



S3:E4 THERE AND BACK AGAIN...

Basadi Dibeela in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Adrian Ellis: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on the intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

And if you like our content, please subscribe, and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. I'm Adrian Ellis, the chair of GCDN, and the director of AEA Consulting, and today I get to talk to Basadi Dibeela.

Basadi is in Kanye, in Botswana, where she grew up, but between being there now and being there as a child, she's had a rich and varied life as a journalist, as a curator, as a DJ, as a serial social entrepreneur, and is now I believe just about to join a curatorial residency with Latitudes CuratorLab.

She has degrees in journalism and political science, and has spent time not only in Botswana, but in the States, and I think in Shanghai as well. Basadi, welcome to The Three Bells.

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Basadi Dibeela: Oh, thank you so much Adrian, and the GCDN team for inviting me to The Three Bells podcast. I'm very happy to be in conversation with you. I learned a lot from The Three Bells podcast so let's see how this one goes.

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Adrian Ellis: I'm sure all the other listeners will learn a lot from this one. Tell us a bit for those who are not immediately picking up Google Maps, tell us a bit about Botswana. Landlocked in Southern Africa, a country what, 70% of it is Kalahari Desert, I think. Just give us a sense of Botswana as a country.

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Basadi Dibeela: Um, yes, Botswana is indeed in Southern Africa. We're small in population about like 2.3 million people, so we're actually like shrinking instead of increasing. Geographically the country is quite big. It started off as like a very poor country because we didn't have anything in Botswana. So in that way, I guess, it's a double-edged sword in that we could balance between having people here and like extracting whatever could be found here and having them leave.



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Basadi Dibeela: And after everybody left because we were under British protection – apparently British protection, we discovered diamonds.

And then from that discovery, the government has endeavoured to really just like develop the country from those diamonds. The country's still kind of finding its feet in terms of diversifying its economy. The people are very nice. The landscape, yes, it's, um, 70% or so desert. But yeah, like, that's Botswana.

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Adrian Ellis: And, tell us a bit about how you got from there, away and back again.

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Basadi Dibeela: All right, that's a story of a half. First of all, I was born in the city, right, in Gaborone which is 90 kilometres away from my home village Kanye. Um, so Kanye is a village of about 45,000 people. You know, it's not like a village in the tighter sense of what a village could be because it's like uh, one of, uh, bigger villages in Botswana. I grew up between here and the city, right, like the life in Botswana is that people go to cities to work and then in the villages you come during the holidays.

So my life was not any different. I, during my time in school, when you are asked to write a composition or something, you know, like, really what, what do you wanna be when you grow up? I always thought, yeah, I want to be an ambassador. I want to eventually leave Botswana. I love the culture of Botswana and I want to be able to, you know, share it with other people outside.

But that didn't happen. I ended up just studying political science at university, but then I guess that was a path of me trying to get to the international relations bit. But as I went on with my, you know, like school life, I then became very restless. I felt like Botswana was very slow.

If it had been by choice, I would have wanted to study in South Africa, in Johannesburg. I really wanted to go to Wits University. But you know, I was in Botswana, I was in University of Botswana, and at that time, actually the government of Botswana was sending a lot of students also to South Africa.

So there were those connections in South Africa. And then I discovered a DJ programme in South Africa. And then that's how then I started kind of like also going between Botswana and South Africa during my university holidays.

Um, yeah, so then I was in Johannesburg and I did that programme. And then in Johannesburg I got a job as a DJ in Newtown. And at this time Newtown is like a very vibrant cultural precinct. And then also that's where really I got my first, I guess, like, exposure to, you know, the places and the people that I felt like I needed to be around creatively anyway.

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Adrian Ellis: So DJing became part of your portfolio of careers. What else were you doing at the time?



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Basadi Dibeela: What else was I doing at the time? Well, at the time I was in school also in Botswana. So every school holidays I would, you know, I would leave Botswana and go to Johannesburg and you know, first there was like studying the DJ programme, and then second was I found a job. And then I was DJing. And then during that time also I was helping the people at the, this space, this restaurant and, uh you know, just assistant really, like, like in a very informal manner. Because I thought the space was really, you know, it was really inspiring to me. It was really different from the spaces here in Botswana. And this is like in downtown Johannesburg, like I said, in um, Newtown, there was the restaurant bit and then there was like the pub or club side, which was called Kospotong and then the restaurant was called Sofia's House.

So these are two places, were run by two, um, Eswatini entrepreneurs who themselves really believed in, I guess like uh, nurturing and people, you know, I came there with like energy. I was a bit shy to walk in and just say, I'm looking for a job as a DJ, but you know, eventually I did it. And, um, besides DJing, I was also just like helping, you know, conceptualise about, you know, how can we make the space even more vibrant than it already is, because I felt like I was also drawn to that.

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Adrian Ellis: And how do you make the space more vibrant? Because that, that sounds like the, the origins of your interest in, in effectively, in place making.

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Basadi Dibeela: How do you make a place vibrant? I think, you know, like, it's a mix between, you know, the place itself, you know, the place also speaks to you, um, without uttering words. Of course, like, just the feeling that you get from being in a certain place. And this time, as I said, you know, like this, uh, place in downtown Johannesburg, it had all the amenities and it had all the people and it had all the energy that at that time I felt was exactly what I needed to explore my ideas, right.

There was like the, the Market Theatre, you know, a lot of people, a lot of photographers graduated from the Market Theatre because there was also like a photo workshop there, if I'm getting it right. There was like getting the African museum, there was the Bassline – an events venue, which was very, very, you know, prolific and well known. There was like so many pockets of vibrancy, in that area. So the vibrancy is also, I guess like the way you can contribute it even further is, developing, you know, like, finding ways to make programmes more sustainable, you know, even if it's like informal programmes.

Programme could be like Kospotong – okay, on Monday we have like Basadi DJing, on Tuesday, we have a fashion show, on Wednesday we have like, uh, poetry session, on Thursday we have this. So just like really engaging the people in that space in a way that they are going to, you know, leave with something. You know, it's not only about, you know, having like a good night out because that's also very, very important for me. It's very important to also like, go out and just like dance, you know, for me that's, that's healing.

But also, you know, somebody maybe is aspiring to become, you know, a fashion designer. How do you facilitate for that person to have a space to interact with other people whilst also being in yeah, a nightclub setting, if you, like. (laughs)



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Adrian Ellis: So you were doing this while still an undergraduate? So, what, what followed graduation?

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Basadi Dibeela: So what happened after graduation, what happened is that I, at around that time they introduced, um, Mandarin in University of Botswana. The Confucius Institute came to set up in Botswana, right, so I enrolled because I was always interested in languages, right? I wanted to be an ambassador.

So I enrolled, and I was the second cohort, I think, after they introduced it. Also at that time, because, you know, it was still, you know, it was still a new programme. There was also a lot of opportunities. And through that programme I got a scholarship for one year to go study in Shanghai at the Shanghai Normal University.

And then I, yeah, and then I went to Shanghai from 2011 to 2012. But then of course, like in between, like in 2011, unfortunately when I was there, my mom passed away, so I had to come back. So, yeah, like my memory of Shanghai at the same time is very bittersweet in that, that happened. But at the same time, um, if Joburg was like a place where I really got to, you know, discover like spaces and really what made me feel excited and happy and, um, fed my creative juices, then Shanghai is really like a place that then I really discovered proper transportation. I discovered walking in the streets and feeling safe, and I discovered also like just this kind of nature of like, old and new, you know, because Shanghai has like those parts of it which are still kind of like traditional, and then you have like the newer Shanghai.

So, you know, just like going around. And I walked around a lot because I usually just like, love walking around. That's how I discovered a new city. So just like walking around Shanghai and the feeling that I got and just like this communal also nature of Chinese people – which isn't really far from how I grew up in Botswana because, you know, I guess, and I'll speak, dare speak for other Africans that we tend to be more, um, communal and more, you know friendly with each other if you like. So, yeah.

Adrian Ellis: So, what happened next?

Basadi Dibeela: You know, because I had, you know, when I was in China, as I mentioned, you know, tragedy struck and then my mom passed away. So coming back also was really trying to regroup and regroup and really you know, take care of some things here at home.

But I, also at that time, I knew that I had to keep on going because also that's the kind of, you know, everything has been possible in my life cause of the way my mom was. So in many ways I feel like I'm also kind of like an extension of her, you know?

So, so, you know, I came back in 2012 and then um, and then I started thinking about also you know, like my interest. You know, I had now gravitate, gravitated away from Joburg, which was kind of like my starting point from Botswana. And then I was just thinking, you know, I know the landscape kind of in South Africa, the arts, and then now starting to think about like, other African countries, right?



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Basadi Dibeela: Like, how do I, I don't want to say insert myself in there, but like, how do I know what's going on, on the grounds, right?

So this became then like something in my head, like, you know what, um, you know, just like a, a feeling of, you know, I want to know more about what's happening in other African countries. So I started um, you know, I started researching about the different events that go on in these places. I remember one of the earlier events that I went to, I found out that there's the Blantyre Arts Festival in Malawi. And then I was like, wow, Blantyre Arts Festival. We don't even have arts festival in Botswana at that time anyway, so I really do want to not only visit Malawi, I also want to find out what the Blantyre Arts Festival is.

So I travelled by bus from Botswana to Malawi and then volunteered for about five days. Really just like doing miscellaneous things, you know, from ticketing to like cleaning up to, you know, just like really learning about like what goes on with like putting up a, a festival, right?

So I met other connections actually at the Blantyre Arts Festival. And then those connections then invited me, two years later to um, work with them in Zimbabwe.

So, you know, during all these times, I'm really, you know, I'm really learning and I'm also really um, you know, I'm feeling also that, you know, this is exactly the route that I want to take. If at all, I was, I'm sure of it. Speaking of Malawi, I just like to also extend my condolences to everybody that has lost their lives in the recent flooding caused by Hurricane Freddy um, which has affected and killed a lot of people in Malawi and Mozambique. So I'm also, you know, like, putting my heart out to all the people that are affected by that. So yeah, like two years later, in Zimbabwe, and then the same thing happened with Zanzibar.

I discovered also another festival in Stone Town called Sauti za Busara. And then I applied for the media accreditation. I had a blog called Culture People. It wasn't very, very operational, but like, this is how I got in. I was like, you know what? I'm running this blog. I'm independent, please let me in.

I got a media accreditation. And then, yeah, and then at that festival I also connected with more people.

There was people from music in Africa, there was people from HEVOS. There was people from all these funding bodies saying a lot of things that I was interested in. And then like connecting with them, I then started contributing for music in Africa through, through the festival because they had a, as a side event, they had a movers and shakers meet and greet.

Um, so through that I met other connections. So that's, that's pretty much how things have been going. And I've always tried to identify, you know, elements that I'm interested in. Of course, I'm interested in the people, I'm interested in the landscape and everything that is there to be interested in.



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Basadi Dibeela: But like, I feel like the best way to connect with people is through the arts, right? It's through music, it's through performance, it's through, you know, whatever arts it is, this is like for me how I really get to, you know, experience people and if there's any kind of uh, biases that I have, by the time I come back from that place, I'm like, so, you know, I'm so taken by whatever was happening there that then I start, you know, I start forming new narratives also about the continent because that's also very important: not only for others to see how others see us, but also how we see ourselves.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: So, your next stop was in the States, I think.

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Basadi Dibeela: Yes, with a bit of space in between. Um, so after you know, like between those travels around Africa, I also started an events here. You know, like just going around and then picking up ideas. You know, I went to a festival in Swaziland called Bushfire Festival.

And then there I was like, you know, it'd really be nice to bring this kind of experience also to Botswana. So when I got back to Botswana in 2014 I founded an event called Jam for Brunch. The event was food and live music. So really just like giving a platform to live music emerging artists and also cultivating an audience because, we being next to South Africa is like a relentless um, older sibling, right? We get everything from it to the point that sometimes it's just we're really just like in the shadow of South Africa especially when it comes to arts and culture.

So for me, the idea is that, you know, like, let's try to like cultivate our own audience so that they can appreciate what is from Botswana as well. As much as they appreciate from what, what is from outside. And then I did that for like four years. And then I also knew that I, you know, I had to move on now to another thing, which for me was arts management, right?

I needed to really formalise this arts management bit and like, uh, whatever facets it covered, which was, I was interested in. I found out about Syracuse University. I was offered an opportunity there, and that's how I then went to Syracuse University.

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Adrian Ellis: So how did that compare?

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Basadi Dibeela: Well, first of all, I thought I was going to New York City, right?

Adrian Ellis: Yeah.



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Basadi Dibeela: Syracuse is like four hours away from, from New York City. So for me, it was like Syracuse, New York. I knew I was going to New York City and this has always been a dream of mine too, right, to go to New York City. So to my surprise, I am like in the middle of upstate New York.

And to get there, I had taken a train. So, you know, I got to Syracuse. It took a long time. You know, Syracuse is like acquired taste, but I have to say that even with that though, there was like some very valuable lessons obviously.

My programme was very, I ended up being in the arts journalism programme and it was very um, yeah, it was very, uh, enriching programme. There was a lot to take from it. From our trips to New York City, you know, our immersion in New York, going to different museums, going to the New York Times, going to this, going to that, you know, obviously for me, coming from, you know, a village in Botswana, this is like such a, a big thing, you know?

Although I had of course been to other places, but had I been actually inside those places was like a different matter. And then in Syracuse uh, because I didn't know anybody, I of course gravitated towards um, a community that, you know, could offer me support. And that community happened to be the new American community, especially like the women from Congo, who came to America as refugees.

I was also involved with a programme at the university that really um, worked with, the community to take advantage of university resources. That's how then, you know, I started really to acclimatise to Syracuse and in the end I ended up really actually loving having been there, especially like my connection with the community.

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Adrian Ellis: So you returned, but you returned to your village with a project, is that right?

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Basadi Dibeela: Yes, I did. Uh, I came back with the intention that, you know, I've learned so much, right? In my heart, of course, I wanted, I would've preferred to be under like a structure because I know, you know, sometimes in places where there isn't a lot of institutions, you end up being your own institution.

And building an institution obviously is not an easy thing, right? And this is where the museum came in. I went to the museum actually, and then I asked them if they were looking for people and then they're like, you know what um, the board is, is just starting now.

There's been a lot of like, transitions with the museum from the time when the chief started it to now. So then I was thrown into the museum board, which really didn't have a lot of people. We were just, we were just building the whole time. It, it was a journey of building, yeah.



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Adrian Ellis: So in that paper that you wrote after you went to the GCDN convening in Lugano last year, you wrote a number of very interesting things in it. But one was: I cannot help but wonder if there are other means of preserving histories that are not a museum and are originally of my culture.

And I wonder whether – not whether you've reached a conclusion on that, but if you had sort of reflect a bit on whether the sort of model that you were pursuing in that, in, uh, in the context of that project, represents an alternative or is an appropriate way of both celebrating and of exploring the past.

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Basadi Dibeela: Yes. Um, so yes, that kind of uh, reflection for me was really thinking about, you know, like, even in on this journey you know, like being involved with the museum. You know, I've been constantly thinking about like, what is this to me, right.

Like, what is this institution, you know, of a museum? What does it mean to me? What does it mean to like, other people, you know? Do they see it the way the museum sees itself, right? So like, this line of questioning was really inspired by, really just like going down to my roots and thinking about like, things in a more purest sense. I guess I was really trying to divorce the, you know, like the colonial bit of Botswana to like my history.

Like what is like the pure Botswana, pure African, you know, even maybe if the model is not existing in Botswana, but like, does it exist somewhere else maybe in Africa where it could be copied in Botswana because then she's the African right. Um, so no, I haven't really come to any kind of conclusion or answers to that.

I think it's like uh, it's an ongoing exploration. I think museums, of course, are still needed, right? Because they are places that not only preserve, but then they'll open up a lot of conversation. So in that sense, I haven't really reached any conclusions, but I do really believe in the idea of, you know, museum not only as, you know, holding and preserving, but also like being a living, living archive, you know, like an active entity in society. And then the different ways that it can you know, activate, you know, it could really plug in to whatever is happening in those spaces.

So in the interim, while we're still thinking about what really is a museum to an African, you know, while researchers are still researching that um, yeah, like whilst all other conversations are going, you know, I'm also really keen to find out where this conversation will go and how Africans especially want to shape it, right.

Especially with people that have a lot of those, um, stolen museum artifacts coming back. How do they facilitate for that coming back? How do they facilitate for that restitution? So maybe the answer is not going to be coming from Botswana, but I'm also curious about like West Africa, you know, the EMOWAA Museum, how are they dealing with that, with this kind of thing? Yeah.

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Adrian Ellis: And is your sense that there's a, an increasingly strong dialogue between these nascent and developing institutions?



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Adrian Ellis: The EMOWAA you mentioned, and the Museum of Black Civilisations in Senegal and the Zoma Museum in Ethiopia. And there's a new generation, if you like, of distinctive museology as people in different circumstances basically explore their longer past, their pre-colonial as well as their post-colonial and colonial past.

Is that what's happening?

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Basadi Dibeela: Um, yeah, I mean, it's, it's of course like extremely hard to aggregate exactly what is happening. But like, if I gave like from the top of my head, just like based on like some of the literature that I come across, I would say there is definitely traction towards like more working together um, in the museum and in like, sharing knowledge of how to facilitate the conversation and like the, the physical part of like getting those um, artifacts back.

Like in the article I also mentioned like, platforms like African Digital Network- Digital Heritage, African Digital Heritage. So African Digital Heritage does work to facilitate also and also fill in the gaps, right, like where we don't really know like what happened historically.

They work with like software and they work with our digital tools to really just like, fill in those gaps. So there is like this kind of um, you know, platforms that are coming up and, and yes, it's based in Kenya, but they work with a lot of people. There's also the Museum Futures Africa. This is like a cultural project established according to the, to their website to test, explore, and study new formats of African museology.

Um, and it's supported by Goethe-Institut. So there's like all these um, formations that are happening. So I would say like, just like from the top of my head that yes, I see a direction of more, you know, partnerships and knowledge sharing within the context of Africa itself, yeah.

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Adrian Ellis: So let me ask a related question, not about museums, but about cultural districts. The article you wrote is, sort of agnostic, on the one hand you point out that culture in its broader sense is so integrated into um, African society that the idea of delineating a cultural district seems somehow a peculiarity and a sort of a uh, you know, a misclassification based on a misunderstanding of the way in which these societies work.

On the other hand, there is a reality with rapid urbanisation – and you talk about the pace and scale of urbanisation, that the creation of identity in urban areas is clearly important and that cultural districts may have a place in that. What's your thought about the sorts of models that you've seen elsewhere in the world, and their applicability to um, Botswana and other Sub-Saharan African countries?

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Basadi Dibeela: Yes that's exactly what I wrote about, you know, my skepticism at the same time about, of um, cultural districts, right?



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Basadi Dibeela: Like, um, I feel like sometimes out of laziness maybe of our leaders um, they tend to really just like move towards more like flashy-

Adrian Ellis: Yup.

Basadi Dibeela: You know, it's all about the building, it's all about the whatever. Even when really it's not been well researched about like what function are they going to have in society.

So at the same time, I'm kind of like really um, very, very skeptical about any project that I hear coming up in general, right. But then of course as I research more and as I see like the case for it, you know, if you think about EMOWAA again um, they really have a definite case of why they have like this development happening because they have like all these artifacts that are coming from outside, they're about to receive looted objects from that culture.

And then in terms of like models from outside um, I'd like to even say, you know, like models from inside, like models from within Africa. Um, I'm thinking about there's an organisation, for example in South Africa called Keleketla! Library, right?

Um, so Keleketla! Library, it started in 2003 um, by a group of students. And then they started it in an, in an abandoned building of downtown Johannesburg called Drill Hall, right. So this project was um, also running school programmes which, school children for them, uh, for downtown kids um, in Johannesburg.

Um, and then also I think they were also renting out studios to artists, but like, not renting out in like a capitalist way, but like in a very community oriented way, because they also probably had to manage that space. And then this project also evolved into a really community centred um, placemaking organisation. So when I think of some of the models, I think of Keleketla, and they're still going on now. And I know that during the Documenta, the, I think the last year's Documenta in Kassel, Germany, they flew some of the political leaders from South Africa and Keleketla to Kassel to think about how a really community centred placemaking organisation could, you know, take the central role in facilitating for urban regeneration.

And so, you know, that's just like one of the organisations that I can think of within Africa. That's me. I feel like it's a really good model of, you know, like grassroots placemaking. And I feel like since government is still very slow in facilitating placemaking, unlike other areas I guess, around the world where maybe government, like the city of London, for example, which is actively pursuing the placemaking agenda, right.

Um, in Africa, I feel like a lot of governments are still not in tune with this kind of uh, trajectory. So a lot of initiatives tend to be more unplanned and spontaneous, but at the same time being very, very effective in producing the impact, yeah.

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Adrian Ellis: And, tell me, what's next?



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Basadi Dibeela: What is next for me? Um, well, as you mentioned at the beginning, I have been uh, selected at the beginning of the year for the Latitudes online curator lab. And I've been, you know, busy with this programme. The culmination of it is a virtual exhibition, which I'm actually currently busy preparing for.

It's going to launch on the 5th of April online, on the platform. So watch out for that. Um, and then away from that – first of all, I am very excited about like the world of curating in general. And then my plans well after the programme is done, start collaborating with Underground.

Underground is a nomadic and collaborative art space in Uganda, which works with contemporary and modern artists and curators. And then, you know, Underground has like a, an ongoing collaboration with another network in Ghana. It's called Black Star Lines. It's a contemporary art incubator that is fluid and experimental. It's made out of a community of artists, writers, and curators at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana.

Um, so, you know, through this collaboration, there's going to be like a culmination um, culminating exhibition at, in Uganda. So I'm very, very excited to be involved in this programme. And then, you know, otherwise I am continuing to really, you know, find my own voice in the curatorial realm and I'm looking forward to doing, you know, whatever needs to be done to really come up with interesting exhibitions and programmes.

Um, at the same time also connecting and researching around placemaking and uh, looking at those possibilities and looking at the collaborations that are possible in that way. Also! Playing music, right? Music is my first love. I'm also looking forward to playing music in places that make me happy.

Um, whether it's like festivals. I'm a big, big festival fan, so this is like really the place. I, yeah, I should be buried at a festival actually. (laughs)

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Adrian Ellis: Basadi, that was really fascinating and fantastic. And I'm thrilled that you've found the time to talk to us, and good luck with the adventures, and stay in touch. Thank you very much indeed.

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Basadi Dibeela: Thank you so much. Thank you so, so much. I appreciate this a lot.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

Adrian Ellis: Thanks for listening. And if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find all the external references, other resources linked to this episode and to Basadi's work. And as they used to say on Monty Python – now for something completely different. A few thoughts on time management, mortality, and mission.



[00:32:30]

Adrian Ellis: I've just finished a book called *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*. It's by, Oliver Burkeman, and it, it falls somewhere between self-help and pop philosophy, and it draws ostentatiously on Heidegger, and Nietzsche and Plato.

Basically, uh, it attacks from many angles – probably too many angles, a very simple idea that is coincidentally true, but that we tend to resist with all our being. And the simple sort of premise of it is, gosh, that we are mortal and that time for us is finite and that we can't do everything, but we don't like to admit that to ourselves and it causes us a lot of problems.

Time management generally assumes that you can get everything you want to, done, if you are only more efficient. But you can't. Your time is finite and the things that you would like to do are, if not infinite, then certainly in excess of the time available. You are better off reconciling yourself to this truth than its implications and learning to live with the dissatisfaction of knowing that you cannot do everything than living with the eternal and delusory dissatisfaction of the gap between unrealistic aspiration and messy reality.

We live in our minds mostly in the future. So we can delude ourselves into thinking about a future in which somehow, we can dodge those compromises, and the things left undone or unexplored of which reality is comprised. You need to make choices, and of course, in trying to dodge choices that implicitly acknowledge our mortality, we end up making them anyway, but sub-optimally and subconsciously.

Burkeman dwells on the implications for us mortals, but the same applies to our organisations with missions that invariably and appropriately are more expansive than our resources. Last time I did one of these end pieces, it was a somewhat downbeat account of the dangerous shoals we are navigating.

The general thought was, background has become foreground. That is issues that were located in our peripheral vision are now front and centre, dominating and colouring our institutional agendas. These intractable issues aren't new, but the move from background to foreground has happened pretty quickly, maybe over the duration of the average strategic plan, five years or so.

I had the opportunity recently to interview a cohort of leaders of cultural institutions in North America, Europe, and Asia about what they saw coming down the pike.

And although the relative emphasis were different, the list offered up of challenges was essentially the same. We do after all still live in a highly integrated world and probably in the long term globalisation is synonymous with history, and if we destroy the planet, then that's probably definitive proof.

There was also a ready consensus that these clusters of issues, in many ways, make cultural leadership significantly more challenging. There are many more dimensions to address in any institutional agenda than there were 10 or 15 years ago, and usually there's a ready confession.



[00:35:30]

Adrian Ellis: The professional experience and training leadership has, does not address much of the agendas that fill their days today. I'd even suggest that there may be a cohort that they're thinking seriously about checking out earlier than they might otherwise have done. Leadership is, or feels more uncomfortable and more exposed. But what there isn't, at least – and this is my current take, is a strong sense from the top of a way forward or ways forward, or a strong sense of urgency about finding them. There is a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive. What constitutes a way forward, I'd frame it like this – a way forward is a way that ensures that cultural organisations are clear and confident about their central purposes.

Seen as morally legitimate and relevant and meaningful by the communities they exist to serve, and are organisationally viable. That sounds what my father would call bleeding obvious, but I want to suggest we would be well served by focusing a bit more on those three clusters; clarity of purpose, legitimacy and relevance, and viability. And that there are some immediate consequences, or at least possible consequences that may suggest how institutional leaders can move from what looks like a defensive crouch to something more proactive.

Clarity of purpose: We should have greater sense of modesty about this. We have absurdly hubristic rhetoric for our institutions, and it's all very samey.

Legitimacy and relevance: At the moment, we're besieged by issues of legitimacy and relevance. Our holdings, if we're museums, are interpretive strategies. Our board composition, our endowments, our donor base, our internal structures. We need to find coherent positions and press through. We need to make choices.

And viability: Nimbleness, not growth. We have silted up our institutions with fixed costs and with real estate. It is why creativity may have moved out to our organisations. Again, we need to make choices.

So I'm suggesting our fuzziness around all three of these has a single cause, a reluctance to make and defend choices, which is perhaps the singular responsibility of leadership. I've rattled on long enough, but maybe what we need are some new tools. The tools we're using were not designed for these times. Most obviously, strategic planning processes tend to emphasise consensus at almost any cost, blunting the reality of choice. We live in interesting times. Maybe we need to be a bit more interesting.

[00:38:02]

THEME MUSIC

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My name's Adrian Ellis. Thank you so much for being with us today, and I look forward to joining you again soon.

