

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"
Sukuma Mkhize and Kopano Maroga in conversation
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Hello and welcome to the "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon" Podcast, brought to you by ANY BODY ZINE! Between Twenty and Thirty is a podcast initiative started by ANY BODY ZINE featuring myself, Kopano Maroga, and Nicola van Straaten talking to different artists and cultural workers about their lives between the ages of twenty and thirty, for between twenty and thirty minutes. Where were they? What were they doing? What did their lives look like? How did they make it work? Join us every new moon, to find out.

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Kopano: Hi to everyone that's listening. This is the between 20 and 30 podcast with ANY BODY ZINE. I am Kopano Maroga, and I'm sitting here with Sukuma Mkhize. How you doing, Sukuma?

Sukuma: I'm okay. Thanks for the invitation, ANY BODY ZINE.

K: Such a pleasure! Can you wanna tell us a little bit about yourself, your practice, who you are, what you do?

S: So, I'm an astronomer by training. And, so I did mostly, I did mostly the... the studies in physics and astronomy, as a start and then found myself really also getting into the humanities during my studies. So I was always always interested in picking up a course in philosophy, but pretty much astrophysics, Honours with UCT [The University of Cape Town].

S: And with a specialization in cosmology. So I really got interested cosmology as something... as a, as a really good application for physics.

K: Yeah.

S: And the physics was the thing that I originally intended to study, but then discovered the astronomy through the UCT astronomy department, because I think they were the, at the time, they were the only only department in the country that had an astronomy degree, you could specialize in astronomy. So I got into astronomy in that way. And into philosophy, history, writing through all those... through, through, through all of that, a lot of a lot of lot of philosophy that goes into it. Lots of writing lots of... a lot of creativity. So, so that's how... that's the link with art and creating. So it's been... so I mean, and it's something that I really got into at the age of 20. So, now I'm turning 33.

K: Yeah! The big three three! (Laughing)

S: So, yeah, it's hard to think about the past 10 years, I think. It's been... even when I left the house, when I got up this morning, I was thinking, how do you...? How do you...? How do you explain to someone what some of those experiences and how they shape the way you think and the way you see the world? But it's a very rewarding exercise also, which is why I'm excited to come in and talk to you.

K: Yeah, thanks for giving us your time. (Laughing). So take us back to like, 20. What did your life look like? Where were you? What were you doing?

S: Yeah, so 20 I arrived.... I moved from Durban and came down to study at UCT. I had done something else before. So, I, from Durban had gone to what do you... I think it's called, now, DUT (Durban University of Technology) It used to be Natal Tech[nikon]. So I did an engineering diploma there. And then, just really soon after that, decided I wanted to study physics, and really get into it proper.

K: So, did you start at DUT just before your 20s?

S: Yeah, exactly. Because I finished... I think I finished... I was 17 when I finished high school, so by that time, so when I was 20 I had already studied something before in and then wanting... and wanting to explore.... It was the physics was always there it was something I was always interested in, in high school even, but I don't think... I think it was only when I turned 20 that I became a really... a serious interest to go into. And I found the engineering frustrating a bit because I was studying a lot of this stuff, but not... I just wanted to know, to study at a deeper level and not so much think about the applications. Although, even that may be like very adolescent way of looking at it, because even now, and I think, now I have spent time thinking about it, studying it, but it's not... It's more the way of thinking but it's not as though I've walked away carrying, you know, this skill set that maybe you wouldn't gain if you studied engineering, I think people who study engineering also walk away having learned something about a way of looking at the world, a way of approaching problems, a way of approaching solutions. But it was mostly just I really wanted to know, I think. (Laughing).

K: 'How does it work? How does the world work?' (Laughing)

S: I just wanted to know! I just really wanted to. And it was really encouraged, I think, in high school there were a lot of... it was really celebrated. If you were really good at maths...

K: Ja...

S: ...it was really something that was really celebrated. So I was always pushing myself also. If you're really good science it was something that was really celebrated. You know, it's always...

K: ...You're the anointed child, if you can do the science thing.

S: Yeah, if you could do that... And then out of interest, I think, really, but a deep interest to know to really understand how it works. And if... also wanting to make a contribution towards it. So not just learning it, but knowing that there's always... there's always... everyone can make a contribution in it. If you spend enough time thinking about it so there's always that as well. So it's quite... it's really rewarding. They give out Nobel prizes every year, which means every year something... people figure out ways of looking at the world.

K: Mmm.

S: Every year something ground-breaking comes out. So, definitely all those things are motivating. And then... and then you get to the philosophy of it, which is also keep you thinking for a very long time. Which is also quite nice.

K: Yeah, yeah. Nice. Nice.

S: It's a very armchair thing to do and makes for good conversation. I've never, never met anyone who wasn't interested if I said, 'Oh, yeah, I'm an astrophysicist'. You know, everyone, there's always something to say. If you say, 'I'm an astronomer' people always have something to say or something to ask. So everyone... people... everyone engages with it also. So it's, it's such an easy, easy thing, or something that most people can relate to.

K: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, you were learning about all of this, like... was this, like, undergrad or...?

S: Yeah, yeah, yeah in undergrad. Yeah, so undergrad... If you really, I mean, some of the calculations that you do, you kind of know that when someone came up with this thing, they must have been really on top of their game as well. But some of the, in the whole, most of will say maybe with your studies, most of the undergrad training, is just merely going through that body of knowledge and reproducing it, and knowing how to reproduce it. So there's some really good results that you will learn, that I learned when I was doing undergrad studies, and everything comes in phases. It gets really tough at points. I mean, a lot of the really, really challenging... It's a really, really challenging exercise to go through it. And you can... there's foolish ways of doing it also. You can end up over-committing yourself taking as many things as you can and then...

K: Do mean course [load] wise?

S: Course-wise. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's where... (Both laughing)

K: Yeah, you can be very ambitious.

S: You can really... So, there's foolish ways of doing it, because you can really want to get into it too soon. And then a lot of it builds up on previous things that you needed to know. But I always related a lot more to people who were on the other side of campus, because I always felt...

K: The more Humanities related...

S: Yeah, the more Humanities related.... Because I also felt, always felt, they were also engaging... it's something that once you get into it you realize it's so much bigger than it immediately [seems]. And if you really want to go far you start thinking academic path academic track. You start thinking papers from a very, very early age.

K: And is that where the philosophy then, the interest for philosophy as a study came for you? Where you found that kind of resonance with people.

S: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. And a lot of the... a lot of the work itself, even the conversation we just had sounds, like philosophy, even, the only difference is at some point, you can go ahead and measure things and calculate them. The rewarding thing about it is you can say things and be really, really exact also about things that you can't really touch or see.

K: In the philosophical discipline?

S: Yeah, yeah, even, exactly. So same with philosophy you can... most of the good theories in philosophy [are] a series of thoughts that, if you put them together, really give you crystal and sound result. To try to refute a good argument is one of the hardest things, right? So it's really frustrating, but it's rewarding, also, if you... if you've understood it, and you can see how you can start constructing other things. Maybe using that way of thinking. So that's where creativity comes in for me. I'm not primarily thinking of practicing as an astronomer, but I'm, I'm applying it in my own practice, which is mostly light installations, and sound... sound sculpture, which is really something that I'm getting into now. And... but the... and then the thing I take away from astronomy is that way of thinking. And, it is an aesthetic also. There's an aesthetic, there's a sensibility to it. It comes across in certain things that you do. And, you know, that's why I was, I mean, even to be invited to come and do this is really... Is reassuring in that way. It means you're doing something that someone might want to hear about or... so... And I've seen this publication grow, as you were saying, it started off as a group of friends. And now it's nice to come to see it's been three years, I think.

K: Yeah, it has.

S: 2016, right? Yeah, I remember the first call for the, for the, for the essays. So it's, it's been, it's a shared journey, but I think everyone from their own practice has, you know, there's a sensibility to be gained in which people apply differently. So for me, primarily, thinking sound thinking, light. But applying... because you can't shake it off, things that you've spent a lot of time thinking about really do inform the way you do things. Yeah, so that's what I take away from it, I'm not necessarily interested in writing papers at the moment or looking at it in that way. It's a very small community as well, and even... it's a smaller village than most other things. More than the art world. (Laughing).

K: I'd imagine. I'd imagine.

S: So, yeah...

K: And, did you find that your kind of your more traditional, kind of, creative practice was coming in at the same time as your interest in philosophy, and your, kind of, studies? Or did that come after? Did it come before?

S: Yeah, there's also the transfer of knowledge from interacting with lecturers. Also you pick up a lot so, the art thing, actually, I was thinking about it, the person who was... I met a lot of good artworks through studying physics, because a lot of the... I had this professor who was, who had this really amazing web page. Like done in a very minimal, physics, like, geeky [way]. I think he was using Apache... So... Do you know...? I think it's called Apache. But it's a really... if you really want to spend a lot of time trying to write a web page you'd use Apache. So, I think people who use that, who use Apache, it's like people will sit there and program that stuff... So you build it from scratch, they build it... it's like a really low level. But the interface comes out neat, it's very stable, but it takes way too much work than... from what I understand. But he had a really good web page for uploading solutions, problem sets... tuts, past exams, you know. You know the way. The usual way professors organize things. But the only thing, he would always have maybe a Rothko, Rothko painting on the side, just as a thumbnail, maybe on the left. And if you clicked on it, there was a link to that person's work, other work. So I really... and you know, I think it's Edvard? Is it Edvard Munch? 'The Scream'?

K: Yeah, Edvard Munch.

S: Yeah, 'The Scream' also, I met it there. So this, so this professor always... he always shared the classics. He wasn't really innovating in that he wasn't pushing us that far. But he was just making sure that you knew about these works. And this was coming from a physics professor. And I always got the sense also that a lot of the physicists are philosophers, they really love... in most lectures that you have, they'll definitely spend a significant amount of time going... at least thinking about those things. And then they'll come back to the physics with things that you can actually calculate. The only the only division between... the only division between physics and philosophy is that a lot of physicists pride themselves in being able to, once they've said all these things that can actually calculate them and show you. So that's the only difference. So the other... and then just the idea that you don't need much also. You can be very fulfilled, doing what you love was just everywhere...

K: Mmm.

S: ...in that department, in those departments. You know, I mean, this is just why you might want to create, why you might do physics, why you might... so I didn't understand that. That whole... it's only making sense now to me, that whole spirit of you can just do for yourself, that independent. Physics really embodies independence, you know, they whole... and astronomy. And, as I say, a lot of the other disciplines you might find in the Humanities, I found that whole independent spirit is there, you know, so that was, those are the things I took away. That you can sit down... oh, you can sit down, work on something, know if it's right, know if you've done it well. Know also if you've messed it up, that that whole thing is really important, right? Especially if you're doing things you might be like... you study... you're doing a web page, or whatever, for these projects. But no one else, no one comes to you and says, 'Oh, let me, like, let me grade this work', or, it's not like you're going to submit this tutorial, right?

So you reach a level where you're able to check your own work, and know that it's good enough, if it's good enough for peers. If it's good enough for the average peer, it's probably okay. But if it's good enough for exceptional peers then you really know. But you, you kind of know once you've done it at that level, right? So I think that's been the only, that's another thing that I, I'd say I was learning throughout that time is the ability to do things, be able to check them yourself, and know when they're okay, know when they're not okay, maybe move on to the next thing. But, just being able to grade your own work without needing someone else. Because a lot of, I mean, generally I find also a lot of people are either in the same field. So to get either people are also going for the same thing that you're trying to do, in which case, they're not going to be as instructive or push you in that direction, because you actually may be all going for the same thing in the first place. So it's really hard to find, to find really objective criticism for work, you know, sometimes you really need to be able to look at your own things.

K: Mmm.

S: And I learned physics really, I learned that spirit of independence: start your own record label, you know? Those, that whole thing, that whole thing is, there's something in there, which I still can't quite explain, but which embodies all these efforts. So personal roads, like Wikipedia, who put up the Wikipedia page? Also, like there's that whole, that you can just put things there for people to go and find and read. Very, almost like that altruistic spirit. But it doesn't mean to the point where you are not eating at the same time, it's not, no one is saying that. It's just saying, there's like there's an ethos, or an approach to doing things that I found was very common in all those disciplines: in making art, in then

doing physics, in thinking about philosophy and reading poetry, you know. Movement... So those are the things that I, I took away from it.

K: Yeah. Yeah, you know, it's almost like, it gives you a good framework for dissecting a thing, and seeing where the gaps in that thing, and seeing where you can place yourself in that gap? But then also, an important part of ensuring that that gap is filled. How to make it sustainable? So it's almost like how to ensure that like, like you said, you were talking about Apache before, and how it's a stable, stable website-building program. But it's like, it's really from the ground up. That really sounds like the point of departure with your own, kind of like, artistic practice or your own building of certain things. Like, very much from the ground up like...

S: Yeah, from the ground up that

K: Ensuring that it's a stable algorithm. (Laughing)

S: Yeah, yeah...

K: So can you talk a little bit more about that? You, you were talking about the recording, you were talking about the light installations, and sound... Was that now...? When did you find yourself, like, kind of, practicing more?

S: Yeah, so that came later. Came...once I...

K: ...and why?

S: I know, so... the closest thing to astronomy is, I would say that a lot of people would immediately understand is, photography. So a lot of a lot of the good images that we see, or even the thing, the thing that maybe makes a lot of... most people curious about astronomy is the images that they see of things. Really spectacular images that people take using telescopes, and cameras that are mounted on telescopes. So, so that's always there as well, right? So now, if we've got this whole photography thing going on, which is... it's very explicit in astronomy, not so much in physics. Not so much in other areas of physics and particle physics... They're also really get nice images from CERN [European Organization for Nuclear Research], you can see those bubble chambers... You'll see at some point, maybe, maybe... if you're listening, just if you Google 'bubble'... 'bubble chambers' you'll see the earlier images of bubble chambers. So, photography is always there. And then in astronomy it's a lot more explicit. So then you never stop thinking about light, really. Then, the whole, so really immersing myself into the arts, I was always just really curious. I would go to say, like... they always, your always encouraged also to attend... to go that jazz concert, or go to that piano recital.

And you always have friends also, you know, who are doing these other things. So you always, maybe that's the, the collective, the collective feeling of being in an academic institution, and maybe being forced also to live around people. But because I was being forced into, A) I lived in res [student housing] initially. So I was really like, forced into a space where maybe the person next to me was studying here at the College of Music or the person next door, you know, doing something else. But I, I think I've always also been curious, maybe [my] upbringing? A lot of... it's hard to tell how we... the shape that we, we form, where it comes from... but definitely a lot of influences and a bit of curiosity. If you're really curious yourself, and it shows in the things that you end up pursuing. So you... there's also like a bit of rebellion. If you really, like... you just rebel against things that seem too orderly. I'd say like a lot of

careers, they seem to orderly, right? It just seems like... it seems like I want to... you know, just being able, like... waking up and improvise and feeling like you're gonna have to improvise and make something happen is really that spirit. So, you know, what we were describing from physics, from from astronomy, from art...

But the light installations and sound that came later from engaging more with friends who were already practicing and collaborating with them, also. I worked on a few shows while I was doing my Masters. I was working on... there's one that I worked on, which I think the whole thing is called 'Performer'... But that was a lot more involved. So I did... And they were interested in... a lot of, I mean, a lot of people will try to use astronomy in their own work, or cosmology. There was a lot of a lot of interest also in, 'there a way in which we can articulate cosmology within this context?'. So some people go on to make works, you know, just thinking about that question alone. And, and so if people know that you've got a background in that area, they generally want to collaborate or ask you a few things. Sometimes not... Some of those collaborations I've looked at and realized, that person just took whatever I said, and then ran with it (laughing). You know, and started an industry of this kind of thing. Now they're doing this thing, but I'm just like, 'No, that's not what I was saying'. Also, you know, you can, yeah, you know, when people start to when people... Yeah, you know, it's like, if you do something really well, and then you decide: 'Now, I'm just going to produce works that'... If you start staying on the same, the same theme for your works, it shows also.

K: Mmm.

S: And that's, that's the other thing it's like, 'Where's the...', 'How do you keep being curious'? How do you wake up every day thinking about a different problem, and I think that spirit... I, that's the one that I really aspire to. And but I... Yeah, I've seen people, you know, collaborate, Or say, 'Let's collaborate'. And then they ask me a few questions, and then they go and do something. Or, also - but this is something else now, this is more just what I've experienced moving, doing the transition from a very technical field into a field that's a lot more people-oriented, and very more... a lot more... A lot more engaging on this level, you know. So very hard, also, that I find, you know, in... This idea of sharing things in physics, if you share something, you're really congratulated. I mean, the whole citation thing works in that way. It's like, the reason why... Like, to show people that you know something is actually a good thing, right?

K: Mmm

S: In the art world... (laughing)... to show people that you've learned something from somewhere I found was almost taboo.

K: Mmm. It has to be an original idea.

S: Yeah, you're supposed to just... you're supposed to just know it somehow, you know? And then... So I found some of those collaborations were a bit sticky because people also couldn't then acknowledge where they suddenly, you know, where they were...? What were they reading, what were they looking at? What were they thinking about, you know, so much harder, but really, I think there is... And I'm also not the first person to be working in this way. So there's a, a long tradition of people who are working in this in this field, some laboratories also have residencies, and some galleries have residencies for physicists, or vice versa. So some laboratories invite artists to come... CERN, for instance, is a really good program in that direction. And then...

K: Which program is that?

S: CERN is the Center for Nuclear Research in Switzerland, Geneva. So they, I know that they've got... they have a program that runs every year, which invites artists to take up residency within the laboratories and then collaborate and work with the physicists there. And so there's a really big collaboration amongst physicists already. And has been, that's where they discovered the Higgs, right? So CERN is really big.

K: The Higgs Boson?

S: Mmm, exactly. So they... So there's a lot, you know... So, in some senses, you do think you're doing something new or something that no one else is doing. But there's always a community also. If you just sit down, and you start thinking about work, you realize, 'Oh, I'm actually not alone'. So there's a lot of people doing this kind of work. And I'm sure, they would have a similar conversation as to how, like it's slightly different practices... Another one is you write papers, the other one you produce works that people can engage with. But yeah, so that's just but yeah, so it was mainly... that's, that's just been my experiences with collaborating more, working more with people and trying to make things that people can touch, feel and see here. And in a gallery space, in a room space, and not so much things that are out there that you can... But pretty much using the work being informed by those things. And just like bringing them small scale those ideas. And then everything will be different also. So, there's a residency coming up with A4 [the A4 Arts Foundation], which should be good. We'll see what comes out of that one. But definitely doing that kind of work for them. Previous work has been with the observatory, SAO. Also a really good institution, and one that really encourages...

K: SAO?

S: The South African Astronomical Observatory, SAAO. They're in Obs [Observatory, Cape Town] So they... so that's the past two residences have been there for me. And then now moving away from that more into... leaving the observatory, but moving more into, an arts foundation.

K: Yeah

S: Right? So moving more in that direction, but also, pretty much I think I'll always be tied, or, I will always try to collaborate with people there. Because ultimately you're always going to need something from someone if you need to use a telescope for something. So the astronomy things is always gonna keep going but... And this has just been a shift, like, a gradual shift. Based on interest, also, the more... It's sort of when you like start hitting your thirties you become, you realize your lifestyle and the things that you really enjoy doing and the things that you just do not want to do, you know?

K: Mhmm.

S: So, it's a choice, these are choices, because everyone... In most careers these days, you can... you need a basis in something and then you can jump into something else, right? So there's always an option of people... if you want to go the corporate way is always... for most people, irrespective of your background, and what you actually studied, there's always always a corporate spin on to things that you do, you know? So to keep creating and to keep finding other ways of not having to do certain things that you don't want to do, but doing the things that you really enjoy I think has been... is the... Has been the

main in recent... in the last three years has been more... more apparent that I need to live that way more. And I think in my mid 20s, I was just really still stuck in that idea that I really want to go, I really want to write papers, lots and lots of papers, you know?

K: In the kind of astrophysics?

S: Yeah, in the kind of astrophysics way. And, even that interest, I don't think that will ever go away. But for now I really NEED to shift the focus the focus into doing this and then we'll see if that, at this stage, brings me back.

K: Comprehensive! Yeah, we travelled to many galaxies.

S: Yeah, we did. (Laughter)

K: Yeah, but thank you for being for being our space driver. For talking us to other dimensions?

S: Yeah. Thanks dude. Yeah, it was nice.