

ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"
Nico Athene and Kopano Maroga in conversation
at Hiddingh Campus in Cape Town
published on new moon (4 May 2019)

Nico: So I have many names but you may know me as Nico Athene. It's a name I chose myself and... practice! I don't know how to define my practice; I don't want to define my practice. I mean, my practice came out of... oh, it's such a... I don't even know how to trace back what it came out of but it came out of a certain kind of gendered performativity, which I was, I think, a lot of my life performing unknowingly but with a lot of dysphoria that was not named and a lot of self discontent and then finding myself in positions where I had to perform that to gain certain kinds of transactional currency that were also un-named. So a lot of it was really invisible. And a lot of, I guess, what I would call my art practice was slowly making that visible to me first and then to sort of wider society.

Kopano: And what disciplines did you find, kind of in the early stages of your practice were you mostly engaging with?

Nico: So, I sort of landed in film by accident. So I was working with film but it didn't feel artistic to me in the sense that I was working for other people and I think I did feel very creatively stifled by that. And then, I guess, performative protest in a sense? Because, as you know, I took myself out of the film space because I was frustrated with the unseen, unremunerated sexual labour I had to do in that space and started working in a strip club so I could charge for it explicitly.

And you know, I think a lot of my argument initially, or I think a lot of my frustration with where my practice came from was around the question of well, why do we not see this as art? Why is sex work, stripping (which is a form of sex work) not considered an art? It's so performative, it's so calculated, no one understands the nuances of this kind of audience engagement other than the women who are doing it. And I mean 'women' in the most inclusive sense possible. Ja and I was getting super frustrated with how holding that possession was making, was so stig... stigmatizing (is that a word?) of who I was in the sort of social circles that I was familiar with, which was a lot of like - white Cape Town artists as well (*laughter*).

Kopano: Our faves!

Nico: Our faves! (*Laughter*). So... and how suddenly, you know, I felt very other-ed, very like - ja, looked on as an object. It's a funny thing to come out as in those spaces.

Kopano: And do you feel like working in the sex work industry was a way to directly respond to that 'object-ness' that was being projected onto you but implicitly as opposed to overtly?

Nico: Um, yes. Definitely. But I think I only managed to start narrating to myself actually what I was doing as I was doing it.

Kopano: Ja, ja, ja.

Nico: It wasn't like 100% clear, it wasn't... (*sighs*) you know and it's this funny thing of people, of like, coercion and choice. Because I think we're all coerced by the parameters of neoliberalism and capitalism and certainly there was this feeling of: fuck it, I'm never gonna make what I need to make or be who I wanna be in this industry so... I'm gonna try this. And all the ways that that plays into our insides in terms of wanting to unravel consent to myself in a space where I was making hard transactions for my emotional labour and physical labour.

Kopano: Ja, I really resonate with that thing that you said about doing the thing before the thing made sense. So often I think if you come from like a traditional artistic institutional background the idea of - the way that you're generally taught, the way that I was definitely taught, is that the concept comes before the enactment or the... So you have the explication and then you go and you practice what it is that you've said you are going to do, you know? But it's such a different way of working to almost have an instinctual sense for a thing. It's just like you notice, okay, I have certain questions that are not being answered in this particular configuration of life, what can I do to complicate the situation such that I can find the answers? You know? And not even just find the answers but just find the question, you know what I mean?

Nico: One hundred percent!

Kopano: You know when you just like feel, okay, there's something here about, let's say, there's something about gender, there's something about labour, there's something about trauma, there's something about erasure. Those are my general thematics and right now because things are being invisibilized, I can't actually engage with them.

Nico: Exactly!

Kopano: So I need to be in an environment where like, it's physicalized, it's visibilized and I'm practising - I'm communing with that thing in a way that is tangible. So that I can, like you said, I can understand it because I have these questions, but they're not being answered instead they're just being gas-lighted. So it's just like where can we go so we can shine the light.

Nico: Even the questions. Also, especially because they're so embodied and I think... I, ja, I completely agree with you and I think this is my big fear going into my MFA, as well, is that - I feel like it's such a patriarchal way of working to assume that we have the right questions or even the language for them or a clean concept before we do the thing. Because it also pre-dictates a very kind of neat art-making that's quite cynical. And I also think it kind of almost pre-requires, or at least perpetuates this sense of like safe disembodiment.

Kopano: I love that! It's like - it's literal necromancy. (*Laughter*). Safe disembodiment - woah!

Nico: And I think a lot of bodies don't - they live in an urgency that that does not... that methodology and mode and materiality it doesn't like...

Kopano: ... it doesn't apply.

Nico: It doesn't apply! And it doesn't give space for that. It doesn't give witness or hold or present...

Kopano: Especially when the majority of the questions that you have are embodied questions in the sense that like it's questions about like, the way in which your body is policed and where you can go and where you can't go and why you cannot go to those places. But I think if we're using the archetype of the cis white able-bodied financially upwardly mobile man-thing (laughter), where all those identities are kind of like a default, none of your experiential enquiries or the questions that you experience are... they're neither visible and they don't necessarily take place on your body, right?

So like, if you're allowed to move through space freely, if you're allowed to articulate your sentiments freely without opposition, if your body isn't biologically controlled by virtue of the fact that you don't have a cervix or womb and, you know, you can go out at night at any time that you please because of your masculine presenting-ness while feeling safe (maybe not necessarily being safe, but at the very least feeling safe) - if that is the way that you're moving through the world why would you have any questions about that movement? It's free movement, you know?

But if you're a person that that is not the case for and you're witnessing people with that free movement, there's an oppositional relationship there that is - your body is that site of. That's where it takes place. Which is why it makes sense that your enquiries are embodied enquiries, but if the expectation is that you must first disembodiment yourself to ask the question, what you're doing is you're taking a very particular mould and archetype and trying to superimpose it onto someone that it doesn't apply to. My questions are of the body, on the body, in the body and if I do not embody them they actually cannot, they can't move, they can't gestate, I can't think! What is a thinking body, you know what I mean?

Nico: You can't figure it out - ja...

Kopano: And I think that's quite interesting because it's like, it's so clever for... that patriarchy has kind of created these implicit contexts where that disembodiment is required. Whether it's the workplace, whether it's the art-making space, all these spaces require that kind of, supposed 'safe disembodiment' because it de-mobilizes your most available mechanism of thinking, which is your body.

Nico: And I love how you're articulating things for me as well because even the work that I was doing before, which was often editing, like - can you think of a more, kind of... I don't know, is the word "technocrat" right?

Kopano: Technocratic, ja.

Nico: Sort of like - engagement where you literally are pretending to not have a body and engage directly like mind to screen, you know?

Kopano: Mh. It's like that philosophical theory of what if we're all just like these brains in these vats that are... and for me, it's like - only a man can think about that! (Laughter) You

know what I mean? Like, only a cis-man can think of like, *what if I'm just a brain* because it's like - I don't know. If you experience any kind of oppression that is embodied, that regulates your movement, the question of whether you have a body or not is implicit. Because it is my body that disallows my movement, therefore I am very aware of it. But if you have this freedom of movement your sense of a body is so amorphous that you're like *maybe we're all just brains in vats!* Which is a great like - it's a great thinking place but it doesn't apply across the world, right?

I don't know, it's just like, hm... the viscosity of it is just so present, I think often times that is facilitated like - feelings of dysphoria, feelings of disembodiment - are facilitated by coming into, just clashing with these ways of thinking, these epistemologies that pre-suppose some level of disembodiment, which is just like...

Nico: Ja, completely.

Kopano: Like your brain is just like... no, but definitely definitely like - I have a body not because it's... not just because it's empirically provable, like I can witness it. But also because my existence, the way that I have existed, necessitates that I have a body. You know what I mean:

Nico: Ja!

Kopano: That I have some form of corporeal matter... How long were you studying for? Did you do undergrad Honours, or did you just do you undergrad?

Nico: I just did my undergrad and I actually applied to Michaelis and then I got in and I thought, *no I can't do this*. And I'm so grateful that I didn't study art formally from the beginning because I think that would have just, I don't know, crushed this exploration through life.

Kopano: Can you extend on that a little bit, like why... why you think that?

Nico: Phew, I don't know, I think that - just, from what I've heard of this institution and precisely the kind of way that I heard of how things were being taught here, I don't know how it's changed. And how it had this kind of 'tough love', hyper-conceptualized aesthetic as well. In the institution I think I just, I wouldn't have survived and I don't think I would have grown. I just, ja. I don't know if I'm articulating that properly but I think it's exactly that problem of not enough emotional intelligence in the institution in a way that could have held or promoted these other modalities. Like, this was even before the ICA mould.

I graduated from my undergrad in 2007, so that was eleven years ago. And I think as well, like, the faculty (I mean, especially 12 years ago and I don't think much has changed) of these kind of much older, mostly white men running the faculty who are also of my father's generation. And my father used to teach here. I mean, it was really interesting because I resisted coming here not for any conscious reason, I just - something didn't... it felt too scary, something didn't feel right. And then went straight into the world of film (through a contact of my father) who was [*the contact*] an emotionally, sexually coercive boss.

And, I think this is useful to speak about in my early twenties, entering the workforce and what that did to my relationship to work and labour and understanding that. Ja, and having a boss who had a room full of young women working for him, was completely emotionally abusive to all of us, you know, who eventually took favour to me because he was attracted to me and who I ended up dating as like, a free pass through the world of his office. *(Pause)*.

Sorry, this triggers me a lot ... and I want to be able to talk about it because I think the way this stuff hides is how it keeps perpetuating. And when I eventually left him as a so-called 'partner', and I don't like to use that word because I do view that period as being coerced, he sort of refused to pay me for the work that I had done for his company, kind of proving what I'd really been labouring as and I guess just, the intricacies of how these things live in and cross over through public and private spheres.

You know, and how my parents and especially (at that point) my father would be like, 'Well, I told you to never sleep with your boss and you shouldn't sleep with your boss' and bla bla bla, and you're going, Well, who's job really was it to keep that boundary? You know, okay, I'm going to have a quick cry and then continue. *(Sighs - pause)*. So... sorry! I kind of want to talk through the cry actually, because I think...

Just how violence lives in these spaces and lives at home. We're so loyal to those systems, as children we're so loyal to our families because it's literally our source of survival. *(Sighs)*. So I think like, naming it is a daily work. And also the complexity of... you know, I come from privilege. I have parents who have shamed me in many ways, but I also have parents who have given me so much and again, nuancing this is so important. So that we can speak about the nuances of this violence without people thinking we're dragging them personally through the trash. That I can love parents who have also really hurt me, you know, and the complexity of that. And I think so many of us live with that, you know? Especially if we're... ja, I mean. Just the way that values change in a generation.

Kopano: No, I mean, I think that speaks to your practice in such a huge way or responds to the linearity of patriarchal logic as far as morality is concerned. So the legal system is like, there is a perfect victim, there is a perfect perpetrator and that is how we dictate who needs to be incarcerated when. And that kind of way of thinking diminishes so much of that nuance and how first of all, how violence is very mundane - it's something that we experience from day one, entering the world, you like split apart the person that gives birth to you *(laughter)* - in order to enter the world you come in screaming, right? And then from there, it's part of the life that you live, you know?

And trying to create these patriarchal modes of justice where there are requirements to understand who it is that is a victim, who it is that is an oppressor, that is a perpetrator, and trying to creating linearities and moralities does us a disservice. And that's how we know that it's not about like "doing the right thing", it's not about morality, it's about creating, I don't know - maybe it's about creating division, maybe it's about creating a... maybe it's a kind of capitalist mode of like, the least input for the maximum output, right? So it's like the least input is a very unimaginative framework for understanding violence or understanding infringement. Maximum output is like a huge body of the incarcerated populace that are used as a kind of example to the rest of the populace as what happens if you cross the wall. You know what I mean?

So just have a very disciplined populace and then you also kind of have a free workforce, depending on where you are in the world and how your social system works, which completely diminishes the ways in which the victim/perpetrator spheres overlap and how they facilitated by ja, people that love you unintentionally can hurt you. And that is a thing that happens. And you can be a person who has been hurt and has facilitated violence.

Nico: Of course.

Kopano: So there's no... to binarize that is just like, that doesn't make sense and that does nothing for us, right? That doesn't actually...

Nico: Hundred percent.

Kopano: And what I mean is, in the sense that like, it extends... it seems like an extension of your practice in that what you've done is that you have taken these kind of two worlds that seem to be removed, the supposed personal, the supposed political, the professional and you've put them on top of each and are like, But no, these things, these inquiries that I have exist in both of these worlds and therefore both of these worlds are in the same world, you know? There is... the division that has been created between the professional and the personal does not serve those who are experiencing violence. And in a kind of... in the opposite sense, it also doesn't serve those who are perpetrating violence because it gives them the mechanism to explain why that violence is permissible. So it does not any justice.

Maybe that's what is so catalytic and alchemic about your practice is that it visualizes that, it visibilizes that, it gives language to it, maybe not lexicon language-language but a visual, affective, emotional language. And that's important because it's like, I think it goes to the thing we often speak about, you and I, about raising energy? So like, using performative practice to catalyse some kind of emotional, affective quality that is also some kind of emotional intelligence. Ja, I think that's quite beautiful and quite shamanic. (*Laughter*).

Nico: I agree with you, ja. Ja, it makes sense. I also think, I mean, we've spoken about this privately before but this whole idea of privatisation. And how we've privatised intimacy and how we've privatised religion, or access to the spiritual and understanding that we can never go backwards in time. I really think that the people working in the shamanic realms, like on the edges, so much of that is artists who are somehow managing to... because art practice allows for non-linear thinking and different modalities of knowledge that we haven't necessarily found ways to kind of easily capitalize, that often we're compelled to do something from, you know, as we were saying, the movement often times comes before we've conceptualized or narrated why to yourself. And so, often the making is kind of... before it gets commodified by markets, which we also want because we need to survive as artists.

I mean, art markets are fucking weird because on the one side they are highly commodifying, on the other side they're always looking for like - the new thing, you know? But the only way to do that is to work outside of them and I think that is quite a shamanic space, often... can be, to boarder, you know? And it has so much to do with who the audience becomes and having this conversation with more than just self, because otherwise you're just doing therapy. So, you know, how to really ... and you know therapy is also this weirdly privatised

experience, you know, of like - I'm going to work through *my* stuff, you know. It's completely in a sense, de-politicized. And doing that in the service of like an audience or community or other I think is often artistic practice.

Kopano: Ja.

Nico: I think the twenties are really hard. I think I kind of bounced out of home into the bigger world into spaces, like psychic spaces of depression and discomfort that I couldn't quite name. I think a lot my twenties was kind of trying to find my place in economy and like, really feeling disheartened and not really knowing how I could make money in a way that felt comfortable enough or, that actually felt do-able and a lot of pressure from my parents in that regard. I think a lot of us have that. You know, in your twenties it's really like this negotiating with that sort of internalized expectation of what should like, or be like, or feel like and then often you know, if you're in a body that's in any way resistant to the success that that really recognizes or supports, sitting in a lot of discomfort and not really knowing how to go forward.

And in a sense, huge release when I entered the strip club and that space of sex work because ja, I felt like I was diving a lot into kind of the subconscious of society, the spaces that are not spoken about, or nuanced; the space of taboo. Which was, in a way, incredibly powerful. It was an incredibly powerful space to be, I think sometimes there's also huge relief in being in a space that is so alien to society when you feel alien to the expectations of society. You know? You kind of go, ah, okay, this makes sense somehow. And almost like a sort of, practice of recognizing and pulling out - it's almost like the badho that Bhuddist kind of circle of cosmology where it's like 12 states of being and you can reincarnate into any one, but like really being kind of in the deep, dark dungeon. Being able to recognize, okay, this is not mine, this is a reflection of me and it's a reflection of society, kind of slowly being able to separate that from self.

I think, ja, it definitely spent the last part of my twenties in that space but these spaces I think are hugely important, where the dark magic happens and where we harvest power, really and we look at things that we have decided or society has decided are ugly, really look at them. And decided, you know, for yourself, what is ugly and what's not ugly and also make space for ugly because we don't live in clean dualities.

I mean, it's also so ironic because in that space hard capitalism also caught me because then you can monetize every "personal" (personal in inverted comma's), every intimate interaction. And you know, the money can become euphoric. Like, if you've never held lots of money in your hands, like 50K cash is like a good feeling, you know? So these spaces are super tricky because you're kind of subverting normalistic, socially endorsed modes of capitalism but you're still like deep in the capitalism machine and letting it infiltrate, maybe not deeper, but more visibly spaces inside of you. And I mean, it's literally a dark place, it's a space, you know you're awake at night, you sleep in the day, which is highly isolating. You're in this world that nobody can language except for you because it's so different to what people know. It's fucking cutthroat in there. Everyone's just trying to scam everyone for more money. Whether it's the women you work with often, I don't think it always has to be like this, but the club I was working at is a highly masculinized space.

So actually post thirties, now, 33 - doing my masters, let's hope. Kind of being more recognized into, like, that crossover into artist, really feels like coming into the full moon, coming into the light, coming into the manifestation of something much more sustainable and holistic and working on different levels.

Kopano: And if you had one question for your twenties to your thirties?

Nico: I think my question from my twenties to my thirties was, Does it get lighter? Will I survive?

Kopano: Ja...

Nico: I mean, I actually went through a phase where I thought I would die.

Kopano: Highly relatable content! (*Laughter*).

Nico: Ja! Sometimes I think we operate in spaces that are like, depression externalized and I think there was something about working in that space that meant that I didn't have to feel sadness because it was so extreme. And please, not all sex work is this extreme or not all environments where you can do sex work in are this extreme in this way and of course there are many that are more extreme in other ways, that, just dealing with so many energies of so many people in a night. It's kind of like doing an extreme sport. And so, almost the euphoria of managing that means that you don't have to *feel* in a way. It's kind of like a relief. The only feeling you get to experience often, when you're in a good moment, is power.

Kopano: I think we're going to sign off there.

Nico: Thank you.