

chief, also on a stool, address their grievances or make announcements. Whenever there were grievances or even community ceremonies, they would be held on level ground with everybody sitting on stools, the idea being: let's all sit together, let's talk about this. My stool design was simple, light and easy to carry. That's one of the things that informed how I was going to design and make them because I wanted to instigate a situation whereby people could copy and make them themselves, carry them easily in a taxi so that they could bring them along the next time they came to the Refugee Reception Office. In Göteborg I wanted the stools to create the idea of a levelled ground facilitating important dialogues.

It's interesting to see how your work does seem to adapt and evolve in different contexts, so you've got the internal space at the gallery and you interact with the architecture, but you're also fed by the outside world, placing your sculptures outside and seeing the sky and how they interact, and then placing them out in the world. In the future do you see your work taking more of a presence outside in the public domain?

It's something I'm open to. I don't want to be set in thinking that my work only exists here and in this particular way. I don't want to be set in anything; anything pretty much goes.

This conversation took place at Stevenson, Cape Town, during the installation of Nitegeka's solo exhibition *Black Passage*, on 8 October 2015

2.

Mawande Ka Zenzile



Sharing ground, staking claim

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!
– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

*Allow me, allow me to be myself! There's not only one world view,
there are multiple world views ...*
– Mawande Ka Zenzile

The following texts are extracts from a number of conversations with Mawande Ka Zenzile. Our exchanges unfurled as a kind of excavation – unearthing battlegrounds and digging up gems. Each utterance would cause a renegotiation from one moment to the next, and when some kind of shared footing could be found we would venture together, a little deeper under the surface.

Ka Zenzile is completing his MFA, preparing for his dissertation entitled 'Decolonising Visualities', and our first conversation took place in his studio at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town. We talked about artist education in Africa and the West; of challenging Western-centric curricula; his fellow students who have been moved to protest and the empowerment of doing this from within. Over lunch and before the 'official' recorded conversation, we exchanged ideas for a second time. We spoke more freely about the importance of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and his ability not only to observe but to newly articulate British culture because he was acting from a deep internal knowledge of its systems. Just 30 minutes later we sat again in Ka Zenzile's studio; this time, by chance, our seats were almost side by side but we were facing in opposite directions. Our exchange was stilted, and I have come to realise that, at that moment, we were entangled in a struggle for representation. I am reminded again of Hall when he explains that:

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation. ... though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who

is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place.
(Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, 1990)

Towards the end of the interview, at a loss, I asked Ka Zenzile to tell me what he is thinking about when he approaches his materials. His vivid response can be read here in part I. I ended the recording feeling acutely that Ka Zenzile and I were far from being 'in the same place'. I admitted my sense of failure and asked Ka Zenzile what questions he would've asked himself in my position. His response was affecting and I pressed record. In this fourth conversation, reproduced here in part II, Ka Zenzile articulates his view of the world. On his own terms.

I

Hansi Momodu-Gordon:

What are you thinking about as you approach your materials or as you make your work?

Mawande Ka Zenzile:

Sometimes I even believe that I'm not thinking. I'm playing loud music, there's smoke everywhere, I dance ...

What music do you play?

I play all kinds of music. I play Wasulu music from Mali, I play a lot of hip hop, the commercial stuff, but it depends what kind of thing ...

You were listening to trap last time I came.

Yes. Lately I have been listening to a lot of Future, the very interesting sounds that he's making. I like that someone is a workaholic like myself because I immerse myself in my studio. And I think it's a very holy space, even though I have to work on this one, go back to it and burn *impepho* every day to just get rid of the ghost of this place. But anyway it's a magical space to be in where thoughts, a lot of feelings and vibrations happen, and this is something that someone else cannot experience – or maybe might experience but not in the same light because the spontaneous moment of making an artwork, the kinds of things that I do when I'm in my studio, you can't imagine.

Can you tell me?

No, I can't expose myself and that's the beauty of it – that it has to be that mystery. But it's fun for me, I just jump around. When I work I'm having fun.

So there is a playfulness, there's definitely a playfulness.

Of course, it has to be there, I mean this thing heals me ... I think that's the most important part for me: the process, the art-making, it heals me, it makes me alive and it makes me forget about traumatic things. Sometimes I take that energy, that negative energy, and then I just throw it into these things and by that I get some kind

of satisfaction which someone else from outside can't imagine because I'm the only one feeling it. Even by applying something on the surface, whether it's a colour or whatever, it's still driven by the impulse, it's still driven by the feeling. Or a colour will come into my head, aha! and I'm like, I'll use that one – finally I've found it. And I'm not thinking about complementary colours, primary colours, and how in the art historian tradition they deal with visual schemas; that's not what's in my head. I work with emotions, I work with feelings, I work with the impulse. It tells me: 'No, Mawande, put this colour' – because this colour excited me and I want to fill the entire surface with this colour and so that's what I do. So in any work that you see in front of you I suffer, because I go through a lot of stress if I can't find the right thing, until that moment when I find the right solution for the work and all the stresses just go away. There's something not scientific, something not mathematical about the process. You can't say this plus that equals that, no, no. That's not how I work unfortunately ...

Fortunately, I think.

So for me, specifically for this work ...

You're looking at the self-portrait that you have here in the studio.

Before the rational, the contextual and the explanation, which you are bringing now, I felt like doing it like this.

I thought, I need something like this. It's not because of any reason that I know of, it's just something that I felt. I always say to people that the rationalisation and all that crap, it comes after – because for me it's not important. I make culture, I make things, so what is important for me is the relationship between me and the making. The rational has to do with other people and what their perception of the world is and what they want to see in the thing. Where I get involved is where people start to assume or start to impose – there I get involved, but otherwise I am so detached from the idea because for me what is important is that impulse that says, 'Mawande make something like this, make a sculpture like this, or just take a bicycle ...' The story comes later as the materials come together. These things put together speak to an experience that I had; it speaks to a memory that I had or it speaks to a story that I related with.

I know that the outside world wants people to explain and tell them what it means but that's all signifiers, it's all floating, like Stuart Hall would say. Anyone can take a word and make a meaning from it but an object is in front of you, it's there, you can touch it. You don't have to make a word for it to exist, it's in front of you, it exists – if it's beautiful, if it's ugly, you can judge according to where you're standing and to your own taste, but it's in front of you. That's one thing that is important for me when it comes to my processes and my practices, you know, that relationship that I have with the object, the relationship that I have with the impulse, the ideas ... whatever that thing is that tells me, 'Get this, make this.' I write some

of my things down to describe if it's going to be a man standing. I don't draw because the idea says that an object comes like that and now I have to go and find that object. So this is how I work. I suppose other artists work similarly but I don't know; for me, that's how I work.

II

Me, myself and my stand in the world ... I can't see from other people's point of view unless we share a moment, a memory, there's a connection there, then we can dwell on that. But it's not guaranteed that everything is going to be the same, right? Allow me, allow me to be myself! There's not only one world view, there are multiple world views ... but because of this ego that wants to impose all the time, to speculate, subjectify, there's power involved in that. Psychologically it's easy to reject all of that if there's no physical violence used – because in the past people were enslaved. But, I mean, if we are engaging with ideas, I don't have to hold onto them because my way of understanding the world is different from yours. Ngugi wa Thiong'o says he can't see himself but he can see me; he talks about this idea of moving the centre, that you can't see yourself because that's where you're standing, it's you.

Do you really have to define yourself? I'm really interested in that – that's why I am not interested in identity politics. I don't have to define myself to anyone. I don't feel I have to define myself because they will come with their own interpretation of what they expect me to

be and then conflicts occur. Because I don't want to be boxed and more especially to be boxed by something that is ideological. You feel that this person is not even speaking from their core, they are speaking something that is common, that is general, that they heard somewhere. Or someone wrote a book about white walls and so everyone has to be anti white walls now because someone in the 70s wrote an essay about white walls.

There are all these small projections that I am against, like 'no, no, take that away from me'. That's how you look at the world and this is how I look at the world. But I realise as I'm growing that this is something that has always been there. It's an attitude that Christians have when they come to your house and they want to teach you about Jesus Christ – they don't even ask what you believe in, they don't even care – they want to bring you to the light. It's the same thing when we engage with ideologies. You come convinced that your world is the truth and you want to impose it on everyone. No! Stop there, wait, come ask me how I feel about it. Don't just say, this is how it is the Fukuyama way. That's why we're having all these troubles now, because one nation decides for everyone that this is how things should be. That's a problem. That's why I wrote the text 'The problem we didn't create' in my catalogue. I was addressing some of my concerns regarding how the geopolitics of today has maintained the imperialist agenda.

I liked how you end it with that reproach of art historians and critics.

When I was in my undergrads they asked me to write an essay about the ‘picturesque and sublime’ and now Mawande has an essay: go to the window and describe the picturesque or the sublime. I don’t see it! I don’t, I don’t see it. I grew up in the villages and there was an open landscape and I didn’t get a sense of awe. There were waterfalls and rivers and I didn’t say, ‘Wow, this is beautiful!’ No, I didn’t see them, I just walked next to them. I’d go to the mountain, I saw plantation, I never got a sense of awe. I can’t even remember, since I was young growing up in the villages ... but why now? Why is it important for me to see them now? At the same time I got to understand the politics, the power relations behind these notions and how they came about, because this person who is asking me to do this thing does not introduce me to how it was invented, these ideas of schemas and romanticism and nature are there and we are here. But then they come to me and they talk as if it’s truth, it’s a reality, that’s what it should be. That’s where chaos begins.

I noticed the same thing throughout art history, the same thing even in art criticism, the same thing. Someone has assimilated a certain ideology and they believe that ideology unconsciously. Maybe they were conscious but they accepted it and now they want to impose it. When they expect other people to fit into that box, then there is a problem. Rather we have no conversation if it’s like that because you already erased me, and because I come from a certain context

or heritage that has been erased by history for so much, for so long, I have to react to that. I have to be straightforward with you and I have to say, this is it, take it or leave it. You document me or I’ll document myself.

Can you tell me what you’re reading at the moment?

Behind you.

All of that?

All of that. I have that, which is the Bible, and *Civilization or Barbarism* by Cheikh Diop and I have Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Moving the Centre* and I have Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, and then I have Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance*, and there’s Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, there’s Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Another Knowledge is Possible*, and there’s another De Santos, *Cognitive Justice in a Global World*, and *Making Europe*, yes.

You know these ones, these two, *Yurugu* by Marimba Ani and *Civilization or Barbarism*, they are very important for me. They are very important materials because they speak directly to the problem that I am trying to articulate, the one that we didn’t create. So *Yurugu* sort of like, similar to what I’m unpacking, takes the European ethos – she calls it *asili*, she takes the word from Swahili – and she studies the behaviour,

the way that Europe sort of fixated itself in domination; everything that they do is about domination, whether bodily, like physically dominating, or epistemologically.

Then you have people like Cheikh Diop who denounced or debunk the entire structure of the Western written perspective of Egyptian history. For me these are very important people who speak to the problem because when you're young and you're in an academic context, an undergrad, you don't understand all those concepts, you just come and digest them. You don't even know when you're being misrepresented, you just assimilate. Sometimes you get this feeling that there's something wrong with what is being taught to you but you can't articulate what it is. But there are people who have been writing about these things and trying to expose these things, this idea of the West trying to claim everything in the world even though it has itself adopted things from all over the world, so whatever it has, it's something that is borrowed.

On the news the other day they were saying how some precious artifacts are appearing in London from Syria and in the end they said, 'These items were being held by the British Museum for safe keeping.' Well, we all know what happens then.

Yeah, of course. I was in Germany some years ago at this symposium and someone was making a call about a museum without objects and I was thinking, all

the objects that are in Western museums are ancient objects from Africa, either Egypt or elsewhere. They degrade these people. And also I realise there's no acknowledgement of African contribution to global knowledge and that's why people always think that we are backward, and every time they think that we are emerging, you know? They exist because we existed before, we fathered them; in fact they are our imitation, all of these philosophies and structures. I mean, if you read *Civilization or Barbarism*, it even went into details of mathematics, of how it was invented in Egypt, but if you are in an academic context in a Western university they won't tell those things to you. They will come with some justification that Sigmund Freud discovered psychoanalysis even if it is a practice that has been done for centuries in Africa, that practice of consultation, even though it is not scientific like in the social sciences. Then they will say Marxism, Marx founded socialism, and you're like, but this is how we've lived all these years and we still do. You've got people who are sharing their cattle and giving to other families so that they can grow their own crops so that they can sustain themselves, and these are things I grew up experiencing. If someone is a sheep herder for another family, they will give that person a sheep so that he can start developing his own herd. So now a white man decided to theorise these things and then it's an invention. He introduces it back to us, these primitive people. And that's where it becomes a problem, because I think Africans taught the

world a lot but the world is looking down at us. And I can't see myself in that bubble.

There was this interesting piece by Olu Oguibe who wrote of an artist who was visited by a critic ...

Thomas McEvelley – he visited Ouattara.

Yes, it was a very interesting thing. But I was in a seminar at undergrad and someone was teaching this, and you know the position they take, 'Oh you know, Oguibe is so rude.' The thing is, no one is expecting this voice that is not from within, that is criticising the within. I mean, Thomas McEvelley was an icon in Western art history, he is someone who was celebrated, who was a god, but no one would witness his mistake. He's groomed by a Western university, he is influenced by that, and that's why for me it's difficult to use people like Derrida because they are short-handed. If I am going to talk about decolonisation, let me use people who have experienced it, people who lived that life and people who are speaking from within, not just logic. And people like Marimba Ani, they explore those ideas ...

It goes back to the idea of the Trojan Horse and what we were saying about Stuart Hall as well.

Ja, now let's go back to that idea of the Trojan Horse, right, let's say the establishment is the house. The house didn't just fall from the sky and then they existed. We participated in building that house, right, it's a huge

house now. My forefathers died, they bled building that house, they are dead now and some were sold building this house. Slavery, it's one of those sources that have sort of grown the capitalist system as we know it today and contributed a lot today as we know it. And mineral resources, African resources are still being used today by people from outside. So they owe me, I don't owe them; the inside is mine, so I belong. I can't say 'Oh no, I'm going to go and build an alternate space', no, there's a huge machine here. Let me get in there. I belong there, I deserve to be there, I'm entitled to be there.

I think we need a generation that feels entitled to exist. I am entitled to exist, I am entitled to privileges like anyone. Yes, it's good for me to understand how things like white privilege were developed by history and whatnot, but fuck it, I exist, I am here. I must benefit from that and I can't complain all the time. I must be in, I must be proud of myself, I must influence power; I must contradict power from inside. I think in the 60s it was a cool thing to be in the underground and so on and so forth. I mean, there were so many hippie movements that were emerging at that time, but it's a different century now and we understand all these things and how they came about and so being inside for me is a different thing to someone from the 60s, who just wanted to be cool, who wanted to be rebellious and leave everything. And most of the hippies, like white people who were rich, could leave their privileges and they could come back anytime they want.

We call them Trustafarians!

Ahhh! There was this guy, remember, during the riots in London, this historian who made this comment about how the youth now is speaking in patois ... The world is terrified of us. You know, they killed us, they enslaved us, and now they think we are gonna be the same and so they are terrified. But we are really nice people.

This conversation took place at the artist's studio, Cape Town, on 9 October 2015

3.

Deborah Poynton