

Kemang Wa Lehulere  
*To Every Earth  
its Blood*

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The Mind in Our Hands

by Damian Jurt

“.. it is only in our memory that this is our land.” – Mongane Serote

The work of Kemang Wa Lehulere (\*1984) engages with the history of his home country, South Africa, in a space situated between tracing personal histories and historical events. In the exhibition *To Every Earth Its Blood*, Kemang Wa Lehulere explores the psychological dimension of ideologies in education, the effects of repression and the erasure of collective memory. The artist creates haunting visual narratives that he subjects to an ongoing process of revision and reconstruction.

In recent years, Kemang Wa Lehulere travelled extensively, he has been restless and roamed the world as an attentive observer. During this time, he realised five sculptures from the wood of discarded school desks, continuing his exploration of education as a focal point of his work (*Library*, 2021). In an ideal world, school education should empower practices of sovereignty and self-determination. In reality, it reveals itself as a system that fundamentally fosters conformity and adaptation. In the inhuman apparatus of apartheid, the education system was designed to limit the educational horizon of the black population. Freedom of expression was suppressed and the prohibition of their own mother tongue forced a foreign language on the black population. The alienation that resulted from this is an intended consequence of oppression and led to people not only feeling alienated in their own country, but to dissociate from their own body, from their own identity, from their own psyche.

Alienation also appears as a central motif in the book *To Every Birth Its Blood* by Mongane Serote, which Kemang Wa Lehulere references in this exhibition. In the book, the South African writer describes everyday life during apartheid and articulates how fear permeates every aspect of existence in a repressive society. His protagonist Tsi conveys the state of alienation tangibly when he says: “What is it that we don’t know? Despair? Fear? Crying? Laughing? Maybe we know too much of everything. Maybe. And maybe that is why, that is why we have never lived?”

We read how Tsi wanders aimlessly at night because he cannot come to terms with his self-alienation. Serote’s story makes it clear that the oppressed are not accepted as social beings. They are deprived of everything they need to understand themselves and to situate themselves in the world. The totality of psychological processes such as cognition, emotions, motivations, sensitivity and imagination is suppressed. The mind of the oppressed is destroyed to an extent that no longer allows for an intrinsic compensation from life.

Mongane Serote's narrative is not only a political lesson, it shows us how the psychological consequences of repression superimpose external reality.

Kemang Wa Lehulere explores what forms these psychological consequences can take in a repressive system. He reflects on how the trauma of alienation permeates the whole mind and remains entrenched in the psyche, even when external circumstances change. It seems that the burden of the past continues to exist in younger generations, even though much has changed on the surface of the system. The artist displaces these reflections into the wooden sculptures of *Library* (2021) and in this way gives material form to his conception of a psychological architecture. He assembles the small objects from countless pieces of wood. Somewhere between archaic machines and organic structures, they appear like modular constructs that seem to be constantly changing. He thus references the human psyche as a structure that continuously transforms itself in the course of life.

Kemang Wa Lehulere's work stems from the idea that art develops in collective processes and is related to the historical and social context from which it emerges. The series of drawings *To Every Earth Its Blood* (2022), which he realised in the autumn of 2022 on a residency in Stockholm, Sweden, acts like a map of a collective memory. These are colour-intensive, raw compositions that speak of tension, dynamics and vigour. Despite their expressive style, the works on paper have a subtle effect. What are their underlying emotions? What emotional states do we recognise in them? Laceration? Reconciliation? New beginnings? It certainly seems that Kemang Wa Lehulere is mapping emotions with these works, drawing pictures of an inner landscape.

Kemang Wa Lehulere thus refers to the effects of repression on the collective psyche of an entire people. Violence is not simply a physical act. It is part of a process, a condition that aims to disrupt inner states. Violence always entails emotional, social and psychological injury. Forms of oppression thus also show up in the imposed national anthem, the distorted teaching of history or the imposed language.

The meanings of language is the theme of Kemang Wa Luhelere's new work *VOWELS* (2023). It consists of bronze casts of hand signs for the deaf, reproducing the five vowels of the alphabet A, E, I, O, U. The sculptures show the hand of his aunt, who was involved in the student uprising of 1976. The artist uses her hand specifically to reflect that language can make knowledge and experience accessible, but it is also an instrument for spreading misinformation and propaganda. While the raised fist has become synonymous with black empowerment movements, Wa Lehulere also sees his hand signs as an expression of rebellion and raising one's own voice. In the second part of his novel, Serote gives a voice to characters whose strength lies in their hope. They invoke the spirit of hope: "The hope we have is that what we stand for must win ... we stand for the destruction of oppression and exploitation." Despite the threats they face, the people believe in hope.

A recurring motif in the artist's work is a German shepherd dog made of porcelain. He is a symbol of control and surveillance and is reminiscent of the gatekeepers to the underworld in antiquity. To this day, shepherd dogs can be found in South African homes guarding the property of the upper classes. In the work *Return to Sender* (2023), two porcelain dogs sit in an upright posture next to an open suitcase filled with earth on which a layer of grass is growing. In an earlier version of this work, the grass came from the grave of the South African writer Nat Nakasa (1937 – 1965), who jumped to his death in New York. The calm yet menacing effect of the porcelain dog makes it a silent witness to South Africa's historical injustice. The earth in which the dead rest refers to ancient suffering and is at the same time a fertile ground for renewal. The earth brings forth new life and can be seen as a symbol of history rewriting itself.