

# Garth Erasmus: the knots of time and place

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by Valeria Geselev [1]

*"I was Simply Never Part of The Dance. I Was a Wall Flower."*

I can't recall the first time I met Garth Erasmus. It might have been in 2014 at one of his performances with As Is in Observatory, Cape Town. Or it could have been in 2015 at an exhibition opening or a workshop hosted by Greatmore in the neighbouring Woodstock. He was around being active, and I was around being curious.

Whatever it is I now cannot remember, the point is that we were already familiar by the time we were to spend ten days together as part of 2018 Thupelo workshop in Stellenbosch.

During that time I started calling him "prof". Here, too, my memory fails me and I cannot recall the exact moment of "inventing" this nickname. Maybe because I was then working for Gallery of Stellenbosch University (GUS), and the academic title was a wink at that context. It stuck since.

I never asked him what he thinks of it, but I like it. For me he is a professor – a man of great knowledge and authority, a senior committed to education. Grammar probably requires a prof to be a Prof., but I see Garth Erasmus as a lower case prof – because all about him is down-to-earth, non-hierarchical.

And that captures his unique appeal for me, as a curator carving out her way, searching for people to learn from, people who do not act superior. I felt that Garth Erasmus was the ideal mentor figure, mastering the delicate balance of having an impressive track record, and being kind, generous and a good listener. A people's prof.

**Valeria Geselev:** Dearest prof.,

I just read the quote "someone reading a book is a sign of order in the world," by poet Mary Ruefle. In this quote order is meant to indicate something good, maybe even justice or sense.

I recall very well your "concluding remarks" in the pink back yard of GUS, moments before opening the Thupelo exhibition. All the members of the workshop set there, and you gave a speech (which I wish I would have recorded) where you said that "chaos is not the opposite of order, but has its own order, logic, beauty, meaning". I imagined in the corner of my eye my boss from the university art department overhearing this part. It gave me a sense of "answering" the faculty, who a few days prior commented negatively on the gallery looking "like a chaos" during Thupelo. I

took pride in that aesthetic, and felt that your words captured well, and in a non-justifying tone, the argument in favour of chaos.

Do you remember saying those words? Can you speak about that more?

**Garth Erasmus:** Yes. I remember it well because that workshop was so memorable. What I said was that chaos does not mean no order it is the order that exists when there is no leader. It's basically chaos theory as I learnt a long time ago.



GUS during Thupelo workshop, 2018. Courtesy: Garth Erasmus



Garth Erasmus (far right) listening to Thokozani Zondo, a participant of Thupelo, GUS, 2018. Courtesy: Valeria Geselev

I think what your lecturer failed to appreciate was the transformative power of art. I believe in the transformative power of art and I think we experienced that first-hand

with the workshop. It's something I experience all the time with all the art forms, but especially when making group music.

I find that the same principles apply when I'm painting. I always reach a point of being lost but if I persevere beyond the pain barrier gradually the work begins to reveal itself. It's a beautiful feeling and it's that revelation of beauty that makes you want to experience it again and again and again. In music I always say it's the sound of surprise. It's nice being surprised don't you think?

The analogy with the workshop was that what was most valuable was the process rather than the end result ... and that the workshop itself was a work of art. We've been socialised to put great value on the finished work of art and not what it took to get there. I think it's Mark Rothko who said something like: "... a painting is not the picture of an experience but the experience itself...". Now, I subscribe to that.

As I said, I especially learnt this in making music. I'm speaking of free improvisation here because that's what I'm involved with and where the value of involved experience is at its most potent. It's no coincidence that music is a group activity, a small social unit. In free improvisation every individual has equal standing and all inputs, no matter what, are equal in value and contribute equally to the whole. There is no instruction and there is no expectation but to start.

We're all dealing with our accumulated yearnings and our dreams – these are the invisible things that make you feel what you feel. So, how you play a note is just as important as what the note is. The same can apply to all the forms of art in my experience. Our greatest stumbling block in all human endeavours is the fear of failure ... of making "mistakes" ... and these are our invisible enemies that hinder creativity. Do not fear mistakes.

But coming back to the music metaphor, the magic can only happen if the individual sacrifices ego and has an understanding of the common good. I sense that was what happened in the workshop.



Garth Erasmus speaking to participants of Thupelo, GUS, 2018. Courtesy: Valeria Geselev

**VG:** Staying a bit longer at that workshop, 2018 Thupelo GUS, I also think often of your opening words on the first day. You spoke about your first encounter with Thupelo, the context of its birth within apartheid, and in an opposition to it.

Soon after that workshop I came back to Israel and my mind was occupied with mapping the possibilities of art and curatorship to operate within tense, and dark, political circumstances. To try to describe it – there is a strong environment of despair in the air, creatives are not motivated to lead the way forward, no collaboration between the “sides” Palestinian/Arab and Jewish/Israeli, and resistance to the idea of change comes in ways of disbelief, offence, othering, anger, “nothing new under the sun” narrative.

All this puzzles me, and provokes many thoughts about South Africa, where I lived and worked for five years.

Can you please tell me more about your experience as an emerging artist, encountering Thupelo and the ideas behind it?

**GE:** In many ways the magic, the alchemy, happens when things align. The year 1985 in South Africa was such a moment. I was 29. The time was right. And politically the time was right for the country as well. Ever since the 1976 student uprising, the country was in a slow burn toward a classic bloody revolution. The worsening situation came to a head in September 1985 when the government declared a State of Emergency. Maybe I should give a little personal context in the lead up to that ...

I had arrived in Cape Town from the Eastern Cape in 1981 and was working as a schoolteacher. I was also producing my own work all the time and I was part of a very active artists group in Cape Town called Vakalisa, that was closely aligned to the Black Consciousness spirit of the day. The Vakalisa group was full of the local cultural luminaries like James Matthews, Lionel Davis, Peter Clarke, Rashid Lombard, and many more ... Many of our events and media were banned. But the creative spirit was alive and fed by the political flames that surrounded it.

That time there was hardly gallery access for our work, in the sense of the opportunity to exhibit one’s work in a dignified way, that is, an opportunity for your work to be considered as “serious” art. This had the effect of us re-evaluating our status as “artists” in a gallery system. That was itself a Western concept and therefore a product of colonialism. We rejected the term “artist” and reinvented ourselves as “cultural workers” as a direct political action.

Painting was my medium and all my work at this time you could say was very clearly political and agitprop in nature. I had immersed myself and was very serious and dedicated to the struggle. But somewhere along the way I encountered moments of self doubt when meditating on the nature of creativity.

Then something happened in 1985. I responded to a small advert in the local newspaper that called for submissions for attendance of a workshop in Johannesburg. That was all. Very mysterious. Anyway, eventually I was accepted.

So this was how the first Thupelo Workshop came about, organized by Bill Ainslie and David Koloane.

Being at the workshop was like a new baptism for me. It was everything I needed but didn't realise. Do you know what I mean?

Firstly, a fact about Thupelo is that there is no agenda on the form or content of your work ... you have complete freedom over what you want to do. And the other thing – very important – working with acrylic paint! Proper acrylic paint as a serious medium was a new thing in the art world. So that was exciting. And thirdly, the socialising and meeting new people from all around the country, the conversations and sharing of experiences, the sense of community and the realisation that we all share a similar humanity, a sense of belonging.

With all this freedom and abandon I thoroughly enjoyed myself and took full advantage of the opportunity. I've never been quite the same after that.

I would say that for the first time I began to appreciate the abstract qualities of art – dealing with emotions and feelings. I enjoyed the whole idea of being engaged with direct response that is required with this kind of approach.

For these reasons Thupelo was wonderful and fruitful for me and it happened at just the right time in my life. I was old enough to understand that I was still young and naive about things, and I was young enough to know that I still had a lot to learn.

But Thupelo was not well received by the “progressive” media of the time. Because of the level of experimentation by the participants, most of the paintings appeared to be abstract art and particularly like American Abstract Expressionism! So the whole thing was accused of being American art imperialism. And this was the most respected left-wing media. They failed to see the whole exercise as a process rather than an end product. Anyway, after all these years Thupelo workshop is still alive and well.

But in my own development as an artist I would say this moment was an “awakening” and happened at round about the same time as another “awakening” – which was the music.

**VG:** How did your music awakening come about?

**GE:** There are two strands to this story.

Well, firstly, the year 1985 is once again pivotal in this... I had reached a kind of personal crossroads with my artwork. An impasse. To put it bluntly, I was sick and tired of all the political stuff and I felt uninspired because I could feel myself getting boxed-in by general expectation. I couldn't breathe. It was just a feeling, an impulse, that I couldn't put my finger on just yet, but it had been building for a while already. It's about this instinct one has as an artist, an inbuilt drive, to create something that doesn't exist yet. To find your personal voice.

I sensed that I needed a change of approach. Then, the State of Emergency happened, which was a lockdown of society... in our case it was the closure of all the education institutions and it lasted a couple of months. I was a teacher at the time and so I decided to make use of the time and start to do something about my artistic “dilemma” and work on my issues. Up until that point in my life I had only concerned myself with painting and so I convinced myself that painting was a dead end and to refresh myself I needed to change mediums. But I had no idea to what... I only knew I needed to change.

But things are not as simple as all that because the issues I had with my artwork were just one aspect of the personal turmoil I was experiencing then... and by this I mean I had deep questions about my ancestral roots. These questions were kind of suppressed due to the pressures of living in political times... there were more pressing things to deal with. These personal things seemed like selfish pursuits by comparison.

Anyway... I had been living in Cape Town for about five years already and soon after my arrival I became acutely aware of my “otherness” in the coloured community. Remember those were the apartheid times and you were classified as a “coloured” person. So, in my naive way, I thought all coloured people had the kind of life and upbringing as I’d had in the Eastern Cape. But in Cape Town I quickly realised this was not so. This is the second strand of this story.

I grew up a barefoot country boy in a dusty little town called Uitenhage. And I had grown up with a rich tradition of storytelling and deep family history going back generations especially on my father’s side. For example, I grew up with references to words like “Hottentot” related to identity, rather than “coloured”. I grew up with stories of maternal Muslim slave ancestry and stories of slave emancipation. I grew up with love stories of all these characters. I could name names. All these things made up the strange fabric of who I was.

I assumed that all this was the default experience of coloured family life. But, as I say, this assumption changed in Cape Town. By this time I was mature enough and reasonably politically aware to understand why. So, during the lockdown of the State of Emergency and to start satisfying my curiosity, I decided to visit the Social History Museum in the Gardens [2] and this had the effect of changing me forever.

Walking through the indigenous history exhibits, I was moved by everything I read and saw, but especially by the section devoted to the musical instruments. The forms and shapes of these objects and reading about their function and place. There was a strange beauty about these objects and the fact that they made music simply compounded the mystery. It was an overwhelming experience.

I was overcome with wonder for a history that was completely foreign to me. And the realisation that all this was intimately connected to my existence awakened a sense of mission in me. For the first time in my life I was exposed to words like “indigenous”. In a flash of inspiration I saw the solution to my dilemma about my artwork. I realised then that my instincts were correct and that I should move away from painting... I should do sculptural or three-dimensional work instead!

Right there, a clear vision formed in my head: I would start working in wood. After all, I had been quite good at woodwork in school and I would create sculptural-type works inspired by the forms and shapes of the musical instruments I had seen. The instruments were simple in nature... mostly bow-shaped forms, branches, sticks, and so on. It was their physical presence and not the music or sound that interested me.

I think here I also have to say this to you, for context, that unlike today's modern museums, you should imagine an old-school museum type of experience. There were no auditory examples of the sounds these instruments made. They were just mummified objects encased in glass boxes. So, this separation, this partition, also becomes a metaphor for me.

Anyway, filled with this newfound energy I went home and started working on my ideas of sculptural work. As a start, and to warm up to my new quest, I simply fashioned some instruments to the best of my memory. Especially the bows, which were easy to do.

But then, of course, what happened was that the sound happened! And when I heard the sound it spoke directly to my soul and it completely took over my life and I never ended up with the sculptures I had envisioned. It took me on a path of music-making and sound and performance and culture reclamation and self-discovery.

I still play some of those instruments I made in 1985.



Garth Erasmus playing with As Is, Moholo LiveHouse, Khayelitsha, 2016. Courtesy: Valeria Geselev



Garth Erasmus playing with As Is, Moholo LiveHouse, Khayelitsha, 2016. Courtesy: Valeria Geselev

**VG:** I have been passionately following your posts on social media. Lately you have been posting about poet James Matthews. What is your story with him? Do you have a list of inspiring elders, or inspiring folk, muses, artists who help you keep on track, not necessary older than you?

**GE:** The recent activity around James was because he turned 90! And it was a real celebration because he is what can rightly be termed a true living legend. James is a natural attractor and I am very lucky to have had the privilege of meeting him all those years back.

James was one of the elders in Vakalisa that the young guys like me looked up to. Even today he carries the proper aura of a political revolutionary with the bohemian lifestyle and a creative genius. Just being in his presence was inspirational.

Lionel Davis is another. And it's amazing that both James and Lionel were in Vakalisa! These men were examples of exemplary artists who were politically sophisticated and who dedicated their life work to the upliftment of others. I wanted to be like that. My relationships with them have only grown stronger over all these years. We have worked together and collaborated on countless occasions. In their own ways they have been like father figures and have always been encouraging toward me. I think that they like my work.

What I learnt from them is about taking this thing called ego and being careful of its influence. To recognise its distracting nature. How this can take you off course. Other inspiring elders in my life have been David Koloane and Bill Ainslie. For the same reasons. They all had a genius for living.

**VG:** While we were conducting the interview you were helping to organise a memorial for David Koloane, who died recently. What thoughts or feelings did that experience inspire in you? How do you make sense of death?

**GE:** Yes, Bra Day died recently. He meant such a lot to the art community. He was a stabilising force for the younger generation, guys like me, back in the 1980s, when there was a sense of hopelessness. He came into my life at exactly the right time.

So, this memorial was in a sense a debt of gratitude to the passing of a great African elder. A statesman. But on a personal level, my dedication was also in respect to my many interactions with him over the decades, and especially a particular workshop in KwaZulu-Natal when the two of us shared living quarters for ten days.

I'm at the age now where death, the passing of older family members, and friends, is so frequent and I become reconciled to eventual demise. I become more and more aware of mortality. I cannot make sense of death, except that it makes sense of life for me. There are now more yesterdays than tomorrows. It's a great consolation. The feeling that you have to make the most of the time you have and to make the most of your potential. Live life wisely.

**VG:** Our creative paths are designed by people who we encounter, and also by places. The right space can be as much influential in guiding artistic development as an inspiring elder. For me, one such space was Tagore's in Observatory. I saw photos of you playing there. How was your experience of this small jazz bar? Which spaces serve as personal landmarks for you as an artist?

**GE:** Tagore's was a beautiful and nurturing space and playing there with various formations was a big development in my technical growth as an instrumentalist. I've been playing there on and off since around 2010. It was an environment that encouraged creativity, so for me I used it as a platform to go for the free improvisation thing that I was into.

The other deep connection is to District Six Museum. I was involved from the very beginning around 1996-7 onwards, with the installation of all the artefacts which are still pretty much unchanged to this day ... in fact, I am the one who chopped in all those nails for the pictures to hang, for some painted banners and so on, but very much part of the team responsible for its interior design.

But the deepest connection to a space is to Greatmore Street Studios in Woodstock. I was one of the artists who founded that place. It was established in 1996. It was a major cultural move coming out of the post-1980s experience and the fulfilment of a dream for Cape Town. I'm very proud of the achievement ... a humble studio space for previously disadvantaged artists where one could rent studio space and work in dignity. Except for Tagore's, the other two are still around.

**VG:** Let's dive into your art, using a particular work or series. If you could describe it, the making of and the idea behind it?

**GE:** Well, I have lots of work and they all seem to follow certain patterns that quickly becomes a series. So there are many series but the one I'm most proud of is the XNAU Series because at the time I thought I was creating my own new art medium.

This was in 2001 but it continues for however long I wish really. XNAU is pronounced like the word "now" but with a click at the beginning. It comes from the KhoiSan word

meaning initiation.

At a certain point in my life I embarked on a path of personal healing or therapy coming out of the precedent socio-political era and its attendant trauma. Now that sounds as if this journey had a starting date or operated like an on-off switch, no, it was a gradual process and had already started happening inside my body before I was intellectually aware of it. But when I became aware of it intellectually, I realised that this decision in itself was a political act and was my way of reacting to the changes happening in the country.

For the sake of context I should add that all this derives from a feeling of being betrayed and abandoned by the ANC government in their marginalisation of the “coloured” community and their attempts to redefine “indigenous” and to hijack the UN proclamation on Indigenous Peoples Rights (which they signed) for their selfish gain.

So, the XNAU means the embracing of my true identity as an indigenous identity and the shedding of an imposed colonial identity. I find it funny how the word decolonialism is so trendy these days but this was decolonial way before it was fashionable.

I have to also quickly explain this notion of “initiation” in the sense of the XNAU because it means a different sort of rite of passage. It means a spiritual reconnection to your culture from which you’ve been cut off.

That’s the background to it, but how it came about was like this: In 2001 we had a traumatic experience when our house burnt down. It was completely destroyed. For three months after that, during the rebuilding and being on the site and seeing the walls all the time, I became fascinated and absorbed by the markings on the walls. It’s a bit like looking at clouds and seeing pictures in the formations. To me a strange kind of beauty was left as residue and it excited my curiosity.

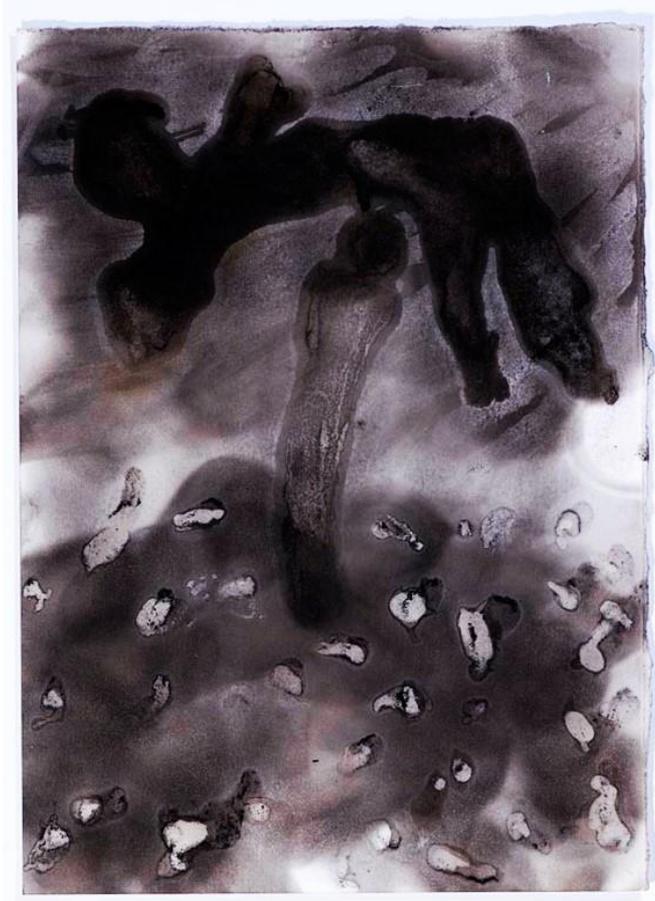
Mother Nature as artist and fire was her medium! I thought it was powerful and I was soon determined to try to “copy” this to get close to the force of nature. So, months later, when I was back on my feet again, I started experimenting with flame and working on paper and scorching it. Basically I was “finding out” how this “medium” works. Well, to cut a long story short, I eventually found a way of taming the medium and so the XNAU DRAWINGS were born. The fire drawings.



XNAU DRAWING, Self Portrait, 2002. Scorched paper



; XNAU DRAWING, 2007. Scorched paper



XNAU DRAWING, 2007. Scorched paper



XNAU DRAWING, 2002. Scorched paper and correction fluid

It changed me. It shifted my consciousness about myself, my work, my approach to materials. It changed everything! I appreciate this in retrospect because now I have a

wider angle view over time. The fact of working with flame, or fire, influenced my self-reflective side, because at a certain point thereafter I realised there was a pattern to my work and my interests, a subliminal narrative that was insinuating itself.

I realised then, with all the different mediums I was working, and also the music, that these were closely tied to the elements of nature. Over the years I had been working with: sand mixed into my paintings (the earth element), then the music thing took hold in my life especially with the wind instruments (the air element), and then of course the fire drawings came along (the fire element). The water element came later with another new medium I developed in a series called AKWA, but that's another story altogether.

**VG:** Now you must tell that AKWA story, because my curiosity is provoked.

**GE:** The word AKWA is my Africanisation of "aqua". It's the name of a series in which the fundamental element is water. It is a medium of my own invention, and the final element to round off all my work with the elements of nature. It came about by accident through a number of mistakes and was a complete discovery. I won't describe my exact process because I want to protect my intellectual property... hahaha ... but I'll give you an idea how it came about.

The only time I ever had a studio in my life was a brief period of four to five years when I was one of the artists at the inception of Greatmore Studios in 1996-7. I've tried to have a studio at home but that doesn't work, not with a family life. So, in the early 2000s I changed gear and abandoned working on large scale. My art life was taking on a more and more nomadic type of character, as I was traveling more and more. I had to make do with working in makeshift spaces. I wanted to be a mobile intelligent unit. So I got into the habit of working on drawing book sized pages and even smaller.

This one time I was working with ink and cleaning my brushes in a small bath of water. Somehow some pages fell into this bath of ink-stained water and lay there for days in my absence. When I discovered them, the pages had been completely saturated on both sides with this dirty water. Much like the process I described in the fire drawings, the ink stains had spread and made these very interesting and ghostly markings... so interesting that I wanted to emulate them.

So it set me on this trip to "understand" what actually happened and how to "control" what happened. I eventually worked out that the secret was in the saturation process and that different grades of paper had differing saturation tolerances and different characteristics in holding the ink. I developed a method of cutting paper stencils as a figurative element, saturating these with ink and water, and then imprinting these very primitively by hand onto the pages that have themselves been saturated and prepared in these ink and water baths. It is a wet-on-wet process.



AKWA DRAWING, 2015. Ink on paper with collage elements



AKWA DRAWING, 2009. Ink on paper



AKWA DRAWING, 2014. Ink on paper



AKWA DRAWING, 2009. Ink on paper

My role is simply to guide the figurative elements in the watery spread. I enjoy the lack of control and am a spectator as a strange kind of alchemy happens on the page. Like magic.

In general, I enjoy this lack of control and seek this out in the mediums I use. It's easier with music where you can let yourself go, so it was through the music experience that this first happened where you get into a trance-like state. With visual art it's a bit more difficult, but I've been doing this for so long already.

If you have a thorough understanding of your medium, then you will recognise its vulnerabilities.... then it's a matter of strategically allowing the vulnerabilities to occur and enjoying seeing what happens. But it starts with you. It starts with your inner state. When you reach a certain temperature things become malleable.

**VG:** What is the latest artwork you have made? Can you describe it for me? Could you roughly estimate how many works came before it?

**GE:** I am busy with a series of what can be called "sand paintings" with the working title "The Rain's Footprints". It's a series I'm very excited about. Actually, I'm getting back to a medium that I first started working with many years ago and neglected in recent years. But at the 2018 Thupelo workshop at GUS I had a moment of reawakening when I rediscovered it.

Basically, I work with sand, building up layers on a 2-D surface ... the layers are interrupted and played with in all kinds of ways. In the end there's a surface relief that's quite dynamic and this comes alive at night or low-light conditions with its shadow play. This opens up interesting possibilities ... and one I'm inspired to attempt is filming this dance of light or dance of shadow.

I've been working with sand since the late 1990s, but then it was still integrated into other materials and methods. I've only started working it as an exclusive medium since about 2007. The sand medium, i.e. earth, ground, grounded-ness and so on, is the final element in the elements of nature that have been the corner posts of all my work since forever.

All these things coexist equally because there is no separation in the meaning they have in my life and here I'm talking about dwelling on the issues of identity as they apply in post-apartheid South Africa. In my case, it is in living the KhoiSan and First Nation identity-complex and brings sanity to my life. So the meaning of all this is nothing more than art therapy to me ... a way of healing myself as the "I" in society.

The beauty of the elements-of-nature aspect of my work has been that none of these choices of mediums were consciously made ... each came about totally organically, by accident.

There are literally hundreds of compositions, I don't keep count and only the XNAU Drawings are numbered ... and so far in the 230's I think.

**VG:** Can you tell more of that identity complex you referring to? How does it express itself in your everyday life? And how does art heal you in that regard? Is it more

about the process? Do you see people around you with the same complex? Do you see in them other ways of healing?

**GE:** The ANC government has failed us in many ways. Betrayed, is a better word. One of those is to fail to have acknowledged us as a post-traumatic nation that needed spiritual healing. What we needed was a national agenda that looked at the state of mental trauma and psychosis. It is a unique suffering that needed an imaginative response.

We have inherited racism, crime, poverty, and so on ... how can one just carry on? At the time of the TRC was the right time maybe. But first we needed to recognise it and we didn't. This is what money can do, so now we have an added trauma of greed to deal with.

Anyway, as an ordinary person with a family I am left to deal with my healing by myself. This is how I felt. We have been left and abandoned to deal with all the classic consequences of a post-genocide, post-colonial, post-apartheid society by ourselves in our individual corners.

For example, the government's insistence on using racial categories on official documents (for the purposes of affirmative action) is a failure to recognise what sort of trauma this had historically on communities. Still using the word "coloured" as a racial moniker betrays a lack of understanding of deep South African history. So this is where it becomes personal – because I belong in this box. For me it is a willful ignorance with political motives and a means of subjugation. It is nothing more than an apartheid device still applied.

My way of a strategy to personal healing is dealing with these issues as material in my work. I feel healing happens in the doing. The doing is the process of course.

What I'm referring to is the struggle for the rights of indigenous people as it's laid out in the UN charter and to which South Africa is a signatory (after 1994). In our context the indigenous I'm talking about is the KhoiSan. And the KhoiSan is the root culture of what is referred to as "coloured" people.

For many years now I have been on this personal journey of informing myself about this rich history – especially the discovery of historical events and looking at the etymology of certain words, place names. By highlighting these things in my forms of expression – hopefully it touches people in the same way I was touched at the moment of discovering... the moment of illumination is usually a moment of beauty and beauty is an element of art, isn't it?

In my work this finds greatest potency in the music-making or the exploration of sound... in the instruments I design and make and play. These are inspired by and based directly on indigenous knowledge systems. Then there is the performance aspect. Music has to be performed. Therefore, it follows that you have to practice your culture if you have to perform it.

What I see happening around me is a wonderful awakening... more and more I see and hear ordinary people expressing their consciousness about these things... in

simple things like rejecting or questioning the “coloured” tag. That’s all one can ask for...

**VG:** Let’s talk about money! So much to say here, when it comes to the economy of creativity and culture. So far we discussed ideas and politics, now it’s the practicality. I’ll dare to ask bluntly what we often tip toe around: did you find a way to make money from your art? Is there truth to the struggling-artist narrative? Did you personally experience the challenge of “making a living” while focusing on art?

**GE:** Economics. Yes. Haha ... the “struggling-artist” thing ... I think it’s gone to “persecuted-artist” narrative by now. The politics determines the economics. It’s symbiotic. But politically in my opinion we made a big mistake ... we chose to follow a capitalist system of doing things before we really gave it any thought.

I’m not trying to be a political scientist here, what I mean is we had the opportunity to create a system that suited our needs as a traumatised society. Maybe a kind of socialist-capitalism could’ve been a compromise. I don’t know. Instead we have a classic Western-styled capitalist system that is essentially a system of competition, competitiveness and greed. This affects everything, therefore, this is what the art world is all about too. Because it operates in that system it too is shaped by that system.

I didn’t want to be part of it. I couldn’t see myself being owned body and soul by a gallery and then churning out works like a factory production line. So I concentrated on doing what I was always doing – social upliftment stuff – workshops, etc.

I don’t need to be on the cover of Time magazine. I still worked hard at my art but figured I would not pursue galleries.

But having said that, I have to admit that I was very lucky in my life because I had the opportunity to teach and that’s how I survived. For twenty years. But soon after 1994 I chose to give that up and be an artist. It was because of the dawn of the new freedom era. The atmosphere of positivity was amazing to experience. The hope it engendered. I was caught up in all that and took the gamble of trusting the government in the creation of new society in which artists would be considered important based on their crucial contribution in the years of struggle. But this was not to be.

I was still teaching really, because the NGO thing kinda exploded and it was important to be involved with skills development. I was frequently invited by all manner of NGOs to conduct workshops in art, and later, music, for their particular focus groups – from children to adults – as part of the skills development agenda. I quickly grew to love this kind of work. It gave me a feeling of being “useful”.

Anyway, I quickly found out that I couldn’t get galleries interested in my work. To be honest, that wasn’t my focus at all, especially in the beginning ... So I never became an artist that worked within the gallery system. The only times I’ve had work in gallery situations has been invitations for group exhibitions.

There have always been people who have taken an interest in my work. I think this stems possibly from the reputation that I had built up during the struggle years and

also as a result of being included in quite a few publications. So I've been fortunate to sell my work by myself from time to time. This has been my salvation.

The arts are a low priority for the government. I am saddened by the way things have turned out for especially the younger generation of artists now. Nothing has changed significantly all along the food chain ... from the accessibility of art in the education system, at community level, at access to tertiary education level and so on and so on.

Things are bleak. You know this thing about First World and Third World ... well, in our case we pretend to be a First World economy in a Third World setting and now we end up with all the classic problems of both.

Sorry for going off the subject like this, but it all ties in to the arts economy. I'll give you an example ... in Cape Town during the struggle years there was only one community-based arts centre which was CAP (Community Arts Project) and it survived through overseas funding. When 1994 came along you would have thought the new government would have seen this as a model for the future, but CAP eventually closed and to this day there is no community-based arts.

**VG:** How important for you is the dance with the big museums, schools, collectors? Do you feel that part of the art-economy relies on the institutions you are acknowledged by?

**GE:** Yes absolutely. I like your image of the dance. And you can add curators to that list as well. When I was younger the dance started with the art writers, the art critics of newspapers. Nowadays curators have a kind of god-like status. But as I've said before, I never understood how these things work because I was simply never part of the dance. I was a wall flower. I sat out.

Art critics, curators, gallery owners ... in general none of these institutions took to my work. Or maybe I just burnt my bridges. I don't know. No South African museum or galleries or collectors own my work.

Ironically, one major museum does have a big collection of my work and that's the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in USA. This happened around 1995 when one of their curators visited me at home and so I conducted the business by myself. Incidentally, a local curator and writer, Mario Pissarra told me that after doing some research there in Washington he discovered that they had more of my work than any other African artist on the continent.

**VG:** Staying on the question of finances – any advice to the emerging creatives? (myself included).

**GE:** This is difficult because if I use myself as an example. I've survived by being involved in all the peripheral activities like teaching or conducting workshops and reinventing myself along the way with the music. But these activities I find are noble pursuits.

My advice would be that you have to start with a vision of the kind of artist you want to be and follow that with a passion. Dedicate yourself to uplifting society – whatever that might be according to your vision. Be a role model – whatever that might be according to your vision. Be useful.

**VG:** Is improvisation – which we've touched on in previous questions about the process of art-making – a way to go also about "career managing"?

**GE:** Definitely. I believe that. Improvisation is an organic process ... an organic way of doing things. I believe we all already have that capacity instinctively. We all have an instinctive idea of what is "right" or what is "wrong". All our actions, however mundane, are guided by decision-making and we spend our whole life honing this skill and then you find that doors open other doors. And so it goes on and on.

Where a lot of us go wrong is where we've placed restrictions on ourselves by following predetermined paths and also this thing of harsh self-judgement. It follows that this must be true for career management as well.

**VG:** How does your family feel about your artistic path? Was your mother worried that you didn't go for a stable engineering or accounting career? Did you worry when your son took on a career as an artist?

**GE:** Life is difficult as you'd expect. Economically, things are getting worse. I've always had nothing but loving support from my family, but I have to say that I have been most fortunate in my life because nothing would be possible without the support of my wife.

Everyone shares in my journey, even in the wider family circle. Partly it's that romantic aura that surrounds the artist. Sometimes, it's like you're living other people's dreams. I'm lucky also, in the sense that in our community, the artistically gifted person is always treated as something special and with a certain amount of awe. This has applied to me since a very young age, so it was always my destiny, I'd say.

I've never had other expectations placed on me.

My mother was ahead of her time when the world was not yet ready for women artists. She was supremely talented and in the perfect world would have been an artist in her own right. So she bequeathed that to me. My mother died many years ago. There is somehow some kind of preservation in you that goes with the passing of a parent.

She lives with me every day. She is right here with me. I cannot explain. She was my greatest motivator and motivation for all kinds of aspects of my life even certain attitudes I recognize sometimes. She understood the artistic impulse and through her life experience, I'm sure she understood that it shouldn't be suppressed. Same goes for my father.

Naturally, when my son showed the same inclinations of being an artist it was just a matter of imparting mindful guidance that comes from the wisdom acquired over a long long time.

**VG:** If you were to do a retrospective show of your work from the 1980s to now, where would you like it to be? How would you title it?

**GE:** Haha, wicked question! The where – the Tate in London hahaha ... seriously, I can't think of a South African art venue simply because I'm outside of the art establishment so to speak. I assume you are talking of museums and galleries. So nowhere springs to mind, locally.

As for a title, now that's nicer to contemplate ... **GARTH ERASMUS: THE KNOTS OF TIME AND PLACE (1980 to the present)** ... hahaha

Let me tell you where I got it... it comes from the title of an old instrumental jazz song by Jan Garbarek I liked from way back... but I had remembered the words wrong... its title is "Knot of Place and Time"... I like my version better, with the plural knots instead of a knot.

*Valeria Geselev is a curator, writer and educator with passion for socially engaged art. Daughter of two Soviet engineers, she is a migrant, currently based in Haifa.*

## Notes

[1] This interview was conducted over four months (April-August 2019) through an exchange of 18 emails, 84 whatsapps and 34 Instagram messages across 10,000 km between Haifa and Cape Town.

[2] The building that serves today as Iziko South African Museum, not to be confused with The Iziko Social History Centre on Church Square.