

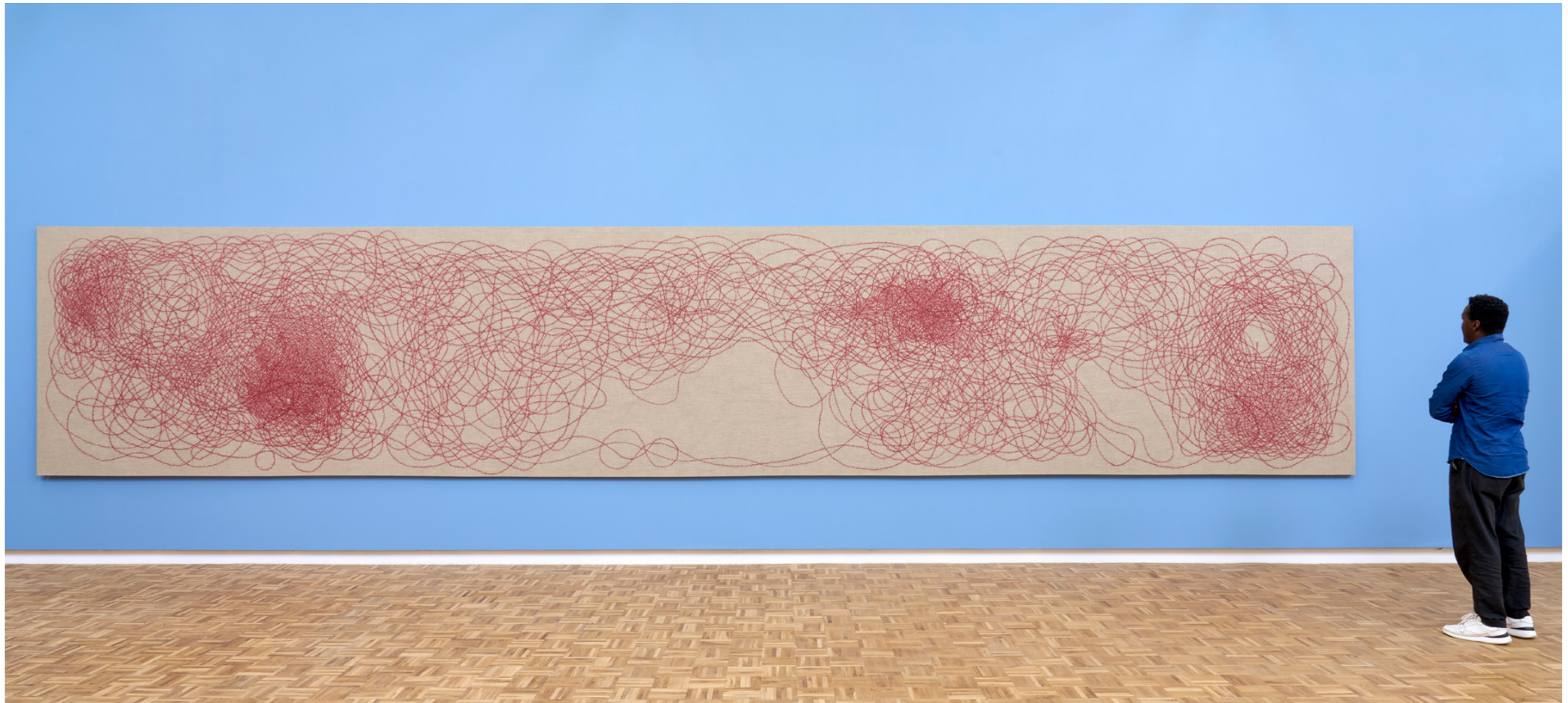
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Lerato Shadi's work challenges common assumptions to critique Western notions of history and make visible that which is invisible or overlooked. Working across video, performance and installation, and often employing repetitive processes, she argues the importance of centering—not just including—the marginalised body as a main figure of narrative experience. By placing herself at the forefront of her work, Shadi

deals with the politics of cultural erasure and structural exclusion. She states: "It serves to challenge myself, and hopefully my audience as well, in how I/we are complicit in the violence of historical erasure by not fighting for a more inclusive and accurate historical narrative. I realised that—by just blindly or lazily accepting an inaccurate history—I would be sanctioning the problematic dominant narrative with my own inactivity."



LERATO SHADI



Above, on the previous- and subsequent page: *Tsela e e motsopodia*, marker on raw linen, 170 x 970 cm, from the *Tsela di Matlapa* series

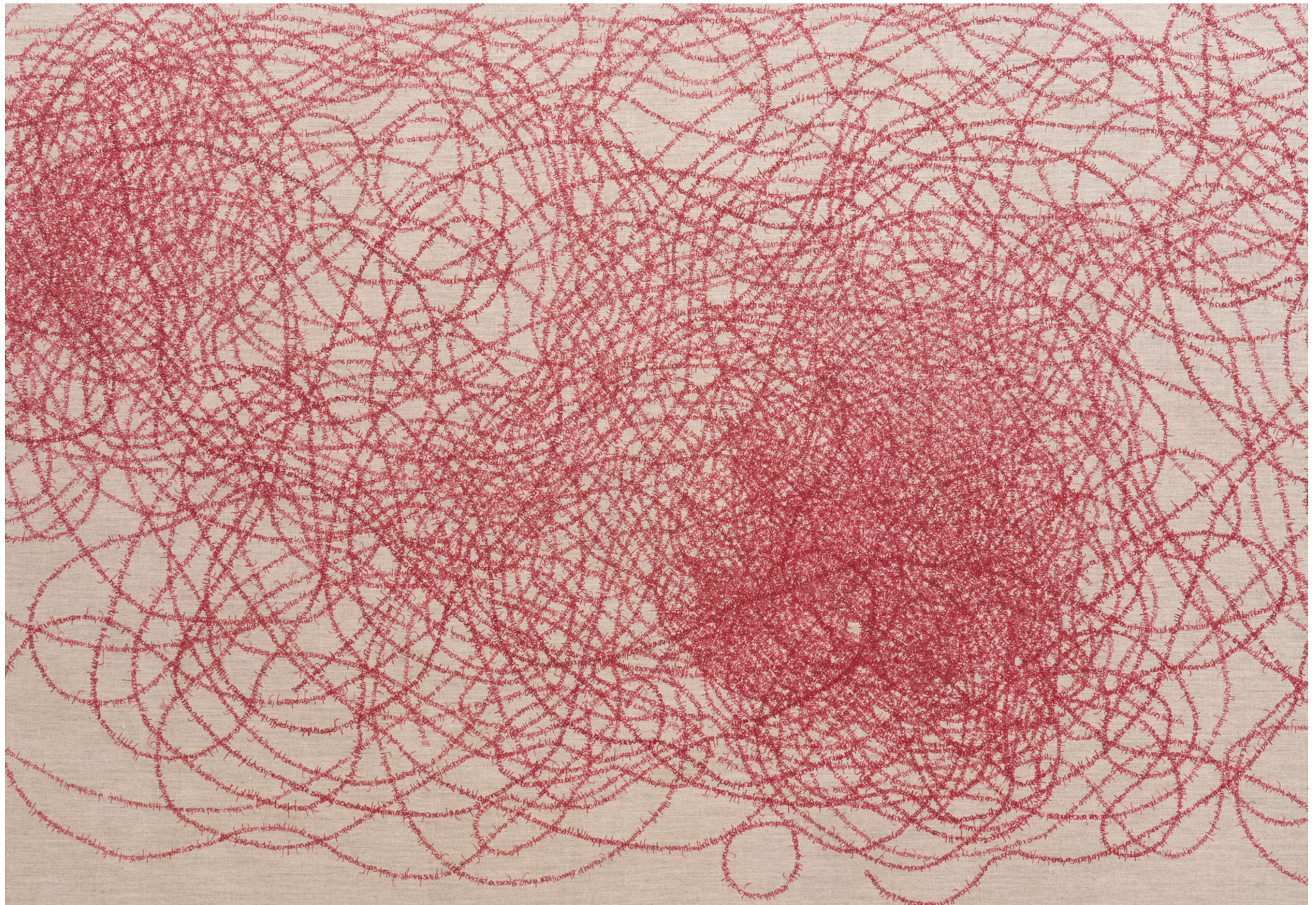
link (solo show) → [Tsela e e motsopodia](#)

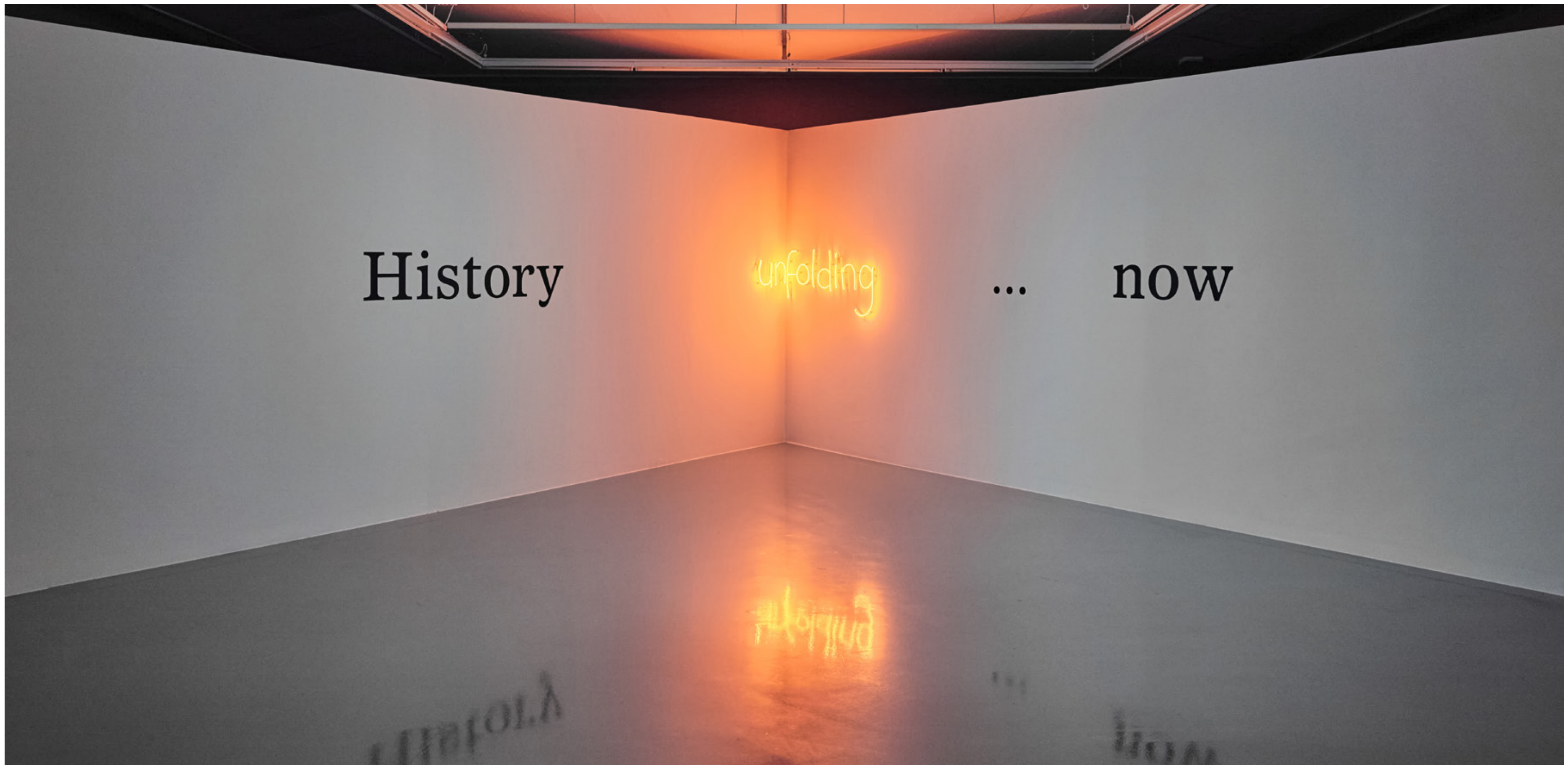
TSELA E E MOTSOPODIA

From the series *Tsela di Matlapa*, installation view, blank projects, Cape Town (2025).

[...] Viewed from a distance, a composition of red lines on raw linen canvases forms the image content. Viewed up close, the lines prove to be a succession of handwritten letters—lines of text executed with meticulous care—which nevertheless remain unreadable because the artist has overwritten them a second time, backward and mirrored. In that Shadi thwarts the Western influenced expectation of image decipherability on the microscopic level, the figure of the unreadable text acquires a dual meaning: It

becomes a painterly gesture while simultaneously critiquing text-based historiography and the epistemic violence of colonial knowledge production,* which draws its authority from a Eurocentric perspective that often remains unquestioned to this day. [...] The work denies legibility to the viewers while simultaneously offering them a differentiated multitude of possibilities for understanding. Depending on the distance and perspective, it allows them to readjust their own viewpoint. Shadi's tableaus can only be experienced intellectually by placing myself—my perception, my (non-)knowledge—in relation to them. [...] *Beziehungsgeflechte*, Oliver Hardt, review in *Texte zur Kunst* (July, 2025).
* Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, New York 1985.





Maropeng, neon-light, lettering, drywall (c. 300 x 1400 cm).
Installation view: *A Protea Is Not a Flower*, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, 2025. (Photo: M. Slater)

link → [A Protea Is Not a Flower, Zeitz MOCAA](#)

MAROPENG

The title of this work comes from the Setswana saying, 'Maropeng go a boelwa go sa boelweng ke teng' meaning 'you can return to your ruins but not to the womb'. This intervention calls for a reorientation between ourselves and history. Shadi's practice is concerned with rethinking marginalised narratives and histories through performance, drawing and installation. The title of this work and the challenges it presents to providing a clear translation also speaks to Shadi's method of using language to simultaneously conceal and reveal. Different

audiences will have different forms of access to the various meanings of her work [...]. Her work often encourages the viewer to think with her through constructing spaces and installations that evoke strong physical responses. Maropeng invites us to view ourselves in relation to space and question what has been hidden from our view. Two large white walls jut out at an angle concealing the architecture of this gallery. The phrase history unfolding now is painted in bold serif text on both sides of the wall, converging towards a bright red neon light sign. Against this large-scale intervention, we are encouraged to consider our personal histories as unfolding with and alongside larger ones and

question the ways that we prioritise written national narratives over individual and personal stories. Maropeng can be read along the many crises we are currently experiencing but also speaks beyond them, questioning the ways that we look back into the past and project into the future. Speaking to the ways that historical writing can both erase and centre the narratives and lives of people and places, Maropeng presents a set of questions regarding our individual positions in history. Which histories are erased, and which are centered? How are our bodies and lives shaped by histories? How can we see the present as unfolding history? *A Protea Is Not a Flower*, Zeitz MOCAA (2025).



“Who is (not) included in the structures of this institution”. *Batho ba ha ba Tlhalonganye*. Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2023



BATHO BA HA BA TLHALONGANYE

Site specific installation in: 'WHO WE ARE', Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (May–Oct, 2023); and 'SEEDS for Future Memories', ifa Gallery, Berlin (Jul–Aug, 2019).

Batho ba ha ba Tlhalonganye (2019/2023)—“Who is (not) part of the structures of this institution?“, this is the question the artist Lerato Shadi poses to us, and also directly to the Bundeskunsthalle. What she means is: Who decides in this institution? Who speaks, whose voice is heard, and who is visible? These are important questions in our soci-

ety and should also be asked in institutions. Usually, decision-making positions are held by people who have no experience with discrimination. Those who belong to a minority that has often been discriminated against have worse chances, for example, in education or in the workplace. People who deviate from the norm of the majority society feel this almost constantly, whether through small gestures or through gross discrimination. The cultural sector is no exception, even if museums see themselves as places of cultural diversity and equality. But are the institutions and their decision-makers doing enough to reflect on their own structures and to be a place for everyone? Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (2023)

Are We the people?





Previous page: *Batho ba Me* (installation, Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2020). Left: *Batho ba Me* (installation, n.b.k. Berlin, 2020)

link → [Batho ba Me, Kunstverein in Hamburg](#)

BATHO BA ME

Exhibited (a.o.) at Neue Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), 2020; Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2020; Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, 2021; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2024. Norval Foundation, Cape Town, 2024–25.

The installation ***Batho ba Me*** provides Lerato Shadi's solo exhibition title in the Kunstverein in Hamburg and presents the text "We the people" in black font on a red background. This expression is found in preambles of constitutions around the world. With two neon elements, Shadi sharpens these words into

a question targeted directly at the viewer: "Are we the people?" For whom is the "we" claimed here actually a reality and how is this "we" defined? Shadi is referencing an essential discrepancy between inclusion and exclusion that always arises when communities are formed. "We" is especially used in political discourses in order to claim a feeling of community that must always be critically questioned. Debates about the access to human and civil rights show repeatedly that the question about "we" is always problematic. In the exhibition as well, the question being articulated about belonging is different for every viewer since it is closely connected to everyone's personal background. *T. Peper*





Above and previous page: *Nkgono le Nna*, neon light installation (two parts) and *I Know What a Closed Fist Means* (both 2020). Following page: *I Know What a Closed Fist Means*, 2020

link → [Maru a Pula Is a Song of Happiness](#)

link → [Intro: Lerato Shadi, KINDL Berlin](#)

link → [In Conversation w/ Bonaventure Ndikung](#)

MARU A PULA IS A SONG OF HAPPINESS

Solo exhibition at KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2020, curated by Kathrin Becker.

Shadi's exhibition at KINDL enters a place of unknowing—The title presents itself as a low frequency assonant—recurring, continuous, persistent. “Maru a pula is a song of happiness. There are clouds up in the sky. The sound of music is in the air. It's gonna rain, it's gonna rain”—the lyrics from Letta Mbulu's 1976 song, “Maru a Pula.” Reverberation, Echo. Musical resonance. A resonance closer

to knowing or a kind of knowing. Although counterintuitive, within any form of knowing lies a doubting. To doubt as to call into question the truth of, to lack confidence in, to fall short of certainty in relation to knowledge. [...] The two part neon-sign installation **Nkgono le Nna** is closely linked to the notion of ‘we’, where Shadi is thinking of herself in relation to her family history. Distance is articulated through the space between the wall-based neon X and Shadi's signature. The X represents the artist's great grandmother, Nkgono, or rather it (re)inscribes her, bringing her into relation with the artist. It is a way of describing what it means to be close to or far away from each other. Although Shadi's signature graphically looks more complex, the X contains more nuance. It is a powerful

sign that refuses the label ‘illiterate’ —challenging back; illiterate by what standards? Illiterate according to who? The X is not just a mark, or two determinate diagonal lines intersecting at a point, it is an indication and celebration of a life lived, of how Nkgono lived in an oppressive system of racism and sexism... where everyday something would have conspired to kill her but failed to. Through this work, Shadi presents us with a question of her own; what is the space between me and the furthest traceable matriarch in my lineage? Perhaps the space between is lost knowledge—the differences between western and customary epistemology. Perhaps that space is a slippage, a crevice necessitating constant negotiation between learning and unlearning. [...] N. Moloji





Above and following page: *Series #2–4*, virgin wool on raw linen, dimensions variable, 2020

link → [Maru a Pula Is a Song of Happiness](#)

link → [Intro: Lerato Shadi, KINDL Berlin](#)

link → [In Conversation w/ Bonaventure Ndikung](#)



MARU A PULA IS A SONG OF HAPPINESS

Solo exhibition at KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2020, curated by Kathrin Becker.

[...] Within her practice and this exhibition, Shadi enters art-making through the pathway of doubt, filled with risk and precarity. Drawing on writer Rajana Dave's idea of risk or taking risks as "an earnest acceptance of precarity [...] a willingness to acknowledge and perform actions whose outcomes

are uncertain or unknown",[*] this exhibition sees Shadi entering a place of unknowing by calling into question western epistemology through its "I think therefore I am" logic. In the making of this work, Shadi moves closer to "I am because we are", which prioritises the multiple over the singular and favours embodied knowing felt through the bones and deep in the gut. Deep, bottomless, cavernous, profound knowledge carried generationally through blood, fibrous tissue and marrow. It is a deep knowing yes, but it is also liquid—loose and flowing. [...] For Shadi, the gut is the place from which the unconscious can reveal itself. Just as the title of the exhibition announced itself to her, the same applies to titles of the works. Made from virgin wool on raw linen, **Series #1–4**

(whose titles are yet to announce themselves) is a return to performativity. Mounted on the wall — a set of three rectangles, a single square and a vertical rectangle resembling a doorway—the works have considerable presence. Movement is the first language as they are informed by small repetitive gestures accumulated over time. The works are connected to the process of fasting, which Shadi uses as a method to remind the body to pay attention. In this sense, the body is not merely a porous absorbent but it works to produce its own forms of knowledge.[...] Nkgopoleng Moloi

[*] "On precarity: a series of conversations", C. Modi, R. Dave, T. Gamedze, in: *Indent: The Body and the Performative* (2019).







Previous page and above: *I Know What a Closed Fist Means*, large-scale photographic print on wooden panel, four parts, dimensions variable (2020–25)
(Photo credits above: *A Protea Is Not a Flower*, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, 2025M. Slater)

link → [A Protea Is Not a Flower, Zeitz MOCAA](#)

I KNOW WHAT A CLOSED FIST MEANS

Exhibited (a.o.) at Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2020; KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2020; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2023; Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, 2024–25.

What does a closed fist mean for you?
Lerato Shadi's large-scale photograph series **I Know What a Closed Fist Means** towers

over the viewer like monoliths. The five fists appear to be extending from the ground upwards and confront the viewer with their scale. **I Know What a Closed Fist Means** challenges the assumption that there is a universal understanding of a closed fist; Shadi makes this evident by depicting fists that each have different positions of the thumb, each with their own symbolism and meaning. The title is ironic, speaking to our assumptions of the universality of signs and symbols, and by extension, experiences. In this work, Shadi shows us that seemingly

minor differences in the widely known symbol of the fist can produce vastly different meanings across people and geographies. Standing as monolithic structures in the exhibition, Shadi's work engages how we can each interpret the fists differently depending on our background, and shows how perspective is rooted in personal experience, one which cannot be generalized. Are the fists a symbol of power, a playful gesture, or something else entirely? How can we hold space for and engage other perspectives? *A Protea Is Not a Flower*, Zeitz MOCAA (2025).



Mo khubu e tla lalang teng, lightbox installation, 280 x 830 cm, installation view: *A Protea Is Not a Flower*, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, 2025. (Photo: M. Slater)

link → [A Protea Is Not a Flower, Zeitz MOCAA](#)

MO KHUBU E TLA LALANG TENG

In Setswana tradition, it is a common practice to bury the umbilical cord of a newborn baby in the yard of the family home. This ritual physically and spiritually tethers the child to their home, family and ancestors. The title of this work in Setswana addresses this tethering for current and future generations roughly translating to: “Here, the umbilical cord will be buried.” When someone says this, they identify a location as their true home—the place from which they originate and to which they are forever connected. This is a photograph of the land in Rooidam/

Makospan that the artist’s grandparents bought after being displaced from their ancestral home and land by the apartheid government. It depicts a pastoral scene of a vast landscape with a blue sky and bright, fluffy clouds passing over grazing cattle. These cattle were raised and farmed by the artist’s aunt; who goes to the farm every day and is a woman in a male-dominated field. This is the land where the artist’s grandfather, great-grandmother, and great uncle are buried. This is where the artist would like to be buried.

This new commission for the exhibition is informed by Bessie Head, who lived an untethered life until she bought her home in Serowe, Botswana aptly named “Rainclouds” after her first novel. How do you claim a place as your true home? Can you have a deep spiritual connection to more than one place? The burying of the umbilical cord, as well as the dead, marks a space as holy and sacred ground, a spiritual place to call home. *A Protea Is Not a Flower*, Zeitz MOCAA (2025).



Unfolding the Sky, theatre performance, Ballhaus Naunynstraße, Berlin, 2025. (Photo: Zé de Paiva)



UNFOLDING THE SKY

Opening production of the festival Black Berlin Black—Festivity at Ballhaus Naunynstraße, 2025.

She returns to the house she remembers from childhood. Back then, she could feel its inner life—the house breathed in its own strange rhythm. Her grandmother has lived here for over sixty years; for over sixty years, she has shaped it. A house is meant to offer protection, to be stable — with walls and a roof; this one lives.

In *Unfolding the Sky*, Lerato Shadi —an internationally active visual and performance artist — takes the audience with her, into her grandmother's house in South Africa.

The performance is both an invitation and an exploration. Countless corridors, doors, and thresholds lead into the interior of an architecture deeply connected to the land and the life of her grandmother. “Come. come, see my home! It’s anyplace where nobody gives orders, it’s any moment of surprise...”. This might be the invitation — like the famous lines from Bessie Head’s poem about her “home,” her calm space amidst the storm. And just like this poetry, Lerato Shadi proceeds both cautiously and purposefully, as she explores and questions the house, traces her grandmother’s legacy, and investigates the creative power of women — of conditions not just for survival, but for living and dreaming. She searches for the complex contradictions that make us who we are.



Unfolding the Sky, theatre performance, Ballhaus Naunyn-
straße, Berlin, 2025. (Photo: Zé de Paiva)





Mosako wa Nako, performative installation (2014–19)

link → [Art at a Time Like This](#)

MOSAKO WA NAKO

Exhibited (a.o.) in *Giving Contours to Shadows* at Neue Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), Berlin, May–June, 2014 (performance duration: 10 working days); in *Noka Ya Bokamoso* at *National Arts Festival*, Makhanda (RSA), June–July, 2016 (duration: 10 working days); at 14th Curitiba Intern. Biennale of Contemporary Art, Curitiba (BRA) Sept. 2019–March 2020 (duration: 8 working days).

Mosako wa Nako (2014–19) is a seminal performance piece that represents Shadi's unique phenomenological relationship to

a practice that at once centralizes absent (Black) bodies and invites viewers to publicly participate in collective reflection. It is grounded in rigorous research about language, history, Black feminist imagination and representation as well as somatic practices that include breath-work, meditation and nutrition. This multilayered engagement with power dynamics and relationships to land, labour and politics has been performed three times thus far: in Makhanda during the South African National Arts Festival (2016), in Berlin at the n.b.k (2014) and at the 14th Curitiba Biennial in Brazil (2019). **Mosako wa Nako** in the artist's Setswa-

na language loosely translates to "Circle of Time." In the performance Shadi is dressed in black clothes and sits on a white plinth, silently crocheting while visitors mill about. To one side of her is a giant ball of red wool. A single strand of wool connects to her crochet needle and her hands. Her crocheting produces a long, narrow stream of red wool that flows down her lap and spills onto the floor. Six to ten days or about sixty hours later, the artist puts down her crochet needle and leaves the space. Materially, what remains is a reduced ball of wool, a paused needle and a crocheted river of red wool. Natasha Becker, *Body—Resistance—Endurance*, in: *Lerato Shadi*, monograph, 2022





Left and previous page: *Makhubu*, performative installation at Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London (2013/14)

MAKHUBU

Performance and installation at Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London, December/January 2013/14; and National Arts Festival, Makhanda (RSA), June–July, 2016.

In Shadi's work, performance lays the groundwork for long-term installations, beginning with a durational event that often revolves around the artist's own body—from knitting long rivers of yarn to enveloping herself in a crochet cocoon or writing

directly onto the walls. Sometimes, as with the text-based installation **Makhubu** (2014/2016), Shadi ruminates on her own place in a collective history and then erases the work, or words, as a reminder that someone decides what gets remembered and that erasure is a political act. Despite her attempts to expunge the text, traces remain—like indecipherable testaments—making the distinction between those experiences that are recorded and those that are lived, and highlighting the biased nature of historical “fact.” *R. Higham-Stainton*

a Fatma N'Soumer Jane Nardal Sanité Belair Thérèse Sita-Bello La reine Nzinga de Ndong Catherine Flon Djoumbé Fatim
raounia Mangou Ndatte Yalla Mbodj Françoise Ego Jane Léro Jennenga Jeanine Ndjia Belkhodja Menen Asfaw Célestine Ouezzin Coulibaly Zewdit
Ndembé Mbodj Marsha P. Johnson Gerty Archimède M'Balia Camara Seh-Dong-Hong
sata Kane Lumina Sophie Aline Sitaé Diatta Sarah Maldoror Rose Dieng-Kuntz Les Femmes soldats du Dahomey Anna Julia Cooper
Yaa Asantewa Eugénie Éboué-Tell Mulâtresse Salitude Suzanne Césaire Ranaivonanalina Mariama Bâ Andrée Blouin D
Eliman



Previous page: *Seriti Se*, installation view, Palais de la porte dorée, Paris (photo: Anne Volery, 2021). Left: installing *Seriti Se*, Galerie Wedding, Berlin (2015). Right: *Seriti Se*, wall, performative installation, GoetheOnMain, Johannesburg (2016)

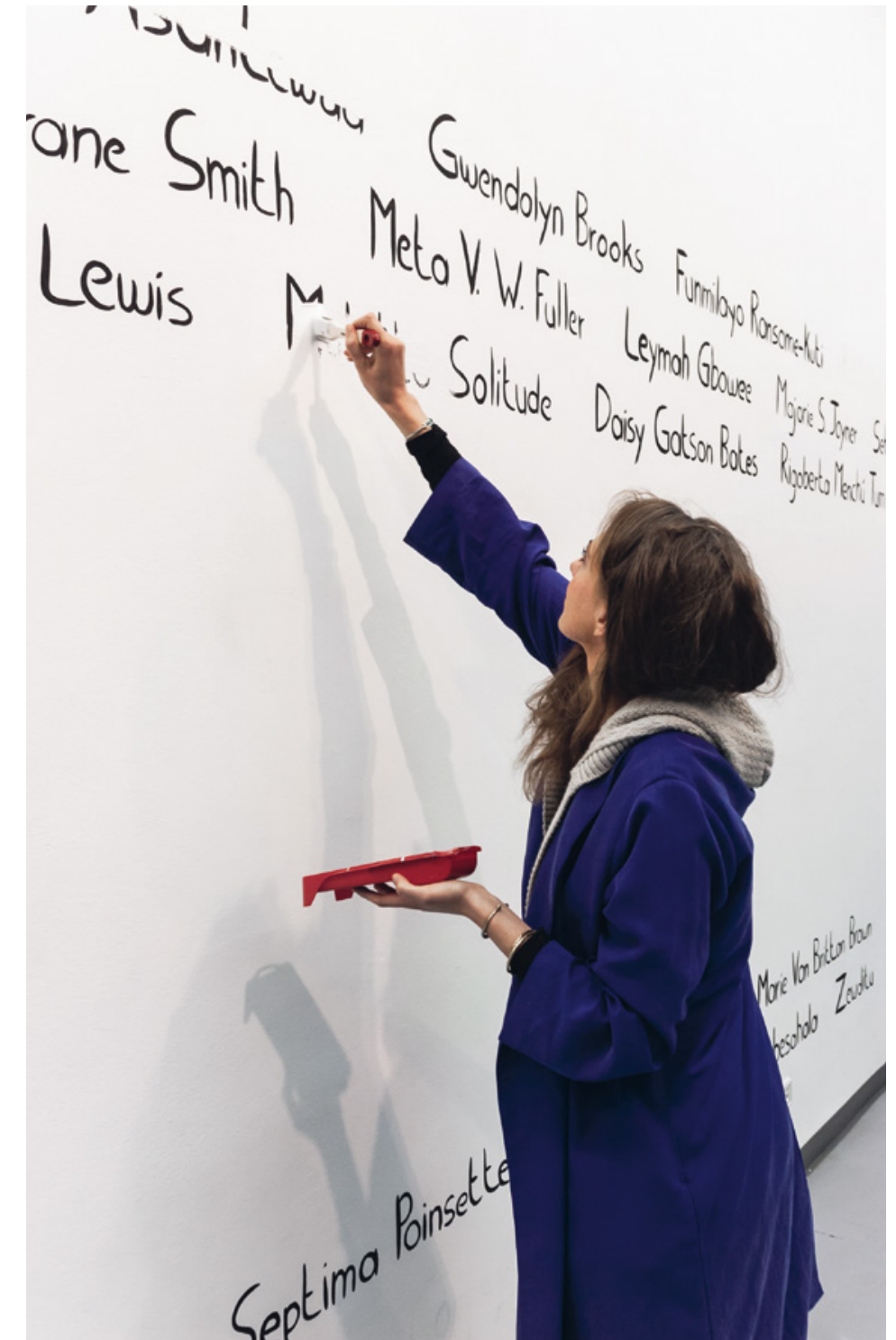


SERITI SE

Performative installation at Galerie Wedding, Berlin (2015); GoetheOnMain, Goethe Institut, Johannesburg (2016); Palais de la porte dorée, Paris (2021)

The performance, drawing and installation **Seriti Se** looks at the politics of historical erasure, specifically of Black females and their achievements and contributions within various fields. **Seriti Se** thematises everyday violence enacted within institutional structures and the different strategies employed within those systems. In **Seriti Se** names of historical women of colour, who have been excluded and erased from world history, are

written on the white walls of the gallery. The performance consists of the audience being invited to choose a name and paint over the chosen name. In the act of erasing a name, the gallery space is turned back to white. No information is provided on who the women on the wall are; therefore it becomes the duty of the one who is erasing the name to take responsibility for the name by further informing themselves.



Left and right: *Seriti Se*, performative installation, GoetheOnMain, Johannesburg (2016) and Galerie im Wedding, Berlin (2015)



Video Link
<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/re-maotwana>
Password: re-maotwana

RE MAOTWANA GONYELA

HDV | 1080p | single channel video work
colour | audio | 11 min. 15 sec. | 2018

Shot on location at Rooidam, Makouspan,
Bokone Bophirima, South Africa, 2018

In **Re Maotwana Gonyela**, a figure completely draped in red roams a landscape as the personified spirit of resistance. Sometimes they pause in contemplation, sometimes they wander through the tall grass, then stop again to perform mysterious movements. Their intentions and actions remain vague, oscillating between energetic and gentle moments and underlining the ghostly character of the figure. Apart from the figure, nothing indicates human presence, so that the scene has hardly any temporal or spatial coordinates. Thus, the spirit of resistance is detached from past, present and future and inscribed in a landscape in which their presence equally leaves their mark.

Re Mautwana Gonyela, video still (detail)



Video Link

<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/sugar-and-salt>

Password: sugar-and-salt

SUGAR & SALT

HDV | 1080p | single channel video work
colour | stereo sound | 6 minutes | 2014

The video **Sugar & Salt** shows a mother and daughter who are licking sugar and salt from each other's tongues. Sugar being licked and consumed off the mother's tongue and salt off the daughter's tongue. The backdrop is of a romanticized ornamental pattern. The scenery acts as a vanishing point for the camera lens, at the same time the pattern creates a border between the two generations. The video looks at inter-generational relationships and narratives while using two substances—one a carbohydrate and the other a mineral—that look the same but are structurally different to thematise the inter-action off screen.



Video Link
<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/motlhaba>
Password: motlhaba

MOTLHABA WA RE KE NAMILE

HDV | 1080p | single channel video work
colour | audio | 7 min. 30 sec. | 2016

What it means to possess no history, and thus to have no future, culminates in the video **Motlhaba wa re ke Namile** that Shadi filmed in her native town, Lotlhakane: the work evokes the so-called slave masks that white slave owners placed over the heads of their dehumanized workforce to prevent them from swallowing dirt and thus committing suicide—as a last gesture of resistance. In the video, Shadi eats earth from her homeland, gags, stuffs more into her mouth, and gags again as tears roll down her cheeks. The only part of her that is visible is the section of her face from her cropped eyes down to the shoulder area and the hands that continue to stuff earth into her mouth.





SELOGILWE

HDV | 1080p | single channel video work
colour | stereo sound | 7 h 3 m 57 s | 2010

In ***Selogilwe***, Shadi sits and knits for seven hours, labouring through and against the difficult terrain of performativity and its demands. Through a series of interlocking loops, she simultaneously arrests time and releases it. We're made aware of its slowness, its movement forward and backwards. Through this work, the indefinite continued progress of existence is made visible and time is tested only to be reaffirmed.

Video extract of 7 hours, link:
<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/selogilwe>

no password required



Video Link

<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/mmitlwa>

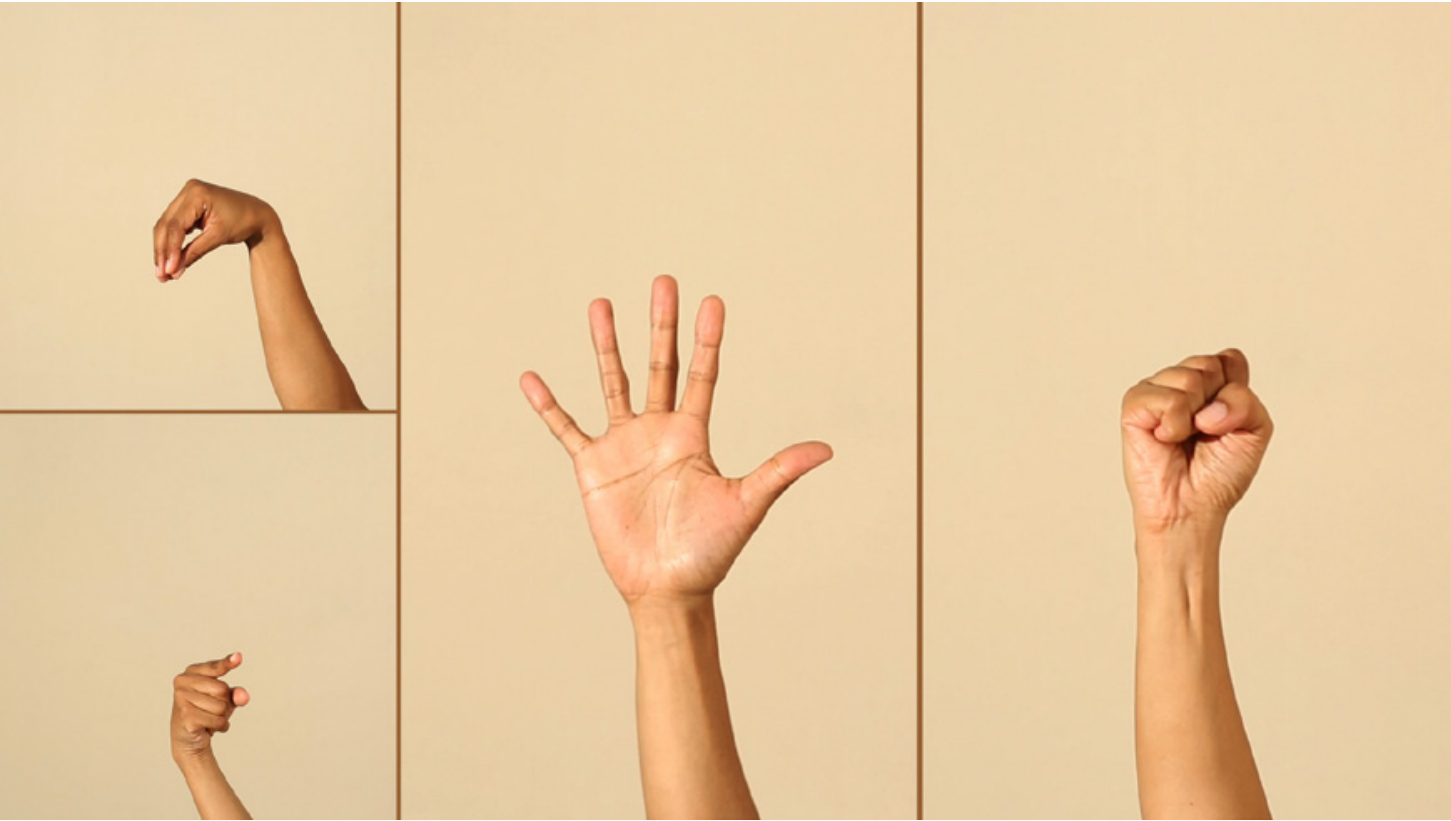
Password: mmitlwa

MMITLWA

HDV | 1080p | single channel video work
colour | stereo sound | 25 minutes | 2010

The performance **Mmitlwa** is shot for video. A female figure perched on top of a plinth all focused and concentrated. The figure starts to wrap her left hand, using masking tape stacked on her side. This action of a single-minded incessant rhythmic flow of twisting movements is dominating the opening scene of the video and peruses in a desperate race to bind, confine and imprison the entirety of her body—using the remaining free hand. The trapped figure pauses in her agony. And a reversal drive begins and—what the free hand had accomplished before—becomes now a frantic struggle, along with the disruptive sound of tape being ripped of the assaulted skin, and to free herself.

Mmitlwa, video stills (left, detail)



Video Link
<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/mabogo-dinku>
Password: mabogo-dinku

MABOGO DINKU

HDV | 1080p | single channel video work
colour | stereo sound | 6 minutes | 2019

In the video **Mabogo Dinku**, Shadi's hand makes enigmatic gestures and she sings a folk verse in Setswana. But she provides no subtitles or guidance on what the words and gestures mean because she is narrating the un-narratable, the history of her people, marginalised during apartheid South Africa. The history she was taught at school is the history of the coloniser, which she rejects, so what history can she tell? Furthermore, the translation of the language into English or other dominant western language would pay homage to western languages as the 'universal' one, continuing the boxing in of others' mother tongues into the languages of the "other". Winnie Sze

Mabogo Dinku, video stills (left, detail)



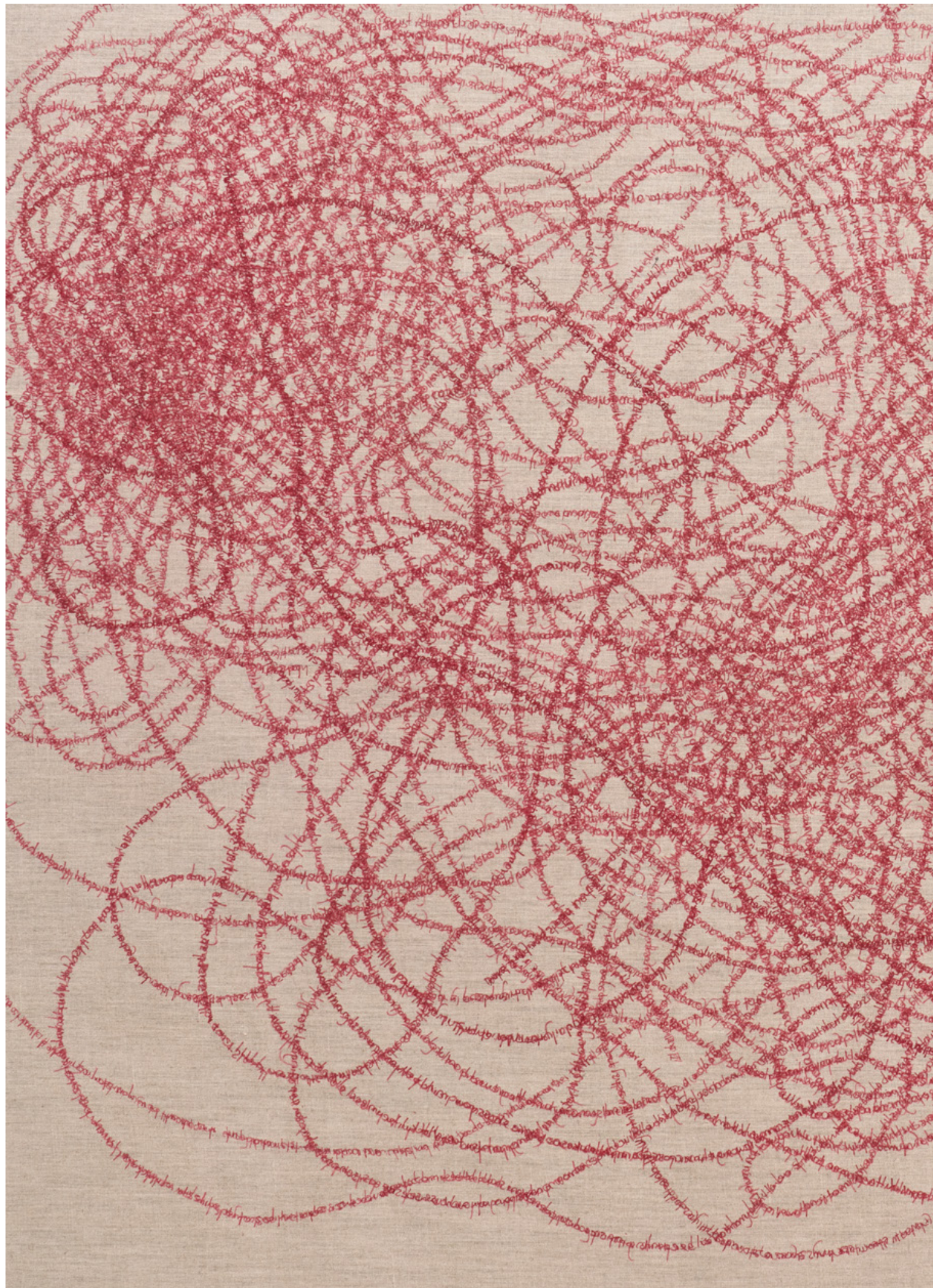
Video Link
<https://vimeo.com/leratoshadi/matsogo>
Password: matsogo

MATSOGO

HDV — 1080p — single channel video work
colour | stereo sound | 5 minutes | 2013

The video **Matsogo** shows a pair of hands crumbling a piece of cake and reforming it into the same wedge shape that references the original slice. Through the process of moving from deconstruction to reconstruction, the essence and consumability of the slice of cake is undermined and lost, as it is recreated into an object, that resembles and has the same elements, as the cake, but has lost its function. The soundtrack combines songs from two different popular Setswana folktales. The songs are mixed together, thereby confusing and convoluting the narratives in such a way that there are three to five characters in an ongoing polylogue, which revolves around belief and disbelief, trust and betrayal.

Matsogo, video still (detail)



LERATO SHADI

By Rose Higham-Stainton*

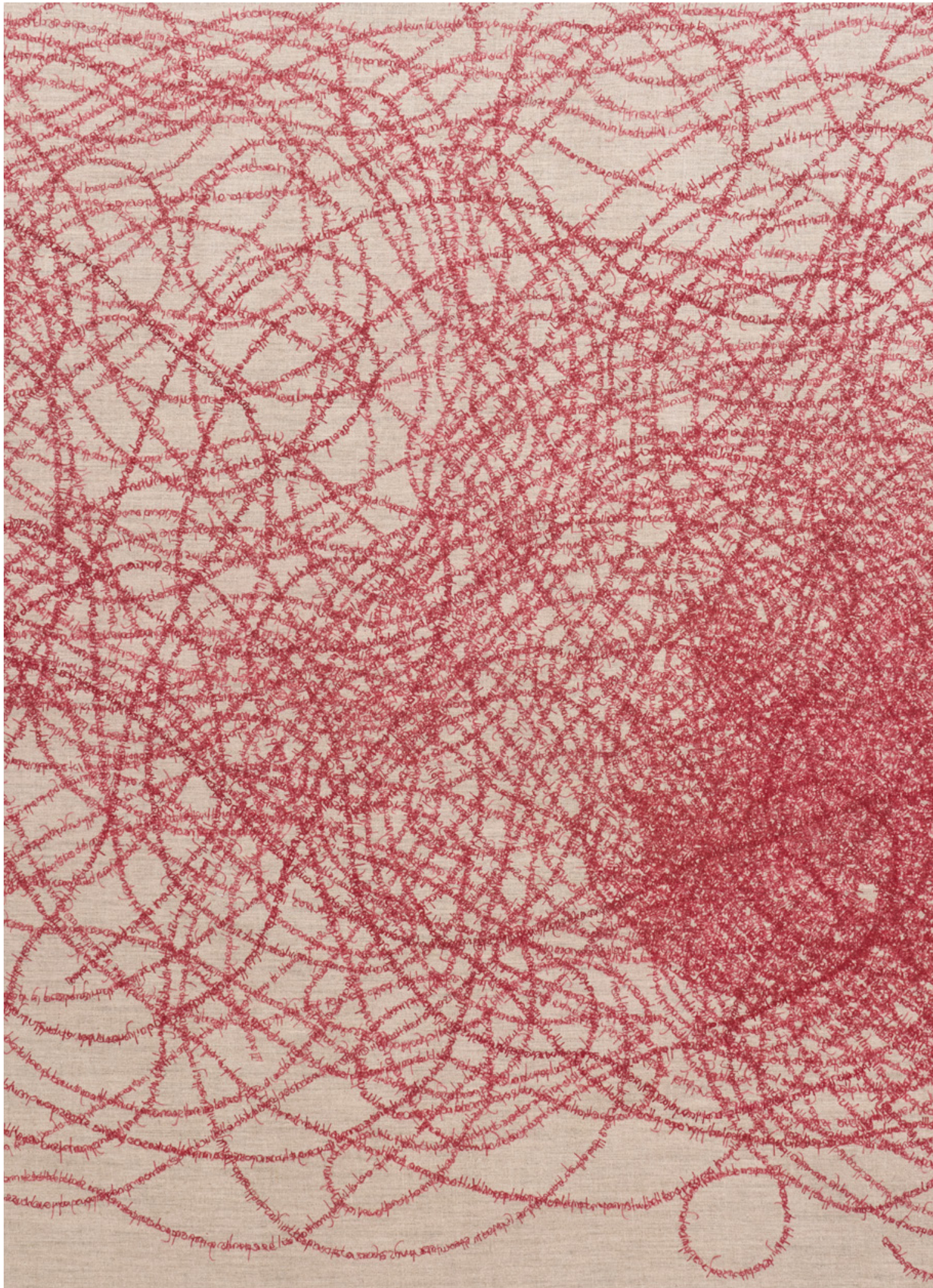
Lerato Shadi creates performances and site-specific installations that challenge institutional structures—from the gallery to the broader establishments of culture, history, and race. She employs images, text, and textiles to challenge those structures and often writes directly onto the walls of the institution in felt-tip pen, or in neon lights, to remunerate those who have been excluded or failed by them. Shadi uses her natural cursive and native Setswana, calling into question who gets to comprehend or garner meaning within the Westerncentric tenets of culture. In **Batho ba Me** (2019/2023), Shadi paints the US and South African constitutional phrase “We the people” directly onto a red gallery wall in a neat serified typeface, prefaces it with “are,” and follows it with a question mark in her own cursive hand rendered in warm neon lights. In her distortion of “We the people,” Shadi comments on state leaderships who universalize individual experience while also peddling it as a false rhetoric of community and care.

In Shadi’s work, performance lays the groundwork for long-term installations, beginning with a durational event that often revolves around the artist’s own body—from knitting long rivers of yarn to enveloping herself in a crochet cocoon or writing directly onto the walls. Sometimes, as with the text-based

installation **Makhubu** (2014/2016), Shadi ruminates on her own place in a collective history and then erases the work, or words, as a reminder that someone decides what gets remembered and that erasure is a political act. Despite her attempts to expunge the text, traces remain—like indecipherable testaments—making the distinction between those experiences that are recorded and those that are lived, and highlighting the biased nature of historical “fact.”

Shadi continues the theme of historical erasure in **Seriti Se** (2015/2021) by inscribing the names of women of color onto the walls of the gallery, wrapping around its corners in a steady but personal hand. Then, with the violence of institutional structures and with participation from the audience, Shadi erases the names, not holding the viewer personally responsible but rather leaving them cognizant of the systematic erasure of bodies and voices. Repetition becomes insistence in Shadi’s work, from processional writing or knitting to her use of the color red, which one is confronted with over and over again—not hints of it but entire walls or reams of fabric. Insinuating corporality but also pain and danger, red suits Shadi, who demands that the subjective experiences of marginalized voices are not simply included in narrative history but sit front and center.

* *Vitamin Txt: Words in Contemporary Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 2024), p. 208.



WHAT’S A [BLACK] BODY GOT TO DO WITH IT?: BRIEF NOTES ON LERATO SHADI

By Vusumzi Nkomo

Value has to come from somewhere. If not labor, then from somewhere else—risk, temporality, circulation, and so forth.
—Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification And The Limits Of Realist Fiction* [1]

Black language needs to be a different kind of language, it needs to be an anti-language [...], it needs to start where language ends or becomes impossible.
—David S. Marriott, *S. Marriott in conversation with Frank Wilderson III* [2]

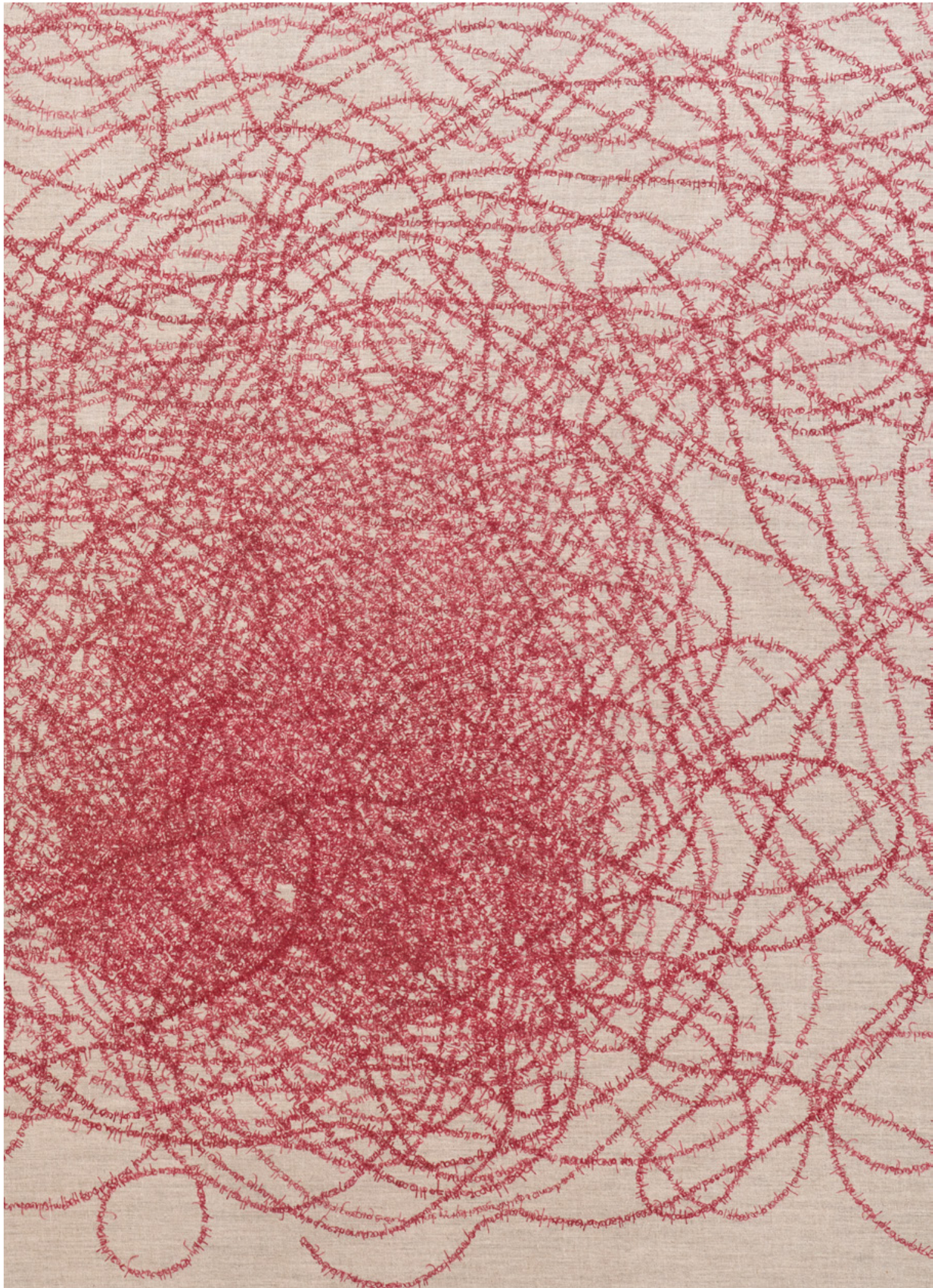
In the work of Lerato Shadi (b. Mahikeng, South Africa) we witness an encounter between the body, work (or more precisely labour) and history. Through primarily performance, installation and video, this body, a Black woman’s body, is put to work in service of an extended inquiry into the constitutive relation between power and history, that is, how history is always fundamentally a question of power and that power is necessarily historical.

This labouring Black woman’s body, placed in plinths and pedestals, reveals the structure of racially gendered domination and its relations to art’s institutionality and the domain of the aesthetic writ large. [3] Shadi takes seriously the entanglements between artistic production and globalised circuits of racialized labour and commodity production within the context, first and foremost, of the longue durée of South Africa’s history of racial slavery, White settler colonial conquest, apartheid and its afterlives. Take **Tlhogo** (2010), a work that echoes Shadi’s contemporaries such as Bernie Searle’s “Colour Me Series” (1998), Tracey Rose’s “Span II” (1997), and less formally but more politically, the devastating politics of the practice of Senzeni Marase-la. [4] **Tlhogo** (2010), like these fellow trav-

ellers who too wait and endure the cruelty of the spatio-temporal logics of an anti-Black world, is about the stakes of embodiment and social death. These violent processes almost descend, with all the full force of history, on the body. Shadi’s practice is organized around a consistent and concentrated set of political concerns that range from Blackness’ relation to labour, knowledge production and language, history and memory, subjectification and subjection, performativity and time, repetition and seriality.

In **Mosako wa Nako** (2014), for instance, Shadi is seen with a red ball of wool, the work’s raw material from which she pulls from, the “somewhere” from which value emerges, to follow Shonkwiler in the epigraph above. This simple gesture stands in stark contradiction to the fictions of capitalist modernity and its tendency to obfuscate sources of value and wealth. It bears mentioning that wool as material recalls the history of its production and centrality in the Cape Colony’s economy and according to historian JA Henry, “before the discovery of diamonds and gold, the entire economy of the Cape was carried on the sheep’s back”. [5]

Shadi’s practice, or more precisely her discourse, could be located at the critical point where Blackness exceeds language, pushes beyond the boundary of what can be said, where speech fails to symbolize, or more colloquially, represent (something). Speech or speaking, the domain of the conscious subject of cognition, is exposed as fundamentally lacking. This is strikingly evident in her text works, where there is a push and pull between legibility and illegibility, writing and erasure, forward motion and reversal. In these texts and incoherent sentences, it is less the structural integrity of the sayable (the what), nor the subject(s) of address and enunciation (the who) as much as it is what we might loosely describe as the register (i.e, the how); how are we going to say the things we think and feel, and those that are unthought and we are yet to feel. These works refuse grand political statements but retreat into the impossibly impenetrable abstraction, a swerving line, indeterminately beautiful line.



In Shadi's performances there is hardly any talking or dialogue (the closest being song), but 'pure' unmediated activity. The statement is the act, immediate and "vanishing". Perhaps this is what's appealing to Shadi about performance despite its concreteness as an event; that it always recedes and resists (not escape) spectatorial capture, what Peggy Phelan, in the seminal chapter "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction", [6] called "performance's being", its very ontology, "becomes itself through disappearance". [7] That is, at its most radical, performance is only when it is not (or no longer). This was the disruptive intervention of event oriented practices that refused the fetishistic relation to the object by the art market.

Further, Shadi's performances are a focused and profound engagement with time; her giving up her time to carry out this or that task, not unlike how one gives up or trades one's labour time in the marketplace. (We could think here of the late artist Pope L who reminded us that what bonds performance and language is nothing other than "duration"). [8] Time, as our capitalist modern order's prized possession, is numbingly explored by Shadi through the strategy of repetition. This repetition compulsion is the reenactment of the structuring lack constitutive of subjectivity, that is, repeating the primal scene not unlike how trauma victims return to and reproduce the fundamental traumatism.

Shadi's labouring on repetition as tool and motif (a banal 'formal' strategy) is a critical exposition of the manner in which, say, historical 'facticity' is secured through repetition and safeguarded as stable meaning or problematic normatively (be it Whiteness, or more precisely non-Blackness, heteronormativity, capitalist patriarchy, conservatism, fascism etc). In another register, to repeat is to remember against generalized wilful amnesia, to remember that "then and now coexist: we are coeval with the dead". [9] As Jacques Lacan once put it, "remembering always involves a limit". If any, this might be the lesson from Shadi to us: [10] that, focused critical thinking necessarily entails that we learn the very limits of unlearning. [11]

[1] Alison Shonkwiler, 2017. *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification And The Limits Of Realist Fiction*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press; pp. xxiii.

[2] David Marriott, 2022. CITY LIGHTS LIVE! DS Marriott in conversation with Frank Wilderson III. [Online]. Available here: <https://youtu.be/Mw20cLg-iic>.

[3] For a sustained engagement with this entanglement, see Rizvana Bradley, 2023. *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

[4] I have in mind, on the one hand, the language of performance and formal grammar of the colour red (from the red thread Marasela uses, to the red dresses she wears) and, on the other, Marasela's ethic of endurance through her durational work in 'projects' such as *Waiting for Gebane*.

[5] Cited in Richard Steyn, 2024. *Rhodes And His Banker: Empire, Wealth And The Coming Of Union*. Jonathan Ball Publishers; pp. 1.

[6] From her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

[7] Ibid., p. 146.

[8] See: Pope.L. *is Making a Commitment to Art*, Louisiana Channel [Online]. Available here: <https://youtu.be/kTs5QkK20M4>

[9] Saidiya Hartman, 2002. *The Time of Slavery*, in: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4; pp. 759.

[10] I say "if any" because it doesn't seem Shadi is in the business of handing down lessons!

[11] The idea of 'unlearning' is cheaply thrown around in our liberal multicultural times and requires the greatest political vigilance.

LERATO SHADI lives and works in Berlin. Shadi studied visual art at the University of Johannesburg and graduated in **2007**. She earned her M.A. (Spatial Strategies) from Weißensee Academy of Art Berlin in **2018**. Shadi is a lecturer at the Master of Arts-program, Weißensee Academy of Art Berlin, since **2020**. Her monograph was published with Archive Books, Berlin, in **2022**.

AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

2023
· Stiftung Kunstfonds, *NEUSTARTplus-fellowship*, Bonn (GER)
2022
· Hangar residency program, Lisbon (PRT)
2021
· Recipient of the Berlin Senat *Präsentationen zeitgenössischer bildender Kunst in Berlin* (fully funded artist book), Berlin (GER)
2021
· Remote residency, New Art Exchange (NAE), Nottingham (GBR)
2020
· Stiftung Kunstfonds, *fellowship 20/21*, Bonn (GER)
2019
· Recipient of the *Berliner Senat Arbeitsstipendium*, Berlin (GER)
2018
· *Seeds for Future Memories* residency at Thread, Tambacounda (SEN)
· *Villa Romana Prize*, fellow and residency program in Florence (GER/ITA)
2017
· *AFRICA’SOUT!* and Denniston Hill residency program NYC and NY (USA)
2016
· *Alumni Dignitas Award* of the University of Johannesburg (RSA)
2014
· *mart stam* studio grant, Berlin (GER)
2013
· Fellow of *Sommerakademie*, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern (CHE)
· Hospitalfield residency by invitation of Iniva, London (GBR)
2010
· Pro Helvetia residency program, Stadtgalerie at PROGR, Bern (CHE)
· *Infecting the City*, residency program, Cape Town (RSA)
2009–11
· Member of Bag Factory artist studios in Fordsburg, Johannesburg (RSA)

INCL. IN ESSENTIAL BOOK PUBLICATIONS

· Vitamin Txt: Words in Contemporary Art (London: Phaidon Press, 2024), pp. 208–209.
· African Artists: From 1882 to Now (London: Phaidon Press, 2021), p. 289.
· I Love Women in Art. 100 Artists (München: 2020), pp. 166–167.

FINE ART COLLECTIONS

· Iziko, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
· n.b.k. Videoforum, Berlin
· Tate Modern, London
· UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria
· Zentral- & Landesbibliothek, ‘artothek’, Berlin
· distinct corporate and private international art collections

PERFORMANCES, SCRENNINGS & LECTURES (SELECTED)

2025
· ‘494h 29m 53s’, The collection of the n.b.k. Video-Forum sorted by running time by Karin Sander Akademie der Künste Berlin (GER)
2024
· ‘Landing: Remembering Marikana & Reflections on Post-Democratic South Africa’, panelist, Javett-UP, Pretoria (RSA)
2023
· ‘Declaration of Independence’, for ‘Bwa Kayiman’, by Barby Asante, performance, HKW, Berlin (GER)
· ‘Climate crisis/Crisis of the imagination’ Turn 2 Lab#3, L’Art Rue, Tunis (TUN)
2022
· Artist talk, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (GER)
· Video screening for ‘Non-Knowledge, Laughter & The Moving Image Festival’, Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg (GER)
· ‘Lesedi la ka’ performance for ‘Watch Your Step, Mind The Gap’, Fylkingen, Stockholm (SWE)
2021
· ‘The Intervention 6’, online conversation with Joan Legalamitlwa, Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (GER)
· Video screening, FNB Art Joburg Open City Art Film programme, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Ditlamelwana tsa Pula’ performance for ‘The Power of My Hands’ at MoMa Paris (FRA)
2020
· ‘Lesedi Kganya’ performance for ‘Radical Mutation: On the Ruins of Rising Suns’, HAU 1, Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin (GER)
· ‘Mabogo Dinku’ video, nominated by The Friends of the Iziko SA National Gallery for Artists’ Films International programme, organised by Whitechapel Gallery, London (GBR)
2019
· ‘Mosako wa Nako’, 8 days performance at 14th Curitiba International Biennale, Museu Oscar Niemeyer, Curitiba (BRA)
· ‘Ke Peo Setlhare Le Leung’ performance for ‘Seeds for Future Memories’ symposium, Villa Romana, Florence (ITA)
· Video screening at Afrovibes festival, Kunsthall Rotterdam (NLD)
· ‘Matsogo’ video screening at 1-54 Forum, London (GBR)
· ‘state of the wind’ performance with Justin R. Thompson at Kunstraum München, Munich (GER)
2018
· ‘The Violence of Historical Erasure’ in: ‘Feminism & Intersectionality in the Arts’ conference at New York University, Villa La Pietra, Florence (ITA)
· Performance with Burkinabés artists, Edwige Ouedraogo and Wendy Nikiema, at 10th ed. of Récréatrales, Ouagadougou (BFA)
· ‘Maru Ga Se Pula, Mosi Ke O Ne’ performance lecture for ‘Whose land have I lit on now?’ at SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin
· ‘Basupa Tsela’ performance lecture in: ‘Crossroads festival’, Kaserne, Basel (CHE)
2017
· ‘Basupa Tsela’ performance lecture in: ‘The Parliament of Bodies’, public programs of ‘documenta 14’ (GER)
2016
· ‘Mosako wa Nako’, 10 days performance for South African National Arts Festival in Makhanda (RSA), June–July, 2016
· ‘TEDxJohannesburg Salon’ presentation, during FNBJoburgArtfair, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Hema’ performance for ‘Undisciplinary Learning—City’, District, Berlin (GER)
2014
· ‘Mosako wa Nako’, 10 days performance for ‘Giving Contours to Shadows’ at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, May–June, 2014, Berlin
· ‘Leleme’, performance for ‘On Fire’ (choreographic advice by Miki Shoji), Dorkypark, and for ‘Giving Contours to Shadows’, Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin
2013
· ‘U’titled’ performance at Grand Parc, South Africa in France and Novart, Bordeaux (FRA)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2025
· ‘Unfolding the Sky’, Ballhaus Naunynstraße (Black Berlin Black – Festivity), (GER)
· ‘A Protea Is Not a Flower’, with Robin Rhode, Gerard Sekoto, Bessie Head and Don Mattera, Zeitz Mocaa, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘Tsela e e motsopodia’, blank projects, Cape Town (RSA)
2023
· ‘Tsela di matlapa’ Galerie Britta Rettberg, in collaboration with blank projects Cape Town, ‘Various Others 2023’, Munich (GER)
2022
· ‘Maropeng’ Galerie im Turm, Berlin (GER)
· ‘Di Sa Bonweng’ blank projects, Cape Town (RSA)
2020
· ‘Maru a Pula is a Song of Happiness’ KINDL - Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin (GER)
· ‘Bato Ba Me’ during ‘#UNFINISHEDTRACES’, Villa Romana Prize exhibition series, Kunstverein in Hamburg (GER)
2019
· ‘Lefa Le,’ Black History Month Florence, SACI Gallery, Florence (ITA)
2016
· ‘Di Dikadika Tsa Dinaledi’, GoetheOnMain, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Noka ya Bokamoso’, during South African National Arts Festival, Albany History Museum, Makhanda (RSA)
2015
· ‘Seriti Se’, POW, Galerie Wedding, Berlin (GER)
2014
· ‘Makhubu’, Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London (GBR)
2012
· ‘Seipone’, alpha nova (galerie futura), Berlin (GER)
2011
· ‘50 G and Tlhogo’, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (RSA)
2010
· ‘Selogilwe’, Brodie/Stevenson, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Mosako Wa Seipone’, GoetheOnMain, Johannesburg (RSA)
2007
· ‘Project Room#7’, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Aboleleng and Hema’, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (RSA)

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)

2025
· ‘Everything Is True—Nothing Is Permitted’, Brutus, Rotterdam
· ‘The Power of My Hands’, SESC Pompeia, São Paulo (BRA)
· ‘Le sel noir’, Städtische Galerie, Villingen-Schwenningen and Bremen (GER)
· ‘Foundations’, House for Contemporary Art, Berlin
· ‘Empowerment’, Delhi and Colombo (IND); Pune (IND, 2024); Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (GER, 2023)
2024
· ‘We, The People: 30 Years of Democracy in South Africa’, Norval Foundation, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘We, The Purple’, Javett-UP, Pretoria (RSA)
· ‘alluvium’, Goodman Gallery (X blank), Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Für alle! Demokratie neu gestalten’, Bundeskunsthalle Bonn
· ‘Notes On The Wake. Rhapsody and Lamentations in Three Acts’, Villa Romana, Florence (ITA)
· ‘Njabala: An Elegy’, Makerere Art Gallery Kampala (UGA)
2023
· ‘Who we are?’, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (GER)
– ‘It Go Have to Adjust. On Language as Parasite’, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin (GER)
· ‘Common’, A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘She Devil’, Bienalsur 2023, MUNTREF, Buenos Aires, (ARG)
· ‘Float’, Kunstmuseum Celle (GER)
2022
· ‘Beyond Homogeneity’, Syker Vorwerk, Syke (GER)
· ‘Polyphon’, Musée d’art et d’histoire de Saint-Denis (FRA); Kunstsammlung Gera (GER), 2021

2021
· ‘Nimmersatt? Imagining Society without Growth’, Kunsthalle Münster (GER)
· ‘What is Authority?’, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London (GBR)
· ‘What is forgotten and what remains?’, Palais de la porte dorée, Paris (FRA)
· ‘The Power of My Hands’, Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris (FRA)
· ‘LandLiebe. Kunst u. Landwirtschaft’, Kunstmuseum Chur (CHE)
· ‘EMAF no. 34’ exhibition, Kunsthalle Osnabrueck (GER)
2020
· ‘These Are the Only Times You Have Known’, n.b.k., Berlin (GER)
· ‘31: Women’, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin (GER)
2019
· 14th Curitiba Biennial, Museu Oscar Niemeyer, Curitiba (BRA)
· ‘Merdelamerdelamer”, curated by, Kendell Geers, Mauroner Contemporary Art, Vienna (AUT)
· ‘Agropoetics’, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin (GER)
· ‘Seeds for Future Memories’, ifa Gallery, Berlin (GER)
2018
· ‘The Main Complaint’ Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘Both, and’, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘She Devil Remix’ Centro Pecci, Prato and Studio Stefania Miscetti, Rome (ITA)
· ‘Tell Freedom. 15 South African artists’, Kunsthall Amersfoort (NLD)
2017
· ‘Women’s Work: Crafting Stories, Subverting Narratives’, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘MINE—The Film Will Always Be You’ a selection of South African artists, LRG (AUS); Tate Modern, London (2015)
2016
· ‘Undisciplinary Learning—Remapping The Aesthetics of Resistance’, District, Berlin (GER)
· !Kauru/Black Collectors Forum, FNB JoburgArtFair, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Being and Becoming: Complexities of the African Identity’, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria (RSA)
2015
· ‘Sights & Sounds: South Africa’, Jewish Museum, New York (USA)
· ‘Emile Stipp Collection’, JoburgArtFair, Johannesburg (RSA)
2014
· ‘Territorien’, <rotor>, Steirischer Herbst, Graz (AUT)
· ‘Fast Forward’, Zajia Lab, Beijing (CHN)
· ‘Giving Contours to Shadows’, n.b.k., Berlin (GER)
2013
· ‘A Sculptural Premise’, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (RSA)
· ‘Próximo Futuro, Next Future’, Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon (PRT)
2012
· ‘III Moscow International Biennale for Young Art’, Moscow (RUS)
· ‘DAK’ART 2012’ Dakar Biennale, Dakar (SEN)
· ‘Theatre of life’ Center of Contemporary Art, Torun (POL)
2011
· ‘Beyond football—shifting interests and identity’, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin (GER) and Goethe Institut Lagos (NGA)
· ‘(Re)constructions: Contemporary Art in South Africa’, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói, Rio de Janeiro (BRA)
2010
· ‘Hinter offenen Türen’, Stadtgalerie im PROGR, Bern (CHE)
· ‘Ampersand’, Daimler Contemporary, Art Collection, Berlin (GER)
2009
· ‘Innovative Woman’, Constitution Hill, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Self/Not self’, Brodie/Stevenson, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Tlhogo ya Tsie’ at World Summit on Arts and Culture, Museum Africa, Johannesburg (RSA)
· ‘Ke Tlhogo’, House of Legacy, Belgrade (SRB)
2008
· ‘Real Presence’, Castello di Rivoli, Turin (ITA)
· ‘Reflect Refuel’, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria (RSA)