems there. We got help to sign the lease and that is how the Bag Factory started after we had been at FUBA since 1985. We moved into the Bag Factory in 1991.

The artists who were here were me, Pat Mautloa, Sam Nhlengethwa, and then later Helen Sebidi also joined us. Later on people like Penny Siopis came too, and Deborah Bell, and Mark Attwood who had come from America to study printmaking – Mark started printmaking from the Bag Factory and people like William Kentridge used to come and work with him.

So, while the idea of the studio took on, it still took many years to deal with a lot of suspicion between us and white artists, which is still there of course, because this is South Africa and you can't run away from that problem. We slowly developed – fortunately we were even-tempered people – and whenever there was a problem we would sit down and discuss the problem thoroughly rather than get emotional about it. That is what is keeping this place alive and the fact that we don't discriminate against artists according to colour or creed, or the type of work you do.

KM: Johannesburg is central to your work as an artist, and to the work that you've done as a teacher and a facilitator. It is also your place of birth. Can you speak about that?
DK: Yes, Johannesburg is central to my work I think because of my experiences here. My father used to be a tailor and I don't know how it happened that he could get a small shop at that time in a place that was so racially divided, but he got a little shop in the suburb of Orange Grove and I used to go there sometimes just to see where he was working. And I would see all these white kids in their nice uniforms coming from school. And then at night there were the lights. We were living in Alexandra township and there were no lights – it was called 'Dark City' because it was so dark you could hardly see your finger in front of your face. But not only that, it was rough and dangerous. There were always gang wars and chaos in the township. Although there were a lot of creative musicians that came out of Alexandra, and a lot of sporting people came out of there too, but it was this chaotic location that did not have any facilities, and musicians had to buy their own instruments through the lay-bye system. So on weekends there would be big concerts because there were so many groups of musicians, and there was soccer, and Lekganyane [Bishop of Zion Christian Church] became more popular in Alexandra than anywhere else in the city. There would be a parade of all of these church groups. There was this lively atmosphere that people had to devise as ways of improving their lives without looking for somebody else to come and do it for them. I think that's one thing I learned from being born in that area. There was a huge contrast because at that time, if you were black and found in the city after 11 pm, you would spend a night in jail, except if you were working as a chef or maybe had to knock off late from work, but then you needed to have a letter to show to the police. So those are the things that made me realise that after 11 pm the city only belonged to white people. You'd only see white people in the restaurants and black people who were there were either security guards or chefs. You would not even see nurses in town. And so these restrictions, I think, made people of that era have this idea of town being special: you'd have to be washed and well-dressed – you couldn't go to town dirty and unkempt … What will white people say?!

KM: My grandmother still thinks like that.
DK: You know you grow up with the habit that when you go to town you wash and you make sure that you are clean. It's still in me up to today. It's become part of me. It's all those things that I am trying to unravel in my work. We once went as a school group to a little township called George Goch because there were a lot of mines in the west of Johannesburg. There were a lot of educated people who were administrators and nurses working in the mines and they built special houses for them with everything – electricity, all the necessities of modern living – you'd just switch on a kettle, switch on a light – you didn't have to go and fetch wood.

When we went to perform there – our schoolteacher had made arrangements for us to do gymnastics –there was a function in this school in George Goch and we went there in the evening. And because we came from that dark place, we couldn't believe that there were black people who had electricity in their homes. It was like a marvel and we said, how lucky are these people! So that memory still sticks with me. You know that at that time we never dreamt that any black person could switch on a light like white people, because the only way we got to know the suburbs was if you had a relative who was a servant and was staying there. She would be given one room and when you came to visit you would stay in that room. You were not allowed to run around. You mustn't make a noise for white people; you must behave yourself in that room. And so all those contrasts I am still trying to work out in my work.

KM: I'm interested in the idea of a grey area, conceptually – not only racially, but as space where people can meet and discuss and share what little or however much they have. I guess it speaks to your landscapes of Johannesburg …
DK: Yes, because in most of my artworks there are always groups of people doing all kinds of things. The concept of commuting, for example,

has become so much a part of our lives that you don't even think twice. If there's a family event in Pretoria or Hammanskraal, you just have to get there by hook or by crook. So, it's that collective that makes life bearable to the masses of people; that collective experience gives people different energies – whether in culture or crime – there are different energies that come out of that. Like unleashing something where you don't know how it'll end, because we have become so used to this confined life that we live in the township that we are even afraid to step out. We don't know what we are going to find out there. We were discussing the other day that somebody was saying Johannesburg is scary, but also very gentle, that you find all these qualities in the city. You find kind people and you find horrible people, and all those experiences either make or break you.

KM: In terms of collectives – maybe I should just call them collective spaces – going back to FUBA and Medu and the Bag Factory, do you think that there is something that as young people we are not doing that we could be? You mentioned earlier that when you got to London you realised that in South Africa we hadn't even scratched the surface around how we could be working supportively of one another. In your great experience, do you think that there is something that the young generation is not picking up on and pushing forward?
DK: No, I think that young artists are using a new way of thinking, which is collaboration, and also not looking only at one art form, but combining different art forms into one artwork. You'll find different collectives of young people who are doing extraordinary work with video. Artists are organising themselves in modern ways. A South African artist can collaborate with artists in Brazil, or Sweden, or anywhere in the world, just through technology. So, it's a new kind of collective that we have today that is technically advanced, and so they are still important and necessary. In Cape Town, this young man Kemang [Wa Lehulere], who'd been at Wits, started a collective [Gugulective], and they do conceptual work rather than traditional work, and they are very successful in what they do. So that is the new collective that you find. Although it's more academically inclined, there's still room also for the traditional approach, like we still need the Funda Centre and Artists' Proof Studio where, for example, the young artists who work in printmaking are developing that media to amazing levels which we never dreamt of. So those are still very necessary.

KM: Do you think that there are resources or modes of accessing funding that we are not tapping into?
DK: Well that still has a long way to go because of the racial situation in the country. I mean, now you have the Zeitz [MOCAA], which is a very expensive enterprise meant for artists, but the question is, which artists? And then you look around and there's not a single gallery in the townships, not one! If you are going to be successful as an artist, your family must travel – actually make arrangements to come into the Johannesburg Art Gallery or the Goodman Gallery or wherever – it's an occasion for them, it's not something they are used to. And so it's difficult for them to be absorbed into that arena because it's not a consumer item, like going to a theatre or a movie house, it's something that is there and still very complex. I mean we hardly have a gallery of traditional paintings of our own as black people. If you went to Zimbabwe, in Harare they can take you to their museum and show you work done by Zimbabweans from I don't know how many years back, and if you go to Bulawayo, the same thing. In Zambia it is also the same. Here [in South Africa], where do you take them? So we are still under the wing of white monopoly in a sense. Zeitz is a key example: who was consulted in the visual arts? The very same artists who are showing there, and the location is in Cape Town in one of the most expensive areas in the world. There's still something that divides us in those terms. I think it was in the mid-'90s, we went to a small village in Zimbabwe called Morewa, and in this village they have a building – not a fancy building, an ordinary building. And in that building was their museum. They had all the objects representing the village, from ploughing to radio, and all the history was there, and there were even paintings by local artists. And it was surrounded by schools, so when these school children come out of school they go there. There's also a library. The children either go into the library or the museum, and so they are familiar with what is happening in their community – they know so and so is an artist, so and so is a musician. That I'll never forget it – it was done in a very basic, simple way that did not require a lot of funding. But we can't even do something like that; here, locally, we spend lots of money on other things ...

KM: The newsletters that FUBA produced during the '60s and '70's are interesting, especially the fact that their distribution was wide – they seem to have been able to travel a much greater distance.

DK: Yes, I started writing through a newsletter at FUBA because the director there at the time was a writer, and so he encouraged us to write about visual arts, to write something interesting each month. And that is how I started writing. I took it up seriously, to inform the students about some event or something that was happening in the art world. I think we are missing a great deal not producing similar newsletters any more, and more so now that we have so many studio places – their information could be combined, and you could have a newsletter that circulates information, vital information. They could help students just out of varsity or high school who couldn't make it to those places and events. A newsletter is as important as a radio in the rural areas: without a radio you can't function.

KM: Ja, you don't know who's died.
DK: There's a story, an artist in Natal, who passed away. He used to do his work on envelopes, decorating envelopes. In fact, these were the letters miners used to send home to their wives and he used to decorate them, and they would pay him. And those envelopes are worth a lot of money today.

KM: Yes, Tito Zungu.
DK: Tito Zungu, yes. He lived in the rural areas. A neighbour of his had gone to visit a friend somewhere in that area and she heard the news on the radio about Tito. He was being sought by the Durban Art Gallery and was being asked to travel to France. And when this lady heard that Tito was wanted by the Durban Art Gallery for an important trip overseas, she ran to Tito's home to tell Tito's wife, and that's how he got to know that … So, that's the power of radio.

KM: You had a gallery that started in 1972. Was it a commercial gallery?
DK: Actually what happened was that in Jeppe – you know where Maboneng is situated – just towards the station we had a friend who ran a framing shop. He was framing these Jesus paintings and he was making a lot of money because people came all the way from Swaziland, Lesotho – everyone wanted to have one in their home. So he was selling and framing them in that building, and one time a friend of ours went to visit him and he said to him, 'Look, I've got an empty space upstairs – two rooms – and you can use it as a studio'. We didn't have space at that time where we could work, and so we started working there. And as time went on we said, why don't we have an exhibition here? It was during the apartheid era, and blacks were not allowed anywhere near the city and there were other residents in that building – these poor whites – and they would come back drunk and say, 'You know we are going to call the police, to put you in jail; you are not allowed to live here'. But we just ignored them, and we had an exhibition there, and we went to the top artists of the time and they agreed because it was not easy for an artist to be in a gallery during that time. And so we organised and we got funding from different sources, and it was a very successful exhibition and was featured in all the newspapers. But then after some time we got into financial problems. In fact the Steve Biko Foundation had already agreed to fund us, and just a month before we got that funding the government outlawed those organisations and froze their money, and others landed in jail. Editors of newspapers were in jail for months, and that collapsed our hope because they were looking to fund us. And what was interesting is that they had a place in Soweto where they wanted to see all the people who were doing whatever culture. They were looking for anybody who was doing anything in the township that made them survive. And that's how we got to know about that foundation. But the government brutally stopped everything because they were seeing that things that were coming out of that organisation were amazing! And people that didn't have the privilege to advance by themselves, whether it was artwork or craft or sports, because nobody elevated them, they benefitted. So it was regrettable that we had to close that gallery after two and a half years.

KM: Yes, but two years is a long time.
DK: We had two exhibitions there. We were using the studio for our own works.

KM: And were you selling works?
DK: Yes, we were selling works because some of the guys that used to come and buy and stockpile the works being framed in the business downstairs would also buy our work. So we did benefit also from that business. They were selling like hotcakes, I didn't know what was happening! Especially by people from Lesotho. Imagine coming all the way to come and take truckloads of these paintings.

KM: So, you made it into some homes next to a Jesus painting? It was a white Jesus I am sure.
DK: Yes, definitely! At that time you couldn't even think of a black Jesus – you'd be in big trouble.!

David Koloane was born in Alexandra, Johannesburg,South Africa in 1938 he lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa. In 1985 he received a Diploma in Museum Studies from the University of London. He co-founded Johannesburg's first black art gallery and was the head of Fine Arts at the Federative Union of Black Artists (FUBA). He was instrumental in establishing studio space for black artists at The Fordsburg Artists' Studios (The Bag Factory) and he founded the Thupelo Workshops in South Africa, a concept that spread to Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Koloane's work has been shown locally and internationally. A reflective and well-published writer, Koloane has written on issues pertaining to Black South African art and the racism in the South African art world.

Keleketla! Library

dinonwane txa rena di fepa bana ba mmu
gomme di a tanta e bile di na le maatla
kgogedi

Keleketla! Library is an inter-disciplinary, independent library and media arts project. It was established in 2008 to create access to the use of arts and media strategies as alternative education models and tools. It initiates and provides platforms for collaborative, experimental, multi-media projects with local, national and international artists, cultural practitioners and activists.

Kabelo Malatsie: How do you define Keleketla! Library? Is it an independent or an artist-run space?
Rangoato Hlasane: We are registered as a non-profit company. If you think about artist-run, we shy away from calling ourselves 'artists' – we prefer "cultural workers". We prefer it to "organisers".
Malose Malahlela: And also "producers".
RH: Yeah, and we are many things, like librarians, shebeenists, archivists. With 'artist-run', limitations come fast. And then, 'independent'? Yeah, we'll say we are an independent space. But then again, that's one element of what we are.
MM: It was an independent thought process, and so we are independent from how people think and, the ideologies that are there. We can compare, obviously, and then have similarities and relations to other spaces. For us everything is based on practice.
RH: Let's starts back with naming Keleketla! Library – with an exclamation mark! So we have two nodes there; one of the library, and one of storytelling. Already we've conflated two possibilities of what we are, but then when we go from there, to storytelling, there are many forms of storytelling. The original is in the name, which is Sepedi, but then there's video, graphic novels, visual arts and all these things that have happened in our programming throughout the years. We are independent of what libraries and storytelling are, because we hope to be a proposal and interpret what that could be. Yet, being independent of being an art gallery, we've nevertheless had visual arts shows. And we're not a promoter of music, but we have had music performances. So we do those things while at the same time we remain porous.

KM: Please speak about 'Skaftien' and 'Stokvel'?
RH: Can I start with 'Stokvel'? It was at the beginnings of Keleketla!. That was a time when we were linked to far more networks. We still are in a way. We were sharing a space at the Drill Hall with a lot of collectives coming together – some impromptu, some temporary, some located in the space. Some struggle and hustle, but lots of dynamism. Being together – drinking, eating, sharing, working, dreaming, painting, showing, thinking about this and that, but always really hustling, without any money coming in.

We always had a space, which comes quite rarely – having access to physical infrastructure – particularly for black collectives. But that infrastructure demands other things, like equipment, facilities and physical things to realise these broad dreams we had. At that time we were doing an auction of artworks that our friends brought. It was fundraising to start a media lab, to have silk screens and materials to work with, and to realise our work. And so Stokvel #1 was informed by that idea, to work from a media lab, because, at first, the people we asked for help towards that were visual artists, so it made sense to have an art exhibition and call it a Stokvel. We had to think about how to curate our work as young graduates, that had already been donated towards Keleketla!'s upcoming auction. We took that stokvel form from boMa le boManne, in order to realise our ambitions of showing work, while doing it together as part of our broader fundraising. It was important to rethink and stretch the traditional stokvel. And so the next Stokvel was called 'Bedroom Studios at the Drill Hall'. With that one, we were thinking about writing, producing and recording together in order to produce an album in one day, while really acknowledging these forms of economic activity and making them accessible in our different fields, however broad and different these fields were.

So, in 'Stokvel #1' there's visual art, and in 'Stokvel #2' there's music. But at the end of the day we burned out with 'Stokvel', because it was a labour of love. It's not like it's not possible, but 'Stokvel' had to die a natural death. 'Skaftien' emerged out of the mix and reflects on 'Stokvel', but it had a different purpose. This purpose, mainly, was 1. to make projects that were already happening visible through this form of talking about them around food and music; and 2. also to gather money to support those projects. One of the things that Pam Dlungwana, who also held a 'Skaftien' in Cape Town after seeing the one in Jo'burg, reflected on why it also stopped. Which was that the idea of supporting one project, and not the other three, always stayed with her, and the difficulty of following up on those projects that had been supported also reflected the challenges with the labour of love, where you can't go as far as you should and want. We are at a stage of rethinking and starting up 'Skaftien'. We don't have answers yet, but some nice ideas. Also being here at King Kong building gives us another step forward with the liquor license and a venue that is bigger, because we are able to attract people from the Drill Hall days. There's a potential to bring back the 'Skaftien'.

KM: Stokvel has the potential of seed funding as well.
MM: Yes. When I was in Brazil, I saw this cultural space and how the artists co-existed. For them to all exist, you believe that they also have to have the same drive and energy towards something. There, they have so many cultural spaces – and I've forgotten what they are called – but they are all linked. They use their own money and they share one account and all these people are doing different things. Some are doing film, but it feeds into their whole holistic vision. Brazil's cultural spaces or these small organisations have one vision.

For instance, somebody from Polokwane, working from an independent institution, can come to Keleketla! and use our joint. They can do whatever they choose in producing this common vision, and they can travel throughout the country using the network of organisations that somehow share a vision.

KM: But that's where stokvel works really well. There's commitment and proper buy-in.
MM: Even in helping another person, you can't just stop until you're finished with your duties, and then it's the next person who gets the support. The question is, what is the ethics of collective work?

KM: But I really love the example of how the Brazilian system works, because in some ways we all want the same things – obviously at different levels – but we can't imagine how we can make linkages, like an archipelago.
RH: Ke letsema – it's that ecosystem – all of that is a cycle.
MM: For us, everything is in practice, and through practice you can see the challenges, so that you experience it yourself by putting yourself in the picture. Once you see the challenges – it's the same for 'Skaftien', same for this fucking Shebeen that we thought was going to be simple. You know, you make money and you make it now.
RH: Kabelo, you're being idealistic, and that's where we all are. But we're also not going to stop. We haven't been stopping. Nobody has been stopping for years. All these trials, and we just keep on. Even the Brazilian example – I'm sure they have challenges, but they have gone to the next step.
MM: They have transcended from these squabble challenges and have a great work ethic. If you slept at their space, when you woke up the next morning those mattresses are gone, breakfast is ready, and they eat, and the computers are installed, because they have to jump into work mode.

KM: The second economy operates on a street level. You have also used the street level in your work. I am linking this to how you were working as an inner city community, where the invitations were sent door to door at the Mariston.
MM: Basically, it's working like a Pakistani.

KM: I'm interested in how you had a specific way of engaging the neighbourhood at the Mariston. The Drill Hall had its own way of working, and here at King Kong the engagement is specific in how you navigate and engage the space.
MM: Ja, why is it that these things are not discussed in these bigger spaces of art, in terms of conferences, you know? It's just constantly reshuffling content without talking about the street level economy, and not talking about how to sustain them. We always talk about galleries and art fairs and stuff. For them it's about big money at the end of the day.

KM: But then they are also not talking to you.
MM: They are talking to the buyers, and it comes to the point where, if you believe in this concept of buyers, you don't believe in the concept of you being the buyer.
RH: We must remember that the art industry was imposed. Helen Gardiner's *Art Through the Ages* was a bible when I was at Wits Tech, but I did not see myself there, and that is why the techniques of art that were deployed in the inner city community at the Mariston, had to make sense in the city. That's where we saw that actually silk-screening T-shirts works, or renting a video camera for the weekend to record the inner city community sessions. That recirculation is something I was trying to express at the launch of the institution here. The fact that we are the main resources, and then there are other fiscal, economic, physical resources that we can also recirculate. When I started the course I am teaching at Wits, I asked the students: 'What didn't the course offer you?' And they said: 'Silkscreen, Photoshop and business'. So I was like, okay, eish guys, I'll try to make a course that will show you all these things. But I won't give you the skills, because I don't have them. I just design courses. So, it was about gathering all these people – silkscreeners and teachers – and using research money that is part of Wits and Keleketla! to get this printing machine and begin to recirculate these resources. But again, the focus is still on these kids – what and how

are you going to learn? How are you going to understand these spaces? And that is why independent publications in multiples made sense. I didn't teach them business, but rather, 'You're going to make something that you're going to sell. Along the way you'll encounter all kinds of challenges, including machines jamming, figuring out transport. All of these things you'll experience in life and you'll figure them out, as long as you believe in the final output, which is launching your own publication that you will sell to an audience'.

KM: Can you tell me about Madibuseng?
RH: You know 'Thath'i Cover Okestra', right? It's one arm of that. Another archiving, remembering, channeling, you know? It's funny, because since the opening of Madibuseng, there have been several parties where people have said that it's one of the safe spaces for women. There's been a lot of toplessness happening here without heavy guns and bouncers. People feel free and they can express something when they are here. Hopefully Lebo Mathosa's spirit is channelled in that way, because really, she fought for these issues. She was first in the forefront, and she was a woman from the lineage of Winnie Mandela, Brenda Fassie. Subliminally, underneath that, maybe it's some of that. But then there are technical landlord issues. That is where it becomes a bit difficult, because we had high hopes that this would actually become a joint called Madibuseng.
MM: It was a really connecting a nice name to open up a bar. As Rangoato was saying, you don't see Keleketla! posting a lot of these social ills that are happening right now like #MenAreTrash. We don't respond directly to that on those social platforms. It's through the practice of Fela Gucci and Desire Marea, because they were celebrated and they felt like their bodies were not policed, and people could just party freely in one secure space. But then again, Madibuseng was mainly to celebrate us acquiring the liquor license that we had, and also to introduce a continuous idea of a space where people would come and host different kinds of things. Like any other shebeen. But we were restricted, like we were saying. You start something, but there's challenges and restrictions, and then you quieten down to try and make revisions.
RH: Sometimes you just have to choose to recognise the beauty, as Kgafela said.
MM: Drill Hall was the greatest opportunity. We weren't paying rent, even though that opportunity came with a hundred and one problems. We were creating content that is going to create more moments for us, more metsotsonyana for us in the future, that we can capitalise on.
RH: Unless black people understand letsema, so that organisations such as ours can multiply, we really want to see formulations like Keleketla multiply. They are important, they are a bigger project that we owe to our ancestors. They need to multiply, but they cannot. Madibuseng is a proposal of terms of circulation within an ecosystem. It's those things, which are interlinked and completely complex, in order to get to the next stage because, if we get that, the Madibusengs will multiply.

KM: One of the elements is to realise that it's possible to do it, and then you don't always have to have the same structures. It may look difficult and it is difficult, but it's doable.
MM: Until you start. The thing is, you start and you find your star alignment, because without me and him, this thing of Keleketla! is a thing of the past. But if you find a star alignment, then you're fine.

KM: Kwaito is a language you employ, and it's an urban language of the streets. It's also a collective language and it's a very agile concept. I am interested in Kwaito because of its agility. You use Kwaito conceptually, and other languages of course, like Sepedi. You are canonising them by consciously writing them into these structures of academic libraries, outside of the people that already understand these concepts.
RH: Well obviously, when one speaks of Kwaito, one also speaks of a time – a time of hope and euphoria and possibility made mainstream by young black artists – problematically, more males than women, which is where we recognise Lebo Mathosa's contribution. We are still facing those gender issues. Now we must still do something. But Kwaito was young black people who didn't wait for record labels. In fact, they contended and came in when they saw it made money, and they love money! Kwaito is the only industry outside of the taxi industry that was forged by black people. When people say 'Kwaito is dead', who says it? Who started it? And what is their stake in stating that? Anyway, it's that sort of circulation. It was a rapid circulation. It was all over the country and across the borders. It was self-determined. It was a need to express, to make money, and an ability to see the potential of an industry; but also speaking to itself and choosing a narrative without

excluding others, and doing it elegantly and vibrantly. That's the importance. Because if we keep on doing this because this one is exerting pressure, we end up speaking to that one, instead of our people, and that's where the language comes in. Why we are obsessing with language? It's done in order to find a language to speak about the struggle beyond the struggle, while simultaneously showing possibilities. And that's the thing about language. You code it so that while white and black people are in the space you are able to speak to blacks. It's not an easy thing to do because there are traps, and Kwaito did that. It was only when Mandoza had to be with Danny K that Kwaito started doing other things. Kwaito has always been about exclusion, and where you channel your energies. Because they knew that they were talking back to the majorities, and majorities represent a number, they are saying that we are a majority across all these fields.

MM: It's also recognising we are a majority and that's why they have advertising that recognises that. They are advertising to this majority that they want money from, but yet we can't see that we are a majority, or we forget ...

KM: I think for me that is why the street level is important, because the taxi industry realised it, Kwaito realised it, and once you realise it and speak to people on that level without shouting at them ...

MM: I mean, you know there's a problem when you get to a point where you can't hang with people on the street anymore. We are still grassroots no matter what, because that's why we do not call ourselves artists, because we are more cultural. Cultural means you exist with people constantly, in and out.

RH: And that's what marks the Drill Hall and here.

MM: Putting [forward] an idea, or using a metaphor of how many people are there to witness something grow and water it in the process. Some saw it as a seed being planted in the Mariston. They left, and then when the first root comes out, the first stem and the root had taken and they water it and they exit. So there is value in who witnesses and encourages our growth because it speaks to our community.

RH: In 2008 you could find a project on 'zine making, a workshop in Jozi, with collectives. There's a lot, and it's very clear that 'who no know go know'!

MM: When you talk about Keleketla! as organic, anything organic manifests and also crosses to spirituality, because if your spirit and your ancestors allow, and if you're determined, it's included in there.

KM: It's not present, it's not past, and it's in all those timelines. Philip Tabane's Malombo speaks to that, and ZCC as well. ZCC is interesting because they practice in an open space, which is important to them. And there's merchandising, which I think is a very interesting model for a church.

RH: Not only merchandising. I finished my entire high school because of their bussing. Then again, their bussing is very fascinating because it's really one of the first interlinking village transport systems when there was none. In fact, I took a taxi or one of my schoolmates fathers' vans to take us to the first point, where we could catch the bus to our Catholic school. So that's a service to the community.

KM: Yes, I'm interested in the economies of ZCC and how they use spirituality. You were talking about spirituality – maybe not ZCC, but definitely Malombo. How do you guys tap into that way of thinking and working?

RH: It can be seen in a number of things with both 'Stokvel' and 'Skaftien'. There is a tapping into Malombo, which is a coded language, and which allows us to tap into an intergalactic past, present and future in our projects. The support of community projects through 'Skaftien' is us acknowledging the importance of those projects, even if we are using our "labour of love" to gather some resources for the projects. We are also committed to spirituality, and Philip Tabane is an inspiration, particularly because he stuck to his project even when it didn't make him money in the end. He is concerned with the language of Malombo, and not with record labels.

MM: And also, he's ancestral.

RH: So that's where it comes in, the naming practices of ours is to resist so that should we canonise them ...

MM: But if you resist, you're broke.

RH: And that's the case. He's broke and then you know ...

MM: The estate and how to capitalise on the estate.

RH: And he performed that song 'Ke a Bereka' at the State Theatre after '94 and he changed it. And then it was in an album with his son and Mabe Thobejane. Then Black Coffee remixed it, and I think it's interesting the case of this track. Like what Ngugi says about securing the base and staying continuously rooted, contextually, in the music that we do, but also physically being here. It sustains, Philip Tabane. We'll keep trying even

though it's tough. The grand ideal has to be connected. He never actually made those grant applications in Polokwane.
MM: For me I wish for a day like this, where we can be free and talk to a space that is bigger. We don't talk like that because we know that when we go to conferences there's still nothing being talked about in relation to going forward collectively.
RH: Actually, this is a beautiful analogy and metaphor. The reason we reduce the number of projects we work on is the fear of shooting blanks or wrong targets. You must preserve ammunition, know when to use it and when not to use it, because it's limited.
MM: It's too much and the next thing you go crazy. You end up picking up papers in the streets and people say, 'Eish, Malose', because your energy has been consumed, depleted. How do you even talk about such things, because it's not easy. Your emotions were invested in it, time was invested in it, family time; so many things invested in that and it's not enough talking about it, because you end up messed up at the end of the day. You see that your day is fucked.

KM: We need to find a way to organise in ways that sustain the spaces we initiate. We all need these spaces. The question is, how do we sustain each other, as a community that values each other's role?
RH: Speak to the people. That is the only way. That brings us back again to Kwaito, where we are trying to find these links. 'Stokvel' and 'Skaftien' are actually Afrikaans terms, and Kwaito is particularly one place where Afrikaans was used, even though they weren't talking to the Boer. It has been localised.
MM: Fuck man!

Rangoato Hlasane is an artist, DJ, scholar and co-director of the independent and interdisciplinary Keleketla! Library in Johannesburg. He holds a Masters degree in visual arts from the University of Johannesburg. His investigation focuses on the role of the arts in mobilising communities.

Malose Malahela is a co-founder of Keleketla! Library – an inter-disciplinary, independent library in Johannesburg. His alias Kadromatt is a creative practitioner on an exploration of sound as emerging theatre for the ear. Kadromatt also co-curate an evolving pan- African orchestra *Thath'i Cover Okestra*.

Nothing Gets Organised (NGO)

In 2016, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Gabi Ngcobo and Sinethemba Twalo founded NGO, a self-organised space in Johannesburg.

> NGO – NOTHING GETS ORGANISED exists as a forlorn and contemplative_____, a ____ and _____ twirl in a moment of bewilderment. The platform functions as a space to reflect on shifting and uneasy entanglements. NGO is interested in un/ conventional processes of self-organising – those that do not imply structure, tangibility, context or form. It is a space for (NON)SENSE where (NON)SENSE can profoundly gesticulate towards, dislodge, embrace, disavow, or exist as nothingness! Research is ongoing, malleable and open-ended. NGO pursues that which becomes publicly visible, as always already processes in motion – to which we confer context, name and identity. What happens when production remains unmediated? What do unmediated spaces (as political and resistant to organisation) hold out for the quest for what might be considered as ___or _____? How does art _____ from spaces so mediated, the possibility of speaking for itself?

Kabelo Malatsie: Tell me about the inception of NGO, Nothing Gets Organised, which was launched in April 2016.
Sinethemba Twalo: NGO came about from a realisation that there weren't many institutions attempting to do the type of work we were interested in. Johannesburg's art landscape is currently over-determined by commercial galleries. One of the intentions of NGO was to have a different position and also to interrogate our many different roles. Are we a space? In what forms are we existing? Are we a collective? Do we exist as a concept, an idea? So it keeps changing. We also inhabit other spaces and contexts, for instance, the 8th Jerusalem Show in 2016, which is part of the Qalandiya International, The Palestinian biennial. NGO attempts not to work primarily as just a physical space – that would be boring – but rather as a concept that questions itself and is open to malleability. We are interested in nonsense in its many manifestations. Nonsense can be very productive. We also invite other people to collaborate with us. NGO is about morphing into whatever is necessary at a particular time. We are weary of over-programmed spaces. We are interested in taking time to reflect on each situation.

KM: Is NGO following any models? The dearth you mentioned in independent spaces, I see it more as an inability of these spaces to access funds or resources to stay open. What are your thoughts on the space's viability over the long term? Have you found funding models that work for NGO?
ST: I think it's interesting that you're thinking about the question of funding. That's an issue we grapple with consistently. We are interested in self-organising as a form and idea. We determine NGO ourselves, we attempt to not be heavily reliant on other institutions to realise projects. We keep thinking about funding models and wonder what getting external funding allows: how it might compromise one's agenda at times, and how one might function. The question around funding is also conceptual. How do we engage the institutions with which we collaborate? How do we determine funding structures or work with funders that don't compromise our ideological preoccupations as an institution? It's tricky negotiating those questions as an independent space because you are also forced to work within an environment that determines and forces you to be a particular thing. At times you have to define yourself within a particular institutional paradigm, but we work it as we go along.

KM: Is there a precedent for the model you're working with specifically in terms of funding in the local context?
ST: There are precedents but I can't go into much detail as yet … because it also relates to how we are working conceptually, and how we are thinking about the institution. I guess we realise there is a certain 'distribution of the sensible', to quote Jacques Rancière, related to funding which we seek to circumvent artistically. There is a certain aesthetics of funding which we find heavily questionable.

KM: Is there a specific reason that NGO has a physical structure? It could be a collective or a space that inhabits other spaces as you mentioned.
ST: Yes, I think it is important to have a space because you are able to determine your own language without having to compromise much. Personally, it relates to my own interactions with other institutions. I can't speak fully for the other two founders, but we've had conversations about this. When working with and/or in other spaces, one constantly negotiates institutional politics that are beyond their control. To a certain degree I have become weary of these entanglements one has to contend with; it is exhausting. Having your own space can allow you to withdraw at times, if need be.

KM: How do you decide on the exhibition programme?
ST: The three of us work collectively to determine each situation or happening. As an individual, you can also propose a situation, and as long as there is agreement to the conditions of whatever you propose, then you can go ahead. Sometimes one might not necessarily be interested in participating, and that is okay. Another issue is that all three of us travel quite extensively, so at times members might not be in Johannesburg at the same time. We are always having meetings and conversations online.

KM: It's interesting that you talk about the individual within a collective and that the notion of self-organisation includes some form of community. Can you talk a bit more about this?
ST: I think it's important that we are always in dialogue. As individuals, we express our reservations if we feel uncomfortable, and always self-reflect. We are interested in restoring some sense of community.

KM: What are your thoughts on the history of independent spaces in Johannesburg specifically or South Africa in general? What is the significance of the location of NGO?
ST: In Johannesburg, I realise that a lot of independent spaces pop up and then a few years later they tend to close down. A lot of these issues tend to be related to funding and a general lack of access to relevant structures. I guess one can also attribute this to a general exhaustion one develops negotiating Johannesburg's tricky landscape. Some artists circumvent these issues by relying fully on the commercial gallery system, which can encroach on artistic production. One can end up creating the same work over and over (and yet again). NGO is located on Albert Street. There is a significant level of sex work within the area. We feel it's important not to encroach on this space. For us it has been important to maintain relationships with the communities that have existed before we opened. At times, they have assisted us when faced with dangerous situations. A block down the street is Mai Mai, the old Zulu market.

KM: Is there a concern that NGO could close, or is that part of the conceptual framework of the space?
ST: One of the ideas is that after five years the current directors/founders would cease to run the space and we will have other people taking over who might work differently and determine the space for themselves. I also have no issues with institutions dying.

KM: NGO's current physical space is owned by the three of you, correct?
ST: Yes, we own it equally. We lease it out to NGO. We all have part ownership of the physical space.

KM: Are there any pitfalls to the ownership that you're concerned with? I have observed that independent spaces tend to be determined by the founder's currency and so I imagine when the new director takes over, they may struggle to acquire funds due to a temporary distrust of whoever is taking the project on?
ST: Correction: directors! They will have to apply as a collective. We are weary of just one individual running the space. We have a board that will continue to exist after we have stopped working as directors of the space. We will also assist if need be. The board is meant to exist independently from the directors. I also assume the new directors should be interested in the guiding ethos of the institution.

KM: Through conversation with founders of local independent spaces and my own observations, I have seen that Johannesburg has some amnesia. Every few years or so a new space opens and it seems to be fresh but it always falls into the same pitfalls as previous spaces. For instance, I imagine something like the Parking Gallery started by Simon Gush ...
ST: I curated a group exhibition at the Parking Gallery, most projects were self-funded by individuals who approached the institution. Organisationally they were assisted by the Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA), which makes their situation somewhat different to ours. Operationally, they didn't seem to have responsibility. I am speaking from my own experience. I am not too sure regarding other projects though.

KM: Compared to other spaces, the Parking Gallery may not have taken many risks financially for super young artists who may not have had access to financial resources. It excluded a few who couldn't fundraise and so only those with means could participate.
ST: That is the general issue in Johannesburg, one needing funding. Enough is enough ...

KM: Even though the Parking Gallery's programme included lectures and discussions and there may have been some breathing room here and there, there was still a lot of time dedicated to running the space. In terms of NGO, were you against particular models?
ST: We're not saying we're unwilling to be funded by institutions that have money, but we want to have an important role in determining the agenda of the funding. After all, we go through loopholes to attain the funding, no? Shouldn't our role be as important as the funders in the agreement? Equality always, I state. We don't seek funding for the sake of having funding. We don't want to be politically and ideologically compromised. That is not to say you're not complicit in other ways even if you have attempted to work through these issues.

KM: Is NGO another way of inhabiting another way of working/practicing for you?
ST: Regarding my production? All of the work that I've done this year has related to NGO. It is something I work on continuously. Tracey Rose makes quite an interesting observation when she says, 'When did everything become just a project?' That assertion is pretty heavy: we are artists, thinkers, these are not just projects. I guess it's different ways of relating to different forms but they're no less different than people make them out to be. I am always wary when things are fully determined. Currently, I have an issue where I have submitted a journal article for editing and I was told I need to take a very specific position. The editors had a problem regarding my position ... Am I writing as an art historian? Am I writing as an artist who is interested in an artist practice that might be relevant to my own work? I also believe this is enforced by the heavy specialisation pushed within the academy. One has to define constantly what it is that one does. For me, everything feeds into everything else I do.

KM: Are these different roles a way of working autonomously?
ST: Yes, there's a certain level of autonomy, but one could also argue that this is not necessarily the case; autonomy is always contingent. It is heavily dependent on the institutional setting in which one finds oneself. A club setting is very different to a museum, What is important for me is not feeling compromised.

KM: That your sense of self-determination is not being compromised?
ST: Yes. It's a tricky terrain and it's interesting also to go back into something as mundane as DJing in a club and working within a museum or gallery setting, as there's a certain lack of freedom that one has to engage in both spaces. That is the beauty of having a varied practice; it allows you to experiment with different forms and settings. However, one is never fully autonomous.

KM: Autonomy is temporary and fleeting.
ST: Yes, we are all implicated. I hate it when people state, 'Oh, I haven't received funding from the state or I am not represented by a commercial gallery thus this makes my practice more political'. That's very naïve. We are all entangled, and in ways that you might not even question or imagine. I am more interested in other questions, such as is there an artist fee? Is the production team sufficiently taken care of? Do I feel uneasy and exploited? Am I apprehensive about this situation within which I'm working? Who is funding this and what is their agenda? One is always constantly negotiating the terms of an agreement. I always ask myself if a particular situation is conducive for me to create the best work I can. These are important issues for me, but I never work from 'Oh, I'm now autonomous'. There's also exploitation working with and in independent spaces. I've seen it and dealt with it. I guess my different roles have allowed me the freedom to withdraw if I felt uncomfortable, to reject the terms if need be.

KM: One easily wants to deal with a headache with painkillers and not remove the tumour/cancer that is riddling the entire body.
ST: Going off course, or veering towards another path, there is also the current trend of armchair research, especially when it comes to international exhibitions of art from South Africa where the same artists are on high rotation. Some curators do not do their research and rely on commercial galleries and recommendations on which to base an entire exhibition.

KM: Absolutely. Resources mean that certain works travel further.
ST: I rarely see thematic exhibitions with 'art from France or Germany', unless of course it's within a biennale situation, such as Venice, or it is funded by some institution seeking to foster foreign relations or maintain it's soft power through culture. A lot of the time some of these exhibitions inhibit artistic sensibilities or languages. It's these entanglements that people don't want to negotiate. There is a comfort in ignorance and laziness, and I don't think laziness and/ or idleness is a completely bad concept or term. For instance, thinking of Sarat Maharaj and artistic research, idleness can be a strategy and a moment of reflection, especially when relating it to over-production. It can be productive for the idle worker to withdraw. That is another thing about NGO: there is certainly a veneration of the interlude.

KM: Your practice has tended to be independent, in solitude and collaborative.
ST: It has not been done consciously: it's also working with what I have access to. Conditions have forced me to work independently. It has led me to other things and it's been quite interesting. Also, I am constantly engaging

people, asking questions and receiving feedback. I also really enjoy working collaboratively with other people as it allows for questions to arise that I may not be able to notice while working by and for myself.

KM: Where is the failure in collaboration?
ST: It fails when it isn't horizontal, where there are defined hierarchies. I always think collaboration is co-authorship. You all contribute to something, and I also think it's important that collaborations don't become dictatorial. You should be able to have your idea manifest into something that you might not have intended. I am very malleable. I abhor rigidness, I guess.

KM: Some have criticised curators working in this hierarchy that you mention.
ST: I rarely engage situations where there is a hierarchy within collaboration. Those tend to be frustrating. I like curatorial interactions with other practitioners where the relationship is organic, where a friendship might develop and there is a sense of community; where I am clear about what I can do and what I can't do and we work it out. I never stay in situations where someone talks down to me. If that happens, then I don't do it.

KM: Which artists, theorists, curators, musicians and stylists inspire your practice?
ST: Fred Moten, David Hammons, Hito Steyerl, Sarat Maharaj, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Gregory Markopoulos, Matana Roberts, Meshell NdegeOcello, The Blue Notes, Johnny Dyani, Busi Mhlongo, and the list goes on.

KM: Is there a project in which you have included your different forms of practicing?
ST: Conceptually, I attempt to do that with every project I undertake. My process involves utilising different aspects of my practice. The ongoing research 'The Abyss is a Tautology', which has been realised in different iterations, has sought to do this. I have held lectures (sonic and otherwise), group exhibitions, written essays and events as part of my DJ group, 'Into the Darkness' with Friedrich M. Ploch.

KM: Which practitioner do you think is overlooked?
ST: So many! Historically, Moses Tladi, Ernest Mancoba, the brilliance of Bessie Head, Noni Jabavu, *Staffrider* magazine ... too many to mention.

Sinethemba Twalo is a cultural worker based in Johannesburg, South Africa and Sierre, Switzerland. He is Co-Founder and Co-Director with Gabi Ngcobo and Dineo Seshee Bopape of NGO – Nothing Gets Organised, an independent platform operating from Johannesburg, South Africa.

Chimurenga

Chimurenga, a pan African platform of writing, art and politics founded by Ntone Edjabe in 2002. Drawing together a myriad voices from across Africa and the diaspora, Chimurenga takes many forms operating as an innovative platform for free ideas and political reflection about Africa by Africans. Outputs include a journal of culture, art and politics of the same name (*Chimurenga Magazine*); a quarterly broadsheet called *The Chronic*; *The Chimurenga Library* – an online resource of collected independent pan-African periodicals and personal books; the *African Cities Reader* – a biennial publication of urban life, Africa-style; and the *Pan African Space Station* (PASS) – an online radio station and pop-up studio.

The aim of these projects is not just to produce new knowledge, but rather to express the intensities of our world, to capture those forces and to take action. This has required a stretching of the boundaries, for unless we push form and content beyond what exists, then we merely reproduce the original form – the colonised form, if you will. It requires not only a new set of questions, but its own set of tools; new practices and methodologies that allow us to engage the lines of flight, of fragility, the precariousness, as well as joy, creativity and beauty that defines contemporary African life.

As Fela puts it, simply: who no know go know.

Kabelo Malatsie: Can you start by speaking about the beginning of Chimurenga in 2002, and the shifts that have taken place in relation to what seems to be inspiration drawn from FESTAC '77?

Ntone Edjabe: It's a long journey since 2002, longer than seventeen years I think, because we've gone through several lives, each one generating the next. There was never a 'grand plan'; there was never even an idea of starting a literary journal, or even a platform. It started from this space, The Pan African Market, which is mainly the initiative of the entrepreneur Vuyo Koyana and myself – I was working as freelance journalist at the time. People like the poet Sandile Dikeni and the writer Binyavanga Wainaina joined the party shortly after. We needed to make a home for ourselves in the city and this was '97 and Cape Town was definitely a different space.

So, we brought funds together to take over the first floor of this building. Initially it is a cooperative, but it has a trade component to help pay for the rent because none of us who initiated the space, apart from the café run by a Senegalese chef we called 'Papa', had any money generating business here. We then went to other brothers and sisters who were selling in Green Market Square and we said, 'Listen, we have this space, we have the entire first floor, please join us'. At that point my involvement really is that on Fridays I would be playing records and invite friends, poets and musicians, to share their work. And Sandile, who was at the time based at the Cape Times, using that platform to big-up the place. Whilst that is going on trade is going on and more people move in, and we need to take over the second floor. And it evolves like that. Over time it becomes clear to me that what we do here on Fridays is actually a radio station without walls, in the sense that we connected all floors with a sound system so traders could listen without having to leave their spots. And people started coming here on Fridays to listen. That's how I met Neo Muyanga and a bunch of other artists that I've kept relationships with. And with the radio, there's a kind of aesthetic that develops because it is going on for years. And you'd come from Ghana, or wherever, and everyone would tell you that there's a place on Long Street called the Pan African Market, go there. Really, they used to send people here like it's an embassy: people would arrive here and say, 'I just arrived from Burundi and was told this is where I'll find Africans'. These were utopian years that we are talking about, the '90s, and there was a different sense of possibility and a lot of dreaming going on, and I was very lucky to be here at that time.

But this was all experience-based, and you had to come here to know what was going on. That's when I started thinking of a publication. There was no space in print to articulate these aesthetics and the collective experience. And because of my own interests and the fact that music was always at the centre of what was happening here, it was naturally going to be a publication about music and politics – about black music and the imagination of the world it makes possible. But I'm not thinking of it as a magazine then, only a collection of writings and art. So, I invite friends – everyone who comes here, and friends in Jo'burg and even abroad, people like Lesego Rampolokeng, Gael Reagon, S'bu Nxumalo, Rustum Kozain, Khulile Nxumalo, Dominique Malaquais, Greg Tate – to submit something. And through Sandile I also approached older writers like Njabulo Ndebele, Neville Alexander and Keorapetse Kgositsile, people who wrote provocatively about music. And my friend Andrea Meeson agreed to do the design for free. And of course, music and liberation struggle are condensed in the word "Chimurenga" because it means both, right? So that was going to be the title of the collection. That's pretty much how the publication was born; it's from life that has been taking place here over the years and at that point and even up to now it feels like a kind of organ of the Pan African Market.

KM: It's serving the Market.

NE: And it's launched here on the balcony, but that's a once-off – it's not a magazine, it's not marginal, it's just, you want to know what life we are living? Here it is! Because we kept it so basic. I wasn't aware that the aesthetic that we are following is – maybe it was subliminally and not on a conscious level that the thing looks like one of those radical black journals of the 1970s. For me it was a very practical thing. I had all of this amazing writing, maybe 50,000 words, that I could only print out of my own pocket. I could only print around 40 pages and I was very reluctant to edit it down. So we had to cram everything in. Like black life, every single thing is plural, and you end up 'decorating the decorations', as Zora Neal Huston famously said. But when people saw it, they connected it to a history I wasn't even aware of at the time.

People like the poet Vusi Mchunu started showing up at the Friday sessions, saying, 'You guys did this journal, I want to contribute in the next issue'. And he would give me copies of a journal he edited while in exile in

Berlin during the 1970s. I'm like, what? Here's my email, send me whatever! The whole thing became an education. One of the pieces that came in was from an old friend who initially ran the café on the first floor after Papa, who was also a journalist, Binyavanga Wainaina. He had gone home to Kenya to bury his mother and remained there. He left shortly after we produced Chimurenga, and while he's there he sends this incredible essay about discovering home, because he had not gone back for ten years. The same piece would eventually win an important literary prize and he would found what is today Kenya's most important literary journal, called Kwani. I realise that many of us drawn to the Pan African Market were either from abroad, or feeling so excluded from mainstream culture in Cape Town that we lived through it like a sort of exile. So I thought of producing a second collection of writing around Binyavanga's piece, and titled it, Chimurenga Volume 2.

For the first two years, the publication essentially works like that, like a dialogue in print. It's always people responding to responses. But every single time it's also a once-off, a unique project. And the contributors of a volume are often involved with the editing of the next one. This, along with the thematic continuities, made me realise that we're in fact producing a magazine. And through my exchanges with those elders, I had become more aware of the history that we are tapping into, the publications they had been involved in. And I wanted to align Chimurenga more explicitly with these projects. There is always this notion that black people make new worlds out of thin air, you know, the myth of exceptional black genius. And one thing happens when you begin to engage more seriously with this history – at least with the publications that I admired, like Transition, Black Orpheus, Drum and more recently, Glendora Review – you realise how fluidly they circulated across worlds. Transition could be Ugandan one year and Ghanaian the next. This had already begun to happen organically with Chimurenga. When the first issues appeared in Lagos through friends, some readers thought that the magazine was published there, and because of the strong presence of Kenyan writers that Binyavanga introduced into the magazine, other people assumed it came out of Nairobi.

Anyway, this is a long way to come back to your query about autonomy. Through our practice it is necessarily a point of departure, a self-determined way of being and creating. And that's the Pan African Market. By the time Chimurenga was born, it already had its own centre, its own way of developing; its own specific context and very inspiring traditions to align with here and elsewhere. I think this is crucial, so that you can be your own centre and always be in relation to it. Glissant calls it the 'poetics of relation'. Without that I think what you have is pseudo-autonomy. Like in many African countries we're still dealing with the mirage of independence of the 1960s. That is pseudo-autonomy.

KM: Yeah, that's really interesting to think of in relation to self-determination, and that this was an organic project. Most independent spaces function from that place, that's how they are born, how they exist in the beginning. And then a loss comes as they figure themselves out. So, I guess maybe the '70s are interesting to consider because autonomy within the continent is articulated within independence or the struggle of independence or ...
NE: You mean national, territorial independence?

KM: Yeah, national. When you're thinking of things like Staffrider, Medu, MDALI, and all of those organisations and formations, they were based on this idea of independence, which on one level is based on this aspiration to be autonomous on a national level, and as a person or as a human – the need to be a human first, because in South Africa black people were not considered human. I'm interested in the fact that you were responding to what was happening on street level. Can you continue to speak about FESTAC ...?
NE: Well, FESTAC will come. But let's talk about resources, since autonomy is linked to that. Initially publication is funded through three means. One is the sales of the magazine itself, two is support from the Pan African Market in a very tangible way, in that I am one of the founders of the cooperative and through this Chimurenga has been based here at relatively low rent; and thirdly, in the initial years, through the generous support of the contributors, because at that point nobody is expecting to be paid. And all of those are very clear sources of funding, before you have to go look for money outside. I was very clear about the fact that I didn't want to go to other funders. I didn't even think about them. But sometimes it is the funders who come to you, and you have to be centred enough to deal with that, and I have to admit that I wasn't. When a funder approached us in the fourth year and offered to cover the print costs for the next four issues, it slightly changed our editorial approach. I am more aware of this now. What happened is that with the printing costs covered in advance, the content became more and more

abstracted from our actual circumstances. Let me clear this, I am not suggesting that there was no space for abstraction or theory in the publication before this, it was a space for ideas from day one. And to be honest I can't think of a reality more surreal than black life in this world, or one that involves such a deep embrace of metaphysics. What I am saying is that the production of culture cannot be separated from the economy that makes it possible. In our case we slowly moved away from responses to responses, and onto concepts that the contributors would then respond to. Each issue was more intensely researched to get to the concept. That's the curse of the thematic approach: you get into the rabbit hole and get lost down there. I suppose it was a necessary passage, and I think the nerds among us enjoyed that trip. Most of the people who got involved at that time, Terry Ayugi, Graeme Arendse, Stacy Hardy, are still with the publication.

But I think music kept us in touch with the initial project. The world of sounds is the space where black self-realisation is undeniably tangible; one of the few spaces where we're in charge because the most forward-thinking ideas are articulated through the practice itself, never outside of it. Nobody gives a shit what the musicologists, or worse, ethnomusicologists think. And I realise now that during this period it became more necessary to work through music and sound. The sense of community was more fully realised there, and we organised more events, concerts, and eventually PASS took form as a separate organ.

The major shift back to what you are calling "autonomy", for me, is in 2008. The first event is the xenophobic attacks of May 2008. I think that when that happens, I'm already very uncomfortable about the system that we are in – this system in which literary magazines can exist as precious little objects of desire, with each edition cleverer than the previous. It is bullshit. So, what happens in 2008 is that it gives us the courage to move away, and for a year we don't publish anything. We launch PASS as a music festival and an online radio station and we start spending evenings at the Cape Town Public Library to research our own library. There's a sort of paralysis as far as print-form is concerned, and it is clear that we cannot go on doing the same thing we have been doing.

Another thing that we start in 2008 is a blog that we use to research how the 2008 attacks came about, how they connect with political violence in Kenya and religious violence in Nigeria the year before, and so on. And I feel that the old magazine format, as clever and beautiful as it may have been, is unable to address the kind of flux of contemporary life on this continent. And a thematic approach only worsens this, as there's no getting to the bottom of anything in this context. Things move too fast and with unpredictable trajectories. We needed something more fluid, more open, and which circulates less predictably in street corners and bookshops. And less fucking precious. Something one can decide to keep or pass on or throw away the next day, like a newspaper. But stupidly we didn't make the jump immediately. We first tried it as a once-off edition of a newspaper – a paper that would be released in three different cities simultaneously: Joburg, Nairobi and Lagos.

We had friends in Lagos and Nairobi working on it as well, and the idea is that it should appear there as if they put it out, always trying to deconstruct the country borders bullshit. And when the paper comes out here, our readers follow the idea. We put a lot of energy communicating it. But when it comes out in Lagos, it's a UFO: people are like, what the fuck is this? Who publishes a 300-page newspaper? Who has this much time and energy? And why is it back-dated to 2008? Of course, we've become more narrowly nationalist since the days of Transition, or when Drum magazine regularly put out East African and West African editions. And transnational circulation mostly belongs to corporations these days. But that response also points to the institutional, infrastructural apparatus that makes such a paper possible in South Africa. Even with all the editorial effort, or the work on distributing it widely in Lagos, it's a foreign object there because primarily Lagos has its own idea of quality, criticality and on its own terms, and it's very different from the South African terms, whatever these may be. And that I once lived in Lagos doesn't change the fact that Chimurenga/ The Chronic is primarily a South African product, as in firstly a response to the South African context. I think such initiatives can be meaningless or counter-productive when they're merely an event or a once-off project. This has to be everyday work, and since we cannot do this 300-page paper every day, then what becomes most important is, what can we do every day? Logistics, the capacity to realise, becomes most important. So first, people who are paid for the work and who produce the work on a day-to-day basis; who owns a printing press and who owns a car to deliver papers etc.

What I am talking about is closing the gap between the capacity to imagine and the capacity to realise, not the old debate on the role of culture. At some point we have to stop looking at ourselves through this fiction of

potential. It is a trap.

When you produce something like that once-off paper we did, it can only exist as a foreign object, here or in Lagos. Which is fine, but it wasn't our intention. We wanted to make an intervention, but an intervention doesn't always have to be a spectacle. So instead we focus more on what we can do every day – and by every day I don't mean every 24-hour cycle, but what we can do inside our own time, and what resources we have to do whatever we want to do. And the moment you do that, you have to look away from external funders, because they're not interested in everyday work, only spectacle. There are reports to be filed and they must be sparkling with unique achievements. So, let's save money to buy our own printing press rather, means of production, right? So, let's buy a press; let's buy a turntable, and then this stuff can generate what we can do, which is closer to what we are now.

KM: I'm interested in institutional autonomy because it's not about what you can do as an individual practitioner, but rather that is there a well-resourced space that can enable autonomous practices or not. Here my idea of autonomy is, do we have resources that allow us to practice, whether its painting or performance? Do we have access to resources to enable self-determination? That's what institutional autonomy is focused on.

NE: One of the issues of The Chronic titled, The Philanthropic Complex (2013), asks similar questions. The question of how culture is produced on this continent now. I think continually throwing stones at the foreign institutions and their systems actually reinforces their power. And even those foreign institutions we give so much time to, we don't even look at them closely. For instance, we're so locked in our colonial embrace with say, France, that we don't pay enough attention to China's influence on the continent. But more importantly, we don't pay enough attention to what is the patronage system for art in a place like Nigeria. When you work inside the system it's very easy to assume that this is it, that this is how it works, that everywhere you have the Stevensons and the Goodmans of the world, and that everywhere young artists just give themselves and their work to commercial gallerists. Or that it is "embassy art" condescension.

These may well be there. But there's also an extensive network of wealthy and middle-class people who directly support these artists and buy their work. Not to mention the Federal State. There's this place in Lagos called Freedom Park. If you go there on a given weekend, you might find someone like Bruce Onobrakpeya or Ola Balogun or Jimi Solanke or Odia Ofeimun. All of these are masters of their craft, and live relatively comfortably, and have studios; and they are inside the art history of their country, and well respected by everyone who is coming up. And you hardly ever see them at so-called global events. Tunde Kelani, one of Nigeria's most important film director, has produced all his films in Nigeria, funded by Nigerians. So there are other modes of circulation.

KM: What I'm hearing is that there's a local system, right? One that functions within the logic of Nigeria?

NE: Yes. But calling it "local" doesn't explain why Nollywood is so important in the Caribbean, for example. Or why Congolese music is huge in Colombia. These are not closed systems, they're always in relation. What we're talking about is different modes of circulation, not necessarily negotiated in Cape Town or London. Nollywood is its own thing, and has its own aesthetic and economic centre, and it spreads all over the world, but the centre is in Lagos. And its roots, both aesthetically and in terms of economic model, are in Yoruba travelling theatre of the '60s and Onitsha popular literature in Eastern Nigeria. Already you have a video form that is based on popular theatre and literature. From that point alone, it is clear that Western institutions would always play catch-up, because there is no mimicry involved. Nigerian filmmakers were shocked when they first came to Sithengi Film Market in Cape Town during the late 1990s and saw their South African counterparts queuing to pitch their films to Western producers. I am not suggesting that they make the greatest films, only that they don't require approval from foreign institutions to make them. Of course, every system has its constraints; the Nollywood filmmakers, for example, have to contend with the so-called marketeers who run that industry. But even Nollywood's biggest critics agree that they're contributing to demystify the process of filmmaking.

Or look at Somali trade – wow! I mean, when you see how systematic and organised this whole thing is, around the world, we have so much catching up to do, to ourselves. Look at the money transfer because it supports the goods trade. Wherever you are – Chicago, Nuremberg – wherever you are there's Somali money transfer that is running parallel to the global banking system. Some of it, like the Dahabshiil, even crosses

over into mainstream business. This is a global penetration of African systems. The art world must just catch up.

KM: I think for me, organisation on an institutional level is important; you cannot do it as a small collective. But if it is an organisation, and that organisation recognises me as an individual artist, then that is something else.
NE: Totally. I think for me the model was clearly, unmistakably Fela Kuti. I was not even aware of the possibility, that culture is something that you produce. And for me he was just a guy who kind of froze the frame; he completely broke the Western-educated wall between theory and practice. I put him in the same bracket with mythmakers like Sun Ra or Coltrane. But he was the first to do this in post-colonial Africa – you truly understand the concept of "post-colonial" when you encounter the music of Fela and how he made it. So, Fela had three shows a week at Shrine, and I was a regular there. On Tuesdays it was "Ladies Free" – always raucous! The band would play mainly instrumentals. He lays down the beat – it's quite tricky when you're in a bar with 600 other people drinking and smoking and all he's is trying to do is get the beat down. And he's fucking screaming at his musicians. And then on Fridays he had this show called Yabis Night, and "yabis" means "insults", and so if you want to know what Fela thinks of current affairs, you go to the Friday show. And then the Saturday show he called it the "comprehensive show" where the beat, the Yabis, the spiritualism all come together and you can't quite tell whether it is a band rehearsal, a prayer ceremony, a political rally or a performance of all the above. Jazz musicians often speak of composition as slowed down improvisation in a public and collective manner. If, for instance, he puts out a call about Babangida, say, 'Babangida don't steal'o' and the people catch onto 'Babangida don't steal'o', the song evolves that way. What people didn't quite get, he reworks. It all happens in the present tense. Say for two months you learn this song with him; you are part of the writing process. When he feels it's ready, he goes into the studio, records it and he never performs it again. The record is literally the record. My favourite in his entire archive, and it is a massive archive, called 'Confusion Break Bones'. That song evolved before my eyes. It is the most poetic song about Lagos, and when it came out in 1990, half of the city knew it by heart, certainly among the student population and the area boys. By the time it is on record, it is your thing. It is a recording of your experience of writing the song at the Shrine. And even today that his music has gone global and is reproduced by bands in Japan and so on, connecting with his music is also connecting with Lagos of a certain era, or with a specific vision of post-colonial Nigeria and Africa.

KM: What you're saying goes back to how you started, where the audience was not just the spectator?
NE: Yeah, I point to Fela's method of an on-going practice, which is the most crucial aspect for me: every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, and sometimes Sunday, except when he's in jail – and he spent quite a bit of time there too. In the glorification of the once-off, we devalue the continuous, the regular; but the everyday in a place like Lagos is anything but banal. Fela had the imagination, but also the capacity to do this. He had his own club, his own republic for goodness sake! And you think of autonomous projects like Werewere Liking's artist village in Abidjan in the 1980s, or even more recently people like Goddy Leye in Arts Bakery near Douala, or Faustin Linyekula at Studio Kabako in Kisangani – they all have infrastructure, and the main infrastructure in these contexts is the people! I'm just not interested in any initiative that doesn't also attempt to construct its own economy.

KM: The Chronic issue on Soft Power?
NE: These questions are in everything that we do. Consciously, I think it begins with an issue called, Conversations with poets who refuse to speak, which came out, I think, in 2007, where we begin to move away from the debates on representation. I think someone like Cheikh Anta Diop produced language that allows us to engage with what is there, rather than eternally questioning what isn't – interrogating African systems of thought, production, circulation etc., not only historically of course, but it is more difficult to do without historical consciousness. Writing on food practices allows us to examine the knowledge that passes through them. How the fuck do you get so many conceptual artists coming out of Cameroon when you don't have a single art school? That question is as important as why are there no art schools in Cameroon.

KM: And can you speak about the relation between PASS [Pan African Space Station] and Chimurenga?
NE: Initially it was in continuation with the Friday sessions at the Pan African

Market and the open studio approach there. Then it evolved into a music festival, which I co-curated with Neo; then it became an ongoing live studio through a bar we ran in Observatory, called Tagore's. Now it is more directly connected to the publication as a space for research and dissemination. Like a mobile editorial room, but more playful and free, because sound is the medium. For instance, to prepare an issue on Zimbabwe and the political developments there, we'd land the spaceship there for a week, and engage with the writers, the artists and set up relationships and reinforce relationships that already exist. And that becomes the content of the paper.

KM: The record.
NE: Yeah, it also becomes the space where you circulate the other papers you've produced, and you install that studio and we install our bookshop there – it's like a mobile tuck shop. PASS is mobile, and because it's event based, it's able to generate funds for The Chronic, for example.

KM: Okay, so it's not the other way around.
NE: Not necessarily. I think that spectacle always sells much more. The spectacle is not your intention, it's the intention of the person who invites you – whether it's a museum or some event, they want to put Africans in a glass cage, that's what they pay you for. How you navigate that is another matter. So, you think with your little art intervention you're going to shift the paradigm – that shit just makes me humble. I'm like cool, cool. It doesn't mean I'm not trying to change the world, but I'm not just relying on that path at all. Last year, at the same time that France was voting in the extreme right, a self-declared white supremacist party as leader of the opposition, there was a blossoming of contemporary African art exhibitions in Paris. African artists were there, those who got a visa giving thanks for the opportunity to strut their stuff. So, I don't give too much importance to PASS intervention-this, Chronic-that. That's just what we do. What I think is more important is that we do it on our terms. Whether this issue on cartography changes the history of cartography, like we say in Lagos, 'Na oyimbo business'. What's most important to me is that once we think about doing it, we can do it, and we provide ourselves a critical apparatus to verify it on our own terms, whether it matches our intention.

We give ourselves the resources to make it, and so if we have to spend a year researching it, we do and those are the things I am focusing on. Every other thing is like Fela's record, like you deal with that shit. It's already been through the process, it's done. That's our gig.

Ntone Edjabe is a journalist and DJ based in Cape Town. He is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Chimurenga, a platform for editorial and curatorial activities. He also founded the Pan African Space Station (PASS), an internet-based music project. He is co-editor of African Cities Reader, a biennial publication in collaboration with the University of Cape Town. Edjabe has collaborated with numerous radio stations and publications, including Bush Radio 89.5, Politique Africaine, L'Autre Afrique and more.

Autonomy? round-table session 1

On 27 June 2017 Kabelo Malatsie convened a discussion about ~~independent~~ self-organised spaces and the notion of autonomy at Keleketla! Library. The participants included Simnikiwe Buhlungu, Mbali Khoza, Tšhegofatso Mabaso, Nyakallo Maleke, Boitumelo Motau, Refiloe Namise, and Abri de Swardt. Hosts were Rangoato Hlasane and Malose Malahlela.

Kabelo Malatsie: Do those that are practicing find independent spaces accessible and what limitations have you experienced?

Tšhegofatso Mabaso: My work is primarily research based. Most practitioners have to find other means of surviving to find some time to practice. That requires us to think about the ability to practice first, and then we can talk about independent spaces' inaccessibility. This often neglects the fact that there is a way to get to that space, that is somewhat inaccessible, and it's very simple, but very inaccessible.

Nyakallo Maleke: For me, the challenge has been being consistent as an artist. I thought I needed to have a studio space at Assemblage or the Bag Factory to be able to work, and that became something that prevented me from practicing. Now I work from home. You have to take every single opportunity and every space and turn it into a space for making.

Mbali Khoza: I'm just thinking of myself straight after graduating, and working at Stevenson, and having to juggle work while being an artist also trying to make projects that are interesting, particularly thinking around ideas of shared practice. I ended up working with Georgia Munnik, and we were lucky enough to get a space from Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, so the problem for us was finding time to work. Another challenge was trying to make it a workable space, because it wasn't the usual space like VANSA [Visual Arts Network of South Africa].

Simnikiwe Buhlungu: I want to say that they are accessible, but even if it is an independent space, you do have to know someone there, that's one hurdle to jump – to get into that space, even though it's independent. Just because it's an independent space doesn't mean it's an open resource. There has to be some familiarity with your work. I am still studying and, because I know the people, I have access to Keleketla!, NGO and Room Gallery. I don't know how accessible they are for others.

Refiloe Namise: Ja, it's the same for me – having worked in art spaces and therefore knowing the kind of language that is used has helped. Like Nyakallo, I was always consumed with looking for a physical space and when I did have it I didn't use it. I then started thinking of the collective that I am in, anticlockwise INGWEMBE, as a space – as a virtual space – because of the conversations we have. You undermine those kinds of moments. You don't think of them as spaces, of the collective as a space. Like in Alex, I work a lot with young artists and there was a space in Alex where we used to work from, the ITC Centre. Then it fell apart because it wasn't funded and well run. It was sad to see it close down because it was a great space. But then a lot of the artists would look for a space to meet, and they would meet at Alexsan Kopano, or people would meet anywhere in the hood and just talk, and I found that an interesting idea of thinking about a space.

Boitumelo Motau: I see a future in creating our own spaces, because it doesn't really have to be like this space, but we can basically create what we would like to see. Because everywhere you go, it's a space that you're creating in order for it to exist.

Rangoato Hlasane: I think Nyakallo started talking about the backroom as space that became, or started to have multiple roles – as a living space, as a working space. Our case, because we have collaborated for so long, we started because of our shared interest in Hip-Hop. We used our bedrooms in the Mariston Hotel as a space. But quickly it became a space for rap, and close to that it was poetry and singing, then visual work. We would design things like posters for our weekly events and also T-shirts of our collectives. Then that became a weekly space for people to gather.

The idea of starting a space, and how different disciplines operate when they are in one space, started from there. What then happened was that we started taking the so-called art techniques that I was studying in art school and putting them in another context. Where I was studying silkscreen on Fabriano that has a potential for being framed and going another route, it was then used for T-shirts in our practice, rather than making things that are framed and go on walls.

Towards the time of my graduation in 2007 and 2008, we had to leave the student accommodation and enter the so-called art world. Then the need arose and Keleketla! was founded through circumstances and encounters with other people, including being lucky to find the space at the Drill Hall. But the practice of encounters with people and making and sharing and building a network, basically, is what lead to the practices at Keleketla!. Almost up to now, really.

Malose Malahlela: For us, our rooms were basically a space in that context, and we never stopped. It extended to the audience because we catered for our surroundings. For us it's about finding out who is on the same wavelength. Who has money doesn't become a factor. It's about a network and tapping into that network for resources. So, that's how we were able to find access to the Drill Hall. We used the Drill Hall to expand our network and to share. Because it's easier when you're not alone. But this was also informed by how we started – by sharing our rooms.

Kabelo Malatsie: I liked what you were talking about when you were saying 'circulation of resources', and I guess I'm also interested in the question of what an institution is. I read a text by an economist called John Searle, who breaks down what an institution is. He describes an institution as a group of people who agree that a space should be. Then you have markers that signify that this institution now exists. For instance, a church has a priest who wears a robe – that becomes the signifier. You have a congregation that recognises that the church exists. In this sense an institution can take many different forms, be it temporary or virtual, which then dictates the type of structure – which informs how it is structured organisationally and how it is signified and recognised by those who use the institution.

Tšhegofatso Mabaso: Tatenda Magaisa and I started Rera Letsema under the mentorship of Rangoato and Malose. In the beginning, we too found ourselves applying for Goethe funding and afterwards we had to sit down and say, was this actually what we wanted to do? We knew our project didn't need it when looking at the institution we were trying to set up, which is in line with what you were saying. We no longer have the weight of problems we'd created by stripping it down to the bare minimum and saying, actually this is what we need. We've had the support and mentorship of Keleketla!, who have been asking us tough questions that made us go back and revisit what we were trying to do. And they also offered us the space, saying, 'Well, now that you've somehow figured it out, here is a space to work from'. And I think what is also interesting is the idea of autonomy as being temporal. It is far more realistic that our autonomy is limited to each other's spaces, where we make autonomous movements, and I think the funding and the resources also wrap themselves around that model as well.

Abri de Swardt: I do wonder if the temporary nature of some of the spaces that are now defunct, like Sober & Lonely, is really an autonomous choice. I think that there are moments where the temporary nature suits the organisation, but not necessarily the audience, or the artists that might have access to that platform. I think that's where the issue of funding becomes a problem, because that space might exist for you, and sometimes you have to pay in order to access the space. Sometimes space is free, sometimes space might give you resources in order to work, and sometimes you have to generate those resources yourself. Those are all, I guess, limitations within which you operate. I guess the utopian space is a space that exists all the time, which gives you all the money – but I don't think that space is here. So, I'm wondering how that space comes about? Maybe I'm looking for models that don't exist?

Kabelo Malatsie: What we lack is actually a dynamic landscape of spaces, those that are temporary because they don't need to exist for long, because they align with a specific project. Then we need to sustain other institutions so that they can exist for a longer time. But you asked an important question: How do we sustain them? An interesting model that I've been looking at is the church, because churches are mainly self-funded through the congregation. But if we are saying that as practitioners, independent spaces nurture us, why wouldn't you want to ensure their existence?

Rangoato Hlasane: Can I also just say, another institution, ephemeral or not, that is also sustained by its people, is the festival circuit. Essentially, the festival circuit is sustained by the supporters of that particular genre and they go through hard times, but they never stop. I think it's the same narrative of value as the church. The church gives people something of value for their support.

Tšhegofatso Mabaso: What you're saying is that we must all have the commitment at whichever level, whether you are renting out the space and bringing whatever resources you have access to, whether it's connections to people or media content. That we are all making the initial commitment now and forever, similar to a baptism, and that commits you to come every Sunday. I quite like the church idea really, because no one ever questions it, and they survive for years. It's just that as an individual artist you say this

space sustains my practice, my interests, and I commit to give whatever is available to that space or network of spaces.

Abri de Swardt: I think also that analogy might be applicable to independent spaces as churches of sorts. I mean people feel much more nurtured here at Keleketla! than going to Goodman Gallery, because I feel the experience is quite different. But should spaces give that much? So the question is, what is the nurturing capacity of a space? And should we nurture it? And how do we then nurture an economy and the system around that?

Rangoato Hlasane: Can I just bring your attention to this collective, The Nest Collective, in Kenya.

> *The Nest is a small collective of makers, believers and thinkers, living and working in Nairobi. Together we explore our troubling modern identities, re-imagine our pasts and remix our futures. In all our works, we prioritize the acknowledgement and stating of our different individual perspectives and privileges, we don't always agree with one another and our work strives to convey this dialogue. We create work together dissecting, subverting the layers of how Africans are seen and unseen, what Africans can and cannot do, where Africans can and cannot go, and what Africans can and cannot say.*

> *Founded in 2012, The Nest Collective has created works in film, visual arts, and fashion, such as the critically acclaimed film 'Stories of our Lives' which has so far been screened in 8 countries and won awards, and Jomajo, a crime detective web-series considered to be one of the best television series in East Africa.*

Now, here's the part:

> *The Nest Collective also created HEVA, Africa's First Creative Business Bank to strengthen the livelihood of creatives in East Africa.*

I'm sharing this because clearly collectivity is central here, and my colleague said that to be autonomous you have to be a collective. We know that the art world model doesn't like collectives – it doesn't know how to deal with collectives. Another thing is that clearly this HEVA thing, this creative business fund, has similarities to what we are trying with 'Skaftien' and 'Stokvel'. Both Skaftien and Stokvel had to take a rest because there's a lot of labour of love involved, and so questions of: should institutions nurture, to what extent, what are the limitations? Obviously, the shebeen is another further attempt at giving and expecting to receive as well. It's that transactional. So, I'm curious about this fund and how it works as well. One needs to check it out, because it's central to think about the livelihood of our community. Regardless of how hard it is, it seems that it's always central, in particular to many collectives, but I still don't see answers yet.

Kabelo Malatsie: If Keleketla! was a church, the congregation would make sure that Malose and Rangoato drive nice cars, that their groceries are bought, their rent is paid. There is a level of commitment that goes beyond the project and also sustains our livelihood, that is crucial. We need to study these models – Nest, stokvel, and the church. You know stokvels back home exist for twenty years without failing! They raise real funds.

Rangoato Hlasane: Ja, I think it's a question of stakes and value in the church. People feel that if they stop going to church they may not get to heaven.

Mbali Khoza: Tithing is part of that.

Rangoato Hlasane: Yes, but at the same time, to what extent do we ascribe value to art? What is at stake to commit to art like we do to a stokvel and a church?

Boitumelo Motau: You guys have been around for some time and I don't think this question of funding is a new one. You probably had this conversation before, and you've probably seen these models. Why have they failed?

Rangoato Hlasane: As I've said, with Stokvel and Skaftien as models of bringing in cash, and so forth, that people believe in, we stopped with the Stokvel because the money was not enough. The very conception of Stokvel was strengthened by a 'labour of love'. In other words, the art world and the community didn't turn up as much as we thought they would. So that's why I am going back to the value of church and Stokvel.and the community didn't turn up as much as we thought they would. So that's why I

am going back to the value of church and Stokvel.

Malose Malahlela: Also, it's semi-worked when it's not within a model of a church or a stokvel, but it worked in that there were people who were committed. It goes back to that gift economy. At the Drill Hall we were given the resources of space, time and everything else, so that a barter system excluded money. We were able to create a system which had more value to create something that is more important, that we can speak about. And the churchgoers, or you can use the stokvel frame, they feel obliged to be in this system and that they have to contribute. If they don't contribute then they fall behind, and if they fall behind what do you do? Do you punish them? Do we say last time you gave this much and that was not enough? For us it was transactional and immediate – it happened now, and then we moved on to the next project. Everyone contributes for a particular project that works for them without them feeling obliged to be a part of everything Keleketla! does.

Mbali Khoza: I actually wanted to ask the Keleketla! guys: are you in any way working with Wits when you have projects? Is there any relationship there? I just wanted to figure out how your space can work with other institutions without them having a hand over you.

Malose Malahlela: There's mutual respect, especially with Rangoato working at Wits. There's a symbiosis.

Rangoato Hlasane: It takes us back to the question of access, where we started – because the church, institutions, don't exist without any of us. I've been working with Wits since 2009. I joined in 2013, but between when I joined and then, we used them quite a lot. It was because of four or five people – Zen Marie, Naadira Patel, David Andrew and Georges Pfruender (who was the Head of Wits School of Arts between 2011 and 2013). So it's about people, and we know them. The art world revolves around dinner tables. You choose whether you go to that dinner table or not, at your own risk and calculation and leverage.

Simnikiwe Buhlungu: I think as a community we have to take responsibility for making people aware that the institution is not a messiah. When we walk in there, we should be aware that this is one of many ways in which we can make ourselves manifest as artists. This thing of going to art school and expecting to go straight to a gallery, stunts your growth, and you begin to think of how you can exist outside those spaces. I agree that we should be finding ways to introduce it. Even if people don't take the initiative, the conversation must be there. People should know that there's other shit you can do – I mean guys, the world is big!

Nyakallo Maleke: I was going to say that I think you also need try in a way to discourage this idea that you have to be dependent on institutions – I mean funding institutions – because there is a way to survive outside of them. For instance, in my situation last year, I participated in a residency workshop seminar programme and I had to rely on the support of my own family. I don't know if you could consider it a kind of funding model, in the fact that we had to brainstorm together: we had a car-wash every single week, and those kinds of methods. I mean the problem with suggesting that we can go to Pro Helvetia, or to Goethe for funding – there's that power dynamic which needs to be broken – and maybe thinking about family as a funding method ...

Rangoato Hlasane: Pro Helvetia and Goethe don't give enough for us all. There's so many of us. Nyakallo, your case was interesting. In your case your family understands the value of your work and the value of you going to Àsìkò, and that's not easy. And I think the money that we are talking about has a direct relationship to art appreciation in the black community.

Simnikiwe Buhlungu is a Johannesburg-based artist with a BA (Fine Arts) degree from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is a member of the artist collective, Title in Transgression.

Mbali Khoza is a lecturer and artist living in Grahamstown. She holds an MA degree in Fine Art with distinction from the University of Witwatersrand.

Tšhegofatso Mabaso is a curator, artist and researcher currently working in Johannesburg. She is co-founder of Rera Letsema, a Johannesburg-based research collaborative. Mabaso is currently completing a Masters in History of Art at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Nyakallo Maleke is an artist currently pursuing an MA (Public Sphere) in Sierre, Switzerland. She graduated with a BA (Fine Arts) degree from the University of the Witwatersrand.

Boitumelo Motau is a Johannesburg-based artist with a BA (Fine Arts) degree from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is a member of the artist collective, Title in Transgression.

Refiloe Namise is an artist based in Johannesburg. She is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand. She is a member of the artist collective, anticlockwise INGWEMBE.

Abri de Swardt is an artist and writer based in Johannesburg. He holds an MA in Fine Art with distinction from Goldsmiths, University of London (2014).

Autonomy? round-table session 2

Khwezi Gule, Rangoato Hlasane and Molemo Moiloa were invited to an online exchange over a three-month period convened by Kabelo Malatsie to share their experiences and thoughts on ~~independent~~ self-organised spaces within South Africa.

Kabelo Malatsie: What are the limitations of local, independent art spaces? The question of what is meant by 'independent' has come up a lot in conversations with a number of people and perhaps this is a moment to speak to the specifics of defining terms that are used by these institutions, and also to ask whether these defining terms (independent, alternative, artist-run, project space) are important in positioning the institution.

Rangoato Hlasane: For me, it is important to clarify what 'art' is. In this way, if we say 'independent visual art spaces' we will be specific, yet I cannot take it for granted that this is what you are referring to. I want to clarify because Keleketla! Library is not a visual art space but does not exclude visual art. Yet, Keleketla! Library has worked with VANSA[1] for many years now, and VANSA commissioned a 'music' project (Thath'i Cover Okestra[2]) of Keleketla!. Chimurenga has also commissioned an iteration of 'Thath'i Cover Okestra', a work across disciplines. I guess I am not asking you to limit your framing, but I think as an exercise this may be a place to start. Similarly, I have sketched out the inherent mutual interdependence of spaces, platforms and initiatives that are distinct compared to the competitive nature of the so-called commercial world from my limited knowledge of its workings. In fact, the commercial is only competitive because of the nature of the business if one thinks of the SWOT analysis[3]. But we know that they are actually in solidarity: they share art fairs, art historical gatekeeping, even biennials that claim something else. These are all part of the solidarity of the commercial world of art. On that note, one of the limitations is the lack of a healthy attitude to the interdependence of independent cultural spaces, as well as a lack of intergenerational dialogue, particularly with regard to defunct spaces.

There are, of course, several mutually inclusive limitations. There is a tendency to seek visibility in the space of the commercial. As a result, the commercial plagiarises the independent. This basically leads to a failure of the independent to conceive of and realise a new order altogether. In my experience, independent spaces fulfil a critical and much-needed role until they run out of the labour of love, while the commercial spaces continue, some of them clocking three, four, five decades in the game. Crucially, the independent goes defunct without even being historicised, hence no intergenerational dialogue. Then the wheel is reinvented over and over again.

Another critical limitation is indeed the very tendency for independent cultural spaces to be multi-/antidiscipline. As noted in 'Bigger Than the Tick-Box'[4], this leads to an incoherent business model, if there is even a business model. This is reflected in the structures independent cultural spaces tend to adopt. While the non-profit company (NPC) is most popular, there are also voluntary associations, trusts and the PTY (Ltd). But then you find us, NPCs, with a structure that is actually pretty much a business these days legally, competing with similarly structured entities. Then again, the labour of love runs out, as members of the independent spaces get co-opted into the commercial realm, thanks to the visibility, or even without it.

Molemo Moiloa: I don't think I have used the term "independent space" in years - I don't think I find the term "independent" helpful anymore. I find "project space" or perhaps 'experimental space' valuable in the sense of enabling experimentation and testing out ideas outside of the market. While Rangoato rightly points to the challenges of the intricacies of entanglement and co-dependence with commercial spaces, there is, without doubt, a significant problem with having no/little space outside of the pressure of commercial viability to "practice". And not being able to practice means one must just know and be an artist before one is ready – I saw this so many times at the Market Photo Workshop but it exists also with other young practitioners who are forced into the mould of commerce before they have chosen it.

I see then project/independent/experimental spaces as part of a broader ecosystem – and perhaps one of its most important parts. And without it we have unhealthy or "unnatural" forms of production – there should be artists who can choose to exist outside of or in a different relationship to commerce; there should be space for young artists to be free to make those decisions; and, most importantly, there should be space to determine art (as it might be defined) outside of its saleable value – perhaps in its social, political or transformative value. We have very little space for claiming this - in the sense that the global and forcibly inherited structure that determines contemporary art to be what it is has distinctly intertwined its identity with the market so that an art that routes/roots itself in a different space (community/communication/spirituality, for example) and from a different epistemological base, exists outside of approved frameworks (or, as Rangoato says, becomes plagiarised within the market).

That is not to say there is a definitive line between the project space and the market – certainly not – but rather to say that here it often feels like there is only the market, no other options.

Which brings me to the idea of "space". I wonder if the idea of space doesn't limit our understanding of the potential of interdependent (to use Rangoato's term again) practice and what it can enable. And whether it again doesn't emerge directly from a particular global and forcibly inherited way of thinking. For example, if we were to think rather of a set of relations and their generative and intellectual capacity rather than the "space" as institution, we might:

1. Reclaim art's potentiality in human-centred and communitarian life;
2. Centre the 'labour of love' that Rangoato refers to – and therefore frame it as temporal, of human origin and ideally non-alienated (or at least not most of the time);
3. Recognise that, particularly in a context like South Africa, it plays a role in people's livelihoods, careering and building future identities.

What I mean in point three is that if we take, for example, the roles of collectives in making careers (something that is often considered taboo within "artist-run spaces") when in fact we live in a place where career options are limited to very few spaces of minimal intellectual interest, and often political and class-based gatekeeping. Collectives and self-initiated 'spaces' can be the only way to create the career – to create the infrastructures of practice that otherwise don't exist for young practitioners locally. (I am thieving a bit here from ideas by the KUNCI Cultural Studies Center[5] and a report we are putting out as VANSA.)

Sorry, Kabelo, I think I have lost your question a little, but I suppose I am interested in these independent/project space relations in their potential for enabling autonomous thinking and practicing as opposed to their autonomy as structures.

Kabelo Malatsie: Rangoato, I understand your point regarding the framing being central to visual art. Visual art is a language in which I am a bit proficient so logically I speak from this point of view, but my interest in autonomy (individual and institutional) is concerned with allowing the experimentation that Molemo speaks about to continue. This experimentation does not and should not be bound to the language I use. The specifics of language at times are limiting and may lead to a particular closing down of doors due to a lack of language for articulation. The research is concerned with forms of organisation that allow autonomous practices no matter how temporary this may be. The experimentation of 'Thath'i Cover Okestra' is of interest whether it falls within visual art practice or not. This also may be because often the distinction between the different forms/media of art close things down and its use within contemporary art keeps the elitism alive.

I find the notions of solidarity and interdependence very important. However, when I think of this interdependence, very quickly it goes into "politics of the stomach, which" leads to a weird scramble for resources that does not lead to a solidarity within a community. Keleketla! Library, in some form or another, has been operating in solidarity that I think is an important distinction from the custodial. Here I am thinking about 'Cunty Power' party[6] which allows another way of sharing that does not speak on behalf of peoples.

Do you think it is possible for this interdependence to reach a level that Molemo is talking about in her three points of "space"? Of course, this brings us to a point where we have to deal with the different value systems and you have already spoken about the market, but there are other systems that could be tapped into, even though these have limits of their own. Here I am thinking of Medu Art Ensemble[7] and its collective practice. Often community/collective is in opposition to the individual, which the contemporary art world praises.

Khwezi Gule: My tendency, as always, is to apply the Marxist lens to reading social and cultural phenomena; in a nutshell, to consider their place within the political economy. So I would want to look at Neo-liberalism as the hegemonic ideology at the current moment. Let me take an odd analogy to illustrate what I mean. Take Uber, for instance, or what has been termed the 'gig economy'. The people trying to sell the idea as progressive suggest two things: firstly, that the Uber drivers are independent contractors and that they are not Uber employees and that Uber is actually a lift club and Uber merely provides the app. Hence, it is said that Uber drivers can choose the number of days and hours they work and thus they are free, and, secondly, that in this new gig economy is a natural progression from the kind of 20th century job market where one would expect to join a company in ones 20s and stay in that job until retirement. However, what has become apparent is that, in an era of deregulation of the labour market, far from being the

"natural progression" of things, these are a deliberate attempt by capital to shed the traditional responsibilities that employers had towards employees such as pension, set working hours, paid holidays, medical aid, workman's compensation if you are injured at work, guaranteed wage increases etc. Among other things, these kinds of employment and labour policies have ensured that there has been a concentration of wealth in the top 1%.

This trend has a number of consequences for art and art institutions. One is that there has been a gradual defunding of public institutions in the West and in South Africa, and a related exponential ballooning of the private sector investment in art. This didn't happen overnight. It has taken place gradually over the past 30 years or so. The irony here, and perhaps it is deliberate, is that just at the time when black people are making significant inroads into established public institutions, they also find themselves heading cashless behemoths which have become more and more dependent on funding. The other consequence of the defunding of institutions is that it dampens the drive toward the transformation of these institutions because you are not able to buy artworks by black artists; in some cases, these artworks are simply priced out of your market. Another consequence is that because a lot of the funding that is available is geared towards projects, there is not enough money for institution-building or training of staff and there is a bias against long-term programmes as opposed to short-term projects. You will also probably find that the admin burden also increases accordingly.

Now, pertaining to independent spaces and organisations, there are a number of things to say. One is seeing some interesting spaces that are not necessarily exclusively dedicated to visual art and there is a historical reason to this as well as an economic one. For instance, places like the Afrikan Freedom Station and Trackside rely more or less on a community of creative people, which is tied up with current movements in jazz and hip-hop. But in these spaces, visual arts do not play a central role in their programming. For me, this is probably as close as one can come, in the present climate, to patronage from below. Is there a possibility that there can be such grassroots patronage for visual arts? A couple of years ago I probably would have said no, but the literary space has shown that you can develop a small but loyal readership which you can then grow into a larger community that has events such as the Abantu Book Festival. Other independent spaces have to tether themselves onto existing cultural institutions, such as the Soweto Arts and Crafts Market which is pegged onto the Soweto Theatre and it has always been a bit of a touch-and-go situation. I heard from someone recently that the monthly markets have turned into drinking sessions. And the few times I went there I saw many young people but no one who might have disposable income actually to buy any of the merchandise being sold there. There was also a serious quality control issue in terms of the art and crafts being sold there. Independent spaces also have to depend to some extent on funding from either funding bodies or corporate money and are essentially constantly living from hand-to-mouth.

As for the issue of how independent organisations really are, one has to consider that in the same way as editors and journalists are free to write what they want, the issue of advertising and ownership does, at the very least, set the tone for what content is produced. So rather than having the owners or advertisers making editorial decisions they get to select what aligns with their interests. Because the contest here is not between free speech and censorship; it is between what will be on the front page and what will be on the back page, whose career will be advanced and whose will be ignored. Framing devices are as important to creative endeavours as the content.

So going back to the point about Uber and gig economies, I think you will find that far from democratising the space, the tendency towards freelancing follows the same lines of race and class privilege. So just as the institutional jobs are dwindling, and independent spaces are faltering and closing down, more and more people are forced into the gig economy. And far from being the panacea of endless opportunities, as one person once punted it to me, this freelancing is more like the scenario of all animals being equal but some being more equal than others.

Having said all of that (and this is the part where I give the rousing revolutionary speech, so brace yourself!), art institutions big or small are only a reflection of the bigger social forces that surround them. We can and should imagine spaces outside of late capitalist hegemony but we can never delude ourselves into thinking we can be "independent" of it. Nor should we content ourselves with merely negotiating for a better position on the floor onto which we can catch scraps that fall off the master's table. The future well-being of our creative endeavours also does not lie in pining over lost relevance and status of hitherto existing art institutions that never loved us anyway, but in a radical imagining of what kind of society we want

to have. In saying so, we cannot speak of a pre-conceived notion of what that society might look like. We have to rely on present struggles, fraught as they might be, to show us ways in which we can play a decisive role in shaping those outcomes. In that regard, we have to become much more involved in contestations over public space and discourse. Where were the voices of black artists during the 'Spear' controversy, where were the voices of black artists during the #RMF (Rhodes Must Fall) and #FMF (Fees Must Fall) and now in the Inxeba debacle? We need to stand up and be counted. And not all of this is either or. Yes, we need to take on the existing institutions and remake them in our own image, and we need to create those spaces outside of those institutions to experiment with different models and modalities of being and we need to plug into the current of already existing social forces that are already remaking society as we know it … This is a huge task but we are equal to it because we are the future and they (whoever they are) are the past.

Kabelo Malatsie: The difficulty I find is that practitioners are reluctant to find ways of responding to our context with its challenges (gatekeeping, lack of funding etc.) in ways that discard the inherited mould of these experimental institutions. In some ways, this has meant that the lack of experimentation on the institutional models has, in turn, meant a predictable experimentation by artists in these spaces as well. The model that is being currently used is that commercial galleries or selling artworks to collectors is the only way of practising sustainably, while there may be other avenues outside of the trajectory of the young graduate who exhibits in a project space and gets noticed by commercial galleries. However, trying to find alternatives should be experimented on, tested and investigated. The role of the institution in this experimentation would mean that this experimentation is done collectively. The institution becomes some form of a base, a depository of the collective investigation on finding sustainable and interesting models.

Molemo, the "unhealthy" forms of production stem from an inability to imagine and commit to institutional models that allow for experimentation on the artistic level. I disagree that institutions are stifling. I think institutions are formations that can uphold experimentations beyond individual ambitions. Perhaps, institutions that are tied to individualist careerism have tainted the potential of institutions. What Rangoato said about interdependence and Molemo's networks and relations that go beyond "space" is very important. Institutional autonomy can uphold autonomy on the artistic level beyond the limitations of individual efforts.

The definition below of political autonomy requires a commitment to experimentation that we all want but it necessitates formations like archipelagos or interdependence, as Rangoato said. This is a notion that Édouard Glissant writes about in relation to the interdependence seen in his creole garden. Glissant's creole garden speaks also to Sylvère Lotringer's definition of political autonomy that I found in Sven Lütticken's article, 'Autonomy after the fact':

> Political autonomy is the desire to allow differences to deepen at the base without trying to synthesize them from above, to stress similar attitudes without imposing a "general line", to allow parts to co-exist side by side, in their singularity (Lotringer in Lütticken 2012:1).

Molemo Moiloa: I think its interesting that this quote starts with 'political autonomy is the *desire*'. Is a desire for autonomy the same thing as autonomy itself?

I have recently returned from a one-week workshop about a network that VANSA is part of. The workshop was aimed at trying to understand why the network, Arts Collaboratory, isn't working the way we *desire*. The network comprises 25 organisations from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. And it's meant to be a non-hierarchical, self-organised network aimed at shifting our ways of operating, our relationships to money and our relevance to our contexts. What has been absolutely fascinating over the week has been recognising that we don't have the capacity to be non-hierarchical and self-organised – we don't have the skills of a "different paradigm" required to make that desired "different paradigm". The network is entirely experimental and, in theory, we are open to failure, and yet our ways of being, speaking, moving and organising limit the extent to which we can be truly experimental. We have learned to be in a certain way, and even though we desire another way, it's not clear how.

We might relate this to the decolonisation desire. Is a decolonial curriculum, one that replaces Michelangelo for, say, Medu? Or is it one that decolonises our imagination and potential for experimentation. Is a decolonial curriculum one that teaches non-violent communication, teaches non-hierarchical decision-making, teaches us how to truly collaborate and

make space for others? These are the very practical skills, tools, that we might use for this thing we desire. We can have a desire for certain things, but where do we find the things we desire, and how do they become a part of us – habits – if you will?

I think Kabelo, you may be right. There may be potential for institutions serving as a base for experimentation (I like this word, base). After all, we (in this e-mail chain) are all *based* in institutions of a sort – the museum, the university, the NPO, the company. And I am struck by the privilege of spending a week working on "being different" with incredible people and organisations – something that would likely not be possible for me outside of the institution, if I am honest. But when I am faced with 25 largely critical, dynamic, differently thinking and really challenging organisations that are collectively incapacitated, it's a bit of a knock. If we can't, who can? But then perhaps, the desire is enough. Perhaps we shouldn't place our value in arriving at a place, but more at the desire for it?

Notes:

1. Visual Arts Network of South Africa.
2. This is one of Keleketla! Library's projects, a collaborative Kwaito music performance that investigates the genre's meaning today.
3. An acronym for the study of a company's Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.
4. An essay written by Rangoato Hlasane and Malose Malahlela in the book *Creating Spaces: Non-Formal Art/s Education and Vocational Training for Artists in Africa between Cultural Policies and Cultural Funding* (2014), edited by Nicola al-Samarai.
5. KUNCI is an Indonesian collective with an open and voluntary membership.
6. This is a safe space party for all femmes, particularly non-binary and transwomen, hosted by one half of the art collective FAKA, Fela Gucci, and artist Tabita Rezaire.
7. Medu Art Ensemble was a collective of exiled "cultural workers" who were operating in Botswana from 1977 until 1985. The collective comprised visual art, theatre, literature, music and photography. Thami Mnyele, a visual artist and member of the collective from 1978, was killed in 1985 by the South African apartheid government with a letter bomb that killed eleven other people. The collective ceased to exist immediately after the bomb. Medu worked collectively and comprised activists who were against the apartheid system as well as white-owned galleries that exploited black artists.

Khwezi Gule is a curator and writer based in Johannesburg. He is the new curator-in-chief of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and, before this, he was the chief curator at the Soweto Museums. Gule has curated a number of projects locally and internationally. He has contributed essays to various publications, including exhibition catalogues, journals and newspapers and has delivered numerous conference and seminar papers on his areas of interest, the art field and heritage studies.

Rangoato Hlasane is an artist, DJ, scholar and co-director of the independent and interdisciplinary Keleketla! Library in Johannesburg. He holds a Masters degree in visual arts from the University of Johannesburg. His investigation focuses on the role of the arts in mobilising communities.

Molemo Moiloa is the director of the Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA), and one half of the artists' collaborative MADEYOULOOK. She has degrees in fine arts and social anthropology, writes sometimes and is interested in popular social pedagogies and everyday socio-political imaginary.

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Editor & Design: Kabelo Malatsie
Transcription: Pam Dlungwana
Copy editor: Tracy Murinik

ContemporaryOffice
Johannesburg, South Africa
+27 65 985 9218
contemporaryoffice@gmail.com

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