



The Future is Now

A podcast series | ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows

Podcast by Qondiswa James

Transcript abridged and edited by Anya Szykitka

Simon Dove:

Hello and welcome to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink. My name is Simon Dove. I'm the Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. For this podcast series, we asked 10 independent artists and curators from different parts of the world, whom we call the Future Fellows, to talk about the current context of their work and to share their vision for how they see the future of arts practice. In this episode, we hear from Qondiswa James, based in Cape Town, South Africa.

Qondiswa James:

My name is Qondiswa James. I'm a cultural worker living and working in Cape Town, South Africa. My mediums are mostly performance. I'm interested in writing-knowledge-theory as it relates to activism and solidarity building. But I also do whatever comes my way to make bread, essentially, but also to keep challenging myself, a multi-disciplinary kind of person. I've even started to work in collage as a medium. I've done installation works. I act, write, do voice, multiple things.

I'm lucky to have a calling to something that I can live doing: I can make money, eat, manage to hustle. This hustle can be something I put towards my purpose. How to affect the world, build a better world. I'm lucky in that all these things aligned. But there are particular avenues or choices you make around which kinds of work to take, or basically, just the choice to take any kind of work, right? Which is about bread, because we are in the arts, and it's not like I can be a freelancer. I haven't had permanent employment in two or three years. So sometimes in a month, even though your rent is paid, you have nothing. Something just pops up: I will go to the meat-market audition and try and get that ad to push some corporation's message that I don't believe in. This is the complexity of living here now.

There is already preexisting mutual aid in the community of cultural workers. We find ways to support each other. Then we try to hold doors open for each other or introduce each other to new avenues of access. But of course it's complicated. And in South Africa it's historical, in a class race kind of way, and how class and race has been zoned, spatially in

geography and urban centers, and how that eventually plays out as access, right? And then how people navigate and negotiate that.

I come from a theater tradition, mostly a theater maker. It has workshopping as its frame, its reference. South African theater, because of protest theater and its history . . . people weren't being taught in European theater, the literary traditions that were being imported, and were finding it from their bodies and traditional practices of virality and improvisation and ritual. Workshopping for protesting became the thing, kind of agitprop theater.

The student movement is a moment in my political becoming, how I come into the network of so-called political people, people interested in politics here in Cape Town. I can reach out to them and say, Hey, I either have very little, or I have got real money, which is actually better when you can share proper money! Or you can say, I have very little, and I have an idea about something. Whether it's creating a piece that can then tour to schools, right? And can we do educational and activist work, but also give people bread? Or whether it's exhibitions or events or actual plays, and short films. Whether it's responding to digital media, like the time we're in now, right? Everything has to be online, otherwise there's honestly no point. Every single project that I make now, that other people in my community make—theater performance, performance arts—you have to conceptualize its existing on a digital platform.

There is improvisation and devising and workshopping in how people, especially working people, are forced to live their lives, right? Hand to mouth precarity that we all experience, to greater or lesser extent. This improvisation that we're used to, this hustle, is something that we can transplant, that we have already. The network does work. It's about continuing to trust it. The thing with the network is that there's no money. That's the thing that's really difficult. We are plugged into each other. We do reach out to each other. I do anyway. And I encourage other people to do it. Sometimes there are things I'm doing for bread, and not doing for bread. Sometimes I'm doing it to support other people getting bread. And sometimes people do that for me.

The way that funding structures are, the government, for example right now there is an open call for the National Arts Council. Anyone can apply, individuals, et cetera. People do get this money. So don't knock where it's working. But, I think the NAC, every three years gives what they call flagship funding. It's almost guaranteed that they will give the institutions, which have already most monopolized the funders, private funders, et cetera, will give them all the money, then trust those institutions to disseminate the money by creating employment.

The government should be disseminating that money evenly amongst everybody. The problem is that the disseminating happens at the top and there is no transparency. The structure is dying. It is becoming derelict; as an abandoned house collapses bits of green starts to come out of the cracks. That's the only thing I'm interested in. The structure's a carcass, a dead thing. But we're not ready. We're not organized. Isn't that the problem, the world over? In every sphere of politics or activity, we're waiting for opportune moments to become organized as opposed to becoming organized. Because this infrastructure of the independent network, like I said, has existed since apartheid and resistance and the culture of protest, art protest, et cetera.

Parts of that even got actually formalized because of the new dispensation. So in a sense, maybe there's been a demobilization. There's also a kind of complacency, because people are able to wiggle enough around, even if it's uncomfortably, to make it work, and that if you kick up a fuss, it's not worth it. This person, Mamela Nyamza, she's kind of famous, an incredible performance artist, dancer from South Africa. She was away from South Africa for a couple of years, maybe five to 10 years. Because you have to do your art here, become relatively known in your network, not in South Africa, just in your network.

Then your network opens an international portal for you. Then in order to make it solidify, you have to go and live somewhere else, Germany, France, America, wherever, or Canada, for five to 10 years. Then you come back and can get a job at a big institution, perhaps.

So she comes back, gets a job at the State Theatre as artistic director. She gets three years; I don't know how long she was there. Even less, two years, she gets fired because Mamela Nyamza is a feminist and kicks up a fuss. Sometimes it doesn't seem worth it. Even when you're inside and you're, like, Let's change it! And you're more like, Oh! I finally made it. I can relax. The further away you get from where you started, and the less visible those struggles become, the more comfortable you are, the more impossible it becomes to imagine the struggle again.

So we have created an alternative and are making do. It's just terribly underfunded. And because of that underfunded-ness, it feels like there is no point putting much effort into formalizing it in any way. But there's definitely something there, otherwise we'd be starving or everybody would be part-time baking cakes. Which by the way, in some of the research for the podcasts that I've been doing, a lot of people are baking cakes, like art makers, art facilitators.

You go to school, become a theater maker, then leave school. And you realize that the industry's oversaturated with theater makers and very few people are going to make it, underfunded, et cetera.

So then you say, Okay, I'm going to become an arts facilitator. Even that's a negotiation. Then hard times hit, right? That arts facilitation, freelancing gig runs out. You can't find anything else. A pandemic hits. Now you find yourself baking cakes. Which is fine because you love baking cakes, but you're a cake baker, you know? My lecturer used to say, if you are a waitress and I come to you, you're serving me, and I say, Hey friend, what do you do? And you tell me you're an actor. You're not an actor. You're a waitress. You're an actor if you are acting, pounding the streets, doing the auditions, actually making it into plays, into ads, into series, into whatever, being an actor. Otherwise, you're baking cakes.

There's not enough support for this thing that already exists. And oftentimes you have to do something else entirely, which is why at the very beginning, I say that I am lucky. And the way that I am lucky, just to be clear, is because I have grown up in a particular environment. Even though I grew up in a working community, I've grown up middle class. I went to private school with white people all my life. The mentality you get taught, you believe it, that you can do anything, the world is your oyster, et cetera. They were teaching white people, and I am just there listening. So I'm also going to sponge it up.

And some people are not even baking cakes, you know? Some are sitting at home drinking alcohol, people that I went to school with who have given up. It just seems difficult: to buy the data you need to log on to the meeting, or to find a 50 rand; or borrowing 20 rand, which is like, I don't know, \$1.05, to be able to go to a meeting and come back. Even those four meetings are not going to get you paid, not getting your bread and your family and whatever your responsibilities are breathing down your neck. The dynamics are very complicated. But there is an alternative, and people have lost faith in the existing organizations.

What we're really interested in is a multi-disciplinary arts school, which begins as a tertiary alternative—not just theater, not just fine art, not just whatever, all of these things—which has got at its frame a political activist lens, that has a food garden network, on-the-campus housing for people who need it. A completely self-sustaining space, but which is educational, creative towards getting free. But again, the demobilization people are not ready. And artists, we're not sharp like that anymore. Some of us were becoming sharp, have retained a sharpness, but we're not sharp like that, where it's art and politics and we are going to rise up in exactly the same way that other people rise up. But more so because we can communicate and message in more effective ways. It's like moving through treacle, thick, thick mud.

It's about how we choose to take on the work of connecting our art to people directly. Without that direct and strong relationship between . . . which actually existed in apartheid, especially the latter years of apartheid, the seventies, eighties, and early nineties: art was a core part of the movement, of people's everyday existence. Even Unam, who's working at the shop right, and can be found with a little poster in her bag. The way that things like that were moving. There's been an active demobilization.

The South African landscape will become such that we have no choice but to make things happen. It's not going to look pretty or anything like that. That's why I don't want to speak about it as optimism. People were so disgruntled, so unhappy. We're talking about it more and more, the ruptures are becoming bigger, more inexcusable. Now they're dividing communities in particular ways, people the state is trying to govern. Things are changing. Since we've been on this Future Fellows, I've been really embracing the future in the present. In general, I'm not about futures. I'm about now. Now. The future is interesting and imagining it is interesting. Imagination and building it is interesting, but now.

Simon Dove:

You have been listening to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink with support from HowlRound. All interviews and post-production is by me, Simon Dove, Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. The specially composed music is by the extraordinary bass player and composer Shri. This podcast is part of the ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows, supported by the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Kirby Family Foundation, John and Jody Arnhold Foundation, and of course, generous individual donors. These podcasts are available to listen to, or download the transcripts at our website, www.cecartslink.org, or at howlround.com.