

One Take: Kemang Wa Lehulere's Performance of Self-Excavation

I cut my skin to liberate the splinter evokes the dissonance and precarity of post-apartheid South Africa

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BY IAN BOURLAND IN FEATURES | 30 OCT 18



Kemang Wa Lehulere, not quite 35 years old, could easily be mistaken for an artist of another era: a multidisciplinary mystic of 1940s and '50s Black Mountain College, like John Cage and Merce Cunningham, say, or an embodied and freewheeling spirit of Willoughby Sharp's 1970s *Avalanche Magazine* circle. Indeed, the Capetonian Wa Lehulere was inspired in recent years by Japanese fluxus veteran Mieko Shiomi and shares with those predecessors a sense of levity and play. His work engages with bodies and their environments and he repurposes the detritus around him, resuscitating it as something wholly new. During his commission for Performa 17 in New York, *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter* (2017), Wa Lehulere moved lithely around a set, shoeless and clad in loose-fitting white garb – like a house painter – while conducting a beautiful cacophony from an array of rough-hewn instruments. During a biennial conceived around the theme of dada, his intervention perhaps most clearly channelled the spirit of his forebears at the Cabaret Voltaire, a whimsically anarchic response to a world riven by nationalism and violence.

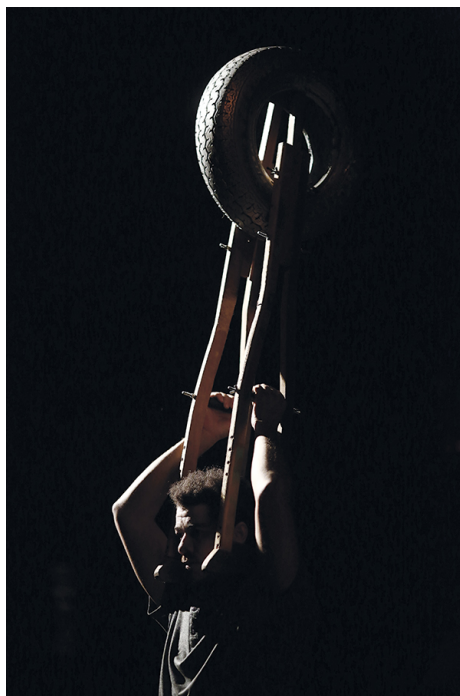


Kemang Wa Lehulere, *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter*, 2017, performance documentation. Courtesy: Performa and Marian Goodman Gallery, London; photograph: Paula Court

Wa Lehulere's practice is, in its way, deadly serious, not stuck on form as such, but deploying assemblage, readymade and kitsch as modes of subversion during a precarious moment in South Africa's post-apartheid history. He came to prominence after his selection for the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 2015 – among the country's highest honours – conferred only four years after his graduation from Johannesburg's Wits University. He was already well-known in Cape Town circles, though, as a founding member of the Gugulective, which he established as a platform for performance and social intervention in 2006. A group of activists, musicians, actors and writers, the Gugulective signalled Wa Lehulere's ongoing engagement with the poetic and ephemeral. In a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2015, he recalls that the group and its manifesto was focused 'initially on discourse around institutions, accessibility and visibility [...] inclusion and exclusion [...] the geopolitical landscape of urban planning of South African cities'. Gugulective's name refers to its place of origin, Gugulethu, a township constructed as a black (primarily Xhosa) area in the 1960s, at the high watermark of apartheid and its systematic campaign of biosocial control and spatial segregation. Gugulethu was the final destination for those from the demolished District Six in central Cape Town, and for many from increasingly overcrowded townships such as the neighbouring Langa. Taken together, areas like these constitute the Cape Flats – a broad, windswept expanse of cheek-by-jowl corrugated structures that typify the new landscape of global sprawl. While apartheid did its methodical work by banning interracial contact, separating families,

demolishing cosmopolitan neighbourhoods and confining black workers to barracks-like conditions, it also structured education. The 1953 Bantu Education Act, for instance, segregated schools, offering a generally poorer standard of education to non-whites. As late as the 1980s, the prospect of a black or coloured person earning a university education in the arts was so dim that collectives and workshops were established by activists as a workaround to the baccalaureate.

While the free elections of 1994, which ended five decades of National Party rule and swept Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) into power, augured a new era – perhaps, at last, a postcolonial one – apartheid's spatial logic has persisted. The population of the Cape Flats has swelled. Colour and class are still powerful life determinants and, especially in the Cape, whites still enjoy privileged access to land and a good education. So, even as South Africa produces global-calibre artists year after year, most graduate from one of several programmes, and precious few come from places like Gugulethu. The last few years in South Africa have seen the advent of two grassroots movements in response to these disparities: Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall. The first echoed the wider turn in the US and beyond toward the removal of controversial sites of public memorial: in this case, the statues of Cecil Rhodes – mineral tycoon and architect of British empire – that featured prominently on university campuses. Rhodes did indeed fall at the University of Cape Town, and next were the fees that kept many, even 25 years after the rise of the ANC, out of university.



Kemang Wa Lehulere, *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter*, 2017, performance documentation. Courtesy: Performa and Marian Goodman Gallery, London; photograph: Paula Court

This is the immediate cultural context in which Wa Lehlere's work must be understood: a time of widespread activism and dissent led by the so-called born free generation, who were denied the utopian prospect that was to be their birthright. Wa Lehlere's process is one of accretion. He often works in chalk, an unstable medium that marks its own erasure and also recalls childhood and its myriad miseducations. So, too, do the rough-hewn wooden forms that frame many of his installations – fort-like structures often fashioned from old schoolhouse desks. In *Cosmic Interluded Orbit* (2016), an astronomy lesson seems to play out for an array of onlooking pupils: mass-manufactured ceramic dogs painted in lustrous gold or black. These knee-high German shepherds, familiar and unnerving, observe with typical alertness. In their repetition, they evoke kitsch sentimentality and manufactured conformity. They are also rich in symbolism: for Wa Lehlere they echo the novelist R.R.R. Dhlomo's *The Dog Killers* (1975), an allegorical account of the slaughter of pet dogs that once belonged to barracked mine workers. The National Party used dogs as a form of terror during rounds of policing the township, including the famous standoff between police and student protestors in Soweto in 1976.

As the title suggests, *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter* seeks a form of release, the dislodging of an irritant lurking beneath a smooth surface, a willful act of self-excavation. Splinters are also a risk of play, of losing oneself in the makeshift battlegrounds of youth or in long days in the studio. The dogs form a phalanx of placid witnesses atop the proscenium, but the action is on the ground, amid the hulking sculptural forms placed around the space like jungle gyms on a playground. They are kinetic, wired for life, amplified. Glass bottles, churning water, the guttural drone of strings: all reveal the liveliness of Wa Lehlere's unsettling assemblages. A mournful trumpet cuts through the air like a missive from the days of hard bop. Over the course of the hour (and roughly ten short movements), the artist's troupe activate this machinery and, in turn, their own bodies. The astronomy lesson, too, appears as a recurrent motif: rotational forces abound in the movement of bodies and mechanisms in the darkened theatre. Wa Lehlere notes that the work was inspired by the astrophysicist Thebe Medupe, who has built a career from bridging mainline astronomy with indigenous (that is, precolonial) understandings of the cosmos.

Ultimately, a studied naivety pervades *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter*, and one wonders how so schooled a performer, and how inured an audience, might find common ground in what often feels like nightmarish child's play. But the piece coheres. Where Wa Lehlere's installations trigger subtle and uncanny resonances, the addition of performing bodies fulfils the theatrical promise of the Gugulective. It also re-animates a defiant current within modernism to do new work in the

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nuanced terrain of South African history – a place whose contemporary art has long relied on more literal strategies of documentary or archival practice. The precision of such mediated forms also re-inscribes certain academic inheritances, certain colonial relics so central to the formation of each generation of young South African artists. *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter* is jarring and incantatory, confrontational and refined; it occupies layers of material and mnemonic space. With it, Wa Lebulere has arrived, on his own terms.

Kemang Wa Lebulere is an artist based in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2018, he has had solo exhibitions at Marian Goodman Gallery, London, UK, Pasquart Art Centre, Biel, Switzerland, and Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa, and his work was included in the 11th Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Main image: Kemang Wa Lebulere, I cut my skin to liberate the splinter, 2017, performance documentation. Courtesy: Performa and Marian Goodman Gallery, London; photograph: Paula Court

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