



CONTEMPORARY AND

'I'M CONTINUALLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION, TRYING TO UNDERSTAND MY PRACTICE ALONG WITH THE WORLD AROUND ME...'

April 18, 2013

Known for his evolving body of performance work, wall drawings and artist collaborations, Kemang Wa Lehulere is part of a new generation of critically engaged and inventive producers. C& talks to the artist.

C&: You didn't start out as an artist but as an actor and that from a young age. What kind of work did you do?

Kemang Wa Lehulere: My first paid job was modelling for children's clothes for a magazine. Later I had a casting agent who got me small roles on television, the first one on *Cape of Good Hope 2*. And then there were numerous other series where I had very marginal roles. The last fiction work was a film entitled *Azure*, which, I am told, won an award in France, but I don't know if this is true, especially because I never saw the edited film. The last acting I did was on a documentary film which I starred in/presented in 2007.

C&: Why the shift from acting to now working as an artist?

Wa Lehulere: Well, the first reason was a frustration I had with the kind of roles I was asked to play, but also those I wasn't 'allowed' to play because I was not 'credible' as a black person on screen. The second was a shift that happened due to my failure to get through standard 8 or grade 10, as it is now called. I was selected to perform in a touring theatre piece in Canada but because I failed grade 10, my aunt wouldn't allow me to go. I was more focused on acting rather than studying in high school...

C&: So the reason you aren't working as an actor today is political?

Wa Lehulere: Yes that's part of it, but there are also personal/family reasons, which I am actually grateful for today as I have learned a lot about myself but also about South African social expectations when it comes to the body politic. After high school I did a very short course, introduction to film and television, and later worked for a production company where I learned on the job, so to speak. I did some research work, writing, sound, lighting and assistant directed the penultimate project I worked on behind the scenes.

C&: But you stayed behind the scenes, worked in different areas behind the camera, right? Were you still doing that when you started working as an artist?

Wa Lehulere: Yes, I was already making art during this period, but not really exhibiting. It was during this time that I also co-founded Gugulective, which taught me a different kind of discipline and way of looking at things. But I stopped doing work for television to focus on my own work and study further as I started reading a lot too.

C&: When you shifted from acting into art were you in contact with the art scene?

Wa Lehlere: I really stopped 'acting' in high school, although I was in a short film that we shot when I did my introduction to film and television course at the (CVET) Community Video Education Trust. Shortly thereafter, I started at (CAP) Community Arts Project (which later changed its name to Arts and Media Access Centre) and it is there that I really started to build a network of artists and friends in the broader arts.

C&: In 2006 you founded the artist-led collective Gugulective. What was the motivation behind this?

Wa Lehlere: I actually co-founded Gugulective with Unathi Sigenu and Themba Tsotsi. We informally workshopped the idea over many nights of chess games, jazz and hip-hop music. We felt a need to start something at the time. We were interested in a number of things, collaboration, an artistic home close to where we lived, the geo-politics of Cape Town and South Africa as a whole, a space for artists from all backgrounds to meet, space to discourse/share knowledge, for film screenings, live music, a site of contestation, the list goes on.

C&: You work in a variety of media including mixed-media drawings and painting, video, installation and live performance art. Does the latter feel more natural to you with your acting experience?

Wa Lehlere: My practice as it is has a lot to do with the various experiences that I have had throughout my life, working in different forms with different people. I continue to do performance because it scares the shit out of me. In fact I hope I never get comfortable with it, otherwise I have no more reason to do it.

C&: Doesn't it feel more 'free' to perform as an artist instead of following a script when acting?

Wa Lehlere: Freedom is relative. This is actually a tricky question as I feel there is no either or. Acting has a script, yes, but not always. I have done improvisational work in theatre. But I have also done improvisational work in my own performances which are hardly ever rehearsed. There is also a difference between working alone and collaborating – the latter I find harder and usually more exciting. Thinking about my process led me to 're-stage' a theatre piece by my older brother Ithumeleng Wa Lehlere, which I re-scripted from memory some 10 years after it was originally staged. The piece was a rehearsal as performance, staged to coincide with the opening of the Center for Historical Reenactments in 2010. This work came from having spent weeks if not months watching numerous plays being developed in rehearsal studio and my curiosity about the process of making and editing at the same time.

C&: You work with chalk to produce huge, mural-like wall drawings. In a way, performance and chalk are both great tools if you want to produce physically instable work.

Wa Lehlere: Yes, these are both ephemeral media. I like the impermanence of them.

C&: You did a mural-like chalk-drawing for the group show 'The Ungovernables' at the New Museum in New York last year. It was interesting how differently all of the participating artists 'embraced' their complex relationship to the historical in a socio-political context.

Wa Lehlere: The one thing that emerged from the group or general sentiment was the burden of history. Like James Joyce said, 'history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.'

C&: Ever thought about going into politics?

Wa Lehlere: That's a tricky question. My uncle, Oupa Lehlere, operates in that realm and I have learned a lot from him about the stickiness of politics, so that would be a big no. To enter politics is to accept the terms and conditions of politics, many of which are in fine print and sometimes unwritten. A friend of mine, Athi Joja, once jokingly said that artists who go into politics become right wing. Some people make what is called political art. I'm not yet so sure about this. Even though my work has sometimes dealt with political content, I don't know if it is political. But also I am not sure how I feel about this kind of work especially when it is to be sold.

C&: Is there a solution to your concern about producing a political piece of work that is intended for sale? A way for you to work differently?

Wa Lehlere: I hope to achieve a space where I can make art politically. But then again, there is no formula. I'm continually under construction, always trying to understand my practice along with the world around me, both literally and metaphorically.

Kemang Wa Lehlere. Sleep is for the Gifted, 18 April – 25 May 2013, Lombard Freid Gallery, New York, lombardfreid.com: Known for his performances and curatorial interventions, Johannesburg-based artist Wa Lehlere presents an installation composed of recent drawings, photographs, sculptural works and video. It is his debut solo exhibition in the United States.

Wa Lehlere was born in 1984 in Cape Town and lives in Johannesburg. He has a BA Fine Arts degree from the University of the Witwatersrand. Previous solo exhibitions have taken place at the Goethe-Institut in Johannesburg (2011) and the Association of Visual Arts in Cape Town (2009). Group shows include 'The Ungovernables', the second triennial exhibition of the New Museum in New York (2012); 'A Terrible Beauty is Born', the 11th Biennale de Lyon at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon, France (2011) and 'When Your Lips Are My Ears, Our Bodies Become Radios' at the Kunsthalle Bern and Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland (2010). Wa Lehlere was a co-founder of the Gugulective(2006), an artist-led collective based in Cape Town, and is a founding member of the Center for Historical Reenactments in Johannesburg. He was the winner of the inaugural Spier Contemporary Award in 2007, and the MTN New Contemporaries Award in 2010. He was the recipient of an Ampersand Foundation residency in New York in 2012.