

Without Walls: South Africa at Performa 17

By Vincent Bezuidenhout

artthrob.co.za

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Performa is back, and during the month of November its inimitable curatorial program presents *The South African Pavilion Without Walls*, a series of commissioned performances in New York City, featuring some of the most important South African artists working today. This year, the 'historical anchor' to the biennale's diverse program is the legacy of Dada, a theme which provides for interesting parallels between the political repression in pre-war Europe and Apartheid-era South Africa.

Founder and director RoseLee Goldberg has curated an astonishing series of performances that reaffirms the institute's continued support of South African art. Within the appropriately absurd political climate of today, Goldberg states that these artists 'express complex political, social and aesthetic developments...where community, ceremony, ritual, and politics are communicated through live performance.' This complexity is apparent in the manner in which the featured artists present their diverse modes of practice and allows for a reexamination of South African performance today.



William Kentridge, *Ursonate*, 2017

During Apartheid performance played a small part in South African art and was mainly informed by resistance culture and contemporary Western performance art in the decades preceding democracy. It would only be in the post-Apartheid era that long marginalized black artists' use of local ritual, ceremony, and dance to inform their practices started to get the attention it deserved. William Kentridge, whose work spans both periods, embraced this year's Dada theme through an amusing reimagining of Kurt Schwitters's seminal 1932 sound poem *Ursonate*. With multiple performances presented in the neo-gothic Harlem Parish, the 'sonata in primordial sounds' that reverberated from Kentridge's theatre trained voice was buoyed by his signature animated charcoal sketches on printed text flashing on the roughly fashioned screen behind him. The projection tied the work to its Dada origins by capturing the disillusionment and irrationality of the time, while also referencing South Africa's moment of Dadaist absurdism. Kendell Geers presented two works: One a spoken word performance where he is (still) fixated on Marcel Duchamp, the other a restaging of his work *RitualResist* which stood out for its surprising simplicity and intimacy. In an empty space in the Lower East Side a naked man and a woman held a double-sided mirror between them by using their body weight and pressure to keep it from falling. Their struggle seems particularly fraught with significance.

A more tangible performance came from Nicholas Hlobo, expanding on an earlier performative installation, first seen in his solo exhibition 'Sewing Saw' at Stevenson. The work *UmBhovuzo: The Parable of the Sower*, still forms the nexus of the performance by utilizing

the biblical parable as a device for Hlobo's use of domestic objects of historical importance as a reflection on destruction and renewal.

It was a welcome comeback to New York for Tracey Rose, as part of the *Afroglossia* platform curated by Adrienne Edwards to illuminate the complexity of the innumerable voices from Africa. Distinct in scope from the South African Pavilion, most of the artists in this multidisciplinary platform were born in the 1970s, which was a period of independence in much of Africa while Apartheid still continued. This delayed liberation from colonial powers might be one reason that a new generation of South African artist have emerged today, using performance as an engine for social activism.

Zanele Muholi has lead the way, traveling with her 23-member strong Sisonke Collective. Together they have taken on NYC in a fierce manner by staging multiple performances, talks on visual activism, and live musical acts across the five boroughs. Muholi has embraced the role of LGBTQI activist beyond her role as a photographer and artist. At the Stonewall Inn, site of the historic 1969 Stonewall Riots which lead to the global LGBT movement, Muholi's ensemble brought a joyous performance that celebrated the space while also challenging the often-unspoken whiteness inherent in it. These events, with an incredible presence which drew the audience in at every performance, and positions Muholi as arguably the most important South African artist today.

In a tête-à-tête with Muholi, Kemang Wa Lehulere continues to excavate South African history in the quietly profound *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter*, performed at the intimate Connelly Theater. Wa Lehulere draws the audience into a chronicle of the concrete and abstract through a series of actions resulting from quotes read by one of his ensemble. Utilizing his sculptural works, here modified into 'instruments', Wa Lehulere's performance was greatly complimented by his six-person ensemble which included recent Standard Bank Young Artist winner Chuma Sopotela. Sopotela stalked the stage with a formidable presence, encasing herself in Wa Lehulere's bird cages or spreading crutches like the wings of an eagle. Inspired no doubt by the Maya Angelou autobiography 'I know why the caged bird sings,' this was one of many literary and political references Wa Lehulere uses to engage in actions ranging from blowing bubbles with an accordion in a zinc tub to the futile attempts of stuffing sand from a suitcase into his pockets. Evoking a very personal story of frustration, forced removals, migration and ideas of home and exile, Wa Lehulere uses our collective history and myth-making to deftly balance on what he calls a 'slippery slope,' leaving us to question everything we think we may know about history.



Mohau Modisakeng, *Zion*, 2017

Mohau Modisakeng's performance *Zion* boldly follows on his work *Passage*, a video first exhibited at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Aware of the recent resurgence of populist and right-wing movements in the U.S. and Europe, Modisakeng choreographs a street procession of twenty dancers, clad in costumes reminiscent of slavery in the American South. Each performer is seen carrying luggage and furniture while walking, jumping, falling and sitting. The performance began in Harlem and proceeded to through various sites of importance to African-

American history, finally ending up in the American monument to consumption, Times Square. Modisakeng poignant march displays how both the legacies of the struggle against Apartheid and African-American slavery still affect the present. In a similar manner to Wa Lehlere, Modisakeng provides a heart-wrenching reflection on the past and present considering forced movement, subjugation and violence against a people while also nodding to the endurance of the human spirit.

The works by Muholi, Wa Lehlere and Modisakeng at Performa 2017 demonstrate that these artists have taken up the baton of South African performance art. With their ensembles of South African talent, reflecting on their own history and identity one could not help but feel that these artists are part of a larger movement reclaiming performance as one of the most significant mediums for activism today, presenting us a respite in a world that still doesn't make any sense.

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Times Square Arts and Performa present Mohau Modisakeng's ZION

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broadwayworld.com

Times Square Arts and Performa present Mohau Modisakeng's Zion, a choreographed street performance of sixteen dancers and four musicians that will take place on the Broadway Plaza between 42nd and 43rd Streets on Saturday, November 11th from 4:30pm - 5:30pm. Zion was commissioned by Performa for the Performa 17 Biennial.

In a global climate of extreme poverty, political conflict, violence and human rights abuses, people all across the world are being forced to seek new lives elsewhere. Zion visualizes that universal anxiety, with each of the sixteen male and female performers carrying an array of personal possessions, various pieces of baggage, and furniture via an exodus choreography of walking, running, jumping, falling, leaning, and sitting-enacting the blistered legacy of segregation, violent displacement, colonialism and apartheid coursing through South African history, American history, and contemporary events. The performance acknowledges both the grief and catharsis of a population subject to the machinations of violence, forced migration, and subjugation.

The Times Square route will be the third of three. The first performance will begin on the morning of November 11 at Mother AME Zion Church in Harlem, the first African-American congregation in New York City, and will run along Martin Luther King Boulevard, passing iconic Harlem locations along the way. The second performance will start from the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and journey towards Summit Rock, just north of the former site of

Seneca Village, a 19th century community of free African-Americans who were forcibly removed to make way for the development of Central Park.

The Times Square portion will travel along 42nd Street to the Broadway Plaza between 42nd and 43rd Streets for a choreographed performance, before exiting along 43rd Street. The combination of the procession and site-specific performance represents a balance between journey and destination, transience and settlement, where Times Square becomes a temporary settlement for a wandering people.

Debra Simon, Times Square Arts Director, said, "In a time when the concept of 'home' is so globally fraught, Zion reminds us of the people whose lives are directly impacted by disruptive political forces."

RoseLee Goldberg, Founding Director & Curator of Performa, said, "Mohau Modisakeng's exquisitely stylized and composed videos and photography, as well as the stately procession Zion, that he has created for New York City, belie the pain and horrors at the heart of his subject matter; the inhumanity of racial segregation and the enforced upheaval of lives as imposed by authorities in South Africa, as well as in this country. The power of his visual imagination serves to directly deliver his message -- the more one scrutinizes his tableau, the more deeply one is affected by the emotional impact of his storytelling."

Mohau Modisakeng, artist, said, "Zion attempts to draw parallels in the experience of displacement within the context of South Africa's history of racial segregation and forced removals within the global climate of mass migration. The work is focused on visualizing the universal anxiety caused by the resurgence of racist policy and rhetoric in parts of Europe and the United States."

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A South African Artist's Self-Portraits Excavate the Traumas of Apartheid

By Antwaun Sargent

newyorker.com

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Endabeni 9, 2015.

On March 9, 2015, at the University of Cape Town, the student and activist Chumani Maxwele walked over to a bronze statue of the nineteenth-century British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes and flung a bucket of human excrement at the monument. It was the first in a series of rebellious acts that became known as the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, which would later inspire the student-led protest movement Fees Must Fall on campuses all across South Africa.

The incidents helped trigger a nationwide debate about the glorification of white supremacy and the legacy of apartheid, and about the country's need for fuller, more authentic representations of black life.

The controversy around these protests has had lasting effects not only among educators and students but also among artists. One of them is the photographer Mohau Modisakeng. This year, Modisakeng is representing South Africa, along with the artist Candice Breitz, at the fifty-seventh edition of the Venice Biennale. The thirty-year-old Modisakeng, who graduated from University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art, in 2009, uses haunting and meditative self-portraiture to create striking images of a country that is in the midst of reëvaluating itself. Born in 1986, Modisakeng grew up in an informal settlement in Soweto, in a makeshift home without electricity. His mother was Zulu and his father was Motswana, and they were part of the influx of migrant workers that, in the early nineteen-eighties, flowed into Johannesburg's sprawling southwestern townships, where most of the city's black population was forced to live during apartheid. "In my art, the significance of growing up in Soweto is dealt with from a biographical standpoint. I am referring to memories from my childhood that somehow highlight what was happening in South Africa," Modisakeng told me recently.

Modisakeng's Soweto childhood has fuelled a research-based photography practice in which he creates layered scenes, littered with iconic symbols that explore the nation's history by "trying to understand how it affects the black body," he said. His photography and video work also follows the character-driven overtures of African self-portraitists such as Samuel Fosso and Iké Udé. In the photograph "Frame XV," we see Modisakeng pictured holding a long sjambok whip, a visceral symbol of state-sanctioned violence that he remembers the police using to maintain order during the final years of apartheid. In the series "Lefa," which is a Setswana word for "inheritance," he captures himself, from above, lying in a bed of coal. The image evokes the industrialization of his home town of Johannesburg. The performative series "Metamorphosis" features images of Modisakeng in closeup and against a black backdrop, wearing his signature black-brimmed trilby hat, shaking white powder from his face and chest. It appears as if his body were physically changing form, in a state of transformation that alludes to South Africa's long democratic struggle to define itself.

At Venice, in the South African Pavilion, Modisakeng has mounted "Passages," a three-channel video projection that, like his photography, reveals the beauty and trauma of black bodies in motion. The nearly eighteen-minute work follows the individual journeys of three South African voyagers, each carrying a single possession, wading through waters, trying to get ashore. In Setswana, Modisakeng says, life is referred to as *botshelo*, or a passage, and human beings are called *bafeti*, or voyagers. It's a view of existence that suggests that all experiences are transient.

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Candice Breitz and Mohau Modisakeng Will Probe South African Identities at Venice 2017 The two artists will show together for the first time.

By Hili Perlson

artnet.com

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Candice Breitz and Mohau Modisakeng. Courtesy the South African Pavilion

Artists Mohau Modisakeng and Candice Breitz will represent South Africa at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017 with a two-person exhibition. Connect Channel, a television production company, has been commissioned by the South African Department of Arts and Culture to organize the country's pavilion in Venice for the first time. The dual presentation will also mark the first showing of work by Breitz and Modisakeng alongside each other.

"Our collective goal is to spearhead a new approach to the South African Pavilion in 2017 by presenting the work of two leading South African artists and to leverage social and popular media to enhance local, public engagement with the South African Pavilion," said Connect CEO, Basetsana Kumalo in a statement.

The South African pavilion will highlight the ways in which the two artists convey complex ideas of selfhood in the context of global marginalization. According to Tyburn gallery, which represents Modisakeng, the exhibition will reflect on experiences of exclusion, displacement, transience, migration, and xenophobia, while mining the web of conditions that shape the perception and performance of one's self.

"Breitz's photographs and multi-channel video installations offer nuanced studies of the structure of identity under global capitalism, while Modisakeng employs a highly personal language to express ideas about his own identity and the body," the pavilion's curator Lucy MacGarry said in a statement.

Modisakeng's photography, film, and installation work grapples with black male identity within a post-apartheid context. Based in Johannesburg and Cape Town, his work has been shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale, and the Dak'Art Biennale in 2012. He has been awarded the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art this year.

Best known for her film installations, Breitz, who is based in Berlin, mines the intricacies of forging notions of identity in relation to a larger community. In her recent work, she has turned her focus to the production of empathy and identification in today's highly-mediated global culture.

Breitz's work has been shown in various biennials, including in Dakar (2014), Singapore (2011), New Orleans (2008), Venice (2005), Taipei (2000), Kwangju (2000), Istanbul (1999), São Paulo (1998), and Johannesburg (1997). Breitz has been teaching as a tenured professor at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Braunschweig since 2007.