

WHAT IS URGENT TO YOU?

Morija, a town in western Lesotho, is the staging ground for an ongoing series of dialogues about art and culture organized by Johannesburg-based curator **LERATO BERENG**. She explains the motivations for her project.



above *Conversations at Morija #1*, 2013. Lerato Bereng, curator, with Ntate Lazarus, a local craftsman from Morija. Photo: Zachary Rosen, Ba Re e Ne Re Literature Festival
below *Conversations at Morija #2*, 2015. Photo: Meri Hyöky



BEHIND EVERY MAP

PHILIPPE REKACEWICZ's maps show how the phenomenon of migration relates to the issue of political borders.

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Al Loving, *Untitled*, c. 1975. Mixed media.
Courtesy of the Estate of Al Loving; Garth Greenan Gallery, New York and the Marrakech Biennale

JS ROSENGARTEN What is the essence of *Conversations at Morija*?

TO BERENG *Conversations at Morija* was created as an attempt to create a platform of engagement with Lesotho's creative community. The first of these conversations began on opening a dialogue between Morija Museum & Archives, visitors to Morija Arts and Culture Festival, and the country's Diaspora. Owing to what has been termed "the national brain drain," the question of Diaspora seemed pertinent in order to understand the reasons for such a percentage of creatives operating outside of the country's borders. It also created further possibilities for exploring the fluid exchange between what is happening within the country and outside

you also seek an audience that isn't entirely the typical art crowd.

When conceptualizing the project, I wanted a static exhibition would not be what was important for me was to be able to speak. So I created a set of interventions: instructions on the inviting people to enter the space, a drink, sit in front of a computer screen, and either read from a cue card or suggestions of questions that would initiate the conversation, or for those more confident, direct a question of their own one of the speakers. I knew that I didn't

want the format to be like a Skype panel discussion where I am the interviewer directing the conversations. I wanted the people themselves to engage. I set up a few computers with their own Skype addresses in the same room and got them all on a group chat. I wanted people to feel as though they were having one-on-one conversations with the speaker on the other end.

MR Dialogue, conversation, and the idea of storytelling seem to be crucial components of *Conversations at Morija*. Who is telling the stories? And what kinds of stories?

LB The second *Conversations at Morija* (2015) took storytelling as its point of departure. This was a result of me asking the Morija Museum and the festival team what they would benefit from discussing. It became clear to me that, after the first event, there needed to be more direct engagement with the local community and showcasing of what is happening locally in relation to presentations by artists from outside the country. The stories that were shared were those created by Morija and Maseru artists. The visiting artists that I invited to take part in the project shared stories about stories and storytelling: videos, photographic archives, and how to tell stories with little means.

MR *Conversations* focuses on the visual arts. What content do you see portrayed in the works presented at the recent festival?

LB There was an interesting array of topics presented. Simon Gush's, Kemang Wa Lehulere's, and Penny Siopis's talks addressed storytelling through film, looking at histories, different versions of the same story, and the question of fictions and re-imagining them. Ruth Sacks's presentation focused on a body of work around text, combining design, language and bookmaking in the form of a work of visual art. George Mahashe told us a story about a fictional character who occupies his creative process. Kabelo Malatsi spoke about telling a story in the form of curatorial processes that require zero budget – ways to work with no capital. Local filmmakers including Patrick Rorke, who runs the Linorsing Animation Studio in Morija, presented short experimental animations to a large audience for the first time.

MR You are from Lesotho. How would you describe your upbringing and coming of age there as a person invested in the arts? Did you have sufficient access to knowledge and support?

LB I grew up surrounded by a creative family. My uncle is one of the country's most celebrated authors, so I was fortunate to be surrounded by creatives. The Sesotho language is laden with some of the most poetic and expressive figures of speech. The Basotho people speak in songs, puns, and idioms. Expression and storytelling are key to our culture in a nation formed

FOCUS ON NOW, NOT TOMORROW

Curator **REEM FADDA**, who is directing the sixth edition of the **MARRAKECH BIENNALE**, speaks about the necessity of solidarity, action, collectivity, and empowerment in a turbulent world.



Khaled Malas, *Windmill in Arbin, Eastern Ghoura*, 2015. Windmill.
Photo: Yaseen al-Bushy. Courtesy of the artist and the Marrakech Biennale

CONTEMPORARY AND (C&) The Marrakech Biennale is presenting its 6th edition this year. How did it all start?

REEM FADDA The Biennale started six editions ago through the initiative of Vanessa Branson to counter stereotypical images emanating from the region in a post-9/11 world. It has grown to become a larger international platform of arts and is fully embraced by the Moroccan community. I was invited to curate this year's edition by members of the board, among them Curt Marcus and Vanessa Branson. The deal was sealed when I met with the director Amine Kabbaj and the team and we decided to make a venture out of this.

C& The Bamako Encounters regained their impetus last year and Dak'Art will present its 12th edition this year. How do you see the cultural and social role of biennales on the continent?

RF Biennales are a great vehicle, especially for places and cities without the standardized art infrastructure to host art and artists. They provide a break from the institutionalized and market-driven models of artmaking. In many ways, they allow a space, a tabula rasa for art to return to its rudimentary roots, to start to investigate the real motives for art. This brings art back to people and society in terms of subject matter, relatedness, and accessibility. Somehow this art becomes less taboo and more approachable, especially in relation

to how it should be exhibited and regarded. Biennales ultimately make art more democratic.

C& The Biennale's title *Not New Now* is quite refreshing – the underlying tone of resistance. What does the title mean? And does it fit into the curatorial program of the Biennale?

RF The title for the 6th Marrakech Biennale, *Not New Now*, was meant to be a provocation and is quite broad with many angles of focuses, which was intentional because it allowed me to develop a framework for art that has to inhabit a city. I have been debating some of the core ideas and strategies for many years. This came as a great opportunity to present them all on a grand scale, and in a way that not just inhabits a gallery space but envelops a city like Marrakech.

The starting point for me was to focus on the place. Basically I'm presenting art that comes mostly from a regional source that speaks to the Afro-Asian area and its Diaspora. This is about solidarity as a train of thought. I believe that in this turbulent world, solidarity, action, collectivity, and empowerment are essential. Europe is no longer just European but has in many ways also become African. So what does it mean to see art from Africa and the Arab world and particularly to see it in its place? The title incorporates a lot of time concepts. It is quite complex and at the same time rather simple. I want to focus on the present. Not the past or the future. The title



Conversations at Morija #1, 2013. Photo: Meri Ilyöky



Conversations at Morija #1, 2013. Lerato Bereng, curator, in a Skype conversation with Kojo Baffoe, poet, writer, and then-editor of *Destiny Man* magazine. Photo: Zachary Rosen, Ba Re e Ne Re Literature Festival



Dan Halter, *Given Another Chance In The Colonies* (detail), 2014.
Found plastic weave bag with custom-woven tartan fabric.
Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery

TEMPORARY AND (C&) You are a Zimbabwean living in South Africa. How would you describe your personal journey moving from one country to the other?

DAN HALTER In Zimbabwe it was not possible to study art at tertiary level. Having Swiss heritage, I moved to Switzerland to further my art education. There I found myself quite culture-shocked and homesick and so I relocated to South Africa. Since then, government policies in Zimbabwe have caused its economy to suffer, and this has caused a mass exodus of people, especially into neighboring South Africa.

How do you see the creative and political interchange and connections between Zimbabwe and South Africa?

When Zimbabwe's independence and transition to majority rule took place more than a decade before the same thing happened in South Africa. So, in many ways, South Africa looks to learn lessons from Zimbabwe and is reluctant to criticize or intervene in the situation there. There is a vibrant art scene in both countries, although in Zimbabwe there are limits to one's freedom of expression.

Tell us a bit more about your work *Space Invader*, in which you use woven plastic bags. You call them immigrant bags.

The bags are cheap Chinese-made woven plastic bags that have become stereotypically synonymous with migrants all over the world. Called *bianzhidai* in China, these bags have taken on different monikers around the world reflecting the immigrant demographics in different regions in a negative way.

The *Space Invader* characters were designed by Tomohiro Nishikado in 1978 and are simple 8-bit graphics that represent alien life forms. I have appropriated these minimalist icons as a metaphor for immigrants or aliens. Made up of about 50 pixels per character, these symbols are easy to create out of immigrant bags.

C& In your artist statement, you use "fabric" and "fabrication" to define your body of work. Why?

DH In my art the process of weaving is a form of fabrication and the end result can be described as a fabric. However, to fabricate can also mean to counterfeit and I like this dichotomy. The word illustrates my creative method and absolves me of the fiction of my work.

C& To what extent is your artistic practice political?

DH In a way all art is political. My work may look overtly political but it is also deeply personal. The issues I deal with resonate deeply with me and I feel a strong desire to convey these matters to an audience. My art is political because of where I was born and where I have lived. Political concerns play a defining role in the life of the average citizen in southern Africa, probably more so than in more developed nations. It informs our culture.

DAN HALTER (WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery) will show his work at the Armory Show Focus: African Perspectives in New York, 3–6 March 2016.



BOWIE IN AFRICA

SEAN O'TOOLE takes a closer look at DAVID BOWIE as an artist.

Find out at
CONTEMPORARYAND.COM

Dan Halter, *Patterns of Migration*, 2015.
Found plastic weave bags, custom-made tartan fabric,
mannequin legs, and Adidas CLOT ZX Flux.
Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery

I'M NOT INTERESTED IN MAKING ART ABOUT WHERE I'M FROM

Well-known for her drawings and works on paper, Nigerian-born artist **ruby onyinyechi amanze** talks about developing new narratives that respond to her growth as an artist living in the US.

IMPORARY AND (C&S) What brought you to drawing?

onyinyechi amanze I came into art through drawing – it was my first love. In school I studied photography and textiles, but my interest came down to the analogous process of working with layers. At first, I didn't have the language to think of drawing outside of its formal parameters, but essentially many of my photographs and drawings were, in some ways, drawings. I returned to paper in grad school and have stayed engrossed in it ever since.

C&S Central theme of your practice is the notion of place / displacement. Where does this focus stem from?

I'm interested in space because of how malleable and limitless it is. I can hold space between my hands, how I can stretch it or turn it down, play with the tension. Place is far less fluid. It's a fixed point, and also quite arbitrary and stale in its design. My work isn't about a definite nation or geography. I'm not interested in making art about where I'm from. I'm from everywhere and nowhere. And I often wonder why it is even important... displacement, that used to be my story, but it outstretched its wings along with other growing pains a while ago. When I identified myself with a word, it was a woe-is-me victim story of being uprooted or of longing for something that was lost or taken from me. I've found a language now that doesn't carry the negative undertone of being uprooted. I've lived in England, the US, and Nigeria and will live in more places to come, but I haven't lost a thing and I'm certainly not broken. Yes, my connections to and memory of each place are pieced of bits and pieces, but that's just what the story is at this point, a story of exactly where I'm supposed to be.

C&S In your body of work, you use a range of figures and characters that incorporate futuristic elements. Can you tell us a bit about this aesthetic choice and process?

I think of it in two parts: I incorporate certain motifs or compositional choices that suggest a fourth dimension – a shifting of time and space. I'm intrigued by how simply this can happen, for example, by looking over the ocean and losing or gaining an entire day. The second part is that it's all in the present moment and less about the future.

Being able to leave Earth for another world can actually happen physically or metaphysically. I've walked down streets in Brooklyn and everything other than my body has been walking down streets in Lagos. People have gone to the moon, had a conversation out there, and a week later, they were back in their homes on earth. Many indigenous peoples all over the world have, for centuries, been able to manipulate other dimensions of being. I'm interested in all of these things as they relate to the present moment.

C&S You move between Nigeria, the UK, and the US. How have you experienced the conversations and links between Black artists in the Diasporas and African artists on the continent?

onyinyechi amanze I'm not sure that I've really experienced concrete conversations or links. And I think it's dangerous territory that these "groups" even exist. I think for many Black artists working in the Diaspora or in Africa, there could potentially be that same number of conversations. The similarity of skin color (possibly) and, of course, the global and historic ways in which others have responded (and sometimes still do) to brown-skinned peoples are in some ways the only connection these two groups have (other than just being human). Even amongst "themselves" – for example, a Kenyan artist working in Kenya and a Moroccan artist working in Morocco – there has rarely existed an automatic shared experience by virtue of being on the same continent. Their day-to-day lives may be as different as those of a Scot and a Turk, who also happen to share a continent. Despite this, there will always be parallel conversations happening because many artists, regardless of race, ethnicity, or geography, are thinking of similar things. I think when it comes to visibility, the Diaspora has perhaps afforded Black artists (including those of direct African descent who have lived in the Diaspora for a long period) an entry into global art platforms – though by no means am I suggesting that we as a society have reached any form of equality when it comes to visibility for non-white artists. I think there is an excitement about what Black and African artists are doing right now, but only in separation from what everyone is doing. It's tricky, because visibility is important, but so is inclusion.

onyinyechi amanze (Mariane Ibrahim Gallery) will show her work at the Armory Show Focus: African Perspectives in New York, 3–6 March 2016.



Uriel Orlow, *Yellow Limbo*, 2011. HD video still, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and LUX, London

SEAN O'TOOLE The forms in which art is spoken for and about vary greatly: from the unseen conversations between artist and curator to the various ventriloquism acts like wall text, guided walk, catalogue essay, symposium presentation, and press interview. Given that you've probably been involved with all, which is your preferred way of speaking around and about art?

NOMUSA MAKHUBU We approached *Fantastic* as academics. It came out of my doctoral thesis, which was titled *The Fantastic Subject*. The exhibition was in a university space. Students were involved in the installation. The aim was not only about showing but the processes of showing. I wouldn't call the discursive platforms ensuing from the exhibition (catalogue essays, symposia, and interviews) ventriloquist acts. We do not seek to speak in place of the artists but recognize that as researchers we can also evoke theoretical material in relation to artworks. Artists remain important in all of those processes.

NKULE MABASO Works of art have a life and presence that goes beyond themselves. This transcendence allows the works to be placed in different conversations in relation to themes and other works.

AMY WATSON The conversations that are primary to me are the ongoing ones with

artists. It isn't always possible to make these entirely evident in exhibition making. I would like to think a strong exhibition does in fact begin to demonstrate these conversations. I prefer, wherever possible, speaking to audiences directly and, even better, artists discussing their works themselves. This isn't always possible given budgetary constraints. It perhaps goes without saying that the forms of speaking around and about work can and should shift depending on the content and context. At best a text about artworks shines a light on practice; at worst it's reductive. The risks of not communicating include alienating audiences.

O'TOOLE Why a group show? We know the pitfalls – curatorial ego and concept versus artistic agency and the autonomy of a work of art, flighty sampling versus deep immersion. But what are the potentialities of a group show?

MAKHUBU I don't call myself a curator; I am an art historian and curating is one of the ways in which I realize research. The exhibition is not about artists we like or don't like. Works were selected based on how well they open up questions and enable debates about the concept of the fantastic and biopolitics. I engaged with some of the artists for my doctoral thesis way before we even thought about the possibility of an exhibition.

MABASO Group shows tend to have many pitfalls, but if the integrity of the artwork is kept intact and not laboriously forced to entertain new meanings, then there is the possibility to encounter the artwork and within the questions proposed by the group staging. The works alter with the telling and the showing. However, they remain integrally themselves, yet offer responses to the thesis being propagated. We have been very conscious of not using the works as examples in any fashion. The works act as inscriptions, which, with new settings and contexts, can illuminate or provide help in deciphering questions.

WATSON Any conceptions I may have of a group show in some form, whether latent or explicit, are derived from and developed in response to an artist's practice. Working with artists operating in and across different contexts and different generations through an exhibition allows for the conditions for their respective practices to be placed in conversation, and in tension, with each other. It has the potential to be generative. New knowledge can be produced; conversely, received knowledge can also be critiqued.

MAKHUBU As a practicing artist, I think whether one's work is included in group shows that are either flighty sampling or deep immersions – those conversations (deep or shallow) are important. If one of

THE ART OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC



Priscilla Rezende, *Brombril*, 2010. C-Print. Courtesy of the artist

Afro-Brazilian art is often overlooked in appraisals of contemporary Brazil. The magazine **O MENELICK 2° ATO** aims to correct this distortion while also highlighting the cultures of Africa's broader Diaspora.

CONTEMPORARY AND (C&) Can you please tell us about the publication *O Menelick*?

RENATA FELINTO Our publication's name is actually different from the famous King Menelik of Ethiopia – it is called *O Menelick 2° Ato*. On our website we explain that this is an independent editorial project for thinking about and endorsing artistic production of the African Diaspora, as well as the urban and vernacular cultural output from the Black West, with a special focus on Brazil. We launched the project in 2007 as a blog: omenelicksegundoato.blogspot.com. In May 2010 the first printed version was published, after four years of research trying to find the right editorial and graphic blend to investigate the contemporary urban Black subject in relation to its ancestral roots – an issue that still informs cultural identity today. The magazine is published on a quarterly basis and distributed free of charge at cultural events, art galleries, stores, public libraries, and neighborhoods of social and political conflict in São Paulo.

C& How would you describe the artistic landscape in Brazil?

RF This question is quite generic and broad so I'll try to be specific. In terms of visual arts I see a desperate attempt to continue the work of Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica. In other words, an attempt on the part of Brazilians to inscribe themselves in a history

of art that is universal, general, and official. These three artists – two of them white – launched the *Movimento Neoconcreto* (Neoconcrete Movement), that proposed a reconciliation between art and life and challenged the concept of "the Eye" that perceived art according to Clement Greenberg's ideas. However, this art that claims to be reconciled with life creates no space for discussing life as experienced by so-called minority groups such as Afro-Brazilians (who are a minority in terms of political power, though not numerically). And so, to answer your question, the artistic landscape in Brazil is quite arid.

C& What are the challenges for Afro-Brazilian artists in the contemporary art scene? To what extent is the lack of representation linked with the history of Brazil itself, especially with its history of slavery?

RF There are many different challenges. Artists have to be able to live with dignity, have access to housing, food, clothing, education and health care. Not all of us have that. Once we get to that point, we could focus more on the creative process. Also, scholars and academics in Brazil can't seem to understand why we [Afro-Brazilian artists] need to create visual works informed by certain issues and histories. It would be a great step forward to be able to engage freely with themes that are relevant to us while in academia, and to have

WATSON Maria Lind, particularly her sustained work around rethinking the potentials of art institutions. Closer to home, Mika Conradie's ongoing research into institutional rhythms is of particular interest, especially given the current lack of independent arts organizations in South Africa. I'm interested in Nontobeko Ntombela's practice too, in particular her exhibition *A Fragile Archive* (2012), which re-examined the positioning and practice of artist Gladys Mgudlandlu through a restaging of Mgudlandlu's first solo exhibition.

Based in Cape Town, SEAN O'TOOLE is a writer, an associate editor of *C&*, and co-editor of *Cityscapes*, a critical journal for urban inquiry.

ideological systems, intergenerational crisis, the horrendous disregard for Black life in America, particularly for Black men. The road is a wonderful metaphor. Also, we started to see an inter-reading between Nance's *You and I and You* and Jelili Atiku's performance *Eleniyan* (2012). For Atiku, drawing from *egungun* [Yoruba masquerade] is a decolonization process. The masked dancers in Nance's work are similarly an intricate allegory.

O'TOOLE Who are your favorite curators right now?

MAKHUBU Bisi Silva, Gabi Ngcobo, and Elvira Dyangani Ose. They've brilliantly shown that art is process, a socio-political phenomenon, and an inclusive ongoing intellectual exercise without being confined by conventions, institutions, and market trends.



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Kodak Ektachrome 34 1978 frame 4, To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light*, 2012. C-type print. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery

see work as solo... that would be like confined to having conversations oneself. It's healthy for a work to exist ly.

LE What prompted you to show artist and filmmaker Terence Nance's *I and You* in the *Fantastic* exhibition?

JBU He's brilliant! For us, this articulates the relationship between the power of imagination and politics. Interest in this theme began with an interest in film, so the interrelation between photography, video art, and film was key. I really like how Nance's work cannot be explained away. The same can be said for all artworks, I suppose. With there's an intriguing intersection of readings, others related to textured images that locate the reproductive formative family within broader

roduction accepted by professors. The historical context is fully to our present situation. Our present reality is not the result of the racist structure in place. And this is so efficient that Black people believe they are somehow immune for the scarcity and oppression in which they live. Slavery is present in our current social relations.

Can you tell us about some Afro-Brazilian artists and projects you find inspiring? Where are they mainly based? Which creative means and spaces are important for their work, and how do they empower themselves and achieve success?

Afro-Brazilian artists with some visibility are mainly located in the Southeast region, especially in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and to some extent in Bahia. There are many names I like to mention, but I will focus on the ones that have been important to my own practice as a visual artist: Rosana Paulino, Mariana, Michelle Mattiuzzi, Moisés Patricio, Janaina Barros, Luiz Rezende, Sidney Amaral, Tiago Gualberto, Marcelo D'Salete, Maurício, Olyvia Bynum. All of them attended university. Rosana Paulino has a PhD in visual art, the first Afro-Brazilian artist to receive this in Brazil. Note the gap we have: the first Black artist to receive a PhD in visual arts in the USA was Jeff Donaldson in 1974; Rosana Paulino received her PhD in 2010. Many of these artists are focused on having gallery representation, but some are taking advantage of public grants and have been successful.¹ This has also worked well for me.

How do you collaborate with other Black artists or artists of African descent whose networks are in the Americas and on the African continent?

It is a huge challenge to know what is going on in the visual arts of the African Diaspora in different countries. *O Menelick 2° Ato* is a small but unique contribution to this challenge by publishing essays about, and interviews with, artists from other parts of the world. Sometimes we only introduce an image and the artist's name. It is tough to rouse the readers' curiosity.

What is your vision in terms of making Afro-Brazilian art and its visibility?

My research focuses on Afro-Brazilian artists but I don't think I need a label such as "Afro-Brazilian art." We should demand the art that speaks about us and to us, as well as to others, is called art. And this art will reflect our history, our anguish, our dreams, our myths, our images, and our desires, just as the art of other artists does. If a Black artist doesn't want to address any of these themes, it is up to him or her. However, I see it as the product of a process of identity alienation, one that has been imposed on us from birth, and it is incredibly efficient.



Renata Felinto, *White Face, Blonde Hair*, 2013.
C-Print. Courtesy of the artist

This interview is part of our online C&S series taking a closer look at Afro-Brazilian presence and cultural production.

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Brazil has a specific system: the federal, state and city governments offer certain grants/awards every year. These grants end up being an alternative to artists who don't have gallery representation and don't sell their work. Besides having a day job (many of them are educators/professors) they apply for these grants/awards. Once selected, they have funds to realize book projects or exhibition projects that they wouldn't have otherwise.

RENATA APARECIDA FELINTO DOS SANTOS is a São Paulo-based visual artist, scholar, and educator. She is a doctoral candidate at UNESP Art Institute and holds bachelor's and master's degrees in visual arts from the same institution. Felinto is a professor of African Art and Culture in the Art History, Theory, and Criticism Graduate Course at Centro Belas Arts. She is a member of the editorial board of the publication *O Menelick 2° Ato*.

THE WARP AND WEFT OF EXPERIENCE

Pop culture and contemporary politics converge in Cape Town-based Zimbabwean **DAN HALTER'S** labor-intensive works, which elegantly riff on his immigrant identity.



Dan Halter, *Space Invader* (Johannesburg taxi rank), 2009.
Photographic Lambda print.
Courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery