

Interview with Dorine van Meel & Simangaliso Sibiyi: “Who gets to tell history?”

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By Zippora Elders

Decolonisation in and through the art world is a hot topic. Many benevolent initiatives are prospering, and at the same time they prove that it still is a huge – and important – challenge. Because *who* gets to tell the stories? How can we collaborate with and without existing structures and institutions? And how should projects around decolonisation be set up to hear as many voices as possible?

A conversation with Simangaliso Sibiyi, representative of the Funda Community College in Soweto, South Africa, and Dorine van Meel, an artist working between Amsterdam and Berlin, about their discursive collective project ‘the Southern Summer School’, hosted by BAK.

Zippora Elders: How did the Southern Summer School get into existence?

Dorine van Meel: Between 2011 and 2014, I was studying Fine Art at Goldsmiths College in London, where I met the South African artist Nelmarie du Preez. Our encounter sparked a lot of discussions on the blurred histories of our respective mother countries and the way in which one can argue that “coloniality” continues in the present – not only through the ways in which power and wealth is distributed globally, but also within one’s own individual thinking.

ZE: How do you see this with regard to the art world?

DvM: It is fair to say that the so-called western art world still dominates the global discourse of art, denying a platform to a vast amount of art practice. We decided to initiate a project that would invite a larger group of art practitioners into this conversation.

ZE: A ‘summer school’ is a course of lectures held during college vacation, often operating more independently. Why did you choose this set-up?

DvM: We choose the format of a self-organised summer school, as it fundamentally is a discursive space that would allow for an exchange of stories, histories, languages, cultures and voices. BAK Basis voor Aktuele Kunst have generously hosted the project.

ZE: The cultural practitioners that participate in this project come from South Africa, the UK and the Netherlands. Why these countries specifically and how do they influence the program?

DvM: To openly address the topic of decolonisation and social justice with a mixed group of people, some of whom are directly affected and damaged by colonialism and racism, is a very challenging task. It means we constantly have to negotiate and renegotiate the ways in which we work together, in order not to reproduce certain colonial power structures.

ZE: How do you see your own position in this?

I believe that my tasks within the project of decolonisation are very specific – I myself as a white, European subject continue to benefit from colonialism – by growing up in the Dutch welfare state, with a European passport, with English as a language I feel comfortable in, with easy access to state subsidized education, etc. Part of my tasks would mean stepping back and giving space to people who have been marginalized within our societies.

ZE: You're an artist, working in the field of theory as well. Can you elaborate a little further on the concept of decolonisation, specifically in the context of art?

DvM: I believe that an actual commitment to the project of decolonisation for me as an artist demands for a very critical approach to the art world and my place within it. To say that art has a role to play in social transformation means a complete rethinking of my practice. I constantly ask myself: how can I take a position within a wider public debate? How can we self-organise, around existing institutions and structures? Or, with regard to the Southern Summer School, how can we actively challenge Eurocentric paradigms in the art world and form relationships of solidarity and exchange across national boundaries?

ZE: Simangaliso, you are an artist based in Soweto, South Africa. What should decolonisation of the art world entangle, in your opinion?

Simangaliso Sibiyi: To me *Decolonizing the Art* means returning all artifacts that were stolen from Africa by the colonizers, so we can begin to record our own art history. This means that countries like the Netherlands and the UK need to take responsibility by working with us, on our own terms. For me personally the question is: how can we expose our little brothers and sisters to the whole art world, including access to artists, curators, gallery owners and art collectors. All of that needs to be opened to a black South African youth within our communities.

ZE: Speaking of youth and education, BAK also hosted an exhibition with 33 prints of artists from FUNDA Community College, South Africa - that speak to its 33 years of existence. Can you say a bit more about FUNDA Community College and its relation to the 1976 Student Uprising in Soweto?

SS: Funda Community College was founded in 1984 by Professor Eskia Mphahlele, Matsimela Manaka and Mr Motsumi Makhene amongst others, as an alternative education center after the Student Uprising. Since its inception, Funda Community College has, through its diversity of programs historically played an important role in its responsiveness to community needs and socio-economic reconstruction in the community of Soweto. It was home for children's programs in the arts, art programs for school going and out of school youth, employed and unemployed young adults. However, shortly after the dispensation of the democratic elected president in 1994, the international community discontinued the funding without the new government taking over. Since then many of the programs have fallen away due to a lack of funding...

ZE: How is this addressed in the exhibition?

SS: *Journey to the Future*, Funda's Retroactive 33 years' exhibition, is an effort to archive and share the wealth of artworks that have survived the test of time. The exhibition was produced to showcase that we, as young South African art practitioners, are dedicated in helping Funda to rise and serve the community to its full potential. As an acting chairperson of a co-operative of artists that operate under the auspice of Funda, Mollo Wa Ditshomo Art

(Fireside Tales), we have been tasked to renovate the Eskia Mphahlele library into what we refer to as *The Library of The Future*. We hope to open a space of negotiation about possible partnerships and funding platforms.

ZE: Simangaliso, you are currently in the Netherlands for a residency at the Thamy Mnyele Foundation. During your residency, you are invited to make a new work that will be shown at the Rijksmuseum as part of their current exhibition about South Africa and the Netherlands called "Good Hope". Could you tell us something about your plans for this new work?

SS: Initially I was asked to create a piece that would react to the *Good Hope* exhibition. However, after viewing the exhibition and reading some of the texts in their thick catalogue, I believe it might be best if I give my own narration of how I feel this exhibition to some extent is a feel-good exercise for the Dutch viewers. To me *Good Hope* has nothing to do with the South African narrative, because if it did, the exhibition would also be travelling to South Africa.

ZE: In light of the process of decolonisation, what do you think about this choice of the Rijksmuseum to organise the "Good Hope" exhibition?

DvM: The potential danger of the *Good Hope* exhibition is multifaceted. It risks to historicize coloniality and therefore does not point the visitors towards their responsibility for this broken present that we are part of. Though I myself did not actively enslave people in the past, I certainly still contribute to contemporary forms of enslavement, due to my complicitness within this system. How can we start to break with this ongoing reproduction of colonial power structures?

A second danger is that the exhibition claims to give a platform to “multiple” voices, but it is clear that the curatorial team has never really been invested in actually listening to, or giving some kind of decision power to people whom have been harmed by colonialism. Though their intentions will not have been malicious, it seems that nobody has been invested in the important question: “*Who gets to tell history?*”. And under whose terms?”

ZE: Can you give an example?

I feel the evidence of this lack of investment is omnipresent. One of the final exhibition spaces opens up to the question of the “future of South Africa”. This space is then given to the work of the white, middle-aged, South African photographer Pieter Hugo and his anthropological photographs of South African children born after '94...

Now, there are many black South African artists whose contribution would have enhanced our understanding of South Africa's present and the many challenges that lay ahead. In my opinion it is a very problematic decision to give this platform once again to a white male artist. Pieter Hugo's work shows us the world again through a colonial gaze, in which the subjects in front of his camera become voiceless – become “others”.

ZE: As for maintaining critical and other voices – how do you see the future of the Southern Summer School?

SS: What the Southern Summer School showed me is that the youth in the creative sector in the Netherlands and the UK are willing to sit down and accept the mistakes of their parents. That alone is a huge achievement. From here we have to try and find actual solutions to the damage. I wish all the governments in our respective countries would sit in

at our discussions and take notes as to what needs to happen in order to heal our communities.

DvM: I hope that as cultural practitioners, we can leave irony, opportunism, cynicism, careerism and individualism behind, and ask ourselves how we can become active agents within the social transformations that are needed so badly. The Southern Summer School has given me a few actual tasks, on which I will work from my own geographical location, within my own working field and community. Simangaliso and myself have told each other that from here we can't go back – I strongly believe that this project is simply the beginning of many more collaborations and exchanges.

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Simangaliso Sibiya is the representative of the students at Funda Community College in Soweto and forms part of the collective Mollo Wa Ditshomo. Simangaliso Sibiya organised several workshops for the Northern Winter Workshops in Johannesburg and is a participant of the Southern Summer School.

Dorine van Meel is an artist and writer from the Netherlands who lives and works in Berlin and Amsterdam. Her interest in discursive and socially engaged art, feminist methodologies, and self-organised forms of collaborations is reflected within the projects she initiates, which include the Southern Summer School.

This interview with Dorine van Meel and Simangaliso Sibiya took place on the occasion of the Southern Summer School at BAK Basis voor Aktuele Kunst and first appeared in the online magazine of SSBA Salon in March 2017.