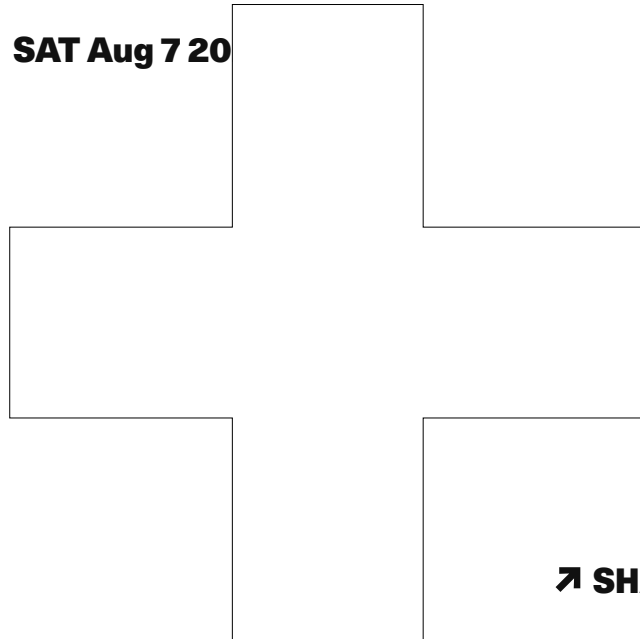


VARIOUS ARTISTS

Finding Ways Out: In Conversation with Kabelo Malatsie

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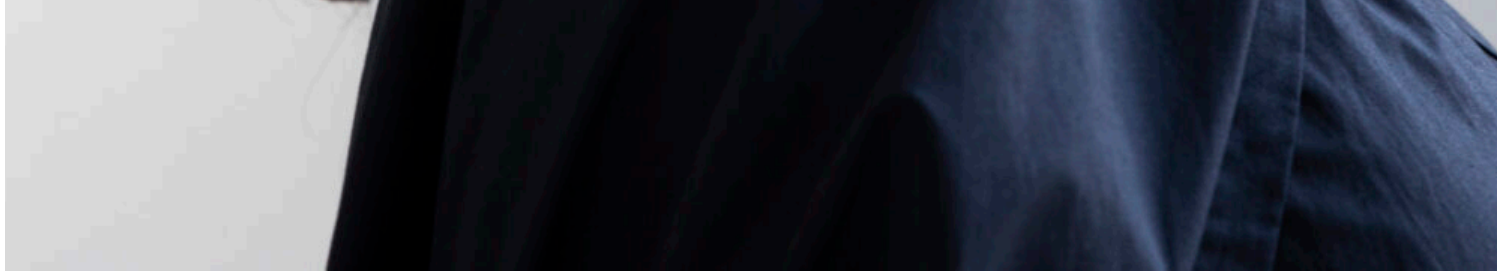
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Over the past years, the South African independent curator and gallery director Kabelo Malatsie has approached the question of (in)dependence in different roles and functions. As part of this work, her interest keeps returning to seemingly trivial and everyday matters and, beyond that, to processes and methods outside of contemporary art as a discipline per se. Instead, so it appears, Malatsie prefers a very broad conception of culture, which ultimately includes the domestic domain. In her role as a curator she insists on not thinking through art and the artistic in separation of the domestic and the mundane; rather, she advocates an understanding of both as equal and connected forms of acting: as moments in which something is tried, told, and lived. In June the ↗Kunsthalle Bern announced Malatsie as its new director. Swiss author and artist ↗Lucie Kolb spoke with Malatsie for V/A in the context of our ongoing theme focus ↗Alliance. She asked her about her attitude towards and perspective on artistic and curatorial practice as well as working in and for institutions. In the interview, the designated director speaks about her interest in finding new ways to illuminate the processes and work beyond representative end results and to explore the nature of what counts as artistic practice. For V/A, Kabelo Malatsie was photographed in Kapstadt by ↗George Mahashe; she was styled by Unathi Mkonto; makeup by Xola Makoba.

Text LUCIE KOLB

Photos GEORGE MAHASHE





LUCIE KOLB You've been the director of VANSA (2018-19), an artist network that promotes artists' rights. You've curated solo and group shows, individually and collaboratively, in galleries, museums, and biennales (most recently the Yokohama Triennial 2020). You've also participated in exhibitions yourself and you have published *Autonomy?* (2018), a study about self-organization and institutional frameworks. I'm interested in how you navigate these different roles and how they influence each other.

KABELO MALATSIE My ambition wasn't curatorial practice because, in the beginning, my understanding of it was limited. I wasn't excited about just putting works on walls in any institution; I was happy doing research and working with artists in the background. When I was working at Stevenson, a commercial gallery in Cape Town and Johannesburg, I felt sad that objects in exhibitions were not able to sustain the depths of these conversations. So I got interested in the interview form: conversations that would enrich and show a way of thinking and doing. So, we get an intimate understanding of practice, a sense of the process, rather than how I make this thing. When I was working in this context, I met people from artists to collectors and curators, and I saw that there's a gap between big commercial galleries that control the narrative of Contemporary Art because of their resources, high circulation, and mobility, and museums that tend to be structurally weak in South Africa. I wanted to explore this gap and investigated independent and experimental practices in the framework of my book *Autonomy?*. It was to answer the question: how do we find a sweet spot for experimentation in

institutions where we are temporarily independent of the impact of soft power by external funders? The interview was the form I used to speak to people who have started such experiments. I wanted to map out those practices, show how they managed to exist, and also explore their pitfalls. How were they able to disentangle themselves temporally from self-censorship, which comes with the implicit and explicit agendas of external funders. When I applied for the VANSA job, I wanted to see what this “theory” looked like in reality – and it was worse. At VANSA, I intervened on a holistic level, putting forth topics such as health and labor, research gaps and filling those gaps. This meant working on a governmental level, trying to take care that artists are being seen in the ongoing development processes of national health schemes. But it’s difficult as politicians don’t keep their jobs long enough for your intervention to have an impact. Such a (curatorial) approach doesn’t manifest in shows or workshops, and it is hard to sustain as operational costs are hardly ever funded by local or international funding bodies. They want you to make an exhibition; they want the PR photos. How do you make visible the processes of labor and research within a funding landscape that is more interested in end results, in exhibitions and productions?

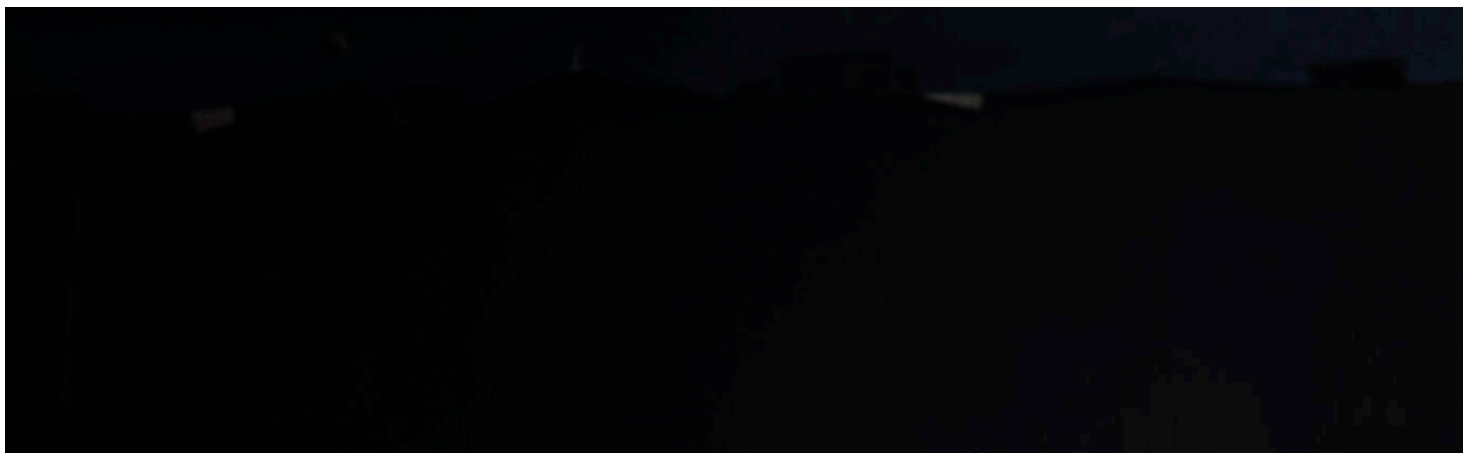
LK I find these questions regarding the relationship between funding structure and artistic and curatorial practice to be crucial. In Switzerland, there’s an initiative called “Wages for Wages Against” which works towards having an open discussion on artistic labor. It highlights practices that aren’t always necessarily oriented towards an exhibition or some other representational output. The initiative is more interested in processes on a governmental level in the sense of infrastructural work; that is, it is similar to what you aimed at with VANSA. In my research on institutions as a way of life, I look at artists who have started to work on the institution, trying to

render visible structural issues, and to intervene in them in a meaningful way. You have described your practice as something that “remakes and rereads the world we inhabit.” You have conducted research on the infrastructures of contemporary art, but you also have developed practical suggestions as to how to remake contemporary art.

*Separation is unproductive,
essentially.*

KM For me, the definition of contemporary art as a discipline has become less and less interesting. We have a working model of what we mean by it: the industry and the way it functions. But this sort of categorization of what contemporary art ought to be is something that the West tends to do. If you are a cook and a philosopher, you don't have to be a cook at this time and a philosopher at that time; you can be a philosopher while cooking.

Separation is unproductive, essentially. I think in this sense, the notion of practice has expanded for me, and I don't much care about if a certain practice is considered to be contemporary art or not. For me, it's important to find ways to avoid becoming a silo. Silos tend to create an echo chamber, where you don't get inspired by other disciplines and don't speak to others because you think your thing is so particular.





LK I like how you're saying it doesn't even matter to redefine or remake contemporary art, which relates to another issue I wanted to talk to you about: your notion of the underground, which seems to be relevant for you.

KM I'm not a curator who has a theme that pops into my head every other day. I have just one idea: following my interest. The question of the underground came when I was researching independent spaces because there you find collective practices that could be considered underground—they persist beyond categories. I'm interested in people who persist, who do things that aren't seen, but still they keep doing it. I'm reading that as a way of being underground. I'm not thinking of underground as a geographical space that is physically underground, or in the sense of underground music, or political movements, resistance. I want to stretch that by saying that people who do things that don't make sense are doing some work underground. You would imagine that they would stop at a point if they don't get recognized, but some keep going. That persistence interests me, like the autodidacts I was talking about earlier: the cooks who are philosophers. How do these practitioners operate? What is their model? As they keep doing their thing, they must have a model. I want to understand these models and see whether I can get something out of them. That's why the underground for me is generative.

LK This reminds me of the notion of undercommons that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney talk about in their book: an unmapped and unmappable non-place where daily activities are considered to be a collective form of knowledge production, which is what they call study. You've now spoken about underground as a practice of others – how do you apply what you learned in your practice?



KM It's linked to the notion of undercommons. There's a South African scholar, Njabulo Ndebele, who writes about domesticated knowledge, which is knowledge that is not scholarly, not referenced, not factual. You can read the domestic in terms of cooking, gardening, and all of those practices, and in terms of embodied knowledge: things like goosebumps. I'm working with that methodology. I'm not interested in truth, othering, or countering anything. There are precedents such as James Baldwin and his conversations on the dinner table in the south of France, which are about another way of knowledge production and collaboration. Or Bessie Head, a South African writer, with her gardening practice. For me, curatorial practice is not higher or lower than any of these practices. It is just one of them. I'm not interested in gardening or cooking as a practice per se, but doing the thing and for it to lead me somewhere, to inform my practice. It has to do with the body, thinking while doing. Coming from South Africa, there's a trajectory of people thinking and doing the work. Sharing knowledge was not something like: now, let's all sit and share knowledge. It could all happen simultaneously and much more fluid. I'm hoping for that fluidity, that space where things melt.

LK So you're not interested in cooking as a format or a genre, but as a method?

KM I'm interested in cooking, not in showing the meal. Curatorial practice doesn't have to be me showing anything; showing could be in some text written afterward. But I also have done things where I have shown things. For Yokohama, we had a scenography in Johannesburg that included plants. They came in as a story. There's a story about a plant that protects against lightning. We then found an air factory in India that uses snake plants, butterfly palms, and golden pothos to clean the air, and we also found an

inconclusive study commissioned by NASA on these three plants from the late 1980s. This is an example on how gardening may come into my practice—as a story I’ve heard. I’m thinking about domestic labor, or what people call feminist or women’s work and the idea of stories. How you get a lot from stories. First, I thought storytelling was very much a South thing. I thought storytelling was overburdened. I was doing a video screening from a collection, and I decided for the publication to include my grandfather’s stories. Instead of having an artist’s statement or work description, my grandfather’s anecdotes followed the video stills. There was a video by Tracey Rose, and there would be a story about Lourenço Marques or something. I went home recording him telling me things, and then I transcribed that.

LK Why would you say that the story was overburdened as a form? Hearing you talk about it, I’m reminded of autofiction and auto theory as a feminist practice that draws on diaries or these types of narration that are more in the domestic realm and come into play in the world of theory making as a political tool. Is that a line of thinking you would see storytelling in?

For me, to always counter something is difficult. It’s labor that I feel is unnecessary.

KM Many practitioners from the South, particularly women and people from the queer community, relied on stories as a model. I was unsure of it because it came with marginalization whereas the realm of fact and objectivity was the realm of men. The marginalized body would come in as a storyteller, as something that is non-factual. That’s why I hesitated. Once I realized that

I'm no longer interested in fact in that sense, that's when it opened up differently for me. For me, to always counter something is difficult. It's labor that I feel is unnecessary. It's like when we're talking about feminism, having to prove your worth to a man. No need for that proof. Trying to convince someone of something is labor that prevents me from doing what I want to do. That's why the notion of countering any narrative for me is not productive.

LK Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet talked about a line of flight; and a particular mode of flight where you grab a weapon on your way out – so even in flight you're still part of a political struggle. You're not just going away, moving elsewhere. You're moving elsewhere in a way that still is somewhat of an opposition, I'd say. Would you move away from that, the opposition, the countering altogether?

KM I'm interested in finding ways out. There's a jazz musician, Jonny Dyani. He talks about contributing and a method they developed to play a song over 24 hours. The repetition is a method of understanding the song. You unpack the piece to find out what it is made of. That method, for me, of course, is a counter. Whatever I do will be countering something. The important part on my side is that I don't intentionally work in opposition because my energies are diverted. Now I'm speaking to someone and not to myself. I agree that everything is political in that sense. I use my practice to give myself more freedom, make more space for myself, be more daring, and be more playful. That, to me, is flight. Dyani talks about how when you're making something, you're contributing. For him, that existed outside of popularity. He wasn't doing it for any external validation but himself. That's something I aspire to get to. I like practitioners who do things persistently. I'm interested in understanding what their drive is, what keeps them going.

What about your research on institutions as a way of life and how that's going, for example?

LK It's a collaborative project. We've been working on a mapping of practices that do policy work as an artistic practice. Similar to you not being interested in gardening becoming an art practice, we're not interested in the institution becoming art, but rather in putting the methodology of the institutional approach to the forefront. It's hard to map these practices because most of them are so marginal and hidden, and they use different words to frame and describe themselves. I've also been working with storytelling. When writing about ongoing institutional practices, I somewhat realized there's a specific danger for you to freeze those practices. That's why I now moved to the fictional realm, to storytelling, to find a different approach to talk about institutional politics and institutional labor.

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KM In the Yokohama biennale we created a moment for the institution to see itself. It happened by accident; it wasn't intentional. For example, one of the projects was to have docents (museum guards) carry radio transmitters. Each time they would pass by each other, there would be a frequency overlap. They usually wear a black and grey uniform. When we tried to

change the uniform for the project, the institutional apparatus became apparent to us. You could see layers of hierarchies, protocols, cultural differences, and language barriers when you asked. We had tons of meetings over months. It still wasn't possible to change the uniform. In another project, we realized that institutions are the people. A lot appears to be a policy first, but if you dig deeper and ask for the policy document, it doesn't exist. Often policies are a performance of authority, performed by people working in the institution. Looking at it in this way, the institution becomes people and thus also becomes tangible.

LK I agree, but are there certain institutions that we would need to abandon altogether? Because too many people are performing the institution in a sense that is not negotiable anymore?

KM I'm for leaving big institutions. I was reading Ivan Illich. He mentions this moment when an institution solidifies and becomes this thing that is no longer close to its intentions but keeps perpetuating itself. Everything from that particular point onwards becomes about its perpetuation into infinity. Illich is essentially saying that every institution, however big or small, has a window. Unless it breaks organically, it keeps going. You see this in collectives and bigger institutions. Initially, the intention was good, then they had that moment of formalization, and it keeps cascading, keeps getting bigger in terms of structure.

LK I'm also interested in the need to perpetually create cracks or openings to avoid the moment of stagnation. Earlier, you talked about persistence, but with a positive connotation.

KM Paradoxically, I'm interested in persisting on an individual level—not on an institutional level. I think institutions have an expiration date. It doesn't matter how great they are. When they reach their expiry date they need to stop. Either to give way to their decentralization or to one or several new institutions that replace them. Every institution needs cracks to let the air in, it needs to be a part of the ever evolving cultures.

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