

Katja Gentric

## [Un]performing Voice Simnikiwe Buhlungu / Euridice Zaituna Kala

Consider two instances of [un]heardness:

One: the title *Free Lettering Translationisms* is handwritten in block capitals across the cover of a few pages bound by two staples. The back of the booklet reads: “© 2016 Simnikiwe Buhlungu, Mark Pezinger Verlag Johannesyburg”. These pages are only one instant in a process, which began in Johannesburg CBD<sup>2</sup> in 2016 and which anticipates its denouement in the response it would draw forth in the reader.

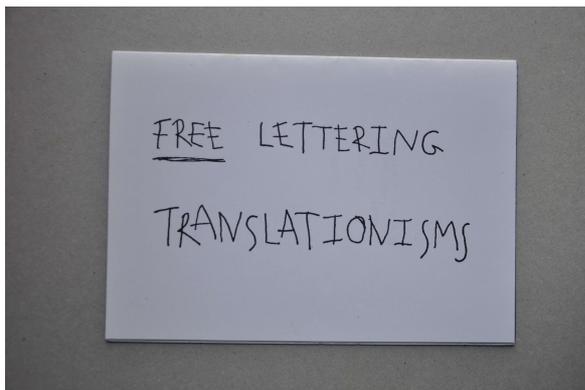


Fig. 1: Simnikiwe Buhlungu, *Free Lettering Translationisms*, Mark Pezinger Verlag Johannesburg, 2016.

Two: at 4 a.m. on 22 March 2014 at Jeppe station, bordering central Johannesburg, Euridice Zaituna Kala speaks into a megaphone – inserting her sonic presence into the ebb and flow of a hurrying, unspeaking crowd that seems to navigate by some inaudible and unwritable code, which will crystallize only when interrupted by a foreign presence, Kala’s, in this case.

In both these instances an ongoing flux of events is punctuated by interruption (taking the form of an artist’s book by Buhlungu, or a sonic intervention by Kala). The process stems from far-reaching historical legacy and extends well beyond the public’s encounter with the intervention. Historical perspective is key to positioning these works. Both are based on language, more precisely translation<sup>3</sup> or, rather, non-

standard ways of speaking and thinking – not foreign, but accented.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2: Euridice Zaituna Kala, *From Compound to City [Conditioned Entry], Tedet – Time*, intervention at Jeppe Station Johannesburg on 22 March 2014. Photo: Akona Kenqu

### On the improbable possibility of [un]ravelling language, politics and history

Both abovementioned instances are strategically placed in Johannesburg and thus are inscribed within South Africa’s unfolding socio-linguistic and political history under the token of the changeover from apartheid to hardcore neo-liberal democracy. Each intervention points to particular details of the interwoven and tangled vectors in this constellation, amongst others, one of the most notable changes implemented by the transitional government after the first elections by universal suffrage in 1994: the recognition of eleven official languages plus sign language. This decision was taken in reaction to language politics before and under apartheid<sup>5</sup> when the majority of the languages spoken in South Africa were disenfranchised by legislation. It also reflects the self-interest of political parties during the negotiated transition.<sup>6</sup> The cohabitation of eleven official languages implies that language skills will remain key in education in South Africa. This is even more so seeing that the memory of the 1976 student protests against language policies

imposed by the Bantu Education Act,<sup>7</sup> and their lethal consequences, are all but forgotten. The renewed student protests surfacing since 2015 have once again brought these questions to the fore. Student activists for free quality education call, amongst other things, for an education system that recognizes cultural specificity, making a decisive step towards amending the discriminations based on language proficiency. South African students aim at making a significant contribution to decolonial ways of knowledge production.

Colonial conquest implemented European languages as the dominant<sup>8</sup> idiom of exchange. Functioning in complete lack of reciprocity, the translator's task was to glean information from the inhabitants, translate them for the coloniser.<sup>9</sup> This form of translation had the effect of silencing and effacing the idiom wherein the utterance had first been expressed. Today South African language activists grapple with how to deal with the conscience of the disappearance of this first idiom, as nostalgia for this loss is complicated by changing ideologies underlying language policies under different dispensations.

As exchanges evolved, the administration of artificially invented ethnicity gave rise to the fiction of clean-cut, "pure", supposedly "primordial" languages demarcating the South African territory. Sifree Makoni<sup>10</sup> shows the political intentions underpinning the identification of one regional variety as a distinct language within speech forms that should rather be seen as constituting a continuum. The ambition of standardization for the purposes of demarcating linguistic boundaries often included passing judgement about the society under scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> Under grand apartheid the myth of languages as mutually exclusive categories was upheld as a "natural" founding principle. Apartheid legislation motivated ruthlessly discriminatory laws which had dire effects on the everyday lives of all South Africans. They had a stronghold on the education system, public radio, the imposition of living areas, etc. The lengths to which the South African Publications Control Board was prepared to go in order to ensure that complete segregation based on language was respected<sup>12</sup> will be remembered amongst the most absurd ventures in human history. Bearing this in mind, it seems quite cynical that after 1994, when South African citizens were

encouraged to rediscover themselves as a nation, the notion of multilingualism was lauded as an asset and romanticized, as it gave the opportunity to celebrate the synergy of the "rainbow nation".

These contradictory relations between proclaimed intentions and tangible consequences linked to the ways in which languages were administered, manipulated or stifled according to conflicting political agendas frequently feature in contemporary artistic interventions in South Africa. For Churchill Madikida for example, language discrimination produces the effect of choking, which he performs by ingesting or regurgitating maize porridge. In the *Interminable Limbo* (2004) series, Madikida refers to reductive exoticization of certain traditions in South Africa as well as the stifling effect these self-same traditions can have on an individual. Kemang Wa Lehulere performs several versions of a scene where he places safety pins under his tongue.<sup>13</sup> This performance references the novel *Under the Tongue*<sup>14</sup> by the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera, wherein the main character, Zhizha, has lost the will to speak. While Wa Lehulere does not give precise indications as to what his gesture is meant to signify, the image of a safety pin can convey an eloquent set of vocabulary: "Safety pins join things" [ . . . ] "They conceal. I like their materiality; they're about refusal to speak".<sup>15</sup>

Through learning about the existence of a most cruel form of punishment, the slave mask, Lerato Shadi extends her research on language interdiction to the Caribbean.



Fig. 3: Lerato Shadi, *Moremogolo (Go betlwa wa taola)*, 2-channel HD video installation with audio, 13 min., 2016 (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

The slave mask, which makes speech impossible and breathing difficult, betrays to what extremes the master will go to impose his domination. As in Madikida,

Shadi's performance strikingly posits the faculty of language as almost concomitant with the ultimate vital function: indispensable, life-giving breath. The video *Moremogolo (Go betlwa wa taola)* (2016) shows Shadi winding a length of red thread around her tongue until the mouth is filled with it. Just when the onlooker fears that she will not be able to breathe, the artist spits out the formless packet. Thread has come up in many works by Shadi as a metaphor for language.

All three of these performances speak of language specificity and oppression in the context of the colonial project; they speak of the ongoing impression of being stifled or gagged that remains in the formerly oppressed, long after the discriminatory legislation has been amended; they speak of the endless process needed to [un]do wrongs and erasures, a process which would have to include attempts at unravelling the fraught history of exploitation – a seemingly interminable process which, notwithstanding much talk of the miraculous peacefully negotiated transition in South Africa is only just about to begin.<sup>16</sup>

Given the fraught, unresolved nature of the history of the relationship between languages, and more precisely the unacknowledged power inequalities between them, translation, which is first and foremost considered to be a benign act of mediation, carries a dark undertone in South Africa as it does in most post-colonial contexts. For the purposes of this text, I will claim the prefix [un-] as an indicator of the quest to *unravel* the abovementioned complexities and as an indicator of the double-edged nature of the processes involved. I will posit the neologism “[un-]hearing” or “[un-]performing” not as an adjective but as a verb,<sup>17</sup> suggesting the possibility of [un]hearing the not-yet-heard or the un-situated. The prefix “[un-]” here introduces an active, constructive intervention easing tension, relieving constraint, amending ignorance, liberating entrapment, as one would *uncork* a bottle, *unscrew* a lid, *unhinge* a door, *undeceive* someone of a preconceived idea or attempt to *undo* damage. I propose to proceed to the multidirectional action of “[un]hearing” the mentioned instances as one would *decipher* a code or *unravel* a tangled piece of string. The action of [un]hearing comes to signify a fine-tuned form of informed and involved listening

capable of bringing to the fore that which ordinarily goes by unheard or remains stifled.

Instead of well-meaning but ineffectual incitement to silencing translation, one task to be performed by this fine-tuned listening might be to develop an ear for the multitude of accents, which may allow the listener to appreciate the cultural specificity of a speaker. In South Africa, most citizens speak a great variety of languages and this is audible in the way they express themselves and in the way they pronounce certain words. Many South Africans express resentment to those (most frequently English-only-speakers) who speak as though it went without saying that proficiency in English was a “universal” given, and that the fluid and sophisticated pronunciation of this language was proof of intellectual superiority. In South Africa this is what is meant by a “monolingual”<sup>18</sup> voice – by juxtaposition, an “accented” way of speaking is inflected, shows situatedness, indicates individuated thought patterns, carries the legacy of historical exchange between languages and the power relations involved, bears recognition of the multiple languages involved in the totality of any act of speech.

### [Un]hearing accents

Recognition of individuated ways in which speakers make use of language and voice, of the auditory features of pronunciation enabling one to place the speaker socially and regionally,<sup>19</sup> is not a South African prerequisite. One of the platforms designed to allow a radical rethinking and enlargement of the methodologies underlying *documenta 11* curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002 explored the notions of *Créolité and Creolization*. In the introduction to the accompanying collection of essays the editors lay out the general principles guiding this rearticulation. They posit the “creative potential of creole”<sup>20</sup> as “the productive experience of the unknown, which we must not fear”. The initial proposal developed in *documenta 11* was derived from creolization in the Caribbean context, but it is evident that throughout contemporary society language is in continual flux and migration, creolization occurs wherever languages enter into contact and inevitably leave marks on each other.

With the aim of better positioning the specificity of Buhlungu's and Kala's approaches, I have singled out

three artistic projects by Violaine Lochu, Bouchra Khalili and Lawrence Abu Hamdan to serve as a foil. Briefly touched upon only in the aspects that are of interest to the current argument, they will illustrate the far-reaching ramifications and complexities linked to the processes involved, purposely selected from radically different political contexts and artistic approaches in order to fathom the extent of the phenomenon.

Violaine Lochu researches and performs the endless ways in which vocal expression morphs from one state to another, shifting over time, according to gender, in situations of migrancy, in storytelling, according to hearsay, in different states of consciousness, remembrance or affect, according to socio-economic circumstances. She explores how wording echoes landscape, conventions of female presence in language, art school parlance, the babble of the young child discovering their voice as their own, etc. Lochu's work is developed in dialogue with a wide diversity of language users and rendered in video pieces like *Chinese Whispers* (2013) and *Lingua Madre* (2012) or in a project in twenty-six performative episodes under the title *Abécédaire Vocal* (2016). While Lochu's tool is her own voice, she addresses vocal expression in the widest sense, mostly based on observation of its use by others.

This is also the case for Bouchra Khalili, who focuses on displacement and migrancy as it manifests through language specificity. By means of recorded interviews with expatriates, Bouchra Khalili points to the ways their serendipitous relocations filter through into the way they relate to their new daily lives by accent and particular uses of language. In the series *Speeches – Chapter 1–3* (2012–13) she may invite her interlocutors to first select, then translate, memorise and ultimately speak fragments of major texts in their creolized “home” language,<sup>21</sup> thus reactivating them into a new context. She may also invite them to write a manifesto, which is then spoken in the language of the host country.<sup>22</sup> These works pose the hypothesis of the task of the “civil poet”, from whose subjective experience a collective voice might emerge.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, Lawrence Abu Hamdan is finely attuned to voice and sound as a political entity. In one striking example encountered in Holland referenced by his project *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012), international poli-

cing became interested in accents, deeming them to be a valid way of drawing conclusions about the precise origins of migrants and proceeding to expulsion in accordance with the presumed “findings”.

Each of the three examples is interested in instances where accents serve to put the finger on difference or variation<sup>24</sup>; one might say that the artist works in an anthropological attitude, meaning that – notwithstanding their sensitivity and sincere involvement with the cases studied – they adopt the onlooker's point of view, following up on cultural specificity in an alienated context.

In comparison, the South African situation – where multiplicity of accent denotes “home” – requires the adoption of a hands-on approach found in the writings of Carli Coetzee, in her book with the fitting title, *Accented Futures, Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid* (2013). Coetzee's argument is centred on teaching situations pointing to the dire urgency with which a new approach to the language question in South Africa has proven to be an imperative, seeing that – even though the laws have been amended and the advent of the “new” South Africa has been celebrated as a miracle of peaceful transition – in the reality of everyday life, the unequal power relations between languages persist. Coetzee's language activism consists in not avoiding misunderstanding and disagreement, claiming them as “productive of, rather than the opposite of transformation”,<sup>25</sup> a locus where the situation one's interlocutor speaks from can be apprehended.<sup>26</sup> Coetzee posits the study of inflexion *not* as an anthropological observation of difference but as a self-transforming labour, where the teacher or reader performs an act of activism which is involved in bringing about the ending of segregation. Accented thinking is the act of developing “a point of view that is at home in a non-monolingual voice” and “shows an awareness of multiple scenes of reception”.<sup>27</sup>

The situations described above showcase multiple attitudes towards accent. When considered an indicator of provenance, personal accent cuts in two ways as it can signify the epitome of belonging or of *not* belonging. As an affirmative attitude embracing cultural difference, creolisation and language specificity is celebrated. Amongst other things, it proclaims resistance to the hegemonies erecting unaccented ways of ex-

pressing oneself as “purity, monolingualism, false universality”.<sup>28</sup> However, when misused as a tool to classify others it becomes part of a politics of inclusion or exclusion as in the example showcased by Abu Hamdan in Holland. On an even darker note, this multifaceted issue results in extreme violence to the one singled out as a foreigner<sup>29</sup> by his or her inflected way of expression.

The divergent scenarios described above point to the vast number of vectors that remain “[un]written, [un]spoken, [un]performed” in this constellation, as has been announced in the title to this essay which hints at the creation of the word “[un]performed”, borrowed from an artist’s statement by Simnikiwe Buhlungu:



Fig. 4: Simnikiwe Buhlungu, *Free Lettering Translationisms*, intervention, Johannesburg CBD, 2016.

“Through print and text based mediums and often taking form of sensory, video and installation based forms, my interest in navigating through the personal, experience, transgenerational and socio-historical narratives presents itself as a complex web of [re]imagined engagements surrounding, but not exclusive to, issues surrounding the positionality of the aforementioned lived experiences in relation to language and knowledge production(s) – which are [un]written, [un]spoken, [un]performed, made [in]visible.”<sup>30</sup>

## [Un]performing

Simnikiwe Buhlungu’s *Free Lettering Translationisms* (2016) begin by an action in the streets of Johannesburg CBD. The artist brings a plastic chair with her. She also introduces a piece of cardboard inscribed in black liner marker, street-vendor-style: “FREE LET-

TERING TRANSLATIONISMS”. For a period of three months, the artist joins the street vendors and offers a service translating her client’s letters into “broken English”, a paradoxical action: breaking English as a “decolonial option of debunking notions of intellect and knowledge as we know it.”<sup>31</sup>

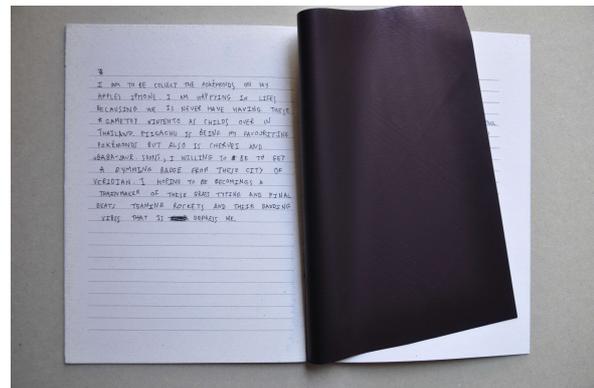


Fig. 5: Simnikiwe Buhlungu, *Free Lettering Translationisms*, Mark Pezinger Verlag Johannesburg, 2016.

How can this remark be decoded? Providing a public service of letter writing can be read as a reference<sup>32</sup> to the fraught history of housing policies dating back to the discovery of gold and the regulation of “influx control” in the cities. On the one hand, a vast work force was needed for the mines, but on the other hand the privileges provided by city life were meant to be restricted to Europeans. The mineworker’s stay in the city being considered a provisional arrangement, they were accommodated in single-sex hostels, referred to as compounds, housing between eight and sixteen men per room<sup>33</sup> while their family remained in the designated rural areas. Seeing that few of the forced migrants were literate, many separated families relied on third parties to write, and then, at destination, to read the letters that allowed them to remain in contact. One unexpected fallout of this condition is the work of artists like Stephen Kappata or Titu Zungu who made a living by decorating envelopes for these messages in transit.

Buhlungu’s service deviates from classic public letter writing in one significant detail: instead of upgrading inept language skills into fluid, standard, flawless English, she produces vernacular. She actively “breaks” the world-class language. Her services joyously translate love letters, birthday greetings, con-

gratulations, task-lists, CVs, poems or insults. Perfectly aware of the shift that has occurred since the first context wherein public letter writing was adopted as a survival technique, Buhlungu nevertheless writes on paper, overriding electronic communication, even resorting to the old-fashioned carbon copy. These copies are later assembled into an artist's book and published in the form of the slim fourteen-page volume described at the beginning of this text. What is striking in the project is the simplicity and furtiveness of the set-up: a plastic chair, a cardboard sign, sheets of carbon copy paper, a ball-point pen. Buhlungu's *Translationisms* are strictly free of charge. This is motivated by the fact that flawless English spoken with a sophisticated accent is currency<sup>34</sup> – a certain market value is attached to it. Instead of normalizing after the end of apartheid legislation, the discrimination has instead worsened under the neo-liberal politics of the ANC government. A sophisticated English accent can obtain the speaker a good job, it augments social status.<sup>35</sup> The free lettering translationisms protest this status quo: "The presence of Broken English further challenges the notions that one's [in]ability to comprehend, read, write is a reflection of one's intellectual capacity."<sup>36</sup> They protest the idea of business-like performance as excellence,<sup>37</sup> they consciously [un]perform – they are engaged in "breaking English".

The subtlety of Buhlungu's project lies in the fact that – beyond being about sound, voice or English under post-colonial critique – it is about the way that Buhlungu (and also her reader, if he/she will agree to follow her reasoning) would imagine what the translationisms would sound like if read out loud. Seeing that obviously there is no "correct" way of pronouncing these broken words, the way the reader tries to unravel the writing makes up his/her personal accented attempt to articulate the silent letters. The project takes effect only on a virtual level – Buhlungu does not produce sound recordings of any kind: "the auditory element to the project was totally in the reader's way of articulating."<sup>38</sup> The user of this project will have to "[un]hear" (wrestle with) this little booklet, as one would uncork a bottle or unscrew a lid.

This wrestling, this process of activist [un]hearing is in close correlation with what Barbara Cassin will refer

to as the "*généalogie du performatif*" (genealogy of the performative) or "*la performance - performativité de la parole*" (the performance-performativity of speech).<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, Cassin has identified the intentions<sup>40</sup> behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (1994–2001) as a striking example in her diachronic (genealogical) analysis of the interrelations between rhetoric and performative<sup>41</sup> usefulness<sup>42</sup> of language. In her approach as a language philosopher, Cassin's task is to comment on the speech forms she encounters and the shifts operated within uses of language – the cases where words hold true as deeds. The artist Buhlungu has other efficient means at her disposal. By writing "breaking English", Buhlungu will have profoundly disrupted something in the uses made of language: she will have unanchored language from the colonial legacy, setting it afloat once more. She will have [un]performed – and in the same gesture incited her spectator to [un]perform – not a translation but a "translationism". It turns out that this [un]performing gesture is urgently needed in the fraught South African post-post-apartheid context, and no less urgently for our planet – this service is provided entirely free of charge.

### [Un]written, [un]spoken

Euridice Zaituna Kala: (*Tedet*) *Telling time - from COMPOUND to CITY [Conditioned Entry]*.<sup>43</sup> For this intervention in public space Euridice Kala chose a train station on the line run by the company Metrorail. Connecting the compounds bordering central Johannesburg, it is the point of entry into the city. Kala, as a Mozambican expatriate living in South Africa, was struck by the oppressed silence as the crowds of commuters hurried through the station. The uninformed onlooker might attribute the isolation between the individual commuters to high crime rates in South Africa, but the situation has many other facets. The compounds, or single-sex hostels, a legacy of apartheid pass-regulated influx control, are today administered differently. Those who live in them do not have the means to find accommodation in the inner city but they constitute the main labour force that allows the city to function.<sup>44</sup> The principal users of the yellow Metrorail trains, they commute on a daily basis, hurrying through Jeppe station in the early hours of



Fig. 6: Euridice Zaituna Kala, (*Tedet*) *Telling time - from COMPOUND to CITY* (2014), Performance, Johannesburg  
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the morning. Titrating her intervention *From Compound to City [Conditioned Entry]*, Kala refers to this complex constellation.

Remembering her first encounter with Jeppe Metrorail station, Kala remarks that what struck her even more than the unspeaking crowd was the fact that almost no indication was given as to which train would leave from which platform and at what time. No overhead announcements, no electronic display panel, no screens on the platforms: trains came into the station, emptied themselves of their commuters and then refilled and departed, in industrialized fashion. Somehow, notwithstanding the complete absence of public signage, the users seemed to know which train was going where. The elusive unspoken common knowledge orchestrating this complex choreography struck the newcomer as nothing short of spellbinding: “No one was speaking, just going into the trains.”<sup>45</sup> To Kala it seemed that the only way to get an inkling of its functioning would be to interrupt the silenced flow of [un]information. As a non-South African, Kala had developed a strategy of “insert where possible”<sup>46</sup>. She spent two weeks observing the ebb and flow of this unspeaking crowd, gleaning bits and pieces of information about the train schedules and the directions the trains took. Kala likens the activity of cultivating and tending this aptitude to glean knowledge to the watering of a plant, which she did, as part of the preparation.

On 22 March 2014 in the early hours of the morning (before 4 a.m.), she installs her folding chair in a square space which she demarcated by white tape on

the concrete flooring, sharing this space with the small tree<sup>47</sup> she tended over the past two weeks. Equipped with a time-keeping device (her mobile phone) and a megaphone, she takes up her position and starts announcing her self-devised train timetables based on knowledge she had managed to gather in the previous days: “The 4:20 to Germiston on platform 2”/ “The 4:22 to Park Station on platform 1”. As the action unfolds, two incidents start occurring: the commuters start coming towards Kala, asking her for information – something in the fear-filled pattern seems to have shifted; and then shortly afterwards a security man employed by Metrorail appears from out of nowhere and tells the artist to leave because these are the company’s premises.

In retrospect, Kala draws attention to the observation that the crowd seems to behave according to a pattern, as though the individuals came in volumes, remarking on the beauty of the movement. Likewise, she sees the verbal exchanges as “pockets” of information and language within a sea of non-communication. Kala speaks English in this space, while inside Jeppe station the commuting locals speak their respective languages. Kala wonders whether she was in the wrong space<sup>48</sup> – or has her foreign presence here met a serious need for something? People seemed to have given up trying<sup>49</sup> – the irregular presence of the immigrant (Kala) seems to have called forth a sense of orientation. The artist within her demarcated space becomes a point of intersection, a coordinate in the never-ending flux of [dis]oriented commuters functioning to [in]tangible clockwork.

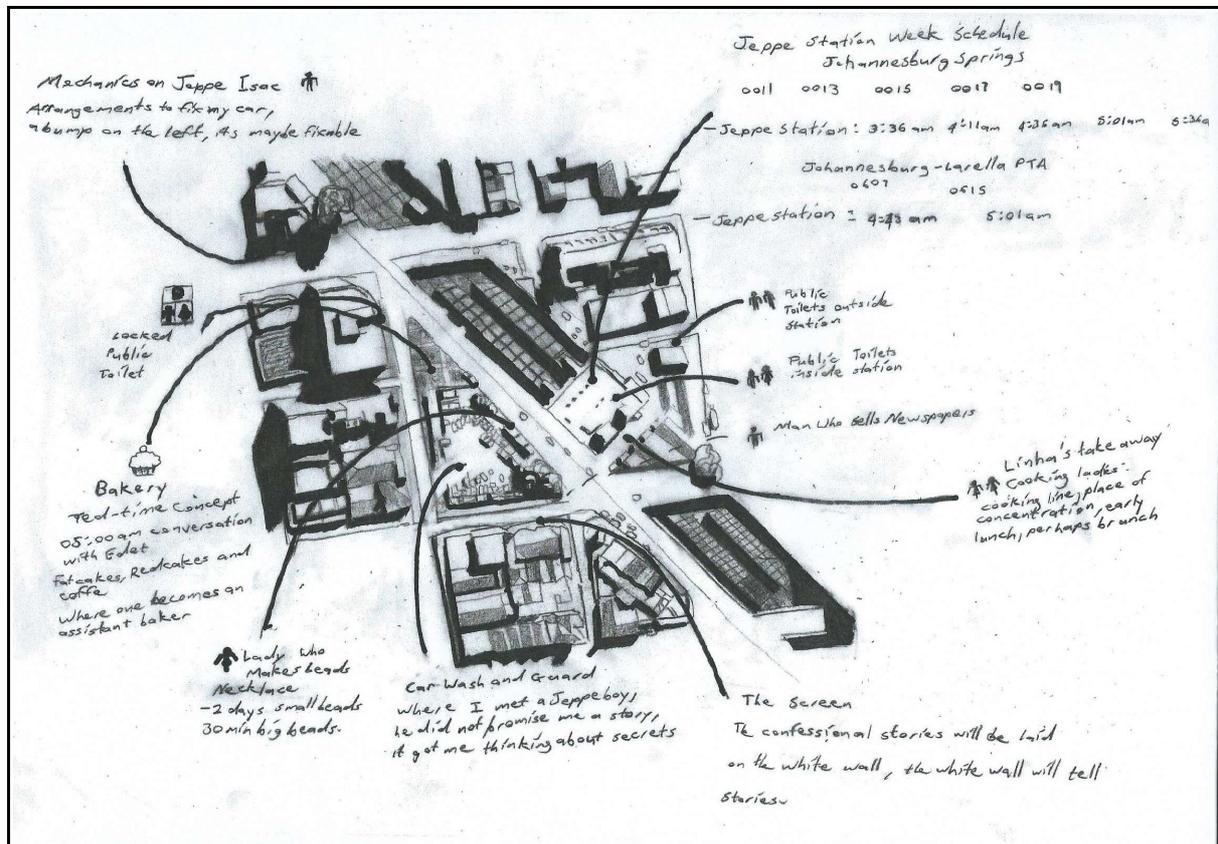
These observations become even more poignant in relationship to the complex interplay of opposing interests linked to claiming a sense of belonging to South Africa where public space is always contested. The self-same crowd, regulated by this common unspoken surge that allows train stations accommodating two million commuters each day<sup>50</sup> to function without written indications, can erupt into what is referred to as xenophobic violence. Having developed an inflated sense of nationalism, locals have been known to sporadically burst into acts of unfathomable violence against those they have identified as non-South African. Kala refers to these incidents as “a collective lack of knowledge” or “collective amnesia”.<sup>51</sup>

This amnesia goes much deeper than mere forgetfulness, ignoring for example the solidarity shown amongst Southern African liberation movements during the fight against apartheid. This amnesia amounts to a blank – a paralysis of both thought and memory, exceeding the reasonable – [un]fathomable. South African post-apartheid society paid close attention to identity politics and accordingly language specificity came to be vested with a new form of nationalism. In an exaggeration of that which at the outset was the need for restored consciousness, the “South African accent” came to be vested with a new form of hegemonic monolingualism. As a consequence, those who did not have the local accent – guest workers and commercial partners from neighbouring Southern African countries – were identified by their way of speaking as a threat to the new-found national dispensation. Derogatorily referred to as “amakwerekwere” individuals thus singled out became the victims of sporadic xenophobic attacks. Kala, making herself conspicuous as a foreigner, posits herself not only a coordinate but as the potential target for collective amnesia to erupt into blank, unthinking violence.

Language identity cuts two ways: it is simultaneously a marker of belonging and a means of singling out those who do not belong. The common denominator between these two extreme cases is the sense of anapostism, the “sense of being out of place”.<sup>52</sup> This is expressed by furtiveness of action, a quality referred to by Nomusa Makhubu, who further suggests the possibility of “live art as a question of citizenship or as a mode of understanding belonging to governance.”<sup>53</sup>

The [un]spoken and [un]heard (inaudible) and furtive flow of clairvoyant and violent information crystallizes when it is interrupted by Kala’s anapostic artistic gesture. Recalling the title – *Telling time* – the interruption is in the telling, in speaking out loud and putting shared wisdom into words. Telling, using embodied voice, the interruption is performed in inserting the physical presence of the artist’s body into this space. “Inserting yourself is always a failure”,<sup>54</sup> Kala remarks. And elsewhere: “Therefore around failure, we could find a sense of commonality.”<sup>55</sup>

Fig. 7: Euridice Kala, preparation drawings for performance (*Tedet*) *Telling time* – from *COMPOUND* to *CITY* (2014), Jeppestown, © Grace Mmabatho.



## [Un]hearing – once more

The two instances described at the outset of this paper each devise a ploy to outwit the [un]spoken, operating a shift in the way language is put to use and by the same gesture evidencing the performativity of language. In both cases this performativity arises due to the diachronically complex relationships between languages and as a result of thinking of language in the way it functions in space and time. Kala intervenes in a train station on a line connecting historically charged sites within a changing social fabric. Buhlungu inserts herself amongst the street vendors, selling a service which draws its significance from solutions contrived to overcome the constraints arising within a segregated community. The strategies adopted by both artists can be said to devise material situations echoing Heinz Wismann's<sup>56</sup> central thesis: that some things that can't be achieved within one single language become possible by navigating between languages. When navigating this space between languages, voice becomes furtive, impossible to pin down; it is inaudible to listening as we know it. This form of furtive voice needs the capacity to actively [un]hear the inaudible, as one would decipher a code. As Buhlungu puts it: "The performative act of translation becomes a way of engaging and exchanging with language as something that is fluid, where some things are lost while others are gained."<sup>57</sup> The performative act referred to by Buhlungu is the same as analysed by Barbara Cassin, following John L. Austin, who concludes on the inability to categorize the performative force of words, deferring to the "the total speech act in the total speech situation"<sup>58</sup> – a quest I have performed here by describing and contextualizing the anapostrophic gestures of Buhlungu and Kala, seconded by Madikida, Wa Lehlere, Shadi, Lochu, Khalili and Abu Hamdan. In agreement with Cassin who concludes that there is neither a definition nor a solution that holds true in all cases,<sup>59</sup> Buhlungu and Kala create situations where language is outwitted, and where each one individually [un]performs the act of telling time or breaking language.

The two artists seem to enter the diachronic perspective of this nexus from two opposing but analogue vantage points. In Buhlungu's work the spoken is translated into the written for the unheard to be

"[un]heard" in the virtual space of the imagination of the reader. In Kala's intervention the unspeaking crowd, hurrying through public space, is interrupted by sonic intervention. By shifting the frame of reference, the silent, almost clairvoyant wisdom underlying the movements of the crowd is revealed. Voice weaves its way in and out of these constellations. A silent booklet, breaking language, and an expatriate artist with a megaphone, telling time, speaking of failure as a method of "getting information out of the unknown"<sup>60</sup> – when met by the reader's or commuter's active, [un]hearing, complicity, these are instances of [un]performing voice.

## Endnotes

1. Intentionally spelled with a "y".
2. Central Business District. See "Johannesburg, the Segregated City", *South African History Online* (updated 27 Feb. 2019) <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/johannesburg-segregated-city>>.
3. François Ost, *Traduire : défense et illustration du multilinguisme* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).
4. Carli Coetzee, *Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013).
5. Njabulo S. Ndebele "The English Language and Social Change in South Africa", *English Academy Review*, 4/1 (1987), p. 1-16.
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12. John Pepper, "Notes on Cuts on Censored Records", *Afrikadaa, "Politics of Sound"* special issue, 10 (2016), p. 64–65.
13. Kemang Wa Lehlere, *A Native of Nowhere (A Sketch)*, 2014.
14. Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996).
15. Robyn Sassen, "He Leaves No Trace", *Sunday Times Review* 2 (4 December 2011), p. 3.
16. Coetzee, *Accented Futures*, p. ix.
17. Kemang Wa Lehlere frequently makes use of this method.
18. Coetzee, *Accented Futures*, p. 13.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
21. *Speeches – Chapter 1: Mother Tongue* (2012).
22. *Speeches – Chapter 3: Living Labour* (2013).
23. Text for Bouchra Khalili's exhibition *Blackboard* at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, 5 June–23 September 2018.
24. "The literature on accent is intent on differentiation and stratification, both of phonemes and of the ways in which we are placed and grouped in the world" in Coetzee, *Accented Futures*, p. 7.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
26. *Ibid.*, p. xiii and p. 45–60. Also see Ost, *Traduire*, p. 420.
27. Coetzee, *Accented Futures*, p. 15.
28. Okwui Enwezor et al., "Introduction", in Okwui Enwezor et al., *Cre olite and creolization* documenta 11, Platform 3 (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2003), p. 13–16.
29. In South Africa, this phenomenon has gone to extremes in what is referred to as "xenophobic violence", which will be referred to later on in this text.
30. Simnikiwe Buhlungu, [artist statement] <<https://blackmarkcollective.wordpress.com/simnikiwe-buhlungu/>> (Accessed on 11 June 2019).
31. Mark Pezinger Books, [book blurp] <<http://www.markpezinger.de/simnikiwe.html>> (Accessed 21 June 2019).
32. Telephone interview conducted on 18 March 2019.

33. For an easily accessible source see "Johannesburg, the Segregated City", *South African History Online* (updated 27 Feb. 2019) <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/johannesburg-segregated-city>>.
34. Ndebele, "The English Language", p. 117.
35. Lesoko Vuyokazi Seabe, "Performing the (Un)inherited: Language, Identity, Performance", MA thesis (University of Cape Town, 2012).
36. Mark Pezinger Books, [book blurb] <<http://www.markpezinger.de/simnikiwe.html>> (Accessed 21 June 2019).
37. Enwezor et al., *Créolité*, p. 16. "Convert the logic of the hegemonic sphere into the symbolic capital of cultural difference", bringing them to the question, "What constitutes a créolized 'translation'?"
38. Email from the artist (27 March 2019).
39. Barbara Cassin, *Quand dire, c'est vraiment faire, Homère Gorgias et le peuple arc-en-ciel* (Paris : Fayard, 2018), p. 7–24.
40. *Ibid.* 193.
41. *Ibid.* 92.
42. *Ibid.* 191.
43. Kala had devised three performances to take place the same day, of which (*Tedet*) *Telling time* is the first, followed by *Troca (No Story/No Cup)* and finally *Exit Time* programmed from 22:00 to 00:00.
44. Nomusa Makhubu, "Artistic Citizenship, Anapopism and the Elusive Public: Live Art in the City of Cape Town", in Jay Pather and Catherine Boule (eds.), *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), p. 19–40.
45. Telephone interview with the artist (8 May 2019).
46. *Ibid.*
47. "As a means to introduce biophilie into a necrophilic environment." Email from the artist (26 June 2019).
48. Makhubu, "Artistic Citizenship", p. 19–40.
49. Telephone interview with the artist (8 May 2019).
50. Metrorail website <<http://www.metrorail.co.za>> (Accessed 21 June 2019).
51. Email from the artist (26 June 2019).
52. Makhubu, "Artistic Citizenship", p. 20.
53. Makhubu, "Artistic Citizenship", p. 21.
54. Telephone interview (8 May 2019).
55. Euridice Kala and Molemo Moiloa, "Four Thoughts on Failure: Call and Response", in *Boda Boda Lounge Project, From Space (Scope) to Place (Position)* (2014), p. 46–49.
56. Heinz Wismann, *Penser entre les langues* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012), p. 62.
57. Mark Pezinger Books, [book blurb] <<http://www.markpezinger.de/simnikiwe.html>> (Accessed 21 June 2019).
58. Cassin, *Quand dire*, p. 108.
59. *Ibid.* 246.
60. Interview with the artist (27 June 2019).

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## Abstract

Two unspectacular interventions performed in central Johannesburg by Simnikiwe Buhlungu and Euridice Zaituna Kala evidence the performativity of voice in public space, addressing the unheard in contemporary society, operating a shift in the way language is put to use (Cassin, 2018). In paradoxical reciprocity, the action of [un]hearing comes to signify a fine-tuned form

of informed and involved listening capable of bringing to the fore that which ordinarily goes by unheard or remains stifled. An "accented" way of speaking (Coetzee, 2013) for example is inflected, shows situatedness, indicates individuated thought patterns, carries the legacy of historical exchange between languages and the power relations involved, bears recognition of the multiple languages involved in the totality of any act of speech. Given current global concerns, it seems indispensable to caution that language identity cuts two ways: it is simultaneously a marker of belonging and a means of singling out those who do not belong. Side-stepping identity-politics, these interventions suggest self-transforming labour where the reader or listener can perform the act of interrupting the [un]heard.

## Author

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## Titel

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