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PANEL DISCUSSION

IN COLLABORATION WITH MADEYOULOOK

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What is the potential of creative practice to enable new modes and strategies of research?

This roundtable discussion served as an open sharing session where a selection of young practitioners could reflect on themes such as claiming knowledge in unknowable spaces, claiming knowledge outside the epistemic bounds of the academy, and praxis as a research feedback loop.

The panellists were Nare Mokgotho, Molemo Moiloa, and Thulile Gamedze.

Molemo Moiloa [MM]: Nare and myself started working together about ten years ago, while students at Wits University, as a response to the nature of our education and the academy. Together we've been working around issues of knowledge production from the position of what it means to drive and pull knowledge from everyday black life. In many ways, the discussion today is an attempt to look at some of the questions and thematics we have experienced from our own practice. The idea is to bring together a couple of peers whose work we're interested in, who we think are connecting to the work we've been doing. Importantly, in situating this panel discussion within this conference, the practitioners we have brought together are primarily people who are working through creative practice, who are really interested in research as content, but also as form. So, these are the kinds of creative practitioners who are working with research as part of their work. We're interested in the ways in which the borders between creative practice and research begin to collapse. So, what we're trying to discuss today are some of the methodologies that emerge out of this collapse, particularly the sort aimed towards ideas of knowledge production. There are three particular strategies that we've selected to discuss today and Nare will introduce them.

Nare Mokgotho [NM]: Cool. So, our first strategy is working outside the academy, and here we're not just speaking about claiming knowledges outside the epistemic bounds of the university, but also about knowledges outside of the disciplinary revisions sometimes imposed by specialisation in the university. Here we're looking at experiences that were previously or historically excluded by the university; that were seen as possibly inconsequential, from everyday life, like orality. What is also very important for us is black subjectivities and the everydayness of that phenomenon.

Then, the second thing we want to discuss is practice as feedback and how artistic practice and the sort of discursive programming that happens afterwards (such as talks and workshops) can begin to collapse into one another. For this, we've invited black students to speak. So, in exhibiting work and speaking about work, you're opening up dialogue that comes back into the production, and you can have a kind of cyclical relationship between research and artistic production.

The third thing we want to discuss is something that's a bit more speculative, and we've termed this a "claiming of knowledges in unknowable spaces." Here, again, these are experiences that are very difficult to grasp: they seem a bit more intangible. So, Molemo and I will be speaking a bit more about speculative approaches, and our ways of trying to capture those experiences.

MM: So, by way of introduction to who we are, I've briefly introduced MADEYOULOOK —Nare and myself. The other person joining us is Thuli Gamedze, who is an artist and writer, and whose work we've been particularly interested in as a combination of writing and a kind of artistic practice, which prompts thinking through these two quite different modes of knowledge production. We're also interested in some of her more discursive and pedagogical engagements, and how these speak to our work.

The last thing to say before we get right into it is that we intend for this panel to be conversational: none of us will be presenting papers; the idea is to open up ideas. We've also invited Kundai Moyo, Sihle Motsa, and a few other people whose practices we are also interested in, and we're really open to a "sharing of practice" sort of experience, rather than a "papers and questions" sort of process. And, of course, you're welcome to ask questions. We're going to hand over to Thuli to start us off.

Thulile Gamedze [TG]: Hi everyone, my name is Thulile Gamedze, and I'm a kind of "in-betweener"—that's how I describe my practice. I started off by studying art and kind of wanted to become an artist. Then, in 2015, I was in Cape Town after studying at UCT [the University of Cape Town], and #RhodesMustFall happened, and this confused me into being less of an artist and more of an in-betweener, I suppose. So, my engagement started with writing from the experience of #RhodesMustFall. We had a writing committee, and I guess we started as an art critical movement, or something along those lines, because our practice took on a kind of embodied criticism of the imagery surrounding us. However, our practice was completely different from western art criticism—it was a criticism of consequence, and it was a criticism that made it necessary for certain kinds of action and certain kinds of education to take place. So, for me, that's where my practice starts.

A lot of my work has been as a regular art writer or critic (or something like that), and I have attempted to invite a kind of embodiment through art because #RhodesMustFall felt like a time when people felt entitled to be the ones reading images—which is not what we generally feel in the art world. Since then, I've been working between "arting" and writing and teaching. I guess my kind of little job in this situation was to write and think about what knowledge production looks like in relation to a response to the institution. In particular, I was thinking about this quote I saw in a YouTube interview with Nawal El Saadawi where she says, "You need to be aware, number one, because splitting makes us ignorant." She's talking about colonial education: "Education is based on splitting reality, you know, in dividing your head. Put here religion, and here gender, and here medicine, and here history. That's why we end by knowing nothing. But creativity is to reunite and to link."

For me, that's the kind of the approach that I try to take to whatever space I'm in—how do we find ways to bring our *entire* selves into the space and into spaces like the university? Our entire selves can, for example, come through as acting illegally or burning paintings. These can be what embodied research might look like, but there are also many different kinds of ways to be ourselves, I suppose. Any intervention that brings more of yourself than what you're supposed to "be" in the university is a useful option, I think.

So, one thing I've done, or been part of, is a collaboration with my brother [Asher Gamedze]. We go as "gamEdze and gamedZe," and we write together, and we talk. One thing we did was that we got invited to this UJ [University of Johannesburg] conference, a creative conference, which they have every year. It's a very traditional conference set-up, on a stage, and it's quite an intimidating space: the lights are in your eyes while you're presenting, and if you're in the audience, you're in the dark. We were trying to think about the ways that educational spaces are curated to indicate authority and inferiority, and what's lost in the in-between, when stuff is curated out or "split" out of you. So, it was by no means a huge intervention, but we asked for an extra space at the conference, and they gave us the pit underneath the stage. We called it the "School of the Undercommons," as a kind of "Hi" to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, and everyone else. And we used that space while the conference was going on, as kind of "underspace" of the conference: a space for people to draw and talk and invent in many ways, or express opinions, or incomplete ideas that feel less easy to say, you know, with a mic in your face or with someone holding up the sign that says "2 MINUTES LEFT." In a way, it became this alternative, concurrent space that was happening at the same time as the conference. For me, it's like there are many different kinds of ways to respond to the university. It's not made with good intent, so we need to see what we can use it for, and also what we *can't* use it for. I think in

spaces like this you sometimes don't want to talk about what we can't use the university for…

MM: So we asked Thuli to talk specifically about the idea of the production of knowledge outside of the university space because, I think, so often, conversations around art and research do end up very specific to these kinds of spaces and, of course, that brings up a whole lot of questions, which I think you've already raised. Part of why we're also interested in this is because it's part of the tradition of the work we've been doing over the last ten years; but it's also because we've been trying to think about what Nare introduced earlier: what we've been calling "unknowability." In many ways, I think it feels very well aligned with what Thuli's introduced as "unsplitting": the question of when we choose not to split these separate knowledges. When we choose to try to bring our whole selves, when we choose to enter into the space of incomplete ideas, where do we end up? It's not really where we are trained to end up. It's not really where we're used to being, and where we're comfortable. A lot of what our work has sought to achieve is seeking new knowledge forms, new ways of claiming knowledge out of everyday black life and often trying to unpack everyday practices, to reimagine ideas that otherwise aren't immediately available and obvious. What we've found is that this is quite a difficult way to work. Trying to find something that doesn't already exist is quite a difficult approach, and so we've referred to this as "looking for knowledge in the unknowable."

An example of this is a project that we did a few years ago called *Corner Loving*. "Corner loving" is a name that we gave to a practice where couples meet on the corners of public streets. It's something that both of us knew well [laughter], and we had a hunch that it meant something. For four years it kept coming up as something, an idea that means something, which we needed to go back to. But we were working on other projects, other things that kept our energy. We both work full-time, so we'd practise after hours, but there was this kind of hunch that there's something there. Part of the reason we struggled for four years was that, firstly, we didn't really understand why we were interested in this thing and, secondly, we weren't really equipped as Fine Arts-trained students to research and seek within everyday public life—or within kind of a historical sense—what this practice might mean. I also think we struggled because, in some ways, the idea that couples meet on the corner, and that you can call this thing "love," felt a little bit impossible; particularly because of the kinds of imagery of black sexuality that we're used to around the way people use corners and what corners mean, specifically in townships and the inner city where we both grew up. So, this knowledge becomes something that we're partly struggling to obtain because the kinds of popular imagery we've received don't enable access to this unknowable thing.

Over the four years of exploring multiple forms of visual practice, but also through other kinds of discursive practice, we were able to, kind of, piece together the project. Eventually, what emerged was a project that attempts to explore ideas of black love, and black love in a kind of ordinary, everyday, working-class life, and to try to articulate this in various forms. We've written a lot about the project already, and it's available on our website, so I won't go into a lot of detail, but I think the primary point of telling you about this is to lead Nare into discussing the feedback loop, which is one of the ways that we had available to approach this unknowable subject. One of the things that research enables, in this kind of practice, is to go back into the archive, to seek information not only there, but also in existing fictional texts, and then to commission new fictional texts, and to work with architects to develop architectural

plans of those spaces. Then we hosted a lecture series called "The Tenderness Lecture Series," where we tried to unpack some of these ideas, and then, further along, to develop a zip folder for the journal, *Ellipses*, and finally, to write a book chapter. So, what you see here is a kind of searching for a subject that feels quite difficult to access, but we were able to approach it through multiple forms.

NM: Yes, I think one of the ideas that resonates with me from your discussion, Thuli, is this idea of "splitting" and the idea of seeking wholeness; like bringing your whole self to the university space because there's this division of your cognitive self from your social self, from care, from affect—all these different dimensions of you that need to be brought back together. I was just thinking about how the seeking of "usness," and this "unsplitting" enables a kind of ease because I think what happens with this very hunch-based way of working, which we usually follow, is that it becomes quite messy when trying to capture something, whereas just specialising in one thing gives you the ability to actually just focus more easily. It's sometimes a good strategy.

That aside, let me continue from what Molemo was saying about the different elements and aspects of the *Corner Loving* exhibition: we had these large-scale drawings of corners and texts from archives, and then we had this lecture series as part of the exhibition, as a way of capturing the phenomenon from different perspectives. One of the other things that we do as MADEYOULOOK—and this has been a working strategy for us over the past decade—is always to have a process of reflection, but also of reiteration. One of the things we constantly do after a project is to reiterate it in other ways. For instance, as part of this project, we've gone on to publish a chapter in a book on friendship and love in South Africa. There, of course we got feedback on some of our ideas through peer review, which then fed back into the next reiteration of our work. So, for the past six years, it hasn't just been an exhibition, it's been multiple other things like the journal article for *Ellipses* that Molemo mentioned. This too received particular feedback, which then went into other explorations of "corner loving," and now we have an idea to explore black love in the form of a children's book. So, for us, all these research and production methods always seem to collapse into each other, then come back into production, and then production goes back into research. In some ways, it's also a resistance to, kind of, finalising something. We've seen that there's often quite a "dis-ease" and a disquiet around reaching a final definition: a final statement of the things we are trying to… "capture" is not the right word, but rather trying to "grasp and produce."

MM: So, to reiterate. We have these three areas that we're interested in: one is producing knowledge outside of the university space; one is the idea of the unknowable and seeking knowledge in unknowable spaces; and the last is the idea of the feedback loop, which becomes, as Nare says, a kind of open-ended space of research and then making, and research and then making, which becomes possible in this way of working. One of the things that came up in some of our discussions with you, Thuli, which I think kind of arches over all three of these strategies, is the idea of "undisciplinedness." Could you maybe speak about that?

TG: I guess for a while I thought it was pretty cool to be "de-specialised," to just do whatever. But I also teach, and I'm doing art history now as a sessional lecturer. So, although I knew that I had some sort of discomfort with the idea of specialisation, I've been trying to figure out what that thing is exactly. When we were talking the other day, I was trying to make the point that people and all living things are specialised, in

terms of having particular sets of knowledge that are useful to everyone else. You go to this person because you need to know this thing: that's a useful thing, and that's a social thing. It's a fact that people know different things, and maybe a lot about one thing. I couldn't, kind of, locate my discomfort in the idea of someone being good at knowing something. But that quote from El Saadawi helped me figure out my discomfort—it's not that knowledges are being separated from one another, but rather, that the body must become specialised in order to access knowledge properly. It's about this thing of splitting. If I'm speaking in a conference, I need to kind of sit in a certain way, I need to use certain kinds of words, I need to suspend whatever might be going on in my social or my family life and the conversations that I have with people. I must follow some sort of professional "trajectory" but, on a deeper level than that, I'm specialised according to a kind of violence. In the university, I'm specialised according to being quiet about things that I see happening and the institutional culture that might erase me, or somebody I know. I'm specialised through the way that I'm supposed to *not* respond to images. I'm supposed to *not* respond to violence, and I'm supposed to *not* respond when I see violence happening. So, it's not that I'm specialised according to what I know, it's that I'm specialised as this colonial subject under capitalism. This is because, whenever I use my knowledge, I must also reproduce the pressure from other people to become specialised in that way, and so the way that my knowledge enters into the world is through these really shitty structures. I suppose it's kind of about what it means to learn content that's going to be useful to students or to friends, but for that content not come with a structure that means, when I learn art history, I'm not myself. It means that I have to ignore the violence in the room, and my only way to access knowledge is through being specialised, which means through being oppressed, and oppressing other people. So, for me, specialisation is not about the content but about how we must take on structures and their violence.

NM: What I find very interesting about your practice is this idea of trying to reunify or make whole, in the exact same place where you have been subject to this process of splitting. Could you speak to that as a kind of strategy of importance, of locating this strategy within the institution as opposed to against or outside?

MM: I also want to add that I think Nare was commenting on the disquiet of finalisation for practitioners. What our three strategies enable is the question of what it means to practice at this moment and in this time, as people who are committed—sincerely— to a new form of political knowledge production, but have to work with the kinds of really problematic methodologies we have at our disposal. To seek new ones and to never really feel entirely comfortable in completely defining those—that's what's really interesting about your point of being "undisciplined" or "unspecialised." I really think it speaks to this kind of tension that many of us are working in, which is very particular to what it means to work through this kind of making and research process, but also to work through that process in this political moment in time, as the kinds of people we are. Do you want to respond?

TG: I'm not quite sure what the importance is of the university itself. I don't know if I believe in the university, but there are certainly people at the university; people will go wherever has potential. In terms of thinking through my practice, though, it's not quite academic because most of my work is a kind of art writing and takes place in the online space. But, in all of those spaces, the important thing for me is to define what the parameters are. We're dealing with the same parameters all the time, but how do

they appear in each space? What is the university classroom space? How can we acknowledge it? Where do we see the violence? Where do we see the potential for something? I guess that the emphasis is always on what people are doing in that space, and how we can together identify the way and the style and the texture of the coloniality in that space. It always tends more to do with us—us being split and trying to do something else—as opposed to questioning what the space is. We must look at the space.

MM: Sihle, are you keen to say something?

Sihle Motsa [SM]: Yes, I'm struck by the third strategy of knowing the unknown. Something struck me when you said that "the body must become specialised in order to access knowledge properly." What does "properly" mean within this context? Does it mean that there's a particular way—a right way—or does it mean accessing knowledge in a meaningful or a beneficial way? It's also very much linked to the idea of propriety: a particular set of rules and expectations within the institution that dictate what and how knowledge is accessed, how it's produced.

Audience Member: I'm interested in your description of the university as kind of a singular thing. You say "the university" as if it's one monumental thing, and I wonder if you can push that idea a bit further, not just to talk about "the academy" or "the university," because making art so often happens within the structures of certain constructs, sometimes its commodification—sometimes you have to make art that sells—and sometimes it's because of a gallery that you work with. Sometimes it's the academy; sometimes you need to work outside of the academy to find a certain amount of freedom, but within the academy, there are also a certain amount of resources that you need in order to make art. Perhaps you have a suggestion for us; if one wants to work outside of the constriction of "the university," where do you go? Where is your next stop and where do you make from, for whom do you make, and how do you make it sustainable?

NM: One of the things that Thuli touched on is the idea of the "in-betweener," and then she went on to speak about the idea of being disciplined. And I think with all three practices, there is definitely a relationship to "the academy" or "the university," and moving in and out of it. For instance, one of the strategies that Black Studio does is they have these public presentations within universities, using that feedback loop, and then, in the communities in which they work, like Umlazi and Thohoyandou, they will then present the same work. This yields very different kinds of results and conversations, so there's always a back-and-forth that happens, particularly when you work in a way that is research-led. So, I don't think it was necessarily about just drawing a dichotomy between "the academy" and the everyday, necessarily.

Same Audience Member: What I'm trying to push is the idea that, rather than thinking of yourself as sometimes in the academy, sometimes out of the academy, how about thinking of yourself as entirely in the academy and transforming it by insisting on change? Artistic research, I think, offers a lot of opportunities to do exactly that: to force universities to think differently about definitions of knowledge, not in their definitions of the production of knowledge, but the definitions of knowledge itself. What is it? What do we consider to be knowledge, or new knowledge, or valuable knowledge? I think, of course, one has to find spaces where you can actually create in the university, which doesn't often allow for that. I'm a huge fan of leaving the

university, but I'm also convinced that one has to work from the inside to transform institutions that already exist and to find ways to use the resources available.

MM: From my perspective, I'm not really interested in any engagement with attempting to save the university or not. But, I think your question around who we make for is really interesting. I think it speaks very much to Sihle's point around what is meaningful and beneficial. Thuli, you were talking about criticism of consequence, and this is something that Nare and I have really tried to think about, and have written about. It is *who* you make art for and *how* you make art that speaks at multiple levels. I think there are more and more people who are not particularly interested in defining themselves within a specific institutional framework. That framework is maybe not that valuable or is valuable in small ways, but I would be reluctant to let this conversation become about whether we want to save the university because I think there is some really interesting practice that's functioning in very complex ways and which move in spaces that are more productive and potentially offer us ways to start thinking differently in the way that you're wanting to. I'm specifically referring to the peers I mentioned in the beginning, whose work we're interested in, and are working in this space of collapsing research and creative-making. We're particularly interested in this commitment to knowledge production from black life, as a kind of "we" who are having to find out ways of working within that set of parameters.

TG: Sihle, you were talking about the "proper," and I guess I should probably have done some kind of [makes air-quotes] thing that alluded to my mistrust of this "proper-ness," or mistrust of any kind of space where we're not invited to be our whole selves because that same mistrust can exist in the family and even in relationships where we're asked to specialise ourselves so that we're acceptable to the situation. So, these kinds of structures are everywhere, including in universities or "the university." For instance, when #FeesMustFall happened, the response to an improper bringing of the entire self to the university was rubber bullets. Maybe, to try and link to the deeper question, three or four years later, *not* being proper has become being proper. In this space, not being proper has become the transformed, predictable, kind of space, and we see that this strategy of being improper is temporary. You can be improper, maybe for a bit. I guess you can disrupt things as one strategy for one moment but, in the next moment, it becomes proper, and it becomes transformation because you know you don't get funded to shut down a university. Then, a few years later, you can get a scholarship to go to Sweden and be a decolonial international student. So, those kinds of contradictions are very much in a room like this. You know, there are a lot of ways to respond: we could be angry, we could be upset, and we might be all of those things, but, potentially, the interesting thing is to be like: how on earth are we all sitting here in this kind of mess? Is there a possibility to source something from this, from seeing this process as it is? Going from improper, un-whole, and undisciplined, into the disciplined, the critical, the excellent scholar, while holding the space and being generative? While also having that weird, uncomfortable sense of: are we just being predictable? Are we beginning to reproduce the institution? Is transformation also another way to talk about reproduction? But, maybe that's what this space is useful for—to talk about those things. But, there are other things that need to happen and those other things can't all happen at the conference, at least from my perspective.

Kundai Moyo [KM]: I was really taken by what you were saying in relation to some sort of propriety, and I was thinking about how we hold space, or how spaces are held for us, in relation to the institution, or the academy. The image that comes to mind for me is around lectured–lecturer: the way in which lectures are conducted so that there's a person standing in front, and the light sort of hits your eyes, and the audience is always in the dark, and how that image translates or reproduces itself in spaces like this—where we're meant to be engaging in some kind of open discussion. But there's still this idea of the circle being some kind of stage, and then everyone else sort of sitting outside, not bearing the same pressure that we bear when we sit in the space. I was thinking about how that begins to limit the possibility of practice as feedback. Or it sort of begins to break the idea of potentially having a feedback loop.

Ultimately, I was struck by how this object-space relation, person-space relation, begins to feed even into the way we practice as artists. I think the reason why I was particularly drawn to work like yours is in how it offers an opportunity to walk into a space and go: "how is the space being held for me?" Because I feel like that's often what we're thinking, even as arts practitioners, when we're talking about holding space. We're often thinking about how the space is holding the art, and I feel that often limits a conversation between the work and the audience or the conversation that you're trying to have with the context, with the people that you're trying to communicate with.

MM: Personally, I'm far more interested in a conversation that isn't limited by the university. I mean, we're often on conference panels, we're often writing in Wits University Press-published books, which are all very academic forms, and yet neither of us are really academics. I think that's possible because, inevitably, our work responds to the university in some way, and I think the university inevitably comes up; it's going to be part of any conversation around research. But none of our research is particularly oriented toward the university or particularly interested in universities. We often use what we call "pseudo-scientific methodologies" as a kind of fake version of research. One of the things we're interested in, which we haven't really been able to discuss is the idea of the speculative. And, the space in which making is enabled is a much more open space. I don't think we need to feel super limited. I think there are in-between spaces, and I think there are really interesting people trying to find them. They're difficult spaces. They're uncomfortable spaces. And we're all struggling, I think. That comes out in a lot of what people are saying today.

NM: Just to add to that, is the idea of capacity, which was touched on earlier—the idea of having multiple audiences but also having a primary audience—and we do find ourselves in these spaces, obviously, to kind of confirm, to do more, to publish, and get the work out. But that isn't the focus and the ways in which people respond to our work is completely different from audience to audience. We've found in the past that, when we do write for Wits Press, for instance, we face this request to kind of translate particular things that we write about our work, which completely goes against what we're trying to do politically and epistemically, you know.

MM: Last word from Thuli.

TG: These things are all often sides of the same many-sided coin. For me to maybe try to re-say something I was saying before: it's a question of where I think artistic ideas or research might be useful. So, you don't routinely enter into a space or make

yourself part of a space, using the same methodology and the same idea that you can know something. You have to respond to the parameters given by each space. And, in some spaces like the university, operating as a full self is very un-strategic because then your full self can be disrupted. So, sometimes you're being strategic because you need the resources to take somewhere else. Sometimes you're being un-strategic, and you just want to be yourself, but those parameters exist everywhere else. And those kinds of capitalist and colonial internalisations are not limited to the university. But, for me, it's quite a useful space because it "makes itself" in many ways. It's quite transparent as to how extremely violent things can be in universities. But, by no means, is it the only one of these institutions predicated on oppression.

MADEYOULOOK (Molemo Moiloa and Nare Mokgotho) are a Johannesburg-based collective that creates interventions and curatorial projects, engaging knowledge production through experiences lived and practiced by people every day.

Thulile Gamedze is an artist, activist, writer, and member of the collective iQhiya, based in Cape Town, South Africa. She is currently studying a Masters degree at the University of Cape Town, researching and practicing creative and experimental learning methodologies framed as urgent artistic and political interventions; thulile.gamedze@outlook.com