

When an event becomes a lesson

(A Concocted Text)

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They, the people, began to write on all sorts of surfaces; some even wrote on old tin cans, baked beans or mackerel cans, using the bonded liquids of its contents that had now become mildew reminiscent of stump oil

They wrote about Pitika Ntuli's sculptures made from bone, including Ovoid Dreams, a fusion of parts. Its bleary eyes and fingers traced by bright beads remained in the public realm years after it was intermittently shown on the internet

They said the 'figure' wore a mask reminiscent of the Covid Epoch, which had a power that spoke to many from different generations; the power to make them write from a will to be included, to log their ideas into a giant jigsaw that started before he carved into the bones of animals.

On a rusty fridge, a family from Kroonstad wrote with the light hues of the disposed through magnets in the form of the alphabet, an ode to the spirit of Ovoid Dreams. They must have retrieved a recording made by the apples & snakes collective of Ntuli in exile in London circa 1985. It emerged in one of the many images by Roger Ballen, of an Orange Free State generation that could neither spell or read - apartheid after all was unable 'to secure the well-being of the privileged minority.'

Many others chose to contribute to an open blog with messages to Ntuli or to commemorate his sculptures. The blog was managed by Marshall Mobutu, an aged army marshall from Burundi, whose allegiance remained still with his former army who he had trained to shoot at an elephants' graveyard.

Many such estranged if not awkward facts were consciously collected by John Henry, a postgraduate student, funded at SEEUS. His ability to search for belief and opinion evidenced in the writings or responses to Pitika Ntuli included the industrious projects by the Nigerian-Japanese artist, Ishii Ikuru based in Kaga, Ishikawa Prefecture. Most demanding of his efforts remain his finely chiselled diagrams and cartoons on decommissioned army weapons, further embellishing old uniforms.

Ikuru had spent four years inscribing key characters and scenarios on surplus army uniforms from the 1962 film Hatari, directed by the gregarious Howard Hawks; a film set in Tanganyika starring John Wayne about a group of hunters trapping wild African animals for zoos abroad. Pitika's emblematic sculptures including the bones from the elephant, rhino, giraffe and horses as well as beads, shells, chains, computer circuit boards, pins, animal skins, and marbles were featured epistemically in each army garment or weapon with an anime character from Hatari. The series by Ikuru is difficult to describe or place in the history of contemporary art nevertheless they were collected and are on permanent view with a section devoted to documentation on Ntuli at the Yokohama Museum of Art.

In a conference accompanying the Biennale Jogja XIV Equator #4 were two academic papers and a poetic rendition accompanied by pre-recorded metallophones and xylophones that argued for further dissemination of Pitika Ntuli's poetry in relation to his artistic practice. The three speakers collectively staged a challenge for the main academic community whose current understanding of Ntuli's oeuvre remains diachronic. The writers Batelmann and Cooms and the performer, Shanti Nugraph offered their apostate privilege, which they believed allowed them to go beyond the present condition to consider his anachronic relationship to African spirit and spirituality.

The above links, minor and major, were revealed in a series of notes by the acclaimed art historian John Berger, whose own historic account on the use of bones in contemporary art, had described work, in an unpublished essay on artists' (including Pitika Ntuli and Jimmie Durham), as the natural "relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sunset. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."

Meanwhile, for the suffragette centenary exhibition in the Museum of London (2018) many artists' works were selected to represent the Representation of the People Act, which 'gave some women and all men the right to vote in local and national elections in the UK.' A number of abstract paintings by Pitika Ntuli were shown in an accompanying slide show. Many believe these early works in exile formed the research basis of his subjects of famishing and anger which form the basis for his sculptures for the Azibuyela Emasisweni exhibition. The postcard set with the quote by the artist, "I externalise their inherent shapes to capture the beauty and the truth embedded in them" were distributed in the education pack to 32,770 schools in the UK. Many of the children wrote and collaged these cards for their GCE and IB exams which in return were offered as a resource by the Aga Khan Foundation in Toronto.

The UNESCO Institute of Education formerly presented some of the work by British students in the reprint of publication Towards a Multilingual Culture of Education Edited by Adama Ouane. The editor invited key writers and thinkers to address Ntuli's work, amongst the respondents were many brilliant contributions. Rustom Bharucha, culture critic and professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, as well as the first project director of the Museum of Brooms, Rajasthan, stated at a small gathering at the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata "he was a touchstone in the field" and he remained intrigued by his "rhizomatic way of thinking".

Beijing based artist, Song Dong, created a day to write your diary with water on bones as an ode to Pitika Ntuli. Previously, Song Dong had used stone, water and a painting brush - in his second diaristic performance, the artist substituted the stone for the collar bone. A multitude of examples can be found on the beguiling website, recently curated by John Henry;

www.elephantsrus.co.za which includes photographs, zines, articles and pdfs. Key to the website is its ability to continually update the plethora of references and keywords that Ntuli's history of ideas has efficiently informed a greater agitation across the Afrofuturistic globe