

## **'NOTES FOR THINGS I WOULD RATHER NOT FORGET'**

### **MOSHEKWA LANGA IN CONVERSATION WITH KABELO MALATSIE**

**KM** The first time I read your emails I was excited because, having read the email in English, I could somehow hear your voice saying it in SePedi. There is something that Zanele Muholi said, that she writes in Zulu first and then translates into English ... Somehow I could read an English text in Pedi, which I found very interesting. I also enjoy it when one is not faithful to the grammar or the codes of another language in the translation.

**ML** Yes, it is beautiful, you can actually comprehend what the other person is saying most of the time. Dutch people speak a very strange English, and when I speak my Dutch-Afrikaans they say I speak 'baby speak', because that is what I sound like to them. And I could probably say the same thing when they communicate to me in a very weird assemblage of English ... But it is the most sexy, the most seductive, and it carries the most wonderful meaning, because it is in that breakage that you actually get a sense of what someone is trying to say.

**KM** I want to talk about the way you use language in your work, and the specific way you title things. I find it very loaded, maybe because I recognise some of the places in the titles, such as *Mogalakwena*, and some of the implications that some of those words carry.

**ML** Who do you address an artwork to, who gets to see it, who is excited by it and where does it end up? When I started to make my work, I was working in my parents' backyard in KwaNdebele. The people who saw me wanted to know what I was doing because I was clearly not working, I was making a mess. I tried to explain to them in Pedi, and my limited Ndebele, what I was trying to do. I was very young, I had just finished matric, and so I was always using overlapping descriptions of language to describe what something was. Those people saw what I was doing as witchcraft of sorts, but a very open one because it was not in secret. It became easier for me to describe my work in those terms because it was something that most people could respond to. So then I asked myself: what is witchcraft? I have always known about it, I have grown up around it, but no one has ever been able to point to who is a witch and what they look like. I think that the way they use language is something that is untranslatable, and I think that brought me to try and describe where I was from. So it became a kind of two-pronged approach, where you can see what my works look like and then describe what I make, and it is totally abstract ... to try and describe to everybody when nobody knows what it actually is.

When I got to the point where I started to use language very explicitly by using or recounting names, it became very interesting because the names or places that I was referencing or recording were probably very loaded for people who encountered the works. The fact that I

have used many names myself over the years – Moshekwa, Mokwena, Aaron, Mamabolo, Langa – was also a contributing factor because of the many different kinds of people that made me the person I was. The first question asked by people who understand Pedi better would have been: ‘Moshekwa, why, o shekiswa eng wena?’ I never got to the ground root of why I got that name because it was my root name, my latent name is actually Mokwena. When I started using the name Moshekwa it was because in my classroom there were people with the surname Mokwena, and it was also not very comfortable for me because it was not the name I used in general.

**KM** I guess I can count myself among the lucky ones because I have the visual knowledge to read your work and I can pick up at least some of the references in the text. I may not understand it in depth the way you do, but I do have some access to both. But what is your intent in using something that may not be accessible to the wider public, the people who receive your work or appreciate your work?

**ML** I don’t have issues with how people understand it or misunderstand it because I think that, when you are looking at an artwork, you have an attraction to it or you are repelled by it or you are fascinated by it ... I do not go out of my way to obfuscate meaning by using complicated abstract concepts by naming them in other languages, for example. It is a very natural thing for me because the way that I use names, it is an anchor, it is notes for things I would rather not forget. That is why it is a very explicit blueprint for me – for example, *Mogalakwena* is the name of the district where I come and it is also the name of the hospital where I was born.

**KM** Staying with language, can you talk about *Zebediela*?

**ML** One has to start somewhere, right? You make a thing, then you call it a thing, and then you give it nicknames and real or native names ... Sometimes it is confusing for people when they recognise it; for example, a place or a person might have more than one name. But sometimes when a thing is called by a nickname it is much more exciting, it is much more real or it is much closer to your remembrance of it than the official name or the official capacity.

That probably goes to how one expresses, for example: 'I love you', 'Ke a go rata' - I do not know if that can be expressed as 'I love you'. I remember from childhood experience, writing those kinds of things, that certain things can probably only ever be expressed in a certain kind of way. Going through my memories or recollections, that is a point that runs right through. I grew up with SePedi as my home language, and with Tsonga-speaking people who would speak Pedi to me; they would speak a private family language of their own, of the homestead. When I was 11 and I moved to boarding school this was something that was already very normal for me. It was not very long before I recognised that I was dreaming in English as opposed to Pedi. In that environment Afrikaans was the base language for most, and English was meant to be the normal communicating mode for all of us, but then there was Zulu and there was Ndebele and there was Shona and all kinds of other languages. And in that kind of context I learned to relate, to cut and paste things to make meaning.

I received a book from a guy who was visiting my school, which I was able to concentrate on at the end of my year - I spent my post-matric year reading. I was not reading it to understand, because it was not

understandable - it was a book by James Joyce called *Ulysses*, and I was having a lot of fun following this very weird, obtuse, abstract, descriptive and all communicating thing ... I think that what I enjoyed was how this person lived from a kind of poetic sense to a clear descriptive sense to something more rounded to something more scientific. And I was struggling with what to make of my own work - what is it? Because if it is a text, if it is a description or if it is a plan of something to be done ... probably in the end I decided that everything that I was making was what it was; it was neither, it did not need to have parameters.

When I started to make my things and to write my things, I was using an atlas that was in English and one that was in Afrikaans, and a geography textbook; I was using my Hallmark cards and newspaper clippings and sentences that I found evocative that were in other languages. At some point it occurred to me to make translations - I would find something in Afrikaans and put it into English, but then I would write both of them because they do not have the same kind of pitch or resonance. The same way that saying 'I love you' does not have the same pitch as 'Ke a go rata', probably because you want to divest yourself of the physical shock of uttering such words to someone.

I live with this kind of contradiction in my everyday world. When I am in Amsterdam I speak in English because it is easier, but when it is revealed that actually I do understand and speak Dutch it is something that makes people a little bit uncomfortable because now they are not at liberty to discuss me freely as they sometimes do when they think I cannot understand them. So it is not a philosophy, it is not a way of life, it is just how things are and it is something that creeps into my work sometimes. So that is, in short, how I use language.

**KM** Can I ask specifically about the title of an exhibition called *Marhumbini*, which is a Shangaan word, and in Pedi it is 'maropeng'; you translated it to English and you wrote *In an Other Time*. I found that interesting as your translation is not as simplistic as I would have translated 'marhumbini'.

**ML** Well, first of all I specifically used this word, 'marhumbini', because I was at the time very, very excited by the music of a girl called Ntombi Marhumbini. It was also interesting because I had just come back and I suppose I like too much Dakota music - I do not know if you know Dakota Vibe? It is in Polokwane, it is a music shop.

**KM** By the taxi rank, right?

**ML** Yes, exactly. Everyone hated me purchasing those Dakota tapes and LPs and CDs, but I can tell you that I kept ending up with sleeves and no CDs. Because nobody wants to be caught dead buying that kind of horror, but as soon as it plays they were into it. I think probably because Ntombi Marhumbini had a very particular image at the time, people thought 'ke moshwathla', you know, 'I cannot be associated with this', but they sang along to it and they embraced it and they realised that it was their thing. And you asked me a very simple thing and I am telling you a story that has nothing to do with your question ... I had spent a lot of time in Bakenberg, but at some point I realised that while I was from there I was no longer from there. I spoke my Standard Four language, which is what I spoke fluently when I left, and now they had incorporated other things into it and I sounded very bizarre. And I just loved what Ntombi Marhumbini described, if I translated it, because in a weird way

it described where I was. I thought that it was easier to intimate what I wanted to say, because it could only be an approximation ... and therefore, in tribute to Ntombi, it was *Marhumbini*. And to try and explain to the German audience what that was, because they could not even speak that much English, I used *In an Other Time*, because it wasn't 'another time'. I can't clarify it better than that.

**KM** Like with language, my sense is that you have a different way of using time that is not linear. You are referencing the past and the present and the future, and it is not even your own past. There's the sense that you are the maker of the work but there's also something else at play.

**ML** How can I say this, bare motho ke motho ka batho - how would you even translate this? This morning I was in Bakenberg and I was talking to my cousin, and actually I left yesterday to go home at half past eight to listen to the radio. We had to stop listening to music along the way on the N1 because there is a drama series that plays at a certain point and it is on its 2 000th episode and it is only 10 minutes but the world stops. I had my computer with me, but since the time that I left Johannesburg to the time I came back, it has been in my bag because there is no network coverage. This is today I am talking about, some people are able to survive in this kind of environment. When someone talks about radio plays it sounds very quaint, not of this time, but to recognise that to someone else this is their reality, they are not into surfing, they are not into emails or WhatsApp, they are like, 'I am going to listen to the radio' ... It is no longer my present, but by association it is part of my present because I was navigating through

that reality. So how, when I talk about me and my fascination and my history, could I purge such things? I don't know if I could ...

And so talking about time and about space, I will one day probably get on a plane and go back to Amsterdam and have a very simple time, and that would also be my reality. We were supposed to leave this morning at half past five but we ended leaving at 10 because there are other more dire realities that have to be faced. You reprioritise time as things might be. And I find that kind of time usage thing very interesting because it cuts across all kinds of platforms ... because when you have to hear someone the pleading is very easy to ignore because they are very far away from you, but when someone is there and talking about that 20 rands ya setlamo and you know that we have to go into Fournos and grab a cup of coffee, you do not always contend with those kinds of things at the same time. But maybe other people are lucky at never having to be faced with such questions.

**KM** I am interested in how, when others use somebody else's story, somehow it remains them telling somebody else's story, but I feel like with you, even though that story of the radio that was somehow not your reality, if you were to tell it, you would somehow inhabit ...

**ML** ... that situation-ship? I do not know, I think maybe I am not always adaptable but I have found that over time you are faced with a reality and you have to find a way to deal with it. But I think at one moment, when I was reading this book of this man, this one day of 6 000 pages, I did not even know what the story was, I just found it so compelling ...



Apparently it takes place in one day and he is able to evoke so many things, describing the door in front of him and whilst sitting on the toilet above his rising smell, and doing this and thinking about his makhwapheni who is with another makhwapheni and he says all of these things because it is probably a very brief moment but he is describing and even looking around at all these people and all of their stories ... I think it is very beautiful to make a capsule for all of their stories. And so therefore, in my particular gaze, that capsule is a snapshot that actually does not tell you much because you and I are coming with our many, many different realities. I am telling you the story today because I am feeling in a certain way and if you ask me the same questions tomorrow I will tell you otherwise. What I make are series of mental annotations and every time they are told differently, and so I cannot tell you the same thing because it is time and space-dependent. How this comes across in an artwork, I do not know.

**KM** Can you tell me your thoughts on boundaries? The boundaries in art that are imposed, or abstract boundaries of space, countries and things, the boundary that we somehow have between reality and the dream space ...

**ML** What can I tell you about that? Apparently there is this thing called prayer.

**KM** Prayer?

**ML** Yes, it is a string of words asking or clarifying, I do not know how to describe it, and it exists in forms in many languages across cultures.

What has it got to do with anything? I do not know but it is part and parcel I think of most people; it has got no particular bearing on reality, but apparently it does in some way ... A friend of mine was interested in religion, she posted a picture on Facebook, 'The Power of a Prayerful Woman'. I think it is a very beautiful thing, it is probably quoted from somebody else. But what is that, what is it about, what is prayer? I do not know.

So boundaries, you know, homeland system boundaries, language system boundaries - Sepulana, is that even a language? Khelobedu, is that even a language? SeSotho SaLebowa, is that even a language? Sehana? Northern Ndebele? Back then when I was learning in school you had SePedi, SeSotho sa Lebowa, what is that? What language did I speak at home? What language was spoken? I mean, in a homeland I am Langa, apparently the Langas are not Northern Sotho, they are Northern Ndebele, but how is that even possible because this is deep in the territory of the Pedi, but is this really a language? And these are real people, it is a real thing, but you do not learn about it and it does not exist for you outside because it has been carefully excised out of your language structure. But Group Areas Act, you were not allowed to wara-wara-wara, but they exist inside of those imposed structures. Why are you asking me about boundaries? I am not against the question, I am just ruminating on this thing. You know, water just moves when it rains; well, sometimes people can put things to imprison it ...

I suppose in trying to describe who Moshekwa Langa is, even for myself as a 17-year-old boy in Standard Nine in boarding school in the heart of Afrikaner territory, living in KwaNdebele, already there you have a couple of boundaries which are not interrelated, which are not meant to mix, but they exist.

**KM** When you work on an exhibition, do you work in series or with an idea or theme? Because to me it does not feel like it closes and opens and closes and opens; it feels like a *Ulysses* ...

**ML** Kabelo, this is a very difficult and simple question. Do I not sound like a politician? I think that I was already bored as a student, and I saw a very kind of repetitive work for any one artist and I thought, is this what will happen to you, is this what you are going to do? Is it not going to be more exciting to improvise and try and incorporate things that are not particularly desirable or interesting? Because when this Mr Bloom is sitting in his toilet, sitting in his rising smell, you know, it was very interesting for me that this person decided this was a normal part of life; he saw this and he decided that this is what he wants to highlight, to clarify, that at a moment nature called and life interceded and he did that. And what am I doing when I make work - do I sit down and plan, do I want to make landscapes, do I want to make things with wool, do I want to make things with threads, do I want to make things with toys? No, because my interest is sparked by so many different things that it is very, very possible to have more than 10 things at once because they are prompted by different desires and different needs. It is like taking notes, and so sometimes a medium takes over. I might be working with ink, and so the work might look like it is sequential, and then it looks like a series, and sometimes within that there is a break because I get distracted - maybe it was sunny and then it started raining, and then suddenly, I do not know, something else happened, but all of those things were made by the same hands at different homes and in different set-ups. I am not going to stop my process because I shifted my focus.

When I was making my dots, for example, I had been working a lot with colour and landscapes and alleged water lilies, and I had loads and loads and loads of different pots of paint and shades of colours. And it was Sunday morning and I wanted to make something and I found it very interesting to use the remnants of those colours to show the colour that I was using. I was not making anything specific, and so you have those five or six pieces because I needed to finish that lot of paint so that I could start something else. I was coming to the end of a very specific thought process and this was literally an interruption and it was too beautiful because all the colours were variations of colours that I desired.

**KM** You have titled your exhibition *Ellipses*, and you have three works that are titled *Zebediela*, *Mamokekolo*, *Kwalakwata*. My question is how you came to *Ellipses*, and how you use titles - are they descriptive?

**ML** They are descriptive terms. Well, *Ellipses* is only an explanation; something broke in the description and I am finishing it and I am just leaving it here for the moment and I will open another topic because I am talking about many different things and I will come back to it. This is what ellipses means to me right now. Now, you have chosen works and titles, one is *Zebediela*, one is *Mamokekolo* and one is *Kwalakwata*, and they are not related and related. *Kwalakwata Café* is somewhere in Mapela near Bakenberg. It was not far from my cousin's place and it was the first time I heard of anything sophisticated. I used to visit him and he would always talk about *Kwalakwata Café*, so this was a big thing for him and so I experienced *Kwalakwata Café* before I even went to the café - and café is not the same meaning as cafe. For years I wanted to go there and I never

went, then one night I drove past it and it was another place, but because I had already revisited it through the works and through my cousin, it felt as if I knew it. And so one day I went there as a kind of pilgrimage and when I was passing by I wanted to record this moment, because I do not think that the work you are talking about has even a smidgeon of Kwalakwata in it.

*Mamokekolo* is my grandmother, and I made an exhibition before as a tribute to her with her name, *Ramokone*. The thing is that when I grew up we called her Mamokekolo, and I am sure she has her names and she was known as Mamokekolo and there were other Mamokekolos around, but it was 'Mamokekolo o kae?' And I was missing her and I wanted to record that moment, that on this day I was thinking about Mamokekolo and I am not letting it rest and I am not letting it pass, I am recording that it happened for no other reason.

*Zebediela* was a place of mystery for me, always. For many, many years you pass Zebediela on your way to KwaNdebele and I wondered, what is Sebediela, Sebediela, Sebediela? And then one day I was saying Sebediela mustn't be Zebediela, it must be ... and who am I to be correcting a people that call a place Sebediela and why is it Zebediela? I have no particular relationship with Zebediela other than that my aunt now lives there, but I've never been to that home because she now lives in Olifantsfontein.

After deliberating about a million other things I was writing notes about what I was doing because, you know, there's just tons and tons of things that I could write that relate to the impulses that made me start the work. There's a brand new body of work that I created in the middle of November, or in February, that I hope to have on this show and it is

slightly different to anything else that I have in this show, it is just a little bit smaller, it is not very detailed. And I think I spent a few days in my own space, not going out and not interacting, I do not know if I was depressed but I was not going out and not eating right. There is some text in those works. Maybe I was also wishing I was somewhere else, I was wishing that I was in Zebediela or I was wishing that I was with my gran.

Are those things important? They may sound less important because those things sound a little sentimental, but those things, for me, they feed what I am doing. Because you do not have to do things, but sometimes there I was in Amsterdam, my phone not ringing, no people asking for bus fare, no people asking for things, and I was wishing that I was in South Africa and I was with those people - but now I am in South Africa and I am avoiding those people ...

**KM** So in some ways these markers, annotations, notes, take it back to 'things that are happening around you'.

**ML** I make things that reflect my life and sometimes I make things that reflect other people's lives and other stories and anecdotes and other things that I find compelling, and sometimes I pull from theatre and I don't write theatre and I don't perform particularly, but I borrow elements from all of those. So I do what I do and somehow maybe there's a small part of me that is performing to Kabelo, when I am drinking this drink with her this afternoon coming from Limpopo, talking about things that we cannot see but talking about the concepts. This is a performance on its own and all of these things that we are talking about and the laughter is going to

be whittled down to something that we are trying to read and make sense of. And I'm trying to get deeper and deeper into it and right now I am trying to avoid phone calls about other people and getting messages and I know that there is a lot going on, and nothing ...

**KM** Do you think that you will ever have a full stop, something that says, 'This is Moshekwa. Moshekwa Aaron Christian Mokwena Mamabolo Langa'?

**ML** Maybe I will find another name; I will stop that process when I am dead and cold. I probably can find an easier process, and it would make life easier for everyone even though I know that I am doing this because of this and because of that. Are we not all in our own ways writing our own biographies from the ways that we choose to interact and not interact with people? There is nothing more pure or more real than anything else. We are perpetually engaged in our own thing, in our own performances of our own biographies.