

Meaningful Contributions

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They are in Alice's car, driving down Wynberg main road. Outside, there is rain. They drive slowly, passing fabric shops, pharmacies and idling taxis. On the pavements, street vendors beneath worn, blue tarpaulins unpack boxes of chips, sweets, and cigarettes.

Alice wanted them to meet in Bo-Kaap this morning, where her photographs are being shown, but Thembinkosi said they should start in Rondebosch, make a stop at The Baxter where part of the exhibition is taking place. Joe hasn't said much. He had a late night.

Over the past six months, Alice, Thembinkosi and Joe have been working together on *LOOK*, an exhibition of public art generously funded by The Funders, a network of organisations based in South Africa, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

For *LOOK*, the three have been tasked with addressing Social Cohesion, Nation Building, Social Ills, and Vulnerable Groups. They are confident that the exhibition will address these issues or, at the very least, draw attention to them.

Alice, Thembinkosi and Joe met through an artist collective that never took off. They don't necessarily get along, but they can appreciate, for the purposes of *LOOK*, what each person brings to the table.

Joe's in charge of publicity – a guerrilla poster campaign targeting street signs, electric boxes, and greyed out walls in and around the city – and managing a team of graffiti writers and street artists to produce site-specific murals. Alice has curated a body of photographs taken in and around Cape Town over the years, and worked with a linguist to translate captions from English into isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and !Ora. Thembinkosi, who has been taking a break from his interdisciplinary practice since he moved down from Johannesburg, has liaised with local performance artists and also with Dennis, a Ghanaian-American artist based in Amsterdam, whose film and installation-based work focuses on the African diaspora.

Six months of hard work has led to this, the launch and public activation of *LOOK*, but their work is not yet done. For funds to be released and artists to be paid, The Funders have requested "Proof of Execution". They've opted to do this themselves with Alice offering to do the documenting in photographs and video and use the money they would have spent on hiring a team of photographers, to increase the administrative and participating artist fees instead.

The rain has slowed to a drizzle. They pull into the parking lot of The Baxter Theatre and walk around to the front of the building where a performance is meant to be taking place.

"Has anyone spoken to Sonia?" asks Alice, pulling the hood of her jacket over her head and squinting at the set of stairs where Sonia is meant to be.

"Her phone's off," says Thembinkosi.

"I think I saw her out last night," says Joe.

It's 10:45 am. Sonia was scheduled to begin her durational performance fifteen minutes ago. The plan, as she had communicated it to Thembinkosi, is to engage in an intensive physical theatre routine while a group of ten dancers lies on the floor around her, feigning death. Every now and then, she will hand out pieces of bread to the audience instructing them to feed the dancers. But there is no Sonia, and no performance. Thankfully, no crowd, either.

"Just keep calling her," Alice says to Thembinkosi. "What if she shows up and we're at the other sites already? We can't miss it."

"It's durational. We won't miss it," says Thembinkosi. "Unless she runs out of bread."

He lights a cigarette and turns to Joe. "What about the murals? Aren't there some here?"

Joe brightens up. "Awe, you're right. The homie Travis did one just up that way, I think. We can walk."

They walk in silence, passing rained-out *LOOK* posters as they go.

"I can't even photograph these," says Alice from behind her camera. "The

ink is running. Why didn't you just print glossy posters?"

"You can't paste those ones up," Joe calls back, "Gotta use the kind of paper that'll soak up the glue. Trust me, these will be up forever."

"They're falling apart, bro," says Thembinkosi. "You got any covered ones? One's people can read?"

"I think so, ja. Awe, here's my piece."

They reach a grey building on the corner of Main and Meadow. A sign in the window reads 'Student Accommodation Now Available' followed by a phone number. They stop and take in the mural. A young woman stares back at them. She is wearing a headwrap and a long, shapeless dress filled with an abstract geometric pattern. Next to her, a ship floats in empty space. A rope runs between them. The mural is rendered in black and white, save for the exhibition website, stencilled in red at the bottom right-hand side of the mural: *LOOKART.CO.ZA*

"Is that a leash or like, a chain?" asks Alice.

"Yoh, that's the question," says Joe, taking photographs of the mural on his phone.

Thembinkosi flicks the rest of his cigarette into the gutter. It hisses as it dies. "Where's the rest?"

"This is it, hey. Travis' piece is closer to town now that I'm thinking about it."

Alice sighs and takes a few photographs of her own, shielding her camera from the rain.

On the walk back to the car, they notice a few tags, some of them on the bus stops, others on the low, bricked walls surrounding apartment buildings, all painted in the same bright red. By the time they get back to the car, they are soaked through.

On the drive towards town, they stop in Observatory and then Woodstock where they document the majority of the murals as well as a few of the installed photographs.

On Albert Road, they stop outside a well-known artist's studio where Sbu, the young slam poet, is busy with his epic prose piece about the history of African migration. Alice gets a few shots of him in action while Thembinkosi films the performance. They are pleased to see a small crowd has gathered to listen. They all agree that things are beginning to improve and that The Funders will be happy. It's even stopped raining.

In town, they head to Park road and grab something to eat at a new restaurant and exhibition space. Then they decide to split up to cover more ground. Alice heads to Bo-Kaap, while Joe goes off to Searle Street Park to check in on the live-mural demonstration, and Thembinkosi makes his way down Darling Street to the Grand Parade where Dennis' installation will be set up in front of the Edward VII statue.

The work is titled *Refuge(e)* and is a sculptural installation made up of bright orange tents and life rafts. Printed along the side of each tent and raft in gold leaf are fragments of found texts – ship numbers, phrases, names and identity numbers written by refugees around harbours and beneath bridges in African port cities like Cape Town, Durban, Abidjan and Freetown. Everyone thinks it will be the highlight of *LOOK*.

When Thembinkosi arrives at the site he finds it empty, except for a plastic plinth containing Dennis' artist bio and a short description of the work. He messages the *LOOK* group chat.

Thembi: Does anyone have the contacts for Dennis' team?

Alice: I might. What's up?

Thembi: No installation.

A call comes in. Alice.

"But they emailed us pictures of everything last night," she says.

"I know, I saw them. And now the whole thing's missing."

"I'm coming to you now."

Thembinkosi pockets his phone and looks around the Grand Parade again. Probably, he thinks, they should have checked that someone was guarding the work. But isn't that on Dennis' team? Panic rises and swirls in his chest. He needs this project to go well. He needs the money, sure, but he also needs to get the fuck of out Cape Town. There is no love for him in this scene. Dennis had mentioned that he was on the lookout for a project manager to join his team. This installation was meant to be Thembinkosi's golden ticket.

He lights a cigarette. Then he takes out his phone and checks his emails. There is a recent one from Sonia explaining that the on and off rain isn't conducive for her performance – is there no back-up plan? – and also that she will not be performing until she's been paid. "Artists deserve better" reads the subject line.

He closes the mail, moves onto the next one, a thread of emails from The Funders. The city, they explain, has received complaints from residents in the Rondebosch and Rosebank areas about murals being painted on their property without their permission, some of it marked with *LOOKART.CO.ZA*. This has coincided with a spike in vandalism in the area. Someone

even painted “Fuck JP Smith” on the Irma Stern Museum. Do they know anything about this?

Alice arrives, looking rattled.

“He screwed me over!”

“Who?”

“That guy I hired to translate the photo captions. Apparently, the Kora ones are all derogatory terms for the Dutch.”

“And then?”

“They’re the ones paying us!”

“Oh ja. Fuck. Well, I can’t find this installation. Dennis is gonna –”

“Right. I passed it on the way over,” says Alice. “Well, parts of it.”

“What?”

“Up on Caledon street.. A bunch of homeless people are sleeping in the tents and using the rafts as beds.”

“Jesus.”

Thembinkosi’s phone rings. A call from Joe, who sounds upbeat.

“Ay man, you guys at the installation? This other lady from The Funders just called. She wants a tour of the exhibition. I told her to meet us there.”

With the unpaid artists, withdrawn funding, and damage claims from the city, Alice, Joe and Thembinkosi are lying low. Emails pile up and simmer, calls are ignored, messages remain unread. It’s unclear when they’ll be able to show their faces in the City Bowl again.

So, they are surprised when, a few weeks later, they receive a warm email from Dennis’ team, thanking them for inviting him to contribute his new work to *LOOK*. The email contains a link to a Dutch art publication where an article explains how Dennis’ recent installation in Cape Town, South Africa, acts as both a powerful, symbolic gesture, and a tangible, albeit temporary intervention into the lived conditions of the city’s displaced peoples, many of them from different parts of Africa.

Pictures of the completed installation accompany the article and a quote by Dennis reads: “For me, too much contemporary public art is purely representational and lacks real impact. Why make an installation about suffering people when you can invite them to help themselves instead? I’m interested in creating art that makes meaningful contributions towards

social cohesion, nation-building, and vulnerable groups.”

None of the other participating artists are mentioned in the article and a link to the *LOOK* website leads to a now dormant webpage. *Refuge(e)*, concludes the article, will be travelling to Vienna, Austria, where it will be installed at the Christine König Galerie with the help of The Funders.

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