



Episode 1: Plans For The Future with Dr. Njoki Ngumi

Kris Nelson: [00:00:00] In 2020, the future was so bright. It was the decade we had all dreamed of. Then, the unthinkable happened. A pandemic that turned culture and society upside down. Now, a year and a half later, what do five leading artists and cultural producers have to say about their plans for the future? I'm Kris Nelson, artistic director and CEO of LIFT, London's biennial festival of international theater, and this is Plans For The Future.

Joining me today from Nairobi is artist, writer, and feminist thinker, Dr. Njoki Ngumi.

Hey, there you are!

Njoki Ngumi: Hi!

Kris Nelson: Great to see you.

Njoki Ngumi: [00:01:00] It's wonderful to see you too.

Kris Nelson: We've known each other since 2019, but in that first meeting, it felt like we got caught up on all the years we've missed.

Saying I admire you as an artist, producer, political activist is an understatement, for sure.

I said this last time, but I'm gonna say it again. When I think about you, I only want to gush! Because, genuinely Njoki, as a collaborator and core member of [The Nest](#), as an event planner, a filmmaker, a producer, a maker/happener, a lecturer, an academic, a museum exhibition designer, the list goes on and on and on...



We were very lucky to recently collaborate together with The Nest, this Nairobi based multidisciplinary arts collective, of which Njoki is a founding member. She is the co-writer, screenwriter, script supervisor for several of their film works, currently co-directing *The Feminine and the Foreign*, this film project we've been working on together, which would have been part of LIFT 2020, and will premier – the world premier [00:02:00] in 2022, uh, which we were meant to do in 2020. Instead, we found all kinds of innovative ways to produce films across international borders, without travel. And we'll be talking a bit about that today.

So, how are you, what's going on in Nairobi at the moment?

Njoki Ngumi: Um, we were just talking about how, as the people of the equator, we have land under the sun and we hear that it's being a little bit moody.

I mean, minus obviously the problematic stuff - heatwaves especially, children and older people - um, you know, we're a little bit cranky because, uh, it's been quite chilly and I guess that, because of the vagaries of climate change, the seasons aren't doing what they should be doing. It's taken a while for the cold season to set in and because we're an agriculture-based economy, we need that cold period at a certain time, and then we need the sun to come out at a certain time, so that then we harvest in the way that we're used [00:03:00] to, and that's all changing.

So, when you hear people from my part of the world, being iffy about the weather, um, minus the issues of living in an urban setting where traffic becomes crazy the minute anybody sees a drop of rain, like we all go crazy. But minus all of that, I mean, the wider concerns obviously are with regard to food supplies, and harvests, and incomes, because so many people earn money from especially subsistence, smaller scale farming.

Apart from that, if there's anything that I've learned over the last couple of years, it's take things by the day. Just take it by the day, take things by the day.

Learning to ask for help, which you would think being a member of a collective would kind of be a lesson in that as it is! But then, [00:04:00] you do get



concerned about everybody else because also, you know their work modes, and you know all of the things that they're going through, so you don't want to just pile more things on somebody else's plate when you know already their plate is full. So it's just, kind of having to learn, for me personally, how to be honest with myself about, um, what my limits and my capabilities are, and accepting that those are shifting a lot more than they used to, you know?

I think maybe I should say, and not necessarily to change the energy of this call, which is already amazing, because you're amazing Kris, if people don't tell you, they should tell you more!

Kris Nelson: Ha, thank you!

Njoki Ngumi: They should, and you should walk around asking them to tell you, you know.

Kris Nelson: Ha, I am going to get a t-shirt, thank you!

Njoki Ngumi: Yeah, I've had a couple of very, very good friends of mine have covid recently and it's been, it's been a little bit scary because of this variant, you know, [00:05:00] and earlier in the year I lost two friends, which was, uh, it was a very, it was a very difficult time for me.

Kris Nelson: I'm very sorry to hear that.

Njoki Ngumi: Thank you. Um, also fuck covid, you know, With hope that, um, maybe the swear word can be edited out. Um, but yeah, also fuck covid.

Um, I think that contributes a lot to what is inspiring me now, and I guess we will talk about that later, um, but yeah, I think being more present to the realities of grief, the realities of death and permanent departure, um, is really a thing I've been sitting with over the past couple of weeks and months.



Kris Nelson: I could see, yeah. Well, I'm sorry to hear about your friends and your loss and everything happening there. I mean, it's echoed by many people, by everyone around the world.

And you talked about making [00:06:00] space for grief and a space for reflection in your work. And from what I know of you, you've also been going nonstop in this pandemic. You've made the film with us. You've launched a museum project, which, folks you absolutely have to check out, which is the [Invisible Inventories Project](#). It's a project that looks at Kenyan objects held in museums around the world and creating an inventory of everything, of all these cultural artifacts and objects or things that are considered an artifact, I guess, placed around the world and essentially stolen from the people of Kenya. Um, but you've also had other things going on.

So, what have you been doing as an artist? How has your practice been changing and how have you been measuring that space and the amount of work that you're doing? How have you been doing that?

Njoki Ngumi: I mean, first of all, [00:07:00] whenever it's listed what The Nest has been up to, even when I'm listening to it I'm like, 'how on earth did we do all those things?' And I guess maybe the really important thing to say is that we only manage because there's several of us; there's literally several us. We're currently twelve, you know, and twelve people can get a whole mess of work done in different ways, passing on different parts of tasks to each other, asking for help on different things. These days, for instance, we really try to write reports together and things like that. We write proposals together....So things, things are not as weighty on the individuals as they could have been, you know. So that's definitely the biggest contributor to being able to get so much stuff done.

When I think about, as an [00:08:00] artist where, as an individual artist and as, of course a constituent member of The Nest, where my work is going, I feel like my work always explores and has always been interested in, in one way shape or form, the ways in which communities form, and the things that make communities fragile. Right? And the ways in which people within communities experience care, and at the same time can experience betrayal and have



belonging threatened. So, I'm always kind of exploring that, in one way, shape or form, from different points of view, and thinking about that differently.

I feel like the only solution for where the world is now is going to have to [00:09:00] be throwing away what I consider to be false communities. I don't think, for instance, that the nation state is a real community. The nation state is a convenient proximity, right? That has an imaginary line drawn around it, and that imaginary line came by way of violence, so of course even maintaining it is an act of violence in many ways.

But then, people have formed communities in many different ways, I guess because of the rise of identity as a way of community building and community forming. And it's not even a recent rise, it's just a thing that's always been. It's just been politicised differently recently. I think there's definitely communities formed around gender identity, there's definitely communities formed around sexual orientation, there's definitely communities formed around ethnic belonging. There are places that those communities overlap, [00:10:00] and intersect. And then there's the places where sometimes those communities are at odds and at conflict.

And so for me, in my work, all of those things: why people identify the way they do; what are the identities they choose; what are the identities they're throwing away; and the many different, meandering and difficult paths to belonging, I feel like those consistently will always be things that are interesting for me.

Kris Nelson: And have been brought into sharp relief by the last two years?

Njoki Ngumi: Absolutely. Absolutely. I feel like, you know, there's many thoughts I've heard from different people and that I've had on my own about Covid. There's ways in which I think the global experience of Covid has given us a common trauma in many ways.

Kris Nelson: Absolutely.



Njoki Ngumi: And because [00:11:00] again, the frame for dealing with this is nation state defined - the nation state is an oddly masculine frame - so now, when you see people counting statistics, it's very much: how many people are in hospital? How many people died? You know, and there's so much other stuff happening under there.

Like, there's somebody in hospital, their family can't visit them. There's people in hospital who nobody even knows are gone, because they didn't have anybody before they went into hospital. And the reasons that they didn't have anybody are many, and complex, and layered. Right?

I feel like the ways in which the ways in which children are being socialized now, especially if you're under five and now your entire world is people wearing masks, do you understand how faces work and what faces are supposed to do?

I think the kerfuffle around the vaccine alone has really shown [00:12:00] us the reality of how the people of the world rank, and which lives you consider more valuable than others. And there's so much to say about that. So ,we'll all come together and like have this, this co-vax hallelujah kumbaya, but then everybody goes home and some countries have stores packed to the brim with vaccines they will never use. And then there's countries like mine where truly, maybe it's less than 1% of the population that have had two boosters of the vaccine and even the reasons behind that are their own disfunction.

So, the only way we're going to be able to get through this, obviously is not individually based. Even it's not necessarily small community based, but we have to start with small communities because from small communities we learn how to form larger communities, and then larger communities are louder, they're more forceful, there's things that they're able to get done, right? So, that's why, [00:13:00] consistently, community is a running curiosity, a running theme, a running frustration, a running hope, for me.

Kris Nelson: Yeah. Is that where you've been drawing your inspiration from? Are there any specific communities that you've been moved by, or that have kind of re-stoked your fire or re-lit your lights?



Njoki Ngumi: That's a really interesting question. I think there's no one specific community, but there's different communities of people. Anybody who's exploring mutual aid right now is super inspiring. Because of course the aid that people are able to give each other, in personal life, has massive limits, and the reasons for those limits are many and problematic.

But people who are figuring out: how do you get [00:14:00] to know your neighbours? Because there's a way in which in the world we live in today we're really proud of not knowing who lives next door. Right? And there's many reasons for that. There's many, many reasons for that. All of which are valid, but then...

If you know the people who live next to you, you know that two floors up, there's this lady, she's 65. She has a son, her son visits her probably once every couple of weeks. Maybe the weather is a little bit tricky and I've noticed that when she's coming down the stairs, she walks a little bit slowly. So, how do I check on her in a way that's not necessarily intrusive? So, I don't go up to her door, but maybe I can bump into her one day and then I just say, "Hey, are you okay?" You know?

All the way through to people that know the number of people in their neighborhood who don't have food that day and figure out what giving them food looks like.

All the way through to all of these kids on Twitter and on TikTok who [00:15:00] get into groups of five, of seven, of 10 or 12, and then have a fund merry go round to fund each other's therapy sessions.

All the way through to people who will say, just honesty about the fact that we're in need and we've been so failed on so many levels, and then to see how the body of human beings will come through for you, you know. We're a fraught race and we have many - the human race that is, and there's many problems – but sometimes it's really beautiful the ways in which we're able to come through for one another.



So, whether it's in the short-term or thinking wider and longer about much more political ways of forming community - the ways in which digital communities and physical ones intersect, the [00:16:00] pros and cons and limits of each and of their intersections - all of those things are profoundly, profoundly inspiring for me.

Kris Nelson: Wonderful. Thank you.

I want to pick up with you Njoki that idea of communities and virtual communities, because our project together has been about connecting you and the artistic community you're a part of in Nairobi - this artistic activist community in Nairobi - with its parallels in London and also in Cape Town.

And when we met, you know, we were meant to host you, squire you around town, introduce you to everybody in London, and that was going to happen in March 2020.

So, what we devised was this way of remote filmmaking. How did you find that process, vis-a-vis community, and then did it reveal anything to you about the future of artistic collaborations across borders, particularly around travel and climates? Sorry, that's two in one, [00:17:00] but how did you find it? What was it like for you to be directing from your studio with Mars via Zoom, while we were in a studio in Peckham?

Njoki Ngumi: So, I think first of all it was really interesting for Mars and I to work that closely together for that extended period of time. We've collaborated on general Nest work before, but I don't think we've ever quite worked that closely together. We're both Aquariuses, which is, which can be both a good thing and a challenging thing! But Mars, as a human being, is immeasurably gracious, and he's one of the most gentle souls I know. So, for me it was a very insightful and illuminating experience, and just a joy to be able to work with him, in that way in both the [00:18:00] pre-production and the production of the film.

I think maybe I should start with the pre-production part, which we were always going to do remotely, and that was meeting the activists.



I think there's a difference between meeting the activists, when you know you are going to meet them physically, versus when you're going to meet again on another Zoom call in this kind of shifting, chaotic miasma of an earth country.

We were all just kind of trying to be very deeply honest about the joy of connecting in the moment, and also the uncertainty of whether we were going to meet up again or not, right, because we can say everything we want about like, yeah, let's talk again in two weeks, but like we've seen the ways in which life itself can tell you very different things about what [00:19:00] your circumstances are in the next two weeks. We can say “see you” today, then you go and three days from now you're running a fever and coughing, or three days from now there is a situation with your parents, or with a relative, or with a friend, that you need to go and address.

And of course, with the people that we were talking to, who are activists in minoritized and oppressed communities, that was already going to be a problem in the context in which they were working, because they might be called away on any random thing, right? So we were deeply honoured that they would find time to speak with us before so that we could map out what we could speak about, hear from them about their lives, and then consider whether moving into the production period would work.

I feel it's really, really important to say what an immense help [00:20:00] LIFT were for us, during the production period and especially, especially Camila, um, because she was the one who was keeping multiple calendars, multiple people running at the same time.

It's not work I envy at all. When we're doing work on this side, I think my production stuff is much more conceptual, but then when production comes down to the logistics, the nitty gritty, the people who do that on our team are exactly like Camila. They're quick to the goal, they know exactly what needs to be done, they have this intense list of everything and they know exactly how it's going to get done. They come back to you and they tell you, “listen, this is what we have to do,. If you have an issue with it, this is the time to speak”, you know? And so Mars and I were really grateful for Camila. We did have back and forths



that were eventually very illuminating for all of us, learning how to work better together. That was really wonderful. [00:21:00]

I think that the thing that we learned the most, Mars and I, was the ability to let go. As The Nest, we're used to having very tight control over all of the production work that we do, especially when it comes to film. And that's why we were really excited about the possibility of being able to come to London. And so, our team in London was going to be our camera, our sound, the directors Mars and I, and then definitely somebody from production, in one way, shape or form, whether they were doing it remotely, or whether they were going to be there physically.

Because we like to like do everything ourselves, we like to do the reccons ourselves, you know? And then Covid, right? And now we have to work with, you know, someone else is going to hold your camera. So we had panic sessions about that. [00:22:00] I mean, you know and Timi is amazing. It was so amazing that he turned out so amazing! But the whole thing around, we've seen work that somebody has done - that doesn't necessarily mean that the one thing they're going to do for you is going to be what you think it's going to be. So just constant palpitations, like how do other people store their footage? How do other people do their setups? How much interruption would we be able to do when we are this far away? And we are very aware that there are definitely many limits as regards to what you can do. We were so grateful that we're able to trust LIFT to be wonderful and kind with the activists, and always, whether it was was accommodating them fully as regards their preferences for being transported to the set and back, while being paranoid that somebody would come to our set and catch Covid. And because we were also in production at home for something that was similar, that was definitely a thing. We were [00:23:00] just breathing, doing, breathing exercises all the way through. So we're really, really grateful that the on-set experience for them in London was amazing. Everybody was working hard to make sure they at least had good internet.

We were doing the interviews and it was really great that we'd spoken to the activists beforehand so, when we were meeting them again on set, we knew what direction to take, the questions were making references to things that they had already said and they were already familiar with. Again, one of the things



that we like to say about hosting guests, especially when want to talk to them about their lives, is that it is our job to make them look good. So, we're not inviting them to ask them sidestepping questions that are supposed to unearth scandal or uncertainty. We were just like, no. Your work is already amazing, you are already amazing, the places that you're coming from are really amazing.

And [00:24:00] so we were really, really grateful that so many moving parts, because those are like many moving parts, came together to make that remote shoot work.

You know, when Mars and I sit down and think about that time, it was hectic, you know, and all we had to do was rock up to a place to be together and put on our Zoom. So we cannot imagine what it was like for people from the London side or even from the Cape Town side, because we were also shooting in the same way there. We can't imagine what that must have been like, and we're so grateful that things worked in the ways that they did.

Kris Nelson: Oh, wonderful. Thank you. And I know the LIFT team will be super excited to hear. Folks, Njoki was named checking Camila Gutiérrez Aguilera, who was our assistant producer on the project and project manager for the shoot, and Timi Akindele-Ajani, who's a local Londoner, a cinematographer, and [00:25:00] he and his team were in responsible for delivering Mars and Njoki's vision as directors from afar. And I think one of the things it taught us was about this process of getting in sync with you, being able to deliver your vision and all the things, the nuance of communication back and forth.

And it's inspired us because we've now launched a commissioning program called Concept Touring, which is all about artists developing international projects with little to no travel. So we're seeding more projects like this, we've been working with 15 artists over the summer/spring, I mean, different seasons for different time zones, because they were all from different time zones, but it was really fantastic and a great group of makers.

Has this - our process of remote filmmaking - given you [00:26:00] a different sense about how you might collaborate on international works in the future with The Nest?



Njoki Ngumi: I mean, definitely, definitely. There's things that we are easier about not knowing immediately, right, there's things that we don't need a thousand percent certainty on. And I feel like maybe the version of The Nest that we were before the pandemic was a lot more tangibly and physically detail-oriented in that way.

I feel like maybe the people that we have since become are a lot easier, and a little bit more flexible, and a little bit more willing to have faith and go with the flow. The other thing that I think our process taught us was just to be okay with the fact that you can't be sure. Because I remember at the very beginning of [00:27:00] March, when we were seeing all of the things starting to happen - and for us, we needed to have a certain decision about whether we will get to travel or not - and when we were running our scenarios, we were like, we can foresee this ending with our borders being closed and being stuck in London. And while the LIFT team are amazing, if we're all locked down everywhere, including hotels, it can possibly get very messy. And so for us, we made the decision to stay home.

Kris Nelson: I remember it very, very clearly, and I cite it a lot because at the time Kenya was Covid free and you said we can't risk coming to London and bringing Covid back. You've told us your government - again talking about the nation state - your government is being kind of cowboy, as I would say, about it.

Njoki Ngumi: They really were, they really were.

Kris Nelson: Saying, you know, "it'll work itself out". And you saying, "No, [00:28:00] we can't come. We can't risk the people around us and we can't risk the travel." Adding to the fact that our first conversation was about the Invisible Inventories project, and we had a long conversation about the - and it's buried within the project The Feminine and the Foreign - the violence placed on Black bodies when they try to pass a border. What happens to you as a Kenyan trying to get into London.

Njoki Ngumi: Especially a global north border.



Kris Nelson: Yes, exactly. And all the things around trying to get a visa to come to the UK, and those were part of our conversation. We knew where each other stood there.

But when you said that, it was our wake up call for the LIFT team, because it was right before things changed here. It was like three days before. But at the moment, there was still hope in this country that it would blow over by May 2020, or whatever.

There was still some sort of whiff of that, which [00:29:00] now when you think about it is absolutely bonkers or just wrong, but you know, hope is a beautiful thing. But when you said that it was, it was a real call.

Njoki Ngumi: Mm. I remember we told you and obviously we were joking, but we told you that we know that London characters were formed in many ways by the things that London as a city has been through. Right? And this thing where, because this makes no sense to me when I hear about it now, as a point in history. But then... a bell rings, people are like, “oh, there's going to be bombs”, and then you just, quiet in an orderly fashion, walk into a shelter and then you wait for bombs to drop and they drop, and then another bell rings and then everybody moves out.

I'm like, I don't understand how that works. But then I'm like, there's the Londoners that brought you guys up, [00:30:00] and the English people that brought you guys up understand that as a way of living. And so you hear a thing, like you know there's a pandemic, you're like... We've seen bad times. You know. It'll come and go. And now for us, we were thinking about it from multiple dimensions, but then the most important was how as Black African citizens, are we going to negotiate with the nonsense rules of security at a boarder, and how militarized it gets already on Black people.

And now, when you add a global pandemic and stuff, there's no way you we were ready for that. And we were already wary of stuff like that, and we've experienced multiple, you know, shenanigans, even in the time before Covid. So for us, we were like, we don't want to be the spoil sports here, [00:31:00] but if anything, let's call this the wait and see process and understand that for us, the



waiting and the seeing is going to take a little bit longer. Right? And I think one thing we were willing to negotiate together, both us and the LIFT team, was the possibility that it was possible that multiple things could change, in March, April, May... Because anything is possible. Somebody could have landed a cure, it was possible. Maybe the thing would have seen itself out, you know? Because other things have, you know, and so we had to have these meetings where we had to continue holding space for the possibility of something that we had not yet seen.

And so, if you come into this meeting and that thing is not here yet, we say “ok fine, let's do another three weeks.” Maybe something would have [00:32:00] shifted by then. And so some things would shift, others would not. And I think maybe it was like being in a relationship where nothing is changing, so you just meet and hold hands. So, I think maybe the thing that I'm really grateful for was that you guys are, really lovely people whose hands we could hold, you know, and just kind of sit through that weird uncertain moment.

You know that moment in - and I hate quoting that movie but that scene is etched into my head - you know that scene in Fight Club where these two people are holding hands and the word is on fire, outside the skyscraper window? That's kind of what it felt like for me.

Kris Nelson: Yeah. Yeah. Us too. I mean, and me too. And I think for the rest of us. I mean, [00:33:00] you spoke earlier about holding space for grief, and I think there's also so much we've all had to do as practitioners about holding space for ambiguity and, you know, staying in that present moment.

And now I want to switch into the future Njoki. What are you imagining? What are you seeing? What's your hopeful vision or what's your vision at all, minus hope, for what arts and culture could look like, in Nairobi, in Kenya or around the world? Sorry, it's a bit of a conversational whiplash, but see how you do!

Njoki Ngumi: Okay. Let's see. I think I have missed the experience of watching live performance, [00:34:00] I've missed the energy transfers of that. And that would be live performance like theater, like theatrical performances, but also music, also DJ performances, that sort of general theme where we are gathered



around something beautiful. And then we just kind of vibe. I miss that. I miss that a lot.

I think there is room, because we're going to be this weird place where not everybody's vaccinated, especially for countries like mine, because not only do we have poor vaccine access, at some point we are going to have to think about vaccinating children because children now are becoming carriers, they're becoming infected with Covid. And so the vaccine people are going to have to figure something out. And the vast majority of the population in Kenya is children. I think the average age in Kenya is 19 and there's a [00:35:00] chunk of people aged between zero and 14. So that's going to be a problem for a while, right. Even as we are trying figure out how to get everybody above the age of 56 and everybody between the ages of 18 and 56 vaccinated. So that's the political promise. I want to call it a political promise because that's what it is. I won't call it a government plan, because those two things have different weights.

So that's the hope and we cannot imagine these kind of vibey performances without a sizable audience. Right? And, we have to think about sizable audiences from a place of reality now. So I do feel, and I do hope that maybe more frequent and intimate performances, with of course the kind of care on the side of [00:36:00] caring for the artists, and the production considerations, and the money considerations, of course for the performing artists and the people who are making the performances possible, I really hope that that those - for people in smaller groups, so whether it's a little estate, you know, or people who can get to a community hall and then you limit the number of people that are going, you can have registrations... it can be a little bit more, you know, thought through on the side of who gets in and how many, but that you can have audiences come in smaller numbers.

We can then figure out ways for audiences to be a little bit more involved. For us, it's always been a Nest thing that audiences are involved in a conversation. Not just people who can just come and do what a fashion designer we know has called "clap, shout and goggle."

Right. It's just like, "Wow that was nice", and especially nice is such a poisonous [00:37:00] word, it doesn't really communicate anything. And then you say, "oh,



that was nice”, and then you go home and sleep. And meanwhile, the artist has kind of left their soul, I don't know, on the floor of wherever they were. Right? So, definitely I think, I'm really hoping that smaller performances, and taking those a little bit more seriously, instead of focusing on mass, that kind of capitalist focus on mass for me has always been a little bit iffy, but I feel like smaller performances are going to be a huge thing.

I do feel that, and this is part of my community exploration, that we're living through a massive decentralization of so many things, and that's also where I think the kind of dissatisfaction with nation state has entered into the zeitgeist. So I feel like also we're going to live through, and I cannot wait for this moment, a decentralization of organized [00:38:00] religion.

We were entering into that space now, and that's going to be really important, especially for women, for queer folk, for gender diverse folk, for Black people and people of color. It's really going to be a moment, I feel. And I feel like art is really starting to head into the place where it wants to centralize the explanations of spirit, so I feel like more people are curious about that. People are more curious about how cults form. People are more curious about the different ways in which people practice different spiritual arts, whether it be ancestral veneration and worship, whether it be witchcraft, whether it be consulting mediums and beyond entertainment value, reality show mediumship. How are those things able to [00:39:00] enter into the lives of people? How are people who have had faith in organized religion reframing that faith to reflect to them as individuals better? What conversations are people having with what they call deities, and with what they call the divine, and with what they call providence?

So I feel like art is starting to ask those questions in some very interesting and beautiful and distressing, necessarily distressing, ways. Because that decentralization is coming, I feel it very strongly. I feel the kind of questions that humanity have been asking and the kind of ways in which the nation state has been pressurized, again, by the work of activists, by the work of minoritized people, by the works of oppressed people, to create space by force for them. The next frontier is a spiritual one.



So I feel like that's where art is heading, because art always gets to places [00:40:00] first. And I feel like, and maybe the last thing that I'll say with regard to what I feel is coming, is that the division of arenas of practice into sectors, was very much into sectors or specialization – so you go and you're an artist, you go and you're a doctor, you go and you're an environmentalist – all of those things are very artificial, I think, and are very much rooted in the necessity of assuring incomes within industrialized ways of doing things. And so, I feel like people going back to having multidisciplinary practices is very much just an organic thing, and is a way of finding balance because, this kind of frame from before was not natural at all.

And so I feel [00:41:00] like in very many ways, and one of my colleagues at The Nest says this, that the arts are going to be called upon to enter into spaces that they've not really been invited to. And we're going to see it even in places that are not necessarily kumbaya and harmonious. So, I feel like getting people to understand, for instance, the cost of climate change, and doing that through and with artistic practitioners, is a very different thing than doing that from a corporate advertising perspective alone. For instance, I think doing health seeking and health conversations from a point of view that's artistic, is a thing that's going to be called upon more. I do think that, of course the arts are going to be called upon to kind of entrench the idea of the nation state, to call for [00:42:00] a re-centralization of things that have been decentralized for public good, to make armies sexy again, as they have, and as we've seen in, you know, in many Hollywood films, all of those things, we're going to start seeing that a lot more when people realize exactly how powerful the arts have and can be.

It's it's been very convenient to sweep artists to aside and say, well, you know, they're just artists doing arty stuff. But then art is going to become necessarily and important for passing all of these social messages that people have thought was just activist stuff, but now is daily life stuff. So we're going to see that a bit more, for both for good and for less than good.

Kris Nelson: Thank you for that forecast. Everything from a surge in our investigation into the spiritual, a blurring of boundaries [00:43:00], an instrumentalization of art for the military to preserve the nation state, I mean, there's a lot in store for us.



Uh, folks you've been listening to plans for the future with myself and Njoki Ngumi.

Is there anything Njoki that you've seen, particularly in Nairobi or in Kenya, among artists and among the cultural sector, that you think the rest of the world needs to know about?

Njoki Ngumi: I mean, I think the one thing, it's not a thing per se, it's a person. If you're not following Elsa Majimbo, follow her now. Elsa Majimbo is a comedic personality and performer who has just gone straight to many people's hearts with her deep and radical honesty, which is also very beautifully and simply [00:44:00] done, about the fact that life is going nowhere, you know, this is all a crock of bullshit that we're living in. And she does it with such grace and with such ease and beauty. And it's hilarious. Elsa is the future. Elsa started out as a comedic practitioner and is now doing an immense amount of work in fashion, and that goes straight to the heart of the stuff that I was saying before. This thing where you're a comedian, you stay a comedian. Even as an artist, you walk into the thing as a visual artist you have to stay a visual artist, and you have to get deep at being a visual artist. I think all of that is nonsense. And so Elsa for me, really depicts also the possibilities that are inherent within the digital space. Because Elsa is [00:45:00] doing all of these videos, you know, for Kenya, but she's truly loved across the globe. And I feel like that that is a truly beautiful thing.

Elsa it's incredible. She's incredible. Yeah. So if you're not following Elsa, follow Elsa, She's truly on the cusp of whatever is coming next, even when it doesn't necessarily have a form it's not limited. It's not. So truly, I completely expect to wake up to news that Elsa is starring in some drama thing, and I'm like, yeah, of course I would love it. She's incredible. She's so incredible, the way she sees things, the way she processes things. She recently wrote a bedtime [00:46:00] book for both children and adults in partnership with the fashion house Valentino. So, you ask yourself, was Valentino doing bedtime story books before? It's unlikely. And along comes Elsa and now they are. You see what I mean? Elsa's amazing. Yeah. she enters spaces and turns them, and they turn to fit and accommodate her in ways that are really, really beautiful to watch.



So I feel like that kind of attitude is really going to be important going forward. Like the space can change. The rules can change. The ways in which people can define things can change. And especially because we've seen everything changing over the last two years, so why shouldn't it, right?

Kris Nelson: Brilliant. Thank you, Njoki.

There's one question here for you [in the comments during the Instagram Live conversation], asking: has art historically always been a [00:47:00] driver or an agent of social change movements - every movement had their art - what makes this new?

Maybe if you could answer that question and then that's our final question for the day.

Njoki Ngumi: Yeah, I think it's a great question. I feel like art has played multiple roles within social change movements. I don't think it has always been a driver. I feel like sometimes it's been what Kenyans would call the matatu tout; the one that stands at the door of the bus and tells people to enter.

I feel like sometimes it's been a passenger on the bus. I feel like sometimes it's been the entity that painted the bus and made it pretty so that people could want to enter. I feel like sometimes it's like the performer on the bus, the person who gets in and then starts playing their instrument and then the journey is a little bit more beautiful than it would have been without the artists.

Sometimes though, the artists do define the place that people are going. They remind people this is where we are going, this is why [00:48:00] we got onto the bus in the first place. This is why we should enter the bus, or this is why we should leave the bus when it is no longer working. So I feel like the arts play multiple roles at multiple times. So of course it's not a new thing the arts are now more involved in social change movements.

I think the thing I did say was that beyond social change movements, I feel like it could be very possible for - and I don't know whether that's for good or for



bad, it could be both - but other sectors are going to start instrumentalizing art for their own ends because they've seen how powerful art can be, especially within social change movements.

Kris Nelson: Great. Thank you. And as you say, we are on the cusp of a new era or we are in the new era and it's all happening.

Thank you, Dr. Njoki Ngumi for joining us today. I'm Kris Nelson from LIFT. It's been a pleasure hosting you. Thank you for joining us. It's been a [00:49:00] pleasure for us to have you here, our audiences. Please follow Njoki and her brilliant collective @thisisthenest and find out what they are up to, which is a lot: films, fashion, gigs, queer dance parties... Everything that you ever could want, they've got it.

Njoki Ngumi: I feel like I am going to go and tell the crew that. Everything that you could ever want!

Kris Nelson: I mean, it's certainly true for me.

Njoki Ngumi: You're the best!

Kris Nelson: Thank you for tuning in, go well, embrace that ambiguity and let us all make this new era that Njoki is talking about. Thank you very much folks. Have a great day.

Njoki Ngumi: Bye everyone.

Kris Nelson: Thank you for joining us today. This is one of five conversations in our series Plans For The Future, so do check out the other episodes where I speak with intrepid arts makers around the world. To find out more about [00:50:00] LIFT and our work challenging, artistic, political, and social conventions, supporting an equitable rebuild post-Brexit and the pandemic, and connecting the world to London, follow us @liftfestival or visit www.liftfestival.com. Even better, sign up to our newsletter for a monthly dose of LIFT. We promise not to bore you. LIFT is a national portfolio organization



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