

“It’s personal”: the origins and aspirations of 1004

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Home-based art practices are of an equally intimate and public nature. Often functioning as project spaces, apartment galleries emerge through the support of close-knit communities and a desire to contribute to an artistic community outside of institutional structures. The apartment/house gallery/project space could be described as a loose model primed for adaptation. As a result, such spaces materialise in numerous configurations in art communities throughout the world in cities such as Glasgow, Milan, Berlin, Mexico City, Los Angeles and Chicago (and surely countless other places unknown to me). Emboldened by the possibility of the model, my husband Daniel Gray and I started 1004, an ad-hoc project space in our tenth floor apartment in Parktown, Johannesburg.

For our first public showing, we hosted a solo exhibition by Kaelo Molefe in October 2021, titled “In The Midst of Other Objects /// Schematics for the (Re)Construction of the Complete Gentleman in the Marketplace.” Almost a year in the making, Daniel, Kaelo and I worked on the exhibition in our spare time, strategising and pouring over details. We conceptualised the curation and hung the show together, and over four weekends Daniel and I welcomed some 200 guests into our home. The exhibition comprised a series of large-scale collage works on paper exploring the “fraught history of black urbanity” and the advent of mineral extraction in Johannesburg through archival excavation.¹

1004’s location at the juncture of Parktown, Hillbrow and Braamfontein allowed for a direct conceptual interplay with the research and recurring visual motifs of Kaelo’s work, further amplified by the views of the apartment which look on to Parktown’s hospital district and the beginning of Hillbrow’s skyline. Dense in archival imagery, the collages benefited from close readings by viewers – which were greatly enabled by Kaelo, who regularly spoke with visitors and gave walk-about – and the intimacy created by the contained space of the apartment.

The preparations for Kaelo’s exhibition led Daniel and I to think carefully about the practice of hosting and the responsibility of having guests visit our otherwise private space. When we moved into the apartment in 2019 we knew that the space would be ideal for hosting projects for a wider public. Before the pandemic, we often welcomed family, friends, colleagues and strangers into our home. In those long periods of isolation during the hard lockdowns, we sorely missed hosting. For us, resonant creative home-based practices are not limited to art events or even salons, but include dinners, house parties, concerts, vinyl listening sessions, meetings and reading groups – the events that marked the character of our social and professional lives. In figuring out how to realise the apartment as a project space, we were excited about the untapped flexibility of the domestic space that is, for those hours, transformed by the people inhabiting it.

We wanted to create an approximate feeling of familiarity and warmth with 1004, particularly in an art world that rarely feels hospitable. We hoped to create something that reflected our own sensibilities; to create a space that demonstrated our belief that art making is sustained by ongoing collaboration, conversation and experimentation. It was important to draw from our collective experiences working in a variety of professional and curatorial spaces and to share these resources with others. It also felt necessary that guests should register that 1004 was not simply a gallery that happened to exist in someone’s flat, but rather, a

¹ Molefe, K. (2021) ‘In The Midst of Other Objects /// Schematics for the (Re)Construction of the Complete Gentleman in the Marketplace’, 1004. Available at: <https://www.1004.co.za/kaelo-molefe> (Accessed: 4 February 2022).

home that could accommodate art and its viewers. Working closely with Kaelo, we decided to retain the position of the dining room table and we rearranged the house plants to become part of the curation of the exhibition. We realised that 1004 was an opportunity entirely in our hands, made doable by the scale of the operation – that is, the living room.

Serendipitously, in the years before we got together, both Daniel and I had a number of experiences that led us to the creation of 1004. For Daniel, the years 2012-2017 encompassed a generative and experimental community-driven period of creative production in and around Observatory, Cape Town. These experiences ranged from playing bass in the Obs House Band – a shapeshifting improvised musical outfit who met every Sunday in a living room for jam sessions – whose gigging was limited strictly to house parties, to the near-24-hour vinyl listening sessions hosted in friends' homes. He held DJ residencies at Tagore's and Café Ganesh, neighbouring establishments converted from residential homes to a music venue and restaurant respectively. A certain type of drive was evident: an organised, punk-DIY attitude that was essential to creating the types of spaces and gatherings that the small artist community wanted to see in the world.

For me, the years 2014-2016 were deeply influential. During this time I lived in Chicago where I was a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Chicago is infamous for its frigid winters and more fondly known for its irrepressible cultural life, even in sub-zero conditions. I went to exhibitions in unlikely locations: students' apartments, a repurposed garage and once, in a hotel room. Apartment galleries and project spaces have long been a pivotal aspect of the city's art constellation. Publisher and curator Caroline Picard reflected on apartment gallery practices in 2008:

“There is a long-standing tradition of peculiar art spaces in Chicago. These spaces are difficult to categorize, idiosyncratic and fleeting. Yet they are one of the primary exhibition opportunities for young emerging artists, or for experimental projects commercial art venues have difficulty marketing.

... [E]ach member of the audience is not simply a member of the public, but a guest. The existence of such a subtle dynamic enforces a peculiar experience with the art on display, in as much as the intuitive experience of an apartment impacts the experience of art. In other words, the home, the exhibition and the people interacting create a single impression that is often difficult to parse. Above all else, it is personal.”²

² Picard, C. (2008) 'Apartment Galleries in Chicago: At the Intersection of Art and Domestic Habitat', The Green Lantern Press. Available at: <https://greenlanternpress.wordpress.com/2008/09/10/apartment-galleries-in-chicago-at-the-intersection-of-art-and-domestic-habitat/> (Accessed: 4 February 2022).

The sprawling network of independent spaces active in the city have, over the years, been supported by public programming such as the Chicago Home Theatre Festival and Second Floor Rear. It's a city home to many independent ventures: there exists a kind of fearlessness to make things, to will ideas – both modest and ambitious – into being. As Picard has noted, this occurs perhaps in part brought about by a high concentration of artistic people and a more affordable standard of living in comparison to other major American cities.

American poet Sam Wein recounted to me about a multi-disciplinary event they took part in at an apartment in Chicago. In each room different artists exhibited work or realised performances. Sam read from their chapbook *Fruit Mansion* (2017) atop a bed surrounded by fresh fruits, occasionally biting into them. Although I was not there myself, this enchanting image remains etched in my mind. The parameters of the domestic space – or inconveniences, depending on perspective – make for compelling constraints that can become memorable and thematically appropriate idiosyncrasies. Why not turn a bedroom into a performance venue? Who said the dining room table wasn't fit for art?

Closer to home, in Cape Town, artists and curators we knew had already established home-based curatorial models and were critically engaging with these ideas in exciting and innovative ways. *Breaking Bread*, run by Unati Silinga, Ziphosenkosi Dayile and Thobile Ndenze, is described as a "space for contemplation, research and review" operating from a house in Rugby. In an interview with Lerato Lodi in *Something We Africans Got*, the curators shared *Breaking Bread's* focus: "Breaking Bread is a space that engages in experiments in food, sound, visual and performance art. Through these experiments we aim to address and engage with discussions around culture and knowledge [...]"³ As part of Cape Town Art Week 2019, Daniel was invited to perform in *Breaking Bread's* "Dub Tactics" three-day programme, with Black Mona Lisa, also known as Bonolo Kavula, and BŪJIN, also known as Dani Kyengo O'Neill. Already living in Johannesburg at the time, Daniel packed his sound sculpture in a small suitcase to take on the plane. This compact, deconstructed artwork expanded into a large-scale installation bolted into the courtyard of the house, upon which he then performed and later, invited audience members to participate.

These types of symbiotic artistic-research collaborations remain compelling to us in the great potential they can offer, whilst placing great value in creating welcoming, generous environments. When Daniel and I began floating the idea of starting a project space in our home in early 2020, we were met with both enthusiasm and bemusement. While Johannesburg has a history of artist-run projects in repurposed spaces,

³ Lodi, L. (2021) 'Food, sound, and art as a technique of bringing people together in a post-1994 South African landscape: *Breaking Bread*', *Something We Africans Got*, pp. 30–34.

exhibitions in domestic settings are hard to pin down or even describe. We recognised this quickly and found ways to succinctly encapsulate the “project space in a tenth floor Johannesburg apartment”. The strength of Kaelo’s work communicated quickly, manifesting in feet through the front door.

Guests, many degrees of separation from either us or Kaelo, found their way to 1004 through social media and word-of-mouth. We made sure when possible, as the hosts of the space, to greet each guest personally. As a result, Daniel and I met more new people in a few short weeks than in the last two years. To our pleasant surprise, people often stayed longer than expected, choosing to hang out in the space and socialise with us and other guests. Through these interactions, we found ourselves in conversation about their experiences viewing art, curatorial practice and welcoming (and unwelcoming) exhibition spaces. These conversations felt vital in dialogue with our own re-evaluations around staging exhibitions and we hope such discussion will continue as 1004 develops.